Flinging dry rain

Mark Medvetz

The University of Montana

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FLINGING DRY RAIN

By

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for Anne
"The face of every neighbor whom I met
Was as a volume to me...."

Wm. Wordsworth
The Prelude, bk.III
Mr. Smith's Chihuahua

Mr. Smith had a foul mouth
and a chihuahua. They both had asthma
and big ears. He had 50s calendar girls
on the garage wall and an intercom
so he could yell to his wife, Alice,
to bring him another fucking beer.
You could hear Alice giggle
before he turned it off.

I used to eat dinner at their house.
Because I was too small to reach the table, Mr. Smith
put phone books on my chair. Alice cooked
spaghetti or pork chops or meat loaf,
but never sat with us.

By the end of the dinner, the end of his day,
Mr. Smith would be drunk.
He'd talk to me, swear at Alice.

His asthma would be heavy.
He'd suck on an atomizer;
the dog's eyes would bulge.

When I got home, I'd tell my mom
I was at the playground. She didn't like Mr. Smith.
He used that word too much,
and besides, that dog wheezed like a man dying.
supper

a man
(the old kind that
  chases
  kids
  down
  the street)

twisted the rabbit's furry
neck and it did a gut
less jump--basted ooooh
  so well--

onto a porcelain
5 o'clock
platter
Fr. Kirby

Before Fr. Kirby was laid to final rest
he was pruned, primmed, and piled
on a satin bed for all the students to view.
It was the first time I had seen a dead priest.

I had seen a dead person before, my Aunt Jenny,
but she was nothing like the priest.
Bathed, clothed, and combed
by her sisters, she slept, waiting
for her God to wake her.

Fr. Kirby probably wanted to wake up and yell
at us for not being in school.
He even had on his glasses,
round and gold,
that had framed eyes the color of anger.

My mother took me close to Jenny and stroked
her hair. I watched my mother's hand caress
her sister's cheek, while tears caressed hers.
I think my mother wanted God to hurry
and wake up aunt Jenny.

After school, I stood in front of the rectory
looking for the right second to dodge traffic,
cross the main street. Fr. Kirby was still there,
waiting. But it was Friday. Tony Marrotta
would hot-wire a car, and Mary Anne Marini
would bring a dirty magazine down to the playground,
and on Monday, Fr. Kirby wouldn't be around
to pass out mid-quarter reports.
Circles on tracers

The war started while Rosie lived in Paducah where she learned to paint her lips red orange, the ache in a setting sun.

Down on a stool in an everyday bar, she met her husband who went off to drop soldiers out of planes.

The night before she left, Paducah bonfired everything in town made in Japan. Rosie hid her ceramic cat.

She moved to Michigan and learned to drink beer with Polacks. She made more money than ever working in a shell-loading plant.

The night her husband came home, a drinking problem in his army bag, she realized putting on her makeup, that she wouldn't have to paint red circles on tracers anymore.
Just before the sun

On the hill sits mother Bess
wrapped in a shawl of train sounds.
She rocks in a wooden chair
lighter and smoother than her skin.

She watches for her husband
who whistled the blues, stroked
her brown thigh, knowing
he's hanging in some white man's tree.

She watches for her son
lost in some war.

In that first light just before the sun,
the hill becomes dark, mustard colored
moss, speckled with black rocks, watching
the growth of another day.
"...I had forms distinct
To steady me."

Wm. Wordsworth
The Prelude, Bk. VIII
between white noises

my father yells move
that goddamn head

a bedroom slipper torpedoes
through the room

first rain pops and cracks
the dusty sidewalk
evening

walking home our feet
move across the sidewalk
like brush strokes
on long auburn hair

ribbons of clouds gather
strands of laughter
braiding souls with dusk
Dinosaurs

Down in the flats
draw bridges awakened
by the call from a ship
rise like dinosaurs out

of the river resisting its
exit, twisting and turning,
wrapping itself around
the city's history.
After the festival

Spanish moss drapes itself over the music lingering in the saxophone's alley.

We walk on the Rue de Royale with our good conversation; summer around the corner drying like an old lizard.
to plot the garden

Bricks stacked for next year.
For the first time I see
my yard bare.

The lack of green lawn hardens
the graying picket fence.
My house shrinks into gaps

of sky breaking through trees.
Hollyhocks no longer lean,
whisper gossip from the alley.
Carnival Jewelry

We drive through a dead town alive with Christmas lights hanging on hill-side houses.

I think of a woman in Vic and Al's. She wears a necklace some carnival operator gave her.

In the headlights, the winds build a spinning ride of yellow and orange leaves.
"...Even as a shepherd on a promontory, 
Who, lacking occupation, looks far forth 
Into the endless sea, and rather makes 
Than finds what he beholds.

Wm. Wordsworth

The Prelude, Book II
The whore and her music

Heather collects phono albums
of classical music. She keeps them close
to her body: Brahms at her breast,
Schubert between the legs.

Whether on the turntable or her body,
the music makes her breasts burn,
thighs itch. She swoons completely.

Someday, Heather will shrink her records,
paint them fuchsia, and wear them as earrings.
She'll walk the night
one more time and let them bob
in a warm, strong wind, a wind
that ends in a quiet storm.
Nets

Nets of knapweed trap the land. Sun haze between mountains dulls the poplar's glitter.

You tell me about the man who owns your heart. Heat carries the noise from the tires up into the car.

To avoid your words, I confront my thoughts of someone who owned my heart. To escape I look out the window. Beehives rest under a cove of trees.

Your last words are very sad, sad enough to bring me back. I try to find something kind to say. Instead my eyes find an old house sunken in a bed of yellow grass.
The Fall Princess Speaks
to the Snow Queen

It was a small park
that belonged to Tuesday,
the fall, a sliding
board, and her.

***

Silent, she began, the trees
should be silent? When they
are attacked? Their color
ripped so carelessly away?

At first they just bend,
ignorant of your cold breath
destruction. But trees
do not stay ignorant
and then they dance
so as not to forget.

You think they are dancing
because you could shatter
mosaics of orange and red;
they make music
from your fierceness.

Yesterday I saw you
as I strolled across the bridge:
a black sky behind
a blacker mountain
with your pillow-white hair.

Too soon the leaves, old
and dry, will attend you,
following you down the street,
scraping and scaring.

(stanza break)
Should I then be a winged creature lost in some despair, draped over a stone ornate and cold?

* * *

That made her laugh. She was nothing but a scarf clad old lady. Never mind. She had a cigarette and the paint-peeled bench.
In another hour

We left the city to avoid another death.

The gulf was dark, the water warm.

We slept in blankets of sand, seasounds for pillows.

Throughout the night jelly fish washed ashore.

Before first light, we walked along a pier that cradled

shrimp boats nesting in their smells.

We called their names: Santa Carla, Luella, Camille, Blue Angel, Night Sea.

We tried to talk of friends sick, dying.

We felt rushed. In another hour the sun would call the ships back to sea.
Playing pool with straight men
Missoula, Montana

I stand outside their circle. From my corner I watch my opponent shoot, then my partner.

An Indian woman prays at the bar. I want to buy her a drink, thank her for the poem I see in her.

My turn. They see I can handle a cue stick. Partner smiles, opponents shift, the Indian woman leaves. I want to ask her should I give these guys another chance. The eight ball cracks in two as moonlight strikes her hair.
"I do go on. Forgive the raving."

Richard Hugo
"A letter to Levertov from Butte"

"I ask you to receive it as the ones who had a share in the making of it."

Henrik Ibsen
"The task of the Poet"
Letter to Heather

Dear Heather: If you can believe it, I've moved to the great Northwest to be a poet, although I think I'd rather write plays about whores. I like whores. You taught me that, though we never slept together, just talked. You did most of the talking. I like your voice, the sounds it could create, the excitement it could stir in my soul. And to think some people just want sex from a whore. Sometimes in the mornings when I walk to school, the clouds, thin and soft, are threading themselves through the pines on the mountain side. I think of what it must have been like when I was very young and held by my mother. I think of those sounds you created, words shaped into advice for me. Remember? It was always about life or love; I don't believe you'd say there was much difference. Told me to find an ugly one to love. No one would try to take him away from me, and he'd be so happy to be loved, he would never leave. And then you'd smile. You told me you thought I'd make a good writer I think you make a better whore. When you work, being naked is a good feeling; when I work, being naked hurts. Would an ugly one take away that pain? You used to say pain is part of life. Have you changed that view? Probably not; pain's the color of a whore's blood. I can hear you laughing behind those words, telling me I should start sleeping with whores instead of just talking with them. Well, there aren't too many whores in Missoula. In fact, I haven't seen a brightly dressed whore wrapping her hips around city life since I got here. But it doesn't matter much now. Winter's already here, and I remember you once said that by Christmas even whores have to wear coats. Love, Mark
A letter to Gennie Nord for her graduation

Dear Missy: Well I had hoped that we would cross the finish line together, but it's probably better that you go first. I'm still learning to leave behind what Hugo called the old ways of defeat. I was thinking about how we discovered Wallace our first year in Montana. Missoula was wrapped in white mink, and we drove west hoping to escape the cocoon as soon as we hit Look Out Pass. The pass was hard blue clear except for the stream of cloud flowing down the mountain. I never told you that I thought it was a dragon's tail and that I was afraid to look down into the valley because although I've always wanted to see one, I was afraid a dragon really would be there. Or maybe I thought it a boa for your shoulders and I wished it red to match your shoes. Up there we talked about men and how they can make your head feel like it is jeweled with hoarfrost. Later that day, forgetting about stores and bars in Spokane, we lunched in Wallace, searched for the whore houses. No luck, so we decided to comb the bars for information. Between your talent for drinking and my charm for passing, we figured answers were ours. And they would have been if that turquoise-studded barmaid at Metals didn't have to choose between us and truck drivers. As if to find our own answers, we decided to climb the valley wall, sit like stars in the saddle of a mountain. Moisture on thistle and pine flickered like winter lightening bugs, and down in the valley Christmas lights hung on the houses like lovely costume jewelry. If there were whores in Wallace that day, they eluded us.

-no stanza break-
On the way down, you told me about your home
I would visit that summer. We talked about our mothers,
comfortable strangers, and about our fathers,
how we are mysteries
to them. Then there was the ride home. It was a
whore's moon:
bright and flashy, and we moved along the curves
of Coeur d'Alene's
lake like a lover's hand. I think we were happy
for a moment.
Then the Chinese dinner soured in your stomach,
and you were sure
that like the trees that surrounded Kellog you
had been poisoned.
Since then, I've dreamt about our trip. We were back
on top of the pass with that moon. You had on the
red boa
and shoes and danced liked the ballerina in the
movie, leaping
back and forth over my dragon's tail. Now Wallace
and the whores
are in the past and you are at the end of this race.
I'll probably even cross the line. Next race? Team event.
No problem there. You just grab the baton, girl, and we'll
win it running backwards. Love, Mark
Letter to Ginny after backpacking

Dear Ginny: It happens every time. 8,000 feet, hunkered down in a cirque, and you have to cauterize blisters on my feet with hot tape. I feel like a snag hollowed out by lightning, and you try to keep the woodpeckers from drilling. Later we sit like sages, listen to the lake, try to remember what it told us in another life. It's been that way since I met you. First graduate quarter and all I could do is fear woodpeckers. Instead of a mountain lake, there were cafeteria tables and coffee; instead of tape, there were your wisdom and humor.

Both combined to make for insight durable enough to fill any hole. You say the tape and much of your wisdom are legacies from your father, but only the tape comes with a guarantee. When you taught me to fish and slice one the length of its belly, my hands turned red from the insides I tore out. It made me think of my father's hands pulling molten steel out of a mill furnace. The redness always reflected in his eyes. You know, you've taught me a lot: surviving while enjoying the wilderness, surviving the Hercynian wood called academia. Funny, isn't it, that I should "learn the ropes" to a man's world from a woman. Or maybe not. Women clean fish to have food; men clean fish to have red hands. I have to admit that one of the best parts of a trip is at the end. Looking "high granola," crunchy, we make a grease run to a Bud and Shirley's. We always get a booth with an outside view: a canyon on fire, the valley smoke-filled, clouds like crimson rivers; or a taxidermist's sign that reads, "Preserve your memories--$5.00 an inch." Inside is never less interesting: a great white moose turns heads on red necks as she orders Shirley's "mess," or an old man, lip swollen with snooze, tells us the fish may dance up in those mountain lakes, but during a full moon they can eat all night, never have to bite a line. I know you and Montana have changed me, I'm just not sure how; but I am sure life back in the big city will let me know. I think I'll just wait for that knowledge. Until then, I have lots of memories, much to accomplish; they'll probably cause more blisters. That's okay. I'll be back when I need wisdom and humor, or just more tape. Love, Mark
A letter to George after a visit to Anaconda

It is said, and it is true, that just before we are born a cavern angel holds his finger to our mouths and whispers, "Hush. Don't tell what you know." That is why we have a cleft on our upper lips and remember nothing of where we come from.

R. McLeish

Dear George: Your family ghosts, living, dead, and almost, are still here. I think you're right; this place can seem like Sunday, seven days a week—even the ghosts get lonely. At Jim and Clara's bar, I saw one of your aunts glimmer to a juke-box heartbreaker. Someone said she'd been out searching again for a husband drowned in Silver Lake. Everyone in the bar knew it was foolish; that lake has no bottom. She floated toward a wall, reached in and pulled through an aunt of mine. They wrapped themselves in cloaks of bar perfume and studied "prospects" for the Foundry Day Picnic, washing the smelter's black frost off the men's bodies. For me, mining men here are just like steel-mill men back in Ohio: the old tell the young about the year they first went up the hill; the young search through cigarette smoke for our aunts. Some of these men are our brothers, our fathers; they all have wives like our mothers: women who can catch flying TVs and gossip, stop both from smashing the living-room wall. All of our families will be in this town someday. Fathers will meet, but won't be able to speak of us; brothers will tell younger brothers about their first year; a sister will run a bar, wait for the picnic. Our mothers will come alone, new and resilient like fireweed. It's always women who breathe life, who know clouds are spun from the crowns of trees. You and I will go anywhere but there; we'd even turn right, head for Wisdom first. But maybe we should, and often, take the pass from Philipsburg, and if there is a spirit named Falling Rock, he'll let us cross. It could be autumn, and the sides of mountains will be the color of a carnival kid's face. We might stop at the lake, help your aunt search; we could look for your grandma's house, or trace signs of fireweed at the cemetery. We'll count on consistency:

(stanza break)
old folks sunken into Buicks, someone telling his story, an old woman calling us nice boys. What else is there to know but where you come from? It's knowledge of the best kind, like not knowing a tree's scientific classification, but knowing it's a good climber. Everything's there even if vacant lots hide memories from us. We'll gather it all, fill our pockets: ghosts, garbage, hopes; add some tamarack needles, take it to wherever we call home, and fling it like dry rain. Love, Mark
A Pleasant Interruption
A one-act play

by
Mark Medvetz
for Ginny, Gwen, and George
From early days,
Beginning not long after that first time
In which, a Babe, by intercourse of touch
I held mute dialogues with my Mother's heart....

from The Prelude, bk.II, 1805
Wm. Wordsworth
Cast of Characters

Mother: late sixties, early seventies.
Ben: her son; early thirties.

Place

Ben's kitchen.

Time

The present. It is midafternoon.

Set

The action takes place in Ben's kitchen. Stage right is an entrance/exit to another room of the house (the living room). Stage left there is a door to the backyard. There is a window in the door. Off center stage to the left is a round table that seats 4-6 people. Off center stage to the right and somewhat down stage is a rocking chair. Behind the table is a long counter with a stove as part of it. There are cupboards above the sink. To the left of the counter but before the back door is a small bookcase with some empty spaces on the shelves. Above it are hooks for coats and jackets.

The general decor of the kitchen should be a successful blend of modern equipment and a somewhat old-fashioned ambience.
MOTHER was never beautiful or handsome, but perhaps on occasion was quite pretty. Her present appearance should be pleasing and should also reflect an outward show of an inner harmony.

BEN is handsome, has a strong frame, and is in his late twenties or early thirties.

As LIGHTS come up BEN enters the kitchen from the door leading into the living room. His mother is at the sink. She has been doing some kind of cleaning. BEN is carrying a package and some books and is wearing a jacket. He puts the package and books on the table and hangs his coat on a hook. While all this is taking place, there is this initial exchange of dialogue:

BEN
Hi, Mom. What are you doing here?

MOTHER
I thought I'd come by to visit and see how you're doing.

BEN
I'm okay. How about you?

MOTHER
Good. Ah, you know. Why complain?

BEN
Where's Paul?

He should be finished and takes a curtain rod and brackets out of the package. He starts to work on hanging the rod over the window in the back door that exists to the back yard.
MOTHER
He had to go to a meeting over at his school. Something about having to volunteer for something extra to do besides teaching. Said to tell you he'd be home around six. It's your turn to make dinner. No stir-fry.

(Laughs.)
I guess I've gotten Paul sick of vegetables and whatever.

MOTHER
Where have you been?
Job hunting?

She takes his books and places them on a shelf of the bookcase.

BEN
I had some errands to do.

MOTHER
Why not teach? Paul likes it.

BEN
No thanks. I'm fine for now. Part-time at the restaurant gives me enough money. Besides I want to get this place settled, our comfortable nest.

MOTHER
It looks fine. (Pause.) Well, what did you do today?

BEN
(He is somewhat guarded.)
Oh, I had to stop by the library, buy this stuff for the window, and visit James.

MOTHER
Who is he?

BEN
The PWA I help support.

MOTHER
She has just started to wipe off the counter, but stops to look at BEN. He keeps working.

PWA?

BEN
(He does not stop whatever he is doing, and he answers casually.)

Person with AIDS. You know, mom. I told you I was involved with a support group to help out guys who are pretty sick.
BEN
(continued)
Mom, look in the drawer; I need a screw driver. Phillips.

MOTHER
She goes to a drawer, but it is the wrong one. Second try is right.

You know, I thought about getting those mini-blinds for the house...

BEN
Yeah, and then you can have grey industrial carpeting and track lighting installed and be the perfect mother of a gay man.

MOTHER
She walks over to him and hands him the tool.

(She misses the humor.)
No mini-blinds for me. They're just venetian blinds only thinner. They were too hard to keep clean. Those would be worse. I'm not going to clean them at work.

BEN
(Stops his work for a minute.)
What do you mean at work? Don't tell me St. Michael's rectory is getting mini-blinds?

MOTHER
She should be at the sink, busy with some cleaning.

Yes, but I'm not going to clean them.

BEN
(Excited.)
Why don't you quit? You've been cooking and cleaning over there for years. Go on STRIKE! Demand higher wages!
Who ordered them? Not that bastard Kirby?

MOTHER
Ben! No, it was the new priest.

BEN
He continues his work.

What new priest?
MOTHER
You know. Fr. Bob. I told you about him over the phone.

BEN
(He says this over his shoulder.)
Is he cute?

MOTHER
BEN! He's a priest.

BEN
Oh come on, Mom, he's human, too.

MOTHER
I don't want to talk like this.

BEN
Mom, do you know why priests can't get married?

MOTHER
She goes toward the refrigerator.

Ben....I picked some berries from the yard. I started a pie crust while you were out.

BEN
Do you know?

MOTHER
(Exasperated.)
It's so they can be free. To be good priests.

She takes two bowls out of the refrigerator. One has pastry dough in it; the other has berries in it.

BEN
(He should have fun with these lines.)
WRONG! Around the 14th century, some pope and his cardinals, all of whom had wives, girlfriends, certainly children...

MOTHER
Ben...

BEN
...realized that church property and money would be open to claim from all these people. If all the lowly priests acted like their superiors there would be little left of the ecclesiastical booty. Any little illigit could come along and claim the next slipper-clad pope or priest as "my daddy."
MOTHER
Starts working on the pie.

Oh, that's not true. You just can't wait for a chance to say something bad about the church.

BEN
The church has fed people so much bullshit, and people believe it.

MOTHER
Stops working, but doesn't face Ben.

(Slightly accusingly.)
Why were you at the doctor's today?

BEN
He fumbles slightly but continues his work at the door.

Who told you I went to the doctor's?

MOTHER
Paul did. (No response.) Why did you go?

BEN
Check-up.

Why was Paul so concerned?

BEN
Oh, Mom, you know Paul. He is always worried. Just like you. Berries look good. We'll have to come over and pick some.

MOTHER
Ben, is something the matter with you?

BEN
He goes over to behind his mother and puts his hands on her shoulders, hugs her.

No, Mom, there is nothing wrong with me.

MOTHER
She begins to work with the dough again.

Then why was Paul so concerned? I could tell something was wrong.
BEN

(Lightly.)
C'mon, Mom, I told you Paul worries as much as you do.

He starts to move away from her.

MOTHER

(She speaks softly, head down.)
Then what about the tests?

BEN

He freezes for a moment and then moves quickly back to his work.

Mom, hand me that curtain on the chair.

What tests?

MOTHER

BEN

(Angrily.)
Mom...(He tries to recover quickly.) Mom, the curtain.

MOTHER does not move. BEN looks out the window.

Goddamn Paul. Had no right to tell you anything.

MOTHER

She turns to him.

If something is wrong, I have a right to know.

BEN

He walks toward the curtain on the chair.

Mom, I have had a rash for several weeks. I went to the doctor to see what is causing it.

He starts to walk back toward the door with the curtain.

That's all.
MOTHER
She stops him from walking away.

That's not all.

BEN
(He ignores this.)
Tell me if this is even at the bottom.

He holds the curtain up to the window.

MOTHER
Yes. And you are keeping something from me.

BEN
He turns to go back to the table with curtain and rod in hands.

The doctor thinks it might be K.S. (His mother looks at him; she does not understand.) Kaposi's Sarcoma.

MOTHER
(Pause. This she understands.)
What are you trying to say?

BEN
He takes the curtain, and, as he walks back toward the window, he puts the curtain rod through it and hangs it up. He does this while saying the next lines.

If the tests come back positive...well...I guess I'll be a PWA.

MOTHER has been moving toward him, but as if almost afraid to touch him, stops a few feet from him as he finishes. She begins to cry. BEN goes to her.

Please, Mom, don't cry.
MOTHER
Ben, it can't be right. Not you. Dear God, not you!

BEN
He starts to walk her toward the table.

Mom, the doctor isn't sure. It could be something else, and I haven't had any other symptoms. Please don't decide anything yet.

MOTHER
(She is recovered slightly and begins to sit at the table.)
Other symptoms...Are you sure? Weight...I remember you said they lose weight....Have you?

Suddenly MOTHER becomes hysterical and jumps from the chair and grabs Ben.

Ben! have you lost weight?!

BEN
He grabs his mother and holds her tight.

Please, Mom, don't. Please don't.

They stay in that position for a few minutes. BEN puts her back into her seat.

Okay, Mom, I've lost 3 or 4 pounds, but I've also been running an extra day a week. C'mon, stop crying. Please. Sit down, and I'll make some coffee.

MOTHER remains seated and BEN begins to make coffee.

(Lightly.)
How's Aunt Agnes doing? Last time I asked about her, she was going to marry again. I don't know, Mom, but I think your sister might be a little loose. You know, with the men.

MOTHER
(Distracted.)
Agnes? I haven't talked to her in a few days. She's busy
MOTHER (continued)
with....Ben....I don't want to lose you.

BEN
He goes to the table and takes
his mother's hand.

Ma, for the moment you aren't going to lose me. There is
nothing we can do until the doctor tells me the results of
the test. Right now I'm fine and you are here. Let's just
wait.

MOTHER
But we should be doing something. (She begins to cry.)

BEN
He sits down at the table.

C'mon, Mom, don't cry anymore. I need you to be strong. If
you get crazy, I'll get crazy.

BEN goes back to making coffee.

Let's talk about Aunt Agnes. Was she always loose?

MOTHER
Ben! (She gives a small laugh.) Agnes was never loose.
(Pause.) She just always had...a...mind of her own. And
she was the adventurous kind.

BEN
As he makes the coffee, BEN
should stop occasionally
and speak directly to his
mother. He should be trying
to pull her out of her
present mood.

Were you adventurous, Mom?

MOTHER
Maybe...but not perhaps as brave as Agnes.

BEN
Loose?

MOTHER
No! (She laughs a little more and begins to lighten up.)
BEN
Tell me about one of your adventures.

MOTHER
(After a pause to think.)
I remember once we wanted to go to a dance. We were still together before our father died, and the dance was in town. We loved to go to dances, but we had no car. I accepted that we couldn't go. But not Agnes. She decided we would hitchhike into town.

BEN
He stops his work.
Mom! you and Ag hitchhiked? You sure Agnes is the only loose one in the family?

MOTHER
(She takes a moment to catch his humor. She is now completely relaxed.)
Oh, Ben, don't be silly.

BEN
To ask this next question, BEN stops whatever he is doing and looks directly at his mother.
Did you go? Did you hitchhike into town?

MOTHER
Well...yes, we did. I was really afraid but terribly excited. We were a big family, no mother. We didn't have much. But I did have dancing. Agnes didn't like to dance as much as I did, but she did love adventure...or loved to be adventurous.

BEN
How old were you?

MOTHER
Oh, I don't know. Maybe 16.

BEN
Ma!

He should be finished with the coffee. He puts the tray on the table and serves them each a cup. He takes his and goes to the rocker.
BEN (continued)

Did you have a good time?

MOTHER

Oh, yes, we did. Agnes and I loved to have fun, and people loved to be around us.

BEN

Well, the boys still seem to feel that way about Agnes.

MOTHER

Ben! Your aunt's 67 years old. I need some sugar for my coffee.

BEN

Ma, you use too much of that stuff. (Pause.) Okay.

He starts to get up.

MOTHER

No, I can get it.

BEN

There's a sugar bowl in the cupboard nearest the refrigerator. Tell me more about the dance.

MOTHER

She stands near the sink with the sugar bowl in her hands.

I'm not sure it was the dancing or the thrill of hitchhiking, but, dear God, if our father had any idea. Anyway, that night walking down the road toward our house, I told Agnes I wanted to be a dancer like Anne Miller. (Slowly.) My life would have certainly been different if I had believed in Agnes and the stars that night. Agnes believed in adventure; she believed in me. If I had followed that dream I probably wouldn't have come to this city, wouldn't have gotten married, no children. You wouldn't be here and you wouldn't.....

MOTHER starts to cry and the lid of the sugar bowl falls to the floor and shatters.

BEN

He puts his cup on the table and goes to her.

C'mon, Ma, we were having a good time.
MOTHER

(Frustrated.)
Ben, aren't you frightened, angry?

BEN
He moves toward the back door.

Of course I am, but what can I do? No answers for a few days, so I'm going to try not to worry about it.

MOTHER
She moves toward the table.

Why is this happening? Where did this disease come from?

BEN
Mom, there are only a few answers. That's what makes this mess so crazy.

MOTHER
But how did it get here? Why is it happening to gay men?

BEN
It's not just happening to gay men.

MOTHER
She goes to the side of the refrigerator to get a broom.
She begins to sweep up the broken pieces on the floor.

(Slowly.)
The papers say...

BEN

(Angrily.)
The papers are....(Stops.)....I'm sorry, I didn't mean to cut you off.

MOTHER
(She speaks as she sweeps.)
They make you think....that...

BEN
(He is trying not to become angry.)
What, Mom, that it's a gay disease, a plague? Something we maybe deserve?
MOTHER
The papers make you think that sometimes.

BEN
(He does not look at her.)
No, mom, you let the papers make you think that. This disease is caused by a virus. A virus is not discriminating. A virus cannot land on a person and say, "Male, white, well-off, but, alas, not gay. Next!"

BEN stops and looks at his mother. MOTHER is staring down into the wastebasket where she has dropped the broken pieces. BEN goes to her and hugs her.

Mom, through certain gay sexual practices, the virus can be easily transmitted. That's all. It's not the wrath of God punishing us because we've been bad boys.

There are a few moments of silence. BEN takes the broom and dust pan from his mother and moves to put it away.

Why don't you finish the pie?

MOTHER goes to the counter and starts working with the pie dough. BEN gets some more coffee and goes to the rocker.

What happened after the dance, Mom? Why didn't you become a dancer?

MOTHER
Oh my, our father did find out about the dance. He was so angry.

BEN
You're kidding? How did he find out?

MOTHER
On the way home a neighbor saw us. It was late at night, too late for us to be out. She told the parish priest, and he told our father.

BEN
Of course. Goddamn priest. None of his business.
MOTHER
Ben...my father would have found out about it anyway.

BEN
He probably told you father that good Catholic girls don't stay out late, don't have good times, don't become dancers. Stay home, cook, make babies.

MOTHER
(Her anger flashes.) Instead of making fun of them, maybe you should go see a priest....especially now.

BEN
What?

MOTHER
Yes. Now.

BEN
He stands up and puts cup on the table.

And ask him what? If AIDS is God's way of sending a message?

MOTHER
Why do you have to be so mean? Maybe it would help.

MOTHER finishes the pastry and begins to clean the counter.

BEN
Mom, the last time I was with a priest, it wasn't in a confessional.

MOTHER
(She stops. It takes her a moment to understand his comment.)

That's not funny. I'm ashamed of you.

BEN
Why? You've known for some time that I go to bed with men.

MOTHER
A priest?!

BEN
They're human, too.
MOTHER
You know, I try to understand you, to accept you the way you are. Why do you push me? I have the right to my beliefs, my religion.

BEN
Your religion has cost me a lot of goddamn trouble.

MOTHER
(She replies with equal force.)
And it has given me a lot of goddamn strength. Strength to deal with you kids, to take care of your father. And now it will give me strength to deal with this. What are you going to do for strength?

BEN
(After a silence.)
I don't know. I just don't know.

BEN goes to the rocker and collapses into it.

MOTHER
She stares out the window over the sink.

When did you eat last?

BEN
I don't know. Before I went to the doctor.

MOTHER
You have to eat. Eating is important.

BEN
I'll make us something.

MOTHER moves toward refrigerator.

BEN
Mom, I love you.

MOTHER
She moves to Ben and kisses him on the forehead. She continues toward the refrigerator.

Do you have any tuna fish?
BEN
Yes. In the cupboard below the sugar.

MOTHER
She begins to busy herself with preparing the tuna salad.

Mrs. Zimmerman and I are going with the golden ages group to Niagra Falls next week. The ladies keep telling me I need a passport or at least a driver's license. I don't have anything. I didn't have a social security card until after your father died. Anyway, I'm not sure what to do about the identification.

BEN
Mom?

MOTHER
What?

BEN
Do you think about dying? Death?

MOTHER
She stops whatever she is doing.

Before this afternoon...(Pause.)...no, not very much. After 60 I don't think it's something that really affects a person.

BEN
Why not?

MOTHER
Well, I don't think it bothers people who have accepted their lives. Are happy. You know.

BEN
Are you happy?

MOTHER
Yes, I think so.

BEN
What about before 60? Were you happy?

MOTHER
So many questions.
BEN

Were you?

MOTHER

Before that? I don't know. Things were different. I had children and a husband to take care of. We had little money, a small house. There wasn't much time or space to worry about it.

BEN

And death?

MOTHER

Death? (She pauses to think.) Wasn't much different from happiness in a way. Just hadn't a lot of time or space. Do you want a pickle in this?

BEN

(Laughs.)

Mom, I never put it in because I hate to chop up the pickles.

MOTHER

It's not any good without them. When you were at home, you wouldn't eat it without pickle.

BEN

Lazy, I guess, and I can't get Paul to do it.

(They both laugh. After a pause, BEN continues.)

Mom, you were talking about death.

MOTHER

Well, let's see. You know that after our father died, Agnes and I came here to help our sister Margaret. When her husband died, she was alone and had children to raise. Eventually, Agnes got married and then I met your father. Life got busy, crowded. Death came and, yes, it was sad, but it was...it was kinda like a change from our crazy, busy lives. (Pause. Almost to herself.) Funny way to think of death, huh? As a pleasant interruption.

She has finished this speech while not looking at Ben. He has walked over to the window in the back door. She notices the silence and turns to him.
MOTHER (continued)

Ben?

BEN
BEN is looking out the window in the back door. Slowly, he turns to her.

Mom, I don't want to die. I don't want to die the way I've watched friends die. Mom, I'm scared. (He begins to cry.)

MOTHER
She goes to him and walks him back to the table.

Ben.....please don't cry. It'll be alright.

MOTHER seats Ben and then herself at the table. She takes his hand.

You know, Ben, you've rolled with the punches better than any of my children. You'll be okay. God has his reasons.

There is a silence. Neither of them wants the atmosphere to change, to become angry.
MOTHER gets up and goes back to preparing the food.

BEN
You know, Mom, I've always envied...(He decides to try another approach.) Do you remember when I was living with Roy? At the time you didn't know I was gay, so you couldn't have known there was trouble in paradise.

MOTHER
I never liked him. I like Paul better.

BEN
I came back home one night, and you and I had dinner. Afterwards, while still at the table, I began to cry. Remember?

(MOTHER nods her head, and he continues.)

You said you wanted, needed to know what was wrong when one of your children cried. Because, you said, when they hurt, you hurt.

MOTHER
She stops whatever she is doing.

I still do.
BEN

(After a pause.)
I told you I was unhappy and didn't know what to do. I asked you what you did when you didn't know what to do.

MOTHER
And I said that I have a God I could turn to.

BEN
(This is as much a statement as anything.)
I've never been able to do that.

MOTHER
Why not?

BEN
BEN gets up and begins to pace.

Because if I were to acknowledge that he could take away the confusion--even for awhile--then I'd have to acknowledge that he was capable of preventing it in the first place. And that pisses me off.

MOTHER
You think too much. All these questions.

BEN
It's important to me. Can I help you with the pie?

MOTHER
I'm just finished. You set the table. (Pause.) Is it so important that you let it blind you with anger? Never just accept things.

BEN
He moves towards the cupboards.

Accept? All the craziness in the world?

MOTHER
That things work out. There are reasons for everything.

BEN
Right. Tell that to yourself.

MOTHER
(Defensively.)
Tell what to myself?

BEN
Nothing. Forget it.
MOTHER
No. I want to know what you meant.

BEN
I'm not the blind one, Mom.

BEN moves toward table with plates and glasses.

MOTHER
I am?

BEN
Yes.

MOTHER
How am I blind?

BEN
Your religion.

MOTHER
My religion?

BEN
Yes.

MOTHER
Why do you hate the idea of me having a religion?

BEN
I don't.

MOTHER
Then what? You're always attacking me for it.

BEN
He starts to set the table.

I hate what it has done to you.

MOTHER
To me? It hasn't done anything to me. You know it's you who should tell yourself something.

BEN
I don't want to talk about it anymore.

MOTHER
No, of course not; you know I'm right.
BEN
What should I tell myself?

MOTHER
That you're the one who is blind, and that blindness leaves you alone. And you can't afford that.....especially now.

It isn't like that.....

MOTHER
I have a God I can turn to. I can let go of my problems, at least for a while, because I know that eventually they will be solved. I experience moments of peace because I believe that someday I will be at peace. You don't have that.

BEN
He moves to the back door, looks out the window. He stands there for awhile.

(As he begins, his tone is neither angry or defeated.)

When I was fifteen, I went to see a priest, to talk about being gay. I wasn't sure what it was all about, but I knew that I had to talk to someone, trust someone. I went to see Fr. Kirby. He was a priest; he would help me. I told him everything. My feelings, my fears. Christ, I even told him some of my fantasies. You know what he said to me? Do you want to make this a confession? I was devastated. I wanted this man to help me. I was lonely and afraid. And he wants to know if I want to make a confession.

Several years later, I was in a bar. It was only my second or third time, and I was scared and nervous. This older man buys me a drink and starts to talk to me. He was very nice, and before long we were talking like we had known each other for a long time. When it was near closing time, he asked if we could spend the night together. I said yes, that I would enjoy that very much. He asked if I had a place where we could go. I said sure. Jokingly, I asked, "Why can't we go to your place? Wife?" He said, "No. I'm a priest." (Pause.) A priest. (Quietly.) A priest.

BEN turns to his mother.

If there is a God, he has lousy timing.

MOTHER
Ben, I'm sorry. I didn't mean those things I said to you. You're not alone. You have me, friends, Paul.
BEN
You were right, Mom. I need something more and I don't have it.

MOTHER moves toward Ben.

BEN stops her before she reaches him.

I'm okay. Finish the pie. We'll eat while it's baking.

BEN goes to drawer to get silverware and napkins.

Do you ever feel lonely, Ma?

MOTHER
Of course I do.

BEN
And when you do, you have your God.

Yes.

BEN
Just God, uh?

MOTHER
Well...I guess being older helps. I suppose wisdom does come along with old age. It helps.

BEN
(This starts out as a joke for Ben.) What did God say about my gayness?

MOTHER
What?

BEN
God and you? Did he help you accept it. (Pause. No response. He becomes more serious.) Do you accept it?

MOTHER
Let's eat. What do you want to drink?

MOTHER begins to put food on the table.
BEN
Do you?

MOTHER
Do I what?

BEN
Do you accept my gayness?

MOTHER
Do I have a choice?

BEN
Do you need one?

MOTHER
She tries to sit down.
I don't know. Let's eat.

BEN
No! I want to know how you feel? Would you and your God rather I not be gay?

MOTHER
(She meets his anger, but replies with less anger.) Is it important to you to know what me and my God think?

BEN
Would I need to change?

MOTHER
I'm hungry. Please, let's eat.

BEN
Why didn't you become a dancer?

MOTHER
(She is stunned by the question.) I came here to help my sister. I told you that.

BEN
It was easier.

MOTHER
Easier than what?

BEN
Easier than believing in yourself. In following your dreams.
MOTHER
My dreams became my family, my children, you.

BEN
BEN leans across the table while speaking these lines.

No. You hid from them in your church, your religion. The same priests that fucked with me had already fucked up your dreams.

MOTHER slaps Ben across the face. The force of the blow should be great. BEN moves far away from the table. MOTHER stands frozen for several moments. Slowly MOTHER goes to where her coat is hanging and begins to put it on. BEN goes to her.

MOTHER
Since you were young, you had trouble fitting in. You were too sensitive. You'd come home crying all the time. Someone was always hurting your feelings.

BEN
(He is becoming alarmed, frightened.)
Mom, it's alright. I survived.

MOTHER
(She is almost ignoring him completely.)
I used to think as you got older you'd change. Well, you played sports and you even took a girl to your high school prom, just like your brothers. But something was still not right; and I hid from it.

BEN
He takes off her coat.

You didn't know what was going on. You're right; we need to eat.

MOTHER
But maybe I did; maybe I saw that you were different and I didn't want to change you. Maybe I did run from my dreams, did what everyone said I should do. Then you came along. Different. And not just sensitive, but in all ways. You were adventurous, but not afraid. As a child you were
MOTHER (continued)
fascinated by out-of-state license plates. Every time you saw one, you told me you were going to travel, live in other places.

BEN
(He wants desperately for her to stop.)
Mom, all kids have wild imaginations.

MOTHER
No, not like you. You meant it. And I wanted it for me, through you. Dear God, did I want it bad enough to let you become what you are?

BEN
Mom, please stop.

MOTHER
I knew something was wrong, and I didn't know what to do. So I prayed. I asked God to help change you. But maybe God knew I didn't mean it. That I didn't want you to change at all.

BEN
Maybe God wanted me just the way I was.

MOTHER
No! You were different. It made you stand out. People could hurt you. I didn't want you to get hurt, but I didn't want you to lose your dreams....for you....dear God, for me.

MOTHER collapses into chair.

BEN
(With these lines, BEN is trying to plead and sooth at the same time.)
You didn't know; you didn't do anything wrong. I am the way I am because I was born this way. I believe that, and you have to believe it, too. (Pause.) Even now, Mom, I wouldn't change. I am happy.

BEN moves behind mother and hugs her. They are silent for a long time.

MOTHER
She stands up and goes to the counter.
MOTHER (continued)

It's getting late. Sit down and let's eat.

BEN
He seats himself at the table.

Mom?

What?

MOTHER

(Carefully.)
About you becoming a dancer.

BEN

(After a pause.)
That was a long time ago. I, too, am happy with the way things are for me. You have to believe that.

(Another pause.)
I think you would have made a wonderful dancer. You have great legs.

MOTHER

(She laughs lightly.)
Oh, Ben. But you know? I did fancy myself to look like Anne Miller or one of those other Hollywood dancers.

BEN

Hey, my father could have been Fred Astaire.

They both laugh. While MOTHER puts food on the table, BEN goes to the radio on the counter. He tunes in an easy listening station, and something suitable for a slow dance begins to play.

Madame, will you dance with me?

MOTHER

Oh, Ben, the food....

BEN

Com'on, Mom, dance with me. (Pause.) Com'on.
MOTHER reluctantly agrees, and they begin a box-step waltz. As they relax and begin to enjoy it, the lights fade.

Curtain.