

Take Down The Letters - Sample

By Sue Schleifer

Scene 1

SETTING: Interior of LYNN's kitchen.

BEFORE RISE: Music from the 1970s is playing as the audience enters the theater.

AT RISE: LYNN and JOYCE sit at the kitchen table.

LYNN

Would you quit already! I don't need or want another therapist. I need you to be my mom.

JOYCE

Honey, I'm really happy you called me to come over today. I've been worried about you.
(Pause) You hadn't told me you're seeing a therapist.

LYNN

Well, I am. It just doesn't seem to be helping. I'm so tired all the time.

JOYCE

I know it's hard. Do you cry at work?

LYNN

No, I would never do that. I've hardly cried at all since Paul died. At work I'm mostly fine, distracted I guess. I've made mistakes and forgotten to do some things. That never happened in the past.

JOYCE

You never made mistakes? Wow, I can't imagine.

LYNN

There's something else. I just feel like I still don't know the whole story.

JOYCE

Really? It's been two years. You questioned the doctors, extensively. Examined his death from so many angles. He had a heart attack.

LYNN

Mom, how many times do I have to tell you. He didn't have a heart attack; he died of sudden cardiac arrest. There's a difference.

JOYCE

Tell me again?

LYNN

It's a sudden unexpected death caused by loss of heart function.

JOYCE

Well it was sudden.

LYNN

I can't stop thinking that I could have done something, to prevent his death. Or that there was a sign I should have noticed. Maybe we ate too many eggs.

JOYCE

Paul was skinny as a bean pole. How could you have known this would happen? I think you're grabbing at straws.

LYNN

What else do I have to hold onto? Maybe there was something Paul didn't tell me. A clue that I haven't discovered.

JOYCE

(Pulls from her purse a newspaper folded to a partially filled in crosswords puzzle)

That reminds me. What's a seven-letter word for drop-dead?

LYNN

What? You're not even listening to me!

JOYCE

Got it. Croaked! Clue? Honey, maybe it's time to move on. Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say that. What about a clue?

LYNN

I don't know. It's just a feeling, like there's more.

JOYCE

You are starting to sound like me.

LYNN

No way!

JOYCE

You always accuse me of being "woowoo". Now you're getting all mystical, wondering if there was something else.

LYNN

It's just a feeling. Like something I may have forgotten that Paul told me. It's not mystical. At least I don't think so. He died too young, and he left me without an instruction manual on how to proceed.

JOYCE

I wonder if you would've wanted an instruction manual.

(LYNN stands up and pours them both mugs of coffee)

LYNN

This may seem petty to you, but it's taken me months to figure out how to make coffee. How many beans do I grind to make just two cups? How do I make it taste the same way Paul did? And then, I realized I'll never make it the same way he did. Because he made it with love, whether he knew it or not. Frankly, I'm not sure I recognized it either. But I do now. It's the small things that I miss the most.

JOYCE

After your dad died, I remembered the small things too. I cried so much. You know, I still cherish the small things.

LYNN

At least you had time to say good bye to dad.

JOYCE

You didn't watch the Brené Brown TED talk I told you about, did you? If you had, you'd realize that saying "at least" is not the way to express empathy.

LYNN

Oh my god. And you're the model of empathy?

JOYCE

I'm trying, Lynn. Really, I **am** trying.

LYNN

Mom, I need to tell you something.

JOYCE

What is it? Are you okay?

LYNN

I felt abandoned.

JOYCE

By Paul?

LYNN

No! By you and Dad, when you left so abruptly for Minnesota. And of all places.

JOYCE

What? Well this is a surprise. You were in your 20's, occupied with graduate school.

LYNN

Mom, I'm just telling you how I felt, at the time.

JOYCE

But why now? Why bring this up 30 years later?

LYNN

Maybe it's my lame way of expressing why I haven't exactly embraced you since you moved back home.

JOYCE

Well, I've wondered about that. Honey, after your dad lost his job, I had to get a better position quickly. And, I felt so lucky to find a great one. I miss my work now, and I really had no idea we'd stay in Minnesota so long.

LYNN

I didn't think you'd stay there after Dad passed. And then it took you so long to move back after Paul died.

JOYCE

I know. It took me longer than I thought it would too. When I got back here I thought I could be of some help to you. And frankly, I thought we would do fun things together. You know, it hasn't been easy for me either.

LYNN

You seemed to think that we could just be best pals again the minute you moved back. I, I wasn't ready.

JOYCE

Are you ready now? Because I brought you something I thought you'd like. A poem.

(JOYCE hands LYNN a piece of paper)

You look white as a ghost. What's going on?

LYNN

This is the same poem that a friend sent me. I don't understand this poem! Why have you both given it to me?

JOYCE

Really! That's fascinating! I love synchronicity! You know, with poetry you may not understand it until you've read it a few times. Keep it with you and pull it out now and again. Why don't you read a few lines out loud now?

LYNN

(Reluctantly reads a bit and then sets down poem)

Love after Love

By Derek Walcott

The time will come
when, with elation,
you will greet yourself arriving
at your own door, in your own mirror,
and each will smile at the other's welcome,
and say, sit here. Eat.
You will love again the stranger who was your self.

(LYNN sighs, folds the poem and puts it into her pocket. She gets up and pours them glasses of water.)

I'm worried about Ethan. He's been coming home more frequently, I think to check on me. But we just can't seem to talk about Paul, or how we're feeling. Ethan asked me how I was doing and all I could say was "fine." Then just as I was going to ask him a question, his friend Alex dropped by and off they went. I headed to the couch and ended up falling asleep. This has happened so many times. We just can't seem to break the pattern. I'm happy that Ethan has friends, because...well, I don't really. Paul was my friend. God, I miss hanging out with him, working on our house projects, just being with him...

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 2

SETTING: Interiors of JOYCE and LYNN's homes.

AT RISE: LYNN is in her kitchen.

(LYNN sits at her kitchen table with a cardboard box filled with letters. She stares at the box and wonders if she should open it. She peers in and then closes it. Then she frantically looks through it. She takes out a letter, skims it and then puts it back and takes out another. She pulls out a blank piece of paper and a pen, counts the letters in the box, and makes notes. She looks at the postmarks on the envelopes and makes additional notes. She calls JOYCE.)

JOYCE

Hello.

LYNN

Mom, I've got to talk with you!

JOYCE

You haven't been answering my phone calls, and now you're calling me with such urgency?

LYNN

I found out he had a girlfriend.

JOYCE

Oh, I see.

LYNN

You do?

JOYCE

Well I see why you might be calling me back now.

LYNN

Can I come over?

JOYCE

Yes, of course.

(LYNN goes to JOYCE's home)

JOYCE

Tell me what's going on.

LYNN

How could I not have known?

JOYCE

How could you not have known what?

LYNN

That he had a girlfriend.

JOYCE

While you were married?

LYNN

No. Well, at least I don't think so.

JOYCE

What are you saying then?

LYNN

I found a box of letters. Up high on a shelf in his closet. I was finally ready to start going through his clothes. And there it was.

JOYCE

Cleaning out his closet, that's a step I was hoping you'd take. I'm glad you finally got to it.

LYNN

(LYNN rolls her eyes)

You don't understand. I found a box of letters. He had a girlfriend who wrote him 108 fuckin' letters.

JOYCE

Did you say 108? That **is** significant.

LYNN

Yeah. Can you believe they wrote that many letters? What do you mean significant?

JOYCE

Well, 108's a sacred number in some Eastern religions. (Pauses) That is a lot of letters, isn't it?

LYNN

I wasn't sure at first if I should open the box.

JOYCE

That reminds me of Pandora.

LYNN

What are you talking about? Are you changing the subject?

JOYCE

Pandora's Box. It's a Greek myth. It sounds like you did, open the box.

LYNN

Yes, and I took an inventory.

JOYCE

What do you mean you took an inventory?

LYNN

Well I had to know. How many letters did she write him? What were the dates? Did she write to him when we were together?

JOYCE

Did she?

LYNN

I don't know yet. I'm just getting a sense of things. It seems that Paul kept most of the letters in order. The first one I found was in 1972.

JOYCE

That was a long time ago. Remind me of when you were married?

LYNN

1981. October 31st, 1981.

JOYCE

That's right. Halloween! I never did understand why you chose that day to get married. What was the date of the last letter?

LYNN

1981, November. Oh, and there was a Christmas Card. That was the last letter in the box. But that's not the point.

JOYCE

Oh? What is the point?

LYNN

That he saved her letters. It makes me wonder what else I don't know. He never told me about her. Or did he? Why can't I remember? He must have written letters to her too. Should I read the letters?

JOYCE

You haven't read any yet?

LYNN

What do you mean, yet? You think I should read them?

JOYCE

Well, that's up to you. Just from what you said, I got the impression that you had read, at least a few.

LYNN

You're right. I have read a few. Do you know what her name is? Starshine! Who would name their daughter Starshine?

(LYNN's mood shifts)

Mom, it's like I'm hearing voices.

(JOYCE looks questioningly at her daughter) (Lights rise on STARSHINE)

STARSHINE

Yes! Freedom! I could unpack my clothes and wait around to meet my roommate. Or... I could go check out Telegraph....

(She steps down forward and looks around. She is now outside her dorm building and after a moment sees someone she knows)

Hi. (pause) Wow. Yes, I remember you. From orientation. (pause) I can't believe you remembered this was my dorm. Paul, right? (pause) I was just going out to explore a bit. (pause) Sure, let's go.

(Lights dim on STARSHINE)

LYNN

I want to read the letters, but I don't know. (Pause) Oh my god. I just thought of something.

JOYCE

What's that?

LYNN

You know that poem you gave me?

JOYCE

Yes.

LYNN

Didn't it have a line about letters? Take down the love letters?

(She shudders)

You knew?

JOYCE

I knew what?

LYNN

You knew that Paul saved letters.

JOYCE

No, I didn't. How could I have known that? That's amazing though, isn't it. There's that synchronicity again.

LYNN

Could my friend have known about the letters? Is that why she sent me the poem? Oh my god.

(END OF SCENE)

Scene 3

SETTING: STARSHINE is in Santa Barbara in her mom's backyard.
Interior of LYNN's kitchen.

AT RISE: STARSHINE writes a letter and speaks it out loud. LYNN
reads the letter at her kitchen table.

STARSHINE

Dear Paul.

LYNN

I never wrote a "Dear Paul" letter. Why didn't I?

STARSHINE

I'm sitting in the backyard after a day at home reading and talking with mom. You'd love it here now. The wind is blowing gently. Well maybe more than gently. I almost lost this letter to the wind. I so wish you were here. We could go to the beach, fly a kite, and watch the sunset! I hope your spring break at home is going okay. Have you told your parents yet?

(Lights dim on STARSHINE)

(JOYCE arrives at LYNN'S house and knocks)

JOYCE

Yoo-hoo! Anybody home?

LYNN

I read a couple more letters. I had to. I just need to know.

JOYCE

Hello to you, too. What do you need to know?

LYNN

I realize there's so much I don't know about Paul, from before we married. And maybe after too?! How can this be? I always felt he was my best friend.

JOYCE

Do the letters change that? It seemed like you were best friends. When you first dated, did you talk about past relationships? You may recall that I don't know much about the early days of your relationship with Paul.

LYNN

Oh mom. Can't you just let that go. The thing is, I don't remember us talking about that kind of stuff. We just fell into being together.

JOYCE

What did you share about your past?

LYNN

(Looks puzzled)

My past? My past was so boring. What was there to share? (Pauses) You know what I'm realizing? We worked alongside each other in the lab before we went out, on a real date. It's like we missed the early stages, the excitement. We just kind of eased into the relationship. Do you think Paul would have kept the letters if he didn't want me to read them?

JOYCE

I wonder...wonder if he made a conscious decision about that? Maybe he put them in the closet when you moved in together and never thought about them again.

LYNN

Really? Do you think? I guess it's possible. (Pause) I thought I'd stay up all night and read all of them at once. But I can't do it. I can read one, maybe two at a time. Then I'm so exhausted. Why didn't he save letters from me?

JOYCE

Did you write him letters?

LYNN

No, I guess not! We were always together. Why would I write him letters?

(Lynn stands and puts eggs into an egg carton)

Do you want some eggs?

JOYCE

I'd love some.

LYNN

You know, our first big home project was replacing the plumbing. Then we decided to build the chicken coop. Actually it was Paul's idea. We named each chicken, and it was fun to watch them run around. Paul loved going out mornings to say hello to them.

LYNN (CONTINUED)

He'd collect the eggs and carefully place them in the basket, and carry them into the house. Now, I've taken on that job. Well, that's just one of many jobs I have to do. But this one brings me pleasure. Sadness, and pleasure.

(Lights rise on STARSHINE as she writes a letter and says it out loud)

STARSHINE

I know it's got to be hard to tell your parents, but I hope you do it during break. I think you'll feel better after you tell them. I still can't believe your lottery number was so low.

(Lights dim on STARSHINE)

LYNN

Mom, did you know Paul's dad was career military?

JOYCE

No, I didn't. How could I have known that? I never met his parents.

LYNN

And Paul decided to be a conscientious objector! Can you imagine how hard it would be for him to make that decision? On the other hand, I just can't imagine him in the service. I did some research about how to be a "C.O". You had to prove you had a good reason to refuse service. It could be based on religion, your morals, and some other reason. Shit, I can't recall the third thing. What really bugs me is that I don't know which he chose!

JOYCE

I wonder too, which reason he chose. You said this was in 1972, during the Viet Nam war.

LYNN

Yes. I knew he took two years out of college, but until now I didn't know why. I just assumed he didn't have the money for tuition. I don't remember talking about what must have been a huge deal in his life! He could have gone to Vietnam! He could have died! Why didn't I ask him more questions? I gotta go. I'll see you later.

(LYNN heads back to her house)

(JOYCE talks out loud to herself)

JOYCE

Why don't you ask me how I am? What's going on in my life? It's all about you and your damn letters. I know you're hurting, and I'm sorry about that. But I don't feel so great either. I've come back to Santa Barbara all alone. My old friends have either left or died. It's not the same here anymore and my own daughter, you, you don't even see me.

(END OF SCENE)