

THE OTHER SIDE OF DESPAIR

by Sophie Gilbert

Characters

SABRINA
LILIAN
KAREN
MOTHER
FATHER
CRITIC
DESPAIR

Act I—Scene 1

Setting: Cemetery, present day. At center stage is a bench. Several tombstones sit upstage off center. Otherwise, the stage is bare.

At rise, SABRINA is sitting at the stage right end of the bench. She has her hands together as in prayer, and her head is bowed.

LILIAN

(Enters from stage left and approaches the bench)

Excuse me. *(beat)* Ma'am? *(clears throat)* Excuse me!

SABRINA

(lifts head and looks at LILIAN)

Yes?

LILIAN

Did you see anybody lay a bouquet of lilies on that grave over there?

(points offstage)

SABRINA

I was praying.

LILIAN

So, you didn't see anyone?

SABRINA

I was *praying*.

LILIAN

So, you *didn't* see anyone. I come to my sister's grave on her birthday to bring her fresh lilies, and someone was here ahead of me. I'd like to know who it was.

SABRINA

Why?

LILIAN

Because I don't know anyone else who would put flowers on my sister's grave. And it was my responsibility. *Mine*.

SABRINA

It's been just me here, praying for my sister.

LILIAN

(sits next to SABRINA on the bench)

Mind if I sit down? I guess we have that in common. We both lost a sister. I don't like coming here. Cemeteries give me the willies.

SABRINA

I love cemeteries. Always have.

LILIAN

I keep thinking of all the bodies lying under the ground. So creepy.

SABRINA

In my experience it's the living you have to watch out for. The dead are quiet and leave you alone.

LILIAN

I like to do what I have to do and then leave.

SABRINA

Well, I'm not stopping you.

LILIAN

Are you sure you didn't see anyone?

SABRINA

I am the only person who has been here all morning.

LILIAN

Then who put flowers on my sister's grave?

SABRINA

I'm sure your sister appreciates your flowers just as much.

LILIAN

Karen left instructions that she wanted her sister to put lilies on her grave on her birthday. I'm her only sister. Her *only* sister. (beat) So, what about your sister? The one you were praying for?

SABRINA

She and I don't get along. That's why I was praying.

LILIAN

And she's buried here?

SABRINA

Maybe someday. For now, she's still alive.

LILIAN

Were you praying for her to die?

SABRINA

No. My other sister is buried just over there.

(SABRINA points off stage in the general direction that LILIAN had pointed earlier)

She and I were close.

LILIAN

Do you miss your sister?

SABRINA

With all my heart.

LILIAN

Both sisters? Or just the one buried over there?

SABRINA

Both. The loss of one sister to cancer is heart-breaking, but the loss of another sister to irreconcilable differences is like a cancer that never kills. It just keeps causing a pain that grows more and more unbearable.

LILIAN

I lost my sister last year to cancer, and I haven't seen my brother in years. He didn't even come to the funeral. Our parents gave him everything, and he disappeared. Ungrateful wretch.

SABRINA

Perhaps there was a good reason to disappear. It's best not to assume things.

LILIAN

He was the youngest. He got all the attention, got away with everything. Mom thought he could do no wrong. I always had to walk to school, but after I learned how to drive, she made me take him to school. Unfair.

SABRINA

That's all very interesting, but I would like to continue my prayer, if you don't mind.

LILIAN

Come on, I know you know something about those flowers. I don't know who you are, but you look familiar. You look a little like my sister Karen, but you couldn't be her.

SABRINA

I just want to say my prayer in peace. Please.

LILIAN

Did you put flowers on my sister's grave?

SABRINA

(folds hands in prayer and bows head in silence)

LILIAN

Yes or no. Did you put flowers on my sister's grave? *(beat)* I'll leave you alone, but you have to answer my question.

SABRINA

It's been a long time, but you haven't changed a bit. I brought Lilies for Karen's birthday, and I put them on her grave.

LILIAN

I *knew* it!

SABRINA

I answered your question. There is nothing more to say.

LILIAN

Who are you?

SABRINA

You said you would leave me alone if I answered your question.

LILIAN

Who are you? One of my distant cousins, I presume. Well, nobody asked you to put Lilies on Karen's grave. *I'm* her sister. That's my job!

SABRINA

I know, Lilian. You and Karen were close when you were children, but you grew apart as adults. In her last years, Karen distanced herself from you.

LILIAN

I don't remember you at all. What's your name?

SABRINA

Sabrina.

LILIAN

I never heard of anyone in the family with that name.

SABRINA

You don't recognize me?

LILIAN

Like I said, you look familiar.

SABRINA

We grew up together in the same household. You, Karen, and me. And mom and dad.

LILIAN

Darren?

SABRINA

My name's Sabrina.

LILIAN

Darren, you walked out ages ago, and suddenly you turn up like *this*?

SABRINA

I told you and Karen that I was trans about twenty years ago.

LILIAN

I thought you came to your senses!

SABRINA

I was trans then, and I am trans now. I was trans when I came into this world, and I will be trans when I die. Nothing I or you do will ever change that.

LILIAN

But I thought...

SABRINA

And I never walked out on the family. I walked out on *you*. Karen and I were close up until she died.

LILIAN

But why?

SABRINA

We had this talk years ago, Lilian. Remember? Right after mom and dad passed away. You wouldn't accept me, so I stopped talking about it in front of you. The only thing that changed was me closing myself off from you.

LILIAN

I prayed for you so many times to find God. When I heard you found a church, I was so relieved that you were leaving that transgender nonsense behind.

SABRINA

It's not nonsense. My church accepts me for who I am.

LILIAN

Doesn't your church ever address this with you? The Bible is very clear about what God wants.

SABRINA

My church is open and affirming. They accept everyone. The Bible is also very clear about not judging people for being different.

LILIAN

Darren, there are so many passages that make it clear that God wants us to live as He created us. Men cannot be women, and women cannot be men. Men cannot lie down with men...

SABRINA

Again, my name is *Sabrina*. And God made me transgender. I did not ask for this. You have no idea the *hell* I have lived through in trying to be what everyone expected me to be.

LILIAN

And you have no idea the hell I have been through. But that all changed when I accepted God into my heart. God did not make you transgender. That can't possibly be true.

SABRINA

It is true.

LILIAN

No, it isn't. The Bible is so clear about what is and is not acceptable.

SABRINA

I don't know which Bible you have been reading, but the one I read doesn't mention the word transgender anywhere.

LILIAN

Well, of course not. They didn't have that word back then. But there are so many passages that warn against men lying with men that we know what God wants for us.

SABRINA

What about all the passages that tell people to stone others to death? How many people have you stoned?

LILIAN

Of course, nobody stones anyone today. But when it comes to being transgender--

SABRINA

Now stop right there. We had this argument years ago, and it got us nowhere. Obviously, nothing has changed. Like it or not, I am your sister Sabrina. This is who I am, and there is nothing you can do about it. You can accept me or not. That's up to you. But I ask that you respect me.

LILIAN

It would be wrong of me to not voice my opinion.

SABRINA

You have voiced your opinion, many times. This is *my* life. I do not need your approval to live my life the way I need to live.

LILIAN

But it's wrong--

SABRINA

Respect me, that's all I ask. If you can't do that, there is no place for you in my life.

LILIAN

I don't know what to say.

SABRINA

How about 'goodbye.'

LILIAN

I can't have a conversation with you?

SABRINA

When Karen left those instructions for her sister to put lilies on her grave on her birthday, it was me she had in mind. She and I talked about it before she passed on. Karen was always there for me, and I for her. She fully accepted me, and embraced me, as her sister.

LILIAN

She's probably in hell right now because of you.

SABRINA

(stands)

How dare you say that! Go away!

LILIAN

(stands, looks at Sabrina, shakes her head)

I had no idea you were going to react this way. *(Exits stage left)*

SABRINA

(Sighs. Sits in silent sadness)

Lights dim to black.

Act 1—Scene 2

A spotlight on SABRINA who is still seated on the bench. Her head is bowed and hands together in prayer.

SABRINA

(Finishes prayer and raises her head)

That was for you, Karen. I hope you're not in hell.

KAREN

(Spotlight on Karen, standing behind the bench, stage left)

I'm not.

SABRINA

(Smiling)

Karen, is that you?

KAREN

In the flesh...sorry, correction. In the spirit. I keep forgetting.

SABRINA

Lilian said you were in hell because of me.

KAREN

Yeah, I heard. As much as she likes to think she's an expert on hell, she's not.

SABRINA

That's good to know.

KAREN

Don't let her get to you.

SABRINA

I try, but there is so much pain. Her words cut into me and reopen old wounds.

KAREN

You were always so quiet when we were growing up. So serious. So awkward in social situations. I always knew there was something going on that I didn't understand.

SABRINA

I knew I was different, but I didn't know how to talk about it. I didn't understand it. I always felt like I was playing a role that I had no idea how to play.

KAREN

Did you ever tell Mom?

Lights go up on the stage and spotlights turn off.

MOTHER

(Enters from stage left and sits next to SABRINA)

SABRINA

Yes, I did.

MOTHER

(Looks at SABRINA and smiles)

What did you want to talk about?

SABRINA

Mom, I think I was supposed to be a girl.

MOTHER

Really? Are you sure?

SABRINA

Pretty sure.

MOTHER

Let me take you dress shopping tomorrow, and we can stop by the makeup counter for a mother-daughter make over.

(MOTHER embraces SABRINA warmly)

KAREN

Wait. That really happened?

SABRINA

No, it didn't. *(MOTHER releases SABRINA)*. That was my fantasy of how I wanted it to happen.

KAREN

But you DID tell her?

SABRINA

Well, sort of.

KAREN

Brie, did you tell her or not?

SABRINA

I told her I wanted to talk with her about something, and we sat down to have the conversation.

KAREN

And? What did you say?

SABRINA

I sat across from her and I looked her in the eye. *(SABRINA looks MOTHER in the eye, and stares in silence for a long pause)*.

MOTHER

Darren? What did you want to talk about?

SABRINA

I, uh, have something I want to talk about.

MOTHER

Yes, I know. So, what is it?

SABRINA

Um, well, I'm not sure how to say it.

MOTHER

Just say it.

SABRINA

Okay. Um, ...

(Long pause...)

MOTHER

I don't have all night. What did you want to say?

SABRINA

Okay, I'm just going to come right out and say it. (Pause)...

MOTHER

Yes?

SABRINA

I really love that potato salad you make. I want to learn how to make it.

MOTHER

(Smiles brightly)

Well, I use Miracle Whip, and no mustard....

KAREN

That's it? Potato salad?

SABRINA

I sat down to tell her at least three times, and I could never bring myself to tell her. I knew almost nothing about the subject back in those days. I didn't know how to describe it to someone who was unaffected, and I had no way to defend my conclusion if challenged. Besides, I was under age and had nowhere to go if she rejected me.

KAREN

I doubt she would have rejected you.

SABRINA

She would have blamed herself. She was so good at that. And I would have felt guilty for making her feel that way.

KAREN

You may be right, but—

SABRINA

I never spoke about it until just shortly after she died. Imagine, I had spent my whole life up until that point trying to bury my true self deep inside my subconscious, pretending that it didn't exist. The silence was deafening. The more I tried to bury it, the stronger it became. After Mom died, it all came pouring out of me.

KAREN

I'm so sorry you had to go through that.

SABRINA

Ironically, Mom unknowingly pointed me in the right direction. We were at the public library together because I had to find a biography to write a report on for school. She pulled a book from the shelf and said...

MOTHER

This one is about a man who became a woman. (*MOTHER hands a copy of the book to SABRINA, who takes it.*)

SABRINA

It was the Autobiography of Christine Jorgensen. I spent the rest of the time saying the name over and over in my head so that I would remember it. When I learned how to drive, I went back to the library and found that book. I took it in a corner of the library and devoured it.

MOTHER

You checked it out. I found it in your room one day.

SABRINA

So, you knew?

MOTHER

I suspected. And I did what you did. I pretended it didn't exist. I didn't want it to be true, and I told myself you would grow out of it. As far as I knew, you did just that.

SABRINA

But it was all a lie. Looking back, I regret that I never told you. I was your child, and you never even knew me.

MOTHER

I did the best I could. There was so much we didn't understand back then.

SABRINA

I wish I could go back in time and do it all different.

MOTHER

Leave the past alone. Live for today, and do not look back.

SABRINA

I wasted so much of my life.

MOTHER

But you learned to let go of denial. I never did. And now I'm gone. But you still have a chance to grow and become more. You are so much more enlightened than I ever was.

SABRINA

Thank you, Mom. (They embrace. Then MOTHER exits stage left).

KAREN

Mom loved you.

SABRINA

I know.

KAREN

What about Dad?

SABRINA

I never told him either, though I always felt like he would have been more accepting. He was so kind and so generous.

KAREN

So, why didn't you tell him?

SABRINA

I don't know. I guess it was because of his agoraphobia. It was hard for him to hold down a job, and he didn't need anything else weighing him down.

KAREN

I mostly remember him sitting in his chair reading.

FATHER

(Enters from stage left holding a book. He sits next to SABRINA, opens the book, and starts to read.)

SABRINA

Dad? Do you have a minute?

FATHER

(Looks up from the book and smiles)

Sure. What's up?

SABRINA

What do you think happens when we die?

FATHER

Well, I don't know for sure. Perhaps we experience a time to reflect on our lives. To think back on what we learned.

SABRINA

What about heaven and hell?

FATHER

Perhaps they are more like states of being rather than places. We strive for perfection, and we learn along the way. I think that's the purpose of life, to learn and become better people.

SABRINA

But aren't we judged when we die?

FATHER

I have always believed more in the spirit of the law, and not the letter of the law. It isn't about the words on the page, but about the bigger picture. We must learn to love each other. That's the bottom line.

SABRINA

So John Lennon was right. All you need is love.

FATHER

Yes. Well, maybe it's not all we need, but it's high on the list.

SABRINA

And life is about becoming the best we can be?

FATHER

Seems to me. That's what I get when I read the Bible. That's how I live my life.

SABRINA

How do you feel about transgender people?

FATHER

They need love, too. Just like the rest of us.

SABRINA

What if I told you that I am transgender?

FATHER

I would love you the same as I always have.

SABRINA

Dad, I had a really hard time when you passed away. Neither one of us were very talkative when you were alive, but I always felt a closeness to you that I never felt with anyone else.

FATHER

I saw your struggle. That's why I visited you.

SABRINA

Yes...you did! I remember. I saw your face in a dream. You smiled, and you waved. I was so startled that I woke up.

FATHER

Did you understand my message?

SABRINA

You wanted me to know that you were okay. That there is no need to feel sad for you.

FATHER

That's right. And I will always be with you. I accept you exactly as you are.

SABRINA

Thank you.

FATHER

Death is not something to fear. When it is your time, you will understand. But it is not your time yet. Do you understand?

SABRINA

Yeah, I guess.

FATHER

You have more to do. Much more. Have faith, and you will go far.

SABRINA

Coming from you, that means a lot.

FATHER

I have to go now. But you are never alone. (He exits stage left)

KAREN

Why did he say 'It's not your time yet. Do you understand?'

SABRINA

I have suicide ideation. Since I was a kid. Almost ever since I can remember.

KAREN

But you've never attempted, though. Right?

SABRINA

You sound like my therapist. Correct. I've never attempted.

KAREN

And no current plan to attempt?

SABRINA

I really miss him. It was so good to talk with him again.

KAREN

Brie, no current plan. Right?

SABRINA

I don't want to talk about it.

KAREN

But we're going to talk about it anyway. Do you have a plan or not?

SABRINA

Seeing Lilian again really shook me up. I wasn't expecting to run into her out here. I came to bring you the lilies you asked for, and to pray. I wasn't going to be here much longer. Then she shows up and confronts me.

KAREN

Don't mind her. She has her own struggles. Her words and actions are about her, not you. Now, do you have a plan to take your own life?

SABRINA

I always have a plan. It's always there, lurking in the back of my mind. The plan changes and evolves, depending on my state of mind, or the situation I am in. Sometimes I notice something that brings to mind a way to die. Every so often, I Google suicide methods and read about the pros and cons of various ways to do it.

KAREN

I agree with Dad. It's not your time yet.

SABRINA

Maybe.

KAREN

I mean, really. You don't want to die before your time. Trust me.

SABRINA

Why? What would happen?

KAREN

Think of all that you could accomplish. You already made it through the hard part. Now, you are the person you always wanted to be.

SABRINA

It's still hard. Being me takes a lot of patience and a thick skin. It's not fair.

KAREN

I couldn't even imagine what it's like for you. But please don't give up.

SABRINA

It really hurts that my own sister rejects me.

KAREN

I had conversations with Lilian in the past about your eventual transition.

Lights fade to black. Spotlight up on KAREN. Then a second spotlight up on LILIAN on the right side of KAREN.

LILIAN

But it's wrong. You need to help me convince him of that.

KAREN

You're never going to convince him. Some people are just born that way. There is nothing you can do.

LILIAN

We have to nip this in the bud. I don't want to see him throw his life away.

KAREN

I know it makes you uncomfortable, but you'll need to find a way to accept it. There is nothing you can do about it. And there may come a time when he will need to transition.

LILIAN

Oh no! That can't happen!

KAREN

What if it does happen? Are you going to reject him? Is that really what you want?

LILIAN

Of course, that's not what I want! I want to prevent any of that from happening! But you need to help me. He won't listen to me, but he might listen to you.

KAREN

He listens to me because I respect him. If I try to interfere in his life, he's going to stop listening to me.

LILIAN

But it's so wrong! I can't stand by and watch him give in to this sick behavior!

KAREN

Can't you see that not everyone sees things the way you do? We all have different experiences, and we all have our own path to walk. There are many paths to understanding truth.

LILIAN

No! There is only ONE path! Only ONE way that is righteous! All other paths are false!

KAREN

You can't really believe that!

LILIAN

I HAVE to believe it! After all I have been through in my life, I found that one path, the only path! And it has made a HUGE difference for me! Everything Dad taught us, everything Dad's church taught us, was so wrong! I never felt like I belonged there, like they respected me. It wasn't until I found a new church that it all made sense to me. A church with rules, and standards, and teachings that led me to focus on what is important. It changed my life for the better, and it breaks my heart that you cannot see that!

KAREN

You found a path that works for you. Great! But it doesn't work that way for everyone.

LILIAN

I can't believe that! I CAN'T!

KAREN

Why can't you love him for who he is?

LILIAN

Because it isn't love to support people's falsehoods. I express my love for him by guiding him to the right path.

KAREN

That doesn't work. All you will do is turn him against you.

LILIAN

I have to try! I wish I had tried harder with Mom. She hadn't been to church in years. I felt so bad when she died, knowing I couldn't save her from hell fire.

SABRINA

Stop right there! *(Lights go up on the entire scene and spotlights dim. SABRINA is standing, facing LILIAN).*

LILIAN

(Continues to face KAREN and does not acknowledge SABRINA)

SABRINA

You have no right to say that! You act like you speak for God! Nobody speaks for God! Look at me when I talk to you! Look at me! You shut up! You have no idea the damage you are causing!

KAREN

Brie! Brie!

SABRINA

You ignorant disgrace! You have no right to say such horrible things! How dare you!

KAREN

Stop it, Brie!

SABRINA

I don't ever want to see you again! EVER!

KAREN

She can't hear you!

SABRINA

Read a book! You're so ignorant! Mom had a horrible experience at church when she was a kid! You know that! She was one of the most spiritual people I've ever known!

KAREN

Stop! SHE CAN'T HEAR YOU!

SABRINA

(To KAREN) What do you mean she can't hear me? She's standing right there!

KAREN

She isn't really here.

SABRINA

What?

KAREN

I was showing you a memory of the past. Lilian is still living. She is not really here. She is a projection of what I remember of my conversation with her. You cannot talk to her. Not like this.

SABRINA

What about Mom and Dad? Were they really here?

KAREN

I can't answer that. Maybe. I don't know.

SABRINA

They were right here. Part of our conversation was from my memory, but the rest was not from my memory. They both told me things I couldn't have known.

KAREN

They both could have been projections from your mind. You started with what you remember, but you could have just filled in the rest with what you expected them to say.

SABRINA

So, they weren't really here?

KAREN

Again, I don't know. Only you can know that.

SABRINA

But I don't know that.

KAREN

Search your soul. The answer is there for you to discover.

SABRINA

Wait. What about you? Are you really here?

KAREN

You already know the answer.

SABRINA

Our conversation seems so real. You look and sound like my sister. But you have to be real. You just showed me a memory of yours. Your conversation with Lilian.

KAREN

Did I ever tell you about that conversation when I was living? Maybe my memory was really your memory of me telling you about my memory.

SABRINA

Maybe. I don't know. *(Pause)* Wait. What about the fact that Lilian couldn't answer me? You said it was because she was still living.

KAREN

Maybe I said that because that's what you expected me to say. Or what you wanted me to say. Maybe she couldn't hear you because you weren't ready for her to respond.

SABRINA

This is weird. Now I'm confused. I feel like you are gaslighting me. You are making me doubt myself.

KAREN

Would I do something like that to you?

SABRINA

No. You wouldn't.

KAREN

Maybe you are gaslighting yourself. Have you thought of that?

SABRINA

That's not even possible. Is it?

KAREN

Brie, I hope you figure it out. You are a good person. Smart. Smarter than I'll ever be. And so creative. Sometimes, though, you think too much. Lilian really hurt you. For years, her words have made a sore spot in your heart. It's up to you to resolve it. The answers are all there. Inside you.

SABRINA

Why did you have to leave me? Why did you have to die? I miss you so much.

KAREN

It was my time. That's all. None of us lives forever.

SABRINA

It was so good to see you again. To talk with you.

KAREN

Whenever you want to talk with me, just look inside. I will always be there.

SABRINA

Okay.

KAREN

Brie, remember, it's not your time yet.

SABRINA

Yeah, so you keep saying.

Karen exits.

SABRINA

Pauses, looks around at the headstones for a moment.

I love you, Karen! Nothing could have stopped me from being here to carry out your request!

SABRINA touches one of the headstones.