

Mutability

By Straton Rushing

MUTABILITY

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For everyone from Sonora

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Mutability received developmental readings with Arizona State University's TheatreLAB in Tempe, Arizona, with Pegasus Theatre's Fresh Reads Festival in Dallas, Texas, and with the New Deal Creative Arts Center's Hudson Valley Theatre Festival in Hyde Park, New York.

Mutability was a finalist for the Association for Theatre in Higher Education's 2023 Judith Royer Excellence in Playwriting Award, and the Runner-Up for the College of Charleston's 2024 Todd McNerney Playwriting Award.

CAST: 2 Men, 3 Women

MARY HOOPER, early 20s, Mexican-American and white Anglo woman

YOUNG MAN, late 20s, any ethnicity, man

FRANK HOOPER 40s-60s, white Anglo man

RUSTY ROMERO late 30s, Mexican-American man

ARACELI "CHELI" HOOPER 40s-60s, Mexican-American woman

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ACT ONE

Before the lights come up, we hear the sound of a steel guitar picking out an old west tune. It is almost soothing.

Flashing red and blue lights like a cop car in the distance fade in.

Center stage sits MARY, a woman in her early 20s, wearing a bloodstained t-shirt. She looks down at the ground in front of her, then her eyes float up towards the audience.

The music devolves into a soft static and the lights gradually shift to a colorless wash.

Mary sits for a long moment.

Once she finally speaks, her voice has a slight Texas twang to it.

MARY. *(Numb, deadpan)* What scares you? ... What really scares you? *(The question hangs in the air.)* Failure? ... Dying? ... Being erased? ... If you ask me, the worst fear is when you're scared for someone you love ... When you know there's nothing you can do to save them... I know that feeling pretty well... you don't just feel it once... Afterwards, it echoes over and over, until... I don't know... forever, maybe... The news had a lot to say about what happened... Dead bodies with bullet holes in them do tend to attract questions... But, I know what happened. How it really happened. I was actually there... And for the few parts I wasn't there for... I guess I'll have to speculate, fill in some gaps... Despite what you might have heard on the news, the real story doesn't start with shotguns - fingerprints - hammers - blood spatters... It started with a guy. A normal, boring guy, in a new Audi A3, stopping off for gas on the side of the road in the "middle of nowhere" – *(Mary closes her eyes and*

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takes a breath. The lights flicker out and the static disappears.

The music is replaced instead with a trendy pop song. Lights up on the inside of the Audi, which can be indicated with just a chair. In it drives YOUNG MAN, a clean-cut dude in his late 20s. Mary has disappeared. His phone rings. He looks to see who it is and sighs. He turns down the radio and picks up.)

YOUNG MAN. *(Fake nice)* Heeeeeey! How you been! ... Oh man, the gender reveal, yeah I - you know, I saw you sent me that thing on Insta and I just totally blanked on replying, my bad bro - *(He fixes his hair in the rear view mirror while he talks.)* ... Yeeeah, well man sorry. I'm not even going to be back in town 'til Sunday... Yeeeah bossman has me checking out a property we're going to scoop up... *(He scoffs.)* Oh, you know, it's off somewhere between Bumfuck, Nowhere and Redneckistan... *(He rolls his eyes then "laughs" at his "friend's" response.)* Apparently, the town's *supposed* to start growing or something but - man, it's rough. There's like nobody out here. And when you do see someone they look like they're straight out of *Deliverance* or something... I'm lowkey surprised you were even able to reach me. My service has been in and out for an hour... There is one perk to driving out here though. I've been doing 95 the whole way, making great time... No, I'm not exaggerating! *(He stops and takes a picture of his speedometer.)* Deadass bro! I just took a picture. I sent it to you! ... But don't even worry about me, I'll be alright - hey, real sorry I can't make it but Jenny's bringing a gift by... *(He rolls his eyes again and pretends he's cutting out.)* Yeah man - I... I can't - he - ... hear - ... My service it's! - ... *(He hangs up. He checks the fuel gauge and sees it is low. He sees a gas station and pulls over to it. He checks his hair in the rear view. He gets out of the car. FRANK, a man in his 50s, pokes his head out of the station and eyes the car. He walks over. He wears overalls without an undershirt. A disgusting sweat-stained hat covers his messy hair. He has*

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a limp and walks hunched over. Frank takes a good second to size the kid up before speaking. He has the thickest Texas accent you've ever heard.)

FRANK. Afternoon. Need a fill?

YOUNG MAN. Yeah... I mean I can just do it myself?

FRANK. No need! *(He opens the young man's tank and starts to fill it.)* We're a bit... *old fashioned ... 'round these parts. (A beat. Frank stares at the man who uncomfortably doesn't meet his gaze. Frank spits on the ground.)* Whereyafrom?

YOUNG MAN. I'm sorry?

FRANK. Where - Are - Ya - From?

YOUNG MAN. San Diego - originally - but, I live in Austin now, so - ...

FRANK. Ya like it there?

YOUNG MAN. It's nice... and expensive, but -

FRANK. What brings ya out here?

YOUNG MAN. My company's looking at buying a property near here. We want to develop it into a rental cabin on AirBnB.

FRANK. ... On what?

YOUNG MAN. Well, it's like a - uh - ... Okay so, do you know what "glamping" is?

FRANK. What?

YOUNG MAN. Like "glamorous" plus "camping" - so "glamping" - *(Frank gives him a blank stare. The young man starts speaking more rapidly.)* Okay so - well it's camping but at like *nice* properties - like, the campsites are so cute looking - ... *(Frank continues to stare blankly. The young man speak even more quickly)* ... or like unique that people will post it on social media and - you know that's just basically free publicity and so - uh... anyway... *(An awkward silence.)* Yup. *(Frank eyes the man with distain. Frank spits again.)*

FRANK. "Glamping".

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YOUNG MAN. Yeah...

FRANK. Hm.

YOUNG MAN. ... You know I really probably don't need a *full* tank -

FRANK. Where is it?

YOUNG MAN. Huh -

FRANK. The property y'all are buying. I'm from here. I know every place.

YOUNG MAN. Oh, uh - (*The man checks his phone to see the name.*)
It's a cabin is uh - near uh - "Carpenter Creek". (*Frank stops pumping the gas.*)

FRANK. What'd you just say? ...

YOUNG MAN. C-Carpenter Creek, a few miles south of the town?
(*Frank's eyes grow wider.*)

FRANK. You talking about... "The River"?

YOUNG MAN. ... *The* river? Why is it *the* river?

FRANK. You ain't heard 'bout what goes on out there boy?!

YOUNG MAN. N-n-no... what goes on? (*Frank begins shaking his head and pulls the gas from the car. He looks off in the distance, as if to remember the horrific things he's seen near "The River".*)

FRANK. He likes when people go out there... When *outsiders* go out there...

YOUNG MAN. ... He?

FRANK. ...They say he was a man... once... maybe... God knows what to call him now... (*A long serious beat.*) ... Ah, I'm sure you'll be just fine. (*Frank pats the young man on the shoulder. The young man wipes his shoulder despite Frank not leaving anything.*)

YOUNG MAN. Wait - no - what do they say about "The River"... (*With all the pity in the world, Frank looks at the young man.*)

FRANK. That fuel's on the house son.

YOUNG MAN. What, no - I -

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FRANK. It's the least I can do for you - trust me ... it's alright now.

YOUNG MAN. Wait, what's out there!? *Who's out there?*

FRANK. No, no... I cain't say. I dun said too much already... It's been good knowing you stranger...

YOUNG MAN. *(The young man climbs into his car very quickly.) Nah - fuck this shit! (He "peels out". Indicated, by the sound of wheels screeching and the young man grabbing the chair and running off. Frank waves goodbye sadly. Once he's gone, Frank stands up straight, takes off his nasty cap and smiles. The lights and/or curtain come up to reveal a gas station. It ain't much, but it's his. Frank turns on his radio and a classic rock hit or an upbeat country song starts to play. He walks over to a sign and flips it to reveal a white board with a couple dozen tally marks. He marks another one. He puts on a T-shirt under his overalls and grabs a comb to fix his hair. He dances along to the music. Lip-syncs into the comb as if it was a microphone. The scene freezes - with Frank mid-dance move. Reenter Mary. No longer blood soaked and carrying with her a suitcase.)*

MARY. Yup, that's my dad... Owner, proprietor and ever since *I* left home - the only employee of the best gas station in this half of Argento county - Hooper Convenience! Located just 25 miles east of Craven Texas, population 1031. My dad's from here originally. My mom too. He used to work on oil rigs out here. He got injured on the job in the mid-90s and got a settlement for a whopping 15,000 dollars. He said his first instinct was to blow it on a new pickup, but then he realized ... He didn't want to work for someone else if he didn't have to. So, he took that money and opened the store - now going 25 years strong. I *literally* grew up in this store. Literally, our house is connected to it out back. And right now, I'm not on the news. I'm not the topic of a true crime podcast ... or anybody really. I'm *just* Mary Hooper - a 22-year-old senior at the University of Texas. And while some of my friends went to Cabo for

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spring break, I'm doing the same thing I did my other 3 spring breaks in college - coming home and giving my dad a load off at the shop – (*The scene unfreezes. The phone rings in the shop. Frank cuts off his music and answers it.*)

FRANK. Hooper Convenience, how can I help you - ... no. (*He hangs up. He checks some notes he has on his clipboard. Enter Mary.*) There she is! (*He goes and hugs his daughter.*) How's the drive?

MARY. (*Mary's accent slips in a bit more when she talks to her dad.*) Long, boring -

FRANK. Such a burden to see your old man, huh ?

MARY. Let me whine for five minutes. How are we doing today?

FRANK. Slow for a Saturday, but that's been the norm.

MARY. Really?

FRANK. Yup, just keeps getting worse and worse... You see your mom already?

MARY. I came straight here.

FRANK. You should stop by -

MARY. I know, I will. (*Mary goes and puts her stuff away. Immediately she puts on an apron to get started working.*)

FRANK. What the hell are you doing? Go rest for a minute.

MARY. What's the point of spending spring break helping you out if I don't help out? (*Mary starts wiping down counters.*)

FRANK. Baby doll, they're already clean!

MARY. They're about to get *actually* cleaned. (*Enter into the gas station RUSTY, a local of Craven in his 30s. An electrician dressed for work with a baseball cap. He's texting on his phone.*)

RUSTY. Hey Frank, I need a couple of bags of - (*Rusty looks up and notices Mary.*) I didn't know you were coming home! – (*Rusty takes off his cap and goes to shake Mary's hand. Before he can - The scene freezes and Mary regards the audience again.*)

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MARY. Rusty Romero - local electrician, father to two really cute toddlers and Iraqi war vet... Maybe it was Afghanistan actually? I'm not sure. Like everyone else in Craven, he says *this* every time he sees me...
(*The scene unfreezes. The pair shake hands.*)

RUSTY. You know every time I see you, I think of when you were little. You know I still remember when you would - (*The scene freezes again.*)

MARY. Okay - you know what - never mind. I'll explain this one myself. So, growing up at a truck stop I learned trucker lingo when I was like a three. When other kids would say "yes ma'am" or "no sir" I would say - "Ten-Four good buddy"... And two decades later, people *still* think that's hilarious... So, they remind me of it, All. The. Time... Anyways, Rusty here is one of my dad's last real regulars. And you're about to find out why-

RUSTY. You got to be close to finishing school right? (*Mary nods and continues wiping down the counters.*)

FRANK. Double major in Business and Economics. She's been on the dean's list 4 semesters in a row. All that while working two jobs *and* interning at a bank. Oh, and tell him what you been working on!

MARY. My honor's thesis?

FRANK. Yeah!

MARY. Oh, it's uh - It's like a final paper thing. I decided to write it about Craven.

RUSTY. What's there to write about?

MARY. It's an economic survey of the county and demographics - oil and gas, all that -

FRANK. She's a wiz with all those numbers. And you know she didn't get that *acumen* from my side of the family ... Did I use that one right?

MARY. I never should have shown you that Word-A-Day app.

RUSTY. Well, congrats Mary. I just hope you realize how proud we are.
(*Mary gives an uncomfortable grin and nod.*)

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MARY. Thanks Rusty. (*Mary addresses the audience.*) It might be kind of hard to wrap your head around if you aren't from a place like Craven but, not a lot of kids get into big schools like UT out here. It's a public university, sure. But it's not *easy* to get into... When you're in a graduating class of sixty, you basically have to be number one to get in... Which I was. And you can thank my mom for that. From the time I was 7, she would ground me if I had a "A-" on my report card... You know what they say, got to break a few eggs to make a valedictorian omelet... (*The scene unfreezes.*)

FRANK. You had any luck on your search?

MARY. Search?

FRANK. Rusty's been looking to find a new workshop to keep his equipment in.

RUSTY. Yeah - for 'bout a month now. Ain't found nothing. Real estate situation's been so weird lately 'round here. It'd be nice to get something outside of town too, since most of my work is outside of Craven these days... Speaking of which - I need to get to my jobsite – (*Rusty glances over to Mary and he adopts a hushed tone.*) But - uh- well, I just needed - uh - you see I'm out -

FRANK. Usual?

RUSTY. Yeah... But I can come back later if she -

FRANK. No, now's just fine. (*Rusty nods and hands Frank some cash. Frank goes to the back. Mary sees everything going on and eyes the exchange curiously. Rusty shifts awkwardly, not saying anything. Frank returns with a paper sack, hands it to Rusty who is dying to leave.*)

RUSTY. Okay, well I better get on -

MARY. Rusty?

RUSTY. Mhm.

MARY. What exactly is that?

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RUSTY. Well, this uh - well, your dad he, uh. He's been selling me veggies from his uh - (*Looks at Frank to bail him out but Frank is silent.*) His garden - you know he keep a garden out back right? Wait - course you do you grew up here - so uh - ... Yup. (*A beat. Then Mary cracks a grin.*)

MARY. I'm teasing Rusty. I know he sells weed. (*Franks busts out laughing. Rusty grins as well.*)

FRANK. Oh man, the look on your face -

RUSTY. Alright alright, y'all got me. (*Ambulance sirens are heard outside. The trio stop and walk over to the windows.*) You don't see ambulances out this way too often -

MARY. Got to be a wreck off of the interstate.

RUSTY. Alejandra's working today. I'll ask her if they brough someone in - (*Mary, to the audience.*)

MARY. His wife is a nurse at the hospital in town... Don't worry, I'll be here to translate all of these "Craven specific" details for y'all.

RUSTY. Well, better get a move on. (*Rusty exits.*)

FRANK. That was a good one.

MARY. I wonder why he's so cagey about pot. I know Texas ain't exactly a 420 hotspot but it ought to be legal soon enough-

FRANK. I don't know. You know how it can be. Some people 'round here still think smoking a joint is just a step away from a crack pipe... (*A beat. Frank remembers.*) You hear about the Flanagan boy? The one in your class?

MARY. Mickey? Yeah, total white trash prick. What about him?

FRANK. He died last week. (*A beat.*)

MARY. Damn... Meth? (*Frank shrugs.*)

FRANK. I'm not sure. Pills, maybe. But something like that, yeah - (*The scene freezes, Mary addresses the audience.*)

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MARY. From 1990 to 1999 there were only 4 deaths attributed to drug overdoses in Argento County. In the 2000s there were 27. In the 2010s, the number ballooned to 47... I found those numbers when I was doing research for my thesis, but they didn't fit into the paper ... I dunno, now when I hear about something like that... I think about 'em... (*The scene unfreezes.*)

FRANK. You know track team's supposed to be doing alright this year. 'Course they did move us down to single-A division -

MARY. They moved us down?

FRANK. Yeah, it was just a matter of time though. There was only 30 kids in last year's graduating class.

MARY. I guess they've been laying off teachers too.

FRANK. Of course.

MARY. God, it just feels like it's happening all at once -

FRANK. It feels slow when you're actually here. I was gonna tell you on the phone last week, but I couldn't reach you. (*Mary notices the white board and points.*)

MARY. What's this?

FRANK. Oh ... - well that's a whole thing really ...

MARY. What is it?

FRANK. I wouldn't want to bore you with all of the details.

MARY. *Details?* What about tally marks could be detailed?

FRANK. Alright, alright ... It's for yuppie spookin'. (*Mary stares at him blankly.*)

MARY. Am I supposed to know what that means?

FRANK. Keeping track of how many yuppies I can spook off.

MARY. As in ... scaring people?

FRANK. Yup. (*Another blank stare.*)

MARY. Dad, what the hell are you talking about?

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FRANK. Okay look, you know how ever since the COVID happened more and more of these techie millennials have been working from home? Some of 'em still doing permanently?

MARY. Yeah?

FRANK. Well, bunch of 'em have been getting the bright idea to move out into the country since they can work from anywhere. And of course, with our luck, we went viral on the TikTok. And I don't know the details - but someone made a video saying the town was cheap and cute, then people made videos about them videos. Then next thing you know, people are saying we could be the next Marfa or something - and all of these kids with weird haircuts and nose rings started coming in, asking about buying property.

MARY. How come I haven't heard about this? (*Frank shrugs.*)

FRANK. It's not like you've been home in a while. (*A beat.*) ... Anyway, it's not a *huge* thing. Not yet anyways. That's why I'm trying to nip it in the bud. But more and more of 'em keep coming. They even opened this artist's colony thing at Doc Del Toro's old house -

MARY. That's awesome!

FRANK. Not really.

MARY. You like art?

FRANK. Yeah, everybody likes art. But I'd prefer they didn't do it in the house my dead friend used to own. Doc was a good man - best physician we ever had. Now, they paint weird pictures of naked people and try to sell them for 500 bucks on his lawn - it's obscene -

MARY. Well, if Doctor Del Toro's kids sold it to them, they can do whatever they want there.

FRANK. Don't mean the rest of us have to approve of it -

MARY. What's the big deal with new people moving into town?

FRANK. Everything? If I wanted to live near a bunch of Californians you know where I'd go?

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MARY. ... California?

FRANK. AUSTIN! But I'm not in Austin - I'm here, and they need to stay in the city where they belong.

MARY. Okay... just so I can have all of this straight - a bunch of well-off, professional young people are bringing money into our town - which has been slowly dying for decade - and this is somehow a *bad* thing?

FRANK. You know them apartments down by Roth Street?

MARY. Next to the cemetery, yeah.

FRANK. Rent's gone up on them like three hundred in the past 6 months. My buddy Chano's scared about just getting by now. There's barely any place to move here. So, the few places left get more expensive quicker than you can blink your eye. Besides - these kids coming in, they don't really want to live *here*. Not actually. They think they do. But then they get to the grocery store and they wonder where all the organic shit is at.

MARY. Alright, well what exactly are you doing to scare them off?

FRANK. Honestly, it don't take much. You know like in a scary movie when - hell, I'll just show you. Matter of fact, I've been cooking up some new lines. Give me the name of a place in town you want to move to.
(Frank grabs his dirty cap and puts it on. Frank slouches over and recreates his "creepy role".)

MARY. Alright, let's say I found a house over on ... Hitchcock Avenue.
(Frank freezes at the name of the place and looking at her in "terror".)

FRANK. "Hitchcock Avenue? ... Lots of people seem to be going down that a way... 'Course I never seen any of 'em come back"... *(A long beat where Frank continues to give her a creepy stare 'in character'.)*

MARY. And that works? *(Frank breaks his 'character'.)*

FRANK. Like a charm. It's all but guaranteed if you look at them like they're about to die *then* give 'em a tank of gas for free - really drives the point home.

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MARY. You're giving away *free* gas!?

FRANK. Only occasionally, when I'm really trying to sell my performance -

MARY. Do you not see how that's like profoundly stupid? I bet they don't even fall for it. (*Frank points to the white board.*)

FRANK. This many have. (*Mary sighs and takes the hat off of her dad's head.*)

MARY. You need to wash this thing -

FRANK. No, see you're not getting it. I dirtied it up specifically for the costume - it's a part of the *mystique* -

MARY. If you say one more fancy word I will delete that app off your phone.

FRANK. ... Look, I don't do nothing crazy. I'm not hurting nobody here. I just act... The way they expect me to I guess... Not my fault they think we're crazy.

MARY. You know - ... As weird as this is. I *think* I get it. Kind of -

FRANK. Good!

MARY. Well, no, not like I approve - I really do not approve at all. But I see why it seems like a good idea to *you*.

FRANK. Why?

MARY. It's like, a new hobby. Some dads pick up golf when their kids go to college. Some make ships in bottles. You decided to cosplay as a side character from *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

FRANK. I don't see it as a hobby. It's more like a civic duty. Hell, half the town is in on it by now -

MARY. And they're on board with it?

FRANK. ... the sheriff's department *did* recommend I stop because a few of the yuppies were driving off at high speeds. Said that presented a possible road hazard -

MARY. The police told you to quit?

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FRANK. They *recommended* I quit. If it was a real issue they'da *told* me to quit. But they didn't! 'Cause they understand - They get it.

MARY. Oh, they "get it"?

FRANK. They really do, people from Craven like this town the way it is! And these people coming in, they're not like us.

MARY. That sounds really bad pa.

FRANK. How so?

MARY. It sounds like you ... might mean something else by that.

FRANK. What?

MARY. Like you're saying they're too gay or too ethnic or something -

FRANK. C'mon, I didn't say that -

MARY. I know. But it sounds like you might mean that. (*Frank stops and considers.*)

FRANK. Look, *obviously* I'm not doing this to be racist or whatever - hell, most of these kids are spoiled suburban WASPs -

MARY. Sure -

FRANK. You know I ain't prejudiced. I never have been. Hell, even back in high school I - (*The scene freezes. Mary takes a deep breath and rubs her head in frustration, then addresses the audience. Frank only unfreezes to speak.*)

MARY. Okay... here we go ... so - this is the part where my dad somehow manages to make a conversation about racism and homophobia ... about high school football. Specifically, the 1988 season and how it -

FRANK. Made me the man I am I today. I really believe that -

MARY. And of course, he mentions -

FRANK. I was one of just four white boys on the *whole* team.

MARY. Craven *is* a majority Mexican town. So, he's not actually exaggerating about that - and then in reference to the other white boys he says -

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FRANK. I was the only one that could run worth a damn too. But that didn't matter what color we were. We were all brothers out there -

MARY. Which I guess is why he started talking about this in the first place. But also, of course, he works in -

FRANK. And I *still* think we'da gone all the way if ol' Mendez hadn'ta blown out his knee during the third quarter of the area championship -

MARY. And of course, at this point, I want to scream at him... I want to call him an idiot for saying all this. I want to yell at him for not listening to me - I want to explain to him how prejudices *actually* work and how being an above average halfback in the late 80s has NOTHING to do with it - ... And let's say I did say any of that - then he'd probably come back with -

FRANK. Did I raise you to be a racist?

MARY. And of course I *have* to say "no", and he'd say -

FRANK. Then why the hell would you accuse *me* of being a racist now!?

MARY. Then I'd try to explain that racism is structural - complicated - and a general animosity towards "outsiders" might well be related to it, even if he doesn't mean for it to be - then he'd say -

FRANK. What the hell does that got to do with any of this?

MARY. Then I'm sure I'd get frustrated, and I'd ask him why the hell he's being so deliberately dense - then he'd say -

FRANK. Mary, no reason to be ugly about this, we're just having a discussion -

MARY. And we'd go around and around - like a tire in the mud - going nowhere... Ask me how I know... So, I try to sidestep that particular rabbit hole, while still making my point – (*The scene returns to normal.*) Dad - I know all of that. But, I'm just saying - ... Well, maybe you're being like - subconsciously bias. Just making *assumptions* about these people. We all do it.

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FRANK. Look, I like Craven. I like it like this. Is that so wrong?

MARY. The Craven I grew up in was a nice place that welcomed *everybody*. At least we claimed to. And that's how I'd like for us to act.

FRANK. We *do* welcome everybody - just so long as they're decent and they don't go trying to change everything. These people, they've already got a place. Why are they entitled to our place too? This is my home. I want it to stay my home ... Look - you know I love everybody.

MARY. I'm not saying you don't -

FRANK. But that's just it - *they* think I don't. They expect me to be... (*Frank doesn't think of the word to describe it, but it would probably be "redneck", "backwards" or something even more aggressive.*) Well... you know... And if all it takes is me saying a few words and they run off... I think that says a lot more about them than it does about me.

MARY. Well, you have a point there.

FRANK. I know I do They have these *ideas* about people like us, they - (*Frank pauses, realizing something.*) Well... People like me anyways...

MARY. What?

FRANK. Nothing... "Generational differences" I guess...

MARY. What, you think that I think I'm too good for Craven now?

FRANK. No, I know you are too good for Craven. And that ain't a bad thing either. We knew you were meant for bigger things since you was a little girl. (*Mary says nothing.*) What?

MARY. Nothing pa.

FRANK. That was a real big pause for a whole lot of nothing.

MARY. ... I know I always said I was dying to get out... Lots of kids say that... Not like it wasn't true... (*Mary goes and looks out the window.*)

When I'm in Austin... Feels like everything I do is a formal handshake... And when I'm home... even the shitty stuff feels like a hug... I feel like cities are a paradox... I guess folks who are from there don't see it that way but... I never realized that the more people you got together the

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more lonely everyone felt... And in so many ways, it's exactly what I wanted it to be. Like... I did it, just like I always said I would. But... It'll never be home. And I can't even tell people about it because it sounds crazy. And it sounds stupid... Like I spent my whole childhood fantasizing about moving somewhere and doing all this stuff, and now ... It's like I got this empty inside of me... And I thought I could fill it with grades, or a good resume - or working... I dunno, I guess I'm starting to think the problem might be me... Maybe I really just don't fit in anywhere... (*A long beat. Mary tells the audience -*) ... Of course, I didn't actually say any of that... Just thought it real loud... I guess to him, me being "Too good for Craven" was for the best. Meant I made it somehow. Meant they did a good job... But I'm just not... I think if I've learned anything since moving out... You can't be too good for your home... Home just *is*, and it follows you one way or another... So, I didn't say anything when he said – (*The scene unfreezes.*)

FRANK. No, I know you are too good for Craven. And that ain't a bad thing either. We knew you were meant for bigger things since you was little. (*Mary says nothing.*) You look exhausted ... (*Mary shrugs.*) You need to get you some rest young lady. I mean it. That's an order as your boss, not your dad.

MARY. I want to hel -

FRANK. Ain't nobody here! Shelves are stocked, you cleaned a bunch of shit that was already clean. If anyone comes in to actually spend money, they're probably looking for weed. You drove four hours. Take a nap. (*Mary looks at her dad.*)

MARY. Fine. 15 minutes. Then I'm coming back out and taking inventory.

FRANK. I done inventory last week – (*As she is exiting.*)

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MARY (OFF). You do it wrong. (*Frank rolls his eyes and gets out a note pad from behind the counter. He checks off some boxes. Mary pokes her head back in and addresses the audience.*)

MARY. Now, like I said - I wasn't here for every last important thing that happened. I'm filling in some gaps here. But, I imagine it went sort of like this. (*Frank's wife, CHELI, enters. She is around the same age as him, wearing a flowing dress. Mary leaves.*)

FRANK. You know she still insists on doing inventory *your* way. All these years later.

CHELI. That's probably because it's the right way... So, how is she?

FRANK. She looked ...

CHELI. Bad?

FRANK. No, not bad. Definitely not bad. Stressed? I think?... She didn't take too kindly to the yuppie spooking once she found out about that.

But even when she first got here -

CHELI. Is she sleeping okay?

FRANK. ... uh-

CHELI. 'Cause you know how she gets when she's stressed - she's like you.

FRANK. I don't know, I didn't ask.

CHELI. Well, how are her grades?

FRANK. Her grades?

CHELI. If they're slipping maybe that's a part of it.

FRANK. I don't know. I don't ask her about that stuff-

CHELI. You should!

FRANK. Cheli, darling, she's 22. She's 'bout to finish school - unless she's fixing to keel over dead on us, I'm not going to bug her. (*A beat.*)

CHELI. You take your pills?

FRANK. Of course.

CHELI. No you didn't.

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FRANK. ... Okay, I didn't -

CHELI. Why?

FRANK. They make me feel woozy.

CHELI. No they don't, you made that up.

FRANK. ... Okay, I made that up. But still, I just don't see any cause in taking 'em. They're expensive!

CHELI. ... Is that really why? (*Another unspoken understanding between them. Frank shrugs.*)

FRANK. What's the worst that could happen? ...

CHELI. Look, I learned a long time ago I can't *make* you do anything you don't want to. But, I think you ought to take them... And that's all I'm going to say.

FRANK. ... I'll get better 'bout it darling. (*A beat.*)

CHELI. ... You know what I've been thinking about?

FRANK. Huh?

CHELI. Just getting sentimental with our anniversary coming up is all... Thinking about the poem from our wedding... (*Frank smiles.*)

FRANK. Yeah, the one you *made* me memorize you mean -

CHELI. "We are as clouds that veil the midnight moon;
How restlessly they speed, and gleam, and quiver,
Streaking the darkness radiantly! - yet soon
Night closes round, and they are lost forever-"

FRANK. (*Cutting her off to get in on the action.*) "Or -..." (*Frank racks his brain to remember the rest. But it comes to him pretty quickly.*)

"... Or like forgotten lyres, whose dissonant strings
Give various response to each varying blast,
To whose frail frame no second motion brings
One mood or modulation like the last."

CHELI. (*As if quizzing him.*) "We rest - "

FRANK. "A dream has the power to poison sleep;"

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CHELI. "We rise -" (*He struggles with that one. Motions to her like "don't tell me". Eventually he recalls.*)

FRANK. ... "One wandering thought pollutes the day;"

CHELI. "We feel, conceive or reason, laugh or weep;
Embrace fond woe, or cast our cares away:"

FRANK. "It is the same! - For, be it joy or sorrow,
The path of its departure still is free:"

CHELI. "Man's yesterday may ne'er be like his morrow;
Nought may endure but -"

FRANK. "Mutability" (*Frank grins. Yeah, he's proud of himself.*) ... You really thought I forgot huh?

CHELI. I'm impressed mister.

FRANK. You know I didn't even realize I could memorize that many words 'til I did. The only things I know anywhere near that long are the pledge of allegiance and the Lord's Prayer probably ... You know, I do have to admit one though.

CHELI. What?

FRANK. I never knew what that last word meant...

CHELI. "Mutability"? (*Frank nods.*) Frank, that's the *title* of the poem?

FRANK. Well, I didn't learn it for me. I learned it 'cause you loved it. (*Cheli grins at him.*) I planned on looking it up, I just nev- (*The phone goes off. Frank picks up.*) Hooper Convenience ... Nope! (*He hangs up the phone.*)

CHELI. Them again?

FRANK. Who else -

MARY (OFF). Hey dad!

MARY. (*Mary reenters looking at her phone.*) Who are you talking to? (*Frank glances at Cheli, who Mary can't see or hear.*)

FRANK. Uh, nobody darling - what's the matter?

MARY. Well, I think I have an idea of why business has been so shitty.

MUTABILITY

CHELI. Frank, tell her to watch her language.

FRANK. Hey now, language!

MARY. You taught me the word. I'll say it if I want to. (*Mary hands her dad the phone.*) Look – (*The scene freezes as she addresses the audience.*) Okay, so here's what happened. For every person dad scared out of the town, at least half of them must have left a review on Google ... (*Mary glances and looks at her frozen mom.*) And yeah, that's my mom... so she, uh - this is going to be a tough one to explain right now. So... I didn't realize she was here. Like I know you're seeing her now - and my dad has been talking to her. But when all of this was first happening - *I* couldn't see or hear her. As far as I knew my dad had just picked up this weird habit of talking to himself... Look, we're right in the middle of something important. I'll get to all of that later on. (*The scene unfreezes.*)

FRANK. One star!?

MARY. Yeah, there's a lot of them! (*Franks holds the phone so Cheli can see it as well.*)

CHELI. Oh no -

MARY. Why are you holding the phone like that?

FRANK. Oh, uh - Anyways well, we just got to call somebody at Google and tell them they've made a mistake.

MARY. I don't think you can just call Google to have reviews removed.

FRANK. Jesus, look at this one - "... And worst of all, the guy had the ugliest, gnarled teeth you've ever seen!" I don't even *use* fake teeth for my act!? Is she talking about my real teeth?

MARY. You're missing the real issue here. (*Cheli walks over and looks her daughter up and down.*)

CHELI. Frank she hasn't been sleeping. (*Frank shoots her a confused look.*) I can tell! It's in the way she's standing!

FRANK. Okay, well I'll bring it up later -

MUTABILITY

MARY. With - who?

FRANK. Nothing - look, this probably ain't worth sweating over. Who reads these things anyhow?

MARY. A lot of people read them pa.

FRANK. Maybe this is less than ideal. But who do we blame here? Google reviews? Times are hard around here. Gas wells are dry. Biggest export has been meth for the last 5 years. Half the kids your age leave. Plus, I bet nobody *actually* reads those things -

MARY. But what if they do and that's why it's gotten so bad? More people are coming to town than ever, yet *we're* not seeing those dollars here?

CHELI. She has a point.

FRANK. I dunno maybe all of them have those electric cars.

MARY. You think *all* of these new people have Teslas? (*Frank shrugs. Mary buries her face in her hands. The phone rings again. Frank answers.*)

FRANK. Hooper Convenience... Well, with all due respect sir I - ... You're goddamn right I was rude to your assistant earlier. I've told you people to stop calling me. If you don't leave us the hell alone, I'm about to file a report with the law. Now kindly, go SCREW yourself! (*Frank hangs up. A beat. He clutches his chest. He gets weak and his legs begin to buckle.*)

MARY. Dad!?

FRANK. Don't worry baby, don't worry - (*He sits on a nearby stool. Cheli sits next to him.*)

CHELI. Just breathe like the doctor taught you. (*Frank takes deep breaths.*)

FRANK. Shouldn't have let my pressure get up.

MARY. What do I do?

FRANK. Hey, hey - I'm okay, I'm okay...

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CHELI. You need water.

FRANK. Grab me a water from the cooler would you. (*Mary goes and gets her dad a water bottle. He drinks it.*) Sorry, I didn't mean to worry you. I just get lightheaded is all.

MARY. I thought Dr. Jordan had you on pills for that?

FRANK. I do, I am it's just - (*Frank and Cheli share a look.*) I'm okay darling, it just happens sometimes. (*Frank looks at his daughter. A beat.*)

MARY. ... What the hell was that call even about?

FRANK. Some business, commercial real-estate firm - whatever - in San Antone. Called - uhm-

CHELI. Burton.

FRANK. Yeah, Burton Holdings. They want to buy the shop.

MARY. Really?

FRANK. Yup.

MARY. Have they made an offer?

FRANK. Yeah.

MARY. And?

FRANK. It's uh - yeah, they started calling up here not too long after the yuppies moved in 'cause they figured the town was on the come-up and they wanted in on the action -

MARY. How much?

FRANK. Look, it's not an option. (*Frank shrugs.*)

MARY. You have to at least think about it?

FRANK. No -

MARY. Look, we're in a hole.

FRANK. *I'm* in a hole.

MARY. How much are they offering?

CHELI. Just tell her. She might as well know.

FRANK. ... four hundred thousand. (*The scene freezes.*)

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MARY. I don't think I need to explain to you how insane that number is - but it is extra bonkers for Craven. A five-bedroom house in town might go for less than 200K out here. (*The scene unfreezes.*)

MARY. What?

FRANK. Yup, for the LLC, inventory, house. All in all. Four hundred.

MARY. Okay look, I get that this is... Not an *easy* choice to make - for you -

FRANK. Darling -

MARY. - but Dad, you're getting older.

FRANK. Believe me my knees got the memo. (*Cheli chortles.*)

MARY. You could actually *retire* with that money? You could finish paying back mom's medical bills... Look, that number might not still be there when you're finally ready...

FRANK. I ain't never going to *be* ready. There ain't no ready. When I'm gone... Whenever the lord takes me. *You* should sell this place. And I guess I'd prefer you sold it to someone from Craven who'd take care of it. But, you know what, that'll be your choice... And when that happens you *should* use that money the way you see fit, but I can't. This is it right here for me. This is where – (*Frank glances at Cheli and quiets down. A brief silence.*)

MARY. What?

FRANK. It's hard to explain. Maybe one day you'll understand ...

MARY. Look... I get this isn't simple. You made this place what it is. And saying goodbye to the shop and the house ... yeah, it won't be easy. But the way I see it, this *is* what you worked for all this time... (*Cheli pauses and looks at Frank. The lights begin to flicker.*) What's that - (*Frank sighs.*)

FRANK. That faulty wiring... (*The lights go out.*) And it tripped the breaker - again. Damn it. (*A pause. We hear a loud banging sound.*)

MARY. ... What was that?...

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FRANK. ...I'll tell you what it was ... it was that goddamned raccoon again! He gets up on the roof cause he's trying to get at the pecan tree - (*We hear more banging.*) Tell you what, grab me my .22! I'm going to crawl up there finish this once and for all -

MARY. NOT right now!

FRANK. ... Fine. Look, just go outside to the telephone pole with the -

MARY. I know where the breaker's at. Don't get up! (*Mary crosses downstage and addresses the audience. She takes off her apron, grabs a zip-up hoodie and puts it on.*) You know, he told me he was going to get that wiring fixed like 2 years ago... Guess paying for it was easier said than done... Fast forward about 2 hours later. It's like 9pm. I drove into town to pick up a toothbrush from the Dollar Tree before it closed and... well, I didn't actually forget my toothbrush back in Austin, but I told my dad that I did. I just needed a second to decompress... Rusty's house is right next to the dollar store. His wife doesn't let him smoke inside - so, he's on his porch - (*Rusty enters downstage, takes out a lawn chair and sits. Rusty looks around, deeply paranoid. He finally pulls a joint out of his pocket. He sees somebody coming. Rusty freaks out, drops his joint and scrambles to put it in his pocket. Mary enters the scene. She is walking past him.*)

RUSTY. Oh - it's you -

MARY. Long time no see stranger. Tell everyone said – (*Making a "joint smoking" motion with her hands.*) "High". (*Rusty grins.*)

RUSTY. Will do. (*He waves as she starts to leave. Rusty pulls his joint back out.*) Oh, I found out what happened with that wreck this afternoon!

MARY. The ambulance we heard?

RUSTY. Yeah, some guy from out of town. Hit an Axis buck doing like 100. (*The scene freezes, and Mary addresses the audience.*)

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MARY. Axis deer are an invasive species in this corner of the state. They're like body builder deer. Hitting one is like hitting a baby cow. In a place like Argento County there's more deer than people - and it's not particularly close. It's really not a question of *if* you'll hit a deer, it's a question of *when* and *how hard*. Which is why folks around here have grill guards ... and watch the road. (*The scene unfreezes.*) So, was the dude a meth head or what? (*Rusty takes a drag from his joint. As he exhales, he replies.*)

RUSTY. Nah, he wasn't no tweaker. Had real nice clothes on. Totaled his car and tore his face up real good- shards from the windshield went right into his kisser.

MARY. So, he's fine?

RUSTY. Yup. Other than a concussion, he'll probably fine. Just way uglier now.

MARY. Anyways, y'all have a good night.

RUSTY. Ten-Four good buddy. (*Mary forces a smile. Rusty takes his stuff and exits the scene.*)

MARY. Okay - look, I get it. We're pretty far into the story, and you're probably wondering where all of the violence comes in. But, like I said. This is what *really* happened. Not what some true crime weirdos from the internet *think* happened... As for my mom... Yeah, I guess I'm gonna have to get into that sooner or later, so ... I might as well now... So, she's dead. In case you didn't figure that one out. She had been for 6 years at this point. And as far as I knew, *completely* dead... Whatever that even means... Breast cancer. It was stage 4 by the time we found it... (*A long beat. Mary has a lot to say, but thinks better of it.*) ...Y'all know how all that goes I guess. (*Mary crosses downstage and enters the 'graveyard'.*) If you're like me. And you have the very specific experience of losing a parent as a teenager, *while* living in a very small town. You probably hate it when people feel sorry for you. In fact, it probably makes you

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angry when people feel sorry for you... At least that's how I feel. Because from my sophomore year of high school until the day I left town, people would give me these ... looks... And of course, I understand why. It's not like they could help it. They saw me and it made them sad... because they loved my mom. She was a teacher at Craven High for 15 years... a damn good one too... So, when she went, everyone lost her... but me and my dad lost her the most... And yeah, of course it feels good to know people cared ... But every day, I had to hear someone apologize for missing the funeral or I had to hear someone tell me how "strong I was" ... At first you accept it. Then you get tired of it. And after awhile, there's nothing left to be but mad... But at least my dad understood. I mean after all he got the looks too... He was the widower, and I was the kid with the dead mom and for what it was worth, we still each other... I've never been the type to visit the graveyard much. I never really got the appeal. It just didn't make me feel better. Made me feel worse... But I did it, whenever I visited home. Because dad always thought I should... After I bought that toothbrush that I didn't need, I went... Parked my car... I just sat there for a long while, not wanting to get out... I looked up at the sky. The moon was a waning crescent. With clouds all around it... Stared at it for a long time. But eventually I made myself go. (*She stops and looks at her mom's tombstone.*) Araceli - quotations marks - "Cheli" Guerrero-Hooper ... Sister. Wife. Mother... My dad picked the tombstone out... She was brilliant... First in her family to go to college... She worked her ass off her whole life... I'm sure she'd want me to tell you that too, 'cause she was proud of it... As you might imagine... I've never been the type "say things" at the graveyard. You know how people do that? Prayers, or talking to people. But... for whatever reason this time felt different ... I think because I was scared... For my dad and his stupid shit. About the shop. School was going to be over soon ... and I'd have to get a good job, a real job. Because if I couldn't then what the hell had I

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working to all this time for? So, I did it. For the first time. I did that thing. I *talked* to my dead mom. Out load... (*Mary sits and looks at the tombstone.*) ... Hey ma... I wish you were here.... Because I imagine, even if you couldn't make anything better - it would just help - (*Cheli enters. She is more confused than anything at her appearance. She looks at her daughter.*) ... Somehow... Maybe that would at least make things *feel* better... Maybe I would feel safer... (*Cheli goes over to her daughter and puts her hand on her shoulder. A long beat. She puts her hand on top of her mom's. Another long beat.*) I didn't actually *see* her. And I didn't know what was happening... but I tried to hang on to whatever it was... But after a second ... (*The lights shift. Cheli has to leave. She exits.*) It was over ... And once I didn't feel her anymore, I felt... Empty... Empty, but... then, pissed... Pissed with myself... Like, fuck - what did I even come out here for? What the was the point? Why? For my dad? Then I thought about everything that had happened that day - and... Why, why the HELL can't he just sell the shop? It would make everything so much easier if he would just do it! Like here I am working my ass off to make it through school, and there he is selling pot just to keep the lights on at the shop - we get a way out of all of that - and he doesn't even *consider* it. He's just stubborn - always has been - and he's stubborn for the sake of *being* stubborn to prove a point to nobody... So, I thought about the one thing I might be able to do... (*She takes out her cellphone.*) I go to the Google reviews page for Hooper Convenience. And I leave one of my own. Simple - "If you stop here for gas, do not be scared off for any reason. It is just a dumb joke the owner Frank Hooper does. Craven is a *nice* town, there's nothing to fear here". (*Mary shrugs.*) Felt good to hit send... But he didn't ask about it. I imagine he never saw it... So, I go home... Dad's already asleep, so I go to bed... Fast forward a few days and things are... Weird. Tense. You know when you're mad at someone... You know something's up - they know something's up - but

MUTABILITY

nobody wants to say it... That's how it was for about four days. And now... in hindsight. I guess he really just had no idea what to do. (*Mary exits. Enter Frank into the store. Cheli close behind him.*)

FRANK. I have no idea what to do -

CHELI. At the end of the day, it's your choice. She'll have to respect that one way or another.

FRANK. If I could just explain to her *why* ... Without her putting me in the nut house... Hell, maybe I belong there, huh? (*A pause.*) I'm sorry, I didn't mean that. (*They share a tender look.*) I don't know, maybe now she'd understand? After what happened in the graveyard?

CHELI. No. It was so quick. And she still didn't *see* me, not really... I don't think she ever will. Her soul just opens up differently. It was different than it is with you. But, I'm telling you whatever happened.... She summoned me, and I showed up like I do here. And I don't know why but, I... Looking at her after all that time away... I mean I've seen her here, when she visits. But just her and I alone for the first time in 6 years. Knowing she felt *something*... I'm glad it happened ... but, it's just hard. (*Frank nods.*)

FRANK. She might not understand, not yet. Hell, we barely understand it. But you still being there. Watching over her, that means something...

CHELI. You know, I wouldn't hold it against you if you sold the store Frank...

FRANK. That's not an option.

CHELI. You need that money.

FRANK. I need you more... Even if it wasn't for you... This is my home. Where else could I even go?

CHELI. ...We'll be together after you pass.

FRANK. Will we? We don't know that for sure.

CHELI. Are you implying you're going to hell?

MUTABILITY

FRANK. No, I just mean that, we *don't* know - we have no clue how any of this works.

CHELI. ... I just want you to... Have a life.

FRANK. I got all the life I ever wanted right here...

CHELI. I'm serious -

FRANK. Me too! I'm not losing you again. I'm not risking it, ever.
(Enter Mary. She is wearing a big t-shirt with a high school football logo on it that says "Lewisville High". She just woke up and has a toothbrush in her mouth. Again, Mary can't see or hear her mom.)

MARY. Water was out. Just going to brush in the ladies' room.

FRANK. You cain't run the washer *and* have that sink on -

MARY. Yeah, I remembered once it was too late - *(Mary exits to the bathroom.)*

FRANK. Look, I've made up my mind on this a long time ago - *(Cheli is distracted.)*

CHELI. Yeah... I just...

FRANK. What?

CHELI. What was that shirt she was wearing?

FRANK. You want me to ask about her about a shirt?

CHELI. Yes!

FRANK. Okay. Uhm - Hey, Mary! What's going on with your shirt?

MARY (OFF). What?

FRANK. Your shirt - what's up with it? *(Mary reenters mid-teeth brushing, looks down at her shirt.)*

MARY. Oh, um... Nothing... Got it at a thrift store, to sleep in. *(Mary abruptly exits again to finish brushing her teeth.)*

CHELI. Oh, my goodness.

FRANK. I know right! ... Okay, I'm sorry - what exactly are we upset about?

MUTABILITY

CHELI. Frank, that is a *boy's* t-shirt. You didn't tell me she had a boyfriend?

FRANK. She doesn't - she - She didn't tell me I - ... Look, maybe it is just from a thrift store.

CHELI. No no, when you were away for weeks on end working in the patch I used to wear your shirts 'cause I missed you. She's doing that!

FRANK. Look, we don't know -

CHELI. Don't avoid this. Just ask her.

FRANK. What do I ask?

CHELI. Just follow my lead, alright?

FRANK. ... Okay. (*Mary reenters, done with her teeth.*)

CHELI. "Mary, are you sure you got that at a thrift store?"

FRANK. Mary, are you sure you got that from a thrift store?

MARY. Yeah, it's soft so doesn't irritate me in my sleep. I've never even been to Lewisville.

FRANK. (*Murmuring to Cheli*) She said she's never been to Lewisville.

MARY. What?

CHELI. Just ask if it's *possible* she got it from a boy she's seeing and she's just a little shy to share that with us right now.

FRANK. Is it possible you're shy about seeing boys - no, wait.

CHELI. That wasn't it.

MARY. Am I what?

FRANK. (*Whispered to Cheli*) Well, what was it then. It was a lot to repeat at once!

MARY. What are you saying?

FRANK. No, that wasn't it - look, are you dating someone? We think you're dating someone.

MARY. "We"?

FRANK. I - sorry - I think that it sure seems like you're dating somebody. And it's okay if you are, but you need to tell me this stuff.

MUTABILITY

MARY. ... I *am* seeing someone. Alright? (*Cheli shoots him an "I told you so" look.*) And I realized as soon as I said the thrift store thing that I probably shouldn't have lied about it but - look, you're being really weird right now and that is one of the reasons I didn't tell you.

FRANK. "One of" the reasons?

MARY. I mean, we've only really been together like ... about six months.

CHELI. SIX MONTHS!?

FRANK. Is that a long time?

MARY. Not really?

CHELI. Explains the shirt for one thing!

MARY. See and I wasn't sure how you'd react.

FRANK. I'm reacting fine -

CHELI. And she is *definitely* sleeping with him.

FRANK. Wait, yeah - are you sleeping with him?!

CHELI. FRANK! You weren't supposed to ask that one!

MARY. Dad, I'm twenty-two?

FRANK. Right right - sorry -

MARY. Jesus Christ, would you even ask that if I was a dude?

FRANK. Right sorry, I just - ... Why didn't you tell me? Really, why?

MARY. - I - I don't know -

FRANK. I mean did you think I wouldn't like him?

MARY. No, I'm basically certain you'd like him actually. (*A beat.*)

FRANK. So, your concern was with him liking me?

MARY. ...No...

FRANK. You know it's bad enough that you never come home, you never return my calls. Would it kill you to just tell me what's going on. Especially with something big like this!

CHELI. Frank, don't!

MUTABILITY

MARY. I'm *here* aren't I? Believe me it would have been way easier for me to *not* spend my only days off work coming all the way home.

FRANK. It's not just about one time or -

MARY. Then what's it about? You think it's easy to be a daughter you can brag about? Because all that "double major" and "two jobs" shit comes with some strings attached. It comes with working 80 hours a week -

FRANK. I just want to know what's going on with you. At one point, it seemed like you could tell me anything. But now -

MARY. Dad, I'm growing up. I don't have the time to just come home every weekend -

FRANK. No, that's not what I mean. This ain't about home the *place*. It's about you and I. It's about me being there if you need me. That's what home's about -

MARY. Well, sometimes home fucking hurts! (*A beat.*) Sometimes home, and everything around it, is a reminder of a lot of shit you just don't want to have to think about all the time. Sometimes you come home and - you see all of the little things you'd rather forget. So then you just want to be careful to not have all that old stuff mix in with your new stuff. Especially when some tiny part of the new stuff is actually going *well* for once ... And if you don't understand that... I don't know what to tell you... (*Mary exits.*)

FRANK. Baby, wait - (*Frank starts after her.*)

CHELI. Give her a second... (*Frank stops. The spouses sit in silence.*)

FRANK. What do I do? (*A beat.*)

CHELI. Apologize for raising your voice.

FRANK. Okay.

CHELI. ... Then I'm really not sure.

FRANK. ... she's hurting ... That's what all this is. And maybe there's nothing we can do. But we have to try right?

MUTABILITY

CHELI. This is all my fault.

FRANK. What? Baby, none of this is cause if anything you did -

CHELI. No ... it's what I couldn't do... Her last memory of me, I was bald... and pale and my cheeks were sucked in. My thoughts were so foggy ... I couldn't say all of the things I needed to say. The things she needed to hear before I went ... She needed it.

FRANK. There's nothing anybody could have ever told her that would have made it easier.

CHELI. Still... If I could just tell her *something*. Something she could carry with her... (*Frank reflects.*)

FRANK. We have to tell her then.

CHELI. About me? (*Frank nods.*) I don't think we can.

FRANK. You said it yourself, she needs it. And you deserve it, to finally say goodbye on your own terms. Of course, it won't fix everything - but anything we can give to her... We have to try. And how can I expect her to be honest with me, when I ain't even been honest with her?

CHELI. Frank, there's no way she'd understand. Ever.

FRANK. Maybe now? That it seems like she's felt your presence? It's a start... (*A pause.*) When the time is right... I'll tell her for you...
Whatever you need to tell her... Okay?

CHELI. Okay. (*A car pulls up outside. Frank eyes it.*)

FRANK. That's a real nice car... should I?

CHELI. I don't see any harm in blowing off some steam after all of that... (*The spouses look at each other knowingly. Frank begins to get "in costume" for his role.*) Don't forget the hat. (*Frank gets his gross hat. He turns into his creepy hillbilly persona and he exits. At the gas pump is the same young man from the top of the show. Now wearing a face covering, under it some gauze is peeking out. His hands are in his jacket pockets.*)

MUTABILITY

FRANK. Afternoon. Need a fill? (*The man says nothing.*) What you wearing the mask for boy? Just the two of us here? I ain't got no disease. (*The man just stares at him.*) Suit yourself... Not that much of anything can really protect 'ya round these parts... (*The man doesn't react.*) Need a fill then? (*Frank starts to gas up the car, then stops.*) Oh, this is one of them electric cars, huh? (*The man nods. His gaze never wavering from Frank.*) Where ya going?

YOUNG MAN. ... Does it matter?

FRANK. Best make sure she's good and charged. You don't run out of juice outside of town... No telling what'd happen to you then...

YOUNG MAN. No telling, huh? (*Frank is the one growing uncomfortable at this point. His persona wanes.*)

FRANK. Well, what you stop for if you don't need no gas?

YOUNG MAN. ...I need a hammer. (*A pause.*)

FRANK. ...What for? ...You don't look like the type to work with your hands?... (*The man says nothing.*) Don't sell hammers here anyhow -

YOUNG MAN. I need one now...

FRANK. ... I have my old hammer in the tool shed? Could just loan it to you?

YOUNG MAN. I'll buy it off you. (*The young man goes into the store. Frank breaks character once he isn't looking at him.*)

FRANK. (*In a whisper.*) What the fuck? (*Frank returns to the character and goes inside after him. The man regards the store. Looking at every corner. Cheli is watching all of this. More to Cheli than to the man -*) I'll go get you my old hammer to sell to you then?... (*The man says nothing. Frank exits. The man looks in every corner of the store. Standing up on things to get a better look. Cheli watches, trying to figure out what he is doing, then she realizes -*)

CHELI. You're looking for cameras aren't you? (*Frank reenters with an old hammer. He sets it on the counter.*)

MUTABILITY

FRANK. Look... It's a little odd selling this thing - I -

YOUNG MAN. How much?

FRANK. It's a little worn down - you sure you?

YOUNG MAN. How much?

CHELI. Frank, I don't know what this guy is up to, but you need to call the cops.

FRANK. Why?

YOUNG MAN. What?

FRANK. Look - it's my only one, I'd to run down to Asterville to get another at the hardware shop.

YOUNG MAN. Forty dollars.

FRANK. Forty dollars for an old hammer?

CHELI. Frank. Call the cops!

YOUNG MAN. You take cash?

FRANK. 'Course. *(He produces a wad from his jacket. He is wearing gloves. Frank's eyes narrow.)*

YOUNG MAN. I've only got hundreds... You take a hundred?

CHELI. Frank!

FRANK. *(To Cheli -)* It's alright! ... I'll be okay... *(The man turns to see who he's talking to, seeing.)*

YOUNG MAN. Who the hell are you talking to?

FRANK. ... Who do you work for kid?

YOUNG MAN. Is a hundred worth it?

FRANK. ... Think that wad of cash makes you better than me? You think I'm scared? *(The man scoffs at the question. The pair stare at one another. A tense beat. The man drops the whole wad on the counter and grabs the hammer. He swings it at Frank's head, but he ducks under the counter. Cheli screams. Frank emerges with a double-barrel shotgun he had stashed. As he is about to fire, the young man ducks out of the way and smacks the shotgun out of Frank's hands. He swings at Frank again.)*

MUTABILITY

Narrowly missing. Frank scrambles for the gun but the man strikes him. Frank tumbles to the floor.)

CHELI. No! *(The man punches Frank.)* Stop, stop, stop! *(Mary barrels into the room. Seeing the chaos, she grabs the shotgun. The man rears back with the hammer.)*

YOUNG MAN. Fucking redneck trash! *(Mary points the gun at him.)*

MARY. Hands up! *(The man drops the hammer and runs out of the door. Mary chases him. Frank gets off the ground and stumbles towards the phone. Covered in blood.)*

CHELI. Oh my god, oh my god - Frank -

FRANK. I'm alright baby. I'm okay - *(Mary reenters the station.)*

MARY. Dad!?! *(The lights begin to flicker. Black out.)*

FRANK. Of course.

END OF ACT ONE

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS—
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