MERCY

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A Memoir

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INT. MARINO'S MINI-MART, ALABAMA 1981

PHIL MARINO, 50's, crunches numbers in a notebook with a calculator. His reading glasses threaten to fall off the end of his nose as he sighs, displeased with his answers.

CHILD'S VOICE
BOO!

PHIL
Godddammit!

MERCY, 6, appears from inside the store's walk-in freezer.

Phil springs from behind the counter and hoists her over his head. She shrieks in glee. A beat. She touches his head.

MERCY
You know, there's no hair here.

PHIL
I noticed that.

MERCY
Why?

PHIL
Well, old guys lose their hair.

MERCY
Why?

PHIL
Why... do they lose their hair?

MERCY
Why are you older than the other daddies?

JIMMY, old, leather-skinned, walks in, waves to Phil. Phil plops Mercy down on the counter next to the cash register.

MERCY (CONT'D)
Welcome to Marino's Mini-Mart!

Jimmy has a Voice Prosthesis, *so he sounds like a robot*.

JIMMY
Thank you!

MERCY
(in a robot voice)
Are you from space?

Phil yanks her off the counter with lightning speed.

PHIL
Hey there, Jimmy. Usual?

He hands Jimmy a pack of Marlboro Reds as Mercy darts out from around the counter and walks, robot-like, toward Jimmy.

MERCY
(robot voice)
Do you know R2-D2?

Jimmy blinks, then rushes out, almost knocking over PAULINE, 40's. Mercy throws her arm around Pauline's waist.

MERCY (CONT'D)
(robot)
I just met a robot!

Pauline gapes at Phil, who looks away. Because he's laughing.

PAULINE
Mercy Marino! That man talks like that because of a health problem. We will call him and apologize.
(lighting a cigarette)
Now just ... go be an Eskimo!

Once Mercy is in the cooler, Pauline cracks up too.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
Goddammit Phil, it's not funny.

PHIL
And she wants to know why I'm older than other daddies.

PAULINE
Well maybe it's time to tell her.

PHIL
Jesus, this *day*...

PAULINE
You've had her for an hour. Oh! I got the job!

PHIL
Thank God.

He hands her the notebook. She reads his calculations.

PAULINE
Well, damn.

PHIL
I really tried.

PAULINE
I know. I'll figure it out.

Mercy pushes the heavy door of the cooler open, yells out.

MERCY
Mama! I built an Igloo in here!

PAULINE
You did?!
(to Phil, as she enters)
Maybe we can live in it...

CUT TO:

INT. THE MARINOS' DINING ROOM

A once-beautiful home. Paper peels from the walls. Beautiful antique china cabinet, credenza, and dining table are in disrepair. Pauline serves Christmas dinner. Phil is crying. Nobody is particularly alarmed.

PAULINE
What did we talk about? Focus on what you have.

MERCY
He can't. He's too sad.

PHIL
I'm sorry. I love you so much and I'm lucky to have you. It's just...

Pauline sits and lights a cigarette.

PAULINE/MERCY
The other two are out there...

PHIL
The other two are out there! It wasn't *their* fault...

PAULINE
(sotto, exhaling smoke)
... that their mother was a *nut*...

PHIL
I just want us to remember, on Christmas, that there are...

MERCY
....two little girls...

PAULINE
They’re well into their 30’s, so...

PHIL
With no father; which is my fault.

PAULINE
It’s not your fault and you are a wonderful father. To Mercy.

MERCY
Amen!

PHIL
Goddamn it we forgot the blessing.

MERCY
Good bread, good meat, good God let’s eat!

Mercy reaches for a drumstick but Phil launches into:

PHIL
“Bless us, oh Lord...”

PAULINE
You’ve already wept with guilt. That’s enough Catholicism for this morning.

MERCY
Soooo can I eat, or...?

PAULINE
Eat. Both of you. Now.

Phil is still noticeably upset.

PAULINE (CONT’D)
(to Phil)
You’re not helping anybody by getting like this. Least of all yourself.

MERCY
(to Phil)
I’ll help you. Okay? Anybody who hurts you, gets *this* in the face!

She picks up a drumstick, waves it like a weapon. Phil laughs. Pauline smiles, too but we follow her gaze...

PAULINE'S POV: a Christmas tree, lit up, a modest spread of presents unwrapped, paper and ribbons strewn about.

PAULINE
(sotto: to Phil)
You've *got* to start looking next week.

PHIL
I know.

INT. MARINO KITCHEN, SIX YEARS LATER

PAULINE (PRE-LAP)
Mercy!

The walls are yellow with nicotine. On a dilapidated wood picnic table: bowls of papier-mache, wooden skewers, gold spray paint, rhinestones. PAULINE, 50, cigarette in mouth, kneels on the wooden bench, hands covered in gold paint.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
Skewer...

Behind Pauline, Mercy, now 12, a white sheet "toga" trailing behind her small body, traipses around the kitchen, gesturing wildly, orating under her breath, in another world.

MERCY
Numerous are the world's wonders, but none more wonderful than man.

PAULINE
One's more wonderful than man. Woman. Specifically woman who makes daughter breathtaking Greek choral headdress. It's your presentation. Get your ass over here.

Mercy twirls herself out of her sheet toga, revealing a halter top and short shorts. She's still built like a boy.

MERCY
Skewer.

PAULINE
How are we gonna fit this and you in the Chevy?

MERCY
Daddy can take me. Carpool sucks. Rena and Jimmy smell like pancakes. Even in the afternoon.

PAULINE
Don’t say sucks. Rhinestone.

Mercy starts to glue a rhinestone on....

PAULINE (CONT’D)
Not there!

She snatches it.

PAULINE (CONT’D)
There. How can you not see the difference?

MERCY
I’m an actress, not a designer.

PAULINE
Listen, Miss Bankhead. Actresses are unemployed a lot. Designers have job security.

MERCY
You’re not a designer either.

PAULINE
Teachers....
(she lights another smoke)
... are the designers of *minds*.

MERCY
Even Mrs. Sinclair?

PAULINE
Mrs. Sinclair, bless her heart, has no imagination. Shel Silverstein? For twelve-year-olds? It’s ludicrous. Shel Silverstein is a purveyor of average. I’ll tell you Where the Goddamned Sidewalk Ends.

MERCY
(sotto)
Mediocrity...

PAULINE
Mediocrity.

MERCY
What if nobody knows who Antigone is?

PAULINE
Mrs. Sinclair will know, and *she* will know, that *you* know. Ready?

MERCY
Wait!

Mercy grabs her sheet and twirls herself back into her toga.

MERCY (CONT'D)
Okay NOW!

It's a coronation. Pauline plops a GOLD HEADDRESS WITH SUN RAYS EXPLODING FROM IT on Mercy's head.

PAULINE
Now that. Is a Greek choral mask.

MERCY
I can't breathe that much...

PAULINE
PHIL?!!!!!
(to Mercy)
We'll cut you out a mouth hole when it dries. Daddy will die. PHIL?!!!!

MERCY
He's on the phone with granddaddy.

PAULINE
He must be off by now. How long can it take to ask for money. PHIL?!!!

Phil, now 60, pushes the swinging kitchen door open. He's shaken, breathing hard, holding onto the wall for support.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
Mercy. Your father is mesmerized.

MERCY
(from inside the mask)
Am I mesmerizing?!

PAULINE
Phil? Is it your stomach again?

PHIL
They found me.

PAULINE
(sotto)
Oh shit. The IRS?

PHIL
The girls. They found me.

PAULINE
Well I'll be damned.

Phil starts sobbing. Pauline exhales, lost in thought.

MERCY
Somebody? I can't breathe...

Pauline comes to, yanks Mercy's mask off. Mercy notices Phil weeping. She throws her arms around him and pats him on the back softly, as if she's his mother.

PHIL
I got a call, Mercy. From your sisters.

MERCY
Oh. That's good. Right?

He nods, then starts crying again, backs out of the kitchen. Mercy looks to Pauline, who holds up the mask.

PAULINE
Take that Quik Dry and spray it.

She holds up the mask, balancing it on her hip while lighting a cigarette. Mercy aims the aerosol at the mask. A minor EXPLOSION happens as Pauline yelps and pulls her hand away. Cigarette in mouth, she catches the mask with her other hand.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
Mercy, goddammit!

MERCY
You *said* to spray it!

PAULINE
Have some damn sense!

MERCY
(thrilled)
That was like a bomb!

PAULINE
Yeah well, I can't handle any more bombs today.

Pauline storms off, pops the back screen door open with her hip and lets it slam behind her. Mercy watches....

EXT. BACK YARD, CONT.

Pauline sits down in the ancient, rusted-out swing-set that leans precariously to one side, head in her hands, and cries.

INT. PHIL AND PAULINE'S BEDROOM, LATER THAT NIGHT

The shades are coming apart, the lamp shades are yellowed, the antique furniture is dusty. Phil and Pauline lie in bed. He's in green pajamas, she's in a summer nightgown.

PAULINE
We can't afford to go.

PHIL
We can't afford not to! They were raised in New York. It's where they live. I'm supposed to ask them to come to me, when I'm the one who never looked for them? This one's on me, Pol.

PAULINE
And by "me", you mean *me*.

PHIL
Don't do that to me. We'll go up...

PAULINE
You'll go up. I'm not going.

PHIL
You don't want this?

PAULINE
Their mother just died. I don't want them to think I'm putting my name in the hat to replace her.

PHIL
Angela's 35 and Roma's 37. They don't need a mother.

PAULINE
They may not need a father. You have to know that, and be patient. Who knows what she told them?

PHIL
Oh God, I hadn't even thought...

PAULINE
They'll want answers, Phil.

PHIL
When they called, I was so happy. Now I feel like they're luring me up there to hang me from a--- what kind of trees do they have in New York?

PAULINE
Tell me when you find out.

PHIL
Please.

PAULINE
No. You can do it without me.

PHIL
What do I tell them about Sonya?

PAULINE
Don't call their dead mama crazy.

PHIL
Even if they do?

PAULINE
Even if they do.

PHIL
What if they don't love me.

PAULINE
They will.

PHIL
What if you don't love them?

PAULINE
I already love them. They're yours.

She puts her head on his chest.

PHIL
I'm afraid to go alone.

PAULINE
That's why Mercy's going with you.

EXT. PHIL AND PAULINE'S BEDROOM, CONT.

Mercy, in her faded Care Bears night shirt, has been listening the whole time. Her eyes go HUGE at this new information. She does a silent little dance of excitement.

Her foot hits an old floorboard, which CREAKS as she darts off down the hall toward her room.

INT. PHIL AND PAULINE'S BEDROOM, CONT.

PHIL
She's been there the whole time.

PAULINE
She's shifty, like me. Oh and if you don't ask your father for her tuition by this weekend? I will.

PHIL
He hates you.

PAULINE
I hate him. But we both love her.

She kisses him, reaches for the light...

FADE OUT.

INT. THE O'NEILL SCHOOL AUDITORIUM, GRADUATION CEREMONY

HEADMASTER RYAN, 50's, presides.

HEADMASTER RYAN
Mercy Marino.

Mercy runs on the stage, grins, takes her award, heads off.

HEADMASTER RYAN (CONT'D)
Mercy, you might as well stay up here. We're just gettin' started.

In the audience, Phil starts crying, holds Pauline's hand...

CUT TO:

INT. O'NEILL SCHOOL AUDITORIUM, CONT.

Mercy is immersed in a gaggle of girls, laughing.

Phil, holding all Mercy's awards, suddenly turns white.

PAULINE
Is it your stomach again? You've really got to get that looked at...

Phil hands Pauline all Mercy's awards, bolts for the Men's Room. Pauline turns to see Headmaster Ryan approaching.

HEADMASTER RYAN
Pauline, you must be so proud.

PAULINE
We are.

HEADMASTER RYAN
She sure is something.

PAULINE
Thank you.

HEADMASTER RYAN
Uh, about the tuition check...

PAULINE
Oh, good! You got it!

HEADMASTER RYAN
What? Uh, no, we didn't.

PAULINE
Really? Well, I mailed it last week. I better cancel the check and start over. So sorry for the delay.

HEADMASTER RYAN
And I'm sorry we only do half tuition scholarships. Have you thought any more about leaving public education to work for us? The mind that made Mercy...

PAULINE
You don't offer health insurance.

HEADMASTER RYAN
Our faculty tend to be on their husbands' insurance policies...

PAULINE
How nice for them. Have a good summer!

INT. SCHOOL AUDITORIUM, CONT.

Phil walks out, ashen. Pauline rushes over to him.

PAULINE
Lied to his face; bought us a week.

PHIL
How can they not give her a shot?

PAULINE
People like us don't get shots, Phil. We get jobs. You might want to try it. Mercy! *Now.*

Pauline jams a cigarette in her mouth. Mercy waves goodbye to her friends, all but her best friend MARY CLAIRE, 12.

MARY CLAIRE
You won everything and you're going to New York. You're such a b-word.

MERCY
You have better clothes.

MARY CLAIRE
That's true.

MERCY
Plus it's not *New York* New York. It's just some kind of long island. But maybe I can stop by Broadway and get discovered real quick.

MARY CLAIRE
I would like *die*.

Mercy blows kisses, follows her family out.

EXT. AUDITORIUM

Mercy catches up to Phil, clocks Pauline storming into the parking lot, smoke pluming behind her like a freight train.

MERCY
How is she mad at me? I kicked so much butt.

PHIL
She's mad at me.

MERCY
Oh. Good.

Phil laughs, puts his arm around her. He winces.

MERCY (CONT'D)
You okay, Daddy?

PHIL
Me? I'm great. I'm with the smartest girl in the class.

Together they walk toward the station wagon.

CUT TO:

INT. RED CHEVY IMPALA STATION WAGON

Mercy can't sit still. Phil's been driving for hours.

MERCY
I don't get why we didn't just fly.

PHIL
Gas is cheap. Planes are expensive.

MERCY
Are you afraid to fly?

PHIL
It's not cost-effective. Yes.

MERCY
How are your prospects?

PHIL
For throwing you out of a moving vehicle?

MERCY
For getting a job soon.

PHIL
I'm looking, Mercy. I told you.

MERCY
You wanna hear Hernando's Hideaway?

PHIL
I'd rather run off this cliff.

MERCY
But that's not on the table and look what I haaaaaaaave!

She grabs a SMALL CASIO KEYBOARD off the back seat. She starts the obnoxious tango. Phil can't help but grin.

PHIL
Name that tune!

MERCY
I only know four songs.

PHIL
So let me play.

Mercy holds the keyboard out. Phil drives with his knee and breaks into a killer jazz rendition of...

MERCY
Don’t Get Around Much Anymore!

PHIL
By...

MERCY
Duke Ellington!

The car SWERVES. Phil puts his hands back on the wheel....

PHIL/MERCY
Couldn’t bear it withoooooout
you/Don’t get around much anymore.

CUT TO:

INT. HOTEL ROOM

It’s a shit hole. Mercy’s in her tiny twin bed, reading. She hears Phil puke in the bathroom, tries to ignore it. Finally Phil comes out in his green pajamas, rinses his mouth in the common sink, and gets into his twin bed.

MERCY
Are you okay?

PHIL
Just nerves.

MERCY
You’ve been doing it for weeks.

PHIL
I’ve been nervous for weeks.

He turns off the lights. In the PITCH BLACK...

MERCY
I wasn’t ready.

PHIL
You didn’t drive all day. Love you.

MERCY
Daddy?

PHIL
Yeah baby.

MERCY
What if you love Roma and Angela so much when you see them that you don’t have room for me?

Phil turns on the light. He holds out his arms.

PHIL
Come here.

Mercy gets on top of her bed and JUMPS through the air onto Phil’s bed, the force bouncing Phil into the wall.

PHIL (CONT’D)
You could have walked.

MERCY
Booooooring.

PHIL
Mercy. I already love you. You’re my girl. I’ll love you forever.

MERCY
Your heart can only love so much.

PHIL
It’s a heart, not a thermos. There’s not a finite amount of love in it. You can’t run out. It just expands to fit someone into it.

MERCY
Like a vagina?

PHIL
Jesus Fucking Christ!

MERCY
You said the f word!

PHIL
Why the fu.... hell do you know about.... THAT?

MERCY
Health class.

PHIL
They teach Sex-Ed to seventh graders?

MERCY
Kids mature earlier these days.

PHIL
We should have brought your mother.

CUT TO:

MONTAGE: TO THE TUNE OF "HERNANDO'S HIDEAWAY" WE TANGO THROUGH A SERIES OF WELCOME TO (INSERT EVERY STATE ON THE EASTERN SEABOARD) SIGNS AS THE CHEVY INCHES TOWARD.....

EXT. ROMA'S HOUSE, LONG ISLAND, THE NEXT DAY

Phil pulls the Impala into the driveway, studies the split level ranch house. Mercy doesn't move. Neither does Phil.

MERCY
Are you scared?

PHIL
Of course not.
(off her glare)
A little.
(then)
My God....

ROMA, late 30's, pretty, waist-length hair, runs out, arms outstretched. Phil LEAPS out of the car.

PHIL (CONT'D)
ROMA!

ROMA
Daddy!

Mercy sidles up, the first time we've ever seen her shy. She studies the ground til Phil releases Roma and remembers...

PHIL
This is Roma! Roma, this is...

ROMA
Mercy. You're so pretty.

MERCY
You're so pretty. Your hair is so long and I love your nails.

Mercy grabs Roma's hand to look. Phil beams.

ROMA
Wanna know a secret? I bite them. All the way down til they bleed. These are fake. When you guys leave I'm havin' the fuckers taken off.

Roma keeps holding Mercy's hand, heads into the house.

ROMA (CONT'D)
So, Daddy! How's life! Whatcha been up to the last quarter century?

PHIL
Oh....

Follow Phil's gaze to..

EXT. RO'S FRONT DOOR

AN ARM CRUTCH PEAKS OUT, pushes the door open slowly.

Roma runs toward the door. ANGELA, 30's, beautiful, tiny, stands on the front step, balancing on two crutches.

ROMA
I told you to wait inside!

ANGELA
It's not every day Daddy comes to visit. It's literally every twenty-five years. That deserves the big guns, dontcha think?

She aims a CRUTCH at Phil. Phil walks over, bends to hug her.

PHIL
I'm so afraid of hurting you...

ANGELA
Never stopped you before.

INT. RO'S BACK PORCH

It's a screened-in on all sides, surrounded by trees. There's a ping-pong table in the corner, a pool table in the middle, and a beer tap attached to the refrigerator door. Angela's staring out the window. Mercy comes out, sits on the other side of the room. Angela stares at her. Smiles.

ANGELA
I think you kind of look like me. Except, you know, you can walk.

Mercy's horrified for a split second, then cackles.

ANGELA (CONT'D)
What'd Dad tell you about me?

MERCY
You had polio as a baby. You never let it stop you even though you only have one lung that works. You were the smartest in your class and the bravest girl he ever knew and he'll never forgive himself for not being as brave as you.

ANGELA
Damn. You memorized it?

MERCY
I didn't mean to. He just said it so much... especially at Christmas. And Easter. And Thanksgiving...

ANGELA
Happy Fuckin' Holidays.

MERCY
I understood he was sad. But sometimes it's kind of like an insult that Mom and I aren't enough to make him happy. You know?

ANGELA
You're very smart. Again, like me.

MERCY
Yeah, but my legs work.

Angela holds her hand up. Delighted, Mercy high-fives her.

ANGELA
Hey, do me a favor? There's a Moosehead in the fridge.

MERCY
(horrified)
WHY?!

ANGELA
Oh Christ. No. It's a beer.

Mercy tentatively opens the fridge, takes out a beer, hands it to Angela.

ANGELA (CONT'D)
So do I live up to the stories?

MERCY
(sadly)
Yeah. You do.

ANGELA
And... that's a bad thing?

MERCY
Well yeah! You were his favorite first. Then I was. What's gonna happen if he has to pick?

ANGELA
He doesn't. I'm not in the running.

MERCY
Why?

ANGELA
I don't need to be anybody's favorite. I'm my own favorite. You've got to be be your own favorite or you're fucked.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. ROMA'S PORCH, LATER IN THE DAY

Roma and Angela show Phil a photo album. Mercy watches.

ANGELA
This is Roma in her cap and gown.

PHIL
What's that medal for?

ANGELA
Regents Award. She won a full scholarship to college, you know.

ROMA
Ang. Stop.

ANGELA
But Mom was in the Batshit Motel and I couldn't walk. So Ro went to work in a factory by our apartment.

ROMA
Where I met a great guy and had a great kid and a nice life. *Jesus*.

ANGELA
Why are you mad at me? Why aren't you mad at *him?*

She points at Phil.

ROMA
I *am* mad at him!

JACK (O.C.)
Is this where the party is?

PHIL
Let that be an axe murderer...

ROMA
My boys. Jack and Little Jack.

Jack, early 40's, and LJ, 17, enter. Both 6'4". *Heavy Long Island accents*.

LJ
Little's a figure-ah-speech!

MERCY
(sotto)
Duh...

Jack picks Phil up, very nearly tossing him over his shoulder, spins him around, then puts him down, misty.

JACK
Man, it's good to meetcha. No judgment about what happened. Just glad she's got somebody, ya know?

PHIL
She sure does, if she'll have me.

They shake hands. Jack hugs him. LJ's staring at Mercy.

LJ
Can I pick you up?!

MERCY
No. But thank you!

JACK
So, Phil, how was the drive?

PHIL
The car started doin' this thing? Like piiiing and then nnrrhrhrhrh?

Jack's eyes light up.

ROMA
Here we go....

JACK
I can fix it!

And he's out the door. LJ starts to follow. Then...

LJ
Wait, Dad! We forgot the surprise!

JACK
What the hell's wrong with me?

LJ pops into the kitchen, brings in a VIDEO CAMERA.

ANGELA
Soooo family porn?

ROMA
We're gonna record our reunion!

MERCY
I'll do it.

They all look at her. It makes her nervous.

MERCY (CONT'D)
It's about your life. Together. I'm not a part of that.

Ang and Ro share a look. Phil, naturally, is oblivious.

RO
Being in charge of the recording is the most important part.

ANGELA
So we're really depending on you.

RO
Show her, LJ.

LJ and Mercy start opening the box and chattering. Jack heads out to the car. Which leaves Phil and his older daughters...

PHIL
That LJ's a charmer.

ROMA
Smart too. He's gonna get a free ride to college.

ANGELA
Better be somewhere close....

ROMA
Shut *up*.

ANGELA
Somewhere really really close.

ROMA
Goddammit, Angela!

Mercy puts the Camcorder down. LJ sneaks a Moosehead.

ANGELA
'Cause Big Jack travels for work and what happens if you don't have somebody in the house at night, Ro?

ROMA
I fucking hate you.

PHIL
Honey what is it?

ROMA
I just, I have panic attacks. Where I can't breathe and I feel like...

PHIL
The room's too small, the air's getting sucked out and the light is so bright it hurts.

ROMA
Oh.

PHIL
But you also got my great hair.

Roma puts her head on her father's shoulder.

ANGELA
She panics when men leave. Hmmmmm.

ROMA
If you're gonna be this smug, go hang out with the other shrinks.

PHIL
You're a psychiatrist?

ANGELA
Psychologist. Can't prescribe drugs. Otherwise I'd get Ro her anti-depressants and anxiety meds and sleeping pills for free.

Roma storms out. Mercy, unsure, follows her..

INT. ROMA'S KITCHEN

Ro stirs something on the stove way too hard. She realizes Mercy is watching, immediately turns to engage her.

RO
I'm gonna wreck this and we're gonna have to go to MacDonald's.

MERCY
That's okay. Daddy bribed me with Egg MacMuffins to get me to go to mass every day. Til I caught on.

ROMA
If a man's gonna bribe you, you should demand jewelry.

MERCY
Maybe when he gets a job.

ROMA
He doesn't have a *job*? Since when?

MERCY
Since the store closed, six years ago. He's usually too sad to work.

ROMA
Must be nice.

MERCY
To be too sad to work?

ROMA
You know what I do when I'm too sad to work? I go to work.

MERCY
Oh. Are you mad at me?

ROMA
No! Shit. No. I'm not mad at you. I'm not even that mad at your father. Our father...

MERCY
I prob'ly would be...

ROMA
I'm mad at Angela, but she got the shittiest deal of everybody so I keep trying to make myself *not* mad at her, and that makes me so tired.

Roma starts crying. Mercy, unsure, hugs her and pats her head. Which makes Roma cry harder.

MERCY
You're a lot like my mom. You're both very tired from being in charge of everybody. I should call her. Can you afford long distance?

CUT TO:

INT. LJ'S ROOM

Everything in the room is METS. Mercy talks on the phone.

MERCY
I'm calling from my *nephew's* room.

INT. PAULINE'S KITCHEN

Pauline prunes an indoor plant, smokes, talks to Mercy.

Phone conversation. Intercut.

PAULINE
That's neat! How are the girls?

MERCY
Ro is a lot like you. She keeps everybody together. And Ang is a smart-ass and she's as small as me.

PAULINE
As small as I. The "am" is implied.

MERCY
That sounds weird.

PAULINE
I don’t care.

Pauline tries to rearrange the dying plant.

PAULINE (CONT’D)
How do you feel about everything?

MERCY
Roma and Angela are really nice...

PAULINE
Is Daddy taking care of you?

MERCY
I just really wish you were here.

PAULINE
What’s the matter?

MERCY
Nothing.

PAULINE
You tell your Daddy to call me.

MERCY
‘Kay. What are you doing right now?

Pauline gives up, drops the plant in the trash.

PAULINE
Gardening.

MERCY
Mama?

PAULINE
Yeah?

MERCY
Where’s the Batshit Motel?

PAULINE
Ask your father.

End phone conversation.

CUT TO:

INT. RO’S BACK PORCH, LATER THAT NIGHT

Mercy is shooting with her camcorder. SHAKY HANDHELD FOOTAGE

ANGELA
So what's your last memory of me?

PHIL
The bathroom floor at St. Anne's.

ANGELA
Fucking cheap crutches didn't fit.

PHIL
I got 'em at the VA hospital.

ANGELA
Yeah well the beach at Normandie wasn't stormed by eight year olds.

PHIL
You wouldn't even let the paramedics touch you. Only me.

ANGELA
I knew you wouldn't hurt me. Then.

PHIL
How can I make you know that now?

Phil reaches across the table, takes Angela's hands.

Mercy stops recording. End handheld footage.

MERCY
'Scuse me. I'm going to go to bed.

Phil hops up.

PHIL
Honey, I'm sorry, I forgot...

MERCY
About me. Yeah, I got that.

PHIL
Want me to tuck you in?

MERCY
No.

She heads out, fighting tears, holding her little camcorder.

ANGELA
Mercy? Come here baby.

Mercy slowly walks over to Angela. Angela pulls her down and hugs her. Holds her. Mercy starts to cry, covers her face.

MERCY
Sorry. I'll be better tomorrow.

ANGELA
You know what my favorite part of today was? Getting you as a sister.

MERCY
That was my best part too.

Mercy smiles. She heads off to bed. Phil tries to grab her hand but she jerks it away, refusing even to look at him.

A beat. Once Mercy is gone, Angela turns on Phil.

ANGELA
She's terrified. She thinks loving us will make you stop loving her. Pull your head out of your ass and show her she's wrong.

Phil is stunned. She points her crutch at the door.

ANGELA (CONT'D)
Now.

CUT TO:

EXT. RO'S BACK YARD, A FEW DAYS LATER

MADDY, a four-year-old Latina cherub, rides on Phil's shoulders as he trots around the yard. Angela watches.

MADDY
Faster, Grandpa!

Phil leans against the side of the house. He's drenched in sweat, white as a sheet. More than winded. In pain.

PHIL
Maddy, Grandpa's gotta take a little rest okay? Hop off honey.

MADDY
You got five minutes.

Maddy gets off his shoulders. Phil limps over to Angela.

EXT. BACKYARD, CONT

SHAKY FOOTAGE SHOT THROUGH MERCY'S HAND-HELD CAMERA.

PHIL
She’s pretty bossy.

ANGELA
The apple doesn’t fall far from the bitch.

PHIL
You wanna tell me where her dad is?

ANGELA
I’d have to know first.

PHIL
But you know... ya know...*who* he...

ANGELA
Jesus, Dad, I’m not a whore.

PHIL
NO! I didn’t mean...

ANGELA
He was a very gifted artist.

PHIL
Oh! Hey! That’s great! What medium?

ANGELA
Blow.

PHIL
Mercy! Go inside!

MERCY (V.O.)
Excuse me. I’m recording.

PHIL
Not this part!

MERCY (V.O.)
Why?

PHIL
One. Two...

Mercy slams the camcorder down. End Shaky Footage.

CUT TO:

INT. LJ’S ROOM

Mercy sits on the Mets bedspread, furious, on the phone.

MERCY
He COUNTED. Like I was a BABY. In front of Angela.

CUT TO:

INT. PAULINE'S KITCHEN, CONT.

Pauline smokes, reads, not really listening.

Phone conversation. Intercut.

PAULINE
How dare he! The nerve! Why?

MERCY
What's blow?

Pauline closes her book, alarmed.

PAULINE
As a noun or a verb?

MERCY
(remembering...)
Noun.

PAULINE
I'll tell you when you're 20.

MERCY
15.

PAULINE
19.

MERCY
16.

Pauline smiles, lights another cigarette.

PAULINE
How's the Summer Reading coming?

MERCY
Where The Red Fern Grows, in an hour. The dogs die. I'm not a child!

PAULINE
There's an extra book in your underwear compartment.

Mercy opens her suitcase. There is indeed another book.

MERCY
“The Merchant of Venice.”

PAULINE
You were named after a speech in it. Children can’t understand it.

MERCY
That’s so cool!

PAULINE
Call me when you get to it and we’ll talk about it.

MERCY
What are you doing right now?

PAULINE
Cleaning the house.

A stack of books two feet tall on the kitchen table. The room’s a wreck. Pauline ashes into a flower pot. Misses.

End phone conversation.

CUT TO:

INT. RO’S PORCH

Mercy quietly enters. Nobody notices when she picks up the camera. Handheld footage on Phil, Angela, Roma.

ANGELA
Where’d you meet?

PHIL
The circus. She was dancing in the air in this sequined get-up. I fell in love with her that night.

ROMA
You’re kidding.

Phil shakes his head no.

ANGELA
Our *mother* was the daring young girl on the flying trapeze.

PHIL
I didn't know she was only seventeen, that she'd run away to join the circus at fifteen....

RO
She never told us that.

ANGELA
She never told us anything.

RO
Did you love her?

PHIL
I was crazy about her! I guess I was running away from home too. I just didn't have the guts to join the circus. She was my circus.

ANGELA
Every time we'd settle and the welfare checks started coming, she'd come up with some new scheme.

ROMA
So we'd move again and starve again and wait for the checks. Now *that's* a fuckin' circus.

PHIL
What did she tell you about me?

ROMA
That you were worthless.

PHIL
Well, there's certainly a case to be made for that.

Mercy puts her camera down, gapes at her father. End handheld. Maddy comes over, jumps into Mercy's lap.

PHIL (CONT'D)
But you need to understand that when she left with you, she told me that if I ever tried to find you, she'd hurt you.

ROMA
She was in three different mental institutions and two rehabs. She was hurting us anyway.

MADDY
Grandpa! NOW!

Mercy instinctively holds on to Maddy in her lap.

PHIL
One second baby.

ANGELA
Look. My kid loves you...

PHIL
I'm glad somebody does.

ANGELA
Oh yeah, fuck that, you don't get to do the victim thing.

RO
Look, bottom line, I want a living parent. I think what you did was weak and maybe shitty but you're sitting here and you're trying and maybe that shouldn't be enough but there aren't any other choices. So I'm willing to try if you are.

PHIL
Of course I am.

ANGELA
Well well well, isn't everyone evolved.

PHIL
What's it gonna take, Angela? What can I do. Tell me and I'll do it.

ANGELA
Daddy?

PHIL
Yeah baby.

ANGELA
Can I have a pony?

A beat. She smiles. For the first time, Phil exhales. He throws his arms around Angela and Roma.

ON MERCY: not sure how she feels about it.

Maddy squirms out of Mercy's lap.

MADDY
Grandpa! I said NOW!

Phil sighs, winces as he picks her up on his shoulders.

ANGELA
You’re out of shape, old man.

PHIL
I’m so sorry. For all of it.

ANGELA
Consider this your penance.

CUT TO:

EXT. MARINO DRIVEWAY ALABAMA, A WEEK LATER

Pauline runs out, Mercy runs toward her, almost knocking her over. When Mercy finally lets go, Phil grabs Pauline and holds her, hugging, rocking, forever. Mercy heads inside...

PAULINE AND PHIL
Grab the bags....

As Mercy sighs and goes back to the car, they hold on tight.

PAULINE
I made spaghetti and meatballs.

PHIL
Not sure I can get that down...

Mercy GROANS DRAMATICALLY as she wrestles the bags inside.

PAULINE
It’s been a big week. You okay?

PHIL
Stomach’s off. The drive. And the stress. But it was great, Pol.

PAULINE
Did you call your father?

PHIL
Mercy and Roma and Angela got you some presents, isn’t that...?

PAULINE
We won’t make it through the month. Call him, goddammit. Tomorrow.

Mercy comes running out toward them, holding gifts.

MERCY
Presents!!!! Surpriiiiise!

PAULINE
(sotto, to Phil)
Tomorrow, or I'm up to bat. 'Kay?

Phil sighs, nods, as Pauline beams at Mercy....

PAULINE (CONT'D)
Presents? For *me*?!

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN, MORNING

Mercy, in her summer nightgown, paces as Pauline opens the NEWSPAPER very slowly, ashes from her cigarette flying off onto the table. Pauline nonchalantly blows them onto the floor, sips coffee. Turns to Arts & Leisure, takes a drag...

MERCY
Can you *hurry*?

PAULINE
Fine. You do it.

MERCY
I can't. I'm too nervous.

Through a plume of smoke, Pauline starts reading...

PAULINE
Summer Stage's production of The Wiz is something to behold. However, of six excellent principles, only two are black. Though extraordinary, the white featured dancers have about as much business in the front row of "The Wiz" *as Redd Fox would in a production of "Kiss Me Kate".*

Pauline laughs til she chokes.

MERCY
Redd Fox? From Sanford and Son?

PAULINE
Yep.

MERCY
(skimming)
Lighting design, blah blah, costumes, whatever.... they didn't even mention my name!

PAULINE
You don't play a character.

MERCY
I created one for myself in my mind! I'm in the front row!

PAULINE
Yes, and the reviewer said you were, and I quote, "extraordinary".

MERCY
He said *we* were.

PAULINE
Maybe he was distracted by the audacious racism of Glenda the Good Witch flying in on a slice of Watermelon.

MERCY
It's not fair!

PAULINE
I drove you to rehearsals for a month. My name's not in the paper.

MERCY
I said thank you. Like a *lot*.

PAULINE
Making you happy, makes me happy. What makes you happy?

MERCY
Being in the show.

PAULINE
That's why you do it. Not for the review. Go get ready for Angela.

CUT TO:

EXT. BIRMINGHAM AIRPORT, A FEW MONTHS LATER

It's like the show "Wings". One plane every several hours. You can meet it outside on the tarmac. Mercy's jumping up and down as the plane lands. Pauline's smoking, pacing.

PAULINE
Mercy, stand still!

MERCY
You're not.

PAULINE
I'm moving in a controlled manner.

MERCY
So, want me to pace with you?

PAULINE
Nobody likes a smart-ass.

The plane's stairway rolls down. Mercy glares at her mother.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
I'm sorry. I'm nervous.

MERCY
Why?

PAULINE
Why? I'm picking up your father's daughter and granddaughter, whom I've never met. Why do you *think*?

MERCY
Angela!

An airline steward is carrying Ang down the steps. Maddy is literally riding down the bannister, with Ang swatting her. Pauline heads over as Ang is deposited into a wheelchair. Mercy runs to her, kneels down, throws her arms around her. Pauline lingers behind a bit.

ANGELA
Heeeeeeey Mercy! And Pauline?

PAULINE
Hey, Angela. Don't get up...

Angela grins up at her, grabs her hand. Everything's okay.

ANGELA
Maddy! Maddy, this is your....

But Maddy's cartwheeling through the crowd, causing chaos.

PAULINE
(to Mercy)
Get her. Now.

ANGELA
Thanks. Hey, can I have a drag?

Pauline give Ang her cigarette. She takes a puff.

ANGELA (CONT'D)
Don't tell Ro.

PAULINE
Rough flight?

ANGELA
Maddy's a lot in an enclosed space.

PAULINE
She's so beautiful.

ANGELA
So are fireworks. You don't want one in your lap.

Pauline hands the cigarette to Angela, pushes the wheelchair.

PAULINE
Here, keep it. Girls! NOW.

Mercy runs. Maddy files in angelically. Ang is impressed.

ANGELA
Amazing. She doesn't even know you.

PAULINE
Right, so there's no guarantee I'm a nice person.

ANGELA
I've heard good things.

CUT TO:

INT. PAULINE AND PHIL'S KITCHEN, A YEAR LATER

Pauline's smoking a cigarette as she opens a card first.

PAULINE
(reading aloud)
To Pauline, the best mother we never had. Love, Ro & Ang (& Jack, LJ & Maddy, although they had nothing to do with this).

Pauline pulls out a tiny ring box.

MERCY
Can I have it if you hate it?

Pauline opens it to find a gorgeous sapphire ring.

PAULINE
I've never had a real sapphire.

PHIL
I told 'em it was your birthstone.

He starts crying. Mercy hugs him, pats him on the back.

MERCY
You did a great job. She loves it. See?

Indeed, Pauline is ignoring Phil, looking at the ring. Phil sighs. Slowly, as if he's in pain, Phil walks out.

We follow him past...

INT. DINING ROOM

As Phil moves past, we notice the credenza is missing.

CUT TO:

INT. DINING ROOM, EVENING

Pauline stands in the dining room, table set for three. She smokes as she places a lasagna on the table. The ashes hit the cheese, congealing to the top of the casserole.

PAULINE
Now!

Mercy pops out, in a tutu and tiara, humming "The Sugar Plum Fairy" music from The Nutcracker, dancing it.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
Sit.

MERCY
Wait, *watch*! We learned the turn sequence today? Double pirouette, then fouette, fouette.

She executes this sequence of turns, her leg extended. On the first pass, her leg's above the table by an inch. On the second turn, not so much. Plates and glasses hit the floor.

PAULINE
Goddammit! That's the last of Mama's china. What did I tell you?

MERCY
Not to dance in the...

PAULINE
What is the matter with you?

Pauline kneels to pick up the pieces. Mercy, stung, helps.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
Go get Daddy.

MERCY
He's not gonna come...

PAULINE
Get him! Now! Tell him it's lasagna.

Pauline waits until Mercy's out of the room to fall apart.

INT. PHIL AND PAULINE'S BEDROOM

Phil reaches out his arms to Mercy.

PHIL
How was ballet, my beauty?

MERCY
Good. I'd show you what we did but I took out a whole place setting.

PHIL
Oooooh I bet Mama's mad.

MERCY
I think she's more sad, actually.

PHIL
Why?

MERCY
You never come out.

PHIL
I will, when my stomach is better.

MERCY
But it's been bad for years and you've been in bed for months and you're so thin. I mean, not that you look bad or anything...

PHIL
Baby. I'll come out soon.

MERCY
I don't believe you.

Phil picks up the old Casio keyboard he keeps in bed, tinkles the Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy. Mercy gets on the bed, hugs Phil, who winces, but holds her. Mercy looks down, the tiara falling off as she picks out a tune on the keyboard.

MERCY (CONT'D)
Awfully lonesome with-ooooout you.

PHIL
Don't get around much anymore....

Phil puts the tiara on his head. Mercy smiles.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN, THREE MONTHS LATER

Pauline is putting foil-covered food into a red Igloo cooler.

PAULINE
Mercy?! NOW.

Mercy comes in, backpack over her shoulder.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
Grab a couple of Tabs.
(re: the igloo cooler)
Is that enough?

MERCY
I'm Tevya's fourth daughter who has no lines. I don't really need fuel.

PAULINE
You auditioned against adults. What did you expect.

MERCY
The solo. Obviously.

PAULINE
I don't feel a particularly deep need to drive you an hour each way for a part you don't want so....

MERCY
I'll go. Maybe Cindy will break her adult femur and I can replace her.

PAULINE
See if Daddy ate anything today. I left a plate in his room.

Mercy follows her into...

INT. BATHROOM, CONT.

Pauline sits on the toilet, smoking, peeing..

MERCY
It's been 3 months. He's not better. He has to go to the doctor.

PAULINE
He hates doctors. They scare him.

MERCY
Mom. Get it together. He's dying!

Pauline pulls her panties up, drops the cigarette in the toilet, and flushes. She gets right in Mercy's face.

PAULINE
Shut your mouth.

CUT TO:

INT. PHIL AND PAULINE'S BEDROOM, FEBRUARY 1990

Ro and Jack, Mercy and Pauline strain to hear Phil's voice.

PHIL
(to Ro)
Hey baby, I can't believe you came all this way to surprise me...

ROMA
I just felt like you might need me.

PHIL
Oh honey, seeing your face makes me feel better. I'll be up soon...

PAULINE
Who wants a drink?! Let me just...

Pauline's hostess smile is slipping. Mercy follows her into....

INT. KITCHEN, CONT.

Pauline's hands shake as she puts ice into glasses.

PAULINE
They just descend on us with no warning? I mean even family can't do that. I'm not ready. What the hell are they even doing here...

MERCY
I called them.

Pauline slams the glasses down, turns on her.

PAULINE
What?!

MERCY
Somebody has to do something. I made a doctor's appointment. He's going whether he wants to or not.

PAULINE
The hell he is...

Pauline slams out of the kitchen and sees....

JACK IS CARRYING PHIL IN HIS ARMS LIKE A BABY.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
Jack! No no no Jack, please. He doesn't .... he'll... you can't....

PHIL
Pol, maybe it's time. I can't seem to shake this thing, ya know?

Mercy whispers to Ro and hands her a piece of notebook paper.

MERCY
Here are the directions.

Ro nods, opens the door for Jack to carry Phil through. Mercy protects Phil's bald head as it almost skims the door frame.

EXT. FRONT PORCH

PHIL
Listen, you part-giant bastard. This is kidnapping. When I'm better I'm gonna kick your ass.

JACK
Lookin' forward to it, Philly.

PAULINE
Should I come? I'll come...

PHIL
Baby stop worryin'. I'll be home in a little while...

Jack carefully carries Phil down the front steps of the porch. Pauline and Mercy Ro and Jack load him into the car.

EXT. DRIVEWAY, CONT.

The car pulls out. Mercy watches it go down the street.

MERCY
He's not coming back.

Pauline turns on her.

PAULINE
For God's sake stop being so dramatic. Look what you've done! Now everybody knows our business!

Pauline storms inside.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM

Angela's here now, plus Jack and Ro. Pauline looks out the window. Mercy sits on the foot of the bed where Phil's sleeping. DR. CHARLES LANDON, chunky, 50's, comes in.

DR. LANDON
Hey, Pauline. Mercy.

MERCY
So what are we lookin' at?

DR. LANDON
Mercy, honey, if I could maybe send you outside for a few minutes...

MERCY
I'm the one who called you. I'm staying.

DR. LANDON
It's soft cell sarcoma. It's a very rare form of cancer...

Ro and Ang are already crying at the "c" word...

DR. LANDON (CONT'D)
...in that it grows in the soft tissue of the body. In Phil's case, it's in the sac that lines all the organs in the stomach, and it's spread. We're lookin' at Stage IV.

MERCY
How many stages are there?

A beat. Dr. Landon studies the ground.

MERCY (CONT'D)
Oh. Four.

Pauline's still staring out the window. Ro and Angela sob.

MERCY (CONT'D)
So what do we do?

DR. LANDON
The rareness of this cancer makes Phil a good bet for a clinical trial at the Mayo Clinic. I'd like to look into that.

MERCY
We don't have any money. Does Mom's teacher insurance cover it?

DR. LANDON
Pauline, please weigh in here...

PAULINE
He won't do it.

PHIL
She’s right.

Everyone turns to face Phil, who’s been listening.

PHIL (CONT’D)
It’s not a cure, right, Charlie?
It’s more like a reprieve?

ANGELA
How long of a reprieve?

PHIL
Does it matter?

ANGELA/RO/MERCY
Yes!

Pauline sighs.

PHIL
Charlie, I appreciate it, but I’m not leaving town to be a lab rat.

DR. LANDON
I understand, Phil. You rest now. Tomorrow we’ll regroup.

Dr. Landon walks out. Mercy’s on his heels.

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR

MERCY
Dr. Landon? I’m sorry about my, uh, tone. It’s just, my mom’s stopped talking so somebody has to.

DR. LANDON
People cope differently, Mercy. She’ll snap out of it.

MERCY
Does it hurt?

DR. LANDON
I’m sorry?

MERCY
Does it hurt him? What he has. I can prob’ly handle him dying but I can’t handle him hurting.

DR. LANDON
I promise you that he will not hurt. Deal?

She sticks out her hand, shakes his. Dr. Landon goes to hug her. She rears back, hands up, warding him off.

MERCY
Please don't be nice to me. I'm trying to stay on top of things.

Looking at the floor, she walks back into the room.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM, TWO WEEKS LATER

Phil is more alert, because the pain is being managed.

PHIL
Goddamn it I'm not doin' this surgery bullshit either! You hear me, Pauline? I'm not doin' it!

Pauline looks to Ro, Mercy, and Ang.

PAULINE
Out.

Ro pushes Ang out. Mercy follows. Pauline kisses Phil, exits.

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR

Ro and Mercy stand against the wall next to Ang's chair.

ANGELA
Look, I think we should vote about this surgery option.

PAULINE
Vote?

ROMA
On the pro side, it might give him an extra month. On the con side, there's the operation itself...

ANGELA
The pro side of the *operation* is that it's covered by insurance. So it's a free extra month. I lost twenty-five years. So I vote yes.

ROMA
Yes.

MERCY
Yes!

PAULINE
No.

ANGELA
Why wouldn't you want...

PAULINE
Charlie told me that Phil has been in horrific pain for years. Years. I will not put him through another thing. Period.

ANGELA
But now the pain is managed, so he can just rest after the surgery.

PAULINE
There will be no surgery.

ROMA
But without it he'll be gone...

PAULINE
He's known he was dying for a long time. And he let it happen. Which means, he didn't want to stop it.

ANGELA
He doesn't want to die!

PAULINE
He doesn't want to die *like this*! He didn't want to end up here! *That's* why I let him ignore it. That's why I *helped* him ignore it! Do you think I suddenly just lost touch with reality and decided not to cope? I cope for a goddamn living! This is a man's *life* we're talking about! There will be no vote! Except his. And he's a "no".

She storms off down the corridor. Ro runs after her. Angela looks toward Mercy, who takes off toward her father's room.

ANGELA
Mercy! Don't...

INT. PHIL'S HOSPITAL ROOM

A lazy smile lighting up his face at the sight of Mercy...

PHIL
(singing)
Oh-oh, Mercy, Mercy, me...

Mercy is crazed, talking a mile a minute.

MERCY
Daddy please just listen really quick okay because I think you need to understand that if you get this operation then we can be together a little longer. Please.

And she throws herself on top of him, forgetting the pain factor. Phil tenses, then opens his eyes, smiles.

PHIL
This morphine is fantastic.

MERCY
Please. I just need you to do this one thing. Stay a little longer. Don't leave me yet.

A beat.

PHIL
Okay baby. Okay.

MERCY
Thank you.

She collapses on him, asleep instantly. Pauline enters.

PHIL
I'm gonna do it.

Pauline and Phil lock eyes over Mercy's head. Pauline grabs his hand, the wires from the various IV's waving wildly.

PAULINE
It's too much, for too little...

PHIL
She has to know she was worth the effort. I've failed her, Pol. Over and over. I've failed Ro, and Ang. I've failed you.

A beat.

PAULINE
Yes. You have. But you helped make all your daughters the most important parts of themselves. They're smart and they're brave.

PHIL
But they wouldn't have had to be brave, see? If I had just...

PAULINE
They all know you love them.

PHIL
What about you? Do you know?

PAULINE
Of course I do.

PHIL
That's something, I guess.

PAULINE
I know you did the best you could.

PHIL
Lotta good it did me. And you.

Pauline sighs. He's right.

PAULINE
(re: Mercy)
She hasn't slept in days.

PHIL
Have you?

PAULINE
Doesn't matter.

PHIL
I'm sorry, Pol. For all of it.

PAULINE
Just tell me I did the right thing. I thought you were just sad for so long, because...

PHIL
...because I was sad, for so long.

PAULINE
But then I knew it was something... else.
(MORE)

PAULINE (CONT'D)
And I know you so well, and I knew that you didn't want to know what that something else was.

PHIL
I was afraid they'd ask me to fight it. I didn't want to fight it.

PAULINE
You've always been afraid to fight.

PHIL
You never have.

PAULINE
I've never had a choice.

PHIL
I'm sorry for that too.

PAULINE
I know you are.

Pauline stands there, quiet, holding Phil's hand. Then...

PAULINE (CONT'D)
I'll tell Charlie you changed your mind. Mercy, baby, wake up...

PHIL
Let her sleep. I got her...

Pauline starts out, then looks back at the two of them.

Phil's eyes are closed, his arms around Mercy, peaceful.

PAULINE
(softly)
I wish I had a camera...

PHIL
What?

Pauline just shakes her head and walks out.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM

Mercy is standing on the dining room table in a beautiful purple satin dress. Pauline takes the last pin out of her mouth, marks where to take it in.

PAULINE
I don't know how y'all did it...

ANGELA
I tried the dress on. It was a little tight and a little too long, so I knew it would work for Mercy.

PAULINE
Ro, how much was it?

ROMA
Stop. I'm getting a kick out of it.

MERCY
Hello? Am I hot or what?

She twirls around.

PAULINE
What do you tell your sisters.

MERCY
Thank you.
(hugging them)
Daddy's gonna love it.

She takes a flying leap off the table.

CUT TO:

INT. O'NEILL SCHOOL PROM, THAT NIGHT

Mercy is laughing with Mary Claire when Mercy's date, JERRY, 16, a hulking idiot, holds out his hand hopefully. Mercy sighs, shoots Mary Claire a look, follows him to the dance floor. Jerry plays grab-ass to Extreme's "More Than Words".

JERRY
Patrick's parents are out of town tonight and he got a keg!

MERCY
I have to be home by midnight...

JERRY
So we can only go for like an hour? That sucks.

MERCY
Sucks.

Jerry spins her, loses his grip. Mercy and Mary Claire link arms, laughing, and split.

CUT TO:

INT. PHIL'S HOSPITAL ROOM

Pauline sleeps in a chair, a book open on the floor. Mercy creeps in. She gets into Phil's bed with him, whispering.

MERCY
So it turns out, prom is overrated. Jerry's a loser. I mean, I look pretty great, but besides that, it's crap. Oh, they decorated it like a casino, you know, with those tables for, what's it called? Roulette? And then they...

PAULINE
Mercy, he's been out for days. He can't hear you.

MERCY
You don't *know* that.

Pauline closes her eyes again. They sit in silence. Mercy whispers to Phil, very softly.

MERCY (CONT'D)
I love you, Daddy.

Phil's eyelids flicker, barely. His speech is slurry.

PHIL
I love you too.

Pauline opens her eyes, shocked.

MERCY
I *told* you.

She puts her head on her father's shoulder and falls asleep.

ON PAULINE, watching them.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. PHIL'S HOSPITAL ROOM, THE NEXT DAY

Mercy, still in her prom dress, Ang and Ro and Pauline stand in a circle around Phil. Who's not breathing.

DR. LANDON
He's gone.

A strangled scream. Ang and Ro reach to grab Mercy. But it's not Mercy. Pauline's doubled over, rocking, hands pressed against her mouth as if to keep the sound in.

CUT TO:

MERCY (O.C.) (PRE-LAP)
(singing a hymn softly)
Brightest and best of the sons of the morning, shine in our darkness and lend us thine aid...

INT. PAULINE'S BATHROOM, CONT.

Pauline enters to find Mercy in the tub, a HYMNAL balanced on her knees. She dog-ears a page, hands the book to Pauline.

MERCY
Done.

PAULINE
Why do you have a hymnal in the bathtub?

MERCY
Funeral music. I've picked four hymns for communion 'cause there'll be a ton of people. Daddy wasn't popular but we are.

Pauline flips through. When she looks back up, Mercy's in a towel getting out of the claw foot tub.

MERCY (CONT'D)
They're arranged by theme, so please don't change anything.

PAULINE
I won't.

MERCY
Can I have a Gap dress for the funeral?

Dripping, she pads out of the bathroom.

CUT TO:

INT. PAULINE AND PHIL'S HOUSE, TWO DAYS LATER

Hoards of people file in, all dressed in black, carrying various foil-covered casseroles. Tons of kids. Mercy's class. You'd think Mercy was the mayor. She's running around with them, as if nothing has happened. Spooning an obscene amount of cheese-grits on his paper plate, Jerry WINKS at Mercy. Mercy darts off and runs right into Mary Claire. Who is wearing the EXACT same Gap dress.

MARY CLAIRE
(re: the dress)
We should have called each other.

MERCY
I was a little busy.

MARY CLAIRE
Why didn't you tell me?

MERCY
About the Gap dress?

MARY CLAIRE
About your Dad. I mean, I knew cuz Mom told me. But why didn't *you*?

MERCY
You knew?

MARY CLAIRE
Yeah.

MERCY
Why didn't you tell me?

MARY CLAIRE
You'd think I felt sorry for you.

MERCY
Do you?

MARY CLAIRE
Of course I do.

MERCY
That's why I didn't tell you.

MARY CLAIRE
I walked right into that. Shit.

MERCY
It's cool. I need to check on my mom.

MARY CLAIRE
She’s smoking on the swing set.

EXT. BACK YARD, CONT.

Pauline sits in the swing, smoking, as Mercy walks up.

PAULINE
I’ll be glad when they all leave.

MERCY
I don’t want Ro and Ang to leave. They’re family but they’re kind of like company, too. Things can’t fall apart when you have company.

PAULINE
We won’t fall apart.

MERCY
Are you sure?

PAULINE
Yes.
(off Mercy’s face)
Mercy. Yes.

MERCY
Can I audition for the next show at Birmingham Rep?

PAULINE
Yes.

MERCY
They pay more, you know. A little. So I’ll be a professional actress.

PAULINE
Yes.

MERCY
Can I go back to school Monday? I don’t want to sit around and think.

PAULINE
Yes.

MERCY
You’ve never said yes this much before.

PAULINE
Your father’s never died before.

MERCY
Does this also work for shopping?

PAULINE
No.

MERCY
Are we more or less poor now?

PAULINE
Don’t worry about it. We’re fine.

MERCY
No. Are we better or worse?

PAULINE
We’re different.

MERCY
You know I loved him, right?

PAULINE
Of course I do.

MERCY
I think I might be a bad person.

PAULINE
What? You are not a bad person.

MERCY
I mean about Daddy. I’m kind of...
I’m relieved, a little bit.

PAULINE
I’m relieved too, in a way. Parts
of my life will be easier now.

MERCY
‘Kay. But I mean you loved him.

PAULINE
More than anybody. Besides you.

EXT. THEATER, A YEAR LATER

Pauline smokes outside a beautiful brick building that looks more like an abbey than a theater. DON, 40’s, ambles out.

DON
Oh hi, got a light?

PAULINE
Sure.
(as he takes the lighter)
How are the auditions going?

DON
Abject agony. I mean these teenage girls and their angst, singing numbers their paltry sopranos can't support. Or worse, the mini-Mermans, who belt willy-nilly. They miss so often you just want to shoot yourself in the fucking face.

PAULINE
Lord, I am sorry I'm missing that.

DON
But today, I gotta tell you, there was this one. She sang "As Long As He Needs Me" you know, that absolutely insipid codependency anthem from Oliver? And she just ... got it. Sixteen going on Lansbury.

PAULINE
She's fifteen.

DON
Mercy is your daughter?

PAULINE
Now that I'm working in the box office she doesn't want people to know we're related. Teenagers.

DON
Do you want to get a drink? Mercy still has to do the dance round.

PAULINE
Oh, that's very nice of you but...

DON
My boyfriend Andy's the choreographer so he's ocupado.

PAULINE
I would love to.

INT. BAR

Don and Pauline drink martinis and chain-smoke.

PAULINE
I've never met somebody who went to Juilliard before. It's just so...

DON
Don't gush. We're going Dutch.

PAULINE
I haven't been in a restaurant in... maybe years.

DON
Unacceptable. We're changing that.

PAULINE
This is a special occasion.

DON
You're not the first person to call me that.

PAULINE
I mean, doing something for me.

DON
Where is this husband? I clocked the ring, so I get that y'all aren't rich or anything but damn.

PAULINE
Oh, he's dead.

DON
Oh shit. Oh Jesus. I'm an asshole.

PAULINE
It's okay. I don't tell people and then this happens and they feel bad. So I guess in a way it's my fault. I'm the... inciting asshole.

DON
To assholes!

PAULINE
Well. Okay, to assholes.

They clink.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
So, how does one go you Juilliard to... this?

DON
Flunked composition. Aced Quaaludes. Wasn't meant to be. Here I'm a big fish in a little pond. I get to run an orchestra. There's nothing more fun. That's legal. You? What would you be doing if you weren't....

PAULINE
Mercy's mother for a living? I use the term living loosely. Well my father would only send me to school to be a teacher. But I wanted to be an interior designer.

DON
So you live in a showplace?

PAULINE
Oh. No. It's a dump. It was beautiful, years ago, but you know, it just got away from me. After a while I just gave up.

DON
Is that why you still wear your ring? Because you've given up?

PAULINE
I... I'm just too busy doing other things. The two jobs, Mercy...

DON
Want me to try to set you up?

PAULINE
I'd rather die. But thank you.

The check comes. Don grabs it. Pauline reaches for her purse but he puts his hand up.

DON
Bereavement discount.

PAULINE
That is just so nice of you...

DON
Trust me. It won't last.

CUT TO:

EXT. ALABAMA HIGHWAY

A cop car pulls the ancient Impala over.

INT. CAR

Pauline, exhausted, stubs out her cigarette, reaches into her glove compartment. A beat. She beats the steering wheel.

PAULINE
Dammit. God dammit.

She leans back against the seat, her eyes closed, and waits.

CUT TO:

INT. MARINO KITCHEN

Pauline sits at the picnic table and goes through the mail.

CU: SPEEDING TICKET

Pauline looks at the amount, sticks it on top of a substantial pile of pills in a wicker basket. A beat. She picks up the stack of bills, starts making decisions.

Mercy, now 16, comes flying through the back door, into the kitchen. She forages in the fridge as Pauline calculates.

MERCY
Has anybody called yet?

PAULINE
Don said they'd know around 4.

MERCY
It *is* around 4! God!

PAULINE
(re: the fridge)
Electric bill. Pick something or close it. How was school?

MERCY
You're looking at the Junior Class Homecoming Princess.

PAULINE
Oh good. What does that mean?

MERCY
I ride around on the back of a convertible at halftime waving like a jackass.

PAULINE
Fun.

MERCY
I'm gonna need a dress.

PAULINE
Can you borrow another one from...

MERCY
I can't ask Mary Claire again. A) she wanted to be Princess and B) there's only so much humiliation I can stand.

PAULINE
We'll figure something out.

The phone rings. Mercy lunges for it so hard she knocks Pauline over. Pauline lights a cigarette, nervous.

MERCY
(suddenly Roz Russell)
Hellooooo...
(a pause)
Why yes it *is*....
(forgets the coy thing)
Really?! Thank you so much. I will work so hard, you'll be... hello?

She puts down the phone.

MERCY (CONT'D)
I GOT IT!!!!!

She throws her arms around Pauline. They dance around the kitchen. She's crying. Pauline is covered in ashes.

MERCY (CONT'D)
Maybe rehearsals will conflict with Homecoming and I won't have to go.

PAULINE
But you must, Princess. Noblesse oblige and all that.

MERCY
I don't have a dress.

PAULINE
Stop. We'll make it work.

MERCY
There's another problem.

PAULINE
Homecoming is in Paris.

MERCY
The dads escort the Princesses.

PAULINE
Well, that's alright, I'll call...

MERCY
I want you. You're both parents now. You kind of always were. So it has to be you. If that's okay.

PAULINE
Okay.

MERCY
Can you get somebody to cover you at the box office?

PAULINE
I'll work it out. Thank you.

MERCY
For what?

PAULINE
For...asking me.

MERCY
Are you okay?

PAULINE
Call Roma and Angela! It's 7 up there and they refuse to eat supper til they hear about your part!

Mercy jumps on the rotary phone. Pauline takes the speeding ticket from the bill pile, crumples it up and throws it out.

MERCY
Ang? Are y'all together? I GOT IT.

Mercy shrieks and holds the phone out so Pauline hears:

ANGELA (V.O.)
I FUCKING KNEW IT!

EXT. THEATER

Mercy heads in as Pauline stops to talk to Don. They smoke.

DON
You look like 20 miles of bad road.

PAULINE
I realize you're not interested in the ladies, but there's a limit...

DON
Sorry. Everything okay?

PAULINE
By my standards. We still on for Saturday?

DON
Yes but don't let me drink. I'm playing two church services Sunday and that organ is murder on a hangover.

PAULINE
Why do you do this to yourself?

DON
Because they pay me. Vodka doesn't grow on trees.

She hands him her cigarette, rushes off.

CUT TO:

INT. COSTUME SHOP, THEATER

BETTY, African American, 50's, measuring tape around her neck, pincushion on a bracelet around her wrist, makes adjustments to Mercy's blue floor-length dress.

MERCY
Moooom look how pretty!

BETTY
For the party scene. Say it. I'm a got-damn genius. You're done baby.

Mercy hikes the skirt up and runs behind a screen. Pauline walks up to Betty, whispers to her.

PAULINE
I need a favor.

CUT TO:

INT. DINING ROOM

The costume is now Mercy's homecoming dress. Pauline comes out in an outfit we've seen several times before.

PAULINE
I'm sorry I don't look better.

MERCY
You look great. Here.

From behind her back she presents a corsage.

PAULINE
I didn't get you anything...

MERCY
You got me the dress.

PAULINE
Temporarily.

Mercy pins the corsage on Pauline's blouse.

CUT TO:

INT. PAULINE'S BEDROOM, THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT

We hear the front door of the house SLAM. Pauline bolts upright, checks the time on the bedside clock: 3 AM. Pauline steps into the doorway of the bedroom to see Mercy, still in her dress, *stumble* into the hall on her way to her own bedroom. Mercy looks over her shoulder and whispers.

MERCY
Oh hey, love you, g'night.

PAULINE
How was the party?

MERCY
You know, the ush-ual.

PAULINE
Mercy, turn around.

She does. There's a stain on the dress.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
What the hell is on your dress?

MERCY
Ummmmmm wine cooler vomit.

PAULINE
You thought it would be a good idea to get that drunk, in that dress.

MERCY
Yeah, mom, I thought it through carefully and decided that would be an awesome idea.

PAULINE
Go to your room!

MERCY
I'm *trying*.

Pauline slams her bedroom door. Mercy, stunned, stumbles off.

INT. KITCHEN, THE NEXT MORNING

The stained dress is laid out across the picnic table. Mercy is on the phone, following instructions.

MERCY
Got it. Betty I'm really...

She's hung up on. As she hangs up the phone, Pauline enters.

PAULINE
Recapping your extraordinary night?

MERCY
I called Betty and confessed. She told me to soak the stain til rehearsal. I said I'd pay her for the dry cleaning.

PAULINE
With what, Mercy? Your paycheck covers the gas it takes us to get back and forth to the theater every goddamn night.

MERCY
Well, I...

PAULINE
Now let's figure out what to do with *my* <u>two</u> pay checks this month! Should we pay for utilities or groceries? Because we sure as hell can't do both but maybe there'll be enough for a dry cleaning bill!

Some of this information is obviously new to Mercy.

MERCY
This is not my fault!
(off Pauline's look)
This specific thing is my fault but the overall shittiness is not!

PAULINE
You think this life I've killed myself to build for you is shitty.

MERCY
That's not what I...

PAULINE
Your selfishness is astounding.

Pauline has managed to take over the work on the dress.

MERCY
I got drunk at a party. That's what teenagers DO. It's not like I drove. I *couldn't* drive! I'm the only one in my class without a car! Without a dress! Without anything! I know have to work harder than everybody else because we have nothing and I never complain so don't you dare call me selfish!

PAULINE
I'm very disappointed.

MERCY
So? I'm disappointed all the time!

PAULINE
Well then a 10pm curfew won't change your mood all that much.

MERCY
WHAT?! I've never had a curfew!

PAULINE
You've never done anything wrong!

MERCY
It's been seventeen fucking years.
I think I've earned it.

CUT TO:

INT. MERCY'S ROOM

A child's room. The furniture is miniature, the walls light yellow. Ballet posters line the walls. Mercy grabs the threadbare Pooh on her bed, cries, dials the phone.

MERCY
(into the phone)
Ang?
(a beat)
We had a fight....

CUT TO:

INT. THEATER, STAGE

Mercy, 17, auditions with the "The Merchant of Venice."

MERCY
The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blest, it blesseth him that gives and him that takes...

In the dark, in the audience, the musical's director, JADE, female, 50's, and the ARTISTIC DIRECTOR, 60's, whisper...

JADE
Her.

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
No. She's in high school. I only let her in here because she begged.

JADE
She gets iambic pentameter. She's not letting the rhythm cost her the meaning. It's instinctive. *Her.*

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR
She's a risk.

FEMALE DIRECTOR
It’s the world premiere of a Shakespeare Musical. The risk train has left the station.

ON PAULINE: several rows behind them, eavesdropping, beaming.

MERCY
...but mercy is above this sceptered sway; it is enthroned in the hearts of kings. It is an attribute of God himself, and...

PAULINE / MERCY
(mouths the words)
Earthly power doth then show like God’s, when mercy seasons justice.

CUT TO:

INT. PAULINE’S CAR, NIGHT

The interior light is on. Pauline chain smokes. Mercy, feet propped on the dash, a Trigonometry book open, does homework. Mercy looks over at Pauline, who’s nodded off.

MERCY
Mom!

PAULINE
What?

MERCY
You were falling asleep! Jesus!

PAULINE
Fine. You drive and I’ll do Trig. Is there anything else I can do to make your life less shitty?

MERCY
We’re still on that.

PAULINE
I’m trying.

She lights another cigarette.

PAULINE (CONT’D)
How did the monologue go?

MERCY
I can’t tell. That woman is weird.

PAULINE
She’s a Yankee. And a Professor at Smith. Maybe also a lesbian.

MERCY
That’s cool. My first lesbian!

PAULINE
She’s not your first lesbian.

MERCY
Yes she is.

PAULINE
The two tallest Kit Kat girls in Cabaret? Lauren and....

MERCY
... her cousin Karen.

PAULINE
Cousin my ass.

MERCY
Oh. My God. So did you have time to read the play?

PAULINE
No, Mercy, because I have two jobs and I drive a lot.

Mercy stares at her hands. Pauline can tell she’s hurt.

PAULINE (CONT’D)
Tell me the story. Keep me awake.

MERCY
Okay so I would play Perdita, which means “little lost one”. She’s a princess who doesn’t *know* she’s a princess, and...

As Mercy talks, Pauline rolls the window down, focuses....

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN, LATER

Pauline and Mercy trudge into the kitchen. Pauline is wiped. Mercy unpacks the red igloo cooler and washes it out. As she organizes her book bag on the kitchen table...

MERCY
I'm sorry. For the other day.

PAULINE
I know.

MERCY
I didn't mean to be ungrateful.

PAULINE
I shouldn't have thrown the details of our circumstances in your face. You're too young to know them.

MERCY
It's fine. It just ... scared me.

PAULINE
It scared me. You doing something so...

MERCY
... average?

PAULINE
Yes. Average. Which is not completely fair to you, I guess.

MERCY
I know our life is not shitty.

PAULINE
We just have to do the best we can. You know you've never gone without.

MERCY
Well....

PAULINE
Just because you don't have things, doesn't mean you've gone without. Just because there's no money, doesn't mean you're not spoiled.

Mercy starts to react, then realizes...

MERCY
Okay that's true. *But* just because I'm spoiled doesn't mean I'm selfish. Do you get that?

PAULINE
Yes. I do. May I go to sleep now?

MERCY
Am I still grounded?

PAULINE
You're rehearsing every weekend for the next two months.

MERCY
So it was more of a symbolic gesture...

PAULINE
Watch the mouth.

Pauline is so exhausted she's holding the walls as she trudges out of the kitchen. Mercy clocks it. We follow Pauline out of the kitchen, through...

INT. DINING ROOM

As Pauline sleepwalks to her room, we notice the china cabinet is gone.

CUT TO:

INT. MERCY'S ROOM

The shades are up. It's pitch black outside. Mercy lies face down on her bed, sleeping on an open text book.

A BANGING AT THE DOOR. Mercy sits up. Terrified.

Follow her out of the bedroom.

INT. CORRIDOR

Down the hall, revealing Pauline's empty bedroom.

MORE BANGING.

INT. LIVING ROOM

Mercy peers through the hall door, gasps.

MERCY'S POV: A POLICE MAN, 40's, STANDING AT THE DOOR

MERCY
No. No no no no no fuck.

She's vibrating with fear as she opens the front door.

INT./EXT LIVING ROOM, CONT.

MERCY
Is she dead?

POLICE MAN
Is Pauline Marino here?

MERCY
No. Wait. What?

POLICE MAN
Who are you?

MERCY
I’m her daughter.

POLICE MAN
Where is Pauline Marino?

MERCY
She’s at work. So she’s not dead?

POLICE MAN
Miss, what are you talking about?

MERCY
You’re not here to tell me you found her on the side of the road?

POLICE MAN
If I’d found her on the side of the road, she’d be under arrest.

MERCY
WHAT? She didn’t do anything.

POLICE MAN
There’s a warrant for her arrest. Unpaid speeding ticket. Missed her court date. You tell your mama I’ve got me a warrant. You hear me?

MERCY
Yes sir. But, um, just to clarify, she’s definitely not dead.

POLICE MAN
Not that I’m aware of.

MERCY
Okay.

POLICE MAN
You tell her, you hear me?

MERCY
Have a blessed ... night.

She closes the door, locks it, totally falls apart.

INT. MARY CLAIRE'S BEDROOM

The phone rings. Mary Claire sits up, turns on the light. A perfectly appointed, modern room with a walk-in closet.

MARY CLAIRE
Hello?

CUT TO:

INT. MERCY'S DEN

Mercy sits, shaking, on the phone.

MERCY
I need your dad right now!

CUT TO:

EXT./INT. MARINO HOUSE, LATER

Pauline quietly unlocks the front door as Mercy rushes into the living room. Pauline screams.

PAULINE
What the hell is the matter with you?!

MERCY
What the hell is the matter with YOU?!

PAULINE
What?

MERCY
I thought you were dead but now it turns out you're going to jail!

PAULINE
What are you talking about?

MERCY
I called Tom Land and he says it's a bench warrant which is not the same as like, hard time, but..

PAULINE
Wait a minute. You called Tom Land?

MERCY
That's what you're worried about? A cop shows up at midnight and I think he's here to me you're dead...

PAULINE
Why would you think that?

MERCY
Why wouldn't I think that?!

Mercy starts sobbing. Pauline grabs her.

PAULINE
Oh my God. Oh, baby. No no no.

MERCY
And then I realize you're not - so *great* - so I'm *not* an orphan - oh but wait yes I am, because my mother's going to fucking JAIL! Which makes me a ward of the fucking STATE! Do you get that?

PAULINE
Baby, I...

MERCY
And you're mad at me because I called Tom? Seriously? I mean at some point somebody has to help us!

PAULINE
I'm not mad at you. I'm sorry. Jesus Christ I'm sorry. I just... I just don't want anybody to know that I'm... I'm failing and I'm so tired and I just.. I'm trying so hard and I'm so embarrassed...

For the first time, Pauline falls apart. Mercy is terrified. Now it's she who grabs Pauline, rocking her.

MERCY
Okay. Okay. It’s all right. Tom’s going to fix it, okay? He’s going to pay for it and it’ll be a loan and he said his firm can find out who it was who came here and guess what? They’re gonna kick that guy’s ass for scaring a child!

PAULINE
You? A child?

MERCY
I’m an actress. I can play one.

INT./EXT. THEATER BOX OFFICE

Pauline works in the box office. Jade knocks on her window.

PAULINE
Hey, Jade. Can I help you with something?

JADE
Pauline, how are Mercy’s grades?

PAULINE
They’re... perfect. Why?

JADE
You know I teach at Smith. Colleges like ours, the other Seven Sisters schools, Harvard, Yale - have so much money to give away. I don’t know that she even wants to go to college...

PAULINE
What she wants is irrelevant.

Jade grins.

JADE
I’m happy to set up a tour this spring if you want.

PAULINE
How lovely. Thank you.

JADE
It’s nothing. She’s worth helping.

Pauline watches Jade enter the house. Sighs.

PAULINE
(sotto)
Is she worth two round-trip plane tickets to goddamn Massachusetts?

The phone rings. Pauline answers - cheerier than normal.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
Thank you for calling the Birmingham Repertory Theater. How may I help you?

CUT TO:

INT. GAY DIVE BAR, BIRMINGHAM

Several DRAG QUEENS, Jade, and the CAST AND CREW dance to "I Will Survive" under a clumsily decorated glittery banner that reads: *A Winter's Tale, The Musical* in bubble letters.

Pauline and Don drink martinis and smoke, watching.

DON
After all those kamikaze shots, that is *not* going to end well.

We follow Don's gaze to the raised karaoke drag show stage. Mercy has taken a running start and is clearly attempting the Dirty Dancing lift. Dainty drag queen CLAMMY WYNETTE has her arms out a la Patrick Swayze. But as she backs up to adjust to Mercy's launch... Clammy trips on her platform shoes.

Both land in a heap on the floor, shrieking with laughter.

MERCY
What the hell happened, dude?

Clammy's voice is Darth Vader low.

CLAMMY
Dude?

MERCY
Oh my God my bad I'm sorry.

They remain on the ground, cackling. Pauline notices.

PAULINE
Aaaaaand we're done.

Pauline kisses Don goodbye, walks onto the dance floor.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
Alright, Madame. It's over.

MERCY
Noooooooo ten more minutes.

PAULINE
Do you want a future? Get. Up.

Mercy struggles up. She and Pauline kiss Jade, Clammy, and the cast and crew. They're obviously a family.

MERCY
I can't believe the show is over.

PAULINE
I know.

MERCY
I can't believe you got a hotel!

PAULINE
I'm not driving all the way home just to be back in...
(she checks her watch)
...six hours.

MERCY
I haven't stayed in a hotel since the trip to Roma's with Daddy!

PAULINE
Which might indicate the importance of the SAT's.

MERCY
But no pressure.

PAULINE
None at all.

INT. ROMA'S KITCHEN

Pauline and Angela sit at Roma's kitchen table. A huge map is spread out across the table, which Mercy sets as they talk.

PAULINE
...and *then* Sarah Lawrence, then we drive to Massachusetts for Brown, Holyoke, Amherst, Smith...

ANGELA
And then we sell Mercy to the highest bidder!

Angela lets out a terrifying cough. Her tiny body shakes.

PAULINE
I can't believe you're coming.

Roma puts food down in front of them.

RO
I can't either.

ANGELA
Jesus, Ro, fuckin' relax already.

RO
Have you met me?

Pauline lights a cigarette.

PAULINE
That is vintage Phil. High anxiety.

ANGELA
(aiming for Southern)
Haaaah an-xaaaa--e-tih.

PAULINE
Keep workin' on it.

ANGELA
Really? Shit.

MERCY
He would have loved this. Right?

Mercy runs out of the room. Ro starts to follow her.

PAULINE
No. If she wanted us to see her cry she'd have done it right here. Give her a minute. She'll come back and pretend like nothing happened.

ANGELA
I'm not sure that's healthy.

PAULINE
Sweetheart, we're Southern.

Mercy pops back in, as if nothing's happened.

MERCY
Mom! After dinner, Ro and Ang and I have a surprise for you!

CUT TO:

INT. ROMA'S DEN

Ro, Mercy, and Pauline sit on the sofa, Angela's wheelchair pulled up next to the end. Ro presses play on the remote.

ON THE SCREEN: MERCY'S FOOTAGE FROM HER TRIP WITH PHIL

All four women lean forward, entranced. Pauline tears up...

PAULINE
Oh my. Oh....

MERCY
What is my hair doing?

RO
Why did I do acrylic nails?

ANGELA
See, now I feel fat.

PAULINE
He looks so happy. Look how happy...

ON THE SCREEN:

PHIL
She saved my life. Saves. Present tense. Ongoing. She pulls me out of - you know, my thoughts. She's patient when I fall back into them. Usually. She gave me Mercy. And a chance to prove myself as a father.

RO
I can't wait to meet her.

PHIL
You'll love her. She'll love you girls too, because you're mine.

ANGELA
I wouldn't go that far.

RO
Shut up, Ang.

ANGELA
So we know Pauline does for you. What do you do for her?

RO
(to Angela)
Can you *not*?

But Phil is considering the question.

PHIL
I love her. I guess I just...love her.
(a beat)
Now that I say it out loud, it doesn't seem like enough, does it?

Pauline suddenly stands up.

PAULINE
I'm gonna turn on in. Love you all.

She trips over Angela's wheelchair in an attempt to escape.

INT. LJ'S OLD ROOM

It's still a shrine to the Mets. Pauline is in bed with a book. Mercy walks in, gets into bed with her. Pauline immediately turns off the Mets light.

PAULINE
Good night, sweetie face.

Mercy turns the light back on.

MERCY
Was it?

PAULINE
It was a lovely night. I just...

MERCY
No. Was it enough? Daddy loving you? He said maybe it wasn't. So, was it?

PAULINE
No. It wasn't.

MERCY
I hope that never happens to me.

PAULINE
I hope so too.

MERCY
What does it feel like?

PAULINE
It feels like running full force on a floor that you know has one loose beam. You know you're going to step on it and fall through. You just don't know when. And then you do - step on it - and you survive, but when you start running again, you realize they've moved the loose beam.

Mercy works this through.

MERCY
So Daddy was... the beam? Or the person moving it?

PAULINE
He was the beam. Life was moving it.

MERCY
You should have gotten more.

PAULINE
I did get more. I got you.

Pauline reaches across Mercy and turns the Mets light off.

CUT TO:

INT. PAULINE'S BEDROOM, ALABAMA, NIGHT

The phone is ringing. Pauline sits up, turns on the light. She leans over, grabs the phone.

PAULINE
Hello?

CUT TO:

INT. MERCY'S BEDROOM

Mercy turns on her light, picks up the phone.

MERCY
Hello?

INT. LONG ISLAND HOSPITAL

Ro stands talking into a pay phone. Jack is holding her.

RO
Yeah hi, it's me....

Phone Conversation. Intercut.

PAULINE
Tell me it's not Angela.

CUT TO:

INT. MERCY'S BEDROOM

Mercy drops her phone, runs into Pauline's bedroom.

CUT TO:

INT. PAULINE'S BEDROOM

Mercy jumps into Pauline's bed, demanding answers as she and Pauline now yell into one receiver.

MERCY
Ro? What's the matter?

PAULINE
Is it Ang?

Pauline's face falls. Mercy grabs the phone.

MERCY
You said she was better. That the tent thing was helping and...

RO
She's gone.

PAULINE
Oh honey I'm so sorry.

Roma drops the phone, sobbing. Jack grabs the phone.

JACK
Pol, Merce, lemme call ya back. Love ya.

He hangs up. Pauline hangs up. End phone conversation.

INT. PAULINE'S BEDROOM, CONT.

Mercy throws herself into Pauline's arms, sobbing.

MERCY
That college tour wiped her out!

PAULINE
Baby, she had one lung, smoked like a chimney, and did what the hell she wanted. I bet if you asked her, she'd rather have lived 42 great years than 72 average ones. Okay?

MERCY
It wiped us out too, didn't it?

PAULINE
Yeah.

MERCY
We can't go to the funeral.

PAULINE
No. We can't. I'm sorry.

MERCY
Okay. Okay. I just, I missed our talk Sunday because of the matinee and I feel so bad.

PAULINE
Five solid years of Sundays. You missed one. What would she say?

MERCY
(Long Island accent)
Jesus. Fuckin' relax already.

PAULINE
Yeah.

MERCY
Maybe they can tape it, you know?

PAULINE
Baby I don't even think Yankees are tacky enough to tape a funeral. I'll figure something out.

MERCY
You promise?

PAULINE
I promise.

CUT TO:

INT. MARINO HOUSE

Pauline closes the front door, holding a small brown box. We follow her into...

PAULINE
Mercy! She's here!

INT. DINING ROOM

Where the dining room table is now gone. She moves into...

INT. KITCHEN

Mercy runs into the kitchen where Pauline, cigarette now in hand, slices open the packing tape. Inside is a smaller box, and a note. Mercy reads it as Pauline peeks inside....

MERCY
Part of Ang's heart was with you guys. So here's a part of her heart. Okay I *can't be sure it's her heart. Love, Ro*
(a beat)
Should we bury her ashes next to Daddy?

PAULINE
You know what happened every time she was outside.

MERCY
Her wheels got stuck in the dirt.

PAULINE
Let's keep her in the den. Come on.

INT. DEN

Pauline puts the box on the mantle. Mercy places candles around it. Next to it sits a miniature grandfather clock.

MERCY
There.

PAULINE
That's beautiful.

Pauline kisses her own hand, pats the box. Mercy does it too. A beat.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
Damn. This clock doesn't work.

MERCY
It hasn't worked since I was eight.

CUT TO:

INT. KITCHEN, CHRISTMASTIME

Pauline is smoking, doing the crossword. Mercy bursts in, drops a large envelope right on top of Pauline's crossword.

MERCY
It's here.

PAULINE
Open it.

MERCY
I'm scared.

PAULINE
Now you're scared, Miss Hari Kari
Shots before the SAT's.

MERCY
Mom. Kamikaze. God. You do it.

Pauline opens it, scans it, smiles, hands it to her.

PAULINE
Congratulations.

MERCY
I got in! Oh my God I got in!!!

Pauline's crying as she grabs Mercy and holds on to her.

MERCY (CONT'D)
What are we going to do?

PAULINE
Shhhh. Let me just have this.

She holds Mercy so tightly Mercy can't breathe. A beat.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
Sometimes you have to let yourself be happy before you start fighting again. Okay. Phone.

She lights another cigarette. Mercy stands up, grabs the receiver off the ancient rotary, hands it to Pauline. Pauline hands Mercy the letter.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
Dial that number right there.
(a beat)
Yes! Happy Holidays to *you*. May I have the Office of Financial Aid, please? Thank you so much.
(a beat)
Hello, Dean Simpson, Pauline Marino. You don't know me, but my daughter Mercy just received her acceptance letter. Well, thank you! I just wanted to check in concerning her financial aid.

A long pause. Mercy shrugs a "what's happening" gesture. Pauline waves her cigarette at her, like "not now".

PAULINE (CONT'D)
I understand that it's not your policy to disclose that information for another couple of months.
(a beat)
I'd like you to make an exception.
(a beat)
Well, now, I'm afraid that's not going to work.

DISSOLVE TO:

Mercy starts a new pot of coffee. Pauline ashes into a desiccated poinsettia. Pauline says, into the phone...

PAULINE (CONT'D)
I *do* understand it, Dean Simpson. Largely because you've explained it so many times, each with truly crystalline clarity. And yet, here we are. I shall not be moved.

DISSOLVE TO:

Pauline has eaten most of a sandwich, the remains of which sit on the Admission letter, which is now mildly stained with ashes, and a touch of coffee. Pauline holds her mug up. As Mercy refills it, Pauline tries yet again.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
Look at it a different way, Frank.

She sips her coffee, holding the phone away from her ear so we can hear...

EXHAUSTED MALE VOICE (V.O.)
Pauline, I really, really have to go...

PAULINE
It's Christmas. And for nearly eighteen years, I've been investing in this present, you see, for my daughter. And now, that present is sitting, gift-wrapped and ready to ship, in your office. So I implore you, Frank, to open that package, and to describe that present to me. And that way, even if it doesn't land on our door step for another couple of months, we'll know it's coming, so we can have Christmas.

She waits. She closes her eyes. Perhaps praying. A beat.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
When you say, "everything"...

She keeps her eyes closed. Tears spill out anyway. A beat.

PAULINE (CONT'D)
Dean Simpson? Merry Christmas.

She hangs up the phone.

MERCY
Everything?

PAULINE
Everything.

CUT TO:

INT. CHURCH, THE FOLLOWING SPRING

Headmaster Ryan stands at a podium, addressing the graduating class of 1993. Mercy sits behind him, in her cap and gown. She peers out into the audience looking for...

Pauline, a few rows back, next to Tom Land and his WIFE.

HEADMASTER RYAN
Last week, Mercy informed me that her class had asked her to sing her speech instead. I think that's a real neat idea. Mercy?

Mercy gets up, side-hugs the Headmaster.

On Mary Claire and the class, cheering like prison inmates.

On Pauline, laughing at the noise and love.

MERCY
Hey everybody. This is a song by Carole King that Mary Claire told me she'd kill me if I didn't sing.

Mercy shoots a look at a TEENAGE BOY dressed all in black, who's running the sound system. He nods, presses play. The music to Now and Forever fills the auditorium...

MERCY (CONT'D)
Now and forever, you're a part of me, and the memories cut like a knife...

Song plays over:

MONTAGE: PAULINE AND OTHER MOMS SERVE FOOD AT A GRADUATION PARTY. ONE GIRL STICKS HER HANDS IN A CASSEROLE AND EATS IT. PAULINE TAKES THE GIRL'S RED DIXIE CUP AWAY FROM HER, LEADS HER TO THE SINK. MERCY COLLAPSES IN LAUGHTER. SO DOES PAULINE. PAULINE AND MERCY PACK MERCY'S ROOM. BALLET COSTUMES GET SHOVED INTO A HEFTY BAG. CLOTHES ARE FOLDED. PAULINE PUTS MERCY'S TATTERED POOH BEAR ON TOP OF THE SUITCASE. MERCY TAKES IT OFF AND LEAVES IT ON THE BED. PAULINE WALKS OUT. MERCY PUTS THE BEAR IN THE SUITCASE. DON THROWS MERCY A GOING-AWAY PARTY. ANDY WEARS A GRADUATION HAT FOR NO REASON. ANDY AND MERCY DANCE. DON AND PAULINE WATCH AND LAUGH. DON SMOKES A JOINT, PICKS UP THE CAT AND PUTS IT ON THE RECORD TURNTABLE. MERCY AND PAULINE COLLAPSE IN LAUGHTER.

INT. AUDITORIUM

Mercy looks at Pauline as she finishes the song.

MERCY
Sometimes I wish that I could always be with you; the way we used to do. Now and forever, I will always be with you.

INT. PAULINE'S BEDROOM, NIGHT

Pauline lies awake, in the dark. Mercy bursts in.

MERCY
I can't go.

Pauline turns on the light. Mercy is shaking so hard her teeth are chattering. She can't catch her breath and the more she talks, the less air she's getting.

MERCY (CONT'D)
I can't do it. I can't go. I don't how to be or what to do and what if I'm stupid and what if I can't find where I'm going and what if I fail or they take everything away from me because that can happen or what if I'm behind everybody else or...

PAULINE
Shhhhhhh.... no no no no no.

Pauline is now out of bed and has finally managed to cover Mercy's arms in a a hug that she can't writhe out of. Pauline struggles to keep Mercy still as she flails and sobs. Finally Mercy stops moving, starts breathing, long and hard.

MERCY
I don't think I can leave you.

PAULINE
Well that's just too damn bad.

Mercy pulls back, stares at Pauline.

MERCY
What? But ...I know you don't want me to leave.

PAULINE
The hell I don't.

MERCY
But, you love me.

PAULINE
Which is why I raised you to leave. To make sure you could accept every invitation life offered. And this invitation, is to a great party.

MERCY
I know.

PAULINE
I'm sorry I can't afford to come.

MERCY
It's okay. Roma's excited about it. Plus Jack can lift shit.

Mercy sits on the bed, exhausted. Pauline sits next to her.

MERCY (CONT'D)
Maybe it's better you're not coming. I mean, I love Roma but I can stand to watch her walk away.

PAULINE
I thought about that too.

MERCY
See, now I bet you wish you'd had that baby sister I asked you for. She could keep you company.

PAULINE
You would have killed her in her sleep to get more of our attention.

MERCY
Prob'ly.

PAULINE
Besides, I got it right the first time.

MERCY
Are you sure?

PAULINE
Positive.

MERCY
I've never been this afraid.

PAULINE
I know. So if you get scared, or feel alone, remember you're doing it for me. It's easier when you're doing it for somebody else.

MERCY
What about when *you* get scared or feel alone?

PAULINE
I'll remember I'm doing it for you.

MERCY
Thank you.

PAULINE
For what?

MERCY
You've been doing it for me forever.

PAULINE
I think it worked out great.

THE END