

Love, M.

a letters play

By

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Based on interviews with mothers, sons, and AIDS activists

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Love, M.

Cast:

DEBORAH, a white woman in her 50's, a quick wit, well-to-do, travels.

CHRIS, a white man in his mid 20's. Deborah's son an actor, gay, funny, lights up a room.

MYRTLE, a Black woman in her late 50's, a true believer from rural North Carolina

TIMOTHY, a Black man in his late 20's. Myrtle's son, a lawyer, gay, an idealist, wants to do good.

Various pre-recorded voices are used.

Synopsis: Told through letters, "Love, M." weaves the story of two mothers and two sons at the beginning of the AIDS crisis. With humor and humanity, and with the AIDS quilt as backdrop, these four souls piece their way towards healing and acceptance.

Time: 1985 -1995. In America.

Setting: Two sturdy writing tables with chairs. All props should be housed on or under the tables.

Prop Note: All letters will be written/printed. Phone messages can be written/printed on note-pads. These papers will be the physical props from which the actors read the majority of the play, except for the final scene. Actors could begin or end each "letter" with a brief bit of the physical activity of writing, pen in hand, but as the letters play on, the actors should look up and out, as if they are composing the missives live, while they are speaking.

The actors do not look directly at each other, until the final scene.

More than kisses letters mingle souls.

- John Donne

for all the orphaned Mothers

SCENE 1 DEBORAH/CHRIS

Lights up on DEBORAH, an attractive fifty something woman writing a letter. An expensive silk jacket is draped on her shoulders.

In another pool of light, we see CHRIS, a handsome young man in his early twenties, opening a letter. He wears a T-shirt.

DEBORAH

(slight southern drawl)

August 3, 1985.

Dear Son,

It's been two weeks since I've heard from you. You are making me worried! Did you get my package? Common courtesy demands a response. Find the post office in San Francisco. I know they have one. If you have received your package, you'll find pre-stamped postcards and envelopes. I gave birth to you, so I feel like I can ask for communication from my baby boy.

Three kisses, xxx Love, Mother.

P. S. I am proud of you. This program is your dream, I just hate that it is 3,000 miles away! I cannot think of a better thing to spend our money on than my talented son. When I see you on stage I know it's where you are meant to be. Your father is a work in progress. However, he never breaks a promise, and he promised, IF you were accepted to this program, he'd pay for it. Don't you worry, I will hold his feet to that fire.

CHRIS

August 12, 1985.

Dear Mother,

(MORE)

CHRIS (CONT'D)

Thanks for the care package. So glad to get it. I've been rehearsing late. Sleeping, getting up, and running out again. You saved my life! I don't even think they sell grits here. Brooks, the new associate artistic director from New York, really seems to like me. Gotta run, I have to prep for class and I am understudying two roles on the main stage.

Love you. Chris.

Deborah writes.

DEBORAH

August 25.

Dear Chris,

Why would you want to live in a town without grits? Let me know if either of the other fellas falls down a flight of stairs and I'll fly out.

Three kisses.

Love, M.

She makes three bold x's on a postcard, then stamps it with a whack.

CHRIS

Dear M.,

Accidents happen. All I'm saying. There are other things in life besides grits. And, I have you pipe-lining me the perfect breakfast food while I pursue fame and fortune.
Your favorite son.

Three kisses, xxx,

Chris.

DEBORAH

Dear Only Son,

Everyone at church misses you. The quality of the choir has greatly diminished without you. Miss Mattie is worse than ever. Daddy is very grumpy since you left. Or, was he always grumpy? Doreen wants to introduce you to her niece next time you're home. She's a beautiful girl. We can go to the club for lunch.

Miss you. Three.
Love, M.

CHRIS

Dear M.,

Don't lie. Everyone at that church does NOT miss me. But, I miss you. Don't get me started about Grumpy. Tell Daddy he better be good to my best girl. Y'all should go somewhere just the two of you. You love the ocean, make him take you to the beach. xo.

Love, Chris.

P.S. THE TEMPEST is going to be incredible, wait 'til you see how they are doing the rain. MY FAIR LADY is almost sold out for the run! The director, Steven, from New York, is phenomenal. He's mining all the social relevance about class and hypocrisy, it's a very biting kind of humor. Right up your alley, Mom.

P.P.S. Tell Doreen NO about the niece. The only woman in my life is my sainted mother.

DEBORAH

Dear Son,

Sainted Mother. Ha-ha. My sarcasm redounds. It's way too hot to go to the beach, and we *are* going somewhere fabulous when we venture forth in November to see you in your plays. I adore San Francisco. I'll get to see the Pacific ocean.

(MORE)

DEBORAH (CONT'D)

Actually, I hate to get in the water, but I do love to look out at the ocean. Sold out, already! Well, well, it is a big operation. One of my sorority sisters was telling me that she's seen several things there. Your father is making noise about not leaving work. I plan to get him drunk and wheel him on the plane. He's still pouting that you didn't want to go into business with him. He will have to get over it. You have a gift. You always have, and I believe in you. xxx
 Love, S.M.
 aka "Sainted Mother".

CHRIS

Dear S.M.,
 Did I tell you about this crazy rain? If I weren't so happy, I'd be depressed. xxx
 your sainted son, Chris.

DEBORAH

Dear *Sainted Son*,
 Your father is working such long hours. I'm an absolute widow since he's expanded. Construction is booming here, and everyone needs windows and doors. They are saying that one day soon Atlanta will spread all the way up to Kennesaw. Can you picture that? If it's true, I'll never see your father as he plans to supply every single window and door between here and there and Mesopotamia. I get lost if I go past the Chattahoochee. Can't wait to see you and the Golden Gate bridge! Did I ever tell you? Well, I know I did - your grandfather left for WWII from San Francisco. He was a prince. I miss him everyday. You look just like him and he'd be so tickled that you are out there in his old stomping grounds. Have you been to the bridge yet? My father told me it was magical at night. Are you making friends? I hope you are not too lonesome. Three kisses, xxx, Love, Mother.

Chris smiles knowingly when Deborah speaks about the bridge. He kisses her letter and tucks it into his script.

CHRIS

October 5, 1985.

Mother darling, dearest of my heart,

I am way too busy to be lonely. I am having the most fun ever! A.C.T. is a dream come true, the whole company is top-notch. To save money on housing, they've moved us to an apartment just off Market Street. It's me and five other MFA students. Please - these folks were not raised by you! "*This is what a vacuum looks like, Steve. Here is where you turn it on.*" Communal living for sure, but close to the trolley, and all the bars and nightlife. Since we have the biggest apartment, our place has become *the* gathering spot for the acting company. It's cold here, but I even love the rain which rolls off the ocean in sheets. Hey, its almost your anniversary; make Daddy spring for the Mark Hopkins. I went up there for drinks last week, someone was trying to impress me. The view is a-mazing. See you soon.
xxx, Chris.

DEBORAH

October 18th, 1985

Dear Chris,

Who was trying to impress you? Guess what? Since it's our anniversary week and Thanksgiving, Grumpy is springing for The Mark Hopkins! A suite with a *view*. Thanks for the suggestion. You see - he does have a soft side. He's making all his usual jokes about how since we met on Thanksgiving Day and then got married on Thanksgiving Day they've made it a *national* holiday, on account of him being so *wonderful*. Can you come stay with us one night at the Hopkins? Surely you will have Thanksgiving Day off, won't you? We'll drink Irish coffee and look out at the view. The brochure says they have a live band and dancing every weekend at the Top of the Mark. You'll have to come and be my dance partner. God bless Daddy and his two left feet. Can't wait to meet all your friends and fellow artistes.

(MORE)

DEBORAH (CONT'D)

Maybe we could throw an orphan's dinner party at your place for all the people in your company who can't go home for Thanksgiving?

xxx Love, M.

Lights fade on Deborah. Time passes.

SOUND: Phones ringing, answering machines picking up. "Mmwuah" is the sound of a kiss, their signature sign-off.

Chris dials the phone and listens to his mother's out-going message.

DEBORAH (V.O.)

You've reached Glen and Deborah Harrison's. We're out slaying dragons and putting out brush fires. Y'all leave us a message and we will give you a call just as soon as we can! Thanks!

CHRIS (ON THE PHONE)

Mom? Are you there? Got your letter. What a fabulous idea! The orphans will be thrilled. If you and Daddy will spring for the turkey and the wine, the rest of the orphans will supply side dishes. I told them not to bother with dessert, that my very own mama, Miz *Deborah*, will be making her world famous apple custard and pumpkin pies. Can't wait to see you. Mmwuah. Mmwuah. Mmwuah.

Lights fade on Chris.

Lights up on Deborah dialing the phone, she listens to Chris' out-going message which features a show-tune and smiles.

CHRIS (V.O.)

You've reached Christopher Harrison, I'm out and about living the dream in rotating repertory. Leave me a message.

DEBORAH (ON THE PHONE)

Hey, Sweetheart. Sorry I missed your call. Have apron, will travel. Miss you terribly. Daddy is never home. I have to watch Jeopardy all by myself. You know I can't sleep til everyone is home. I need someone to sing *me* a lullaby. Will you call me and sing? Remember?
Skinamarinkadinkadink Skinamarinkadooo, I love you.
This is a picture of me *pouting* until I see you! Mmmwuah.
Mmmwuah. Mmwuah.

Lights shift. Actors transition. Actress removes her jacket and perhaps changes her hair. Actor dons glasses and a sports-coat.

SCENE 2 TIMOTHY/MYRTLE

Lights up. MYRTLE opens a bible and reads occasionally underlining passages with her pencil. She closes her eyes and prays, then reaches for some paper and begins to write.

Lights up on TIMOTHY. He opens his briefcase, removes a stack of letters.

MYRTLE

(rapidly, heavy rural accent)

March 1.
Dear Timmy,
Hope this gets to you by your birthday. Did you get the package? I labeled the poppy seeds to make it easy for you. If you sowed in January, they should be about six inches now. REMEMBER - weed out half or they won't do.

(MORE)

MYRTLE (CONT'D)

You've made the paper again! See enclosed clippin'. Ms. Valley Oxley would be out of business if it weren't for you and the Masons. You can keep this copy. Whenever you are in The Times I get an extra copy. I am making a scrapbook but can hardly keep up! Guess who likes to take naps right on top of my scrapbookin' work? That Sparkle is gonna be the death of me! He got out last night an' I was worried to death. Now you know there are wild dogs around here. I'm a fool about that cat, I know I am, but he's purty and keeps my toes warm. It has been COLD here. I've had to lay straw to protect my seedlings. I worry about you son. I hope you keep out of wind and weather. Timmy, I have prayed and prayed for you. I've not told your daddy what Pam and I've found out about you and that boy, Michael. I'm afraid it would kill Daddy. Read from First Timothy, Chapter One, verses eight through eleven. Read Timothy, the name of your grandfather, I named you for him. Your sister, Pam, is so upset, she's praying for you. The doctors have put her on bed-rest until the baby comes. I'm putting in twenty dollars so you can have a nice steak dinner. Love, Mama.

TIMOTHY picks up a Bible flips it open and reads aloud.

TIMOTHY

(to himself)

First Timothy, verse eight through eleven. "*We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that the law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious, for those who kill their fathers or mothers...*" Really, Mama? (Continuing to read) "*for murderers, for the sexually immoral, for those practicing homosexuality*"

(Takes a big breath, writes)

Dear Mama,
Thank you for the money. *Michael* and I will treat ourselves. I am sorry to hear about Pam being on bed-rest.

(MORE)

TIMOTHY (CONT'D)

We will send her some good books to pass the time. I'm so excited to be an uncle. Pam's baby will grow up in a better world. I will talk to Daddy in person; it's my place to do it. I hope you are taking care of yourself. How is his cough? I love you. Tim.

MYRTLE

Timmy. You've made the front page! Miss Valley Oxley is beside herself about you in the picture with the *Governor*. I am real proud of how well you've done there at Georgia Tech. Here's some money. The picture of your patio garden is real pretty. Daddy is about the same.

Love, Mama.

P.S. You are a good boy. I wish you were not gay.

TIMOTHY

Mama,

Thanks for the clipping. Miss Valley Oxley is in fine form. She makes me sound a whole lot more important than I am. Daddy's cough sounds terrible. Try to get him to quit smoking, that will do a lot for his heart.

Love, Tim.

MYRTLE

Dear Timmy,

Your daddy is his own man. Can't change him, you know that. Son, I've been going to prayer circle here at church to save your soul. I love you, but I hate that you are gay. How can I sleep knowing my son is doomed for eternity? You were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Please pray on this choice of yours. You are risking eternal damnation. Don't you want to be with your brother Barry when you die? Your brother is in heaven.

(MORE)

MYRTLE (CONT'D)

Don't you want to see him again? I can't help thinking if Barry had lived, you would be different. In my mind's eye, I see the two of you sitting on a pew at church with your granddaddy washing your sweet feet and wrapping you up in towels to keep you warm. Jesus can help you change.

Love, Mama

P.S. Read Corinthians Chapter 6 Verse 9-11 "Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor homosexual offenders, nor thieves, will inherit the kingdom of God."

TIMOTHY

Mama,

Tell Miss Valley Oxley to buckle her seat belt - I am going to the middle east on a trip with the Carter Center for Peace! I am the youngest person, and the only lawyer, to be selected. Tell her I will get her a picture with a camel. We will be traveling to Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon, Greece, the West Bank and Israel, seeing many significant archeological sites. One of the purposes of this trip is to get folks of different religious backgrounds to talk reasonably to people with differing points of view. Maybe it will help us? It grieves me that you are so worried about me. I don't want to argue with you. How is Daddy?

Love, Tim.

MYRTLE

Timmy,

Here's the latest from Miss V. Oxley. You are the local hero. But how would everyone feel about you if they knew the truth? Nothing but rain here. My dahlias are going to be seven feet high! You aren't the only famous one. Miss Valley took pictures of my flowers and many folks have stopped by to talk gardening with me and ask for advice.

(MORE)

MYRTLE (CONT'D)

Sparkle is jealous and meows up a storm, and constantly circles my legs when I get visitors. Daddy is coughing whenever he does too much. The oxygen at night has helped him. I am proud of you for being selected for this peace trip. I am not proud of your choice to be gay. Please stop it. Move out from that Michael. Can't you get another roommate? Read bible verses Leviticus 20:13. Here's twenty dollars, you look too skinny.

Love, Mama.

TIMOTHY

Thanks for the money. If only it was a choice. Do you think that I would I choose to be "the other" to bring prejudice and shame on my family? God knows, I feel guilty that I cause you pain. Mama, I've always known I was different and I think you've always known about me, too. I love you. Please don't ask me to change what I cannot change. You can't change Daddy. Why in the world would you think you could change me? I am doing these intense weekend training sessions in preparation for our peace mission. The group includes religious leaders from all faiths, but the majority of them are Southern Baptists. President Carter wants to make sure that Baptists aren't becoming too insular, a big part of our mission is learning tolerance. I'm learning that the Bible has been translated many times to suit the purposes of those doing the translating. We don't own slaves, or stone people anymore. Humans evolve to higher truth, and I hope and PRAY, if I live a good life and help people, that God will accept me as I am.

Love, Tim.

Lights shift. Music. Actors transition. We hear phone rings, hang-ups, and aborted snippets of Deborah's extra chirpy outgoing answering machine message.

SCENE 3 DEBORAH/CHRIS

DEBORAH (V.O.)

You've reached Glen and Deborah Harrison's. We're out slaying dragons and putting out brush fires. Y'all leave us a message and we will give you a call just as soon as we can! Thanks!

Auto time stamp voice says:

November 30, 1985 You have one unheard message.

CHRIS (V.O.)

Mom, I know you're there. Please pick up. I'm *sorry* y'all found out this way. Is Daddy still mad? Call me. Did you even *see* the play? I went over to the Mark Hopkins after my matinee - they said y'all had checked out. I wish you hadn't had to leave town without talking to me. Mooooooooommm. Please answer.

Deborah is doing busy work at her desk.
Phone rings. She does not answer, her outgoing message plays.

DEBORAH (V.O.)

You've reached Glen and Deborah Harrison's. We're out slaying dragons and putting out brush fires. Y'all leave us a message and we will give you a call just as soon as we can! Thanks!

SOUND - *Beep!*

CHRIS

(on the phone)

Mom, pick up. Mom, please. We have to talk. I love you and I love Daddy. Please call me back.

He makes the sound of three kisses.

CHRIS (CONT'D)

Muwah. Muwah. Muwah.

Deborah reaches for the phone but then decides not to pick up instead she picks up pen and paper.

DEBORAH

December 3, 1985.

Dear Chris,

Please stop calling, give us a little breathing room. This is a lot to deal with. You have choices in life. We all do. I've always supported you in your acting, but your daddy is so upset. We cannot condone this lifestyle. I love you, son. I always will, but this is killing us. Every time someone asks about you I just freeze. We are worried what will happen if people find out. That it will reflect badly on Daddy and his business. He views this as a betrayal and something more. He is beside himself as he thinks it calls his own manhood into question. I saw the play. Dad did too. He cried through the whole thing but the tears were for you, not Willy Loman. When Linda Loman held her son's face and said "my baby", I lost it. You are a wonderful performer. Let us recover from this upset. Please understand and give us space.

Love, M.

CHRIS

Mom. I'm sorry Daddy is mad. *You* had to *know*, from my 'dress up' days in your giant closet. Please don't let this change things between us. I don't want things to be weird at Christmas.

(MORE)

CHRIS (CONT'D)

xxx. Chris

P.S. All my compadres were going on about my good-looking mother. You totally charmed them at the orphan dinner with your southern hospitality. They'd all heard my tales of the divine Miss D. and were not disappointed. Loved your hair cut!

DEBORAH

Dear Chris,

Dad's not mad, he is *destroyed*. He wanted to surprise you and take you out to brunch before your matinee. He wasn't prepared for what he saw when he opened your door. I wasn't really prepared. Remember, when you brought your friend Claire home from college that time and she adored you so? Daddy just loved her. He, well, *we* hoped that we were wrong. Remember how he took Claire down to his office for lunch and showed her around? He wanted grand-kids. Hell, I want grand-kids. Why make this choice? Surely you can just control these urges? I am living proof that sex is not the be all and end all of life! Your father will NOT continue to pay for your school unless you promise him that you will exclusively date *women* for two years. He is just furious and I am wondering if you ought to come at Christmas. I don't want to upset him. xxx

Love, M.

Lights dim on Deborah.

CHRIS

Dear Mom,

If it makes Daddy feel any better, tell him I did try women, *lots*. Those U.G.A. Sorority girls were mooning over me as you may recall. Don't you think if I *could* love women I would? Yes, I do LOVE Claire. Life would be so much easier if I were attracted to her sexually, because
a.) Those would totally be some awesome looking kids
and

(MORE)

CHRIS (CONT'D)

b.) She knows how to vacuum.

I've always had the most beautiful, funny, wonderful women in my life and yes - that includes my sainted mother. I *am* coming home for Christmas! Daddy is loaded, you cannot permit him to drop his only son from the payroll, even if I am the black-sheep. As for grand-kids, Julie and Frank are on this for you. I am guaranteed to be the world's greatest uncle. I'm sorry Daddy is mad. Handle him. You always win.

Jingle bells! Three kisses. Chris.

Lights shift. Music. Actors transition.

SCENE 4 MYRTLE/TIMOTHY

MYRTLE

Dear Timmy,

A leopard cannot change its spots, it is in his nature to kill or be eaten. This relationship with this boy, Michael, ain't natural. Judges Chapter 19 verses 16-24.

TIMOTHY

Seriously, Mama. Stop the verses. We are not 'wicked'. God has blessed me with a true love. Just like he blessed you and Daddy. Aren't we lucky? You know how good Michael is and how he loves me. Doesn't the church teach love and acceptance anymore? This is *me*. Please accept me and my life's companion. I'm leaving soon and I don't want to argue. How is Daddy? Love, Tim.

MYRTLE

Timmy,

How can you ask me to accept the unacceptable?

(MORE)

MYRTLE (CONT'D)

Our new preacher is preaching sermons saying this AIDS is God's punishment for the sin of homosexuality. I raised you right and gave you what I could. I was so proud of you in high school. Basketball, band, and all those girls loved you. Good girls. You could have married any one of them and not lived in this *sin*. I'm *afraid* for your soul. Read Romans Chapter 1, verses 18-32. It says it plain.

Love, Mama.

Phone rings Timothy answers it.

TIMOTHY

(on the phone)

Timothy Davidson. Oh hey - - Nothing. - - I'm not mad at you Michael It's just... I got another letter. - - Same as always. I'm a sinner - - easy for you to say your parents are liberals. She *won't* listen. - - I am the source of her pain, I'm the bad seed, the deviant, the sinner - - it gets to me - I feel guilty. No, no, it's not you - - Yeah, well, I'd like to have a rational conversation with her but... - - Okay, I will try reason. Love you. Bye.

Timothy grabs a pen and writes.

TIMOTHY

Dear Mama,

Please lets talk about happy things in our letters. Words have power and yours are hurting me. I understand that you are repeating what you are hearing at church from some well meaning, if under-informed, folks. Long distance is expensive but please call me if you have to say this stuff. You'll get it out and it will be over. There will be no record of it.

He stops and considers what to say.

TIMOTHY (CONT'D)

Letters linger. *(pause)* Let's don't fight. I am asking you *please*, no more misinterpreted Bible verses. We are doing classes every weekend for the next two months to prepare for the Middle East trip. The classes are great and the people are very cool. It's a mixture of real movers and shakers here in Atlanta; business leaders, civil rights advocates, educators, clergy, artists, and lay people. I took religion in grad school but never really knew the history part. All this war - in the name of God - such a waste. Hope we are doing some good by trying to spread peace a few folks at a time. Speaking of peace, today, in our group, a woman read Psalm 121 and it reminded me of you.

Love, Timothy.

Tim opens his Bible and recites Psalm 121.
Myrtle joins him they finish in unison.

TIMOTHY

I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth. He will not suffer thy foot to be moved: he that keepeth thee will not slumber. Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep. The Lord is thy keeper: the Lord is thy shade upon thy right hand. The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night.

TIMOTHY/MYRTLE

The Lord shall preserve thee from all evil: he shall preserve thy soul. The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore.

MYRTLE

Dear Timmy,

121 is a good un! My granny, Zonie Pruitt, who was half Cherokee, taught it to me. She couldn't hardly read but she could say that one by heart. Thank you so much for the candlesticks, they are beautiful. I cannot get over the picture of you on a camel! Miss Valley Oxley has put it in the paper. Ha-ha-ha no surprise there. Ms. Valley did a little write up of your trip with the caption "A man of peace". I thought you'd like that. I've got three copies so I'll save one for you. I put one in my Timmy brag book and I got the other'n' on the refrigerator with a magnet. So, it's like you're right here with me while I'm cooking. Today, I was standing blanching corn for canning - and you know what a hot job that is - the steam was coming up like it does from the pressure cooker. I turned and saw your picture through that all that steam, and you with that Arab scarf on your head. Well, it was like you walked right out of a Bible story. Was that a sign? Please be safe over there. I won't sleep good 'til I know you are back in the U.S.A. When you come home I'll make your favorite chicken 'n' dumplings. I sure could use a Timmy massage! I took a tumble off the back steps, don't know what happened just lost my balance. Anyway, I must've pulled a muscle in my back. Next time you come, if you rub my back for me, I promise we can sit here and watch programs and I'll give you a first-rate foot massage. Don't be angry with me for trying to save you from the fiery furnace. You are my precious son.

I love you. Mama.

P.S. Miss Valley is hoping you'll do a talk for the auxiliary and the historical society. She's got a slide projector so if you've got slide pictures to show from your trip, she's ready.

TIMOTHY

Dear Mama,

Be careful on those steps! I've met the most amazing woman on this trip. Her name is Dr. Cathy Turkel and she is an ordained Presbyterian minister. She is only a few years younger than you. We had a long talk about you and the church. She is helping me to understand your letters and why you're turning to the Bible. She maintains that fear is driving your letters, and all these Bible verses, this is fear talking. I understand why you are scared, these are scary times for gay people, and Dr. Turkel has helped me view things from your vantage point. She's an amazing woman and she has been on several digs here in Israel. She said, usually on digs, there are many *strata* or layers of civilization stacked on top of each other. The first layer is typically the Jews, then the Christians built right on top of the Jews, and then the Muslim symbols are on top of that, each civilization building on top of the next. All of this fighting, in the name of God, all followers of Abraham, three great religions that share so much but cannot seem to get along. Dr. Turkel and I spent a day together digging at an ancient archeological site on the West Bank of the Dead Sea. It was hot and windy, a strange place, oddly beautiful. Anyway, this site is unique because in this *one* location researchers have found symbols of all three monotheistic religions mixed together in the *same* strata. Dr. Turkel says the site shows us, through archeology, that once we all lived together in peace and that we can again. This entire trip has been about us learning to talk to people who *hate* each other. I know you *love* me. I'll probably be home by the time you get this letter but I want *us* to work towards understanding.

Love, Tim.

P.S. Went to the Port of Ashod yesterday and met members of the Israeli Navy. Their uniforms reminded me of the picture of you have of Daddy with his Navy buddies in Japan - made me think of him. Hope he's hanging in there.

Timothy exits.

MYRTLE

Dear Tim,

Your talk was wonderful at the library. You'd of made a good teacher. Everyone in town that I meet tells me how lucky I am to have you for a son. Don't be mad at me for saying so but I was glad you did not bring Michael. Daddy's pretty good today. He said to send you'uns some money.

Love, Mama. First Kings 15:12.

Lights shift. Timothy's out-going message is heard.

TIMOTHY (V.O.)

You've reached Timothy Davidson and Michael Hernandez we are unable to come to the phone right now. If this is business related please call Tim's office at the Carter Center for Peace 496-1105.

The machine BEEPS. Tim re-enters with a rolling suitcase. He carries a large stack of mail.

MYRTLE (ON THE PHONE)

Timmy, your Daddy is bad sick. They've taken him in the ambulance to the hospital. Come home.

He grabs the phone.

TIMOTHY

Mom? Mom! What's happened?

Lights shift. Actors transition. SOUND: a cacophony of phones RINGING, aborted Answering machine messages and BEEPS, HANG UPS, DIAL TONES are heard.

SCENE 5 DEBORAH/CHRIS

Deborah's out-going message is heard.

DEBORAH (V.O.)

You've reached Glen and Deborah Harrison's. We're out slaying dragons and putting out brush fires. Y'all leave us a message and we will give you a call just as soon as we can! Thanks!

SOUND - *Beep!*

CHRIS (LEAVING A MESSAGE)

Mother, you are not getting back to me! Please call me back.

Lights shift. Deborah reaches for the phone, dials waits, and listens to Chris's outgoing message.

CHRIS (V.O.)

This is Chris, I'm out -

Deborah loses her courage and hangs up.
SOUND: Dial tone. Lights shift.

CHRIS

March 15, 1988

Dear Mother,

I hope you and Daddy are well.
(MORE)

CHRIS (CONT'D)

Julie tells me things are frosty, but okay, between you. Please understand my decision to go to work full time for the Names project. My neighborhood, my community here, has been hit by the plague. I felt stupid walking past the AIDS Quilt offices everyday to go class to do *Alexander* technique. What bullshit! Alexander would make you cringe too, Mother. It is a cult, if you ask me. I do love acting, I really do. But, the day I walked into the Quilt office there was this mad amalgam of folks - young, old, gay, straight - sewing, working on these panels, these quilt pieces, I had - and I don't want to sound too 'left' coast for my mother, the cynic but - I had this feeling of peace, of belonging. It was the biggest "sense memory" I ever had, and I wasn't lying on a sprung floor "feeling a cloud of energy" or "breathing through the soles of my feet!" Suddenly, I had a crystal clear memory of Granny Harrison's quilts made from scrap pajamas. I still have one; I brought it out here with me. That quilt is tangible, it is something from home that can travel and cover me with love. It hit me, in that *moment*, that these people are TRYING, they are DOING, they are not just walking past. There's a beautiful young woman named Gert, she is the main seamstress, I've fallen in love with her! Well, not that way, spiritual love, with her, we are quite the team - she has a killer sense of humor. She reminds me of you. The Names Project gives meaning to my life in the midst of the *insanity* of all my friends dying. If this many deaths occurred in any other segment of the population there would be an unbelievable outcry, a public health emergency. We are going on the road soon with the Quilt, with several stops, then ending on the mall in Washington, D.C. I want to see you. Could I come home for a visit once the tour is done? Could you meet me at the airport Sunday evening May 15th? Is that Mother's day? Well, it is for me. Miss you. xxx C.

DEBORAH

(angry)

May 4th, 1988.

(MORE)

DEBORAH (CONT'D)

Dear Chris,

We received your letter right before Easter and I put it in a drawer until now. It was too painful. I haven't been sleeping and the emotional strain of your announcement has been too much. But you've forced my hand and I must deal with you. I can't work at all. I don't know if this letter even makes sense I am so upset but I am trying to hold it together. Your father has fallen into a deep depression. It hurts me terribly to say so, but you are not welcome here. Do NOT come to Atlanta after the tour. No one in our family will be there to meet you at the airport. We refuse to have anything to do with your "work" with AIDS. What would our friends think? When you took Daddy's money for college and DID NOT ENROLL, you crossed a line! That check was for your *tuition* and living expenses. You've squandered it and worse - you *lied* to us. A lie of omission is still a *lie*. You let us believe you were still in school. How could you do this to us? On top of everything else you've put us through? I cannot defend you any longer. Daddy blames me for you being gay. He says, I *spoiled* you and I suppose I did. Chris, how could take our money, money for school and give it to AIDS? Why in the world would you throw away your *talent* and your life traipsing around the country in a van full of hippies with the AIDS quilt? What you are doing will not make one little bit of difference. You cannot cure this disease. You are making a spectacle of yourself and embarrassing your family. Until you stop working with those AIDS people you are not welcome here and we will no longer support you financially. You have to grow up, my baby. Be a real man and get a decent job. Enclosed is a check from my mad money account. It is the last money you will ever get - and if Daddy knew I was giving it to you he would divorce me. Spend it wisely. This is the hardest letter I will ever have to write because I love you. Take this money, leave San Francisco, go somewhere, anywhere, get a haircut - start over and leave all this AIDS business behind you. Until you stop crusading for AIDS I must say goodbye. xxx
Love, M.

At his desk Chris holds up a check, pondering. His phone rings.

He does not answer. Chris' chirpy out-going message plays.

CHRIS (V.O.)

You've reached Chris. I'm out dancing somewhere in the Castro. Catch me if you can. But change first because you are NOT going to wear that if you want to be seen with me. Or, be boring and leave a message.

SOUND: Beep! Gert's voice comes over the answering machine.

GERT (V.O.)

I know you are there, Sweetness. Pick up. Listen, sister, we are going to fight this. There are some new drugs. My best friend is not going down without a fight. Boring, my ass. I have my hair done and my big girl shoes on. I will be there in fifteen minutes and we are going dancing!

Chris starts to change. He's going dancing.
Sound: Raucous Dance music plays. Actors transition.

SCENE 6 MYRTLE/TIMOTHY

As the actor reads, the actress sits at her table holding his letter.

TIMOTHY

April 26, 1989. Dear Mama. You weren't in the room when Daddy passed, so I need you to hear my story. It was late, or really early, around 3:30 a.m. I had fallen asleep with my head on his bed. Something woke me. I could sense a change in his skin, a sort of blue tone coming up from his feet. I knew he was leaving, Mama. I could see it. Since I knew this would be our last moments together I jumped into the bed with him and held his hands.

(MORE)

TIMOTHY (CONT'D)

I was stroking his face and telling him how much I loved him and how grateful I was for all he sacrificed for me, for my education, and that I was honored to be his son. I said, "Daddy, Mama tells me that I've disappointed you. I'm sorry if I've caused you pain. If you know about me and accept who I am please squeeze my hand." Mama, he squeezed my hand. He *accepted* me. His face was peaceful. Daddy knew that Michael was not my roommate. He *knew* and he accepted me. He gave me that gift before he passed. Can't you accept me too? I'm not asking you to choose me over your faith, but I am asking you to consider What would Jesus do? The Bible is a translation yes perhaps guided by the spirit but man-made. Please look at this list of verses from Dr. Turkel that support accepting differences and even same-sex relationships. I know how much the Bible means to you so I'm asking that you meditate or pray on these passages.

Love, Tim.

As Myrtle reads the following letter,
Timothy grows more and more upset.

MYRTLE

Dear Timmy,

That your telling about Daddy, ain't true. He wadn't in his mind at the end and he did not know enough to answer. These verses don't change your sin. You're not reading it right. There is no such of a thing as a devout gay Christian. I showed your letter to Pam. She's very upset, she claims you are twisting the Bible. Pam said that she was ashamed that you let Michael come to the hospital for everybody to see. She don't want Michael to come here no more and she 'specially don't want him around her babies because she says it will be a bad influence on them. You are always welcome in my home but please respect Pam's wishes and don't bring Michael here anymore. I've been through a lot and I just can't take any more upset.

(MORE)

MYRTLE (CONT'D)

I miss your daddy something awful.

Love, Mama.

Timothy writes. After Myrtle signs her name, she drops her pen and rubs her hand, squeezes and releases her fingers.

MYRTLE

(quietly)

Goodness me.

Lights shift.

TIMOTHY

(angry but controlled)

Dear Mama,

I've tried to answer all your letters with love, and the duty of a good son, but I cannot allow you or my sister's family to treat Michael unkindly. I hope you will come to accept me for who I am. Until then, please do not contact me. I will not open any more letters. I'm done. They hurt too much. I am making this defensive move because I feel you are never going to change. I strive to live a peaceful life. It hurts me to do so but I am abandoning you. Though we won't be seeing each other anymore, please know that I will always love you.

Timothy.

Myrtle visibly upset, reaches for her Bible as the lights change. Music. Actors transition.

SCENE 7 DEBORAH/CHRIS

Lights up on Chris' table he is sick.

CHRIS

Dear M., I have floaters in my eye. I'm on the AIDS ward at San Francisco General Hospital. Amongst the social outcasts left to die alone. I have malignant skin lesions called Kaposi's Sarcoma. Open sores. It's all so awful. I am sorry. I am ashamed. Three years ago, when I moved to the magical land of Tales of the City, I was so happy, but I was a foolish spoiled boy, only thought about having fun. I was handsome (*with a sad chuckle*) - not now! I wanted to be wanted, touched, desired and I wanted to have sex all the time. For the first time in my life I was away from the judging eyes of Georgia Southern Baptists. Coming out did not go well. I was so used to sneaking around at home and in college, couldn't let anyone know about the 'seedy' side of my life. I heard your and Daddy's comments about fags. The golden boy couldn't come out. How could I be anything less than perfect in your eyes? Perfect is hard mom. I was never *perfect*. Maybe if I'd valued myself more, if I had *accepted* my true self, I wouldn't have had sex with strangers or partied so much... I have an idea who infected me but I am so ashamed to say that I have no idea how many men I infected. This is my fault, I am being punished for my promiscuity. Sorry, but there, I have said it. My work with the Names project was my penance. I pray it makes up for any harm I did. I just wanted to be touched, to feel wanted, to belong. A lifetime of being "the other" and finally here in San Francisco I felt like I belonged. Well, I'm not pretty anymore and no one wants to touch me.

Chris takes the letter, crumples it up and drops it in his wastebasket.

Lights shift. Music. Time passes.

Deborah pushes the button on her answering machine, sounds of rewind and the time stamp voice says.

January 10th, 1989. 2:44 p.m. You have one new message.

There is a loud BEEP. Gert's voice is heard.

GERT (V.O.)

This is Gert Mullins. Do you know what day it is? His birthday? This is your son, lady. The letter you and your asshole husband sent broke Chris' heart. All he's ever done is love you. He is dying. Get your ass out here. The doctors can't *believe* he's still alive. God! The years I've spent hearing about his sainted "mother" and how much he loved you. You make me want to puke. What kind of mother are you? YOU should be here with him. His T-cell count is less than ONE. He is in the fetal position. How can you? - the years he spent working with the Quilt, advocating for change - helping others. What a great life he's lived. What fun we had together. We were *warriors* against stupidity, hatred and the God-damned N.I.H. What an idealistic, beautiful, intelligent person you raised. How in the world can you not be proud? Why in hell haven't you come? I think... you are afraid to face him. You've waited so long while he *begged* you to come. Well, now, he can't speak, so you're safe! He can't tell you how much you've hurt him. If you have one shred of decency, you will get your ass out here so he can see you. He *can* still see. Let him *see* your face so he can *die*. Get a ticket, bitch!

SOUND: phone disconnects with a deafening BUZZ. LIGHTS down on Deborah's table.

Chris in a SPOTLIGHT. He is in the throes of HAD (HIV Associated Dementia), he is in great pain. His eyes are wild and expressive. In reality, he can no longer speak. This is not reality. He speaks to us from another plane.

CHRIS

M come. Moooooom coming. C-ca-ca cold. Sweaty.. sh- sh-shaking. Pain... wait... for you. M, pleeeeeease come.

(MORE)

CHRIS (CONT'D)

Pain pulling... vomit, shit, drugs. Can't eat, can't sleep. Machines. I hear. "*Why is he still here?*" Nurses wear moon-suits, don't love me. No one touches me, but Gert and YOU - stroke my hair. (sings) *Skinamarinkadinkadink. Skinamarinkadoo. I love you. Hold my hand - - won't be scared - I go. Love you in morning... in the afternoon... want to go. Time. To. Go. M.... underneath the moon. M. Skinamarinkadinkadink. Skinamarinkadoo. Sorry... wasn't careful.... Sorry... got sick.*

With a lot of effort, he makes the American Sign Language hand signal for "I love you."

Love you..... M.

Lights up on Deborah. There is a FLASH like the flash of a Polaroid camera capturing the same exact moment in time across the continent.

Both Actors FREEZE.

Chris is in his pool of light, Deborah at her table. Chris' hand is still raised in the "I love you" sign.

Deborah's gasps, her face frozen in horror she knows that Chris is dead.

BLACKOUT.

The auto time-stamp voice says:

March 15th, 1989. 12:40 p.m. You have ten new messages.

Lights slowly up on Deborah. She is in shock, with great effort she plays her answering machine messages.

SOUND: BEEP!

JULIE (V.O.)

(upset)

Mother. Daddy just called. He was so upset I could barely make out his words. So, it's finally over. I am coming home. Jeff and I will be there by suppertime. Hang in there. Uh. Jeff's sister, Sherry, can keep the kids. Or, do you want them there? What will we say about his death? Oh, Mother, I'll do whatever you and Daddy want. I love you.

SOUND: BEEP!

A YOUNG GAY MAN (V.O.)

Mrs. Harrison, this is Kyle Duncan. Chris and I were in acting school together. I'm wondering about funeral plans. Several of us would like to attend. We will be having a memorial here in San Francisco, as well -

SOUND: BEEP!

SOUTHERN MATRON (V.O.)

(heavy southern accent)

Deborah, I am *so* sorry to hear about Chris. You let me know if I can do anything for you -

Deborah pushes the button, forwarding to the next message. SOUND: BEEP!

FUNERAL DIRECTOR (V.O.)

(deeply, reverent)

Mrs. Harrison. This is Greg Winthrop at Winthrop and Sons. We've received your son's ashes. Our chapel is available for services next Thursday evening or next Saturday morning.

(MORE)

FUNERAL DIRECTOR (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I received an obituary and the photo from your husband. I'll get it in order and you can proof it. We can take care of submitting the obituary. We need not say AIDS; mostly now, we are saying pneumonia to protect the families. Please let me know the details, as you are able. Will you be speaking at the service? Again, I'm sorry for your loss.

Lights shift. MUSIC. Chris' funeral.

Deborah slips on a coat and steps downstage. She is heavily sedated. She speaks with difficulty, she holds the DS edge of her table for support. The word "Chris" comes out of her like a plaintive cry.

DEBORAH

Chris...When Chris was born he had the most amazing head of hair. The nurses combed it and it just shined and shined, it was almost metallic, it shone like gold. Darling Chris, you will always be my golden boy. You were wonderful in your plays. Chris... I wish - I had - I wish -you- I wish I- Chris... Gleeeee - Gleuhhhnnn?

She looks around for her husband, falters, then collapses. BLACKOUT. Church music plays.

SCENE 8 MYRTLE/TIMOTHY

In darkness we hear the pre-recorded voice of a preacher.

PREACHER (V.O.)

In announcements: Miss Valley Oxley reminds us to bring your "Say good-bye to the '80's" clothing donations to the auxiliary. You'll be helping someone less fortunate ring in the new decade, with 'new to them' items. Brothers and Sisters - again today I am *concerned* by what's in the news... Turn to Romans, Chapter One. Verse 27.

(MORE)

PREACHER (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Men committed indecent acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.

Lights up on Myrtle in church holding her Bible. During the Bible reading, she stands, and raises her hand.

PREACHER (V.O.)

Due Penalty! That is what the Bible says. The *word* of God. These homosexual sinners have brought it on themselves! Yes, Sister Davidson, are you moved? Please come down and testify.

Myrtle is isolated by light, as she speaks, she glows, she is filled with grace.

MYRTLE

(quietly, respectfully, timidly)

Um... I grew up in this church. My grandfather founded this church. Daddy, Uncle Morris and Uncle Dan were Deacons. I was married in this church. My sisters, Bertie and Beth and I all went to and taught Sunday School. 'Course my little Barry and my husband Augustus are both buried in the graveyard. This church has been my rock. I have fund-raised and I have tithed. Preacher, you say AIDS is God's wrath and his judgment. You give us Bible verses to back up that claim. See, I've been prayin' and... *meditating* on what it means to be a Godly woman, a truly good woman. When I was little there was polio, and people had so much fear about that disease. Mama wouldn't let us near a swimming pool for fear we would catch it. They wadn't no cure, but there was love and faith. We did not *turn our backs* on them and leave them to die in agony. You say it is God's wrath and his judgement. Well... I am just one woman and I've not been to college, but I read the story of Christ as - forgiveness, acceptance and love.

(MORE)

MYRTLE (CONT'D)

Jesus knows we are all sinners, but if he were here today among us, I believe he would go to these young men that are infected, and he would touch them, bless them and forgive them. So preacher, I think maybe you are wrong. Maybe AIDS has come not as a curse on THEM, but as a test of *our* Christian charity. That is what I think.

Pause. Myrtle gathers her courage.

MYRTLE (CONT'D)

My Timothy is gay... I lost my youngest boy to cancer, I'll not lose my oldest son to... meanness... so... I am leaving this church... and I am not coming back until we leave off of this hatefulness and turn back to love.

Lights out on Myrtle.

INTERMISSION

ACT TWO

SCENE 1 TIMOTHY

Timothy enters DSR with a large rolling suitcase. He sits on the suitcase and writes a postcard.

TIMOTHY

Dear Michael, So glad to get your letter but I'm heartsick to hear Nathan has full blown AIDS. What is happening to our world? I'm sorry about the rudeness of hospital staff. Tell Nathan he will not end up on the street. If or when the hospital turns him out, we will find him a place. This 'no phone calls' rule at my leadership retreat is harsh! I ache for you, to kiss you, to hold you. You are right; our love has kept us alive and crazy as it sounds I look forward to growing old with you, because way too many of us are dying young. Thank God we found each other at Tech.

(MORE)

TIMOTHY (CONT'D)

Can't wait to see the new puppies!! See you at the train station on the 26th. Please thank Christian, Doug, Jeff, Guy, Randall, and Stephen for helping out while I'm away. Love, Tim.

Lights shift.

SCENE 2 DEBORAH

Deborah writes.

DEBORAH

Clay Reese, Esquire.
Reese, McCurdy and Candler.
310 North McDonough Street,
Decatur, Georgia

Dear Clay,

Enclosed please find my signed copy of the final divorce decree. Thanks for holding my hand through this process, being the grown-up in the room, and generally making Glen behave. He yells because he can't cry; he's always had a temper. I have been mulling over your advice to divorcees and widows - "What at first seems like a loss becomes over time an opportunity for something good." I can't see it that way right now. Right now, I just want to get away. So, I'm leaving next week on a slow boat to China. Maybe when I return I will take you up on the invitation to dinner, you are a true gentleman. Your Charlotte was a very lucky woman.

Regards, Deborah.

Deborah signs the letter and puts it in a legal size envelope. Music. Lights shift.

SCENE 3 MYRTLE/TIMOTHY

Timothy reads a postcard, then signs his name.

TIMOTHY

Dear Michael,

Only you could find a home for all fourteen puppies. Wow. The lady from the Irish Setter Club of America will recruit you. See you soon but not soon enough.

Love, Tim.

MYRTLE

Dear Timmy,

I don't know if you will open this letter or not but I wanted you to know that I love you and I miss you. Me and Sparkle are coming to see you and Michael. My sisters think I am foolish over this cat but if I don't bring Sparkle I am afraid they'll let him out and he'll get lost or worse. I reckon I am stupid over my cat. This past year and a half has been awful for me without your daddy but made so much worse because I didn't have you. Daddy is in a better place, I know that, and he is out of his pain. He visits me sometimes and he's helped me come to this decision. Though we haven't talked. I've thought about you everyday. I've prayed hard. It took me awhile but I've considered all of that you sent me about the Bible translations First Peter Chapter 3 verse 8-11 really rang out in my head. *"Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous: Not rendering evil for evil, or railing for railing: but contrariwise blessing; knowing that ye are thereunto called, that ye should inherit a blessing. For he that will love life, and see good days, let him refrain his tongue from evil, and his lips that they speak no guile: Let him eschew evil, and do good; let him seek peace."* That un spoke to me because I believe you are a man of peace. I want you to know that I've left Kenansville Baptist, at least until they get rid of this yelling preacher.

(MORE)

MYRTLE (CONT'D)

(pause) I had been reading that passage and the preacher started up with what you'd call "railing" and I was called down to testify and I told the whole church that I could not stand by anymore and hear hateful sermons against gays, because my own son is gay. I got to thinking...maybe AIDS is not a curse but a contrariwise blessing, a blessing we all need to inherit from God teaching us all about love. I told him as much. It was real scary to do it, I won't lie, but ever since I did it, I feel lighter. *(pause)* I have to put up some pickles, and do some freezing. I have had a bumper crop of squash this year. Aunt Bertie is going to take care of my flowers and the mail so, quick as I get my chores done, I am loading up Daddy's Cadillac and I am coming down there to Atlanta to see you and Michael. You know Uncle Dixon passed last year and your Auntie Odessa has said I can come and stay with her - I'm aiming to stay there and help Odessa until I bring you around. I wanted to give you fair warning but by the time you get this letter I'll probably be there, I'm thinking it'll be Sunday evening. I hope you won't turn me out.

Love, Mama.

P.S. I am bringing lots of food and stacks of papers where Miss Valley Oxley still writes about you. Folks make fun of her for being so high tone but if it wasn't for her I wouldn't have known about your new job.

Music. Actor transitions.

SCENE 4 DEBORAH

Deborah digs through a postal crate full of MAIL. She sorts through it throwing out junk mail. She pushes the button on her answering machine.

Auto time-stamp voice says:

March 3rd, 1991. You have thirteen new messages.

The messages are from salesmen or financial advisors. She listens to two-seconds of each message then hits “delete” until she hears her daughter’s voice.

JULIE (V.O.)

Hey Mom. You have to take Daddy’s name off your message. Unless there’s something you’re not telling me... Are y’all getting back together?

Deborah laughs sardonically.

JULIE (V.O.) (CONT’D)

Thanks so much for all the lovely gifts. You spoil my boys rotten. They are so cute in their little Chinese silk pajamas. I’ll send you a picture. Talk soon. Love you. Change your message.

Deborah pushes the button and we hear the deep voice, of Glen, Deborah’s ex-husband.

GLEN (V.O.)

Hey. I’m just checking on you. Force of habit. Julie said you were doing okay. Well, shit.... I don’t know what to say.

Deborah sighs and pushes the button.

ROBIN (V.O.)

Hey lady! I loved getting your postcards. What a trip! Call me, so we can go to lunch and plan. What are you going to do now? Charity work awaits you. Are you still interested? We need you at the hospital.

Deborah continues to throw away mail and scroll through voice messages, but stops when she hears the message from the Names Project.

RITCHIE (V.O.)
(effeminate)

Hello. This is Ritchie Crownfield, I'm a volunteer from the Names Project. Thank you for your donation. I'm just following up to see if you received your packet -

Deborah hits the button stopping playback and quickly searches through the rest of her mail. She locates a legal-size envelope, slices it with her letter opener and reads aloud as she skims through the instruction letter.

DEBORAH

Dear Loved One, Thank you for your interest in creating a quilt panel in memory of your loved one. Panels can be vertical or horizontal, the finished panel must be 3 feet by 6 feet – *(she continues reading instructions.)* ...backing helps to keep panels clean when they are laid out on the ground. *(pause)* Every panel should be accompanied by a *letter* describing the person...details about the quilt maker... donations... caring for this piece of living history. Recently the quilt was designated by the Smithsonian Institute as the biggest piece of folk art in the world. Hmm. Well, my goodness.

She puts down the instructions, gets a piece of typing paper, places it in her typewriter and types. She's a good typist.

DEBORAH (CONT'D)

(deep breath)

You can do this.

Dear Friends,

As some of you may know, I lost my beloved son, Chris, to AIDS two years ago. I want to make a memorial panel for the AIDS Quilt, that bears his name. Chris spent the last few years of his life working for a cure, this seems like a fitting tribute and the best way to honor his memory. Enclosed, please find a red heart. If you write a memory or quote about Chris, or attach a photo, I'll include it in our *'hearts full of love'* quilt panel for Chris. Please use the enclosed self addressed stamped envelope. Thank you for being his friend and for your memories. Please share this letter with anyone who might have known Chris.

Many thanks, Chris' mother, Deborah Harrison.

She pulls the paper out of the typewriter.

DEBORAH (CONT'D)

(taking deep breaths)

Okay. Okay. Okay.

Lights shift.

SCENE 5 TIMOTHY

Lights up on Timothy, listening to his answering machine. SOUND: BEEP.

CARL (V.O.)

Hi, Mr. Davidson, it's Carl Lukes. I left three colored folders on your desk, with the remaining figures for the grant proposal.

(MORE)

CARL (V.O.) (CONT'D)

I can work a half day tomorrow, then I have to leave town for Thanksgiving. Thanks for this internship I've learned so much.

ROBIN (V.O.)

Hello Timothy. Robin Stanley here. Good news! I have three more volunteers for the hospital association. All three of these ladies came down to Crawford Long and did orientation. One is my best friend - Deborah, she's just gone through a divorce. She's *loaded*, I'm talking *Harrison Construction* loaded. Miz Deborah volunteered to do *hospice* work and *specified* working with AIDS patients. There's a story there. You love her up, handsome. She could be a real help to you. If we don't talk before then, HAPPY THANKSGIVING!

Phone rings. Timothy answers.

TIMOTHY

Timothy Davidson, Atlanta Hospital Association. Oh hey, babe. You're home? Sorry, I didn't realize it was this late. I have to get this grant proposal turned in before I leave. (Pause) What in the world is wrong with the dogs? (Pause) Hello? (Pause) Everything all right? (Pause) What? (Pause) You are kidding. She is? With Sparkle? Well... uh... tell her - NO. (Pause) No! She cannot come in. I don't want to see her. Call me back when she's gone.

SCENE 6 DEBORAH

Deborah sews on Chris' panel, a folded muslin quilt piece in-progress is draped over the edge of her table. The light blinks on her answering machine. She pushes play.

The auto time-stamp voice says:

June 12, 1991 you have one new message.

CINDY (V.O.)

Hello, Mrs. Harrison, this is Cindy McMullin. Chris and I worked together painting sets at A. C. T. He always made me laugh, just a really good person. I got your letter about the hearts for his panel. I sent you one, hope it's not too late. He was a funny guy, and talented, and I miss him. Bye.

Deborah picks up a letter, rips across it with a letter opener, a paper heart falls out. Deborah reads the first few lines of the letter aloud in conjunction with a pre-recorded voiceover of Gert.

GERT/DEBORAH

Dear Mrs. Harrison. Here's a memory for you - a Xerox copy of the letter in your handwriting -

As GERT'S voice fills the theatre, we focus on Deborah's stricken face.

GERT (V.O.)

- the letter *cutting* him *out* of your life. The letter that broke his heart. This does not *die* with Chris! How dare you - now that he's gone, play the grieving mother? You only want to remember what you like - the baby, the boy - you have no desire to know the *man*. You ask for memories; I have them. He gave me *everything*, including your awful letter. At the time I was confused, *why* would he give your letter to me? I realize now it was so painful, he couldn't bear to keep it. He needed a witness to his *pain*. Here's your memory - take back HIS heart - *cut* in half - attached to your letter. Because that is what your letter did - it *cut* his heart in half. He *grieved* you. It's your turn. You missed the last three years in the life of a *prince*. If you want anything else - other memories, and I have it all;

(MORE)

GERT (V.O.) (CONT'D)

photos, theatre programs from his shows, antiques from his apartment, you come to the Quilt office, walk through our door, see where he worked, accept who he really was. If you can do that, I will give you everything I have of Chris' because I *hear* Chris telling me to give you another chance, though I don't think you deserve it. Gert.

Deborah picks up the half a heart which has fallen out of the envelope. She holds the quilt fabric to her chest and sobs.

SCENE 7 TIMOTHY/DEBORAH

Timothy at his desk writing. Phone rings.

TIMOTHY

Hello, Timothy Davidson. How did you get this number?
No. Please don't call me.

Timothy slams the phone down. He picks up the phone and dials.

TIMOTHY (CONT'D)

(warily)

Hey babe. Did you give her my office number? --Well, I don't know how you can forgive her. ---- She sided with Pam against you. Don't see my sister Pam camping out. - - She did? That's nice but... Look, hon, I gotta get back to work. We'll talk about this when I get home. I have a bunch of donor letters to get out. Okay. Love you. Bye.

Timothy writes.

TIMOTHY

September 30, 1991

Dear Mrs. Harrison,

(MORE)

TIMOTHY (CONT'D)

What a pleasure it was to finally meet you in person. Your reputation preceded you. Our mutual friend Robin told me what a dynamic woman you are. You did not disappoint. Thank you for a lovely lunch. I've always heard about the Polaris but I had never been there. Spending the afternoon spinning in a circle with you, and hearing about your life and travels was a treat. I was thinking as we revolved - that you and Atlanta are alike, the embodiment of the south, old and new, unafraid to acknowledge past mistakes but looking forward to a shining future. I could almost *see* change as we turned. Thank you for sharing with me about the loss of your son. That is not an easy story for you to tell but I felt privileged that you would share it with me. Hospice work is a place for grace. We are all striving for peace and grace. I wish you peace. Thank you for your service as a volunteer and for your interest in our work. We could not survive without dedicated volunteers like you. Sincerely,

Timothy Davidson, President Atlanta Hospital Association.

DEBORAH

October 10, 1991

Dear Timothy,

You are an impressive young man. I'm amazed that someone as young as you is so focused on caring for the old and the sick. I have to admit, it was bittersweet to meet you. When you spoke of your work and of your home life with your partner, my mind kept flashing to what Chris' life could have been. Robin mentioned that funds are running low. Your work is so important. Surely you qualify for some grants? Can't you get some governmental support? Keep up the good work.

Sincerely, Deborah Harrison.

TIMOTHY

Dear Mrs. Harrison,

Thanks for your note. Unfortunately, the demand for hospice beds in greater Atlanta far out strips our capacity. We are overwhelmed. Sometimes I feel like I am holding my finger in the dyke, so many people need help. We do receive some federal and state monies but across the board cuts have deeply affected us. We are on the front lines struggling to find enough beds each day. We still have a great deal of education to do. Sadly, many terminal AIDS patients are dealing not only with their disease, but also with the stigma and prejudice surrounding an AIDS diagnosis. We are currently looking for angel donors to create and staff a new hospice wing devoted to HIV/AIDS patients. Could you help us find sponsors? Normally there's a long dance between our organization and donors, but I thought perhaps given your story you'd be someone we could count on for support. Unfortunately, many of our steadfast hospital donors are reluctant to allocate funds for AIDS patients. It's hard not to get discouraged. Would you be willing to open up your Rolodex and help us in this work?

Sincerely yours, Timothy Davidson, Atlanta Hospital Association.

DEBORAH

Dear Timothy,

I am interested in helping however I am not in a place to financially help to you right now. The truth is, Glen still controls my purse-strings. We aren't on good terms right now and I am reluctant to reach out to our friends for fear of embarrassing or angering Glen. I hope you understand my delicate position.

Sincerely, Deborah Harrison.

Phone rings and Deborah answers it.

DEBORAH

(on the phone)

Hello? Oh, hello Glen.--- You do realize that we are divorced? No. Julie just left. Yes. No. Well... I've been volunteering --- at the Hospital. No, They have not. It's always money with you. They haven't asked me for a dime. Do you? MmmHmmm. Well I'll keep it in mind. Goodbye, Glen.

She picks up the letter from Timothy. Lights shift. Time passes. Deborah dials the phone excitedly. Waits for the outgoing message.

TIMOTHY (V.O.)

You've reached Timothy Davidson and Michael Hernandez please leave us a message and we will get back to you as soon as possible.

(SOUND: BEEP.)

DEBORAH (ON THE PHONE)

Hi Timothy, It's Deborah. Success! We have a private dining room at the Druid Hills Country club for a one o'clock lunch Thursday May 21st, the year of our Lord 1992! It took some doing but I've corralled some folks who owe me. Be there. NO excuses. I'm sorry it took this long but we are on the verge of big money. Keep the faith.

Lights shift. Pre-recorded outgoing message plays. Timothy dials the phone and listens to Deborah's outgoing message.

DEBORAH (V.O.)

You've reached Deborah Harrison. Please leave a message and I'll get back to you. Unless, you are trying to sell me something! Know that I will never ever call you back because I don't need another blessed thing. I'm downsizing.

TIMOTHY

(leaving a message))

Hi Deborah. Great message. It's Tim. Thank you for all the encouragement and the introductions. Something good has already come out of the lunch at Druid Hills. You were amazing, and so right about rich folks wanting to see their *names* on things. Michael and I would like to invite you to our place for brunch next Sunday, to say thank you. It's casual. If weather holds we'll eat on the deck. Hope you can make it.

Tim hangs up. Deborah writes. Timothy opens a fancy card.

DEBORAH

Dear Tim,

Thank you for the lovely brunch. Michael is a keeper. He can cook and do woodworking! That staircase is amazing. If he is missing just know that I've come in the night and kidnapped him and you won't get him back until my lake house is redone. Don't be upset with Michael for sharing with me about your mother. What a story. She's got some tenacity and I have to say I envy her. Take it from a lady with a suitcase full of regrets. Make amends while you can. Life is short my friend. Your mom may not be perfect - none of us are! But she keeps on showing up and that says a lot. My darling daddy used to tell me "*showing up is half the battle.*" So forgive my meddling but you have a good life and a lovely home with someone who loves you. Be the bigger person and let her in. It's not too late. At least read her letter.

Signed, your-bossy-friend-Deborah-who-should-mind-her-own-damn-business.

Timothy opens his desk drawer, searches around, then removes Myrtle's letter.

He takes it out of the already opened envelope and reads parts out loud.

TIMOTHY
(reading)

Though we haven't talked. I've thought about you everyday. It took me awhile but I've considered all of the verses you sent me. First Peter Chapter 3 verse 8-11 ---- That one spoke to me because you are a man of peace. ---- at least until they get rid of this yelling preacher.

Timothy laughs.

TIMOTHY (CONT'D)

---- I was called to testify. I told the whole church that I could not stand by anymore and hear hateful sermons against gays, because my own son is gay.

Timothy wipes his eyes.

Lights shift. Time passes. Timothy dials the phone, waits. SOUND. Deborah's out-going message.

DEBORAH (V.O.)

You've reached Deborah Harrison. Please leave a message and I'll get back to you. Unless, you are trying to sell me something! Know that I will never ever call you back because I don't need another blessed thing. I'm downsizing.

SOUND answering machine BEEPS.

TIMOTHY (ON THE PHONE)

(leaving a message)

Hi Deborah. Got your note. You can't have Michael but thank you for the advice about Mom. You'll be pleased to know that Michael has organized what he is calling the "Camp Davidson-Mother/Son Peace accords" Wish us luck.

SCENE 8 MYRTLE/TIMOTHY

Lights up on Myrtle at her table.

MYRTLE

Dear Timmy,

I miss y'all already. You've certainly got your hands full with those dogs! They are adorable. I had the biggest time nussing with them. Tickled me to death that Michael did not know about nussing and him such a dog lover. Cooking with Michael and showing him how to do chicken 'n' dumplings was really special. I hadn't made it in a long, long time. I reckon it was too sad for me because it was Daddy's favorite. Just felt right that I would teach it to Michael - made me feel useful - after he'd worked so hard on my floor. He'll make a pretty good cook and it eases my mind that he has learnt how to make your and Daddy's favorite dish so well 'cause I'm not getting any younger! It felt like old times to do all of that cooking with Michael; reminded me of when Mary, Beth, Bertie and Shorty and me would be cooking up a storm back in the day. I am soooo tickled with the my floor! The quilt pattern is just beautiful -the way all the different colors of wood come together, and I really loved that we found a pattern we could all agree on. Anybody that comes over, I march them right back here to my kitchen, to show them my quilt-patterned floor. Hope I am not being too house-proud but it sure is pretty. To thank Michael for all of his hard work, I'm putting in a few of my best recipes. Since he likes tart, he will love the rhubarb one.

(MORE)

MYRTLE (CONT'D)

Son, you've done a good job keeping the starter for Daddy's secret barbecue sauce going - that would really tickle him. Since you 'uns enjoy barbecuing, I'm putting in my slaw recipe for Michael. It will be easy for him. Sparkle is meowing so I better sign off and pay him some mind. Give Michael a hug from me and thank him for taking care of you. Hits so cute how he calls everybody initials. Tell him "M." says "hey" and I am proud to be the "M" in his alphabet.

Love, Mama.

Lights shift. Time passes. SOUND: Phone rings Timothy picks up.

TIMOTHY

(on the phone)

Timothy Davidson, Atlanta Hospital Association. --

Timothy is shocked to hear from his estranged sister and works hard to control his anger.

TIMOTHY (CONT'D)

Pam? -Well, this is a surprise.... What? ...how - how long has she? - a stroke? - Exactly when were you going to tell me? - Can she speak? We just had such a great... Yes...of course I am bringing Michael-- he and mom are --I'll get on the road as soon as possible.

Music. Actors transition. Projections take us forward in time.

Timothy comes forward, speaking directly to the audience as if he's addressing a large group, as the speech goes on he's emotional but maintains his composure.

TIMOTHY

Can you hear me in the back? My mother, Myrtle, suffered a debilitating stroke two years ago. Since I believe our Atlanta hospital system to be there best there is, I did not hesitate to bring my mother from rural North Carolina to Atlanta. Intellectually, I knew I was making a smart decision, but what I learned from you - her caregivers - far surpassed anything I learned in college. Hospice work is more than a job, it is a calling. Mom's decline was pretty rapid. Her hospice workers, many of whom are in this room today, were truly astounding, you taught me how to let my Mom go with grace. Mama was a devout Christian, she believed in heaven. She believed in angels. I hope I will see her again. Many of us aren't able or willing to be with our loved ones when they leave this life. With amazing grace, you are there. The work you do every day borders on the divine. Thank you for being there for the sick and the dying, for being everyday angels. Mama is surely holding a special place in heaven for each of you. Last year was a tough one for me personally, I lost my mother, and professionally it looked like we might have to close our doors. I was losing my faith. A very special friend of mine has turned her own grief into something positive. Through her courage and her generosity the Atlanta Hospital Association has created a *tangible* way to thank you, my angels, here on earth, in this lifetime, for the heroic work you do. So, starting January 1st, 1995, not only will there be a dedicated HIV/AIDS hospice wing, but every single hospice worker, LVN, LPN, and direct care staff will receive sick-pay, paid family leave, vacation days and, most importantly, *healthcare* through our system for you and your family members.

SOUND rousing applause. Lights shift.
Timothy exits.

SCENE 9 DEBORAH/TIMOTHY

Deborah enters in evening attire. The completed quilt panel is draped across her table.
Underneath the table is a large mailing BOX.

SOUND: offstage doorbell and Timothy's voice exchanging hellos with an offstage maid. He enters wearing a tuxedo.

TIMOTHY

Deborah? Hello, Marta said it would okay for me to come on in.

DEBORAH

Yes, of course. Thanks for coming. It is silly of me really to ask you. But... when you offered to drive me to the hospital gala...I've put this off and off, you know I completed it two years ago but I couldn't let go. Because...I just didn't want to do this alone, and Glen and Julie will just fall apart and Chris was such a happy guy - I didn't want this to be a sad occasion. If I have learned anything from - what is it now - three years of doing hospice work - it is, the soul does not die, something good, some energy, some part of the spirit, survives.

TIMOTHY

Yes, I think so. Well now after my mom. I know so.

DEBORAH

Okay, I'm ready.

She holds out the quilt. Timothy takes one corner of the quilt. They stretch the quilt out long, then slowly, tenderly, ritualistically, they fold the quilt, while walking towards each other. Timothy hands the folded panel to Deborah. Deborah hesitates before putting the panel in the box. She struggles to maintain her composure, this is final, this is Chris' coffin.

DEBORAH

Could you do the tape?

He picks up a packing tape dispenser and begins his work.

TIMOTHY

What about the letter?

DEBORAH

It's in there.

TIMOTHY

You're not going to read it to me?

DEBORAH

Well, it's already sealed. It took me forever to write the letter almost longer than making the quilt! It's in there with a big check from Glen.

Timothy gives her a firm look.

DEBORAH

I made a copy of the letter for Julie.

He holds his ground, waiting. She relents, goes to her desk, puts on her glasses and reads him the letter.

DEBORAH

June 11, 1995.

Dear Names Project,

This quilt is an amalgam of all the stages of my son Chris' life. He was an actor so there are photos and programs from plays at different theatres in Atlanta, where he was born and raised and began acting, and lots from San Francisco where he worked and where he died. It took me a long time to know and accept all the facets of my son's life. As a child, and as a young man, we were very close. You can see from the photos he was very handsome - laughing and smiling all the time. He could totally charm the socks off of anyone, especially me! His daddy claims I spoiled him rotten. I plead guilty to that charge. When we found out Chris was gay, and then later when we learned that he was sick, I had to face the fact that I didn't really know my only son, the son I professed to love so well. Only now, do I realize, that I only wanted to know the parts of Chris' life that were comfortable or pleasing to me. It has taken me *years* to accept him as he was. Though I will never get over losing Chris, assembling this quilt has been a comfort, it has helped me to better know my son and I think we have assembled a fitting tribute to the *whole* person, the funny wonderful man, Christopher Glenwood Harrison. The two comedy masks in the middle of the panel are not a mistake. We intentionally chose to forgo the actor's tragedy mask, no frowns for Chris, only the two smiling masks of comedy because Chris' favorite parts were in comedies and he always made us laugh. Chris had the ability to find humor in any situation. Chris spent the last years of his life working for a cure with you at the Names Project. I did not support him in that work; it was a chasm I could not cross at that time. All I can say is... I know more now than I did then. I was not there for my son, at the end of his life, something I deeply regret.

Deborah starts to crack and Timothy hands her a tissue, comforts her and she continues.

DEBORAH

Please accept this panel and the enclosed donation in honor of the best son in the world. Chris and I wrote lots of letters when he first moved to San Francisco, in a way, this letter is to him. So I'll sign off as we always did -

xxx, three kisses, Love, M.

She is crying. Timothy applauds her.

TIMOTHY

Well done, Mom! Well done. Chris would be proud.

She and Timothy hug. He picks up the package. She blows her nose and repairs her make-up.

TIMOTHY (CONT'D)

If we hustle, I can get this to the good P. O. at Peachtree Station before they close and it will be on it's way. Oh, that reminds me! So it's not too stodgy tonight, we've added a little "sparkle", a really fun deejay who loves the seventies. Will you *do the hustle* with me?

DEBORAH

Chris and I used to do all those dances, I'm afraid I've forgotten them.

TIMOTHY

Tch. Tch. Tch. A true dancer never forgets.

Timothy extends his hand in a grand gesture. 1970's disco music swells. They do a few dance moves and then freeze in a tableau.

Sparkling lights shimmer all over the stage and the audience, like a fabulous giant disco ball of love.

The End.

(Curtain call is a choreographed disco dance with all four characters.)