

DESIGN

A new play by

Nov. 30, 2016
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Design

I found a dimpled spider, fat and white,
On a white heal-all, holding up a moth
Like a white piece of rigid satin cloth --
Assorted characters of death and blight
Mixed ready to begin the morning right,
Like the ingredients of a witches' broth --
A snow-drop spider, a flower like a froth,
And dead wings carried like a paper kite.

What had that flower to do with being white,
The wayside blue and innocent heal-all?
What brought the kindred spider to that height,
Then steered the white moth thither in the night?
What but design of darkness to appall?--
If design govern in a thing so small.

- ROBERT FROST

CAST OF CHARACTERS:

CLAIRE HARPER, mid-20s, a writer of children's books, recently married and relocated to a house in an idyllic, wooded suburb.

LEN HARPER, Claire's husband, mid-30s, a one-time sports writer, now press agent, trapped in a job that no longer enchants him.

HAROLD (HAL) SIEGEL, Len's former co-worker and now, neighbor, nearly 50, an editor and frustrated poet, recently separated from his wife.

The story: Caught in the cross-hairs of a serial sniper, three friends reconsider the trade-offs they have made in life and love. A post-9/11 comedy about learning to thrive in an indifferent universe.

THE TIME: Next year.

THE PLACE: Len and Claire's house, impressive in setting if not in style, more house than they can really afford. In the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C.

All the action takes place in the family room and patio beyond it, overlooking a wooded slope that rings a man-made lake.

The notations // and /// indicate overlapping dialogue.

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES:

- Sc. 1 - a Saturday afternoon in early October.
- Sc. 2 - late the following afternoon.
- Sc. 3 - two weeks later, a Friday evening.
- Sc. 4 - later that night.
- Sc. 5 - the following Sunday morning.

ACT ONE.

At rise, we see a projection of an illustration, in the spirit of a Grimm's Fairy Tale and the style of a 19th century woodcut - the stark silhouette of a man and woman holding hands, framed by a thorny growth of vines. We hear the voice of Claire Harper:

CLAIRE

(Voice-over, sweetly)

Once upon a time, not so long ago--there lived a happy couple with all the right ideas ...

Sound of a page turning. The image dissolves to another drawing in the same style, of a rambling house in the woods.

CLAIRE

(voice-over, sweetly)

And they bought a wonderful house in the woods, far from the noise and danger of the city.

Sound of a page turning. Image of couple, now sporting big toothy grins.

CLAIRE

Where they knew they would be safe. And their hearts would be full and happy.

Sound of a page turning.

CLAIRE

For good things always come. To those who deserve them.

Image dissolves to a close-up of the roofline of the house, and the menacing silhouette of an angry crow.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

(voice-over, sweetly)

They were so wrong.

The image of the crow dissolves to a projection that Claire reads:

(v.o.)

Chapter One: Moving Day.

Projection fades and lights rise full on the family room, an elegant, impressive room with tall wide windows framing a set

of double doors--almost a wall of glass--overlooking a flagstone patio and garden. Beyond the garden, a lovely wooded slope falls gently away.

At rise, the room has the jumbled look of moving day--furnishings deposited but not placed: a lonely arm chair, an empty bookcase, the odd table or lamp, framed prints leaning against one wall, multiple tatty boxes, stacked and scattered. Above the fireplace, the terrifying visage of a stuffed boar's head oversees all.

As the lights rise we see a tangle of legs, sticking out from behind the armchair or a stack of boxes, and we hear the sounds of fervent kisses and clothing in motion. A pair of silky panties flies across the room.

CLAIRE

Len--wait--Len. Oh my god! (laughing) Oh my god!

LEN

What is so damn funny?

CLAIRE

Oh my god, I can't, I'm sorry--

--and she crawls into view, wearing a only a man's shirt ... and digs into the carpet, laughing. Len gets up.

LEN

This is not good for my self-esteem, Claire.

He stands up, pulling up his pants.

LEN (cont'd)

You're supposed to be writhing in ecstasy right now.

CLAIRE

(indicating and laughing)

That thing ... What is that thing? --I was looking straight up its nose--

LEN

It's a boar's head.

CLAIRE

Please tell me it wasn't there when we looked at the house.

LEN

I'm sure the Clarksons had the good sense to hide it. Or the realtor did.

CLAIRE

They were supposed to clear everything out.

LEN

Honey, in life--there is the stuff that is supposed to happen. And the stuff that actually does (nuzzling her).

CLAIRE

I can't! Not with all with that thing staring at me.

LEN

Don't look at it.

CLAIRE

It's got to go.

LEN

But it's kind of shamanistic, don't you think? Exuding all that ... masculine energy?

CLAIRE

If I'm going to write down here--

LEN

Nothing says guyness like a boar's head on the wall.

CLAIRE

This isn't a man cave.

LEN

I think it could be. I can see it now: Poker parties. 12-year-old Scotch. Big cigars. And him. Presiding over it all.

Claire retrieves a stepstool.

CLAIRE

You know what I think? (setting up the stool) I think this thing tells you everything that went wrong in the Clarkson's marriage.

LEN

Too much guyness?

CLAIRE

Look at it. How does it even belong in this room? With all this light--and these colors--it's totally wrong for this space--yet here it hangs, like the Lord of the Freaking Flies. You know the Clarksons had a fight over that.

LEN

And you know who won.

CLAIRE

And then he leaves it behind. What does that tell you?

LEN

He didn't want it.

CLAIRE

It was never all that important to him. But he had to have it-- because it irritated her.

LEN

Are we talking about the Clarksons now--or characters in your next book?

CLAIRE

Put this somewhere I don't have to see it.

She hands him the boar's head, which he accepts and carries away with an approximation of a primitive ritual dance -- as Claire watches.

CLAIRE

What do you call that?

LEN

Tapping into the anima. You should try it. Release some of those primal urges ...

Claire crosses to retrieve one of the bubble-wrapped paintings.

LEN

Whoa.

CLAIRE

What?

LEN

You're not hanging that one?

CLAIRE

I thought you liked it.

LEN

I said it had great energy. Didn't say I liked it.

CLAIRE

We have to hang it somewhere. Trudy will be offended if we don't.

LEN

How will she know? She lives in Iowa.

CLAIRE

She'll sense it, believe me.

LEN

Why don't you hang that other one? It's pretty.

CLAIRE

It's too bland. I need stimulation--

LEN

If it's stimulation you want--

He blocks her--

CLAIRE

Mental stimulation.

A sexy kiss. She giggles, then melts
into it

CLAIRE

Len?

LEN

Hmmm?

CLAIRE

How can you not like Trudy's painting? I know it's kind of out
there, but it's the best she's ever done.

LEN

I love your sister's painting.

CLAIRE

Now you love it?

LEN

I love it, I love it! (nibbling on her) I just don't want to
look at it.

CLAIRE

(without reproach)
You are so bad.

She goes all in for it just as Hal
crosses the patio to the double doors.
He raps on the outside screen door.

HAL
 (through the door)
 Len?
 LEN
 Shit.
 CLAIRE
 Is that Hal?
 HAL
 Hey Len?
 CLAIRE
 Oh my god.
 (a whisper)
 His timing is amazing.
 LEN
 Just a minute. One minute! (to Claire, as she gathers herself)
 Rain check?
 CLAIRE
 My panties--where are my panties?
 LEN
 Uh--
 CLAIRE
 Find them, will you? (as she starts out of the room.) Hide
 them!
 As she charges up the steps, Len finds
 her slacks crumpled in a corner.
 HAL
 (at the screen door)
 If this is a bad time--I can come back...
 LEN
 No, no--it's--all good. All good!
 He folds the slacks under his arm, looks
 around,
 LEN (cont'd)
 We just thought ... you'd come to the front door.
 HAL
 I came up the path.
 LEN
 The path?

From the Lake. It's faster than the road. (beat) Okay if I come in?

LEN
Sure, sure--

HAL
(as he enters)
Brought a screwdriver.

Good thinking. LEN

HAL
In case, you know—

Len spots Claire's panties

LEN
Something needs screwed?

Right. HAL

A beat as Len stuffs the panties into the nearest box.

So how's it going?

Good. Real good!

HAL
(seeing the boar's head)
This is interesting. Housewarming gift?

LEN
A leftover from the Clarksons. (off Hal) What do you think?

Kind of old world. HAL

I find it inspiring. LEN

What does Claire say? HAL

LEN

I believe she's a vegetarian on this topic.

Claire returns in a different outfit.

CLAIRE

Hal! Hi!

HAL

Hey there, Claire.

CLAIRE

It's so sweet of you to come by and help us.

HAL

Sorry I didn't make it last night. We had a crazy time at the paper ... With that thing at the Safeway.

CLAIRE

What thing at the Safeway?

HAL

Uh, the shooting?

CLAIRE

(steady)
There was a shooting?

HAL

Yesterday afternoon.

CLAIRE

Omigod-- what happened?

HAL

They don't really know. They found this guy in the parking lot.
Shot in the back ...

CLAIRE

This is the Safeway on Georgia?

HAL

Sorry, I thought you knew.

A look to Len.

CLAIRE

I had no idea. (off Len) Though I guess I'm the only one.

HAL

It was probably a personal thing. I think I told you that, Len?
It might be a personal thing?

LEN
A personal thing, right. I think you said that, right.

HAL
So, I wouldn't lose any sleep over it.

LEN
No.

HAL
Okay, so - the couch?

LEN
Top of the stairs.

Len gestures. Hal nods, goes upstairs. A beat.

CLAIRE
What's that about?

LEN
Don't make this into a thing.

CLAIRE
It is a thing. You knew about this, but you didn't say a word?

LEN
I didn't want to ruin the evening, okay?

CLAIRE
Len--

LEN
You were already freaked out about the house.

CLAIRE
I'm not freaked out about the house--

LEN
Bad energy. Isn't that what you said ... it's got all this baaaaaad energy?

CLAIRE
Because the Clarksons are divorcing. Of course it's got bad energy--

LEN
But the thing is--

CLAIRE

Divorce isn't good energy--

LEN

The thing is, Claire: their bad energy is our good luck.

He moves to her.

LEN

One hundred and fifty thousand dollars worth of luck, sweetie.

CLAIRE

That's not the point, Len. It's--

He silences her with a kiss.

CLAIRE

Len.

He puts a finger to her lips.

LEN

We were having a great evening last night. Are you seriously gonna be mad at me today - 'cause I didn't wanna spoil the mood?

A beat.

CLAIRE

I guess not ... but--

LEN

And then it slipped my mind.

a beat.

LEN

You can't be mad.

CLAIRE

Go move the couch.

He goes out. A beat. Claire is uneasy. She retrieves the bubble-wrapped painting that Len hates. As she tears the bubble wrap from the painting -- she hears ominous scratching noises from the chimney. She stops and listens. A beat. Scratching sounds are louder.

CLAIRE

Oh, no.

Claire sets the painting down and approaches the fireplace. She kneels and listens. Sounds are louder still.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

Len?

Sounds are louder still.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

Len! I think there's something in the chimney.

Claire frantically rifles a box, tossing out newspaper, oven mitts, cooking utensils in bubble wrap.

CLAIRE

Why is this box marked family room?

She discovers a heavy copper saute pan. The sounds from the chimney are insistent. Offstage, the sounds of agitated men's voices up the stairs.

LEN

Back it up.

HAL

I think it will go if you just--.

LEN

We'll have to turn it.

HAL

Just lift it--

LEN

There's no room.

CLAIRE

(calling off)

Len?

LEN

(off, to Claire)

Under control! I've got it all under control!

CLAIRE

I need the poker, Len.

LEN

(off, to Hal)
Set it down.

HAL
It won't go down. It's caught on the railing.

CLAIRE
Have you seen the poker?

LEN.
(unintelligible swearing)
#\$\$^@!

HAL
You'll have to back it up.

LEN.
(further unintelligible swearing)
@#!\$%!!

The chimney makes more noises--more thumping than scratching.

Claire considers this, then with resolve, takes the copper pan and approaches the chimney. She bravely smacks the pot against the fireplace insert--THWACK, WONNNGGG!! A scrambling sound and Claire lets out a little shriek. A beat, footsteps on the stairs, and Hal appears.

HAL
Are you okay?

CLAIRE
We've got squirrels.

HAL
Squirrels?

CLAIRE
In the chimney.

He crosses to examine the fireplace.

HAL
Is your flue open?

CLAIRE
It would have to be a squirrel, right? There wouldn't be something wrong with the house?

Like what? HAL

I don't know. Drywall cracking? An electrical problem? CLAIRE

In the chimney? HAL

A slight scratching sound.

There! Do you hear it? CLAIRE

Hal strains to hear.

Don't open the flue. Not till you get it checked out. HAL (cont'd)

Len appears, screw-driver in hand.

What's going on? LEN

We've got squirrels. CLAIRE

Everyone has squirrels. We're in the woods. LEN

In the chimney. HAL

Oh man! LEN

Len crosses to examine the fireplace.

Don't open the flue. HAL

What if they're rabid? CLAIRE

I never heard of a rabid squirrel. HAL

You have rabid raccoons. You could get rabid squirrels. CLAIRE

If you want, I'll call somebody? HAL.

CLAIRE
Would you? Oh, Hal, you're a saint!

HAL
Keep reminding me.

He punches a number in a cell phone.

CLAIRE
Really. You've been such a help.

Hal nods without enthusiasm and goes out the back door. A beat. Len taps the flue with the screwdriver and listens.

LEN (cont'd)
What did this sound like, exactly?

CLAIRE
Kind of thumpy.

LEN
Thumpy?

CLAIRE
Like--thump, thump, THOOMP!

LEN
That doesn't sound like a squirrel.

CLAIRE
That's what I heard. But I might have scared them out.

LEN
If you scared them out ... then we don't have squirrels.

CLAIRE
They could come back, Len. Those things can chew through concrete.

LEN
You can't be serious.

Hal returns.

CLAIRE (cont'd)
Any luck?

HAL
Nobody home. I'll try again later.

Len gets up.

LEN

This is about that thing at the Safeway. Isn't it?

CLAIRE

Oh, please.

LEN

(on //)

Just like when your father died.

CLAIRE

My father?

LEN

You're having an anxiety attack.

HAL

I wouldn't worry about // that thing at the Safeway...

CLAIRE

(on //)

That is not even /// close--

LEN

(on ///)

You developed a fear of elevators.

CLAIRE

(forcefully)

It was a creaky old thing with a cage!

LEN

Displaced anxiety. That's what // this is.

CLAIRE

(on //)

And I wasn't the only one /// who thought it was creepy. Even my mother //// wouldn't--

HAL

(on ///)

I wouldn't say never--but it's, that is, there's hardly ever--

LEN

(on //// topping Claire and Hal)

Sudden fear of elevators!!

HAL

(in the clear)

I've lived here 20 years. It's a very safe area, really.

A beat

LEN

And not just at the hospice, either. Everywhere we went. She wouldn't get on an elevator to save her life. Then after he died--pfft! (to Claire) You were fine.

HAL

It's. A lot of stress. Serious illness.

A longer beat

LEN

There was never anything wrong with the elevator. (to Claire) It was all that anxiety over your dad.

CLAIRE

Hal heard it too. Didn't you Hal?

HAL

Uh - well. Maybe. It could've been the wind.

CLAIRE

The wind?

HAL

My hearing isn't all that good these days.

A beat. Len goes to work, removing the railing from the stairs. Annoyed, Claire rips into a box.

HAL

(to Claire)

But seriously, Claire. I wouldn't worry about that ... thing at the Safeway.

She finds items wrapped in newspaper. She unwraps one - a pair of carved bookends.

HAL

I know it can freak you out. Freaked me out, to tell you the truth. But the thing is--the thing is--the victim was found ... with money on him.

CLAIRE

Money?

HAL

Quite a bit, according to Henry. So it wasn't a robbery. That's the thing.

CLAIRE

Who is Henry?

LEN

Sports editor at the Gazette. You've met him.

HAL

Actually, // he's--

CLAIRE

(on //)
Your old boss?

LEN

Never my boss. He was an intern when I worked there.

CLAIRE

Was he at the wedding?

LEN

Drunk at the wedding. He was the one who kept trying to sing with the band.

CLAIRE

That guy! (to Hal) What does he know about anything?

HAL

He's metro editor. He sees all the stories, gets all the dirt--

LEN

Wait a minute--Henry is metro editor? Since when?

HAL

Couple months now.

LEN

I thought you were up for that job.

HAL

Not really. Not seriously ... But the point is, Claire--the point is, it wasn't some random attack. That's the point. So. (a beat, shifting gears) Well! This is quite the room -- I have to say. With this view? The Clarksons really did this up right -- all this light! And the way the house uses the slope--this is really something ...

CLAIRE

It is lovely. And it'll be even better--once we purge the negative energy.

LEN

Okay, Claire--

HAL

What negative energy?

CLAIRE

The Clarksons' are divorcing. That's why the price was so good.

LEN

(steadily)

Claire.

CLAIRE

(to Hal)

I thought you knew that.

HAL

I--did not know that.

CLAIRE

And it's a very ugly split, too. You can feel the animosity ... seeping out of the walls ...

LEN

Claire! Okay Claire--you do what you want? But no incense.

CLAIRE

We can't--

LEN

No incense, Claire! Light a candle, say a prayer to Isis or whoever--but no incense. That stuff stinks.

CLAIRE

It won't be much of a ceremony without incense!

HAL

Ceremony?

LEN

Animal sacrifice. Claire bought a goat just for the occasion.

CLAIRE

It's a dedication circle. To which you and Beth are both invited.

HAL

Thank you.

CLAIRE

We'll have a little wine. (pointedly) Light some candles. Share good thoughts all around--and purge the negativity. (to Len) But it only works if everyone participates.

LEN

I say it should be optional. Otherwise it *generates* negativity. But whatever; I only live here.

Len lowers the rail to the floor, then charges upstairs.

CLAIRE

I really hope you can make it, Hal. We wouldn't be here if not for you.

HAL

Beth's the one who saw the listing.

CLAIRE

And that was a big selling point for me. Let me tell you. Having friends in the neighborhood? I haven't really had that since I left Cedar Rapids.

During this next section, she unwraps more items from the box and places them strategically on the shelves--a long row of books about writing, a framed wedding photo, a smiling green Buddha, a Celtic cross--but her pace is unhurried. What she does not place now, she will place later.

CLARIE

Especially older friends like you. (off Hal) Not that you're ancient or anything. But you know. Wiser? More schooled in life?

HAL

Don't know about wiser.

CLAIRE

Compared to us, you're old pros at all of this.

HAL

All of what?

CLAIRE

House, home--family. Kids. (off Hal) Not yet, but soon, we hope. (bashful) Next on the list.

HAL

We all have our lists.

CLAIRE

I'm really looking forward to spending more time with you both. Really getting to know you.

HAL

That's sweet.

CLAIRE

So how about next weekend?

HAL

I dunno. Beth can be a little funny ... about things like that.

CLAIRE

But it was her idea.

HAL

Her idea?

She pulls
another item
from the box.

CLAIRE

We got to talking about the Clarksons. ... Which, by the way-- you guys! You are worse than me and Len. She had no clue we closed on the house! So I brought her up to date. And I told her, you know, about the bad feelings in this place. Which Len does not get at all. But Beth totally does! And she said, you know, you can purge bad feelings ... And that's when I thought -- of course! A dedication circle. (seeing his expression) What?

HAL.

When was this?

CLAIRE

Yesterday. Didn't she tell you? We ran into each other at the Starbucks.

HAL

Downtown?

CLAIRE

The one out on Georgia. They've got a great pumpkin latte by the way.

HAL

(to himself)
She didn't tell you.

LEN

(off)

Hal?

HAL

(to himself)
What does it mean that she wouldn't tell you?

CLAIRE
Is something wrong?

LEN
HAL!

CLAIRE
Hal, is it Beth? Is she okay?

HAL.
She's fine ... she's ... (a sigh) uh. She's. Er-- (a deep breath) She's--uh, she's ... she's got a new address.

CLAIRE
She moved out?

LEN
HAAAAAL!

The railing, if visible, slides up the stairs.

HAL
Don't say anything.

CLAIRE
Don't say anything?

HAL
To Len. I told him she was traveling. For a new account. (off Claire) I shouldn't have told you--

CLAIRE
Why shouldn't you tell me?

Sound of furniture moving, off and Len's muttered curses.

CLAIRE (cont'd)
Aren't we friends?

HAL
Of course we are, Claire, but--there's nothing to say, really. It's just, uh ... just one of those things.

CLAIRE
I can't believe it. Beth looked so happy yesterday. Glowing, in fact.

HAL
 (a bit sick)
 Oh, I'm sure she was glowing. She's probably glowing all the time now. That's one happy, *satisfied* woman now.

CLAIRE
 Oh, Hal. What happened?

HAL
 Do I have to spell it out for you? (off Claire's blank look) I'm a CUCKOLD!

CLAIRE
 A ... a what?

HAL.
 A cuckold! A CUCKOLD! Can't you see the horns?

CLAIRE
 Uh--horns?

HAL
 The badge of dishonor! Right here! (tapping his forehead) Where everyone can see---except the blind, stupid fool himself. That's the worst part--I never saw it coming. You ought to see it coming--it's your wife!

CLAIRE
 I'm so sorry, Hal. I--I--had no idea ... was this? When was this?

HAL.
 A few weeks now. Eighth of September.

CLAIRE
 The 8th? That was my book signing party.

HAL.
 Which I had every intention of making, Claire, honestly I did, but--I-- got a little distracted.

CLAIRE
 (searching)
 How's Jimmy taking it?

HAL.
 Jimmy...

CLAIRE
 He must be in total shock.

HAL.
 Well, he's ... he's so busy these days--taking 18 credits--

CLAIRE
You didn't tell him?

HAL
I wouldn't want to burden him.

CLAIRE
Hal. He's your son!

HAL.
Yes. Though, technically, Jimmy is Beth's son. Shouldn't she be the one to tell him?

Suddenly, a couch makes an appearance at the bottom of the stairs. With a grunt, Len pushes it into the room.

LEN
Thanks for your help!

HAL.
Len--I'm so sorry--

LEN
You didn't hear me shouting?

HAL.
Sorry, Len - where do you want it?

LEN
There for now.

CLAIRE
Actually it should go this way.

LEN
You've got to be kidding.

CLAIRE
No.

LEN
The fireplace is there.

CLAIRE
But the windows are there.

LEN
Don't start in on that stuff--

HAL

You could angle it.

LEN

Angle it?

HAL

Get a little of the window, a little of the fireplace—

LEN

That's even worse.

CLAIRE

Don't pick on Hal. He's had a terrible day.

HAL.

No worse than yesterday, actually.

CLAIRE

(with too much feeling)

Oh, Hal. Len is your friend. He's your *friend*. You need to rely on your friends.

A beat, then Hal suddenly begins blubbering.

HAL.

(through tears)

Oh gawd.

Embarrassed, he turns away.

LEN

What the fuck?

HAL.

I'm sorry. I ... I

CLAIRE

Oh Hal!

LEN

Stop saying that.

CLAIRE

He's in pain.

LEN

I can see that, Claire. You're making it worse.

Hal goes out to the patio.

LEN (cont'd)

Did you give the guy a breakdown?

CLAIRE

It's not me giving him a breakdown. It's Beth.

LEN

Beth?

CLAIRE

It's awful! He asked me not to tell you. But - (a whisper) she's left him.

LEN

(slowly sinks in)
Shit.

CLAIRE

Can you believe it? And he's kept it to himself all this time. He didn't even tell Jimmy.

LEN

All what time?

CLAIRE

Since my book signing.

LEN

She left the night of your party?

CLAIRE

That's what he said.

LEN

Hoo boy.

Hal returns, tapping on the door.

HAL.

(at the doorway)

Len? I think I'll--take a ... break?

LEN

Sure thing.

HAL.

I'll just be ... down the hill.

CLAIRE

Are you all right, Hal?

HAL.

Fine. I'm--my allergies ... All the dust.

LEN
Take your time, man. (calling after) We'll get a pizza later?

Hal nods without interest, goes out the back way. Another beat.

CLAIRE
Poor Hal.

LEN
I'll say. Bad enough your wife leaves you. But for a cab driver? That's really gotta hurt.

CLAIRE
Cab driver?

LEN
He didn't mention a cab driver?

CLAIRE
No.

LEN
Oh.

CLAIRE
What do you know about this?

LEN
Now don't freak out.

CLAIRE
(steady)
Len. Why would I freak out?

LEN
Because it's not my fault.

CLAIRE
Your fault?

LEN
If I ... may have. Possibly. You know. *Inadvertently*? ... encouraged her? It wouldn't be my fault.

CLAIRE
How can you inadvertently encourage someone to leave her husband?

LEN
I didn't know she was talking about him.

CLAIRE

(after a beat)
 Could you back this up please?

LEN

Okay. The night of your party, Beth came late ... and she was alone. Which I didn't think much of, because it was a Sunday and sometimes Hal on Sunday, Hal is playing catch up at the paper.

CLAIRE

Uh huh.

LEN

And you were busy with people, so--So, okay. I offer her some champagne. She knocks it back--and asks for another. And so: I observe that she seems a little ... down. And she gives me this strange look and says point blank: "Len. What's more important in life? Security--or satisfaction?" And I say: "Satisfaction, hands down." (off Claire) Because it is. And she nods and says, "You're right; it is. So why don't we go after the things in life that make us truly happy?"

CLAIRE

And you say?

LEN

I say: "If it makes you truly happy--what's to stop you?" She gets a little teary-eyed and says, "Even if you make someone else deeply unhappy in the process?" And I say: (brightly) "Isn't that always the way?"

CLAIRE

Brilliant!

LEN

I thought she was talking about her job.

CLAIRE

Where does this cab driver come in?

LEN

Right after that, she sent for a taxi.

CLAIRE

Len. Just because she sent for a taxi doesn't mean she was dating the driver.

LEN

She got in the front seat.

CLAIRE

You saw that?

LEN
I walked her out. (off Claire) She was a little toasted.

CLAIRE
Still.

LEN
(with a wince)
And then she kissed him.

CLAIRE
(with distaste)
Oh.

LEN
But look--if Beth was already planning to leave. Nothing I said would have made any difference. Right?

CLAIRE
Depends on her frame of mind.

LEN
But it wasn't like she said "should I leave Hal?" She was speaking generally. Philosophically. That's what it was.

CLAIRE
She was looking for affirmation, Len.

LEN
But she didn't tell me for what!

CLAIRE
It doesn't matter. You still affirmed her. (pointed) You're still responsible.

LEN
How is that fair?

CLAIRE
You put negative energy into the world--it comes back to you. In ways you don't expect.

LEN
I was just trying to make her feel better!

CLAIRE
It's the universe, Len. I didn't make the rules. (surveying the room) No wonder things feel so out of alignment, if Beth's been gone all this time.

LEN
There's nothing we can do about it now.

CLAIRE
There certainly is. You can make repair.

LEN
Make repair? How?

CLAIRE
Get in touch with her. Find out what she's thinking.

LEN
Oh, no.

CLAIRE
You can't just let it go.

LEN
I wouldn't even know where to begin.

CLAIRE
Then start with Hal.

LEN
With Hal?

CLAIRE
He's over there by himself now. You should make some overtures.
Then he will see ... there is good energy between you--and it
could cement your friendship.

LEN
I've known this guy for 15 years, Claire. I think our friendship
is cemented by now.

CLAIRE
Yes? Then why didn't he tell you about Beth?

LEN
(taken aback)
It's ... he... Why would he?

CLAIRE
Um. Because, it's like. You're one of his oldest friends? And
his life just fell apart?

A tentative tapping. A beat. Hal is at
the back door again. Len opens it.

HAL.
Uh. Len? You've got a ... there's a--a dead crow? Out here?

LEN
A what?

HAL.
A dead crow? Near the path?

CLAIRE
A dead crow?

HAL
I would clean it up for you, but ... Henry called. And--I have to go back in. They're a little short on the desk.

Stunned, Claire crosses away to retrieve some newspaper.

HAL
(confidentially to Len) It's another shooting.

LEN
I got this Claire. (crossing, he takes the newspaper from her)
You just sit tight, okay?

She watches as Len follows Hal outside.
The men disappear across the patio.

CLAIRE (cont'd)
A dead crow.

We enter Claire's imagination: The light in the house shifts as the garden beyond takes on an otherworldly hue and the trees transform into the gnarled branches and twisted trunks of a nightmare. Claire takes this in.

Suddenly the scratchy squirrel sounds return in the chimney.

CLAIRE
Oh no.

Noises grow louder. Claire approaches the chimney. She takes up the copper pot and prepares to do battle with the squirrels again. Boldly, she whacks the fireplace insert. Instead of scattering, the squirrels grow noisier, more insistent, more menacing. She whacks the fireplace again. The squirrels are undaunted.

Outside an unseen crow lets out a cry—recognizable as a crow and yet, somehow otherworldly. Hearing this, Claire crosses and slams the door shut. As she does, the noises in the chimney stop abruptly. A beat. She listens. The nightmare image outside fades back to a muted reality. She takes this in. Len returns and sees her there, clutching the copper pot.

LEN

Claire? You okay?

A beat.

CLAIRE

I know what I heard, Len.

A beat as he regards her. Fade to dark and in the darkness, a projection of an image:

In the style of the Grimm's Fairy Tale woodcut, three crows on a rooftop; none look very happy. Fade to inscription that Claire reads:

CLAIRE'S VOICE

Chapter Two: An Unexpected Visitor.

Projection fades, then lights rise, but not full, as Len and Claire reposition the couch—it is clear they can't agree on where it should go—but Claire concedes to Len's wishes. This sequence should be underscored and stylized. Len places the coffee table, Claire removes the boar's head and a few boxes from the room. She returns. They exchange a quick peck on the lips and Len goes up the stairs. A beat. Claire opens the patio doors—she kicks off her shoes, and sets to work.

Lights shift and rise full on the following day, late in the afternoon. A few leaves drift to the patio. We might hear the soft sound of a jazz radio station as Claire kneels at the fireplace with a flashlight. She opens the flue and peers up the chimney.

Nothing. She closes the flue again. Sets the flashlight aside. Considers the hated painting leaning against the wall.

CLAIRE

God that is ugly.

She steps back to study it.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

But ugly can be very inspiring.

She moves the painting to the mantel as Hal crosses the patio with a bottle of wine. He taps on the door frame. Claire crosses and opens it.

CLAIRE

Hal!

HAL

Don't tell me you're home alone.

CLAIRE

I'm home alone. What's your excuse?

HAL

Happy day after moving day.

CLAIRE

Hal. You didn't have to do that.

HAL

I felt bad. About the way I bailed last night--.

CLAIRE

Don't worry about it. I'm sure it was a zoo at work--

HAL

It was a little hectic. But we had to get a story up on the web.

CLAIRE

I saw it. Oh, my.

HAL

Yeah.

CLAIRE

Where is that diner exactly? Near the Safeway?

HAL

Up the road a bit. But it wasn't at the diner. It was at a bus stop ... near the diner.

CLAIRE

You think it's connected to the other one?

HAL

I'll give you the inside scoop, Claire: We have no idea.

CLAIRE

Ah.

HAL

But there is an interesting wrinkle to it.

CLAIRE

Which is?

HAL

The woman who was shot at the diner—and the man at the Safeway.
Lived on the same street.

CLAIRE

They knew each other?

HAL

They maybe knew each other.

CLAIRE

Wow. That. In a weird way—that makes feel better.

HAL

Not so weird. I had a similar reaction.

She studies him, then:

CLAIRE

Sit down, why don't you? (clearing a space) Len should be back soon.

HAL

Did he run off? Leave you with all the work?

CLAIRE

He went to the driving range.

HAL

That skunk.

CLAIRE

He's going to the grocery on his way back.

HAL

Not such a skunk.

CLAIRE

(with a smile) No. (at the wine) So what is this? It looks French.

HAL

It's a ... a Beaune. (off Claire) A dry red. Light, but strong. I thought you might use it for your ceremony.

CLAIRE

My ceremony? I think we'll be skipping that.

HAL

Oh?

CLAIRE

There's no point if Len won't do it. Only ... I dunno. The energy in here is so off ... Do you think I'm being ridiculous?

HAL

Bless this house. It's an ancient custom.

CLAIRE

Try telling Len that.

A beat as she roots into a box for some glasses wrapped in tissue,

HAL (cont'd)

So ... other than being in fear for your life--how's the house been so far? Some good I hope?

CLAIRE

It's wonderful. To have so much space. And that garden! Of course, the commute downtown ... I'm not so excited about that, but—

She examines the glasses, finds a towel to wipe them

--we knew what we were in for, when we bought this place.

HAL.

You're still at the library?

CLAIRE

Three days a week.

HAL.

Len said your book is really selling.

CLAIRE

You have to remember: Len's in P.R.

HAL.

Still. It must feel good ... to have it out there.

CLAIRE

We won't have any idea how it's doing for another few months. And when I get the report from the publisher: I'll either be deliriously happy---or won't want to live.

HAL

Those are your only choices?

She hands him a corkscrew.

CLAIRE

I've had one review so far. Know what they said? Not enough magic. "Pale third cousin to T.H. White."

HAL

Not enough magic? I thought your guy was an alchemist.

CLAIRE

An alchemist's apprentice.

HAL.

Turning lead to gold. Kids won't go for that?

CLAIRE

There's no witch. (beat) I dunno. I keep thinking I should try something completely different. Something for adults, maybe. Woman trades man for enlightenment.

HAL

The point is: You've really done your thing. I have to admire that.

CLAIRE

You've done your thing.

HAL.

My thing was Renaissance literature. Now I edit the movie listings. For a suburban weekly.

CLAIRE

It's a valuable service.

HAL

Yes. (pouring the wine) As my mother used to say: More people go to the movies than ever heard of Christopher Marlowe.

CLAIRE

That's comforting I guess.

HAL

(glumly)

It was to her.

She lifts her glass.

CLAIRE

So. To homeownership.

HAL

To homeownership.

They touch glasses and Claire sips the wine. Another beat. She smiles tightly. Hal gets up, abruptly.

HAL.

Claire. Look, Claire. I'm sorry--I have to tell you something. I saw Len drive past a little while ago. I knew you were here by yourself.

CLATRE

Oh?

HAT.

I wanted a chance to talk you alone. About Beth?

CLAIRE

Beth! Of course. Beth.

HAL.

I need to know exactly what she said to you. At the Starbucks on Friday?

CLAIRE

Mostly we talked yoga.

HAL

Yoga?

CLAIRE

And window treatments. She recommended a place for drapes. Even though I've pretty much decided nothing's going on those windows! With that view? My god, the lake! (seeing his expression, more sober) It was along those lines.

HAL

(carefully)

You mentioned something about ... purging bad feelings?

CLAIRE

Oh, yes! We got to talking about the Clarksons. (beat) And I think, you know---she was suggesting---actually, no, come to think of it, all she said was "you can purge bad feelings." That's really all she said. And I thought, absolutely, yes. Of course you can! If you make it a point to--you can. And that's when I decided we needed a dedication circle ... (seeing his face) This isn't helping, is it?

HAL

What was she doing there?

CLAIRE

Buying coffee.

HAL

She's moved across the river. She's got no reason to be up here now, buying coffee.

CLAIRE

Maybe she had an appointment? In the neighborhood?

HAL.

(abruptly)

She's been to the house.

CLAIRE

(with hope)

You spoke with her?

HAL.

I haven't seen her at all. But I got home Friday night. And the coffeemaker was on. And I saw. Her favorite cup. Sitting on the dining room table. (explosive) God, I hate that! What does it take? To put a cup in the dishwasher? (a beat, recovering) And it's not the first time, either. A week ago, I went home. The closet door was hanging open. And there were magazines-- catalogues---on the floor. (with malice) Pottery Barn. I thought I was losing my mind... But when you said you'd seen her - you'd spoken to her. I knew: She's really been coming in. I'm not imagining anything. (fiercely) What is that about?

CLAIRE

(lightly)

Was? She home doing laundry?

Hal stares at her.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

Or there to pick something up, maybe?

HAL.

No. No, I'm sure not. Everything was exactly the way she'd left it. Her clothes in the closet, her jewelry on the dresser--

CLAIRE

She didn't take her clothes? When she left?

HAL.

She threw a few things in a suitcase. (off Claire) We'd been having this argument--and she slammed out the door. (beat) An hour later, she comes back and drops the bomb.

CLAIRE

I see.

HAL.

I thought you might have some insights.

CLAIRE

I don't know. But it sounds to me like she's having second thoughts ...

HAL

I thought that too. Except. (a beat as his insecurities overtake him.) Why that coffee cup? Dammit! She knows how I feel about that!

CLAIRE

Can't you just call her and ask?

HAL.

The minute I hear her voice--I'll lose it.

CLAIRE

So you lose it.

HAL.

She already thinks I'm a wuss.

CLAIRE

(mulling it)

That's awfully retro.

Hal moves away, pacing. Another beat.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

Hal. Why don't you talk to Len? He knows Beth so much better than I do--

HAL

No.

CLAIRE
But he could have insights--

HAL
I can't talk to him. Not about this.

CLAIRE
I don't see why. You've known each other for years--

HAL
And he's been betting on this for years!

CLAIRE
I'm sorry?

A beat.

HAL
(to himself)
He didn't tell you. Of course he wouldn't tell you--why would he tell you?

CLAIRE
Will you please stop talking in code? It's driving me crazy.

HAL
I'm sorry, Claire--. (a long beat) Okay, I'll tell you: The day Beth and I announced our engagement ... Len organized a pool. With the other guys in sports.

CLAIRE
A pool?

HAL
He took bets. On how long we would last.

CLAIRE
(processing it)
He must have been joking.

HAL
He bet six months.

Hal takes a sip of wine. Claire considers this.

CLAIRE
That's ... that's awful, Hal.

HAL
(with a shrug)
Some guys bet three.

Sound of door upstairs and someone coming in.

LEN
(calling down)

Claire?

CLAIRE
Still. It had to be a misunderstanding. Len can be glib sometimes, but he isn't cruel.

Len charges down the stairs with a plastic Safeway bag.

LEN
You okay?

CLAIRE
Why wouldn't I be?

LEN
You didn't pick up the phone.

CLAIRE
I'm sorry ... did you call?

LEN
Twice already. This place is going nuts. (seeing the wine)
What's this?

CLAIRE
Hal brought us wine.

HAL
(lightly)
I'm having an affair with your wife.

LEN
(undisturbed)
You wish man.

Len drops the bag and moves to a small TV and begins to fiddle with the channels.

HAL
Actually it's a housewarming // gift

CLAIRE
(on //)
How was the golf?

LEN
Never got near the place.

CLAIRE
You decided not to go?

LEN
It was crawling with cops. Wouldn't let anybody in.

CLAIRE
Len. Not another one?

Hal goes to his phone

LEN
Eleven o'clock this morning.

CLAIRE
Oh no.

LEN
Two guys, with a bucket of balls between them---boom, boom, BOOM!

CLAIRE
You saw that?

HAL
(into his phone)
Henry? It's Hal.

LEN
No, no--it happened before I got there. (at the TV) This fucking thing!

CLAIRE
I don't think the cable's connected--

HAL
Right... Okay ...

LEN
I got the story from the cashier. Her sister's a dispatcher. And by the way, this guy, who was shot at the Safeway? He is like mister solid citizen all the way. Not an enemy in the world.

CLAIRE
What do you think it means?

LEN
Means there's some nut running around with a shotgun.

HAL
Rifle. (off Len) It's a high-powered rifle.

a beat

HAL
(into the phone) Okay, Henry, you know where to find me. (as he closes the phone) Looks like he's shooting from a distance--300 yards or more.

LEN
A sniper?

CLAIRE
Who is shooting--?

LEN
Fan-freaking-tastic. Another lunatic with a Bushmaster--

HAL
They don't know that it's a Bushmaster.

LEN
I'll put money on it. 2002 all over again.

CLAIRE
Oh God.

LEN
You can't even imagine it. Lived with my heart in my throat for three weeks.

HAL
First of all, you don't know that these shootings are related.

LEN
Come on.

HAL
You don't even know what kind of gun was involved. Those guys on the golf course -- could have been a hunting accident.

LEN
In this part of the county? Give me a break.

(beat as he dials his cellphone)

CLAIRE
Who are you calling?

LEN
Athletic director. I might need to go in.

CLAIRE

On a Sunday?

LEN

If they close the university.

CLAIRE

Close the university? What are you talking about?

HAL

How about you wait for some evidence before you hit the panic button?

LEN

This is not panicking. It's called making plans. Calmly looking over the situation - figuring out the next best step.

HAL

Closing the university? Is that the best next step?

LEN

I'm saying. If they decide, in the interest of public safety, to or postpone or cancel some events. I've got to be ready for that. (beat) Not picking up.

HAL

If they need you, they know where to find you.

A beat.

CLAIRE

Len. (stoutly) I think we should grill.

She stares at him.

LEN

Right.

CLAIRE

And I'm thinking. Maybe Hal would like to join us? (intently) Because. Beth is out of town today. (urgently, underneath) And he is by himself. Today.

A pointed look.

LEN

Righto. So, Hal--

HAL

(abruptly)

I don't want to intrude.

LEN

You already opened the wine. (softening) Besides, we owe you.

HAL

You don't owe me anything.

LEN

It's the standard exchange, Hal. You help us move? We feed you. Since you bailed on the pizza last night, you are morally obligated. To eat a hamburger today.

HAL

Is that how it works?

LEN

That's how it works. You can look it up. (as he goes) Plus, Claire is going to make her world-famous guacamole. Aren't you, Claire?

CLAIRE

You got avocados?

LEN

Would I let you down?

As he goes,

CLAIRE

And the charcoal?

LEN

In the car. I'll get it.

He goes upstairs. Claire checks the Safeway bag.

CLAIRE

These are nice.

Another beat.

HAL

(quietly)

Look, Claire. I'm sorry. I had no business laying all that crap on you just now.

CLAIRE

It's all right, Hal.

HAL

It was a long time ago. Len was just a kid then ... I should be more of a sport.

CLAIRE

And I'm sure Len would be mortified. If he knew how much it upset you even now.

HAL

(not at all sure)
I'm sure he would.

A beat. Hal turns away. He spots the ugly painting. Grateful for a change of subject,

HAL (cont'd)

Is this new? I don't remember seeing it before.

CLAIRE

It's a wedding gift. From my sister.

HAL

Seascape?

CLAIRE

(pleased)
Close. It's actually a park on Lake Michigan ... We used to spend time there in the summers. When we were kids. (carefully) What do you think?

HAL

It's an interesting ... use ... of color.

CLAIRE

Trudy paints the interior. How she feels about places. She fell in love there one summer when she was in high school.

HAL

And it colored her perceptions?

CLAIRE

I guess. (beat) I was thinking to hang it right here. (another beat) But Len hates it.

HAL

What does Len know?

A beat. She studies the ugly painting with hope as Len returns with a bag of charcoal and a beer.

LEN

Okay--all right. Here it is: It kind of doesn't matter that there's no connection, right? -- because that would be the point? Just pick off people at random. That's what they did the last time.

CLAIRE

But there is a connection. They knew each other.

LEN

Who did?

CLAIRE

The woman at the diner. She knew the man at the Safeway.

HAL

They maybe knew each other.

CLAIRE

They lived on the same street. They surely knew each other.

LEN

Knew each other in the Biblical sense? Because *that*. Would give someone a motive.

HAL

It could ...

LEN

No, it definitely would. Because the guy at the Safeway was married with three kids—I got that from the cashier. Family man, Rotary Club--the whole thing. They all knew him.

HAL

It would just be speculation.

LEN

Let's hope there's something to it.

CLAIRE

Why would you hope that?

LEN

It could be the answer to the whole thing. Jealous husband slash boyfriend slash lover.

CLAIRE

Not a serial killer?

LEN

Just a couple of fools who got caught up in something stupid.

HAL

It's possible.

LEN

That's gotta be it. That's totally it.

CLAIRE

What about the men at the driving range?

(BEAT)

LEN

Maybe they cheated at golf.

He sips his beer. Hal laughs. Seeing Claire's displeasure, he stops.

CLAIRE

So what are you really saying, Len? It's got to be their fault, somehow? Those people who were killed?

HAL

Nobody said it was their fault.

LEN

But if you put negative energy into the world ... you get it back, right? Karmic justice?

CLAIRE

I'm glad you can find humor in this. Because you've got a little karmic justice of your own to work on.

LEN

It's a joke, Claire.

CLAIRE

Funny that you're the only one laughing.

Claire takes the avocados and heads up the stairs. As she goes,

LEN

Pfft!

HAL

She's really freaked out about all this.

LEN

She's freaked out about everything. (he examines the battered avocado) Her job, her books. This move, her books. This house. Her books. She finally gets what she wants—and she still isn't happy. Now she's talking about doing something completely different. Go back to work full-time, get a PhD in anthropology—

HAL

Anthropology?

LEN

Or architecture. It changes every week.

HAL
(into his glass)
Sounds grim.

LEN
Doesn't exactly fit with the baby plan.

HAL
You've got a baby plan?

LEN
That's why we bought the place. All about the schools, right?

HAL
Schools are very good here. Jimmy did very well.

LEN

The thing is--when she's writing, I'm not even allowed to talk to her. (feeling the hurt) Too busy to break for dinner, working till 1 a.m., in this crazy mode where she has to get it out, get it out, get it out. And this goes on for weeks. And then--bang! She isn't writing and now it's--oh, no! (dramatic) Where is my purpose in life? What is the meaning of it all?-- (He stops himself.)

HAL
The artistic temper.

LEN
My mother warned me. (correcting himself) Nah, it's not that bad. Things will fall into place once we have kids.

You think so? HAL

LEN
It will have to. She won't have time for any of this crap.

Hal regards him steadily.

HAL
Why don't you let her have her ceremony?

LEN
You're kidding me, right?

HAL.

It would make her feel better.

LEN
(with excess dignity)
It's the principle.

What principle? HAL.

I refuse to give in to base superstition. LEN

Oh bull. HAL.

If something frightens you--You // gather the facts ... LEN

Bull, bull-- (on //) HAL.

Evaluate // your options--- (topping him) LEN

Total bull! (on //) HAL.

And come to a rational, logical conclusion about what to do. You of all people should appreciate that. LEN

Why me of all people? HAL

It's the reason you quit going to Temple, right? Because of the superstition? LEN

I never said that. HAL

I quote: "Len: There is no rational reason to believe anything in that book. It's a religion for goatherds." Unquote. LEN

I never said goatherds. HAL

You said goatherds. LEN

Fine, all right! But I was probably drunk-- HAL

You were drunk. And you said goatherds. LEN

HAL

And if I recall, I'd just had a fight with my mother. But the point is--

LEN

The point is--

HAL

The point is--

LEN

(topping him)

The point is: You can't fight fear with fear. That's the point.

A beat

HAL

The point is: you're equating spirituality with superstition.

LEN

Spirituality! // Give me a break.

HAL

(on //)

It's not the same /// thing--

LEN

(on ///)

Lighting candles and waving incense around the house?

HAL

It's--a--ritual.

LEN

Bogus.

HAL

And ritual--is about--giving shape and form ... to feeling.

LEN

Exactly--it's irrational!

HAL

It's about connecting. Finding meaning. And security within a group. Which is why it has to be communal.

LEN

Man. What is with you today?

HAL

And it's not the reason you don't want Claire to have her ceremony. It's not about some principle!

LEN
No? What is it?

HAL
You just like to give her a hard time.

LEN.
(considering it)
Well there is that.

HAL.
What I don't get is why. She's a real sweetheart.

LEN
(steady)
You don't live with Claire. You don't know how it is.

Another beat.

HAL
You're right, I don't. Sorry I brought it up.

Hal puts his glass down.

LEN
Forget it.

HAL
I better get going.

Len grabs the wine bottle to refill
Hal's glass.

LEN
Have another--

HAL
I don't--

LEN
Come on--

HAL
Really I'm fine--

LEN
Lighten up, will you?! Or she'll really lose it.

HAL
Why should she lose it?

LEN
It's a thing with her. She'll feel like a social failure ... if she can't cheer you up.

HAL
(cautiously)
She shouldn't feel that way.

LEN
Well, she does. With Beth---Beth away. So ... much. She worries about you.

HAL
(warmed by the idea)
She shouldn't.

A beat.

LEN
Cut me a break?

Hal holds out his glass, and Len fills it.

LEN
So.

Hal takes a tentative sip of the wine.
Len sips his beer, considers what to say next.

LEN (cont'd)
How are things with you anyway?

HAL
Me? Fine. (with a bit too much force) Fine! (off Len) Beth ... has a new territory. I think I said?

LEN
So you said. (going along with it) Where is that again?

HAL
(searching)
Ohio.

LEN
Ohio?

HAL
What?

LEN
Nothing. I just ... thought she was all Northeast.

HAL

Well, you know. I don't know, really. A sales job -- that's-- that's ... a foreign country to me. She's here, she's there.

LEN

(with too much cheer)

She's everywhere! Hard to keep track!

Hal studies him grimly.

HAL

She's been on the road ... so much.

(carefully)

I guess you haven't seen her in a while.

LEN

Not since Claire's signing.

HAL

(beat, steady)

Beth was at the party?

Another beat. Len realizes his mistake.

LEN

For a ... few minutes ... (off Hal) Didn't stay long. (another beat) Hardly said a word, actually.

HAL

You spoke with her?

LEN

Not really, no. Just--chit-chat. Yep.

HAL

(a hard stare)

What did she say?

LEN

Nothing much. It was. A. Kind of ... you know ...philosophical ... conversation. She was kind of ... philosophical.

HAL

Philosophical? About what?

LEN

It's kind of funny, really. We just got into this ... you know, odd little ... exchange? About how life is a tradeoff, you know, between ... satisfaction and security---and--uh. How she was struggling with all that. Like who isn't? Now of course, I told her: You know, you reach an age. Where you just have to accept that you don't always get everything you want out of life. Like, I miss the hell out of the Gazette. I do. I never had so damn

much fun as I did that summer with you and Beth and Henry--those late nights putting the issue together? Remember hitting the diner at 1 a.m.? I guess there's something about your first job, you know? (coming back) But ... the thing is: You have to make some money eventually, right? Which is why I got out of newspapers ... And why Beth--I'm sure she was thinking exactly the same thing when she went to American Medical.

HAL

She took that job. Because she thought it would be interesting.

LEN

It doubled her salary, Hal.

HAL

That wasn't the reason she took it.

LEN

Okay---

HAL

She loves sales. She loves travel. She wouldn't take any job. Just for the money.

LEN

Oh for sure! Beth really is made for that kind of thing. But the point is---the point is: none of us will make the front page of the New York Times when we die ... And that's okay. Because you get to a point in life where you realize ... there's nothing better out there ... I mean ... and so ... So I told her, you know ... I said: (earnestly) There's nothing better out there.

A beat.

LEN (cont'd)

Let me see where Claire is with that guacamole.

Len crosses away. Hal struggles to regroup.

HAL

My god. Beth told him.

LEN

(going up the stairs)

Claire? What's going on?

HAL

Beth told him ... before she even told me.

Len is gone.

HAL (cont'd)

That weasel.

He drinks from his wine. Hal finds himself staring at the ugly painting.

HAL (cont'd)

Damn. That is one ugly painting.

Claire enters with corn chips and salsa. She has changed into warmer clothes. Outside, the afternoon is fading into twilight.

CLAIRE

Sorry. I just had to get out of those ratty jeans. No guacamole either, I'm afraid, Len forgot the limes.

Len follows

LEN

Were they on the list?

CLAIRE

So it's just salsa for us.

LEN

You're the one who made the list.

Claire sees Hal, apparently mesmerized by the painting. She puts the food on the coffee table.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

Hard to resist, isn't it?

HAL

(off Claire)

This? Yes. It's ... yes.

LEN

Don't tell me you like that thing.

CLAIRE

Len bet me you'd hate it!

HAL

Making bets again.

LEN

What I said was--Hal has actual taste.

CLAIRE

Then let Hal be the tie-breaker. (off Len) Since he has taste.

LEN

(steady)
Why not?

CLAIRE

So Hal: Here is our question. Must a painting depict what is in front of us, or what it inspires in us?

LEN

That's not the question.

CLAIRE

What is the question?

LEN

I've got nothing against abstract art--.

HAL

This isn't really abstract.

LEN

It's this particular kind of abstract--

HAL

It's more impressionistic--

CLAIRE

He thinks the colors are weird.

LEN

They are weird. It's a fucking green sky.

HAL

What's the question again?

CLAIRE

Whether the painting is any good.

LEN

No! No! It's not whether it's any good. It's whether it belongs on that wall. That's the question, really. Does this particular painting belong. In this particular place? That's the question.

They look to Hal. A beat as Hal considers the painting.

HAL.

You plan to write in this room?

CLAIRE

Right over here.

HAL
Then I would say ... not.

 LEN
 (surprised)
There you go.

 HAL.
Len is right. This is not the right piece for this space.

 CLAIRE
What's wrong with it?

 HAL.
This painting hits all the wrong notes. And it takes you
backwards - to your childhood. When what you really want to do
is move forward. Into some new territory. Am I right?

 CLAIRE
I just don't know what yet.

 HAL
And you're a little scared about it.

 CLAIRE
Terrified.

 LEN
What are you talking about?

 HAL.
So what you need, Claire--

 LEN
Terrified // of what?

 HAL.
 (on //)
---is something that takes you away from all of that fear---

 LEN
You're doing fine.

 HAL.
To a completely new place.

 LEN
I know writers who can't even get a deal.

 HAL
And instead of anxiety ... you can be filled with a sense of
possibility.

CLAIRE

Wow.

LEN.

(underneath)

All that in a painting? Who knew?

HAL.

I know this gallery. In Bethesda? They bring in a lot of new artists. And ... and there's an opening coming up in about two weeks. I'll probably have to cover it--Maybe you'd like to join me? (off Claire) The both of you?

CLAIRE

Oh, Len! An opening!

LEN.

An opening. I don't know if I could be that chic.

HAL

I'm sure you could fake it for an evening.

Claire laughs, annoying Len.

LEN

(a bit hurt)

Sure, why not. It'll be a big adventure for all of us.

CLAIRE

Maybe we should start the burgers.

LEN

Am I allowed to have another beer first?

CLAIRE

Never mind, I'll do it. Where's the starter?

LEN

Starter...

CLAIRE

Len!

LEN

Okay, fine---I'll go back for some starter--

HAL.

You don't need any starter. I can get it going.

LEN.

What, spontaneous combustion?

HAL.

All you need is a little newspaper.

LEN

Don't you think a match would help?

Hal produces a cigarette lighter-CLICK!
A flame erupts. Claire finds some
newspaper.

CLAIRE

Let me know if you need anything else.

Hal goes out. She closes the doors
behind him. A beat.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

What is the matter with you?

LEN.

What's the matter with you? Acting like you're sixteen. Sixteen,
with a crush on the art teacher. (mocking) Oh an opening! Oh
Hal. Jesus, Claire. Dial it back just a little bit.

CLAIRE

Len, I am not--Hal is not--my god, he's just lonely!

LEN.

And who's to blame for that?

CLAIRE

Are you saying this is his fault?

LEN.

It's not my fault.

CLAIRE

I never said it was your fault.

LEN.

One chance remark--and suddenly I'm responsible for his
happiness!

CLAIRE

I'm just think you could show a little more compassion.

LEN

Compassion.

CLAIRE

He's in shock, Len!

LEN.

Well, he shouldn't be. This thing has been building for years.

CLAIRE

What do you mean?

LEN

Oh, they were never right for each other. And everybody knew it. Beth was—God--cracking smart—and so damn funny. And—Jesus. She ends up with him? A guy whose idea of a great evening ... is staying home--and re-reading Faust in the bathtub?

CLAIRE

My God. It's true.

LEN.

Believe me, it's a miracle they lasted as long as they did.

CLAIRE

You really did bet against them.

LEN.

Bet ... ?

CLAIRE

Don't pretend you don't remember. The office pool?

LEN

(it comes to him)

He told you about that?

CLAIRE

Len! How could you? Even as a joke!

LEN

Don't tell me he's still pissed about it.

CLAIRE

What do you think?

Outside, a strange, distant whirr of a motor...

LEN

You know. That's the whole problem with him? He doesn't let go of things.

CLAIRE

It's not funny.

LEN

Beth thought it was.

CLAIRE

Oh I'm sure. She must have been laughing all the way to the altar.

LEN

She was. She was in the pool.

Claire stops, aghast.

LEN (cont'd)

And nobody won, by the way. Did he tell you that?

The sound outside draws her attention.

LEN (cont'd)

We used the money to take them out. On their first anniversary.

Claire goes to the door and opens it.
Hal is already staring up at the sky.
They go into the garden. The sound bears
down. Suddenly, a helicopter passes
over, capturing the three of them in the
angry glare of its searchlight. A
tableau as they gaze upward, transfixed
as the helicopter hovers over them, then
moves away. They look to each other.
Fade to projection:

"It's Not About the Squirrels."

END ACT ONE

ACT TWO

Inscription from end of first act fades to the image of a hunter, returning from the hunt. In the same nightmare fairy tale style as the previous images, the hunter holds his gun low in one hand and a brace of crows in another.

We hear:

CLAIRE'S VOICE

Chapter Three: Signs and Portents.

Image fades and we begin a series of progressive moments:

1. Lights rise on the room. It is morning. The house is now otherwise in order--books on the shelves, lamps and an arm chair in place and a writing table, positioned to catch the morning light, near the patio doors. On the writing table, a laptop computer and a small printer.

Claire, on the couch, scribbling into a notebook. She stops, reviews what she's written. Makes a face. She scratches out what she has written.

CLAIRE

This. Is. Such. Crap.

She tears out the page, crumples it. She starts over - barely gets a sentence down, looks at it again.

CLAIRE

Why did I think I could do this?

She looks at it again, then hurls the entire notebook across the room with a cry of frustration.

2. A light shift. Later in the morning.

Claire pacing, the notebook in hand.

Her eyes settle on the couch. She gets up, considers the couch. Walks around the couch.

Suddenly she makes her move: and pulls the coffee table out of the way. She shifts the couch to a new position. Studies it. Considers the relationship between the couch and the entry to the room. She then adjusts the coffee table to match it. Then she sits, with a feeling of victory.

CLAIRE

Much better. Now I can write.

She picks up her cell phone and punches in a number. She gets a recording.

CLAIRE

Hey ... Beth? It's Claire. I had. A sudden inspiration. If-if-if you are in the neighborhood today? I'm going to be at the Starbucks. This afternoon. I'm starting something new-and I'd love to tell you about it. So come on by. (a beat) Okay?

She puts the phone down. A light shift.

Late in the day. Claire is sucking down the last of a pumpkin latte from Starbucks as the printer on the table barfs out pages.

The day outside is now fading into twilight. Claire has kicked off her shoes and settled comfortably onto the couch with pages of her manuscript. At the bottom of the stairs, Len stands, a briefcase in one hand, his car keys in another, transfixed by the transformation of the room. A long beat. Then,

LEN

What brought this on?

CLAIRE

Better flow.

LEN

Flow.

CLAIRE

Of energy.

He moves around the couch, studying the flow.

CLAIRE
It really helped.

She brandishes the pages.

CLAIRE
15 pages today. How about you?

LEN
Game on.

CLAIRE
Really?

LEN
All games on, indefinitely.

CLAIRE
That's good isn't? Not to let fear rule the day?

LEN
Until somebody gets shot. And we get our asses sued. (beat as he notices her jacket on the arm of the couch) Did you go out today?

CLAIRE
For a coffee.

LEN
Claire.

CLAIRE
I needed a change of scenery.

LEN
What's wrong with this scenery?

CLAIRE
It helps sometimes, to have a little buzz around me. Don't worry, I parked in the back. So I was not a good target.

LEN
Don't joke about this shit.

CLAIRE
Look what I did today!

(she hands him some pages)

LEN
What's this?

CLAIRE

An adventure story—about these kids who get lost on a camping trip--.

LEN

What happened to the series?

CLAIRE

I'll get back to it—

LEN

You better. You've got a contract.

CLAIRE

I've been so stuck, Len. And this morning I realized why. The first book was all about the past—this fantastical, impossible past—but right now I need to focus on the future.

He opens up his briefcase.

CLAIRE

Because there is a future. And it doesn't just involve some anonymous kids out there—it involves our kids. And came to me this morning: What if they were in the room with me—what would I say to them? Would I really tell them about some magical world? Or would I tell them about this world? And help them understand that no matter how dark things might seem—how deep the woods are or how scary—there is a path through. And you can find it.

LEN

Let me get this straight. You're writing a story for the kids we don't have yet?

CLAIRE

Once I decided that, it really flowed.

LEN

Let me show you something.

He produces a paper map from the manila envelope. He spreads out the map.

LEN

I want you to look at this—because it's important.

CLAIRE

What's this?

LEN

There is definitely a pattern here.

CLAIRE

Did you do this today?

LEN

On my lunch hour. Look: There are a couple patterns in fact.

CLAIRE

So those numbers--

LEN

Distances.

CLAIRE

Between the ... ?

LEN

Right. This is the first one. Seven o'clock at the Safeway. The second was just down the road maybe a half mile--

CLAIRE

The lady at the bus stop.

LEN

And the third and fourth--

CLAIRE

God, the golf park.

LEN

The fifth at the car wash, the sixth at the reservoir--and this is where the road crew was filling potholes in White Oak--You see a theme here?

CLAIRE

Transportation?

LEN

Not quite. Look what's there. A shopping center. And the latest one. (off Claire) You've been there.

CLAIRE

The Mobil.

LEN

Which is what? A commercial location. These are all commercial locations. No houses, no churches, no apartment buildings. Now. What else do you notice?

CLAIRE

(at the map)

Big intersections?

LEN

Mostly, yes. But what else? (a beat, then patiently) Look at the timing. What do you see?

A beat as she ponders the question.

LEN (cont'd)

Five in the evening. Five-forty in the morning. Seven-thirty at night--

CLAIRE

I don't know, Len.

LEN

Ten in the morning, eleven a.m.

CLAIRE

Give me a hint.

LEN

He never strikes in the middle of the day--

CLAIRE

The golfers.

LEN

The golfers were before noon. Now look: He never hits after eight at night. And one thing more - he never hits the same place twice.

CLAIRE

Not yet--

LEN

So this zig-zag thing you've been doing--

CLAIRE

I only did that once.

LEN

Or squatting down at the pump---

CLAIRE

Because you said I should.

LEN

It's all wasted energy. Next time you need gas--go to the Mobil.

CLAIRE

Oh no. That's too awful.

LEN

The point is: Your impulse is to avoid these places. But Claire. That's exactly where you should go. Because he's done with them. So next time you need a change of scenery? Go to the diner, not the Starbucks.

CLAIRE

I hate the diner. The coffee is awful.

LEN

I've been thinking about this all day. And I'm convinced. All of this is just a build-up to something really big. The question is--what? What's his ultimate target?

A beat. As she looks again at the map.

LEN (cont'd)

Look at the data, Claire. Connect the dots. You'll see the pattern.

A beat. As she looks again at the map. Claire picks up a pencil and literally begins to connect dots ...

CLAIRE

Star of David?

LEN

What?

CLAIRE

It kind of looks ... like a Star of David. If you connect the dots.

He looks at the map.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

I mean if this line extended---of course you need another dot here---and one over here would help---but if you had those dots, then yeah. I mean it's not a *perfect* Star of David-- It's kind of squished, really. Squished and. A little bent, but yeah. Is that the pattern?

LEN

No that's not the pattern! I'm talking about habits--movements. Targets!

CLAIRE

Oh.

LEN

(with disgust)

Star of David.

He sulks. Claire gets up.

A BEAT

CLAIRE

There's a story in the Post today. Guys who shoot up a school or a movie theater--they want to go out in a blaze of glory. But someone who picks people off one by one ... over days or weeks ... or months. He draws power from being unknown.

LEN

What's your point?

CLAIRE

Maybe it really is terrorists this time. The FBI says it isn't--but maybe it really is.

LEN

Terrorists usually make demands.

CLAIRE

They also want to terrify people. And we're terrified. But Len, think about it--there are people who live this way all the time--waiting for the next bullet, the next bomb--it's a way of life for them.

LEN

Not for us. We're Americans.

CLAIRE

Exactly. Whoever it is, wants us to see life from the other side. It's got to be part of the design--there's no way around it.

LEN

There's a way around it: Stay home.

CLAIRE

What kind of life is that?

LEN

A long one, if you're lucky.

He crosses to the laptop with the map. A beat, and he taps in a command. He studies the screen.

CLAIRE

Is that what you're wearing tonight?

LEN

Tonight?

CLAIRE

We're supposed to meet Hal at 7.30.

LEN

You're not still going to that.

CLAIRE

Of course I'm going. We promised we would. And I've been looking forward to it all week.

She crosses to close the patio doors.
Something catches her eye.

CLAIRE

That's weird.

LEN

What's weird?

CLAIRE

There's a light on in Hal's kitchen.

LEN

What's weird about that?

He looks to her.

CLAIRE

He isn't home. He called about an hour ago—he's going straight from the office.

LEN

Maybe he left it on for security.

A beat as she considers. Len refocuses on the laptop. He makes a notation on the map. Claire goes upstairs.

LEN (cont'd)

Okay. (with resolve) Every place he's hit so far---is commercial. Public. Gas stations, car wash. Bus stop. Supermarket... strip mall. What hasn't he hit? Office building? Church? (it comes to him) ...

He observes the screen, a few more taps. What he sees startles him.

LEN (cont'd)

Claire?

A beat. A bit frantic now, he double checks his efforts---

LEN (cont'd)

Claire! I think I found something. CLAIRE?

Claire comes running down again with a pair of boots.

CLAIRE

I don't believe it.

LEN

Look at this.

CLAIRE

Len--

LEN

It's a school. That's the next dot. If you extend this line, like you said--

CLAIRE

Len.

LEN

It's a school.

CLAIRE

It's Beth.

LEN

There's no gas station--there's no strip mall---but there is an elementary school.

CLAIRE

Did you hear what I said? It's Beth!

LEN

Beth?

CLAIRE

She's at the house. Her car is in the driveway. You can see it from the kitchen clear as a bell--she's at the house.

LEN

It's her house.

CLAIRE

And just now, a light went on upstairs.

She retrieves a pair of boots as Len goes to the patio doors to look out.

CLAIRE

I have a very bad feeling about this.

LEN

Feeling about what?

CLAIRE

(putting on the boots)

She's been going over there. When Hal's not home. He told me. Going in ... leaving things out of place. But Len, this is a change in the pattern, // because so far, it's always been--

LEN.

(on //)

Wait a minute. Wait a minute! (in the clear) What things?

CLAIRE

Little things. Magazines ... coffee cups.

LEN.

Coffee cups?

CLAIRE

On the counter. It's really messing with his head.

LEN.

A coffee cup is messing with his head?

CLAIRE

It's not the coffee cup so much. As what it represents.

LEN.

What could a coffee cup represent?

CLAIRE

Consideration? Care? Just a willingness to-- to listen?
(abruptly) She could be suicidal.

LEN

Suicidal? Beth?

CLAIRE

Connect the dots, Len. Here's a woman who leaves her husband for someone else ... but she keeps going home ... Only, she can't bring herself to speak to him. Even to leave a note. Instead, she leaves silent messages all around. Now *that* is a troubled individual. And who is reaching out to her?

LEN

I'm not sure it's our department.

CLAIRE

Of course it's our department. She's our friend.

LEN

Don't get in the middle of that mess.

CLAIRE

We're already in the middle, Len. She turned to you for an answer—

LEN

Oh man!

CLAIRE

(grabbing her coat)

And it was the wrong answer!

LEN

Okay. All right! I screwed up. I said the wrong thing—I brought the wrath of the entire, unholy universe down on our heads! And now we are paying the price. When do I get off the hook for this thing?

CLAIRE

When you tell me the whole story?

She goes out the
patio door.

LEN

What story? Claire. Dammit Claire! Claire—don't. DON'T TAKE THE PATH!

A beat.

LEN

Aw, fuck.

Len goes for his phone.

LEN

Suicidal, my ass. She's probably cutting up the mattress right now. (as he punches a number) And don't think he doesn't deserve it, either. Because you don't really know the guy, Claire. You do not know the depths of dullness that dude is capable of---

A recorded message: He waits, then:

LEN (CONT'D) (cont'd)

(a shift in tone)

Yeah, hey Beth, it's Len. Uh--I know I probably should have - called. Before. But I have to say--uh. What I want to say--Okay. This thing with the cab driver? It's a bit--uh. I mean ... (with force) what the FUCK, Beth?

He is out of time. Annoyed, he redials.

A recorded message: He waits, then:

LEN (cont'd)

Okay, Beth. The thing is—this THING has ripples, okay, like way beyond your personal happiness? And it's just maybe something you should've thought about before you started fucking that guy, all right? Like, for instance-- (he is out of time) Dammit.

He redials again, waits while the message cycles through.

Okay, the thing is: Claire is on her way down there right now. And she thinks you're in some kind of trouble. (with feeling) But the thing is, Beth, the thing is—I didn't have any idea—how it was for you--

A beat. He holds the phone to his chest, gathering himself. Then he dials one more time.

LEN

I didn't have any idea. Because if I did. I would've tried to help. (a beat) So I hope—I hope you're happy now. (a sigh) Okay?

He ends the call.

LEN (cont'd)

Okay.

A beat. Claire's cell phone goes off on the other side of the room. Len hesitates.

Claire's phone rings again.

He crosses ... and picks up Claire's phone. It rings in his hand.

LEN (cont'd)

The fuck. He's in her contacts now? (into the phone, casually) Hal? What's up, man? ... No, she's gone out. For a minute. Where are you? (he isn't) Oh you are? ... Nothing. It's just that I thought we were meeting you there. ... Yeah, sure, that makes plenty of sense ... Okay. I'll let her know.

Len closes the phone.

LEN (cont'd)

That fucking weasel!

Len pockets Claire's phone. He picks up his own, thinking of punching Beth's number again as Claire crosses the patio.

LEN (CONT'D)

That was fast.

CLAIRE

I saw what I needed to see.

LEN

No need for an ambulance?

CLAIRE

Do you know why I came back? There are two cars down there now. Beth's Volvo. And a taxi.

LEN

Whoa. Now it gets interesting.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

I've been completely wrong about this. I thought she was tormented Struggling. Having second thoughts. But she's not tormented; she's turning the knife. That's what this is all about. God knows what Hal will find. When he gets home from the gallery tonight--

LEN

He may find it sooner. (off Claire) He's on his way over.

CLAIRE

He said to meet him there.

LEN

Change of plans. Wants to carpool. Safety in numbers.

CLAIRE

Oh, God. Where's my phone?

LEN

Claire.

CLAIRE

We can't let him go to the house.

LEN

Don't you see what's going on? It is so so obvious.

CLAIRE

My phone, Len.

LEN

She's getting her stuff.

CLAIRE

(blankly)

It was right here.

LEN

It's what she's been doing all along. Getting this thing or that thing--that's why she's been going over there.

CLAIRE

He said nothing was ever missing.

LEN

How would he know? He doesn't cook--he doesn't shop. She could unload half the kitchen, he wouldn't know the difference.

She searches for the phone.

LEN (cont'd)

Think about it, Claire. He had to be most clueless person in the world not to see this coming---and you think he'd notice if the cuisinart was gone? She's getting her stuff--and she brought the boyfriend to help. That's what's going on. She isn't there to stain the sheets or rip up the wedding pictures. (off Claire) And I'll put my money on this: He knows she's down there.... because he's already been by the house.

CLAIRE

He called me from work.

LEN

Are you sure? (producing her phone) Because this---is his cell number.

She takes the phone, studies it,
realizes he's right.

LEN (cont'd)

(triumphantly)

That's his M.O. Been that way ever since I've known him. Any time she wants a showdown -- he avoids the fight. Give in, make nice, no waves. But Beth wants waves. That's the thing he never understood about her. She's always wanted waves.

Claire regards him intently.

CLAIRE

And I guess -- she would have gotten them from you?

A beat.

LEN

Jesus, Claire.

CLAIRE

That's what the bet was about, wasn't it? You were jealous.

LEN

The --- Claire. This is nuts.

CLAIRE

That's it. You wanted to go out with her, but Hal got there first. He one-upped you--and you never forgave him. That's what happened right?

LEN

Claire. Sweetie. We've both been under a lot of stress. And you know how you get when you're under stress.

Claire regards him intently.

CLAIRE

What I don't understand is--why keep it a secret? It was so long ago - why keep me in the dark about something like that?

Doorbell off.

CLAIRE

Don't say anything about the taxi.

She goes upstairs.

He sinks into the couch, in a cold sweat.

LEN

... fuck.

A beat, then,

HAL

(off)

... made more sense to go in one car.

CLAIRE

(off)

Totally. Len's downstairs. I'll be with you in a minute.

HAL

(as he comes down)

Take your time! (he enters) Hey, Len.

LEN

Hey.

HAL

You okay?

LEN
Fine. What's up?

HAL
Got off a little earlier than I expected.

LEN
That's cool.

A beat.

HAL
Helluva week, huh?

LEN
Yeah. I could do with a little less excitement.

Hal takes a long look out the windows.
He paces a bit. Len observes this.

LEN (cont'd)
You catch that press conference today?

HAL
What? Oh--yes. We had it on at work.

LEN.
What is up with that nitwit sheriff? Go about your business.
Pff! Go about your business. Don't worry--be happy. Make
yourself a target.

HAL
What else can he say?

LEN.
He could level with people.

HAL
And cause a panic?

LEN.
You think they're not panicked now? Or how about this? He could
double down--and actually catch the guy?

HAL
They're already doubled down. They're quadrupled down.

LEN.
It can't be this hard. There have to be witnesses.

HAL
He's shooting from a distance. By the time you even realize
what's happened he's gone.

LEN.

I got stuck in a five-hour traffic jam yesterday. Cops were searching every car--and for what? They didn't even know for what.

Another beat.

HAL

What are you working on there?

LEN

A little project.

Hal leans in to look.

HAL

You're making a map?

LEN.

Let's just say. I'm looking for patterns.

HAL

You and everybody else.

LEN

Well, I found one.

Len taps the map.

HAL

An elementary school?

LEN

It's only a matter of time, man.

HAL

You think this is a build-up to some Sandy Hook-type thing?

LEN

Anything's possible.

HAL

And that's based on what--that schoolteacher at the Mobil Station?

LEN

No, it's based on this (indicating the paper map): Look where he started. The second, the third, the fourth, the fifth---connect the dots ...

HAL

(after a beat)
Is that a Star of David?

LEN
And extend the line---the distances add up--I'm telling you. If you complete this arm--

HAL
You're serious about this. You think there's some kind of grand plan here.

LEN
It's obvious. He's up to something big. (off Hal) What?

HAL
You realize what you're doing, don't you?

LEN
Mapping patterns.

HAL
Appeasing the gods.

LEN.
No. I'm taking a scientific approach to a serious problem.

HAL
It's bargaining, Len. You're bargaining with the Fates. If I go here--or don't go there. Then I'll be safe.

LEN
Information, man. So you can develop your strategy.

HAL
What strategy?

LEN
To stay alive. What's your strategy--rosary beads?

HAL
Me?

LEN.
Prayer beads, then. Or a menorah. Whatever it is you pray with.

HAL
That's a candleholder, and I don't really pray.

LEN.
Maybe you better start if you plan to reject the science.

HAL

What science? You don't even know if you've got the right dots ... For all you know it's not a Star of David he's drawing there. For all you know, it's a Christmas tree.

LEN

Oh for Christ's sake!

HAL

A Christmas tree with bells on it---all you need are seventeen or eighteen or forty-five more dots.

LEN

(grabbing his pencil)

Forget it!

HAL

Besides, you're missing one anyway.

LEN

(looking at the map)

....

HAL

There should be nine. You've only got eight.

LEN

(consulting the map)

What's the ninth?

HAL

(off Len)

Crispin Way.

LEN

Crispin Way ...

HAL

Rockville.

Claire appears on the stairs, now wearing a dress, holding their coats.

HAL (cont'd)

About an hour ago.

Another beat as Len consults the map.

LEN

That's--fuck--that's a cul de sac.

HAL

Right. He was in the front yard. Raking leaves.

LEN

(after a beat)
Jesus.

HAL

Kind of throws your star out of alignment there, doesn't it?

CLAIRE

I'm ready, Len. Any time you are.

LEN.

He's in the neighborhoods, Claire. In the neighborhoods. You get this? Going up the side streets now and picking off people in their front yards. Their fucking front yards!

HAL

It's the other side of Georgia Avenue.

LEN

And tomorrow it will be this side. It's a whole new pattern--don't you see? It was all commercial before---but now he's in the neighborhoods.

CLAIRE

But he's done for the day. That's the pattern, too, isn't it? One a day?

LEN

Who knows any more?

HAL

You don't know. You don't know and you can't know. None of us can know. That's the point.

CLAIRE

So we might as well go out.

LEN

Use some common sense will you? If you have to go out - do it for something worthwhile.

CLAIRE

This is worthwhile.

LEN

A bunch of pictures in a gallery?

CLAIRE

Pictures in a gallery. A concert on the mall. A-a--dance recital. Dinner with friends. A company picnic. It's all worth leaving the house for - all of it.

LEN

Even with some crazy gunman on the loose?

CLAIRE

Especially then.

LEN

Otherwise, what, the terrorists win?

CLAIRE

Otherwise, what are we? If we sit here, cowering in the dark? What are we?

LEN

We're survivors. That's what we are. Survivors. (off Hal) So where was this guy, exactly? When he was hit?

HAL

What difference does it make?

LEN

Makes all the difference. If you know where the victim was--you know where the shooter had to be. And if he's going up the side streets, then he has to be a lot closer, right? To get a clear shot? And if he's closer--then he's going to be easier to see--and they can finally get the guy. Right?

HAL

I don't know exactly--but they think the shot came from the woods.

LEN

What woods?

HAL

(indicating)

It's right off Rock Creek Park. They think the shot came from the trees down there.

Len looks to the map, then towards the patio and the shadow of the trees beyond.

LEN

Oh man.

A shift to the nightmare landscape--only now the nightmare is Len's. The gnarled branches emerge in the trees, and the trees begin to pulse and distort.

CLAIRE

Len? What are you staring at?

Stirrings in the chimney, Len turns to the sound, but Hal and Claire do not hear them.

LEN

We are fucked.

He looks back to the trees.

LEN

So fucked.

A tableau. Then trees fade to normal again as a projection bleeds through: The image of a man caught in a cage.

CLAIRE'S VOICE

Chapter Four: Bless This House.

Projection fades ... Lights shift to the darkened house, later that night. Sound of door opening off, and a light goes on at the top of the stairs.

CLAIRE

(laughing)

Who was that woman anyway?

HAL

(right with her)

A patron of the arts.

Claire coming down the stairs. Hal follows, carrying a framed print, wrapped in paper.

CLAIRE

(as she turns on a light)

The way she looked at you?

HAL

She did not care for my opinion, apparently.

CLAIRE

She did not ask for your opinion. She just inserted herself into the conversation--

HAL

She has money.

CLAIRE

For what it's worth, I thought you were exactly right, Hal.

She turns on another light, takes in the empty room.

HAL

Thank you.

CLAIRE

How can you put a price tag on a work of art? It's--arbitrary.

HAL

There are costs to recover. Time invested ... materials.

Claire turns on the patio light, looks out. Opens the doors, steps out. Hal watches. She steps back in.

HAL

But the fundamental question is - how do you value beauty?

CLAIRE

I guess Len went to bed. (goes to the stairs) Would you like something? Something cold?

HAL

I'm fine.

She goes up the stairs. A beat. Hal takes off his coat, drapes it over the couch. Another beat. He goes to the patio doors, looks down the hill. A moment. Claire returns.

CLAIRE

He's not up there.

Claire retrieves her phone from her purse.

HAL (cont'd)

It's too bad Len missed the opening. I think he would have enjoyed the reception.

He watches as she punches a single number into the phone.

If not the actual paintings.

CLAIRE
 (into the phone)
 Hey. It's me. We missed you at the gallery. (beat) We're home now. Call me, okay?

She closes the phone. A beat.

HAL
 I'm sure he's fine, Claire. He probably got bored and went out. In spite of himself.

CLAIRE
 Don't mind me, I'm just a little rattled ...

HAL
 It's the Mobil isn't it? It's my fault. I should have gone a different way.

CLAIRE
 You can hardly avoid Georgia Avenue.

HAL
 (abruptly)
 Why do people do that, do you suppose? Leave flowers like that?

CLAIRE
 For remembrance.

HAL
 At a gas station.

CLAIRE
 He was a popular teacher. You need to show that he mattered.

A beat. Hal consults his watch.

HAL
 Maybe Len went to the gallery.

CLAIRE
 He's not at the gallery.

She takes the print to unwrap it.

HAL
 We could call there to see--.

CLAIRE (cont'd)
 He's not at the gallery, Hal.

A beat. The print is an art deco travel poster---

CLAIRE (cont'd)

I know you asked me not to say anything. But I couldn't keep it a secret. Beth is his friend too--I thought he ought to know.

HAL

I see.

CLAIRE

And since he knows he can't bring it up--I think he feels a little awkward. Being around you.

HAL

It is awkward.

CLAIRE

I'm sorry.

HAL

My fault. I had no business asking that of you. Let me.

Hal lifts the print to the mantel.

HAL (cont'd)

There now. What do you think?

CLAIRE

You were so right! It really does come to life in here. (off Hal) What do you think?

HAL

I think ... you really should have taken that landscape.

CLAIRE

(longingly)

Len would have a fit.

HAL

It wasn't that much.

CLAIRE

More than a mortgage payment.

HAL

Not much more. And you loved it, Claire.

CLAIRE

I didn't love it.

HAL

The minute you saw it--your face lit up--you went straight for it...

CLAIRE
(embarrassed)
Oh Lord.

HAL
And you kept going back to it, too. Three, four times ... you
found your way back to that very spot. (a steady gaze) I saw it.

CLAIRE
You'd think I'd never been to an art gallery.

HAL
It was wonderful.

CLAIRE
Embarrassing.

HAL
How excited you were.

CLAIRE
I'm sure if Len // were there--

HAL
(overlapping on //)
So enthusiastic--

CLAIRE
He would have said something.

Claire crumbles into tears.

HAL (cont'd)
Claire?

CLAIRE
I'm sorry. Len is--I mean, sometimes I don't know. I mean--. I
shouldn't tell you this, Hal. (beat) But I had fun tonight, and--
--I feel kind of bad about it.

HAL
Because Len wasn't there?

CLAIRE
Because if he had been-- it would have been so different.

HAL
Making remarks.

CLAIRE
But he wasn't there. And it was almost a relief.

Another beat.

CLAIRE (CONT'D) (cont'd)

I don't think that's such a good thing to be feeling. When you've haven't even been married a year.

HAL

You didn't do anything wrong, Claire. You were excited, and it showed. That's all.

CLAIRE

Sometimes it feels like Len is the one out there, in the dark---taking shots at me.

A beat.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

I look at him and I think--who is this person? Was he always this way -- or is it just that I didn't see it before?

HAL

... (turning away) You have a hammer? I can hang this for you.

CLAIRE

Hal. There's something I should tell you. Len would say stay out of it, but I feel I must tell you. (deep breath) Beth was at your house tonight.

HAL

You saw her?

CLAIRE

I told Len we should reach out to her ... because she must be in terrible pain--and we should do something because she's been a friend. But that's not the real reason. I wanted to talk to her because I needed an answer. You know what I'm talking about.

HAL

Not sure.

CLAIRE

There was more to it. Wasn't there? The two of them. They were friends, but Len wanted more.

HAL

He didn't tell you?

CLAIRE

Is that not what happened?

HAL

I can't believe he didn't tell you.

CLAIRE

Hal. I need to understand. Whatever it was, I need to understand.

HAL

The thing you need to understand? Beth was a prize. Such a prize. The first time she walked into the newsroom ... heads turned. When she smiled--when she spoke, the way she moved--I couldn't take my eyes off her. Neither could anyone else.

CLAIRE

Including Len.

HAL

Especially Len ... and he was so brash. Everyone said: he won't waste any time, that guy. He didn't. (another beat) They were together, most of that first summer. Then one Friday in late August, Beth started to flirt with me, in the mailroom. I flirted back. I was doing theatre reviews then, so I offered her my spare ticket. (beat) And Len. Faded out of the picture. That wasn't really his style--to fade away, but he did. But Beth, being Beth - always kept him on the party list. 'He's a good kid,' she said. 'You can't deny he's fun.' Yes, he was fun. Len was always ... so much fun.

CLAIRE

I knew it had to be something like that.

HAL

I'm sorry. I thought you knew.

CLAIRE

I'm not bothered by the fact of it. Please understand. It's not the fact that it happened. It's that he never said anything. And Beth. Oh my god, I don't understand Beth. We sat there for nearly an hour in that coffee shop. Talking window treatments and fitness classes, and I'm babbling along about Len and how moody he's been lately--and stressed about the move and... other things... And all the time she knows ... so much more about him than I ever dreamt she knew. But she sits there. With that little smile--all the while, knowing--that she's walking out on our lives forever. Without a word. How do you do something like that?

HAL

I don't know.

a beat

CLAIRE

She wasn't alone tonight. You should know that. Her friend--that cab driver--he was there, too.

HAL

I figured as much.

CLAIRE

You know?

HAL

I called her... and asked her to come clear out her things. I figured she might bring some help.

CLAIRE

Oh.

HAL

You're surprised?

CLAIRE

Only because ... I thought you were hoping to work things out.

HAL

I was. Until last night.

CLAIRE

What happened last night?

HAL

I went for gas.

A beat.

HAL

What do you suppose he was thinking, that schoolteacher? Right before the shot came?

CLAIRE

Lesson plans?

HAL

Price of gas. Whatever trivia occupies you in those odd moments. I'll tell you what I was thinking. About those flowers piled against the fence. Carnations, daisies, bluebells--beautiful and wretched at the same time. How many flowers would there be, if I had been the one? Because I could have been. Easily. I go there all the time. Only, someone else was at the pump when the bullet rang out. So his life ended and mine goes on. It's an accident of timing. And it came to me, Claire--right there, at the pump. Like the voice of God whispering in my ear: It's all an accident of timing. My whole life--coming to the paper, meeting Beth, adopting Jimmy. None of it was planned, but so much of it was wonderful. This beautiful woman; this bright little boy ... They needed me. And I needed them ... and wanted them. I knew I would never be the ... bon vivant ... I can't hold court at parties; I

can't tell jokes ... but I can keep your glass filled. I can laugh at your jokes. That's worth something.

CLAIRE

Hal.

HAL

I knew that she'd been restless for a long time. Looking for something. But I still believe--no, I'm sure: she was happy. For a while. I know she was. And Jimmy was. I certainly was. So maybe that's the best any of us can hope for -- to be happy ... for a while.

CLAIRE

The day I met Len, I was working the evening shift in a branch in his neighborhood. He walked in--so handsome and confident and funny. (off Hal) The thing is--I wasn't supposed to be working that day. I'd switched with another girl.

HAL

Fate stepped in. Don't you find comfort in that?

CLAIRE

What comfort?

HAL

We can't control what happens to us. Only what we do with it. Wiser minds have already figured that out--but the rest of us, I think we have to live through something like this. To get there.

A beat.

CLAIRE

She owed you better, Hal. So much better.

HAL

She wanted out. She got out the only way she knew how. (a beat) I admit, I was bitter. Wanting to get even. But after all this mess ... I don't need to get even. I just need to move on.

She squeezes his arm.

HAL

So I called her. And I told her--(a deep breath) I'm getting the locks changed; if you want anything more from the house--come get it tonight. (another breath). It felt good, I'll tell you. And I did not lose it.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

It was brave, doing that.

HAL

Maybe.

A moment.

CLAIRE

Hal--

He feels a dangerous impulse as she moves towards him.

HAL

(abruptly)

Do you have any wine?

CLAIRE

You want some wine?

HAL

Isn't that what you need? Wine, candles? A little incense?

CLAIRE

Are you serious?

HAL

Let's do it, Claire. Let's bless this house. Purge this place of all bad feelings.

CLAIRE

I'll get some glasses.

HAL

These candles here--are they okay?

CLAIRE

Sure.

Claire brings two glasses and a half-drunk bottle of wine as Hal moves some candles from the mantel to the coffee table.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

Wait a minute. It's after sundown. Sabbath, right?

HAL

So it is.

CLAIRE

Maybe you should light them.

HAL

Actually, you do it before dark.

He hands her his lighter.

HAL (cont'd)

And you would be the one to light them. It's the mother of the house ... who does that.

CLAIRE

Oh. Okay.

She lights the candles. Hal pours a little wine.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

So.

HAL

So.

CLAIRE

The idea is--you call on the spirits to come to you. And purge any negative energy from these walls.

HAL

All right.

CLAIRE

I guess we would hold hands?

He extends his hands.

CLAIRE

And pray for the--(correcting herself) the Spirit to fill our hearts with hope and mercy.

HAL

Hope and mercy.

CLAIRE

I'm sorry, maybe that's too Catholic?

HAL

How?

CLAIRE

I was tempted to say Holy Spirit. But that's--if there's something you would say instead? Is there like--a standard Jewish prayer?

HAL

For purging spirits?

CLAIRE

Stupid! Maybe Len is right--maybe this is just an idiotic exercise--

HAL

No, no, Claire. It's not stupid. You want to create a sense of community around a common need. It's the reason people start religions.

CLAIRE

It's just that I feel so scared.

HAL

We're all scared.

CLAIRE

Not what's out there. That scares me, yes—but what's in here. Scares me more. I thought I knew him. I thought I knew so much about him. Now I wonder if I know anything.

HAL

Listen: In the end, we're all a big mystery. Every one of us, even to ourselves. And we can't always explain ourselves to each other. Sometimes, I think, you just have to take ... take people on faith.

A rustling from the garden.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

What's that?

HAL

Local wildlife probably.

CLAIRE

Raccoons?

A crack as if a twig has snapped underfoot.

HAL

Get down.

CLAIRE

Hal.

HAL

Scoot down.

He puts out the candles as Claire sinks to a crouch. He crosses to the patio doors.

HAL

There's something in the trees.

He turns out the other light, kills the light on the patio. Considers a moment and grabs the poker from the fireplace.

A beat.

CLAIRE

(a whisper)

Hal, the door.

Claire quietly begins to pray. The shadow of the crow flies across the room, unseen by Hal. It alights near Claire. And flexes its wings.

CLAIRE

No, please. Go away. Please.

Outside, a figure of a man crosses the patio. He is carrying an oblong object. The figure stops, raises the object-- Claire cries out--

And from outside,

LEN

Claire?

The shadow of the crow vanishes.

HAL

Shit!

LEN

Can you see me?

CLAIRE

Len?

LEN

Cause I can see you.

CLAIRE

(going for a light)

What are you doing?

Len enters, and we see that the oblong object is a broken-off branch from a tree.

LEN

Just a little scientific experiment. What are you doing?

Getting ready to kill ^{HAL} you.

LEN
(with great cheer)
Lucky for you this isn't loaded. Cause I was thinking pretty
much the same thing.

CLAIRE
What are you doing out there in the dark?

A beat

LEN
I wanted to see if I was right about the windows. And I am.
You've got a clear view into this room from those woods.

CLAIRE
You were in the woods?

LEN
(a dark look to Hal)
In the trees, yeah.

CLAIRE
What were you doing in the woods?

LEN
Somebody could be out there right now--

CLAIRE
Were you watching us?

So we need to do something about those windows-

CLAIRE
That's sick Len.

LEN
I'm trying to protect you.

CLAIRE
By sitting in the dirt?

LEN
To make sure I don't lose you. Because it would kill me, Claire--
it would kill me--

CLAIRE
Have you been drinking?

LEN

Some.

She turns to go, he stops her.

LEN

Okay if you must know—Claire. If you must know—I went to make repair. Like you wanted. You wanted me to make repair—so I did. I tried it. And you know what? It's not me, okay? I didn't cause all this. She's the one who's messed up.

CLAIRE

You're pretty messed up too. Sitting out there in the dark—in the dirt—for how long? And I'm supposed to feel what—loved and cherished? Because you would do something like that?

LEN

'Cause you asked me to.

CLAIRE

I didn't ask you to sit in the dirt and spy on me.

LEN

You wanted me to go down the hill—so I did.

CLAIRE

It's just weird, Len. It's weird.

SHE GOES OFF.

LEN

Claire. Come on.

A beat.

LEN

Fuck.

A long beat.

HAL

How long were you in the woods?

LEN

Long enough.

HAL

You came up the path?

LEN

It's a nice night.

HAL

Where's your car?

LEN

Down the hill. Where's yours?

HAL

In your driveway. I brought your wife home.

LEN

Have a nice time?

HAL

It was all right.

LEN

Didn't look that way to me. Looked a little better than all right to me.

HAL

She was upset. I was trying to console her.

LEN

How considerate of you.

HAL

What about you? You put Beth's mind at ease?

LEN

Fuck man--we'd been friends for 15 years. And she was just going to load up her stuff and take off? Not even say goodbye? Who does that?

HAL

She does, apparently.

LEN

It's a shitty way to treat people.

HAL

Welcome to my world.

LEN

I told her that, too. You can't just throw people away like that.

HAL

What did she say?

LEN

Hard to know. She was pretty upset.

HAL

She cried?

LEN

"I need a clean break," she says. "The past is too much for me."
"I can't have it in front of me like this."

HAL

You say she was crying?

LEN

Bawling.

HAL

With that guy standing right there?

LEN

Eh, he was gone by then. I saw him drive off, so—I thought I'd take my chance.

HAL

Your chance?

LEN

To talk her out of it.

Hal starts to laugh.

LEN

What's so funny?

HAL

It's a bitch, isn't it? She finally decides to dump me--and instead of calling you, she runs off with a different guy.

LEN

You think I want to get back with her? Seriously? You think that's what this all about?

HAL

Isn't it?

LEN

No, man. Christ amighty, no!

HAL

Then why go down the hill?

LEN
To restore order.

HAL
To what?

LEN
Restore order. You know. Set the universe all right again. Tell her I'm sorry.

HAL
For breaking up with her?

LEN
No. For being a smart-ass who didn't listen.

HAL
(processing it)
Back then, you mean?

LEN
Last month. The night of the party. Jesus. Not all of us live in the past. (beat) And she broke up with me, by the way. Just for the record.

HAL
She dumped you?

LEN
You knew that.

HAL
(pleased)
I don't think I did.

LEN
Really? She never told you that whole story?

HAL
I never asked.

LEN
Well, she--she did. And very abruptly.

HAL
Must've been hard to take.

LEN
Eh. (Feeling the loss). What the hell, you know? Life goes on.

HAL
So why not tell Claire about it?

LEN

Claire? What for?

HAL

Reassurance. Full disclosure? Trusting her with a painful memory? (off Len) Because it was painful wasn't it? When Beth let you go?

A beat.

HAL

I'm betting that didn't happen to you very often.

LEN

Happened enough. (beat) But it's water under the bridge. So no point talking about it.

HAL

Talking about it is a good way to get over it.

LEN

What are you now? Armchair psychologist?

HAL

Why can't you admit you cared about her? And that it hurt to lose her? Why is that so hard?

LEN

What do you want me to say? That I never got over it? Is that what you're looking for? Man! We had a lot of fun a couple of weeks one summer. She wanted to dial things back, so fine. I didn't see any reason for it, but fine. I'm easy. I don't hold grudges.

HAL

(after a beat)

You're full of shit.

LEN

Suit yourself.

HAL

You won't tell me how it went down, okay. I'll tell you how it went down. I have a theory: Beth found you great fun--a bit reckless, but a great match, lots of good energy, excitement, all that. But you were awfully young. And she needed somebody she could depend on. Somebody her son could depend on. You weren't ready for that. Nobody's fault. That's just the way it is sometimes. Just an accident of timing--that you two didn't work out.

A beat

HAL

Just like we didn't work out. Things have changed - and she needs something else now.

LEN

That's where you're wrong. You're exactly what she needs.

Hal gives a half-laugh, picks up his coat.

LEN

No, seriously, man-seriously. She's a smart lady, she needs a guy like you. Somebody who sits around and ponders shit, you know? I mean, I never knew what the fuck to say sometimes. But you always know what to say.

HAL

Thank you.

LEN

And all this shit -- the coffee cups, the catalogs--LL Bean--

HAL

Pottery barn.

LEN

Pottery barn. What the fuck, it's all code--all her trying to put the ball back in your court. That's what it is.

HAL

You're saying she wants me back?

LEN

But she's too ashamed to ask. And this, this fucking cab driver? He's got nothing on you.

HAL

He's a published poet.

LEN

He is? (off Hal) Shit. Well, still. It doesn't matter. Just call her, tell her it's okay. Put the universe back together.

HAL

Universe is fine.

LEN

No, man, you have to. You. Are the one. Who has to make repair. 'Cause I can't do it, okay? And somebody has to make repair!

HAL

I feel bad that Beth is so distraught. I do. But somehow ...
(beat) Somehow I think we're both better off this way.

He puts on his coat.

LEN

So that's it? Just like that?

HAL

That's it.

Hal moves towards the stair.

HAL

You know what, with everything that's been going on— we never
did tell Jimmy. I've got to call him.

LEN

Hal. Look, Hal. That whole thing with the bet--

HAL

Forget it.

Before he can move, a rifle shot rings
out, distant but distinct. They look to
each other.

LEN

Did that come from the lake?

Another shot.

LEN

Jesus!

Claire charges down the stairs.

CLAIRE

What was that? Was that a rifle?

Len crosses to her as Hal crosses away,
clear of the windows. He turns out the
lights on his side of the room.

HAL

Get that other light.

Len does. The room is illuminated now
only by the moonlight outside and a
splash of light down the stairs.

She puts the blankets on the couch.

CLAIRE

We could get some drapes.

LEN

I thought you wanted the trees.

CLAIRE

If we're going to cover these windows - drapes would do better.

LEN

We need something right now.

CLAIRE

Blankets and sheets.

LEN

It's better than nothing isn't it?

A beat.

CLAIRE

I'd sooner sit in the dark.

A beat.

CLAIRE

Did you see the paper this morning?

LEE

No.

CLAIRE

There's a story. About him. The man who died.

Len looks at her.

CLAIRE

A big picture of him. Fishing off his back deck ... Big grin on his face. Said he used to get fish that way all the time. Fishing in this lake. From his back deck.

Another beat.

CLAIRE (cont'd)

We knew them, you know.

LEN

We did?

CLAIRE

He was a friend of that copy editor who retired.

LEN

Nancy?

CLAIRE

He threw her a party. You took me.

LEN

I did?

CLAIRE

Don't you remember? It was right after we met. (a beat) Hubert. And Sally. That was their names. Hubert and Sally.

LEN

You give me a hand with this?

CLAIRE

We should have gone over there.

LEN

Yesterday?

CLAIRE

After we settled on the house. We should have dropped by. And told them we were moving in.

LEN

We didn't know them that well.

CLAIRE

It's what you do, Len. We should have done that--and we didn't do that.

He gets another sheet and climbs back on the stool.

CLAIRE

Life is so short. What is it worth if you don't reach out to people?

LEN

Claire. Will you help me here?

CLAIRE

What's the point?

LEN

You do know what happened Friday night. They shot through the kitchen window? Through the window, Claire.

Another beat.

CLAIRE
And you think this will stop them?

LEN
We have to do something, don't we?

Len gets down from the stool.

LEN
I need more pins.

He goes upstairs. Claire crosses to the windows.

CLAIRE
Yes, we have to do something. But what?
(quietly)
I'm late, Len. I'm pretty sure this is it. I feel it. (to herself) That's great, Claire. That's fantastic.

Claire pauses, then yanks the sheets down. As she does so, Hal enters the patio, on a bicycle, and glides to a stop. Claire opens the patio doors.

CLAIRE (cont'd)
Good Lord, Hal!

HAL
Great day for this, don't you think?

CLAIRE
I didn't know you even had a bicycle.

HAL
I haven't been out in years. (beat) What a day, huh? That sun is like gold.

CLAIRE
Want some coffee?

HAL
No, thanks. Just came by to see how you're holding up.

CLAIRE
Okay.

HAL
Okay?

CLAIRE
Hal. The man that was killed--Friday night. Did you know him?

HAL

Just to speak to. He was a friend of someone I worked with.

CLAIRE

You've been in that house.

HAL

Right. Yes.

CLAIRE

So you know he was when it happened. At the kitchen stove. Making hot chocolate for his wife.

HAL

Claire.

CLAIRE

You know there were curtains on those windows. Blue cloth curtains.

HAL

It's going to end, Claire.

CLAIRE

Curtains at the window, but that didn't stop it.

HAL

They found shells.

CLAIRE

Curtains didn't stop it.

HAL

And Henry says. They might have a print. So it will end, Claire.

CLAIRE

But how will it end?

HAL

That we can't know. But it will end. (beat) So come with me. Let's go for a spin along the lake.

CLAIRE

Len would have a fit.

HAL

He can come too.

CLAIRE

And you crack jokes.

HAL

What else can we do?

CLAIRE

So this is defiance?

HAL

Maybe. Or maybe I'm just restless.

CLAIRE

I'd love to come. I would. But I can't.

HAL

Next time. Meanwhile - this is for you.

He produces an envelope.

CLAIRE

Hal. What's this?

As she opens the envelope,

HAL

They're holding it for you at the gallery.

She finds a receipt

CLAIRE

Oh no, Hal. No, I can't.

HAL

Sure you can. You said yourself. It's beautiful. And when you find something beautiful--you can't pass it by.

CLAIRE

But it's too much--

HAL

It's for both of you. For you and Len. To enjoy together. And be inspired by it. Together. Please take.

CLAIRE

Only if ... if you promise you'll come by often. And enjoy it with us?

HAL (cont'd)

You bet. (pleased) I'll see you, Claire. (as he goes) I hope you can get out sometime soon. It's glorious out here.

She nods. A moment as he gets on the bicycle, then rides away. Claire regards the receipt, folds it back into the envelope, then places the envelope on the mantel. Len appears, carrying some blankets.

LEN
(seeing the sheets)
What happened here?

CLAIRE
(without looking at him)
Fell down.

Annoyed, he rehangs the rope, then folds
the sheets.

LEN
Was that Hal on a bicycle just now?

CLAIRE
It's a beautiful morning.

LEN
He's got to be out of his mind.

CLAIRE
(fixed on him)
I don't think so.

Len shakes out the blankets.

CLAIRE
I think he's figured some things out.

LEE
Figured out a good way to get shot.

CLAIRE
He's made a decision.

Claire quietly opens the door.

CLAIRE
He's not hanging curtains.

She steps out into the garden.

LEN
I think you're right about the drapes, Claire. These sheets are
too thin. We need something thicker.

Overhead, the sound of a crow. Claire
looks up.

LEN
Whatever you want, though. You should pick them. Something dark
--with a liner. That you like.

A murder of crows wings noisily across the sky. Claire observes this intently. She is singular in her stillness, like a character in a Magritte painting.

LEN (cont'd)

For these windows, they'll have to be custom made. But. It'll be worth it for the peace of mind, right?

He looks about. A scratching kind of rumbling from the chimney draws his attention.

LEN (cont'd)

Claire?

The rumbling grows more intense--a loud, strange, thumping. Len watches in astonishment as the flue drops down with a BANG and a dead crow falls onto the hearth.

LEN (cont'd)

A dead crow?

He approaches the fireplace tentatively. Hears the terrifying sound of wings, hundreds of wings.

LEN

What the hell?

Suddenly hundreds of crows erupt from the open flue and fill the room with a batting of wings and caws. Len cries out in horror--then takes up one of the blankets in a futile effort to do battle. In the garden, Claire observes all this, but makes no move towards him.

LEN

Claire? Claire! I need you! CLAIRE!!!!

Lights fade on Len swinging the blanket at the circling crows as Claire settles in the garden to observe with a thin sense of satisfaction.

End PLAY.

A NOTE ON THE PLAY:

The images presented in A GRAND DESIGN are intended to frame the story as a contemporary suburban fable, and the final moment presents a man at last consumed by his own fears. How to stage that, is of course, a key question. I imagine that one way is through the use of projections, but there may be other ways to achieve the effect. Given that the final image portrays the unconscious overtaking the rational mind, I can easily see the eruption of crows coming from multiple points within or outside of the house: down the stairs, through the garden, smashing into the windows, falling from the ceiling and so forth. There need not be any logic to it so long as the effect is terrifying. Though the play hits many comic notes along the way, this last one should not be played for humor.