

the thrush & the woodpecker

a revenge play

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List of players:

Brenda Hendriks	...	a woman in her fifties, fit, quick-witted & sharp tongued but down to earth, practical, nurturing, and genuinely willing to roll up her sleeves
Noah Hendriks	...	a young man, early twenties, something of a hipster idealist, sarcastic & sporting the worn charisma necessitated by a nomadic upbringing
Róisín Danner	...	a woman in her forties, stylish & graceful, her pleasant demeanor is an act masking rage; very put together, she commands a room with ease

Notes about staging:

[] indicate overlapping dialogue.

The play takes place in the entry area and living room of a small house in the rolling hills and valleys of Northern California.

Shadow puppets are very smooth, bordering on filmic in execution. Perhaps even projections if possible. Realizing the immensity of their scale is the most important idea.

the thrush & the woodpecker

Early morning. The living room of the Hendriks home. Small, well kept, comfortable with a lived in feel. There is a central entry area. The front door is visible.

Brenda stands looking out the window. She is fit and casual in jeans and a simple, dark v-neck t-shirt. She has a scarf or bandana casually wrapped to hold her hair out of her face and a pair of gardening gloves jammed into her back pocket. She holds a mug of some kind.

Noah enters in pajama pants and t-shirt. Unsteady. He has a pale, hipster vibe – even in pajamas. They look at each other. He crashes into a chair. She glances at him then looks out the window and sips from her mug. After a moment...

Noah

Is there coffee?

Brenda

It's so early. Of course, you've been sleeping for over a day, I wondered if you'd ever wake up. You're just in time for the prettiest part of the morning. I have no idea why I thought east facing windows were so breathtaking; it gets too bright. It's something though, the light, you take it for granted; well not you, I mean me of course, but I was starting a bit of gardening and I thought, "Why don't you just stop for a moment and enjoy the morning?"

She finally turns to him.

And now you can enjoy it with me. Actually, I find it shocking that you were able to get any sleep at all. Not shocking, that's a bit much; I mean to say that I find it surprising that you weren't up all night trying to figure out what you're going to do with yourself now. In life I mean, rolling out before us, another [day dawning.]

Noah

[You don't] [have to be so...]

Brenda

[What do] people, people such as yourself, you'll have to forgive me, Noah, what do those people do when they're thrown out of an expensive private college after working so hard, after struggling so hard to get in? Imagine what would happen if someone like that were actually kicked out? Can you fathom it?

Pause.

I'm sure you can.

Noah

That's my fault for asking about coffee.

Brenda

Vandalism.

Noah

You're saying it like, the way you say things.

Brenda

I'm sorry, is there a positive way to say vandalism? Help me out here.

Noah

It wasn't vandalism.

Brenda

Breaking things, destroying things, a lot [of things.]

Noah

[It wasn't] like that. Do you even want to know my side?

Brenda

Not particularly.

Noah

The administration refused, blithely even, dismissively, to make any changes to the outdoor lighting, even when I succinctly presented my written, my well-written and clearly documented grievances and I'm not going [to just...]

Brenda

[Outdoor] lighting.

Noah

Yes.

Brenda

Pet project.

Noah

Important issue.

Brenda

Semantics.

Noah

You know what? Don't. It's pollution.

Brenda

Is that right?

Noah

You heard me.

Brenda

Have you perhaps taken my efforts to raise you with a green conscience to an entirely inexplicable, unproductive level?

Noah

Is that a real question?

Brenda sighs and half-heartedly motions for him to continue.

It's a kind of pollution and should be acknowledged as such. With all of the money that school has to take corrective measures [they really...]

Brenda

[When you say] outdoor lighting, I feel unprepared because you haven't shared your "grand manifesto" with me.

Noah

Jesus.

Brenda

So what encompasses “outdoor lighting?” You’re talking about those tiny spotlights that illuminate signage, or street lamps, that kind of thing?

Noah

It sounds small when you say it like that, but man-made light creates a kind of bubble that will eventually [inhibit...]

Brenda

[So that’s] a yes?

Noah

Yes.

Brenda

All right, am I listening to you? No, not anymore. I’m drinking this and enjoying the morning. Unless you’re prepared to have an actual conversation, then please spare me these details and let me just drink this, whatever this is.

She drinks.

Noah

I need one guess.

Brenda

Well if you only need one then it wouldn’t be a guess, would it?

Noah

That’s fair.

Brenda

Look at you. It’s good to see you.

Noah

It’s good to see you too.

Brenda

Have you been eating?

Yes. Noah

Just, you're thinner. And your hair. Brenda

It's just messy right now. Noah

Isn't it. Brenda

What did you do to my room? Noah

Your room? Brenda

That room. The room where I sleep that's suddenly full of books and a less than forgiving pull out couch. Noah

Ah. Well, I foolishly thought that because you made it all the way to your senior year in college without being expelled for vandalism that making it one more year wouldn't be a problem, so Robert and I turned "your room" into a study. I apologize if the sleeper couch, the one that's meant for guests, isn't to your liking. Brenda

I'll deal with it. Noah

Temporarily. Brenda

When's Robert coming back from Washington? Noah

He can't. Brenda

He can't? Noah

He can't. Brenda

He can't? Noah

He can't. It's like a game, now you say it. Brenda

Why can't he come back? Noah

You're bright; reason it out. Brenda

Okay. He can't come back from Washington because, okay, it's really early and I'm out of practice at talking with you, Mom. Noah

She toasts her mug to him.

I raised you to be a thinker. Brenda

And apparently you're in a bad mood. Noah

And apparently you're a vandal. Brenda

Stop it. Noah

Hmmm, the topic is on my mind. If you'd rather discuss Robert at the moment then you'll have to reason it out. Brenda

I don't know, I don't have enough to try to put together a plausible, okay, Robert can't come back from Washington because... you won't let him come back? Noah

So wise. Always my fault. Brenda

Noah

You've never been very good with men.

Brenda

He can't come back from Washington because that's not where he is right now.

Noah

I thought he was at Mt. Wilson?

Brenda

Clearly.

Noah

Look, he said he was going to Mt. Wilson in October.

Brenda

He said a lot of things.

Noah

Well then where is he?

Brenda

Who knows, somewhere, he has to be somewhere. Let's get back to you.

Noah

Mom, where's Robert?

Brenda

He decided to go to Anchorage for a while. Something to do with a shipping deal, ostensibly, I didn't really ask. He has his own life.

Noah

He's your husband.

Brenda

Thank you.

Noah

When's he coming back?

Brenda

No idea. He might stay for a few extra days to "explore" the city. But trust me, he'll be more disappointed than I am, if possible, so if I were you I wouldn't be wishing for his return.

Noah

Alaska, huh? I'm not surprised I guess. He loves the cold, so there he is. And you love the middle of nowhere, so here you are.

Brenda

This is not the middle of nowhere; the highway is less than a mile down the drive. You're being hyperbolic, you're changing the subject, and you're doing a poor job of it.

Noah

This is isolation.

Brenda

This is space to breathe.

Noah

Come on, we're always hidden away somewhere; it's always a project to get to wherever [we are.]

Brenda

[Well you] don't live here anymore, so you don't have to deal with that.

Noah

Think about how much happier we'd all be if we just lived somewhere beautiful, "tropically" beautiful, near water, on the beach. Somewhere like Hawaii.

Brenda

You're being fanciful.

Noah

I'm being absolutely serious.

Brenda

It's a childish stalling tactic, but fine, for the sake of argument, let's say you actually mean that. You don't want to live in Hawaii, Noah. Robert's like old leather and I could probably handle it, but you with your pale skin, can you imagine? You're not made for the sun, like porcelain crisping red, just the thought of it. I took you to the beach [once...]

Noah

[I definitely] remember.

Brenda

You remember, and you, afraid of sharks, sunburned and all of your whining, and that's all I needed to know about you and the beach.

Noah

I was a little boy.

Brenda

You're still that little boy.

There is a quick, sharp knocking at the door.

Noah

Thank god.

Brenda

Are you expecting anyone?

Noah

Maybe it's a rescue party.

Brenda

You're definitely in need of rescue, but that's not an answer.

Noah

No I'm not "expecting" anyone.

Noah heads over and opens it. No one is there.

There's no one here.

He looks around outside.

Brenda

Sometimes the woodpeckers attack the door.

Noah

That sounded like a knock.

He closes the door.

Brenda

It started recently. They like the wood. Or they don't like it. Either way, Robert says it's something about the particular wood we used.

Noah

Isn't that bad for the door?

Brenda

Undoubtedly. Here is another point to consider about your beach fantasy. There is an abundance of volcanic activity in Hawaii, volcanic instability. Over time, it breeds tentativeness. Besides, I've been and it isn't what you imagine, being there, being marooned in the Pacific.

Noah

Good grief.

Brenda

Never been a fan.

Noah

Well, I don't think the people of Hawaii would share your assessment.

Brenda

The indigenous people or the tourists who live there now?

Noah

Tourists? Really Mom?

Brenda

Of course the people of Hawaii would disagree, they're the "people of Hawaii." They don't know. You're born, you look around, ocean, ocean, ocean, you get used to how things are; that's how it works.

Noah

Tell me about it.

She puts down her drink.

Brenda

Oh, your life. So hard.

Noah

I'm only saying that considering the number of times we moved before you met Robert and we actually settled in here, which is more than I can count or even remember, it would have been great to try somewhere like Hawaii. That's the only point I was making.

Brenda

Well, I'm happy here. That's why I wasn't going to go to Washington with Robert in the first place and it's why I'm not wrapped up in a parka in Alaska right now.

Noah

He asked you to go?

Brenda

Who can say?

Noah

You can say.

Brenda

He usually asks me to go. But it's a good thing I didn't go or else who would be here to welcome you.

Noah

You should have gone. It's not good for you to spend so much time alone.

Brenda

That garden takes a lot of work.

Noah

I worry about you.

Brenda

I love you, but don't push it.

Noah

Why didn't you go?

Brenda

He doesn't notice the difference and we just... needed a bit of time apart, don't make that face, apart from each other. Everything is fine.

Noah

Mom.

Brenda

He wants some time to think about things, all right?

Noah

What things?

Brenda

Noah, when I use a word as general as “things” it’s because I’m not going to tell you anything more specific beyond the word itself. That’s between the two of us and nothing for you to worry about. You certainly have your own concerns at the moment and you never even liked Robert anyway.

Noah

He’s a territorial jerk but I like that you like him and I like that he makes you happy. So don’t talk like he’s gone if you don’t know for sure that he’s gone.

Brenda

I’ve never been very good with men; you said that.

Noah

You should have told me something was wrong.

Brenda

There’s nothing to tell. Yet.

Noah

Is he leaving?

Brenda

That’s not what I said and I know you were listening.

Noah

If he leaves, are you going to [have to...]

Brenda

[Don’t get] ahead of yourself.

Noah

Will you have to go back to work?

Brenda

Excuse me, I have a job.

Noah

Volunteer work at the library is not a job; it’s volunteer work.

Brenda

It’s distasteful to look down your nose at things, Noah. And the money from leasing the land is more than sufficient.

Noah

Whoa, will you even get to keep the land, the house? He's the [one that...]

Brenda

[Look at] me. Nothing's happened yet, so how can I answer you? Robert is a good man and we needed some space. I shouldn't need to explain it twice and I will not explain it again.

Noah

Did he go to Alaska by himself?

Brenda

And I'm here by myself. Except for you. Unexpected.

Noah

For both of us.

Brenda

Couldn't behave.

Noah

Are you drinking whatever that is because of Robert?

Brenda

Jesus Christ, if I wasn't standing here to, you listen to me, seldom do I use this tone with you, young man, because you're smarter than it implies. I've spent a good deal of time alone in my life and it's much better to have people around you. So clearly I'm not happy about this situation with Robert, but I'm doing my best not to indulge in any anxiety I might be experiencing. And I will not have you using my personal life as a tangential escape route to avoid me; it's petty.

Noah

That's not [what I'm...]

Brenda

[And even if] you're actually concerned, thank you for that, it just makes your pressing on the topic now opportunistic. I got a room ready, I made you soup, I've let you recover a bit from something that I'm sure was difficult and hurt your pride, but what you've done is serious, the repercussions are serious. You make grown up choices and you have to take the grown up consequences so please give me some small glimmer that you understand that basic fundamental even a little because it would at least be a place to start.

Pause.

Noah

I'm sorry.

She throws her hands up and picks up her mug again as if she might really just walk out of the room.

Brenda

Ugh, that's such an easy thing to say when confronted with your actions. Don't be sorry, don't regret things, be able to defend them. To yourself. And to me.

Noah

Look, just, do you want me to leave?

She spins on her heel, diving right back into the thick of it.

Brenda

Ah, okay, where would you go?

Noah

I don't know.

Brenda

Then it's another empty thing to say.

Noah

Mom, it wasn't vandalism.

Brenda

Smashing the campus streetlamps and any other outdoor lights [you could find.]

Noah

[I'm trying to explain] how all of this unnecessary, man-made illumination is blocking [out the...]

Brenda

[Save the] activist stump speech, please.

Noah

It's not just a talking point, I'm studying astronomy.

Brenda

Not anymore.

Noah

It's too important to me, to what I hope to do, [to observe...]

Brenda

[You're] getting closer.

Noah

Jesus, what do you want to hear?

Brenda

Why did you do it? You, specifically, Noah, why did [you do it?]

Noah

[I was doing] what I thought was right!

She stops, cocks her head and grins.

What?

Brenda

Now, that is an answer.

Noah

Okay, good.

Brenda

You were doing what you thought was right.

Noah

Yes.

Brenda

In the dark. With a hammer.

Noah

Yes.

Brenda

All right, let me just... an evil man-made "bubble" of light is going to blot out the night sky, rendering the stars invisible, isolating us from the rest of the galaxy, blinding us from the bigger picture.

Noah

We learned about it in my optics class and there are [very real...]

Brenda

[So as a] whole, we'll eventually lose our ability to see the stars but also our perspective on our place in things. Something like that?

Noah

I thought you hadn't read my manifesto?

Brenda

I read National Geographic. And I'm the one that showed you all of those constellations when you were little, so please don't act like I'm ignorant. Now, you don't really have a manifesto, do you? You haven't gone that far down the road towards idealistic self-destruction?

Noah

Not per se.

Brenda

You acted on your beliefs.

Noah

Yes. And I would fully think you'd support that.

Brenda

Really?

Noah

Yes.

Brenda

You'd still think that, really?

Noah

Yes I would and do think that, in fact, yes.

Brenda

You'll be unsurprised when I admit to not knowing everything. I suspect you've thought that for quite some time. But I do know what it is to make a decision that seems questionable. I know what it means to choose the unconventional for the sake of what seems right.

Noah

“Seems” right?

Brenda

Or what we think is right, Noah, but everyone has different ideas about what that means. So I’m telling you right now I can understand. And I hope you can understand how important it is to me for you to achieve something, for you to be able to hold your head high [and...]

Noah

[Why?]

Brenda

Because I’m your mother and if you need a better reason: so you can have some semblance of a happy life.

Noah

You’re blowing this way out of proportion, it’s not like my whole life [is going...]

Brenda

[Noah, my issue] with you is nothing grand or philosophical. It’s simpler and much more personal.

Noah

Okay.

Brenda

After everything you’ve been through, after having to grow up with me as a mother, like this, forced to think, forced to understand, I still don’t think you sat down before you did this and weighed the cost of causing all of that damage; the actual cost. You were angry and felt marginalized, so you acted from a place of embarrassment and desperately hoped that you wouldn’t get caught.

Noah

No, I didn’t even think about it, I didn’t care about getting caught, this [is so...]

Brenda leans forward and places the mug down again forcefully.

Brenda

[That’s not] a better answer; please don’t sound so proud when you brag about not thinking. You have to stand up for what you believe in, absolutely, but you also always have to understand what you’re giving up.

Noah

I did.

Brenda

No more school in exchange for breaking easily replaceable lighting fixtures.

Noah

Yes!

Brenda

That were probably up and running again by last night.

Noah

It was worth it!

Brenda

I find that hard to believe.

Noah

Believe it or don't, it doesn't make a difference now, does it? Here I am. But it was the right thing. And I do feel bad about it, okay? It's not like I'm proud of myself for fucking the whole thing up, but you did raise me to stand up for what I believe in and if you can't see that's what I was doing then maybe you're just not looking hard enough, not even trying to understand, and all I wanted was some fucking coffee, I just came out here to ask about coffee, god, which I can just make for myself, all right?

Pause.

Brenda

You'll make it yourself?

Noah

What?

Brenda

You'll make the coffee yourself? That would be something, wouldn't that be something?

Noah

I can make coffee.

Brenda

No doubt.

Noah

Okay, you know what? I make excellent coffee.

Brenda

Huh. All right then, let me just say, because it seems clear you need to hear it: I'm so proud, you know? I've worked so hard, supporting you, keeping you on track and to see you here now, ready to make your own coffee, I don't know if you're aware, but I'm so very, exceptionally proud of you.

Pause. Stand off. He eventually drops his gaze. She picks up her mug again.

I know you want me to let you off the hook, but clearly that's not how this is going to play out. So let's get past the sparring portion, even though it's such fantastic sport, and figure out what you're going to do now.

Noah

Fine.

She rises to leave. As she passes him, she stops and lifts his face to look at her.

Brenda

You know that I love you.

Noah

Yes.

Brenda

Just so we're on the same page.

Noah

Yes.

She places her hand on his shoulder. He puts his hand on top of hers and gives it a squeeze.

Brenda

Good. I need to splash some water on my face and then run into town quickly, so you'll have some time to formulate a new game plan while I'm gone. But when I get back, we're having a talk about this, about you, about exactly how long you'll be sleeping on that sofa bed and what's next for you, got it?

Noah

Yes.

Brenda

That's a start.

She exits. He sulks.

Noah

Quietly.

Good to be home. Love you too.

Brenda (from off)

I hope you're not pretending that this reaction is anything unexpected, anything that you couldn't have foreseen when you decided to start smashing other people's property under cover of night.

Noah

Uh huh.

Brenda (from off)

That's not a reply, that's just a guttural noise.

Noah

Uh huh.

There is another quick, sharp knocking at the door. Noah heads over and opens it. No one is there. He looks around outside and closes the door.

Brenda (from off)

Is that the door?

Noah

No.

Brenda enters looking refreshed, she is finishing the last of her drink.

Brenda

Woodpeckers.

She hands him the mug as she passes him. He smells it.

Noah

I guessed right on the drink.

Brenda
Congratulations.

Noah
So... it's a little bit early for whiskey.

Brenda looks through her purse.

Brenda
It's not "whiskey." It's coffee with a splash of whiskey and you're in no position at the moment to lecture me about anything.

Noah
So it's a little bit early for whiskey.

Brenda
Do you feel better now? I can't find my keys.

Noah
They're probably over on the table by the door.

Brenda
Ah.

Crossing to the table, she stops and looks him up and down.

Noah
What?

Brenda
Nothing.

She continues to stand still, looking at him.

Noah
What? I'm sorry I got kicked out of that stupid, elitist college, okay? I said I was sorry and I meant it even though that's not how you want [to hear it.]

Brenda
[I'm just looking] at you and wondering: do you think you'll be cleaning yourself up today?

Noah
Jesus, I didn't even have any coffee yet.

All right. Brenda

Thank you. Noah

So then you will be cleaning yourself up today? Brenda

I'll do my level best. Noah

That's a bit subjective lately, isn't it? Brenda

Clearly. Noah

Brenda grabs the keys. Noah exits in a huff towards his bedroom.

I'll be back soon. And then we talk. Brenda

She exits. After a moment, there is a knocking at the door. This time it is a more familiar sound. Noah comes back in fastening jeans. He is still barefoot and unshowered as he heads toward the door.

I'm going to permanently attach house keys to your wrist if you can't... Noah

He opens the door to find Róisín. She is in a silk blouse or thin, fitted sweater, slacks, high-heel boots, perhaps a jacket. She is adjusting a beautiful scarf around her neck. Everything about her, from posture to style, speaks of careful planning. As the door opens, there is the sound of birds scattering. Róisín looks over her shoulder towards the sound, apparently a bit startled.

So many birds. Róisín

Oh, sorry. I thought you were my Mom. She's always forgetting her, you know, it doesn't matter. Sorry. Noah

She looks him up and down.

Not at all.	Róisín
Can I help you?	Noah
I'm looking for Brenda Hendriks?	Róisín
She's not here right now.	Noah
Ah. Hmm. Did you see all of those birds?	Róisín
No.	Noah
All over the lawn.	Róisín
Where?	Noah
You scared them away. The door, I mean. But there were so many.	Róisín
Huh. You were, you're here to see my Mom?	Noah
You can't possibly be Brenda's son?	Róisín
I'm Noah. Nice to meet you.	Noah
All right.	Róisín
She just ran into town for a minute, was she expecting you?	Noah

Probably not. Róisín

Happy to tell her you stopped by if, I'm sorry, what was your name? Noah

Róisín Danner. Róisín

Are you staying in town? Noah

Do you mind if I wait? Róisín

In here? Noah

You're right; I'll just come back. But it's quite an undertaking getting out here. Róisín

Yes it is. No, I mean, it's fine. Come in, please. We don't have guests very often, so I'm just a little rusty. Of course it's all right. Noah

Róisín enters and takes in the room.

I appreciate it, really. Róisín

Make yourself at home. Noah

Huh, this place looks like your Mom. Looks like the way I remember her. Does that make sense? Róisín

I think so. Noah

It just takes me back. Róisín

Noah

Can I get you anything?

Róisín

Do you have any Scotch? I take it neat.

Noah begins to exit. Róisín looks at him blankly before holding up her hand...

Are you, are you really going to get me Scotch?

Noah

If I can find some, sure. I don't know if there's any in the house [right now.]

Róisín

[That's, huh,] very accommodating of you.

Noah

Okay.

Róisín

Do you often have guests in the early morning asking for Scotch?

Noah

I think I mentioned we don't really ever have guests. And you asked for Scotch.

She laughs at him, a small thing.

Róisín

Yes, I remember that.

Noah

So you weren't serious?

Róisín

No. I don't need any Scotch. That was apparently a very poor joke on my part. But I appreciate the hospitality and some hot tea would be wonderful.

Noah

Tea.

Róisín

Please.

Noah

I can do that. But are you sure this time? Because I'm going to go in there and make some tea for you now.

Róisín smiles at him and nods.

It'll take a minute for the water.

Róisín

I don't mind.

Noah exits.

As soon as he leaves the room, Róisín leans against a chair for support, almost overcome. She clutches at her stomach and looks as if she may weep. She looks up taking in a huge breath and tries to compose herself, suddenly doubling over again. Noah enters.

Noah

Like I said, it'll only be a minute for the...

She jerks upright as he enters.

Are you okay?

Róisín

Oh, yes, don't give it a thought, my back is just twisted into knots from the trip. I don't know what it will take to sort it out at this point.

Noah

Do you need to sit down?

Róisín

I'm fine, thank you for asking.

Noah

You just got in?

Róisín

Yes. Long flight.

Noah

From where?

Róisín
Boston. Actually just north.

Noah
I've never been on an airplane, believe it or not.

Róisín
That's unusual.

Noah
We drive everywhere.

Róisín
Car people?

Noah
That's a good way to say it.

Róisín
How would you say it?

Noah
Nomadic.

Róisín
Hmm. I don't have much use for airplanes so I won't try to change your mind.

Noah
You don't like them?

Róisín
As it happens, I don't.

Noah
Got you here in one piece though.

Róisín
Did I say I took a plane?

Noah
With a chuckle.

You said it was a long flight.

Róisín

I did indeed.

She winks.

Stick to the roads.

Noah

I'm sure if my Mom knew then she could have been here to meet you.

Róisín

Do you think?

Noah

It's just with guests, you know? She usually makes a big production out of it.

Róisín

Honestly, it's been a while and I just thought I'd surprise her. Maybe that was a bad idea, but it's what I decided to do and here I am.

Noah

No, it's fine. It's great actually, I was just telling her that she spends too much time out here without, huh, it's just nice she'll have some company.

Róisín

Good. And it's been a long time coming.

The whistle of the teapot sounds.

Noah

Right back.

He slips away to get the tea. Róisín walks towards the front door and then quickly spins around, taking in the room.

Róisín

Bitch.

Noah (from off)

Milk or sugar?

Róisín

Both, thank you.

She opens and closes her hand making a fist. Bracing. As Noah comes back into the room with a mug, she pulls herself together, pleasant demeanor restored. He hands her the mug.

Noah

Here you go.

Róisín

Thank you very much.

Noah

Probably better let it cool for a minute.

Róisín

I forgot to ask this: on my way in I noticed the, I'm embarrassed to say I don't know what they're properly called in this incarnation? Windmills?

Noah

Oh, the wind turbines? Sure.

Róisín

They're beautiful. Rows and rows of them, I've never seen anything like it.

Noah

I love to just stare at them sometimes. It's hypnotic.

Róisín

And they're immense.

Noah

They look bigger than they actually are, from far away I mean.

Róisín

Do they belong to you?

Noah

We lease the land to an alternative energy start-up and sort of keep an eye on them. Actually, they have people for that, we don't officially watch them. It's not like someone could just walk away with one or anything; like you said, they're pretty big. The hills on our property, Robert's property, they're ideal for it though. So the company came in and built them. It's something else.

Róisín

Robert? Is that your father?

Noah

He's my mother's husband.

Róisín

Ah, thus the use of the first name. Where's your father?

Noah

Uh, was it Mrs. Danner?

Róisín

Ms. Danner.

Noah

I'm sure my Mom will be back soon.

Róisín

Oh no, I'm asking too many questions. I do that, I'm aware of it and I just can't stop myself. I'm always so curious about other people's lives. Why they do the things they do, how they get to where they are, choices, like that. I apologize.

Noah

No, I didn't mean to, this is the longest conversation I've had with anyone in a while. Except my Mom and those aren't really conversations, so...

He shrugs. She inhales deeply from the mug. She then looks at the mug, smiles and looks at Noah.

Róisín

Maple?

Noah

I'm impressed, most people can't tell from the smell.

Róisín

Ah, I'm not most people, Noah. I'll say it's an interesting choice and it smells wonderful.

Noah

Just tell my Mom I was a good host. Please. Or I'll never hear the end of it.

Róisín

You've been an excellent host.

Noah

That will relieve her some. She's not very happy with me right now. Actually, your visit might take the heat off of me a little, so great timing all around.

Róisín

What did you do? That's another question, I know, but it seems like a logical progression [from your...]

Noah

[I don't] mind. Vandalism. That's what she'll tell you, I'm sure. We're currently finding some common ground to talk about it.

Róisín

To talk about it.

Noah

Yep.

Róisín

Vandalism. Isn't that something? Hopefully she smacked you around a little bit. Huh, I don't mind telling you that's what I would do.

Noah

She did.

Róisín

Good for her.

Noah

She just doesn't understand; I take this seriously. If I want to really be able to pursue a career in astronomy, light pollution matters.

Róisín

All right, that brings any number of questions to mind, but I'm trying to be on my best behavior now.

Noah

No, please go ahead.

Róisín

Well in no particular order, what is light pollution? Is astronomy something someone can have a career in? And why would you choose such an unconventional field?

Noah

Is it unconventional?

Róisín

Only in so much as I've never met an astronomer, but that probably shouldn't be the recognized standard of what's conventional.

Noah

All right, let me just, I'll just keep this simple.

Róisín

I'm actually pretty sharp.

Noah

I'll keep it simple so that I don't end up talking for two days.

Róisín

Ah, thanks for that.

Noah

Light pollution, very generally, is the impact that man made illumination has on our ability to see the night sky, the stars. It's a problem, a growing problem. Especially for astronomers. Or mostly for astronomers, at this point, and that's what I'm trying, was trying to become.

Róisín

Why astronomy?

Noah

I mentioned we moved around a lot?

Róisín

Nomadic.

Noah

No matter where we lived, I could always find the same stars. Well, in this hemisphere anyway. That's incredibly reductive, but I guess the night sky has always been a comfort. That's maybe a big part of how all of this started.

Róisín

That is an absolutely lovely explanation.

Noah

I'm over-romanticizing.

Róisín

There's nothing wrong with that, nothing at all. Astronomy lets you study the stars, study what you love.

Noah

Not just stars, it's basically focusing on any celestial objects, anything that's outside of us, outside of the Earth's atmosphere.

Róisín

Far away things. Things you'll never touch.

Noah

I've... huh, I've never thought of it that way.

Róisín

Probably not the best way to think about it.

Noah

Food for thought.

He smiles and nods. Róisín sits gently on the edge of the couch. It's more like perching. She sips her tea and stares at Noah. He smiles. She smiles. He takes a stroll around the room. She follows him with her eyes.

Róisín

Compared to most trips to town, is this a particularly long one?

Noah

She shouldn't be much longer. So, did you two go to school together or [something?]

Róisín

[I'm just now] taking the time to notice. You're a very attractive young man.

Noah

Uh...

Róisín

I hope that doesn't, I'm not propositioning you.

Noah

No, I didn't think that.

Good. Róisín

Yes. Noah

But you are very attractive. Róisín

Okay, thanks. Noah

You know that though, don't you? You seem like maybe you know that. Róisín

Um, I'm not really sure how to answer that. Noah

Honestly. Róisín

I look normal, I guess. Noah

It's striking to me. How old are you? Róisín

Noah puffs up a bit.

How old do you think? Noah

How old do I think? Róisín

How old do you think? Noah

I'm asking you. Róisín

No, I want you to guess. People always guess [older.] Noah

Róisín

[Let's not] do that, I've never experienced that game ending well.

Noah

I'm 22.

Róisín

Huh, it's been almost that long since I last saw your mother. We weren't much older than you are now. Well, a few years at that age makes a huge difference.

The punctuated knocking sounds again at the front door. Róisín stands up. Noah doesn't really acknowledge it.

Noah

So how exactly do you know my Mom?

Róisín

Are you going to answer the door?

Noah

No, it's fine.

She looks at the door and then back to him. He waves it off.

Róisín

Are you sure?

Noah

Woodpeckers. I said that like I know, really it's just something Mom told me about this morning. I haven't been around much lately, but apparently they've started attacking the door recently. Not attacking, pecking at or whatever you call what they do.

Róisín

Drumming. It's called drumming.

Noah

Huh. It has something to do with the wood.

Róisín

Or they're just trying to get in.

Noah

Or that.

Róisín

It's funny, not funny, but I have something of a history with woodpeckers.

Noah

Seriously?

Róisín

Oh yes. I realize it's an odd thing. You've only just met me and I've certainly been giving you the third degree without sharing very much about myself. But it's uncanny that those particular birds would come up while we're sitting here waiting. There's a story if you're interested? Hmm, if you're not too afraid when someone old enough to be your mother says, "there's a story."

Noah

Not afraid. Oh, do you need some more hot water?

Róisín

No thank you, this is fine.

Noah

So tell me about your "something of a history with woodpeckers."

Róisín

That's just what I said; you pay close attention.

Noah

Kind of a must in this house. You know Mom.

Róisín

Hmm.

She smiles and sips her tea, sitting down at a small table.

Noah

You were saying...?

Róisín

Yes?

Noah

The story.

She sets down her mug.

Róisín

Yes, absolutely. Well, this was so long ago now, I was much younger, where to begin. There was a woman who lived in my town. She had been going through a particularly difficult time. That's generous; she wasn't in a good place at all.

Noah

What happened?

Róisín

It's not important.

Noah

Doesn't it kind of set the stage?

Róisín

No one ever really talked about the details. People rarely care about the finer points. But she had, her husband left her suddenly and then there was a series of rather tragic events. And loss. Does that work for you?

Noah

Sure.

Róisín

Needless to say she was something of a wreck. More of a walking corpse, truth be told. It's embarrassing to remember her that way. The only time she left her house was to walk out to the mailbox each afternoon. I used to watch her. Bathrobe, slippers, probably exactly what you imagine if you were to imagine the cliché of a woman coming undone. Although she wasn't crying, I never saw her cry, so maybe not exactly what you'd imagine, but you get the idea.

One entire wall of the living room begins to glow, warm, becoming an opaque screen. A shadow representation of a small row of houses appears in the distance. A shadow of a woman appears on the screen and she makes her way to the mailbox.

One afternoon she came across something lying in the driveway. It was a woodpecker, a male bird. The red head gives it away, you know? The females have black heads, but the males are more colorful. She bought a book on the subject. I never saw the book, so it's perhaps only a convenience to add detail. But from that book, she learned this was an Ivory Billed Woodpecker and that this particular bird could grow to have a wingspan of up to three feet. That seems, well at the time it must have been unimaginable. This poor little bird was on death's door after all and it fit in the palm of her hand, just like this.

She gently holds out her cupped hand as the shadow figure kneels down and picks up something off the ground.

Small. Noah

Yes, so small. Róisín

Too small? Noah

How do you mean? Róisín

Did it die? Noah

She stops, leans one elbow on the table and smiles at him. As the shadow woman disappears from view.

And here I thought you were a good listener? Róisín

Sorry. Noah

The houses fade as a table appears in shadow. A grandfather clock sits in the background with its pendulum bob swaying rhythmically. A small box sits on the table. The woman crosses to the box and places the bird inside it.

Róisín
So this broken woman took the bird in and made a little nest for it inside an old shoebox. Makeshift at best, you can imagine. It would just lie there, eyes wide open, and stare at her. She would bring it bits of fruit, a thimble of water. Not just the common sense things though. She also offered up everything she felt to the injured bird. The few good things, the many bad, those feelings you have for just a flash of a moment and then regret having for days on end after; she took all of them and poured them into this bird. Everything. Everything. And time passed.

The shadow woman gently touches the box and then exits.

Much to her surprise, the bird got better. Now, it was hard for her to tell at first with no particular training in ornithology. But she woke up each morning expecting to find him dead inside the box and each morning he was still there, waiting for her, staring at her. With these bottomless eyes.

The hands on the clock face begin to move faster, but the pendulum bob stays at the same rate. The sound of a woodpecker call, softly, almost inaudible begins to rise from the box on the table.

Then after more time, he started greeting her each morning with a quiet chirping, something of a fledgling call.

The shadow woman returns to the table. She places her hand over her heart as she leans on the table looking into the box. The bird hops up and down a bit in the box popping into view.

And then after more time, up on his feet, with a tentative shake of the wing here and there. After more time, he took to flying. Still waiting patiently each morning for the woman to wake up and check in on him, but flying around the house.

The hands on the clock face move even faster as the bird flutters out of the box and around above the shadow woman. She claps and lifts her hands as if she might try to join him.

She was delighted in a way that she had thought gone forever. Sometimes she would even smile, this broken woman. And the bird grew.

The clock hands spin and spin. A larger bird appears fluttering above her.

And, although it seemed almost unthinkable, he grew even more.

An even larger bird appears. The shadow woman reaches her hand up and genuinely tries to touch the fluttering bird.

And he kept growing until it seemed he never could have fit into the palm of her hand. This beautiful bird, beautiful even in fits of excitement or rage, had once been just a day away from death. And she decided that the bird's miraculous recovery was a sign from some higher power. I won't pretend to name it here; I wouldn't even venture a guess. But it was a sign. And so she pulled herself up and began the arduous process of reclaiming her life.

The lights return to normal and the shadows fade.

I editorialized the ending a bit, to be honest. But I like that ending.

Noah

What happened to the woodpecker?

Róisín

Ah, you're more interested in the fate of the wounded bird than the broken woman? It's not really an epilogue kind of story.

Noah

Epilogues aren't in your wheelhouse?

Róisín smiles at him. The lights dim as the wall is illuminated again. An empty chair is present.

Róisín

All right then. At a certain point, and this was after a long while, at least a few years, it became impractical to keep him in the house. This large bird flying around, and as he got healthier he got more rambunctious.

The shadow of the woman enters and sits in the chair. It closely echoes Róisín's current position. The grandfather clock has stopped. There is no movement. It is broken. It is cracked.

That's not embellishment. I'm not ascribing the bird human qualities as a narrative device for your benefit.

The loud sound of wings flapping, stirring, causes the shadow woman to look up at a sharp angle. Everything on the screen shakes. The grandfather clock falls over. She stands up.

He actually became this kind of effervescent force, breaking things, slamming around; once he got started there was nothing to be done. And if the bird were to get angry, well, the damage was simply beyond belief. So as much as it pained the woman, she had to set the bird free. And that's just what she did.

The shadow of a woodpecker eclipses a huge portion of the wall and causes the shadow woman to fall back. This is only seen for a moment and then, almost as quickly, the wall images disappear.

But I'll tell you, that woodpecker wouldn't leave; it stayed on with her for years. Hidden, full of everything that woman ever was and ever would be ever again.

A deafening bird cry rips through the space. Noah jumps up and Róisín places her hand over her heart, startled.

Noah

What the fuck!?!

Róisín

So loud.

Noah rushes to the front door and throws it open. The sound of dozens of birds scattering rushes in as Noah looks in both directions.

Noah

I saw all of the birds you were talking about. They scattered again, but there were so many. They can't all be woodpeckers; do woodpeckers travel in flocks?

He closes the door.

Róisín

It's called a "descent."

Noah

What?

Róisín

When a group of woodpeckers is gathered like that. It's not a flock; it's a descent.

Noah

That seems like an intentionally ominous thing to call it. I've never seen more than one or two at a time.

Róisín

They must really have something to say.

Noah

Well, that's a creepy thought. There's never anything that loud out here. Ever.

Róisín

Ever? Really though, there are so many little things every day that would simply baffle us if we tried to explain them away. Don't you find? Or that might just be my experience. Could I trouble you for some more hot water?

Noah

What? Oh, of course. Yes. I think I just got a little caught up in your story.

Noah heads over and takes the mug from Róisín.

Róisín

I doubt very seriously that we just heard a giant woodpecker.

Noah

Can you imagine?

Róisín

I wouldn't even know where to start.

Noah

I'll be right back.

He exits. Róisín is immediately up. She moves to the window and looks outside, more accurately she looks up into the morning sky. She grabs a small notebook or scrap of paper and a pen from a nearby shelf then returns to the chair. She begins humming a tune as she writes something on one of the pages, tears it out and folds it in half as Noah returns. She is still humming the song as she pockets the folded piece of paper.

Róisín

Hope you don't mind, just needed to jot something down.

Noah

Huh, I know that song you were humming. Maybe.

Róisín

Not a common song.

She begins again and after a moment he picks up humming along with her. This lasts for a moment. As they finish the phrase, Noah seems confused.

It's a beautiful tune, isn't it? It always reminds me of a thrush song. The way it meanders.

Noah chuckles.

Noah

A thrush is a bird, right? Another bird story?

Róisín

No, I'm afraid not.

Noah

Are you sure?

Róisín

Yes, yes. We only had one wreck of a woman in our town to tell stories about.

Noah

But she pulled it together in the end.

Róisín

At least in the version you heard.

Noah

I'll just pretend it worked out for her.

Róisín

Do that. And as much as I'm sure you're just dying to sit through another one of my lengthy stories, I don't have anymore and certainly nothing about a thrush.

Noah

Or even a flock of thrush.

Róisín

A "mutation" of thrush.

Noah

Not really? Who would name a group of anything a "mutation?"

Róisín

And yet, that is what it's called.

Noah

I'm not sure I believe you.

Róisín

Regardless, there is no thrush story. It's just the impression the tune of the song gives me, that's all. This cup of tea gets you one woodpecker story, one thrush song, and one grateful unexpected guest.

Noah

What was that song?

Róisín

Something my mother used to sing to me. Honestly, I don't even remember her singing it, but I still remember the song.

The punctuated knocking sounds again. This time from multiple sources against the door, different rhythms and tenors but all quick and sharp.

The birds are back?

Suddenly the knocking stops, the sounds of birds scattering as the door opens and Brenda swings into the house already speaking. She closes the door behind her, removing sunglasses.

Brenda

Jesus, did you see all of those birds outside? They were practically organizing a full-scale assault on the front door, I've never seen [anything like...]

Noah

[Mom, Mom] you have a visitor.

Brenda

What do you mean? I didn't...

Róisín stands. Brenda stops. She drops her sunglasses.

Róisín

Here you are.

Noah

Mom? Mrs. Danner's been waiting for you to get back.

Róisín

Ms. It's Ms. now, but she knows that. We've been having some tea, I've been having some tea. Noah didn't want any but he's been very gracious with his time.

Brenda awkwardly retrieves her sunglasses from the floor.

Brenda

He doesn't like tea.

Róisín

Just look at you, you look wonderful.

Brenda
I'm sorry, do we know each other?

Róisín
I'm sorry, what?

Brenda
I'm Brenda Hendriks.

Róisín
Yes, and I'm Róisín Danner.

Brenda
That's, what an unusual, that's a beautiful name.

Róisín
Thank you. So I'm me, you're you and he's Noah. Apparently your son and all grown up. So we're all who we are. And I'm a bit shocked because I don't think I've ever heard you stutter over a sentence before in my life.

Brenda
Are you sure we know each other? I'm having trouble placing [your...]

Róisín
[Now don't] do that, I know you remember me.

Brenda
All right.

Róisín
I know I must be more memorable than that. Noah, all things considered and given our short time together, wouldn't you say I'm relatively memorable?

Noah
Sure.

Brenda
Quietly.

Don't.

Noah
Don't what?

Róisín

You've seen me at my very worst, or at my worst then. Certainly I've seen worse since. How can you not, oh, is it because I'm calling you Brenda? Would your memory turn over a bit if I called you Connie instead?

Brenda

There's no need to do that.

Róisín

When I knew your mother, she was Connie. I didn't want to say anything to you about it in case she showed up here and I somehow had the wrong house. Wouldn't that have been embarrassing? But I had a feeling, a reliable feeling this time, and here she is. Finally. After so long.

Noah

Connie?

Róisín

That's right.

Brenda

It's my middle name.

Noah

Your middle name is Lynn.

Róisín

Connie used to live next door to us.

Noah

When did you live in Boston?

Róisín

North of Boston. Next door to my husband and I, just the smallest strip of yard between us. Practically on top of each other, isn't that right, Connie?

Brenda

Yes, yes, and it's Brenda.

Róisín

Brenda. Yes. It's hard to just start thinking of a person as someone else all of the sudden. Even after this long, I know you can understand that.

Brenda

Of course. And of course I remember you, Róisín. It's been such a, I don't know where my head is today. We're dealing with a bit of a "situation" regarding Noah's scholastic future [and I'm...]

Róisín

[Yes, he] recounted a bit of it. Vandalism, such a shame. And I told him as much.

Noah

Connie from Boston?

Brenda

Clearly there's an explanation, Noah. And I will happily give it to you when we don't have company.

Róisín

No need to be shy on my account, Connie.

Brenda

Brenda.

Róisín

Absolutely.

Brenda

I am so sorry you had to sit here and wait. Noah, while sharing tales of your destructive exploits, did you offer Róisín something to drink?

Róisín moves back to sit at the table and lifts her mug to illustrate.

Róisín

He did, the tea I mentioned; he's been an excellent host.

Brenda

Has he?

Noah

Yes.

Róisín

I just said he has. We've been getting to know each other.

Brenda

Have you?

Róisín

Oh, these questions. But you and I? We have so much to catch up on. And you move around so much, what was the word, Noah? Nomadic. It's almost impossible to imagine I'm here. In fact, I'd be willing to bet you can't; you just cannot imagine what it's like for me to be sitting here right now with you and your son.

Brenda

It's certainly a surprise.

Noah

She just showed up at the door.

Brenda

I didn't see a car?

Róisín

So I'll just have to keep reminding myself you're not Connie anymore. Brenda. Brenda Hendriks. Is that your husband's last name? Robert?

Brenda gives Noah a cautious look.

Brenda

You know about Robert?

Róisín

Yes.

Brenda

No, I didn't take his last name.

Róisín

Am I doing it again, Noah, am I asking too many questions? Help me out here, I feel like I might be.

Noah

It was my father's last name.

Brenda

Noah?

He turns to face Brenda. His back is to the table where Róisín sits.

Noah

Yep?

Brenda

Don't say "yep." And we discussed you taking a shower and actually putting yourself together today, didn't we? But look at you now.

Róisín uses a single finger to slowly, quietly slide her mug along towards the edge of the table. Her focus is on this task even when she interjects.

Noah

Well, Mrs. Danner got [here...]

Róisín

[Ms.]

Noah

Ms. Danner got here right after you left and I haven't [really...]

Brenda

[I'm sure she's] just as eager as I am for you to make yourself presentable.

He moves closer to her and tries to keep his voice down.

Noah

Jesus, Mom. I'm doing you a favor entertaining your friend while you're not here and you want to criticize me because I didn't have time to hop in the shower? That's exacting, even by your...

He is interrupted as the mug falls over the edge of the table and hits the floor with a splash of liquid. Brenda and Noah are startled.

Róisín

Oh no, I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention [and I just...]

Brenda

[It's no] problem. Noah, go and grab a hand towel from the laundry room.

He exits. Brenda speaks quickly in a hushed voice, the urgency amplified and immediate. Something else all together.

What are you doing here?

Róisín

Looking for you. And clearly you didn't want to be found, why [is that?]

Brenda

[Whatever you're] going to do, don't do it in front of Noah.

Róisín

I'm perplexed, why would you think I'm here to do [something?]

Brenda

[I won't play that] game with you.

Róisín

I'm just thrilled that you suddenly seem to remember [me now.]

Brenda

[What do you] want?

Róisín leans in and suddenly, for an instant, becomes a razor sharp dagger.

Róisín

Any business I have is with you, Connie. If you're sending him away, do it quickly.

Brenda

My name is Brenda.

*Noah comes back with several hand towels and begins to clean up the spill.
The women cover well.*

Noah

I'll get it. Did you get any on you, Ms. Danner?

Róisín

Thankfully no. I only managed to make a mess of the floor.

Noah

No mess, there you go. All clean.

Brenda retrieves the truck keys from her purse.

Brenda

Noah, give me those.

Noah

The dirty towels?

Brenda

I'll finish cleaning up, I almost forgot that I need you to take the truck out to check on one of the turbines.

He hands her the towels as she places the truck keys in his hand.

Noah

Right now?

Brenda

Turbine 7 isn't turning and from the drive it looks like it might even be leaning a bit. Go and take a look.

Noah

I don't even know anything about them, what am I [supposed to...?]

Brenda

[You don't have] to have a degree in mechanical engineering, just look it over at the base and see if there's any damage. If you spot anything unusual, we'll call it in to the company, this is not complicated.

Noah

All right.

He begins to leave.

Brenda

And fill the truck up with gas. It's running low.

Noah

Can I have some money for that?

Brenda

You have money.

Noah

No, I don't.

Brenda

Use your tuition.

Noah
Nice talking to you, Ms. Danner.

Róisín
Yes it was.

Noah
Play nice, Mom.

He disappears out the front door. Brenda exhales deeply, crosses to the other side of the room and sets down the towels. She turns to face Róisín. They look at each other for a long while. Then...

Brenda
You look well.

Róisín
As do you.

Brenda
Fit, bright. Thinner than I remember.

Róisín
It has been some time.

Brenda
That's true. It's my experience that people tend to go in the other direction as they age though.

Róisín
Well, it's easy enough. I don't eat anymore. Anything. At all.

Brenda
Anything?

Róisín
Is that concern in your voice?

Brenda
It just doesn't sound healthy.

Róisín
Oh, it's not. But you'd be just amazed what a person can accomplish with just a little bit of purpose and an abundance of time.

Would I? Brenda

God, these little questions. Róisín

Well, we have to start somewhere. Brenda

By catching up? With pleasantries? Róisín

Yes. Brenda

Okay. Is that my son? Róisín

Pause.

Brenda
Róisín, I realize that we knew each other during a very difficult time in your life and I really did [my best to help...]

Róisín
[That's the most] damning understatement of facts that I've ever, hmm, but not the point. Although your memory seems to be returning at an exponential rate.

Brenda
I remember how devastated you were.

Róisín
Perfect.

Brenda
I remember trying everything I could to comfort you.

Róisín
Comfort?

Brenda
Is that too general?

Róisín

I will not indulge you, I will not be deterred. I remember well your fondness for banter, for games, but I'm asking a very direct question: is that my son?

Brenda

I don't know what this is, but that is ridiculous.

Róisín

Answer me.

Brenda

I did.

Róisín

No, you didn't, you said a bunch of other things. Is that my son?

Brenda

No.

Róisín

No, he wouldn't be now. Not after all of this time.

Brenda

He's not your son.

Róisín

Just the right age.

Brenda

The right age for what?

Róisín

The age that my son would be now, isn't he?

Brenda

Don't be [ridiculous.]

Róisín

[If he hadn't] been taken out of his crib in the dead of night by some horrible, awful, [calculating...]

Brenda

[He's my] son.

Róisín

Repeating that over and over doesn't make [it true.]

Brenda

[Is this why] you came? Get out [of my house.]

Róisín

[How can you] even try to, just look at him; he even looks like me.

Brenda

That's not true, he [doesn't.]

Róisín

[It must make] you panic to [see it.]

Brenda

[It doesn't] do anything of [the sort.]

Róisín

[His skin, that] pale skin, just [like mine.]

Brenda

[He just] doesn't like [the sun.]

Róisín

[His hair. And] those eyes, so light, I never [even...]

Brenda

[In every way] that matters he's mine!

Róisín

Oh! Oh, I should be more specific, shouldn't I? You've no doubt calcified further into your word games with age, games that were never as cute as you thought, Connie, or as endearing and often something akin to justified lying, isn't that right? So I'll do that for you then, I'll be more specific: did that used to be my son? He's been dead to me for two decades, Connie. I'm not here for him, although finding him here with you did have an unexpected impact. The answer's not going to have any sway on what happens between us so tell me. Is that my son?

Pause. Róisín waits. Then suddenly...

Is that Ben? Is that my Ben?! I already know, how could I not know? He was standing right there looking like his father and humming the same goddamn song I used to sing to him as a baby, Connie, [the same...]

Brenda
[Stop calling] me that! That's not [who I am.]

Róisín
[Is that my] son?!!

Brenda
Yes.

Pause. Róisín is momentarily shocked, but she fights through it.

A long time ago.

Róisín
And you took him.

Brenda
And I left.

Róisín
No, no, say you took him, say that.

Brenda
I took him, yes.

Róisín
From me.

Brenda
Yes.

The deafening bird cry rips through the space again causing Brenda to jump, looking around. Suddenly there is a thud on the roof of the house followed by a few large scraping sounds, almost like large steps, something finding a footing. Róisín, with no acknowledgment of the noises, exhales from somewhere deep inside and wipes the tears from her eyes. She rubs her fingers together with a bit of wonder, examining them.

Róisín
I didn't know I could still cry.

Brenda
What was that?

Actual tears. Róisín

What was that sound? Brenda

What sound? Róisín

You're telling me you didn't [hear that?] Brenda

[Frankly,] Connie, I'm more than a bit surprised you haven't fallen down apologizing yet. Róisín

Róisín, I know how it must seem [to you, but...] Brenda

[That's what] comes next. An apology. Róisín

I won't. Brenda

Oh no? Róisín

I will not. Brenda

Huh, well that is a pretty clear indicator that you don't understand what's happening here, the finality of this encounter. Róisín

Finality? Brenda

You hear me when I say these things, stop repeating them back as questions, stop trying to make me clarify, I'm not being at all cryptic. Finality. Finality. Róisín

Brenda

I hear you.

Róisín

Good.

Brenda

And I've dreaded this, the possibility [of this.]

Róisín

[You have] no idea.

Brenda

But I won't apologize; I've done right by that boy.

Róisín

So fucking [predictable.]

Brenda

[And I'm] not sorry. I'm not. You were a wreck, after your husband left. You were a danger to that baby, you were a danger [to yourself.]

Róisín

[My husband] left me, that's right, and I was young and all alone in that house, yes, with a baby. I had a right to be upset, to be sad. That's not the same thing [as not caring about...]

Brenda

[You won't let me] rewrite my history, Róisín; don't you try to rewrite yours.

Róisín

You rewrote my history, you did that.

Brenda

Do you think I didn't agonize over that decision? You were depressed and not taking care of yourself and not taking care of him and out of your mind. That's very general, but you were generally out of your mind. And terrifying. When I would come over to clean up, to help out, you would muse about cutting his ear off and sending it to your husband, about leaving your new son in the middle of the street somewhere to get back at that man, about covering his face with a pillow to stop his constant crying, constant crying because he was hungry because you weren't [feeding him.]

Róisín

[That's not] true, that's, people say things when they're, people say all kinds of things! That doesn't mean I would actually do any of it, not to my own son.

Brenda

And the bruises.

Róisín

Accidents.

Brenda

And the screaming.

Róisín

All babies cry.

Brenda

All babies get broken arms?

Róisín

They can.

Brenda

All babies are so thin [that they...?]

Róisín

[If you had such] enormous concern about my parenting you should have been more vocal, called the police, tried to do something about it.

Brenda

The police? That's irrevocable, if they'd even believe me. And I had a plan. So that it didn't have to be permanent. I had what I thought was a good plan.

Róisín

Thrall me with this plan, please, thrall me with your grand scheme before I go to the kitchen, get the largest knife I can find, and take it to your face.

Pause.

Well!?

Brenda

I wasn't going to keep him.

Róisín

Look at him, he's had an entire life that I never [got to...]

Brenda

[I just] needed to get him away from you until you got better.

Róisín

Was he there in your house, the entire month? After he vanished, before you vanished, he was right next door?

Brenda

No.

Róisín

Where?

Brenda

I left him with my mother until it wouldn't seem, until I could leave without drawing too much attention.

Róisín

Huh, your mother. That makes perfect sense. I don't mind telling you that makes so much sense that I'm thoroughly ashamed it didn't occur to me immediately, why didn't I easily put that together for myself? And then you left.

Brenda

I left.

Róisín

But until then, until it wouldn't be as patently obvious that you took my son, you stayed. And in a particularly sociopathic stroke of malice, you came over every day for a month to "comfort" me. To listen to me, to witness the fallout of what you'd done while making me tea, the same fucking tea I'm served at your table?

Brenda

That's not what I wanted.

Róisín

To feel superior. Maybe just [a little.]

Brenda

[No, no it] wasn't like that.

Róisín

Then what was it like?

Brenda

I weighed the costs and made a decision.

Róisín

You “decided” to be his mother.

Brenda

I felt responsible. If I had to take him, I was going to make sure he had a better life, the best opportunities, the [chance to...]

Róisín

[He was] supposed to have that with me.

Brenda

You’ve come for this reckoning, but we both know you were in no state to ever give him what [he needed.]

Róisín

[I don’t know] anything of the sort and I don’t give a damn about your theoretical assessment of the job I would have done as Ben’s mother. If not for you, helpful you, always visiting you, lonely you in that house all by yourself because you never had anyone.

Brenda

That doesn’t have anything to [do with...]

Róisín

[You were] jealous and you took him, you wanted him, you saw your opportunity and you took him. I know exactly what you wanted.

Brenda

I wanted that boy to thrive.

Róisín

No, you wanted that boy.

Brenda

And I’ve done that, he’s thriving, he’s [becoming...]

Róisín

[You raised] my son, my son, into a stranger and you liked it.

If that's what you think. Brenda

Think?! Róisín

I wouldn't expect [you to...] Brenda

[Who are] you?! Róisín

Róisín, you have to believe me when I say that I was destroyed to watch what you were going through and I tried [to make it...] Brenda

[You were the] cause of it! Róisín

I couldn't leave him there with you. Brenda

It wasn't your choice. Róisín

But I thought if I could just get your head clear, if I could just get you to see what you were doing to him, to yourself, then I could give him back. You remember, you said you remember, how I came every day to check on you. Because I wanted to give him back. Brenda

But you didn't give him back? Róisín

Pause.

You never got better. Brenda

I never...? I never got better? Róisín

Brenda
You got worse.

Róisín
You gave me a month.

Brenda
I couldn't take the [chance.]

Róisín
[Couldn't?]

Brenda
Wouldn't.

Róisín
Why can't you just admit you wanted him and you took him?

Brenda
Someone had to do something [or else...]

Róisín
[Someone] or you, someone [or you?!]

Brenda
[I was] the someone there. And I knew I was, I knew in [my heart...]

Róisín
[Say it, you] were what? Too alone, in need of purpose, wanting love, too [desperate...]

Brenda
[I was what] that little boy needed; I could see it in his face.

Róisín
It's staggering.

Brenda
I knew I could do better [than...]

Róisín
[It's] staggering!

Brenda

I was better.

Róisín

Do you hear yourself?! Who made you the judge and executor of his fate, my fate?
And how could I ever get better when you took the only thing I had left in the
[entire world?]

Brenda

[He wasn't a] thing, he isn't [a thing.]

Róisín

[Enough of] your patronizing semantic bullshit, the way you decide things for
other people, it's enough, it's enough!

She lunges at Brenda, striking her repeatedly. It is not decisive or controlled, it is unmoored. Brenda does her best to defend herself, but Róisín gets a grip on her throat as the women fall to the floor.

As the women struggle, the sound of large groups of birds outside, wings flapping, calling, crying, a raucous thing. The intense, varied knocking on the door again and the deafening cry from above. Brenda smacks Róisín off of her for a moment and quickly crawls to the other side of the room. Róisín sits up on her knees. The noise dies down again.

Both women are exhausted, trying to catch their breaths. After a moment, Róisín leans over and begins laughing, face down. The laughing turns into punctuated screams as she pounds her fist on the ground. After a few blows, she goes quiet. Brenda is very still.

Róisín

I never got better.

Brenda

Your hands are like ice.

Róisín

I never got better.

Brenda

I don't know what else to say.

Róisín

I never got better!! I never got better. You used to ask me, ugh, I think I might be sick. You used to always ask me if I had any idea why all of this might be happening. During your “visits.” And I always thought, you know, what an odd question. Because how could I know? How could anyone know that the only answer you wanted was, “Because I’m a bad mother.”

Brenda

Róisín, even if that was unfair, I can’t go back now and change [any of it.]

Róisín

[How is] your mother?

Brenda

What?

Róisín

I remember her from when she would come to visit. She was always so nice to Ben when we would see her getting into the car or out in the front yard. She would always give him a smile and he would smile back, even though he was just a baby. For a long time I had forgotten about her, but then one morning...

She snaps her fingers.

Just like that. “Connie’s mother was always so kind.” And always so generous to Ben, so complimentary. Both of you so covetous.

Brenda

She was just being nice.

Róisín

Is that what she was doing? When she was hiding my son, taking care of a baby that she clearly must have recognized as mine? She was being nice?

Brenda

She helped me because I begged her to help me, to help Ben.

Róisín cringes at this as she manages to get back to her feet.

Róisín

So how is she?

Brenda

She’s, she was well the last time [we spoke.]

Róisín

[Was she?]

Brenda

Yes.

Róisín

Well when I saw her, she wasn't well at all.

Pause.

Brenda

When did you see her?

Róisín

What if I told you she was incredibly difficult to track down? Not as difficult as you, but when I say years I know you'll believe me. And what if I told you that when I saw her, she looked just the same? Well, in fairness, she was tied to a chair with a belt and I think that I already mentioned to you my fondness for kitchen knives. She was willing to tell me anything I wanted to know about you, your whereabouts, your new name, your son. She aged well.

Brenda

You didn't do that.

Róisín

I wonder, was she being nice then, too? Telling me everything? And after I got that everything I needed, I wanted to untie her for you Connie, I really did. I wanted to bandage her up, help her. But I told myself that I would leave her there until you decided to apologize. But unfortunately you never did, Connie. I never got better and you never apologized and your poor mother and all of this.

Brenda uses a nearby piece of furniture to hoist herself back to her feet.

Brenda

What did you do?

Róisín

What did you do?

Brenda

Is she, is she [all right?]

Róisín

[It's so difficult] when people begin to disrupt your family, isn't it? Oh, do you think Noah will be back soon?

Brenda

If you hurt my mother, [I will...]

Róisín

[I hurt] your mother. I did that, it's done. Do you believe me?

Brenda scrambles to the nearby phone and frantically begins to dial.

Oh yes, please call her.

Brenda

You didn't do anything to her, how would you even find her?

Róisín

I found you.

Brenda

Mom?

Brenda suddenly looks at the receiver in horror.

Róisín

Busy signal? Oh, I might have left it off the hook. Hard to fathom, isn't it? There's nothing you can do about it right now, so accept it. Accept that you can't do anything. And what would you do? Would you call the police? You haven't yet. Oh no, wait, you can't. Because you're a kidnapping traitor and you care more about saving yourself than turning me in. Do you want me to call the police?

Pause.

I'll call them for you.

Róisín reaches out for the phone. Brenda hangs it up quickly.

No. That's right. Neither of us wants the police. That's not what you want for me right now, is it? And that's not the kind of justice I have in mind for you.

Brenda

Quietly.

Did you kill my mother?

Róisín

Let's just wait for Noah to get back?

Brenda

Did you kill my mother?

Róisín

We'll see what he thinks about [all of this.]

Brenda

[Did you?!]

Róisín

Well I certainly didn't do her any favors, Connie. You're fond of understatement, isn't that right? And I'm not really in a good place to be doing any favors for any of your loved ones. So, as I'm sure it just slices you up to imagine, I won't be doing any favors for Noah.

Brenda

Oh, God. Why would you tell him any of this?

Róisín

To ruin you.

Brenda

It will crush him.

Róisín

Whoever Noah is, he's not Ben. You killed whoever my son would have been and replaced him with that unfamiliar albeit polite young man and I don't really care what it does to him as long as it hurts you.

Brenda

You do still care, you can try to hide it, even if you're this monster now, [even if...]

Róisín

[Oh, I am] a monster.

Brenda

But you didn't expect him to be here. That's what you meant earlier, isn't it? You never thought you would see him. And now that you have [you can't...]

Róisín

[And now that] I have it makes eviscerating you even sweeter.

Brenda

I can see that it hurts you.

Róisín

Everything hurts me!!!

Brenda

He won't believe you.

Róisín

Shouldn't be too long now.

Brenda

He won't.

Róisín

Isn't this fun?

Brenda

I should... I should kill you.

Róisín

Now that's refreshing.

Brenda

Leave now or I will kill you.

Róisín laughs at her and it is cruel.

Róisín

I suspect you've been making that calculation since you walked in the door and saw me with "your son."

Brenda

I will do it you, Róisín. To keep you from hurting him, from hurting anyone [else, I will...]

Róisín

[Now I'm] truly fascinated by this; how would you do it? In order to spare others the hurt, how would you kill me?

Brenda

I don't [think...]

Róisín

[In what] manner would you take my life?

Brenda

My bare hands if that's what [it takes.]

Róisín

[Your bare] hands? Not a knife? Not shotgun to take off half my face? Not a rope around the neck with a pull until you hear that awful cracking noise and everything [goes limp?]

Brenda

[I don't] need anything except [my hands...]

Róisín

[You can't] kill me.

Brenda

Yes I can, I will.

Róisín

All right, well do your best, Connie, but you're too late. I died seven years ago.

Brenda

What [are you...?]

Róisín flies into a rage.

Róisín

[That's right,] dead. Dead! You can't kill me because I'm already dead. And I don't mean that figuratively, emotionally, I don't mean from the weight of the grief. I mean dead: numb hands, icy skin, no heartbeat, not a sound. You know, after you left me there with nothing, no husband, no son, no comfort at all, it only took me a few months to begin to suspect. You also suddenly vanished. And so soon after my boy, how peculiar? I couldn't find you, not a trace. No one could find you. And it suddenly became clear to me what must have happened. Not clear, but it began to make sense. Why would someone just disappear? Someone who had so often expressed deep concern for my son, for something she knew nothing about?!

Róisín picks up a framed picture and smashes it on the ground, but then returns to a calmer demeanor.

And after 13 years of mourning my missing son, hating you and wishing for any kind of ending, I finally reached a limit and drowned myself. In the bathtub. Which takes a hell of a lot of conviction, let me tell you.

Brenda

Oh my god.

Róisín

But I did it, I held myself under until I swallowed half the water in that tub and my eyes felt like they would spill out, burst open. But just look, I'm still here. And I've tried since then Connie, trust me. I hung myself, I cut myself open, I drank bleach, and I'm still here. Dead and still here.

She looks at her own hands and starts laughing. It's deeply unsettling.

Because I'm not done, you see? Because instead of my son, I raised a bird, a wounded little bird that grew into a starving terror, starving for vengeance, a gigantic fucking beast that's sitting on your roof right now, so heavy, biding his time, getting impatient, can you hear him? And he won't let me finally be done until I finish this. Finish with you.

Brenda

You really are insane.

Róisín's laughing becomes more intense, almost maniacal.

Róisín

Would that be better?

Brenda

You want me to believe there's a giant bird outside [that you...]

Róisín

[I raised] him and he loves me. And he wants me to finish [this.]

Brenda

[The lengths] to which you'll go to [try and...]

Róisín

[I'm so tired,] Connie, but he's making me [finish this.]

Brenda

[This is] lunacy!

Róisín

Because it sounds impossible? Because it [sounds...?]

Brenda

[Yes!]

The woodpecker calls out from the roof as it moves around some more, getting a new footing. Suddenly the flapping of enormous wings as the bird takes off from the roof.

Róisín

A ravenous woodpecker roughly the size of your house that does nothing but hate and hate and hate because that's all I ever gave it to eat. And that's impossible, too. And ridiculously. And insane! But whether you believe it or not, he's up there getting more and more restless and I'm right here without a pulse and you will pay for how you've wronged me. He will bring this house down and when I tell you that neither of us will leave here today, no matter how impossible that sounds, you had best begin digesting the reality of it.

The front door flies open, startling both women as Noah rushes in. He slams the door and looks out one of the windows.

Noah

Did you see that?

Brenda

Noah, we're having a private conversation [and you...]

Noah

[Mom,] turbine 7 isn't leaning, it's bent. It's dented and bent over like something just, just slammed into it. Like a car or, but higher up than a car. And when I was coming back up the drive I saw something fly away from the house. I couldn't tell, but it looked huge, it [was just...]

Róisín

[Just think, he] used to fit right here.

She holds out her cupped hands to Noah.

Noah

What?

Brenda

Noah, I need you to go into town and get the police.

Noah

What's going on?

Róisín

Noah, how do you think you would know that song I was [singing earlier?]

Brenda

[Noah, go into] town and get the police for me, right now.

Noah

Why? Can't you just [call them?]

Róisín

[She wants you] to leave, have you ever noticed how pale your skin is?

Noah

I just don't go in the sun very often.

Brenda

Your issue is with me and whatever you brought with you, it's after me, right?

Noah

Mom, what is [going on?]

Róisín

[Are you asking] me to show you [kindness after...?]

Brenda

[Róisín, he has an] entire life to suffer disappointment, hurt, that's what life does. Look at him! Don't dash him against the rocks with so much still [ahead of him.]

Róisín

[I don't] know if I [can, Connie.]

Brenda

[Maybe I was] wrong, I was only doing what I thought was right. You're right. You're right, I did want it, I did. So don't hurt him just to hurt me. Just hurt me.

Noah

Mom?

Brenda

Please.

Róisín crosses to Noah taking the slip of folded paper from her pocket. She quickly pushes it into his front pocket and then steps back a few feet, squeezing her fists. She closes her eyes tightly.

Róisín

Get him out of here.

Suddenly Brenda is up and moving, pulling at Noah.

Brenda

You have to go, Noah, you have to get out of [here now.]

Noah

[Are you crazy?] I'm not going out there with whatever [that...]

Róisín

[He won't,] the bird won't hurt him.

Brenda

You have to take the truck back into town and get the police. Bring them back here; you have to do that for [me now.]

Noah

[I'm not] leaving you [here.]

Brenda

[Stop arguing] and go! Now!!

Noah

Mom, I don't [understand....]

Róisín

[Make him] leave now, Connie, I can't bear this.

Brenda pushes Noah to the door. The thumping sound again on the roof, the agitated scraping noises. Noah looks up, but Brenda keeps him moving. She opens the door to a chorus of birds scattering outside.

Brenda

You don't have to understand, all right and you don't have to like it, but you do have to go. And you have to remember that I [love you.]

Noah

[I can get her] out of here if [that's what...]

Brenda

[I love you.] Go.

She pushes him out and slams the door. She turns to Róisín who opens her eyes again. There are tears on her face, but she is not weeping.

Brenda

Thank you.

Róisín gasps for air and then steadies herself.

Róisín

You're welcome.

Brenda

He will go into town.

Róisín

I'm sure he will.

Brenda

He will bring the police back here.

Róisín

I'm sure he will.

Brenda

He is a good boy.

Róisín

I'm sure that's true.

Brenda

He will come back.

Róisín

And he will find this house collapsed, piles of wood, nothing salvageable. Our bodies will be picked clean to the bone, and then what's left will be carried away.

Brenda
All of it?

Róisín
Carried away to heaven.

Brenda
And Noah will be all right.

Róisín
As far as you or I know.

Brenda
Then it was worth it.

Róisín
Oh Connie, that all depends on the heaven part, doesn't it?

The birdcalls from outside begin again, the flapping wings. It is perhaps the sound of hundreds of birds now. The light from outside grows dimmer somehow and seems to writhe with motion. Brenda takes notice.

Brenda
I want to, I don't know how to say this to you.

Róisín
I'm stunned.

Brenda
Róisín, I am sorry how I hurt you. And how it made you this. I've tried in every way to live my life without, I never want to regret things, but I do regret that.

Róisín puts her hand to her chest. She seems surprised by something.

We were friends once.

Róisín
I used to believe that, yes.

Brenda
So even now, I want you to know that I mean it.

Róisín
I do. And I so wish that was enough.

The cry from the giant woodpecker on the roof rings out again. The light grows even dimmer as the mixing of the bird noises quickly swells to a deafening cacophony that swallows the stage.

A dim light gently creeps downstage. Noah is suddenly illuminated in a special standing alone off to the side across from the shadow screen wall of the living room. His hands are in his pockets. He wears a lightweight jacket.

As he speaks, the screen wall begins to glow. Just the wall, leaving the rest of the living room dim and creating an eerie, isolated effect. The shadow images revealed on the wall are a few rolling hills with a line of wind turbines in the distance. They slowly turn.

Noah

When I got back to the house with the police that day, it was decimated, nothing but a pile of wreckage, a pile of all the things that used to be home. They brought in a rescue team to search and I just stood at the end of our drive with my back to the scene and watched the wind turbines turning on the hill. Oblivious. Quiet. They're very quiet, you can't hear them at all.

The funeral was hard. That's not specific, she would tell me to be specific. The funeral was a herculean effort on my part to remain composed while lowering an empty box in the ground. No body. Not many friends to speak of, but somehow an abundance of flowers. So many flowers.

Robert came back from Alaska and we negotiated a very mature parting of the ways. I didn't expect him to still be my father, but he loved her. I did watch him try to salvage her garden and felt more affection for the man than I ever had.

Afterwards, I went to stay with my grandmother. I was going to tell her all of it and just try not to care that the entire thing sounds crazy. But when I got to her house, she had her own story for me. One day she came home from dinner with her friends and someone had broken in, shattered all of the windows, torn things off the walls, ripped wiring out of the walls, even the roof was damaged; the entire house was ransacked. But as far as she could tell, the only thing missing was her address book. And there were feathers. She found feathers everywhere.

I still don't know what happened the morning that strange woman showed up at our door. The piece of paper she pushed into my pocket? A note.

"Woodpeckers are some of the only birds that knowingly steal other birds' eggs."

How messed up is that? I just... I can't make myself throw it away.

The thing about my Mom, she only ever wanted the best for me. I don't have to know everything about her to believe that. Who really knows everything about their parents, I guess? But I still drive out here sometimes, away from the city lights. When night falls, I look at the stars, so clear and somehow closer, and I remember her teaching me about the constellations. How they hang in the night sky, where we all fit, the larger scope of things. About right and wrong.

Noah smiles but is on the verge of tears. A shadow of a flock of birds flies by in the distance on the screen.

And I miss her. Every day.

END OF PLAY