The Flu Season
Production History

*The Flu Season* was first produced on April 7, 2003, by the Gate Theatre in London. The director was Erica Whyman, the designer was Soutra Gilmour, the lighting designer was Anthony Simpson and the sound designer was Michael Oliva. The cast was:

**Prologue**
- Martin Parr

**Epilogue**
- Alan Cox

**Man**
- Matthew Delamere
- Raquel Cassidy

**Woman**
- Damien Thomas

**Doctor**
- Pamela Miles

Dramatis Personae

**Prologue**
A narrator, male (see Production Notes following the play)

**Epilogue**
A narrator, male (see Production Notes following the play)

**Man**
Intelligent, somewhat scrappy, late twenties or so

**Woman**
Intelligent, somewhat delicate, late twenties or so

**Doctor**
Male, doctoral, dignified though somewhat distracted, fifties or so

**Nurse**
Female, maternal, also dignified though somewhat distracted, early fifties or so

Setting

The play takes place in a mental health institution of a not very specific type. (Though not specific, it is very certainly not meant to be any kind of shocking or cruel environment. *The Flu Season* is not in any way a critique of the mental health industry or of psychoanalysis. It is a play about the difficulty of love, the difficulty of being human, of making art.) The play also takes place in a theater, as each narrator makes clear.
We tell our little story, staring out. We come up with a beginning while knowing the end, and this is trouble. We trudge on, into winter, losing ground, looking back, trying, slipping, telling a tale of summer, a sinking feeling amid the leaving geese and slush. It's coming, little one. Truth. Real cold. Now, where's my shoes?

—from the film
By Dint of the Bridge's Collapse

PROLOGUE (Enters, in darkness. Footsteps. Pause): Darkness and footsteps. A little pause. (Pause) It's quiet and dark. But you knew that. (Pause) I could leave it at that. I could leave it all alone, leave us all uncomforted by the shaky fiction of anything shared, of any common story. Let us wreck ourselves in the dark, shiver closer to death, slowly, unnoticeably, instead of making such a big production out of it. But I won't. So, savor it, the dark. Like everything, it's ending. Yes, as for the darkness, at least: The End. (Lights up) Hello. My name is Prologue. Welcome to a play whose title is The Snow Romance. It is a chronicle of love and no love, of interiors and exteriors, of weather, change, entry-level psychology, and time; but, oh, lo—what chronicle isn't. Composed one spring, it follows the lives of four or five people living in the season just previous. I'll be brief. We are in a sort of hospital. The time is almost winter. The lights fall.
(The lights don’t fall.)

EPILOGUE: Right. (Brief pause) A couple quick things. About the title, the play is now called *The Flu Season*. A lot of downtime has gone by since the first draft was written, or, quote, composed. The new title stands for the fatigue, for all the sick days, the sick years, wasted in coming up with a title at all. *The Flu Season*. I don’t know. Could use some work, another year of scribbling, erasing. There’s always a different word, some other title, something better the language might cough up. My character, we’ll call him “Epilogue.” Could have also been called “Regrets.” Or, “Mr. Sorry-So-Sorry.” Could have been called. I don’t know, “Steve Stevenson”—the names don’t matter. Can you hear me okay? Can you see me? (Motioning to the Prologue) He can’t. Strange. Theater. This. Certain things we have to live with. Little rules and lies. Anyway, I come later, after, a little more, maybe, coldly. I’ll revise a line, add an afterthought, subtract a feeling. I’ll try to speak plainly. But I liked that last part. It describes life. I quote: “I’ll be brief. We are in a sort of hospital. The time is almost winter. The lights fall.”

(The lights fall on the Prologue and Epilogue.)

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

The Man is sitting downstage, in very low light. The second half of the scene will take place on the other side of the stage, and the Woman and the Nurse can be seated there, now, in darkness, while the first half of the scene is played.

DOCTOR (Enters upstage, near a door): All alone in the all-dark, are we? Sitting in the twilight of the exit light, dreaming of some great difference, some healing hand, some heavenly or electrical light? Or just sitting there? Which? There’s a difference. Tell us. The shuffling coughing world awaits. Give us a little of your disquiet.

MAN: I’m not doing anything.

DOCTOR: Well, not anything or not, we still need the light. (He turns on a light switch. Lights up) It adds a sort of decorum to our proceedings, brightens up the otherwise muted
decor of our shadowy procession. And it helps us see. But how was it, without it?

MAN: Darker.

DOCTOR: I see. Less light. But what about you? How are you?

MAN: No.

DOCTOR: I'm sorry? I said, "How are you?"

MAN: I'm sorry, I thought you said, "Who are you?"

DOCTOR (Brief pause): Even if I had, wouldn't "No" still have been the wrong answer?

MAN: The mind doesn't work this way.

DOCTOR: What way?

MAN: Responsively. I don't know. Responsively.

DOCTOR: I'm sorry?

MAN: Nothing. Can I go lie down?

DOCTOR: First, I have to quickly ask you a question or two.

MAN (Takes a very large breath in and holds his breath. He speaks with great difficulty): Yur tha dogdo. You know bess.

DOCTOR: The first question is, (He reads) "In your personal dealings with people, with the certain persons who people your immediate surroundings, have you ever personally felt it humanly necessary to present, solely for the sole and lone purpose of individuality itself, a persona, such that . . . ."

(The Man is still holding his breath.)

This is not that important. Would you like to go lie down?

MAN (Huge exhalation): I really would.

DOCTOR: We can talk later. I do need you to sign something. Nothing very serious or breathtaking, just some more paper for the future to shred. A form. Strictly a formality. (He begins to fill out a form)

MAN (Watching the Doctor from across the desk): How do you do that?

DOCTOR: Do what?

MAN: Write upside down like that?

DOCTOR (Flips the paper around, showing that he was writing right side up): Voilà!

MAN: Oh, right. I get so used to seeing things from my own perspective.

DOCTOR: I see. From my own, I guess, yes? Please sign.

MAN (He signs): Voilà. (Looking at his signature) Look at that. It really is strictly a formality. This is me—strictly, formally me—but it's not the only me. There's a hundred ways I could do it, all different, all mine. Looking at my little slanted mess of a signature, I have to wonder where my life will take me.

DOCTOR: I'll show you your room.

MAN (Looking back down at his signature): I should have seen that somehow.

(The Doctor and Man exit. Lights up. The Nurse is at a desk, the Woman seated before it.)

NURSE: I think that would be fine.

WOMAN (Pause): What would? No one said anything. You're just going to start talking to me, totally out of the blue?

NURSE: I am. That's just how life goes. Maybe you've seen a baby born, or a grown-up die. Amazing. Totally out of the blue. And, as someone once said to someone, everything has to start somewhere.

WOMAN: Well, so, then, start.

NURSE: In fact, dear, we're almost finished. So, lastly, any allergy or injury or personal personal history that you would like to make public? Any distinguishing marks, inside or out? A birthmark in the shape of anything? Some internalized agony wholly without form? Any even sketchy sense of your
character to help us empathize with you, to help us live more empathically, more heroically, within the life-size form of our own familiar pain?

woman: No.
nurse: Splendid. I will duly note that. (She writes for ten or fifteen seconds in her notebook)
woman: Are they still spelling, "No," with just two letters, or is it more, now?
nurse: Oh, this—I'm sorry. I'm just scribbling. You're probably wondering where my little scribbles will take you. Yes? Either way, it all comes to something. A period, at least. A comma, or, dot-dot-dot, in some sad cases. (Pause) Well, I think you'll be a wonderful—
woman (Interrupting): No, I won't. I won't be a wonderful anything. Whatever noun was about to come out of you. I'll be here until I leave here, and I was only here because some family—reportedly mine—brought me here, and left me here.
nurse: Families are only groups of people. And groups of people mean well, they try. Unless they're angry mobs waving broken bottles and golf clubs, and even then, they still—in their way—try. Here, we also try to create a familial atmosphere. Or at least we try to act like a group of people. And the grounds are beautiful, this lovely time of year. The temperature dropping. Fall. Us, trying. The wonderful maple trees.
woman: Yes, wonderful wonderful. Beautiful trees shedding their leaves, as I disintegrate into an animal, snow gently falling onto the uncombed hair of me, a cold cold girl, a sometime bitch in heat.
nurse: Yes, well, you're tired, I'm sure, and possibly a little more elegiac than the situation seems to call for. I'll show you where your room is.

(They exit.)

PROLOGUE: In the world of our world, it is now late afternoon, a few days later. Our new admissions are settling in. The setting autumn sun is streaming through the thinning trees on the hospital property's edge, setting a kind of mood in the world. We are in the Crossroads Psychiatric Retreat Center. We are at a pay phone in the hall.

EPILOGUE: No argument here. It's getting darker, trees are dying. A few days later, a pay phone in the hall.

SCENE 2

The Man is standing near a pay phone. The Woman enters.

woman: I need to call somebody.
man: I'm waiting for someone to call.
woman: I'll only be a second.
man: What if you suddenly find something else to talk about?
woman: What if your phone call never comes?
man: What if the place you call is filled with people you haven't talked to in years? A line of loved ones and distant cousins, lined up through the house, waiting for their chance to get on the phone and twirl their hair and talk to you?
woman: What if the person you're saying is going to call wrote the number down wrong and then lost the tiny piece of paper and was lying in the first place when he said he'd call at all?
man: It's a she. And she'll call. Go make your second-long call somewhere else. This is for normal human use. Phone calls lasting into the minutes and hours, years of long-distance
and polite chattering, trailing off into raging and expensive silences. Humanity, on the horn. Conversation.

WOMAN: Fine. So make some conversation.

MAN: I will. (Pause) Nice weather I'm having, yes, I would have to agree with myself there. That's a nice haircut I have. Yes, thank you, it is but a sign of human civilization. Like standing up straight and eating worms, it's not something I can really take credit for. (The Woman begins to walk away) And I see you wander through life in a social architecture called the family, the rubble remains of which we build our new relations on. Yes, we do, and we use the same name and share the same features and we all move apart so as to later hold reunions. (The Woman is gone) Ice cream, you scream. This is how the mind works. Poorly. Around on the ruin of the last thought. I'm glad we had this little chat. Etcetera. "Social architecture." I'm an idiot. She has nice hair. A last ruined thought.

PROLOGUE: He is certainly outgoing and verbal, certainly expectant and full of hope, standing by a phone that doesn't take incoming calls. She is walking back and forth somewhere, ingoing, unverbal, biting her nails, rereading things, rereading her life. But cut to the offices of the doctor and the nurse! It is morning, days later.

EPILOGUE: In a little while, we begin to depart from an earlier reality, from the original little mess of real life we built our play on. Hardly even noticeable. All the sweat and pain. All the lying and pretending, the rereading, the revising into ruin. A signature move. It's only natural. If we could control life, it wouldn't be life. If we could control our likeness of it, it wouldn't be a likeness.

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SCENE 3

The Nurse is in a chair, the Woman on a couch. On the other side of the stage, in very separate light, the Doctor is in his chair, with the Man on a couch.

WOMAN: He stayed waiting, I left. That's the story. I don't know.

(Pause) Can I leave?

NURSE: In a little. Once—I'm reminded—I didn't know, either.

On a train, in a dress, in the winter. Me, and the snow coming down into the ocean that the tracks ran along, as if in some famous short story. I saw a horse, from the train. I was on my youthful way south to see if someone might marry me, a man I had already given my hand and the rest of my body to, because that's what you did when you did that in those days. Only a pony really. Are you cold? He said no, go home—essentially, get lost. That horse looked cold, standing in the middle of such a snowy and fictional-seeming winter. Or, pony. All the frozen marsh water around her. I never understood. The tall dead grasses. I assume it was a female. I was pretty. Not as pretty as you. Pretty enough, I thought, but, maybe not. What changed, I wanted to ask him. Cute, I guess. You would say. No, pretty, I was pretty when I was young. The way you are. The way you—I mean this as a compliment—will have been. Nice horse, pretty girl.

WOMAN: Thank you. I'm sorry, can I go?

NURSE: No, dear. What I learned from all this is that I didn't learn that much. Live and learn—but not that much. (Pause) We still have some time.

DOCTOR: How goes life here, too fast, too slow? Happily, lamentably, timelessly, around, not at all, so many choices—how goes it?
man: I saw someone, the other day. I tried to make conversation.
doctor: Really? Because, I saw someone, once. Once, I, yes, standing ankles-deep in a brook watching geese flying by, saw someone, once. I was thinking of the shape of a horse and trying to picture the cloud that might best represent it. Who comes along but—life is too remarkable—a woman. She was so pretty-looking, her collarbones, or, you know, clavicle, her clavicles, and so on, down the bones of her body. I climbed out of my water, crying hello, crying hi. I proposed all sorts of things to her. She slowly declined, over the coming months. I invited her to the ocean. She said no and no and never and then, one coming month, yes. We were together for a time. She threw me a surprise party. I had a mild stroke. Everyone came. She gave me an antique train set and I was rushed to the hospital. Some people knock looking backward as a way to live. I do not. Never did.
nurse: I've felt a lot. As many people have. Where I distinguish myself is, I stand outside at night. I try to make new constellations out of the old stars, if there are any old stars out. Sometimes it rains. Or there's sleet, or nothing. I don't know if this distinguishes myself. I remember I was so hurt. I stand there. Or I don't. Is this a lonely picture? I'm a professional. This may all seem as if it's... I don't know. But it isn't. Unless it is. And if so, then, there you go. But all you need to know is that I, like the rest, like you, sit here with a serious history, with little and real fears and dreams, a heart and two eyes, looking out, from a body of bones, watching you and the rest of the world for some sign. I'm looking at you. Hello. (Brief pause) We have a little more time.
doctor: I loved her and felt ugly. I grew to hate the way I walked, my stupid posture. I saw my dull reflection glaring at me from windows and mirrors, saying to me, "What are you looking at?" I asked myself, "Am I beautiful, inside?" No response, inside, except gurgling. None, without, except a different gurgling. People died. Winter and Summer Olympics passed. I slowly declined. I used to love the Butterfly, in swimming. The Downhill, in skiing. You probably don't see me as a man who loved so much. I, like everyone, was and was so very long. Summertime or winter, I cheered for everyone. I learned the stories of our nation's young athletes, their role models, subjects they failed in school, how hard they worked, and in such awful weather. I loved a lot. Instead of her. I don't know why.
nurse: My one true love: a meaningless fling. I looked for the horse on the ride home.
doctor: It wouldn't have killed me if things had been different.
man: My life is going to be different.
woman: My life story unfurls itself before me in gleaming ripples and hopeful waves of never-ending and over-written difference.
nurse: (Earnestly) Good for you. Really, darling. (Pause) I'm surprised, as I get older and people look me less and less in the eye, how nothing ever changes. It seems that the way things seem is the way they're going to stay seeming. There's that old saying: "Buck teeth are buck teeth." And that other old saying: "Horses always smell like horses."
woman: Are those really old sayings?
nurse: They will be, someday, if people start saying them now.
(She looks at her watch) Speaking of someday, we don't have any more time, for today.
man: You know what's probably pretty interesting, is that I don't think I've ever really—
doctor (Interrupting. He is making notes. His pen appears to have run out of ink. He shakes it, vigorously): Hang on a sec. (He finds another pen, has to draw scribbles with it for a moment, in
order for the ink to begin running.) There we go. (Shaking his head, smiling) Ink.

(The scene ends.)

PROLOGUE: It's evening. The cold air, dark sky, and historical stars. Faraway traffic goes unhonkingly by, with daylight savings over, the beaches uncrowded. It's past twilight. Geese are flying noisily overhead, mated for life, as the duck-hunting season opens. Houses and corporate headquarters are festively decorated, empty except for the light. 'Tis the season hardest to suffer, and better to hibernate through. So now we, to the TV room, for some television.

EPILOGUE: Winter isn't sad. You've had happy times in winter. And sad ones in summer. Life goes by year-round. People get married in sleet storms. People get cancer on soft summer evenings, sitting by the radio, looking up words in a dictionary. The wonderful world falls apart around the clock. You know this from experience, if you've ever had any. And there's nothing necessarily sad about anything. Or happy. I just wanted to make that clear. Am I making myself clear? It doesn't matter. You don't care. You're thinking about yourself. Our scene moves to the TV room.

SCENE 4

The Woman turns on the television. The television faces upstage.

television: . . . cars with their lights on coming down Main Street, through this once darkened little town, now alight with grief. All, in a state of shock at the loss—the drowning—of the popular Williams family. The area always has a tragedy to grieve, but rarely a one as grievous as this. A family, in whole, pulled drowned from the local pond, after an evening of skating, a winter's outing undertaken too early in the season. We are all on thin ice, but, for some of us, it's even thinner. Young and old, they still wore their skates, tightly tied on to make up for their weak ankles. Whatever they wore, all those generations now are now gone; and, though this reporter understands that this would have naturally happened eventually, this reporter also understands it is tragic it happened now. One bright spot, they leave no family behind. They are survived by only their neighborhood and house. No legal battles will ensue. It's all settled. They're dead. Live, I am in Carlisle. Stay tuned for some holiday gift ideas and tips on ways to keep your car battery from freezing. Reporting for channel—

(The Woman turns off the television. Pause. The Man enters.)

MAN: Hi.
WOMAN: Well, if it isn't you.
MAN: Yup. Or, would it be, "Nope." Hi.
WOMAN: Did your phone call come?
MAN: That thing doesn't take incoming phone calls, it turns out. Did you find somewhere to make yours from?
WOMAN: I decided not to call.
MAN: I feel bad.
WOMAN: It isn't your fault. It was better I didn't call. I'm glad.
MAN: Oh good. I'm glad. I still feel bad. (Pause) Not because of anything to do with you.
WOMAN: I'm sorry.
MAN: It isn't your fault. As I think I just, you know, I don't know, I think, pretty clearly, said. Do you have change for the laundry room?
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WOMAN: I might. *(She begins to look for change)* Did you watch
the sun go down tonight?
MAN *(Pause)*: Don’t you see what’s happening here?
WOMAN: No.
MAN: Me neither.
WOMAN: Did you see the sunset?
MAN: Oh, right—the sun, going down. No. I didn’t. I think I can
honestly say, I did not.
WOMAN: You should have. It was pretty. It was cold-looking. A
person could come up with all kinds of words, if he sat
down and tried.
MAN: I’m sure. *(Pause)* Bye. *(Begins to leave)*
WOMAN: Do you have anyone come, for visiting hours?
MAN: I’m separated.
WOMAN: Is your wife near here?
MAN: Oh I’m not married. I just kind of meant—
WOMAN *(Interrupting)*: Me neither.
MAN: I thought I would be divorced by now. Sometimes I see a
rickety little house with broken shutters and a tiny swim-
mee. pool and I think, “I’d like to get married, and then get
divorced, and then live there.” But I never met the right per-
son. See you around.
WOMAN: Didn’t you need quarters?
MAN: No. No, thanks. That was just a need I had. Something to
act on. And so I did. And here we are. Bye, again.

*(He exits. The Woman exits.)*

PROLOGUE: Do things seem aimless? Maybe that’s how things
are. Do you think anyone has a future? An aim? The man
and woman? The nurse and doctor? Are you an optimist?
Do you see a love scene on the sunless horizon? Are you
good at making things up? And can you properly repress?

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My questions won’t get us anywhere. Nor will my answers.
But, so, to the group therapy room, for group therapy, in
the morning.

EPILOGUE: Is the main action of the play someone with a pen-
cil in his hand, sitting at a desk in the morning, trying to
come up with a word for sunset? Is the through-story (so-
called) thrown away? As he tries to revise the play and cre-
ate ornate metaphors for simple blunt facts? As the old
fears creep in. The old story. Is repetition a failure in dar-
ing, or a step toward deliverance? Could be both. Don’t
know, never knew. So, to the group therapy room, for group
therapy, in the morning. I quote. Or, repeat. Because, why
wouldn’t I? That’s what we do.

SCENE 5

The Doctor, Nurse, Man and Woman are seated together.

DOCTOR: It was always one of the most beautiful places and
times in the world for me.
NURSE *(Long pause)*: What was?
DOCTOR: Didn’t I say? I’m sorry. The Netherlands, when I went
when I was young. The days were beautiful girls. Blue skies,
yellow flowers, the world’s largest diamond. Decent drugs,
Anne Frank’s attic, tall blond Dutch women on vintage
bicycles, and me. I saw the queen at a tennis game.
NURSE *(Pause)*: How does traveling make people feel?
WOMAN: I’ve never been anywhere. No, yes I have.
MAN: Sad.
NURSE: I’m sorry?
MAN: Traveling makes me feel sad.
NURSE: Why, do you think?
MAN: Why do I think? I guess because—
NURSE (Interrupting): Why do you think it makes you feel sad?
MAN: I don’t think it makes me feel sad. Traveling makes me feel sad. F E E L S A D.
NURSE: Oh, a speller.
DOCTOR: Maybe—M A Y B E—it has something to do with all the things going past in the window. The sadness, I mean. Life life life, mile after mile. You’re a smiling baby, a reckless teen, a tax-paying adult, a corpse. Bang bang bang. You’re just getting the hang of the toilet and, suddenly, time to pick out a coffin. I’m kidding. Or, exaggerating. Slightly. (Brief pause) Amsterdam.

(Everyone looks at the Doctor. Pause.)

WOMAN: Once I lived a whole summer with a friend’s family. I did everything they did. I got stung by bees and tried drinking and simple kinds of kissing. It was hard being away and then hard being home. Is that something like what you were looking for someone to say?
NURSE: Just like, dear. Thank you. I guess we’re all away from somewhere. Away from some house on some street, or from some position in relation to the body of the mother. By dint of our being here. Did anyone know that “dintless” was a word?
MAN: Did anyone ever see a movie called By Dint of the Bridge’s Collapse?
WOMAN: Is that where the shoeshine boy is always staring at the girl who sells flowers? But there’s no reason to buy flowers and no one has good shoes because the whole town is poor and sad. He’s a poet. Or he’s thinking about it. The girl only eats vitamins.

DOCTOR: And she was played by Susette de Baronelle, who I was a little in love with. Still a little am.
NURSE: Movies are wonderful. I didn’t see that particular one.
MAN: And his brother keeps bringing different animals home and naming them all the same thing. And, right, the main boy stares at the main girl. You never know if they ever meet, or ever fall in love. The town is in a sort of quarantine.
DOCTOR (Looking at his watch and his notepad): I know this has only been a few pages, but we have to stop. (He takes out an appointment book) Sorry. Funny, life. We don’t even have time to misrepresent ourselves. We hardly have time to make a tragic error of our lives. Oh, well; ah, well. Now, before everyone leaves, I need to change next week. (He begins writing in the appointment book and, as he’s writing, says, offhandedly) I’m starting to think it was Belgium I went to, and that I only read about Amsterdam.

PROLOGUE: The weeks change anyway. Another little pause in the world. (Pause. Perhaps the Prologue turns around to survey the quiet stage) Then, right on cue, here comes more time, giving us life, rushing past, taking it away. Time. Do you feel it? Ladies and gentlemen, do you? It’s there. I wouldn’t know how it feels. In words. That’s all right. It’s late on an early winter’s evening, and we, to the rec room, rush!

EPILOGUE: In other words: tick-tock, tick-tock. But, again, well enough said. “The weeks change anyway.” Time is important here, to us. The general sweep of it, not its particularities. “Sweep” is the wrong word, but, you’ll live with it. Gentle, deadly. Slow and violent, it just goes by. I wouldn’t look for some life-changing event. Except life, or illness, or death. This is all supposed to be at least plausible, after all, our play. Real American realism. But, so, what changed your life? Forever. Whatever it was, it’s probably still doing it. Tick-tock. Or to put it another way, at what moment did
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your life suddenly stay the same forever. It’s night in the rec room. We claim. You’re sitting there in the dark. Strangers, forever, on either side of you.

SCENE 6

The Man is assembling a balsa-wood toy airplane. The Woman walks by in the background, upstage. She stops to look and listen, unseen. Perhaps, it is in this moment that she begins to fall in love with him.

MAN: All quiet, as I assemble a balsa-wood toy airplane. I’ll use a rubber band to drive the propeller. Once finished, once this project of mine is done, when the little toy can finally fly, it won’t help anything, but it will fly high above this dirt-bound life, without changing anything, and then crash, without end, until it’s over.

(The Woman exits.)

PROLOGUE: Night’s over. And it’s morning. And we return to rooms we thought we left. We return to the rec room. It makes you wonder. Have life and the whole world already been written—been foreseen, foretold, long been forborne? Is the ending of the story already in your bones? The fevered climax already long in your cold blood?

EPILOGUE: Maybe. Probably. But you hope that along the way there will still be, sometimes, a surprise. We’re back in the rec room, yes. The woman enters, yelling:

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SCENE 7

WOMAN: Surprise! (She enters holding a lit birthday-cake candle. The balsa-wood airplane is completed. She sings) “Happy birthday to you.” (She speaks) You know the middle part. (She sings the final line) “Happy birthday to you.” (She speaks) I guess you know the ending, too. The fevered climax is probably already long in your cold blood. But it seemed unkind somehow, or anti-art, not to sing it.

MAN: My birthday isn’t until spring.

WOMAN: How would I know that? We’ve hardly talked. That’s what makes this so gracious an act. So mysterious.

MAN: It is pretty gracious an act. Pretty mysterious. Thanks. (He holds up the candle) Was there a cake that came with this?

WOMAN: My uncle died on his birthday last year.

MAN: I’m sorry. He’s in a better place, I guess.

WOMAN: We don’t know. He had a nice house. He died.

MAN: I’m sorry.

WOMAN: It’s not your fault. Is it? It isn’t. His gravestone read, “Here lies the late myself, dead as far as the eye can see.”

MAN: Cake? (He feeds her an imaginary piece of cake)

WOMAN: Mmm. Not bad. Here, you. (She feeds him a piece. Pause) You put your hand in my mouth, just then.

MAN: Ditto you yours in mine.

WOMAN: What a cold and intriguing sentence. I remember, once, I don’t know why—I know why: because it was cold. And intriguing. To me. But, so, up north, once, I threw all this outdoor furniture off the roof of a museum. Chairs and tables and glass ashtrays. That was the start of my adulthood. I was trying to become a lifeguard. I was supposed to be rescuing things. Around that point, people stopped returning my calls, generally. I started acting really psychological. When I bled—you know, girl stuff—I bled too much.
man: Oh. A lot of that kind of went over my . . . so, did you ever become a lifeguard? Wasn’t the water cold? I got really emotional next to a screen door, once. So there was that. (Pause) Have you seen outside? It looks like rain. Or snow.

woman: What does?

man: It does, what else, the—I don’t know—sky, the firmament.

The, um, welkin. We pretended to eat pretend-cake. I find that sort of interesting. We shared something that doesn’t—

woman (Interrupting): It was interesting. I’m looking forward to seeing you again.

man: Are you leaving?

woman: No. It was for children, I should add.

man: What was? The museum was?

woman: I should go.

man: Did I say something?

woman: Did it sound to you as if you said something? I didn’t hurt anyone, throwing the stuff off. Even though I broke everything. And could have killed someone. I feel as if I should go. And that usually means I should go. Bye. (She exits)

man: Bye. (To himself) I feel as if I should go.

(The scene ends.)

Prologue: Despite winter coming at these two from every angle and direction, one can sense a little spring in their speech. Them two, warming toward each other. Our scene moves ahead one week. And it’s snowed. And it’s night. On the grounds, somebody built six snowmen, facing different ways, standing too close together. And our love story has progressed without us. Will we catch up to it, overtake it? Either way, to the sunroom, in the moonlight.

Epilogue: The birthday scene was a happy scene. But let’s not be precious. It wasn’t even anyone’s birthday. And if not these two talking, then two others. Or one of them and someone else, some third person. The history of plays and the history of the world is a set of the same conversations being had by different people. We’ve all been through them. “You are the only one, forever,” we swear, having sworn it twice, or more. People are liars, but, liars are people. Take me. I’m an excellent example. So, forgive and forget. Then die and be forgotten. Or, I don’t know—maybe there’s more to it. But in the meantime these two are becoming sort of lovely together. I admit. A handsome couple. Either way, we are in the sunroom. A week later, a night, the Winter Solstice.

Scene 8

The Nurse and Doctor are seated, wearing winter jackets. They hold ice skates. There is a bowl of plastic fruit on the table before them.

Nurse: They’re probably having one of their very particular conversations, in which they both take such solace. I remember those conversations, those whispered times—so original, such pure meaning and total motivation, you know? You go ahead. I’ll wait.

Doctor: No, no. I’ll wait with you. It’ll make the time go by faster.

(Long pause. The time doesn’t go by faster. They fidget.)

I haven’t been skating in years.

Nurse: How about that heartbreaking story of that family skating. And the ice broke and they all fell through? Williams, was it? The name?
DOCTOR: I think, yes. Imagine, a dead family. When they dragged the bodies out, the whole town could hardly keep staring. I thought I might speak about it, might try to bang it up into words, at the conference on the National Grief in the spring. To the which, by the way, I would, I must say, of course—it goes without saying—love you to come.

NURSE: Please, Doctor. Must you be so forward?

DOCTOR: I'm sorry, you're right. There was a lot of punctuation in that invitation. But it would be wonderful and helpful. Give it some thought. Period. Speeches about grief during the day, a whirlpool, a shower, and then cocktails at seven. It's in one of those little sea towns. We could take the train down.

NURSE: I haven't been to the ocean since I was a girl. I was a girl at one time, Doctor, as you are probably aware.

DOCTOR: We could play golf. Doctors are good at golf. Although I never played. Don't tell anyone, I could lose my license. And I was aware.

NURSE: I would love to see the sun set somewhere different.

DOCTOR: So it's decided. Is it decided? Well, you think, and then decide.

NURSE: I will.

DOCTOR (Looking at the bowl of fruit): These are fake, I just noticed.

(The Man and Woman enter.)

NURSE: And here they are! Come on, you two. Everyone is waiting.

WOMAN: You go ahead. I'm cold. I want to put on more clothes.

DOCTOR: Okay, but quickly now. Time's a wasting. There's only so much cocoa. That's my philosophy.

NURSE: You can't go wrong with a philosophy like that. Also, "Don't get sick in Europe," someone once told me. (To

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the Man) You need a hat. And hurry. We're going to light some sparklers.

(The Nurse and Doctor exit.)

WOMAN: Let's stay. I've seen a sparkler before.

MAN: Okay. Are you thinking what I'm thinking?

WOMAN: Are you thinking about when I burned my hand one year on New Year's Eve?

MAN: No.

WOMAN: Then no.

MAN: You look pretty.

WOMAN: Maybe I am pretty.

MAN: That would explain it. (Pause) Where were you hiding yourself today?

WOMAN: In the basement, behind the hot-water heater, in fear.

MAN: You missed exercise this morning.

WOMAN: I said I was under the weather. And behind the hot-water heater. I always liked exercise.

MAN: I bet you throw like a girl.

WOMAN: I am a girl.

MAN: Oh, hi. (Brief pause) Are your mother and father still together?

WOMAN: My father is. (Brief pause) But don't change subjects so fast. Because, just don't, please. Swimming is an interest I have. Let's talk about that. "What Swimming Is Like." Begin. Discuss. Enlarge. You have an average lifetime.

MAN: Swimming is different. From walking.

WOMAN: I see.

MAN: It's fun.

WOMAN: I see. Go on.

MAN: I'll never be how you think.

WOMAN: Oh.
MAN: Whales swim.
WOMAN: They do. Every day of the week.
MAN: There’s enough room in the ocean for everyone in the world to have room to drown in. Do you see? (He looks at the ceiling, speaks quickly) But don’t leave me, don’t leave me, (She moves to his side) please don’t leave me, please—
WOMAN (Interrupting, Puts her hand on his shoulder): Here I am, I’m right here—
MAN (Interrupting, Unkindly, He shrugs her hand off): Listen, can’t you see I’m in the middle of something?
NURSE (Enters): I forgot my scarf. Come on, you two. Don’t just sit around here and miss everything. Okay, Miss Everything? (She playfully flicks the Woman with her scarf) And Mister Everything Else. The world is racing by and Doctor is skating around backward. He also just proposed to me that we all build an igloo. Does my hair look okay? Do I look, would you say, crazed, at all? Anyway, hurry. (She exits)
MAN: I’m sorry I yelled.
WOMAN: You didn’t yell. (Pause) I don’t want to miss everything.
  I really don’t. I like everything.
MAN: Me neither. (Pause) I meant to yell.
WOMAN (Pause): Name a season.
MAN: Winter.
WOMAN: Name another.
MAN: Spring.
WOMAN: We were made for each other.
MAN: Name an animal.
WOMAN: The otter.
MAN: Name another.
WOMAN: No, thanks.
MAN: We were.
WOMAN: Can we go be alone somewhere?
MAN: Both of us?

WOMAN: Yeah.
MAN: I know just the place.
WOMAN: Where?
MAN: I don’t know, I’ve just heard people say that before.
WOMAN: How about your room?
MAN: If you don’t mind the state it’s in.
WOMAN: No.
MAN: And you don’t mind that it’s mine.
WOMAN: No.
MAN: Or that everything in it is mine. If you don’t mind that loss shall be yours. And then even that will be taken away. And it might be messy. Are you allergic to dust?
WOMAN: No.
MAN: I want you to have the last word.
WOMAN (Pause): Sympathy?
  (They exit, him carrying her.)

PROLOGUE: What more could anyone want? What would anyone add? And why? And how would he phrase it? (Brief pause) I’ll say this. Their skin is young. And they know nothing. Unlike ourselves, whose skin is old and who know nothing. But onward. There’s no need to show what we all can so easily imagine. For instance, her taking his hand in hers and running it over her mouth, wetting it, running it over each breast, to down between her legs where all of herself comes together. All in a single fluid movement. And then him responding in kind, whispering into her eye, gently pulling her hair. They both say, “God.” They both come to an understanding. And it’s over. They lie all over each other. (Pause) Now it’s late. The skaters have all come in. What cocoa is left over is frozen. The doctor fell and sprained his ankle, having fun and showing off. Nobody
drowned. Winter has officially begun. Somebody lost a mitten. It’s quiet and nothing more need be said.

Epilogue: Probably not. Probably not. (Pause) But, feelings between the man and woman, yes. The two characters seem right, beside the other, like the characters of the bird and the rock in ancient Chinese writing, beside the other. One bird, one stone. What is between the man and the woman is starting to seem inevitable, as with the rock and the bird. Will they be beside themselves forever? Do you follow my drift? From away from where we were? Is it noticeable yet? For I have one, a drift. All will painfully make itself painfully clear. Oh, but for now, such splendor, the liquid movements, the responding in kind, the hair, the hands, my God. Almost makes you . . . (He stares off, wistfully. Returns abruptly) I don’t know. The room of the man.

Scene 9

Man: Do you see children anywhere on your horizon? A little baby screaming out of you? A new father standing frozen in horror behind his rented video equipment, trying to smile and focus? And a new voice in the world, crying? A new cry. Is that so crazy-sounding?

Woman: No.

Man: Once I was younger with legs unbroken and dreams undreamt, years before I’d met or left anyone, and I looked forward to the future, and my mouth on you, parting the ocean and your legs, baying at the moon and earth, crying, “Mother Mother,” or “Not Mother, Not Mother,” wanting only to be lonely and home, to be drenched on the inside with blood, as usual, waiting, a man in a house, all the lights out, this is my vision, et cetera, et cetera. (Pause) Is that so crazy-sounding?

Woman: A little. But I could see a child. We could take family trips to the beach. You’d look for a place for our towel. I’d do that thing, pull my suit down from where it had ridden up. We’d take showers under those little weak showers they have in front of the giant ocean. And get something to eat. Maybe I’d lower your fly while we’re driving home. The baby, asleep. A wet road map. Showering at home. You have pretty bones in your face. I would always lose my keys. You could type upstairs. Is this too scattered-sounding?

Man: No.

Prologue: Ah, love.

Woman: You should have the last word.

(The Nurse and Doctor enter at the other side of the stage, but remain in a separate playing area from the Man and Woman.)

Man: Sympathy is such a good one. But let’s see. Ocean, no; medication, no; redemption, no; cocoa, no; myself, no; salvation, no; it isn’t summer, trust, or honesty, no. It’s from Latin I have a feeling. I don’t know. “Dire”? Is “dire” Latin? Is “Latin” Latin?

(The Man and Woman exit.)

Nurse: I think it’s beautiful.

Doctor: It’s a little unheard of, isn’t it? I never heard of anything like this. I fear for them.

Nurse: I’m sure they fear for themselves just fine.

Doctor: How far have things progressed? If I may use so clinical a term. See, there’s the problem. This growing clinical-
ility. The old heartbreaking songs don’t break my heart any-
more. I haven’t cried for the last five Olympics. But, how
far?

Nurse: Far, I’d imagine, from that distant look they give each
other. Those old songs will break your heart again, or the
new ones will, when they’re old. (Pause) I saw people ice-
fishing, driving in this morning. There was a little bird fly-
ing over all the holes. How is your ankle healing?

Doctor: Correctly, I think, I thank you. I’m glad it’s not bro-
ken. You’d have to carry me all over that conference.

Nurse: Which I would do with a smile. A grimace, I guess. A sort
of pained, burdened, hyperventilating but not unhappy gri-
mac. A smile.

Prologue: Outside the window, a kite in a tree is covered in
ice. People’s bodies looked changed in the distance of the
parking lot—hunched, closed, as seen in ultrasound—as
they struggle with their frozen car door locks. Something
to behold. And how long can they be beheld? How long
can an image be kept in mind? I wouldn’t hold your breath.
Go stretch. I need to relieve myself. We’ll take a little break,
an intermission. Please come back, and, if you do, maybe
you’ll find that the cushion of your seat is cold and has
given up the shape that you gave it, that there is no trace of
you but your absence and a few gum wrappers. No trace.
Imagine that. Hard to conceive. Almost impossible for us to
conceive. See you soon.

Epilogue (Stands as if about to deliver a soliloquy, seeming to be
considering many things): Fifteen minutes.

(Lights down.)

Act Two

Scene 1

Lights up on the Man and Woman, seated next to each other, but not
touching. They stay very still. Lights down. They exit.

Prologue: You’ve come back. Some time passed, in the last
few minutes. Christmas did. Life continued. Christmas
ended. Those decorations that made it through the wind
and cold unbroken now are all down and put away.
Whatever was frozen, froze harder. On the south lawn are
snow forts and snow angels losing their child-made form.
Very very north of here, a polar bear is eating a seal cub.
And far over that, a dead satellite launched from Florida,
America, during an earlier presidency, is floating out of
control in freezing outer space. Back on Earth, we are in the
reading room, in the common era.

Epilogue: What if you were writing a play, or doing anything,
and your feelings changed? You didn’t even know how you
felt anymore, or what you thought. You couldn't keep going. The image disintegrated. Your mind wasn't up to it, or your heart. Would your claim to realism be lost if you didn't somehow incorporate the change, the not-knowing, the cold feeling? Even if only subtly? Would you just abort the whole thing? Turn your back on everyone and wash your hands of the whole bloody mess? What would you do, back on Earth? If this were you? If this were yours? (Pause) We move our scene to the reading room, sure, why not, in the common era.

Scene 2

Lights up on the Man and Woman. He is reading.

Woman: Where were you yesterday?

Man: I had to take some tests.

Woman: What kind of tests, blood tests? History tests?

Man: I took a Spielberger Rage and Anger Index, a Van Beck Depression Composite, a Taylor Manifest Anxiety Scale, and, just out of curiosity, a Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory.

Woman (Pause): How did they go?

Man: I think I did really well.

Woman (Pause): What are you reading?

Man: The dictionary.

Woman: How is it?

Man: You know the joke. It's a little wordy. The verbs are good, at the beginning. You get sick of them.

Woman: I'll wait for the movie. (Pause) You don't think that's funny?

Man: Listen to this. (He reads) "Hilaktia: Disorder named for Greek ruler whose vivid nightmares of winter caused him to die and his body to manifest all signs of having frozen, despite the season being summer, the weather being warm. He wrote several plays, which survive in fragments or not at all. The disorder is characterized by a flight of ideas, a fear of the mind, and disregard for language and others. Treatable, with bright light, photographs, meditative therapies."

Woman (Pause): What am I supposed to think about that?

Man: You got me. Something, though. You'd think you'd think something. (Pause) Don't you ever change clothes? I'm sorry I said that—you look fine. But don't you? Forget I said that. Forget I said I'm sick of you and your body and sick of our story. One side of me is like saying—I don't know. Forget it. Listen to me, my sucky vocabulary. Blah. Blahhh. I wonder if I have that General's disease. Or, whatever, "ruler."

Woman: Maybe you just need—

Man (Interrupting): Thanks, I'll try that.

Prologue: Do you remember somebody mentioning an otter?

When verb followed noun, when the man and woman spoke lovingly and plainly in simple yups and good old household nopes? The woman said—it was such a nice line—"Yes." I forget what the man had asked her. I forget the exact feeling. But I can use the word "beautiful." I could say that. I could say a lot of words, if I sat down and tried. And I do know where this is going. So, to someplace! Lights, action!

Epilogue: Darkness, inaction. As an aside, have you ever been stung by a bee that had nothing against you? Or bitten by a dog who otherwise seemed to like you? Or fell, due to a gravity not your own? Or hurt someone you loved, or used to love, or never did? Ever suffer loss? Ever slowly lose control of something? Ever slowly lose control of everything? Fail? Ever fucking really badly fail?
WILL ENO

Scene 3

woman: This is sort of a juncture, for us. Would getting one of those books of children's names be a good idea?
man: Theoretically.
woman: You have to have some feelings. Name some names.
I think Alexander Graham Bell has a certain ring to it.
woman: A first name is fine. And what if she's a girl?
man: Then you can name her "You," after you. Or, I don't know.
"Simone"? Isn't there a human name "Simone"?
woman: Please, darling, try.
man: All right, darling, I will.
woman: Now, think.
man: I'm thinking. (Brief pause) I've thought. (Brief pause)
I should speak. This might hurt. What if there's someone else?
woman: There's everyone else.
man: No, no there isn't. What if I don't care about this, because I'm in love with someone else. That would be quite a turn.
The famous "another woman." What if. She studied trumpet and she's teaching me the harmonica. We play in the snow. I gave her the children's book you gave me that I said I'd lost.
woman: I'm sorry? I'm preoccupied. With the baby, yours, inside of me. You said something about a trumpet?
man: I said something about my lying and cheating and going back on my word. Listen to this, the following words: my feelings changed. From away from ones of love.
woman: Stop it.
man: I already did. It'll be as if I never started. I would have told you sooner, but, I don't know.
woman: You're serious.

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man: Not really. I don't know. I am.
woman: What is her name?
man: Again, with names. You wouldn't believe me if I told you.
woman: Why not?
man: Because I'd be lying.
prologue: Ah, love.
woman (Pause): How could you do this?
man: This? Is that how you would denote my million million feelings: "this"? Or do I mean "connote"?
woman: Just the other day we were talking—
man (Interrupting): I know I keep interrupting, but, "The Other Day and The Other Day and The Other Day. Life is but a bucket boy drumming for loose change, a person playing pots and pans on the street as a way to get some food. Or, not really, not at all. That isn't at all what life was, The Other Day, The Other Day, The Other Day." It ends a little weakly, kind of tails off, but how's that for a little soliloquy?
woman: Please listen. Just to this one little thing. I want you to listen. When I was little, before school or anything— (Brief pause) You gave her the book I brought back from England? I walked forever. I went through miles of stupid English rain to buy that stupid book. I loved that stupid book. Sleepy Time Rhymes. We colored it together. And you gave it away to some bitch to remain unnamed?
man: Don't be vulgar. But, that book, I believe you mentioned that book, Sleepy Time Rhymes. It made her happy. She loved it, too. She cried over it. We read it to each other and went through it with Wite-Out and uncolored it together. It was our best night.
woman: What did I do?
man: Nothing. Somewhere, though, someone did something. It would seem. Once, there was a pretty pretty girl. Maybe she's the one who did something. Time will take care of her.
We'll see what pretty bones her face is made up of. Her, I loved. Unlike you and the woman I'm now leaving you for. Her name is Jennifer, too.

**woman**: My name's not Jennifer.

**man**: No, I know. I just meant that she's another person with that name.

**prologue**: Welcome to a play whose— Parlez-vous anglais? Sprechen Sie Englisch? Niwappi inglappa? Schön totes Kind, estos zapatos son cuyos? Esti palid. Mimi niliyeona nasema hivi. Wo ist der Zoo? I speak English. Or, I used to. Let us now rejoin— This doesn't cohere. I can't make this make sense. (*He exits*)

**epilogue**: He just said, "Welcome to a play whose— Do you speak English? Do you speak English? Do you speak English? Beautiful dead child, whose shoes are those? You are pale. I who saw say thus. Where is the zoo? I speak English. Or, I used to. Let us now rejoin— This doesn't cohere. I can't make this make sense." I quote. For what it's worth. Which is probably very little. But maybe not. I'm not big on assigning values. But, it's entertaining to see people in pain, yes? (*He looks to where Prologue has just exited*) We now rejoin the man and the woman. It doesn't matter where.

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**scene 4**

**woman**: You can stop loving me overnight?

**man**: I started loving you overnight.

**woman**: We took walks. We undressed each other. You said such beautiful true-sounding things.

**man**: Get lost. (*He returns to reading the dictionary*) "Should. Verb. Past tense. Used to express duty, obligation, necessity." (*He has mistakenly read "used to" as meaning "formerly did" rather than "employed to") What? Oh, used to, I see. (*Pause. The Doctor enters. To the Doctor*) What do you think are some good baby names?

**doctor**: Did you both forget? Everyone's going out on the hill for a big photograph. We're losing daylight, so rush. We need everyone. I would come back if I could. I heard you fighting.

**man**: Just she was fighting.

**doctor**: One person can't fight.

**woman**: Yes one can. I was, just. Me, alone, fighting.

**doctor**: I'm wrong again, then—malpractice, my old friend. But let's go outside. We never get good weather, so let's not let it blow over. Winter is going to kill everything and we want to have a photograph to look at to keep us warm while we suffer through it. I know this is a bad time, but it's for the Crossroads brochure.

(*The Woman, Man and Doctor exit*)

**prologue**: (*Enters, slightly disheveled. He has a glass of water*) I apologize for the awful languages that I was using before. It's just that... I don't know. Sometimes we don't... (*Pause. He regains some composure, resigns himself to continue on*) Anyway. They all go. They stare at the camera. Like life, it's over, like that. Long complicated life histories, over, click. Where did all the talk about the ocean go? Down some drain, out to sea? And you? I wonder how you are. Think of yourself when you were younger. Did you ever love anybody? I'm sure you did. You looked so proud. Your nice shoes and clothes are still somewhere. Maybe you're thinking of that. As you live on, as you lose some more of the rest of your life, quietly, in the dark. I don't know. (*Pause*) Everybody leaves. The photographer gets in his car. Day is over again.
epilogue: Right. Right. One more thing. There’s more snow in
the forecast, moving in like an angry animal from some-
where out over the ocean. If you’ll forgive me the simile.
Which you probably don’t. So I take it back. It’s black, out.
The freezing shitty night settles. And people do to people
what people have always done to people. No big deal.
I don’t care about the time or where anyone is.

Scene 5

The Woman, Man and Doctor enter. A long pause. They stand, not
knowing exactly where they should be.

nurse (Enters): Good morning, everyone. (Pause) I see our
scene has moved to the group therapy room, for group
therapy. (They all move across the stage and seat themselves)
Did someone get sick in the hallway?

woman: Is this an experience experienced by anyone? Where
it’s just you and someone, and you lay and lie and lie in a room.
This someone is lying next to you in the breathing dark but
he doesn’t know who he is, and that makes you start to slip.
And you make the statement: “I am not in control of my
body or my mind.” And you state the question: “So then
what is the ‘I’ that is the subject of the assertion?” And then
you tender the inquisition: “Who is the liar, the breather,
the nobody, lying next to me? And who is the one lying
inside me, kicking?” You won’t recall this time in your life
with any warmth. And you feel sick. And as you suffer all
that and grow great with mistakes, you can’t even count on
anyone to be—not even faithful—but just humane? Just at
least recognizable? Anyone? Any goddamn body? I never
swear.

Doctor: Why doesn’t everybody take a few deep breaths and—
woman (Interrupting): Why doesn’t everybody not do that. I’ve
breathed deeply enough, thank you. I think I’ll go be sick
again. That would be the most expressive thing I could do.
Words. (She gets up, seeming light-headed) Excuse me. I’m
sorry. I’ll be all right. Or I’m wrong. I’m sorry and I won’t
be all right. And I’m not sorry.

(She walks downstage, stares at the audience for a moment.
Perhaps she is thinking and feeling, “Is it your need for plays
that is causing all this to happen, that is causing me all this pain.
Are you happy now?” She then exits.)

Doctor: Why don’t I go see if I can say anything. (He exits)
nurse (Long pause. Not unkindly): Well. You seem to be living
with yourself. I don’t know exactly what to say. (Pause) It’s
supposed to be a beautiful sunset, tomorrow night. Or
the night after. Or that’s what they said. Why don’t we . . .
I should . . .

(The Nurse exits. The Man exits.)

prologue: Traffic lights are changing, clicking, alone across
the suburbs, the tundras, the empty urban intersections.
I’m picturing this and telling you this. I don’t know why.
Maybe to help. Maybe I’m trying to help.
epilogue: Click-clack. Tick-tock. This last night is now weeks
ago. A new routine has set in. We are in evening. The action
moves to a waiting room. Enjoy.
on a scrap of paper to be left behind or recycled. Maybe I doodle a little design, have a heavy—I don’t know—sigh. I’m glad you’re here. I’ve told you my hobby. What do you like to do?

nurse: I’m glad you’re here. Everything will quiet down eventually. I’m too busy for hobbies. Except reading and skiing. Landscape painting, quilting, calligraphy, comparative philology and... I’m kidding. I thought a little levity might... I think I’d like listening to the traffic. (Pause) Spring will be pretty, the birds and the bees, and your speaking engagement. Then of course you’ll have to decide how you’re going to injure and embarrass yourself in the interhospital softball game.

(They share a little laugh.)

prologue: Ah, finally, kindness. Love is deep and real and everywhere. All is well and all will be even better. We can see this all around us, clearly.


Next scene. It’s got flowers in it.

Scene 9

The Woman is asleep in bed. The Nurse enters with flowers.

nurse: Here are some flowers, dear.

woman (She is waking): Was I... What did I... I was in a field that went down to this water. Everyone was watching me. I looked nice. Someone wrote you’re cold on my arm. I wanted to thank everyone for being—

nurse (Interrupting): Hello, darling. Easy, slowly. It was just a dream. I know it’s hard. Here are some flowers.
WILL ENO

WOMAN: Thank you, I need to take a bath.
NURSE: I remember wanting to do the exact same thing. After I underwent this same procedure. I remember I had hopes of snow days and photo albums. I was to remain an unwed non-mother. I'm sorry, darling. Forgive me. I was just harking back.

(The Man appears at the door.)

And who is that young man, so boyishly entering. I'll leave you two alone. Yell, if it gets too lonely. (She exits)
MAN: They said you were sick.
WOMAN: How kind of them to phrase it that way.
MAN: Is there anything I can get? (Pause) Is it contagious?
WOMAN: No. I had them evacuate the fetal material attached to my uterine wall. Can you think up a better name for that? A girl's name? There are so many pretty ones. (She closes her eyes)

(The Doctor and Nurse enter. The Prologue leaves his narrator's position to join them. The Nurse is holding a sweater. The Doctor has a tray of food. The Prologue has a heart-shaped box of candy. One by one, they set these things down, on a table or at the foot of the bed, and exit. The Prologue returns downstage to where he narrates.)

(She opens her eyes) That was nice of everyone. You know, it physically hurt. It still really physically does. You don't know. Once, sweat from you got in my eye. It physically burned and I liked it. Will this be going into your play? And do you wonder whether you'll allow me to recover? What would be your name for this? This procedure, you and I, our life? I should go. But I don't think I can walk. So, you. Come on, go. Consider yourself forgiven, your almost pretty

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eyes forgotten. Hand me that candy, please. I will be polite up to the end. I was never a person who swore, even though you had me swearing. Please go. No, wait. (Pause) Now go.

(The Man exits.)

PROLOGUE: I— I wish— Now we— The— (Pause) I could mis-quote the old books. That might be meaningful. What flowers could grow out of this rocky garbage? A gross of broken statues and a pile of overdue books. Maybe the thunder will say something motherly. Maybe someone will say something kind.

(The Epilogue steps a step forward, pauses, a tiny shrug. He lowers his head, slightly, and steps back.)

(Pause. He holds up a photograph.) Here's the picture from the hill that everyone stood on. You can see their breath. Aren't pictures of people beautiful? (Brief pause) But, our story! Our scene moves up the coast, to the dazzling, cold, and pacific Atlantic Ocean! Quickly! To a young family, in the sun, happily. With all speed, fly!

(The scene does not change. It is the Woman in bed, still.)

EPILOGUE: Oops.

SCENE 10

WOMAN (Taking sleeping pills, one with each sentence or so): This little piggy went to market. This little piggy is not careful. This little piggy's bladder relaxes, as she wets herself, as she did when she was little. And someone blew my house
down. Mein Schönes totes Kind. I will huff and puff and die. *Uff-hay* and *uff-pay*, in Pig Latin. *Ipsa facto*, in regular non-Pig Latin. I am killing my body, in English. I'll be fine, don't worry. Dad? Tell me the story of me. A sleepy time rhyme. Italicize my life. This little. *(She closes her eyes)*

*(The Prologue stares at the scene of the Woman in bed. He turns to the audience, pauses. He begins to open his mouth, closes it.)*

**Epiologue** *(Gently)*: Stop crying. Practice holding and kissing your pillow, for when the day comes you really need to hold and kiss it. This is what I tell myself, softly. There's a philosophy for you. Or, for me. And don't get sick in Europe. Life is a word game. I don't know what else. *(Pause)* Everything is worse, including our desire for improvement. Of a life, a life story, a play. All are awful, worse, the same, but, in the end, to be lived with. Life is fine. It's spring. In fatigue and a lack of creativity, we fall back on the device of a telephone.

**Scene 11**

**Doctor** *(Speaking on the telephone)*: I would like you to come down. I need to speak with you about your daughter. *(Pause)* I would like to speak to you in person. Here. *(Pause)* Please come. I'm sorry for being difficult. Thank you. *(Pause)* I really need to speak with you, here. Person-to-person is best. Yes, a right turn after the big wooden ice-cream cone. Thank you. *(He hangs up the telephone)*

*(Pause. The Epilogue looks over at the Prologue, who stares into the audience.)*

**Epiologue** *(Interrupting)*: Nothing to say? Cat got your tongue, and the rest of your body? No more scribbly poetry to throw at the moment? Lost your nerve? Can't do it? The image gone, disintegrated into synonyms? I guess I understand. I guess I remember, too. *(To audience)* It's weeks later, again. Spring, more flowers. A desk. Sunlight. A patient sits near the desk with his belongings in a bag marked *patient's belongings.*

**Scene 12**

**Nurse** *(Filling out paperwork. The Man is watching)*: Isn't it amazing how I can write upside down like this? Remember that? We're going to miss you around here. Do you have a forwarding address?

**Man**: I do, but I don't know it yet. Is the doctor coming in today?

**Nurse**: He said he'd try. Do you have any nice plans?

**Man**: I'm so sorry. One minute, I was so sure, I completely felt as if—

**Epiologue** *(Interrupting)*: *(He does not believe that the Man should be given the chance to explain himself or apologize)*: Outside—

**Man** *(Interrupting)*: I felt as if I—

**Epiologue** *(Interrupting)*: Outside—

**Man** *(Interrupting)*: I wish that I—

**Epiologue** *(Interrupting)*: Outside . . . it's afternoon. Clouds, sun, whatever you like. A pretty May day, too late for excuses. Carry on.

**Nurse**: Did you want to say something, dear?

**Man**: Should I say that I was . . . I don't know. What should I say? I never knew.
NURSE: Yes, dear, of course you didn’t. I know. (Pause) If you get out to Concord, say hello for me. Get down to that wonderful bridge they have. I went there once with a beau. We had quite a time of it down in the weeds by the water. It’s one of life’s wonders how pretty it is. The river going by, people going by us, us saying to each other, “Quiet. Quiet,” while our lives and those people went quietly by. Oh, the daffodils, and all the other flowers, all so prettily named.

MAN: I’ll try to go.

(The Doctor enters walking with a cane. His face is swollen. He has trouble speaking.)

NURSE: Well if it isn’t you.

DOCTOR: Yub. It ith. (Trying to say: “Yup. It is.”)

NURSE: How are we today, Doctor Oh-So-Wonderfully-Handsome?

DOCTOR: Nod bad, thang you. (“Not bad, thank you.”)

MAN: Doctor, what happened?

DOCTOR: I wath looging for my thrain thet in the attic and I god thunng by bees. I broak my toe drying to ghet away from them. Thirty-five bee thnings in one second, they thaid. I cand feel one thide. Bud, ind warth my hand thide, ain-way. (“I was looking for my train set in the attic and I got stung by bees. I broke my toe trying to get away from them. Thirty-five bee stings in one second, they said. I can’t feel one side. But, it was my bad side, anyway.”)

NURSE: I’m sorry?

DOCTOR: It wath my bad thide. For dayging pithurth. (“It was my bad side. For taking pictures.”)

NURSE: Thank goodness your good side was twice as good-looking to begin with. Maybe we’ll take some pictures this afternoon.

DOCTOR: Thang you. You are nod thow bad yourthelve. Do wee haff thum way of reathing him? (“Thank you. You are not so bad yourself. Do we have some way of reaching him?”)

NURSE: He’ll let us know.

DOCTOR (To the Man): You ghan alwaith contag uth, here. (Pause) Whad a fath winder. Lod off yangeh. (“You can always contact us here. What a fast winter. Lots of changes.”)

NURSE: I’m sorry, Doctor?

DOCTOR: Lahdz, ough, yangehes. (“Lots of changes.”)

NURSE (She doesn’t understand): Yes.

DOCTOR: Ihth — (He has to swallow) Ih your vhamly gummin? (“Is — Is your family coming?”)

NURSE: We called a taxi. (To the Man) Which you should get out front for. And I think we have some new people arriving. May I walk you to your office?

DOCTOR: Thang you. All thride. Bheeg gooth. Wheel mith you. (“Thank you. All right. Be good. We’ll miss you.”)

MAN: Thank you, Doctor. Good-bye. I loved—I was—Thank you.

(In the following two lines, the Prologue and Epilogue both begin to speak over one another, then the Prologue needs to pause to drink some water.)

PROLOGUE: Later, the doctor is in his office, the nurse—

EPILOGUE: Not that anyone cares, but—

(The Epilogue stops, steps back, in a moment of kindness and deference, to allow the Prologue to speak.)

PROLOGUE (He clears his throat): Later, the doctor is in his office, the nurse in hers. The body of the woman, gone, and the tiny empty swaddling clothes on a shelf in a store, unbought. The body of the man is in a taxi, and then on a
train. He sees the reflection of his reflection looking out the tinted window and sees the land and trees fly past. Towns fly by. People. "Whad a fath winder." There is a long long pause, no sound at all. Like the quiet I deprived us of at the start of this. Excuse me. (He exits)

epilogue: It's neither not winter nor not summer. So what is it? The body of the man, some man, is in another white room, alive, staring at another white wall. There was never any woman, never any nurse, nor doctor, nor certainly any man. Isn't that sad? There was never any abortion. There was no toy airplane. So what was there?

prologue (Enters with flowers): The sun is setting, the great sad past in the air, all of your life in the air. Another sunset, another dusk. The doctor and the nurse soldier on. The beauty of the suffering, suffering.

epilogue: Life. Writing. Try again some other year. This was a mess. The wrong words, too late. This is awful. So sorry. So cold.

nurse: Isn't it a pretty light? Aren't we lucky.

doctor: Yes. It's a very pretty light. We are lucky.

nurse: Doesn't it look quiet.

prologue: Thank you for coming. The End. Good night.

epilogue: Thank you for coming. There is no end. Good night.

doctor: It does look quiet.

(The Prologue has his bouquet of flowers, and, in a simple gesture, he turns and raises them, as if about to present them to someone, though he does not know to whom he should give them. The lights fade.)

END OF PLAY
saying, and they care about the audience (though in very different ways). The play has a close relation to each of their identities and histories. Both narrators remain on stage, except where noted. Finally, though the Prologue is not aware of the Epilogue, the latter is aware of the former.

The Epilogue: as described above.

**General Notes about Staging**

Sets should be simple. Sets should also allow for quick transitions between scenes. (In fact, the play can move along almost seamlessly, with transitions being made while narrators narrate. Though, if done this way, it should be done sensitively and with meaning, and not just for the sake of speed.) *The Flu Season* is very much a play, as each narrator often reminds us; directors and producers should not put too much money or energy into lavish sets in an effort to make believable what can most be made believable by the actors’ performances. Also, a certain humility about theater is expressed by the play, and this humility might be undone by particularly ornate or complicated scenery.

**General Notes about People and Acting**

People are complicated and behave in ironic and self-contradicting ways that can be seen as tragic or comic and, often, as both, simultaneously. We can contradict ourselves, often severely, almost effortlessly. And we live with near-constant anxiety, though almost all of it is buried beneath (and in fact informs) our normal behavior. The same is true for the characters in this play. This does not mean that the complication and irony or anxiety of the characters need to be “played” in any blatant way. On the contrary. The strongest performance, the most human and most forceful, will often be the simplest and most unguarded. Though the language in the play is not necessarily naturalistic, it is, on the other hand, how these characters naturally speak. This is how it comes out of them. Attention should be paid, in rehearsal, to finding a delivery or a way of performance that, on the one hand, serves the heightened nature of the language and the heightened nature of the characters’ circumstances; and, on the other hand, serves to create real and believable characters who speak real and believable lines. Running times will vary, but, in general, pauses should be avoided, except where called for.

Finally, the Prologue and Epilogue are narrators, so they speak with some degree of formality and reserve. But it might be that they (particularly the Epilogue) have, in an earlier life, suffered the fate of the Woman. Or suffered the fate of one or more of the other characters in the play. Thus, their relation to the play is real and immediate and based in feelings (such as love or defensiveness, delight or suspicion). It’s also important to note that the Man and Woman are not “crazy people,” but are simply people trying to live in the world in which they find themselves. And that the Doctor and Nurse are not unkind, are not even necessarily ineffective, but instead are simply people who are trying to help, despite being somewhat distracted by their own private pains.

**Another Thought**

*The Flu Season* could be called an experimental play. It uses some complicated strategies. It should not be played or staged, though, in an overly complicated or radically experimental way. All elements should simply be used to tell the story, the whole
story, as powerfully and clearly as possible. Proceeding this way should produce, I hope, an effect that is brave and new and moving and meaningful, rather than just “experimental” for the sake of being experimental.

INTERMISSION