I Left the Lights On

A musical in two acts

Book, lyrics and music by Jessica Mulein

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Book, lyrics and music by Jessica Mulein.
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The world is responsible for keeping my light on.

About this story

It's true. The names are changed; what happened isn't. You may trim, cut, reorder and restage to make it work in your theater. What I ask you to keep:

- **Jennifer was always a girl.** Don't soften it, hide it, or turn it into a debate.
- **Her boys were taken while she was sick, not because she was dangerous.** She owns her mistakes; let her. But don't make her the villain, and don't make the people who took them into cartoons either. "I won't call anybody wrong. I just wrote down what happened."
- **She is dying, and she wants to choose her ending.** Don't turn that into something she needs rescuing from.
- **The family that carried her was chosen, not blood.** Nora stays at the center.
- **It's funny.** The jokes sit right next to the grief, because that's how she lived it.
- **The lights stay on at the end, and the door stays open.**
- There's always a chance that new technology/research can change the course of things, but as it stands in 2026 she is incurable and several years into a relatively short expected lifespan for iodine refractory metastatic papillary thyroid cancer. Ultimately, this is a story and detached from my life at this point, it has meaning beyond my life. Whether it ends exactly the way I predict is anyone's guess.

If you're unsure whether a change keeps the truth, ask my wife or me while we're here, and whoever holds my rights after that. The test I'd use: would someone walking out of the theater know what actually happened to her? If yes, you kept it.

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Act One: The Coat

Prologue

A house, open like a dollhouse: rooms on two levels, every window dark. Center, a kitchen table with more chairs than it needs. Downstage, an upright piano with a laptop on it and a mug of tea gone cold. On the stage floor, painted white on black like a road marking: a long box and two words, KEEP CLEAR. By the front door, an empty coat hook.

Somewhere in the house, a music box plays.

JENNIFER, now, comes in and sits at the piano. For a moment she looks at the two chairs nearest the door. Then she picks out the music-box tune on the keys.

♪ *I Left the Lights On* (*Prologue*)

(*A music box plays four bars and stops. JENNIFER finds the same notes on the piano, slower.*)

JENNIFER
I know you heard a story,
and you were young when it was told,
and you needed something steady
and a story you could hold.
I won't stand up and fight it.
I won't call anybody wrong.
I just wrote down what happened,
and I put it in a song.

I don't know what to tell you.
I've never known the way.
So I wrote down every year of it,
every word I couldn't say.
It's all here when you're ready.
Play them out of order, too.
I'm not asking you to believe me,
just to listen till it's through.

(*She reaches up and switches on a lamp. One window of the house glows.*)

(*spoken*)
Come inside.

Scene 1: The Gawkers

A train whistle, far off. The light changes: headlights, a crossing signal. The COMPANY drifts on as GAWKERS, slowing down the way you slow down for a wreck: commuters, a nurse on her break, a teenager

filming on a phone. At the edge of it all stands a man in a short-sleeved dress shirt with a clipboard. This is THE ADJUSTER. He writes things down. He will be at the edge of a lot of scenes.

JENNIFER: (*to the audience*) Oh, don't be shy. You paid for the good seats.

♪ *Trainwreck*

(*A train-beat shuffle kicks in.*)

JENNIFER
The insurance said I'm fit for work and sent me back to grind.
Turns out I'd had the cancer for years. It must've slipped their mind.
Now a man up on the Rock is watching me like I'm a racketeer,
and we sold the house for pennies. Wasn't that a banner year?
Chased a promise up the coast and landed on my face,
and my play count doubled. Guess you like a basket case.

Every time I hit the ground,
the numbers come around...

Everybody slows down for a trainwreck,

COMPANY
(*Slow down!*)

JENNIFER
rolls the window down to see,
and I don't mind you looking.
I've made a catalog of me.
Hit repeat, hit share, hit like,
pour a whiskey, take a seat.
My worst year's my biggest hit,
and the encore's on repeat.

Wrote a song about my dying, and somebody left a heart,
and a guy in Ohio asked me if I'd sell him the art.
The algorithm loves me now. I finally found my niche:
turns out nothing trends like a woman in a ditch.
The chatbot says to call a hotline. I said, "Honey, I'm all right.
It's not a breakdown, it's a musical, and it opens here tonight."

Every time I hit the ground,

COMPANY
the numbers come around...

JENNIFER and COMPANY
Everybody slows down for a trainwreck,
rolls the window down to see,
and I don't mind you looking.
I've made a catalog of me.
Hit repeat, hit share, hit like,

pour a whiskey, take a seat.
My worst year's my biggest hit,
and the encore's on repeat.

(*Instrumental break: hot fiddle, then steel. The GAWKERS hold up their phones. THE ADJUSTER writes.*)

JENNIFER (*voice and pedal steel only; she finds someone out in the dark of the house*)
But I see you there in the dark, hon.
You're not here to point and stare.
You've been riding this train too, friend.
Come sit down. I saved a chair.
We'll wave at all the gawkers
from the best view on the line.
You hold on to your ticket,
and I'll hold on to mine.

JENNIFER and COMPANY (*full band, rowdy*)
Everybody slows down for a trainwreck,
and you bought a ticket to see,
and I don't mind you looking.
I've made a show of me.
Hit repeat, hit share, hit like,
there's room in the caboose.
My worst year's my biggest hit,
and this train's still running loose.

(*Train whistle. The GAWKERS scatter. THE ADJUSTER is the last to go.*)

JENNIFER (*spoken, deadpan*)
Next stop: the beginning.
Y'all hold on.

Scene 2: Linen Napkins

The Whitcomb dining room, years ago: white tablecloth, silver, linen napkins in rings. DR. WHITCOMB, a pediatrician, eats with precision. MRS. WHITCOMB sits very straight. Between them sits YOUNG JEN, about nine, in a navy blazer one size too big.

JENNIFER: (*from the piano*) Seventeen and scared, she gave me away. That's everything I know about the first part. The second part had a dress code.

YOUNG JEN: Dad. Why did the—

DR. WHITCOMB: Elbows.

YOUNG JEN: (*elbows off*) Why did the pediatrician bring a ladder to work?

(*Nothing.*)

YOUNG JEN: Because all his patients were having growth spurts.

(*Nothing. MRS. WHITCOMB touches her napkin to her lips.*)

MRS. WHITCOMB: That's enough, sweetheart.

♪ *The Mirror*

(*The joke has just died at the dinner table. YOUNG JEN folds her napkin very neatly.*)

JENNIFER (*from the piano, to us*)
I grew up in a house with linen napkins,
where you laughed politely or you didn't laugh at all,
and I'd crack a joke at Sunday dinner
and watch it die against the wall.

(*Later. MRS. WHITCOMB's dressing table. YOUNG JEN, eleven now, alone at the mirror.*)

There's a boy in all the photographs
in a collar buttoned tight,
a crooked grin for every camera,
standing still in the flash of light.
But she'd sit at her mother's mirror,
try a new name on for size,

(*YOUNG JEN uncaps a lipstick and writes on the glass: JENNIFER.*)

YOUNG JEN (*barely*)
Jennifer.

JENNIFER
then wipe it off before the door clicked
and put the boy back in her eyes.

(*A door clicks somewhere. She wipes the mirror with her sleeve.*)

You can fold a life up smaller.
You can learn to sit and wait.
But the walls were never strong enough,
so she'd wander to the gate.

There once was a boy who was always a girl.
She just needed the sky to let her wings unfurl,
'cause you can't cage a gender
any more than you can cage a ghost.
She'll slip between the bars you built
to the place she's wanted most.

(*DR. WHITCOMB in the doorway.*)

DR. WHITCOMB
Square your shoulders, son.

JENNIFER
So she learned to play the part.

(*MRS. WHITCOMB buttons YOUNG JEN's blazer, every button, all the way up.*)

Folded up her wings beneath a heavy coat,
buttoned all the way to the heart.
And she drifted down the hallways
like a stranger in her skin,
half a ghost inside her own life,
just waiting to begin.

And the world will tell you who to be.
It'll bolt and chain the gate.
But the gate was never strong enough.
She'd be through it, soon or late.

JENNIFER and YOUNG JEN
There once was a boy who was always a girl.
She just needed the sky to let her wings unfurl—

(*The music stops short. YOUNG JEN alone, to the mirror.*)

YOUNG JEN
Jennifer.

(*She checks the door. Then she does up the top button herself.*)

Scene 3: The One Who Always Came

Two short honks of a car horn outside. YOUNG JEN is at the front door before the second one. In comes LOUISE, Dr. Whitcomb's mother, in a cardigan and sensible shoes, with her car keys in one hand and a foil-covered pie tin in the other.

LOUISE: That traffic nearly killed me. Who's hungry?

YOUNG JEN: Grandma. Why did the pediatrician bring a ladder to work?

LOUISE: Oh, for Pete's sake. Why?

YOUNG JEN: Because all his patients were having growth spurts.

(*LOUISE laughs: a big, helpless, Midwestern laugh, the first laugh anybody has had in this house. YOUNG JEN stares at her like she's never heard the sound before.*)

LOUISE: Tell me another one.

♪ *Louise*

JENNIFER
There once was a woman, her name was Louise,
a Wisconsin girl who did as she pleased.
At the hardware store she ran a tidy floor:
"Use the spittoon, boys. That's what it's for."
In a little town where the neighbors all knew
if you picked your nose, and if you farted, too,

she was tough as a fence post and warm as the sun,
and somehow she made room for everyone.

She'd come down from Sacramento in her Oldsmobile Ciera,
white-knuckled on the freeway, the last one of her era.

LOUISE
That traffic nearly killed me!

JENNIFER
And she'd hug you at the door,
and the house got loud and warm the way it never was before.
She'd sit with me for hours, and she'd tell the same old jokes,
the Ole and Lena ones she swore were true about her folks.

She never broke, and she never gave in.
She carried her sorrow underneath her skin.
She'd say Walt was waiting, just like he said he'd be,
and thirty-two years was nothing to eternity.
She'd tell you she was fine, then she'd bake you a pie,
and make room for one more and never ask why.
She spent her whole life giving love away,
and I still hear her voice when I think of her today.

(*Sunday. A church pew. LOUISE in her good coat; YOUNG JEN beside her, swinging her feet.*)

Every Sunday at her place, I'd sit beside her in the pew.
I didn't understand it all, the things she swore were true.
She believed that God was waiting, and her Walt was waiting too,
so I went because she wanted me there.

LOUISE (*holding out her hand to YOUNG JEN*)
Come on, kiddo.

JENNIFER
That's what you do.

JENNIFER and LOUISE
She'd say Walt was waiting, just like he said he'd be,
and thirty-two years was nothing to eternity.

(*LOUISE gathers her keys. The car door; two short honks, going away. YOUNG JEN waves at the window until the car is gone.*)

JENNIFER: (*to us*) She was the one who always came.

Scene 4: Danny's Party

A basement, a few years later. Music too loud, and a strobe light somebody's dad bought. TEEN JEN, thirteen, stands against the wall in a too-big flannel. YOUNG NORA, thirteen, crosses the room and leans on the wall beside her.

YOUNG NORA: You're not dancing either.

TEEN JEN: I'm holding up the wall.

YOUNG NORA: Want help?

(*They hold up the wall together.*)

♪ *Thirteen*

TEEN JEN (*small, to herself, while YOUNG NORA leans on the wall beside her*)
We were thirteen at Danny's party,
and I stood against the wall.
You were the first thing I was sure of,
maybe the first thing at all.

JENNIFER (*from the piano*)
We had a little while, maybe,
before I let you go.
I was too scared of who I was
to let somebody know.

(*Somebody calls NORA's name. She goes. At the stairs she looks back once. TEEN JEN doesn't wave.*)

JENNIFER: (*to us*) Hold on to her. She comes back.

Scene 5: Keep Clear

A high school hallway between classes: lockers slamming, a bell about to ring. TEEN JEN, fourteen, at a locker. Down the hall, CASEY, Teen Jen's best friend, cups her hands around her mouth.

CASEY: Jennifer!

(*TEEN JEN turns on a dime. Then she freezes. Half the hallway is looking at her. She's shocked, and embarrassed, and trying very hard not to grin.*)

TEEN JEN: (*hissing*) Are you crazy?

CASEY: You turned around.

JENNIFER: (*from the piano, to us*) First time I ever heard it out loud. I turned on a dime.

(*RUTH's kitchen: warm light, a table with a wobble, a cookie jar shaped like a cow. This is the first room in the show where nobody is performing. RUTH, Casey's mother and a minister, is at the stove. CASEY and TEEN JEN come in and drop their backpacks.*)

RUTH: You're staying for dinner.

CASEY: She always stays for dinner.

RUTH: Then she's always staying for dinner.

JENNIFER: (*to us*) I went to Ruth's house a lot. She believed in me. It was the one house where I didn't have to be anybody.

(*Another day. The KEEP CLEAR box on the floor lights up. Outside the high school, afternoon. Two lanes of stopped traffic, suggested by headlights. TEEN JEN, backpack on one shoulder, looks at the stopped cars and steps into the gap.*)

♪ *Keep Clear*

(*Soft felt piano, alone.*)

JENNIFER
There's a box on the road where the traffic leaves room,
two words painted white on the black.

TEEN JEN
Both lanes had stopped, so I crossed through the gap,

JENNIFER
and the world came around from the back.

(*Impact: light and sound. TEEN JEN is lifted out of time for a moment, then she's on the ground.*)

TEEN JEN
Then I was the sky and the glass and the ground,

JENNIFER
and a voice standing over me said,

THE EMT (*standing over her, not kind*)
Look what you did.

JENNIFER
And I've carried it since
like a stone that she set in my head.

Keep clear, keep clear.
It's the one thing I still see.
Every second of the day it happened
is the clearest I'll ever be.
And everything after's a window that fogged,
a road with the lines worn away.
I can tell you each moment of losing it all,
and hardly a thing since that day.

(*A classroom. TEEN JEN at a desk, a bandage at her hairline.*)

TEEN JEN
I was back in my seat before lunch,
and the hallways already had me dead.
Nobody asked what was missing,
so I didn't ask either. Instead
I'd reach for a thought that was always right there,
like a hand reaching out for a stair
in the dark of a house that I grew up inside,
and find that the step isn't there.

JENNIFER and TEEN JEN
Keep clear, keep clear.
It's the one thing I still see.
Every second of the day it happened
is the clearest I'll ever be.
And everything after's a window that fogged,
a road with the lines worn away.
I can tell you each moment of losing it all,
and hardly a thing since that day.

(*Strings drop out: voice and piano. JENNIFER leaves the piano and crosses to TEEN JEN's desk.*)

JENNIFER
They still call me smart, and I let them.
It's easier than explaining
that I'm the last one who remembers her,
the girl who could hold the whole machine in her head,
and I've been living off her name.

JENNIFER and TEEN JEN (*full strings, building*)
Keep clear, keep clear.
Everyone stopped but one.
I went through the space they had left me
like anybody would've done.
I've spent my whole life crossing where it was clear,
and it keeps coming round anyway.
I can tell you each moment of losing it all,
and hardly a thing since that day.

(*The instruments fall away.*)

TEEN JEN
Keep clear.

JENNIFER
It was.

(*THE EMT and her partner tape TEEN JEN to a backboard. The EMT never looks at her face. The headlights go out one by one. The box stays lit.*)

Scene 6: Exile

JENNIFER: (*from the piano, to us*) By junior year, my grades were in the toilet. So they took me out of my school and sent me to a private one in another city. It felt like being sent to oblivion.

(*A smaller, quieter school. A bell. TEEN JEN, sixteen, walks the hall with her head down and talks to no one. Then her company's office: a rack of blinking modems and a phone with a headset. It rings. She answers on the first ring, all business.*)

TEEN JEN: Tech support. (*a beat*) Is it plugged in?

(*Night, in her room. Her cell phone rings. She answers it on the first ring too.*)

JENNIFER: (*to us*) At the end of junior high, a friend of mine wanted to get a big internet connection to share with a few friends. I said, let's make it a lot of friends. (*a beat*) We called them customers. So we wrote a prospectus and pitched it to our parents and some other people we knew, and they invested. By junior year, it was the only thing that was mine.

(*Senior year. It's an open campus, and when the last bell rings TEEN JEN is the first one out the door. On her way out she passes YOUNG NORA, seventeen, at a locker. Neither of them stops.*)

JENNIFER: (*to us*) Nora went to that school too, my senior year. We barely said a word to each other.

(*After school, across the stage: YOUNG NORA at a folding table under a hand-lettered sign, with a phone and a stack of pamphlets. The phone rings. She picks it up and listens, carefully. TEEN JEN never sees.*)

(*An empty classroom after the bell. TEEN JEN at a desk with a spiral notebook. On the board: ENGLISH. DUE FRIDAY.*)

♪ *The Notebook*

TEEN JEN (*writing*)
Some things can't be known,
and some things can't be said,
not because they won't allow it,
but the words stay in my head.
I'm the only one I know of
who is built the way I'm built,
and I don't know what to call it,
so I carry it like guilt.

'Cause words can't ever say
just why I feel this way.
I'm torn in two, and I don't know who
would listen anyway.
No, words can't ever say
just why I feel this way.

(*She looks out the window. The piano's left hand starts to pulse.*)

TEEN JEN
And the longer that I wait,
the more this feeling grows.
It tells me, take to the air and fly,
and where to, no one knows.

What I'd give to slip away,
to fly up and up into the azure sky!
What I'd give to leave today,
to leave this ground and fly!

My wings give out. I fall. I try.
I disappear into the sky.

And the sky goes on forever, but it only lets you in
if you've got the nerve to fly.

What I'd give to slip away…

JENNIFER (*from the piano, over her*)
Oh, how as time went by,
that need that told me, fly,
just grew and grew and wouldn't go.
I'm thankful now I learned to fly,
even if, for years and years,
it was only in my mind.

(*A bell. TEEN JEN shuts the notebook and is out the door before it stops ringing.*)

Scene 7: The Assignment

Senior year, spring. A bench a few blocks from the school, as far away as a free period allows. TEEN JEN sits alone with the spiral notebook, which has gotten fatter. She reads her poem aloud to nobody.

♪ *Road Less Traveled*

(*TEEN JEN reads from the notebook. The first verse is spoken over a few piano chords; the music gathers under her until she's singing.*)

TEEN JEN (*reading*)
Here I stand, on the precipice of eternity,
gazing out across the vast expanse that is me,
having to decide in one night, forever, who I will be,
looking into the future to decide what to do with my past.

(*sung*)
Behind me lies the life of a man,
morals intact, skills in demand.
Ahead is a fork in the road,
and I will take the road less traveled.

Few mortals dare cross the threshold,
dare approach the limits of tolerance,
dare cross the line into the unknown,
and this is where I must boldly go.

The answer lies in plain view,
but the question begs to be forgotten.
To one side lies happiness at unspoken cost.
On the other, innocence lost.

Behind me lies the life of a man,
morals intact, skills in demand.

Ahead is a fork in the road,
and I will take the road less traveled.

(*The music swells: strings, a low drum.*)

Wingèd time with its outstretched talons
pulls me ever onward, affording me no rest.
Oh, sweet night, hide me in your cloaked arms
and deliver me into the heart of darkness.

(*The music falls away. Spoken, quietly.*)

Time takes its horrid toll, each chime of its bell,
turning and turning in the widening gyre.
'Twas nobler to bear the slings and arrows
than to hide sorrow under happiness for eternity.

(*She closes the notebook.*)

(*She tears the page out, folds it once, and drops it onto a stack of papers on a teacher's empty desk. It disappears among the others.*)

JENNIFER: (*to us*) I turned it in. Nobody asked which road. (*a beat*) It took me a long time to answer it anyway.

Scene 8: June Snow

A riverbank near campus, June 2001. Cottonwood fluff drifts through the light like snow. JENNIFER, in college now, comes down the path in clothes she picked out herself. A JOGGER passes.

JOGGER: Morning.

JENNIFER: (*a beat late, delighted*) Morning.

♪ *June Snow*

JENNIFER
Every day when I go out,
the cottonwoods dance for me.
They drift across the air
as light as light can be.
The birds pick up the melody.
The rabbits hop in tune.
The river chimes in, rippling,
and it's not even noon.

The cottonwoods dance for me!
They float across my skin
like a fine, warm snow in June.
Some settle down to rest a while,
and then they dance again.

The trees sway along softly.
The flowers do their part.
And the sweetness of the morning
goes straight into my heart.
A boy from my econ class
says, "Hey, Jen," and goes,
like it's nothing, like it's Tuesday,
like everybody knows.

The cottonwoods dance for me!
They float across my skin
like a fine, warm snow in June.
Some settle down to rest a while,
and then they dance again.

(*She stops on the footbridge and looks up.*)

I look up at the azure sky
I used to wish that I could fly to,
and the clouds are watching too,
as intoxicated as I.

The cottonwoods dance for me!
They float across my skin
like a fine, warm snow in June,
and every time they settle,
they get up and dance again.

(*spoken, as the music thins*)
I spend an hour every day watching the dance.
Then I go home.
Invigorated. Intoxicated.

(*A party flyer in her hand.*)

I look forward to tomorrow's show.

Scene 9: The Party

That fall. A house party: a kitchen packed too tight, a keg in the sink, a birthday banner for somebody's roommate. JENNIFER, a margarita in her hand, is laughing with her friends. She's dressed somewhere in between, and in public she goes by Jen; these friends know the deal. LEAH, in a flannel over a T-shirt, leans on the counter, watching the room like she's taking notes.

♪ *The Party*

(*Someone bumps JENNIFER. The margarita goes down her front. LEAH laughs at her, not unkindly.*)

JENNIFER
It was somebody's roommate's birthday,
in a kitchen packed too tight,
and I wore half a margarita
down the front of me that night.
And a girl in a flannel laughed at me,
then she took the flannel off.

LEAH
Here. You're soaking wet.
It's warm. It's clean. It's soft.

(*JENNIFER puts it on. The sleeves are too long.*)

LEAH (*spoken*)
I'm Leah.

JENNIFER (*spoken*)
Jen.

(*A FRIEND squeezes past with a pitcher.*)

A FRIEND (*spoken, easy, like it's nothing*)
Jennifer, you're dripping on the floor.

(*JENNIFER freezes. LEAH looks from the friend to her, and something clicks.*)

LEAH (*trying it out*)
Jennifer.

JENNIFER
Say it again.
Say it like that,
like it's easy, like it's mine.
I've only been her since the spring,
and I'm not used to the shine.
Say it again.
Say it once more.
I'll wear your shirt all night
if you'll say it like before.

LEAH
Is Jennifer your real name?

JENNIFER
Realer than the one before.

LEAH
Do your parents know?

JENNIFER
Not yet.

LEAH
Can I ask you something more?

JENNIFER
You can ask me anything.

LEAH
Does it scare you?

JENNIFER
Every day.
But this is the first room I've been in
that I didn't want to run away.

LEAH
Jennifer.

JENNIFER
Say it again.
Say it like that,
like it's easy, like it's mine.
I've only been her since the spring,
and I'm not used to the shine.

(*The party freezes. JENNIFER, now, at the piano.*)

JENNIFER (*now*)
She asked me things that no one asked.
She didn't always like what I said.
But that night she said my name
like it had always been in her head,
and I'd have followed it anywhere.
And I did.

(*The party moves again.*)

LEAH
Jennifer.

JENNIFER
Say it again.

LEAH
Jennifer.

JENNIFER
Say it like that,

JENNIFER and LEAH
like it's easy, like it's
JENNIFER mine.
LEAH yours.

(*Later. The party is thinning out. JENNIFER, still in LEAH's flannel, and LEAH by the door.*)

LEAH: Keep the shirt.

JENNIFER: I'll give it back.

LEAH: I know. That's the point.

Scene 10: Giving Up

Thanksgiving break, 2001. The Whitcomb kitchen. The linen napkins are out for tomorrow.

♪ *Giving Up*

(*JENNIFER is still in LEAH's flannel. MRS. WHITCOMB stands at the counter, her back half turned. At the edge of the light, TEEN JEN holds the spiral notebook.*)

JENNIFER (*spoken*)
Mom. I go by Jennifer now.

MRS. WHITCOMB (*spoken, after a long time*)
Are you sure?

JENNIFER (*spoken*)
Since I was eleven.

MRS. WHITCOMB (*spoken*)
Your father and I are paying for that school.

(*She turns back to the counter. That's the end of the conversation.*)

TEEN JEN (*sung, reading from the notebook*)
why wreck so many lives
when it's over my own strife?
why hike so many miles
to find an absence of smiles?

what can you really do
when you're no longer you?
what can you really do
when no one sees the real you?

(*LEAH's dorm room. LEAH and JENNIFER sit on the bed, not quite touching.*)

LEAH (*spoken*)
I like you. I do. I just don't get why you need all... this.

JENNIFER (*spoken*)
It isn't "this." It's me.

LEAH (*spoken*)
Couldn't you just be you, without it?

TEEN JEN
why does no one understand?
even the most caring never can.
why does it have to be
just family, or just me?

what can you really do
when there are none exactly like you?
what can you really do
when saving family means throwing away you?

(*JENNIFER alone. She takes off LEAH's flannel and folds it, carefully. On the back of a chair hangs the navy blazer from Act One, grown up into a man's sport coat.*)

TEEN JEN and JENNIFER
why must the end always be so near
when you're living a life of fear?

(*She puts the coat on and buttons it, all the way up. From here until #15 she is JEN.*)

TEEN JEN
what can you really do
when your life is through?

JEN
what can you really do
when you have to leave the dock
in a leaky canoe?

(*LEAH comes in, sees the coat, and smiles, relieved. JEN smiles back. It costs her everything.*)

JENNIFER: (*from the piano, to us*) Fifteen years.

Scene 11: Leah and the Boys

Fifteen years go by in a few minutes. The house fills up: a crib, a dog bed, school shoes by the door. The coat hook by the door is empty, because JEN is wearing the coat.

♪ *Leah and the Boys*

(*A small wedding. LEAH in white. JEN in the sport coat, buttoned all the way up.*)

LEAH
I wanted a house with a porch and a swing,
a husband, some kids, all the regular things.

JEN
And I wanted to give you every one.

LEAH
So give me every one.

(*An office. A conference table. JEN at the far end, in the coat. Men talk over her.*)

JEN
Too soft for the table, too quiet to count,
sitting right at the bottom of the corporate mount.

They passed me right over, they locked up the prize,
while the truth was a ghost shining straight through my eyes.

(*A hospital room, 2004. LEAH, exhausted and glowing, hands JEN a baby.*)

LEAH (*spoken*)
Say hi to your son.

(*JEN holds OWEN. The music box tune from the Prologue, very softly. She sings it to him, the first time anyone has sung it.*)

JEN
Little train, little train,
running through the night,
past the hill and past the river,
past the last streetlight.
When you wake up, I'll be here.
When you're grown, you'll still be mine.
I'll leave a light on at the station.
Follow the line.

(*The years go by in the house: birthdays, a dog, a mortgage. LEAH and JEN pass each other in the hallway, close and careful.*)

JENNIFER (*from the piano, now*)
She knew. She'd always known.
We never said it, not once, in all those years.
It sat in the corner of every house we lived in,
like a chair nobody used.

(*2015. A bedroom with a little bed shaped like a train engine. THEO, tiny, is in it. OWEN, eleven, reads in the corner and pretends not to listen. JEN sits on the floor between them.*)

JEN
Little train, little train,
running through the night,

OWEN (*spoken, not looking up*)
Past the hill and past the river.

JEN
past the last streetlight.

(*LEAH in the doorway, watching. She joins in, quietly, on the harmony.*)

JEN and LEAH
When you wake up, I'll be here.
When you're grown, you'll still be mine.
I'll leave a light on at the station.
Follow the line.

(*JEN switches on a nightlight. The music box plays the tune. Something unsaid passes between JEN and LEAH in the doorway. Then LEAH smiles, and turns off the hall light.*)

Scene 12: Another Night

February 2016. The house, late. Everyone else is asleep. JEN sits at the kitchen table in the sport coat, with a stack of bills and a cold cup of coffee. The phone rings.

♪ *Another Night*

(*Across the stage, in a small room in a care home, LOUISE sits in her cardigan, the phone cord stretched as far as it goes.*)

JENNIFER (*from the piano, to the tune of Louise's chorus, slow*)
She wanted to die at home, where she'd be near him.
She said she wanted to go where she knew she'd find him.
They'd moved her somewhere she could be cared for.
She hated every minute, and she never made a fuss.
Then one night she called me, and her voice sounded tired.

LOUISE (*on the phone*)
I don't think I can make it another night.

JEN
It's okay.
I love you.

(*A pause. JEN opens her mouth to tell her something else, and doesn't.*)

LOUISE (*barely*)
Walt's waiting.

JEN
I know.

JENNIFER
She didn't make it another night.

(*LOUISE sets the phone gently in its cradle. At the kitchen table, her chair is the first to go empty.*)

There once was a woman who lived her whole life
with her chin held high and her heart open wide,
believing the people she loved never really die.
And somewhere beyond what I can see tonight,
a woman named Louise walked into the light,
and if Walt was waiting, like he promised he'd be,
I hope he held her close
the way she always believed.

(*The music thins to the piano. JEN alone at the table.*)

JENNIFER
I never told her, and I didn't need to.
She loved me the way that she knew how.
And when she was gone, the house got quiet,
and the quiet said, *It's now.*

One less heart I was scared of breaking,
one less face I'd have to brave.
I'm ashamed of how much lighter it got,
and I'm grateful for the room she gave.

(*JEN looks at the coat hook by the door, still empty. The music box plays two notes and stops.*)

Scene 13: The Bedside

JENNIFER: (*from the piano, to us*) "It's now," I thought. Then it was October.

(*October 2016. A doctor's office. LEAH and JEN in two chairs, holding hands across the gap. A DOCTOR says a word we don't hear. LEAH nods like she already knew.*)

LEAH: Don't tell the boys yet.

JEN: Okay.

LEAH: And don't look at me like that. I'm not dead.

JEN: I'm not looking at you like anything.

LEAH: You've always been a terrible liar.

(*A beat. They both hear it.*)

♪ *Fluorescent Moon*

(*A slow pulse, like a monitor. LEAH in a hospital bed. JEN in the chair beside it, in the coat. Upstage, a lightbox flickers on: a scan. It's JEN's. Nobody looks at it.*)

LEAH
It takes all of your energy.
It saps all of your will.
It turns you into a shell of yourself.
It makes you wonder if you're going to hell.

JEN
The calendar pages lose their shape and blur,
and the war is behind a closed door, and it's hers.
I count her breaths like numbers on a screen,
between the person that she was and what I've seen.

LEAH and JEN
And cancer is a bitch in a sterile room,
weighing out the days beneath a fluorescent moon.
It takes all of your energy.
It saps all of your will.
It turns you into a shell of yourself.
It makes you wonder if you're going to hell.

(*The weeks go fast. The hospital bed is in their house now. OWEN does homework at the foot of it. THEO drives a toy train along the rail.*)

(*November. A small birthday cake on the tray table, one candle. OWEN and JEN sing to LEAH, quietly; THEO claps. Everyone knows it's the last one, and nobody says so.*)

LEAH
Is there an architect behind the static,
or just the random falling of the dice?

JEN
We search the dark for answers in the attic,
and pay the heavy, unspoken price.

(*The lightbox brightens for a moment. JEN glances up at it, then back to LEAH. Nobody reads it.*)

LEAH and JEN
And cancer is a bitch in a sterile room,
weighing out the days beneath a fluorescent moon.

LEAH (*drifting*)
Just a shell.

JEN
A clockwork heart.

(*LEAH sleeps. JEN keeps counting. Then, very quietly, to no one:*)

Cancer is a bitch.

Scene 14: Two Worlds

That winter. Morning. Down the hall, LEAH sleeps in the hospital bed. JEN stands at the kitchen sink with a pharmacy bag. She reads the label twice, runs the tap, and takes the first one. Then she stands there with both hands on the edge of the sink.

LEAH: (*from the bedroom*) You up? Is there coffee?

JEN: (*steady*) Coming.

♪ *Ghost in the Machine*

(*A fast, ticking piano, like a clock or a racing heart. JEN carries trays in and out of the bedroom. The COMPANY fills the house as visiting nurses, neighbors with casseroles, and coworkers on speakerphone.*)

JEN (*fast, witty, conversational*)
Here's your water, dear. Here's the pill for the pain.
Fluff up the pillow, then fluff it again.
Meanwhile, at the sink, with the tap running loud,
a little blue pill that I'm not quite allowed.
I'm refilling the ice chips, I'm signing the forms,

I'm the calm in the middle of seventeen storms,
and the visiting nurse asks how I'm holding up
while my whole chemistry changes in a coffee cup!

It's a marvelous trick of engineering and art:
how to stand completely still while your universe falls apart.

JEN and COMPANY
Oh, you live in two worlds at the exact same time!
One in the red and one in the prime!
One is a costume you wear in the dark,
one is a quiet, immaculate spark!
They see a person who's nodding along,
never suspecting the words to the song:
the invisible woman, the ghost in the machine,
running two timelines that never have met on a screen!

JEN
Act normal, they whisper. Don't rattle the frame.
Just answer to pronouns that aren't quite your name.
It's a wonderful life if you swallow the glass,
and smile and nod till the moment has passed.
I'm drafting a spec for a decentralized hive
while I fold the clean laundry and keep her alive.
It's a high-stakes performance, an Oscar-bound feat:
dressed up as a husband from collar to feet!

It's a marvelous trick of engineering and art:
how to stand completely still while your universe falls apart.

JEN and COMPANY
Oh, you live in two worlds at the exact same time!
One in the red and one in the prime!
One is a costume you wear in the dark,
one is a quiet, immaculate spark!
They see a person who's nodding along,
never suspecting the words to the song:
the invisible woman, the ghost in the machine,
running two timelines that never have met on a screen!

(*The COMPANY melts away. Slow, solitary piano. JEN stands in the bedroom doorway, watching LEAH sleep.*)

JEN
And the hardest part isn't the leap or the fall.
It's knowing the room never noticed at all,
that the man they relied on, the anchor, the stone,
was just a glass house waiting to be overthrown.

LEAH (*half asleep*)
You there?

JEN
Right here.

(*She goes in. She sits. She takes LEAH's hand.*)

It's a marvelous trick of engineering and art:
how to stand completely still
while your universe falls apart.

Scene 15: Again

The Whitcomb living room, that same winter. Linen coasters under the coffee cups. DR. and MRS. WHITCOMB on the sofa. JENNIFER standing, in the coat.

JENNIFER: I need to tell you something. I've told you before.

MRS. WHITCOMB: (*already knowing*) Oh.

♪ *The Winter Coat*

(*Upstage, in her own house, LEAH sleeps in the hospital bed.*)

JENNIFER
I had a perfect picture. I had a sturdy frame.
But every time I smiled, I felt a quiet shame,
like walking in a pair of shoes a couple sizes small
while everyone is clapping 'cause you haven't taken a fall.
You can't explain the feeling. You can't explain the ache.
You just know you're bending, and you're finally gonna break.

So what do you do when the mirror is a lie?
Do you keep the peace for them, or do you fight to stay alive?

Imagine wearing a winter coat in the blazing summer sun,
and everybody tells you that you're the lucky one.
Imagine holding your breath for half of your life
just to play the part, just to avoid the knife.
I didn't change who I was to put on a show.
I changed everything because I just… know.
You take off the coat, or you suffocate in the heat.
I just wanted to stand on my own two feet.

MRS. WHITCOMB
Again?

DR. WHITCOMB
Are you sure?

MRS. WHITCOMB
Is it real?

JENNIFER
Like I need a committee to tell me how I feel.
But you don't ask the drowning if they really need the air.
You don't ask the freezing if they have a spark to spare.

(*She looks upstage, toward LEAH asleep.*)

The hardest part was knowing I might break somebody's heart,
but the only way to save myself was tearing it apart.

(*DR. WHITCOMB stands, and walks out of the room without a word. MRS. WHITCOMB looks at her hands.*)

(*RUTH's kitchen. The cow cookie jar. Late. RUTH, older now, in her bathrobe. JENNIFER in the doorway, still in the coat.*)

JENNIFER (*now, from the piano*)
Then one night she said it out loud,
just her name and nothing more,

JENNIFER (*to RUTH, spoken*)
Jennifer.

JENNIFER (*now*)
and the whole house held its breath,
like the wind had found the door.
Some folks pulled the curtains closed
and never came back around,
but someone took her by the hand

RUTH (*taking her hand*)
There you are.

(*JENNIFER unbuttons the coat, all the way down, for the first time since she put it on. It falls open. She doesn't take it off.*)

JENNIFER
It wasn't some big firework. It wasn't a parade.
It was just the quiet peace of the choice that I made.
It was waking up normal.
It was letting out the breath.
It was choosing to live,
and stepping back from the edge.

Now there's a girl in all the photographs
with that same old crooked grin,
standing easy in the flash of light
like she's always been.

JENNIFER and RUTH
There once was a girl, she was always a girl,
and look at her now, watch those wings unfurl,
'cause you can't cage a gender
any more than you can cage a ghost,

but she's not haunting anymore.
She's here. She's real. She's home.

(*The music settles. JENNIFER looks down at the coat, hanging open.*)

JENNIFER (*spoken, to us, deadpan*)
Error 404: the old man not found.

Scene 16: The Funeral

April 2017. A small chapel: folding chairs, lilies, a framed photo of LEAH laughing. RUTH in her robes. JENNIFER in the front row with OWEN, twelve, and THEO, two. Across the aisle sit the WHITCOMBS and CLAIRE, who don't sit with her.

♪ *Ruth's Blessing*

(*JENNIFER holds LEAH's flannel shirt, folded.*)

RUTH (*spoken, reading*)
For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

(*sung, a plain hymn*)
We see in part, we know in part,
as through a darkened glass,
but someday, face to face, the heart
will know, when this has passed.

Go now in peace, and take your rest,
and set your burden down.
What you saw darkly, you'll see best
when you are homeward bound.

(*JENNIFER steps forward and lays the folded flannel on the coffin.*)

JENNIFER (*spoken, very quietly*)
I said I'd give it back.

(*OWEN takes THEO's hand. Back at the house, LEAH's chair at the table goes empty: the second, after Louise's.*)

RUTH and JENNIFER
We see in part, we know in part,
as through a darkened glass,
but someday, face to face, the heart
will know, when this has passed.

Scene 17: The Club

Not long after. The phone. DR. WHITCOMB.

DR. WHITCOMB: The club's having its spring dinner. Your mother and I would like you there. (*a beat*) Wear a jacket.

(*JENNIFER looks down at the coat, still hanging open. She buttons it, all the way up, one last time.*)

♪ *Sport Coat at the Door*

(*The Pacific Union. Heavy wood, marble, oil-painted fathers. DR. WHITCOMB, at home here. JENNIFER beside him in the coat, buttoned all the way up, because he asked her to wear one.*)

JENNIFER
Heavy wood and marble floors, standing by those heavy doors,
Pacific Union with my dad, wearing clothes that made me sad.
I tried to check my burning coat. A sudden lump caught in my throat.

COAT CHECK ATTENDANT (*spoken*)
Only women do that here.

JENNIFER
They said it, and they made it clear.
So I put it back upon my frame, and walked right into the domain.

Caught between the tailored lines and where I really live,
holding onto secrets that I didn't want to give,
looking for a quiet room, a door that I could close,
to leave that heavy jacket where the coat check never goes.

(*Town and Country, visitors' day. Chintz, soft light, women at tea. MRS. WHITCOMB, guarded, with JENNIFER beside her.*)

Town and Country, visitors' day: beside my mother I found my way.
A women's club, a softer light. For the first time it felt so right.
I sank into the cushions there, breathing in the open air,
but kept it quiet, kept it small, afraid they'd see me after all.

Caught between the tailored lines and where I really live,
holding onto secrets that I didn't want to give,
looking for a quiet room, a door that I could close,
to leave that heavy jacket where the coat check never goes.

(*DR. WHITCOMB alone, in an armchair, looking at a photograph of redwoods.*)

I never made the trip up to the Bohemian Grove
to see the shadows hidden in that private redwood cove,
just a fleeting curiosity I never got to see,
a rite of passage meant for him, but never meant for me.

(*Outside the Pacific Union. JENNIFER takes off the coat, the one she has worn since #10, folds it over the brass rail by the door, and walks away without it.*)

JENNIFER (*spoken*)
Up north, they cremate care, and they keep the world.
I kept the care. I gave up the world.

(*sung, quietly*)
Some doors I never opened.
Some rooms I left behind.
I left that sport coat at the door.
I don't need it anymore.
I found my place.
I found my home.

Scene 18: Hal

JENNIFER at a laptop, late at night. A DOCTOR's voice, from somewhere: "Any family history we should know about?" *She doesn't know. She starts looking.*

Across the stage, a phone rings. HAL answers.

HAL: Hello?

JENNIFER: Hi. This is going to sound strange. I think you might be my father.

(*A long pause.*)

HAL: Is this about a kidney? Because I've only got the two.

(*JENNIFER laughs before she can stop herself. So does he: the same laugh.*)

♪ *Turns Out It's Genetic*

(*A diner booth. HAL, an engineer in a fleece vest, across from JENNIFER. Two coffees. A long, awkward silence. Then HAL tells a joke so filthy we don't hear it, only the end of it. JENNIFER laughs so hard she has to put her coffee down.*)

JENNIFER (*to us*)
Nobody in that house could tell me
where the crooked streak came from,
so I figured I just built it,
like a weird kid builds a drum.

Turns out it's genetic.
Turns out I came by it fair.
I found my father late in life,
and the punchline was already there.
I spent my whole life thinking
I'd invented my own brand of wrong.
Turns out it's genetic.
He's been telling my jokes all along.

HAL
I'm an engineer, of course I am.

JENNIFER
We talked tolerances and code.

Then he told a joke I won't repeat here,
and my mascara overflowed.

HAL
Same timing,

JENNIFER
same raised eyebrow,

HAL and JENNIFER
same "wait, it gets worse" grin.

JENNIFER
I'd been looking for my people,
and the first one let me in.

HAL (*spoken*)
Your people? I was raised on a kibbutz. You've got a lot of people.

JENNIFER and HAL
Turns out it's genetic.
Turns out I came by it fair.
I found my father late in life,

HAL
I found my daughter late in life,

JENNIFER and HAL
and the punchline was already there.

JENNIFER
Now we trade links at midnight
from the back alleys of Reddit,

HAL
the kind of threads you'd never show your mother,

JENNIFER and HAL
and we both swear we never read it.

JENNIFER
Two engineers with a browser history
that ought to be encrypted,
and somewhere there's a family tree
where all of this was scripted.

(*JENNIFER's phone buzzes. Then again. Then again. Around the diner, pools of light come up on three people, each with a phone: TESS, MAGGIE and SAM, her sisters and brother by blood.*)

TESS (*spoken*)
Hi. It's Tess. So, we're sisters. Also, I'm trans. Surprise.

JENNIFER (*spoken*)
...Me too.

TESS (*spoken*)
Shut up. Do you like girls?

JENNIFER (*spoken*)
I married two.

TESS (*spoken*)
Weird. I like boys.

MAGGIE (*spoken*)
Hi! Maggie. That's my wife, waving. She's trans too. It's kind of a family thing.

SAM (*spoken*)
Sam. Gay. Hi.

JENNIFER (*spoken, to HAL*)
Is anybody in this family straight?

HAL (*spoken, a beat*)
About half the time.

JENNIFER, HAL, TESS, MAGGIE and SAM
Turns out it's genetic.
Turns out I came by it fair.
I went looking for my father,
and the whole parade was there.
I spent my whole life thinking
nobody else was built this way.
Turns out it's genetic,
and the whole family tree is gay.

(*The music softens. The phones go dark one by one, until only TESS is left.*)

TESS (*spoken*)
There's one more. A brother. His dad took him. Nobody knows where.

(*TESS's light goes out. JENNIFER and HAL alone in the booth again.*)

JENNIFER (*spoken, to us*)
I've looked. Under the name he was given, there's nothing. (*a beat*) Maybe he changed it. (*a beat*) People do.

JENNIFER
(*slows down, half-spoken*)
They taught me which fork to use.
They taught me how to sit up straight.
But the part of me that laughs too loud
at things I shouldn't?
That one came by mail.
And the part they tried to button up?
Same envelope.
Took half my life to get here.
Postage due.

JENNIFER and HAL (*big finish*)
Turns out it's genetic.
Turns out I came by it fair.
I found my father late in life,
and the punchline was already there.
Nature gave me the punchline,
nurture gave me the shame.
Turns out it's genetic,
and I'm laughing all the same.

HAL (*spoken*)
Don't ask about the subreddits.

JENNIFER (*spoken*)
We don't talk about the subreddits.

(*The diner fades. Later: JENNIFER alone at her laptop. It chimes. An email from HAL, with a photo attached.*)

HAL (*spoken, as she reads*)
Thought you'd want this one. She's one of ours.

(*JENNIFER opens the photo. She looks at it for a long time. Something in it stops her.*)

JENNIFER (*spoken, quietly*)
She looks like someone I knew.

Scene 19: The Photograph

That night. JENNIFER at her laptop, Hal's photo still on the screen. She looks at it for a long time. Then she opens Facebook and types a name.

♪ *The Photograph*

(*JENNIFER alone at the laptop. She opens a message. Types. Deletes. Types again. Sends.*)

JENNIFER (*the We Take Turns melody*)
Then a whole life happened in between,
and I never said your name,
till a photograph in twenty-seventeen
lit it back up like a flame.
I went looking, half afraid
you'd forgotten I was there,

(*Her phone lights up. NORA, grown, across the stage, phone to her ear.*)

NORA (*spoken, no hesitation at all*)
Hi, Jennifer.

JENNIFER
and you answered like the years between
were nothing but the air.

(*A wedding, very small and simple. A few chairs. JENNIFER and NORA face each other. NORA'S MOTHER is marrying them. OWEN and THEO are not there.*)

(*The music falls almost silent. NORA'S MOTHER nods to them.*)

NORA (*spoken, simply*)
I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine.

JENNIFER (*spoken*)
I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine.

(*NORA's family's kitchen. A big table, loud, too many people. One empty chair, already pulled out.*)

JENNIFER
Then I married into kindness I had never known:
a table with a chair already set.
No one asked me where I came from,
just how I'd been, and had I eaten yet.

NORA'S MOTHER (*spoken, pointing at the chair*)
Sit. Have you eaten?

(*JENNIFER sits. NORA sits beside her and looks at the photograph on JENNIFER's phone. She holds the phone up beside her own face. JENNIFER nods. NORA studies it, and nods too.*)

Scene 20: Small Euphorias

An empty jar on the kitchen counter, a handful of coins beside it.

♪ *Small Euphorias*

(*A montage. A coffee counter. A hardware store. A dressing room. A doctor's waiting room. JENNIFER drops a coin into a jar at the end of each one.*)

JENNIFER
Seven-thirty, coffee line,
she wrote my name and spelled it right,
didn't blink and didn't stumble,
and I carried that cup like a light.
Then the guy at the hardware counter
called me "ma'am" like it was plain,
and I sat out in the parking lot
just to feel it once again.

Nobody threw a parade.
Nobody rang a bell.

The barista just got it right today,
and I'm doing pretty well.
Small euphorias,
little lights you carry home.
Nobody else would notice.
That's how you know they're your own.

(*Her FRIENDS crowd in: a trans guy with his phone held out, and a friend in a new dress.*)

My buddy sent a photo
of three hairs on his chin,
like a prospector with nuggets:
"Look what's coming in!"
And my friend found a dress that fit her,
first try, right off the rack.
She spun around the dressing room
and sent me twelve pictures back.

JENNIFER and FRIENDS
Nobody threw a parade.
Nobody rang a bell.
He just texted me his chin hairs,
and we're all doing well.
Small euphorias,
little lights you carry home.
Nobody else would notice.
That's how you know they're your own.

(*A waiting room. A NURSE with a clipboard.*)

NURSE (*spoken*)
Jennifer?

JENNIFER
First time in a waiting room
they called the name I chose,
I stood up like a queen,
and I didn't care who knows.
And some Tuesday, out of nowhere,
the mirror didn't fight,
and I stood there with my toothbrush,
grinning half the night.

(*softer, piano and voice*)
It isn't always like this.
Some days are long and gray.
So I'm saving every one of these
like coins in a jar,
and on the days you can't find any,
you can borrow from mine.

JENNIFER and FRIENDS (*full, joyful*)
Nobody threw a parade.
Nobody rang a bell.
But we're keeping every little thing
we earned so well.
Small euphorias,
little lights you carry home.
On the bad days, borrow mine.
You don't have to shine alone.

Scene 21: Curtains Up

Every window in the house lights up, one after another, until the whole house is blazing.

♪ Curtains Up, World

(*Everyone. NORA, RUTH, CASEY, HAL, TESS, MAGGIE and SAM, the FRIENDS, NORA's family. Every window in the house is lit. Theatrical piano and an operatic vocalise, then the band kicks in.*)

COMPANY
Ah, ah, ah...

JENNIFER
Turn the lights up!

Walking out into the golden glare,
head held high in the midnight air.
They build their walls out of fear and stone,
thinking they can make us feel alone.
But I'm laced in silver, draped in red,
living out every word I said.

JENNIFER and COMPANY
Gown of thunder, boots of chrome,
in my own skin, I am coming home.
Feel the heartbeat through the floor.
We're not hiding anymore!

I'm still breathing! I'm still here!
Unapologetic, crystal clear!
Suit of velvet, heart of gold,
this is a story that WILL be told!
Let the anthem rise, let the thunder roll!
You can't put handcuffs on a living soul!

(*YOUNG JEN and TEEN JEN appear at the back of the house, watching.*)

JENNIFER
For the kid out there in the back of the room,

watching the flowers try to bloom,
for the pioneers who paved the track:
look at us now, there's no turning back!
They bought the stage, but we own the song.
This is where we all belong!

JENNIFER and COMPANY
Gown of thunder, boots of chrome,
in my own skin, I am coming home.
Feel the heartbeat through the floor.
We're not hiding anymore!

(*Operatic piano break. The COMPANY in choir harmony.*)

JENNIFER
Turn the house lights up so I can see
every face that ever looked through me!
Raise your glasses, hold them high!
This one's ours, and so am I!

JENNIFER and COMPANY (*key change, everything*)
I'm still breathing! I'm still here!
Unapologetic, crystal clear!
Suit of velvet, heart of gold,
this is a story that WILL be told!
Let the anthem rise, let the thunder roll!
You can't put handcuffs on a living soul!

JENNIFER
I exist…

COMPANY
We exist…

JENNIFER and COMPANY
Curtains up—

(*Cut. Total silence. The lights snap to a single cold pool. JENNIFER alone in it, a hand at her temple.*)

JENNIFER (*spoken*)
Then a headache in twenty-eighteen that nothing else could touch.

(*Blackout.*)

End of Act One

Act Two: The Empty Chairs

Running staging rule for the act: each loss leaves a chair empty at the table, and nobody moves the empty chairs. THE ADJUSTER is the fear, not an event. He never actually does anything; he lurks at the edge of any scene where Jennifer does anything at all, and writes it down. Later the CREDITORS join him: three figures in dark coats, hunched like vultures on a wire, played by the actors who played the LAWYERS. They never do anything either. THE LANDLORD is different. He writes things down too, in a small ledger, and he does send the bill.

Entr'acte

Instrumental: your theme (the "A Warm Future" stems) flows into Strong as the Tide, Nora's slack-key theme. The hook by the door is empty. The coat is gone. The lightbox from Act One glows faintly upstage.

Scene 22: Open Source

House lights at half. JENNIFER, now, at the piano with the laptop open. She waits for the last latecomers to find their seats.

JENNIFER: (*to the audience*) Everybody back? Good. (*a beat*) Before the break, I told you the parts I'm allowed to tell. (*She glances at the table, at the chairs.*) I've been asked, more than once, to keep the rest in the family.

(*She closes the laptop halfway. Then she opens it again.*)

JENNIFER: Which family?

♪ *Open Source*

(*Dark Americana. A slide resonator, a foot stomp. JENNIFER at the piano, with the laptop open. Behind her, the windows of the house flicker like screens.*)

JENNIFER
Said keep it in the family.
Said keep it off the line.

They said hush now, keep it private,
keep the curtains drawn.
Don't hang it for the neighbors
to see what went on.
But I never learned to bury
what was eating me alive,
so I pushed it to the public,
time-stamped, signed, and archived.

It's open source, it's open source.
Every line of it's there to see.

Clone it, fork it, check the history,
everything they did to me.
Nothing hidden, nothing sealed,
I'm done with the closed-door deal.
It's open source, it's open source,
and the whole world's got the key.

Some say it's dirty laundry.
I say it's evidence.
Hung it out in the daylight
'cause the dark never made it make sense.
Run git blame on the whole damn story,
see whose name comes up on each line.
I didn't write the first commit,
but I'm putting my name on mine.

It's open source, it's open source.
Every line of it's there to see.
Clone it, fork it, check the history,
everything they did to me.
Nothing hidden, nothing sealed,
I'm done with the closed-door deal.
It's open source, it's open source,
and the whole world's got the key.

Yeah, I know it's not a clean look.
I know it costs me too.
A bleeding heart on a public server
ain't the smartest thing to do.
But a secret kept is a debt compounding,
and I'm done paying in the dark.
So check the log, every line of it,
and see who left the mark.

It's open source, it's open source.
Every line of it's there to see.
And if they want to fork it, let 'em
tell their side as open as me.
Nothing hidden, nothing sealed,
that's the only honest deal.
It's open source, it's open source,
and I'm finally breathing free.

No closed source.
Not anymore.

Scene 23: Silver Tongues

2018. A headache clinic in Chicago: a narrow bed, an IV pole, the blinds drawn against the light. JENNIFER lies with an ice pack over her eyes. NORA sits beside her with a paperback she isn't reading.

JENNIFER: (*from under the ice pack*) You've been in that chair all week.

NORA: (*not looking up from the book*) We take turns.

JENNIFER: (*to us, without lifting the ice pack*) In 2018 I had a headache nobody could stop. There's a clinic in Chicago for those, so that's where Nora and I were. (*a beat*) That's the year they took my boys.

(*Across the stage, in a cold pool of light, the kitchen table. The WHITCOMBS and CLAIRE sit down at it. A folder slides across to them: JENNIFER's medical records. DR. WHITCOMB opens it and reads, nodding, as if it says what he already thought.*)

♪ Silver Tongues

(*A courtroom made of the kitchen table: the WHITCOMBS and CLAIRE on one side, JENNIFER alone on the other. Behind the WHITCOMBS stand the LAWYERS, in beautiful suits, singing in close, smooth harmony like a barbershop quartet that bills by the hour.*)

LAWYERS
In the matter of the minors…
in the best interest of the children…
the petitioners would show…

JENNIFER
The fever finally broke, but it took the house down with it.
I know the words I threw had jagged edges.
I was fighting shadows, lost inside a storm,
but underneath the madness, a bitter truth was born.
I own the mistakes I made when my mind was ripped apart,
but it doesn't change the way you chose to hollow out my heart.

LAWYERS
…a pattern of instability…
…the medical record speaks for itself…

JENNIFER
Now the halls are quiet, and the gavel's put away.
You bought the finest silence that the silver tongues could pay.
You took the only light I ever really needed to see,
and you're lucky that this sickness took the fight right out of me.
The winter came too early, and the fire is burning low.
I'm laying down my armor, and I'm letting it all go.

(*The fog comes in, and time slips. On the floor, the KEEP CLEAR box glows faintly, the way it did after the accident. A driveway, a car with the engine running. A COUSIN buckles THEO, three, into a car seat. He holds a toy train.*)

They didn't go together. They went on different days.
I don't remember all of it. It's lost inside the haze.
The little one went first, by car, his engine in his hand.
He waved it at the window like he didn't understand.

(*The car pulls away. One chair at the table goes empty.*)

(*Another day. An airport curb, gray light. OWEN, thirteen, with a backpack and a boarding pass.*)

Then Owen, on a later day. They put him on a plane,
thirteen, and old enough to know, and too young to explain.
I don't remember what I said. I know what I meant to say:
I love you, and it isn't you. I'll leave the light on. Okay?

(*He goes. A second chair goes empty.*)

JENNIFER
You painted me the villain, and I guess the canvas dried,
but we both know the secrets that the expensive papers hide.
There's a difference between a monster and a soul that's worn and sick.
You saw the cracking foundation, and you took a heavy brick.

LAWYERS (*overlapping*)
In the best interest of the children...

JENNIFER
Now the halls are quiet, and the gavel's put away.
You bought the finest silence that the silver tongues could pay.
You took the only light I ever really needed to see,
and you're lucky that this sickness took the fight right out of me.

LAWYERS (*a perfect, ringing chord*)
So ordered.

(*A gavel. JENNIFER alone at the table with the empty chairs.*)

JENNIFER (*spoken*)
I own the mistakes.

(*The WHITCOMBS and CLAIRE stand, gather their coats, and push their chairs in neatly. They go without looking back. Their chairs stay where they are, empty.*)

JENNIFER: (*to us*) I want to be clear about one thing, because they weren't. When they took my boys, I was sick. I wasn't crazy. After they took them, I was an angry, depressed woman who'd lost her kids. Who wouldn't be? (*a beat*) Post hoc, ergo propter hoc: after this, therefore because of this. I came apart after they took my boys, so they decided that's why they took them.

Scene 24: Birthdays

Months later. The table is just a table again, with more empty chairs than full ones. NORA sets a small cake in front of JENNIFER, lights the one candle, kisses the top of her head, and leaves her alone with it.

JENNIFER: (*from the piano, to us*) Every birthday, I make the cake anyway. The first year, Nora asked who it was for. I said, "Whoever comes."

♪ *Frozen in the Light*

(*A cake with one candle. JENNIFER alone at the table. Upstage, OWEN and THEO appear, frozen at the ages they were when they left: thirteen and three. They don't move.*)

JENNIFER
Every year your birthday comes,
and I light a candle all the same.
The calendar says you're grown now,
but you're still small inside the frame.
Somewhere someone with your name
is blowing candles out tonight,
and I'm grieving my baby and his brother,
frozen in the light.

You can't bury someone breathing,
so the funeral never ends.
There's no stone to lay my flowers on,
no casseroles from friends.
Every time I think it's scarred,
the date comes round again,
and I lose you like the first time.
The funeral never ends.

(*Under the next verse, the cello plays the lullaby from #11, slow and out of shape.*)

I try to picture you taller,
with a deeper voice, a stranger's face,
but my mind just hands me back
the two of you in the same place:
my baby in his little train bed,
who never left my side,
and his brother growing up too fast
with a grief too big to hide.

You can't bury someone breathing,
so the funeral never ends.
There's no stone to lay my flowers on,
no casseroles from friends.
Every time I think it's scarred,
the date comes round again,
and I lose you like the first time.
The funeral never ends.

And people say, "At least they're living,"
and I know that that is true,
but in my head you haven't aged a day,

the way only the dead do.
Hope keeps the wound from closing.
It pulls the stitches every spring.
And I'd rather bleed forever
than stop hoping anything.

(*Strings out: voice and piano only. She speaks to the frozen boys.*)

I'm not telling you to hurt you.
None of this is yours to hold.
I just need you to know you were missed
every year that you got old.

You can't bury someone breathing,
so the funeral never ends.
There's no stone to lay my flowers on,
no casseroles from friends.
Every time I think it's scarred,
the date comes round again,
and I lose you like the first time.
The funeral never ends.

(*Cello alone.*)

Keep growing,
even where I can't see.
I'll keep grieving.
That's a trade I'd make again.

(*She hums the lullaby. It breaks off before the last line.*)

Little train, little train…
I'll leave a light on at the station…

(*She can't finish it. She blows out the candle.*)

Scene 25: The Football

The Iowa kitchen. The phone rings. NORA looks at the screen and hands it to JENNIFER without a word. JENNIFER puts it on speaker.

JENNIFER: Hi. (*a breath*) Is this about the boys?

♪ *Good Grief*

(*Across the stage, CLAIRE on her phone, warm and certain, holding a football.*)

CLAIRE
A couple months.
Just till things settle down.

When you get out to Seattle,
we'll bring the boys around.

JENNIFER
And I believed you every time,
'cause what else could I do?
I backed up, took my running start,
and I ran straight at you.

And you held it so steady,
you looked me in the eye,
and at the very last second…

(*CLAIRE pulls the football away. JENNIFER lands flat on her back.*)

You pulled the football, Lucy,
the way you always do,
and I'm flat on my back in the cold again,
looking up at you.
Every season, every promise,
every "this time, I swear,"
I ran with all I had left,
and nothing was there.

I think some days you meant it.
I think you wanted to.
But you never wanted children
till the children came to you,
and then you couldn't let them go,
and couldn't say it plain,
so you'd set a date, and move the date,
and move the date again.

CLAIRE (*sweetly, holding out the football again*)
Next month. I swear.

JENNIFER
And you held it so steady,
you looked me in the eye,
and at the very last second…

You pulled the football, Lucy,
the way you always do,
and I'm flat on my back in the cold again,
looking up at you.

(*A FOR SALE sign. Boxes. NORA taping them shut.*)

So we sold the house in a hurry,
took whatever they would pay.
A realtor and a falling market
picked our bones along the way.
We ran so fast for Seattle

that we never saw it clear.
We got there with nothing in our hands,
and the boys were never here.

Now you sleep fine in a house full of noise,
and I sleep in a house with none.
I blow out the candles on their birthdays
for the both of them, one by one.

(*Piano and voice.*)

Everybody knows the story.
Everybody's watched me sprawl.
But nobody loves the one holding the football.
They love the kid who ran at all.

You pulled the football, Lucy,
the way you always do,
and I'm flat on my back in the cold again,
looking up at you.
Every season, every promise,
every "this time, I swear,"
I ran with all I had left,
and nothing was there.

(*CLAIRE walks off with the football. JENNIFER stays on the floor. NORA sits down next to her.*)

JENNIFER: (*flat on her back, to the ceiling*) Good grief.

NORA: Want a hand up?

JENNIFER: Not yet.

NORA: Okay.

(*She lies down on the floor next to JENNIFER instead. They look up at the ceiling together.*)

JENNIFER: (*to us, still on the floor*) Something you should know about those years. Somewhere in all the headache treatments, they put me on an anti-seizure medicine called Keppra. In some people it causes rage. It did in me, for months. Nobody connected it to the pill, because I'd just lost my kids, so of course I was angry. Everybody thought I was bitter. (*a beat*) I was bitter. But the rage came out of a pill bottle, and it took us forever to figure that out.

Scene 26: The Dream Job

Seattle. A small apartment, boxes still taped shut. JENNIFER on the phone. NORA watching her from the doorway, not breathing.

JENNIFER: Yes. Yes, Monday's fine. Thank you. (*She hangs up. To NORA:*) I got it.

NORA: The—

JENNIFER: The one.

(*NORA screams. They jump up and down like idiots in the middle of the boxes. Then JENNIFER stops.*)

JENNIFER: What do I wear?

(*NORA glances at the empty hook by the door. A beat. They both laugh, hard.*)

♪ *Spy in the Boys Club*

(*Seattle. A glass-walled conference room, a whiteboard, a bowl of free snacks. JENNIFER on her first day, with a badge. The OFFICE MEN snap their fingers on two and four; a slinky upright bass creeps underneath.*)

JENNIFER
I had the tailored uniform. I knew the secret knock.
I stood inside the inner circle, listening to the talk.
When the heavy doors were closed and the ladies left the room,
I saw the way you operate through the whiskey and the gloom.
I nodded at the punchlines. I memorized the code,
a perfect double agent on a heavy-shouldered road.

You handed me the keys to the kingdom of the men,
but I was planning my escape before the meeting could begin!

'Cause I was the spy in the boys' club, standing by the wall.
I saw the golden pedestal. I saw the way it falls.
I had the golden ticket, the unearned benefit,
but the armor was a cage, and the jacket didn't fit!
So I left my deep disguise hanging on the leather chair
and walked right out the fortress with the wind in my hair!

(*An OFFICE MAN takes the marker out of her hand and explains her own diagram back to her.*)

Now I'm standing on the outside, and it's funny how it goes:
you're explaining my own expertise directly to my nose.
I lost the automatic nod, the quiet right of way,
the VIP invisible pass I carried every day.
But baby, I don't miss it: the ego and the musk,
the posturing and pacing from the morning till the dusk.

I handed back the keys to the kingdom of the men,
and I wouldn't trade the loss to be a ghost in there again!

'Cause I was the spy in the boys' club, standing by the wall.
I saw the golden pedestal. I saw the way it falls.
I had the golden ticket, the unearned benefit,
but the armor was a cage, and the jacket didn't fit!
So I left my deep disguise hanging on the leather chair
and walked right out the fortress with the wind in my hair!

(*Bluesy, dissonant piano. A dramatic pause.*)

Yeah, it costs a little capital to take a different door.
You don't get the benefit of the doubt anymore.

But the freedom of the exit? Oh, it's worth the sudden drop
when you finally stop pretending you're the ruler at the top.

(*A snare roll into a brassy cabaret strut. Piano and guitar trade solos. The OFFICE MEN try to keep up.*)

JENNIFER and OFFICE MEN
'Cause I was the spy in the boys' club, standing by the wall!
I saw the golden pedestal. I saw the way it falls!
I had the golden ticket, the unearned benefit,
but the armor was a cage, and the jacket didn't fit!
So I left my deep disguise hanging on the leather chair
and walked right out the fortress with the wind in my hair!

JENNIFER (*the bassline creeps back, quiet*)
So go ahead and lock the door.
Have your little meetings.
I already know the playbook, boys.

(*spoken, cheeky*)
Your secrets are safe with me… mostly.

Scene 27: The Man on the Rock

Some time later. The work badge sits on the kitchen table. JENNIFER, in a robe, with a heating pad, signs a form. Then another. Then another.

(*A knock. THE LANDLORD at the door, warm. He says something kind that we don't hear and shakes JENNIFER's hand. She thanks him. He goes, and on the step, out of her sight, he takes a small ledger from his coat and writes a line.*)

JENNIFER: (*to us*) When I got sick, the landlord took eight hundred a month off the rent. We thought it was a kindness.

JENNIFER: (*from the piano, to us*) Long-term disability. You pay into it every month and never think about it, the way you never think about the fire extinguisher. Then one day you pull the pin, and it turns out the fire extinguisher has questions.

(*Upstage, a single fluorescent tube flickers on over a desk. THE ADJUSTER sits down, opens a file, and clicks his pen.*)

JENNIFER: He's never called me. He's never written. He's never flagged a thing. (*a beat*) I'd know him anywhere.

♪ *Javert in a Cubicle*

(*A lonesome harmonica and a slow, galloping train-beat. JENNIFER at the kitchen table with a three-foot stack of forms. Upstage, THE ADJUSTER at his desk, under a single fluorescent tube.*)

JENNIFER
I paid my premiums for years like a law-abiding fool,

then I got sick and filed my claim, just like it says in the rules.
Now a man up on the Rock has got my number on his desk,
and he's been dogging me for years like I'm a fugitive at best.

He's Javert in a cubicle.
He's the law without the badge.
He don't care if I'm dyin';
he just wants his money back.
I'm Valjean with a claim number.
Every year he finds my trail.
I could die here in this bed,
and he'd ask for proof by mail.

THE ADJUSTER (*reasonable, tired, sincere*)
I've got eleven hundred files and a mortgage of my own.
Somebody has to read the fine print. Somebody has to phone.
You'd be amazed at what people claim, and what a camera shows.
I'm not the villain in this story. I'm the one who knows.

JENNIFER
What if he sees a track go up one Saturday, five minutes, drag and drop?
He'll never see me in my bed, just a timestamp on a laptop.
He'll write, "The claimant's highly capable," from a number on a screen,
like five minutes on a good day makes a full-time working machine.

(*As she sings, others gather at the edge of the light around THE ADJUSTER's desk: THE LANDLORD with his ledger on "the roof," and on "the debt," the CREDITORS, three of them in dark coats, hunched like birds on a wire. They watch the deposit with him.*)

Seventy-two hundred a month. That's what keeps the lights on here.
That's the roof and the meds and the debt we've carried years.
And every month I hold my breath until the deposit clears,
'cause one man with a pen could make the whole thing disappear.

He's Javert in a cubicle.
He's the law without the badge.
He don't care if I'm dyin';
he just wants his money back.
I'm Valjean with a claim number.
Every year he finds my trail.
I could die here in this bed,
and he'd ask for proof by mail.

In the old book, the convict met a bishop at the door,
got the silver and the candlesticks, and a chance to live once more.
Me, I got a form letter and a file that's three feet wide,
and a man who reads the fine print like there's mercy hid inside.

(*Voice and harmonica only.*)

But you know how that story ends.
The hunter never wins.

Valjean dies a free man
with the people that he loves,
and the inspector's just a footnote
nobody's thinking of.

(*Full band, defiant.*)

He's Javert in a cubicle.
He's the law without the badge.
He don't care if I'm dyin';
he just wants his money back.
Well, I'm Valjean with a claim number,
and I'll die before I fail,
and when I'm gone, tell the Rock
I sent my proof by mail.

THE ADJUSTER (*spoken, deadpan, not looking up*)
Claim status: pending.

JENNIFER (*spoken*)
Still pending.

Scene 28: The Old Scans

A doctor's office. NORA and JENNIFER in two chairs, holding hands across the gap, the way JEN and LEAH sat in Act One. A DOCTOR with a folder.

DOCTOR: It's thyroid cancer. And it isn't new.

JENNIFER: I was checked. After Leah died, they checked me for everything.

DOCTOR: For the common ones. This kind has its own markers, and nobody ran them. So we went back to your imaging from back then, to compare.

NORA: And?

DOCTOR: Can I show you something?

♪ *Alive in the Breeze*

(*Upstage, the lightbox from Act One flickers on, with the same faint high tone. The same scan. Now a DOCTOR points at it.*)

JENNIFER
My biggest fear isn't dying, or facing the dark alone.
It isn't burning in a fire, but the fire inside the bone.
I don't need a crystal ball to see the writing on the wall.
I know where this road is leading. I can hear the final call.

(*A soft, steady military snare. A trumpet plays the theme.*)

I don't want to wallow, but it's more than I can take:
the wailing man down the hall, a ghost I cannot shake,
a tortured cry that only heavy ketamine could break,
a vision that will never clear, a constant ringing in my ear.
I'm forced to live in the shadows of a factory of fear.

I just hope that when it reaches deep inside,
I'll be allowed to step off of the ride,
to claim my death with dignity, to face it standing tall.
Before the fire breaks me, let me answer my own call.
Bury me beneath a tree, right there upon the beach,
where the crashing of the ocean is always in reach.
Let me find my peace. Let me find my release.
Alive in the roots, alive in the breeze.

(*The trumpet theme returns, warmer. JENNIFER looks up at the lightbox.*)

They went back to the old scans, the ones from Leah's year,
and there it was in black and white, as plain as it is here.
I'd been sitting by her bedside, counting every breath she drew,
and the thing that's killing me was on a lightbox in full view.
They checked me for the usual, for every common sign,
but nobody thought to look for this, and it grew there, line by line.

(*French horns, swelling strings.*)

Now I must stare down the fortress alone,
face the heavy cannons mounted in stone.
This is my Fort Wagner, the final wall to climb.
Death with dignity is not a coward's crime!
I take back my surrender! I draw the battle line!

(*The full trumpet theme, soaring and mournful, over strings and snare.*)

I just hope that when it reaches deep inside,
I'll be allowed to step off of the ride,
to claim my death with dignity, to face it standing tall.
Before the fire breaks me, let me answer my own call.
Bury me beneath a tree, right there upon the beach,
where the crashing of the ocean is always in reach.
Let me find my peace. Let me find my release.
Alive in the roots, alive in the breeze.

My life meant something. My words leave a trace.
Beneath the coastal tree, my resting place.
Salt in the air. Roots in the sand.
I took the ending back into my hand.
Alive in the breeze.

(*A last, distant trumpet note. The sound of waves.*)

Scene 29: The Crossing

JENNIFER: (*from the piano, to us*) This part is hard to tell, so I'll tell it plainly. For four years after they took my boys, I was angry and sad, and that was all it was. Then, in 2022, the cancer got into my head, and a few of the medicines they tried for it made it worse. I stopped eating. Then I stopped drinking. They put me in the psych unit to keep me safe until the surgery, and all I could think was: if they keep me here too long, I'll miss it, and then I'll die for sure.

(*The psych unit, night. A bare room: a bed, nothing on the walls, a meal tray untouched. JENNIFER alone on the bed, very still. The chair beside it is empty: the same chair JEN sat in beside LEAH.*)

(*A NURSE, played by the actor who played LOUISE, comes down the hall and looks in.*)

THE NURSE: Jennifer? (*She's beside her in a second. Then, toward the hall, louder:*) I need somebody in here!

(*Light floods the room: a code team, fast and calm.*)

♪ *The Crossing*

(*A hospital alarm. A flatline tone that becomes a single harp note. The hospital dissolves into mist and a black river. JENNIFER stands on the shore in a hospital gown.*)

JENNIFER
I stand where the living and dead collide,
chaos behind me, peace on the tide.
The weeping of earth on the mortal shore,
but the water is still forevermore.
The mist is heavy, the air is cold,
a dream of a crossing for the brave and the bold.

(*Dark contrabass, sharp harp plucks, a tolling bell. THE FERRYMAN poles out of the fog, a tall figure in gray. He holds out his hand.*)

Through the fog, the hollow prow appears,
carrying the weight of a thousand years.
Ancient Charon holds out his hand
for the silver price to leave this land.
I place the coin in his withered palm,
trading the storm for the endless calm.

(*The boat moves. The COMPANY, as souls at the oars, row in rhythm: sweeping cellos, timpani.*)

COMPANY
Row, push through the shadowed deep,
over the river of dreamless sleep.
The dark water ripples, the harp strings cry
beneath the dome of a starless sky.
Row through the sorrow, row through the night,
moving away from the fading light.

(*Dance: "The Dark Oars" from Journeying the Styx. The far shore comes into view. On it, waiting, are LOUISE, in her cardigan, and LEAH, well again, in her flannel.*)

(*The boat touches the far shore. LEAH looks at JENNIFER: at her face, her hair, all of her. For the first time, she sees her.*)

LEAH (*spoken, slowly*)
Jen?

JENNIFER (*spoken*)
It's me.

(*A long moment. LEAH reaches out, and stops just short of touching her face.*)

LEAH (*spoken*)
Go back.

LOUISE (*spoken*)
Go on, kiddo. Somebody's calling you.

(*From behind, far off, the way you'd hear someone through a wall: NORA.*)

NORA (*offstage, the We Take Turns melody*)
We take turns.
It's my turn.
Come home.

JENNIFER (*slowing, rubato; a solo violin*)
Your voice, a phantom through the veil,
a weeping song, a fragile sail.
To cross the river ends the pain,
but leaving you is bitter rain.
I hold the coin. I look across
and weigh the quiet against the loss.

I see the shores of the peaceful gray,
but a tether pulls my soul away.
I dream of the crossing. I long for the rest,
but the mortal breath beats in my chest.
It is not my time to step on the sand.
I must let go of the ferryman's hand.

(*She lets go. THE FERRYMAN withdraws. LEAH and LOUISE fade into the mist.*)

I turn my back on the quiet deep.
I choose the waking. I leave the sleep.
I pull the thread through the heavy night,
away from the ferryman's fading light.
I take the breath. I take the pain.
I come back to your arms again.

(*A gasp: the first breath. The hospital alarm resolves into a steady beep.*)

Scene 30: Ice Cream

Later. Morning light. The steady beep of a monitor.

♪ *Six Month Bites*

(*A hospital bed. JENNIFER opens her eyes. THE NURSE, played by the actor who played LOUISE, leans over her.*)

THE NURSE (*spoken*)
There you are. Stay with me, now. They've got ice cream on four.

JENNIFER
Cancer took me to the brink,
stole my ability to think.
Gave up on eating, gave up on drink,
took it all the way to a code blue line.
When I came to, I saw an angel's eyes,
a nurse's face in a plain disguise,
an ethereal stare, a divine design.
She talked me into staying for ice cream in time.

THE NURSE (*spoken, holding out a little paper cup and a wooden spoon*)
Come on, kiddo. Chocolate or vanilla?

JENNIFER (*spoken*)
...Both.

(*NORA in the doorway, still in her coat, out of breath. She sits on the bed.*)

JENNIFER
Now I'm taking life in six-month bites,
counting up the days, pushing through the nights.
Life is hard, but I'm still standing here,
writing code and music, facing down the fear.
Every single day with my wife by my side,
another chapter written, and the book's still open wide.

Remember the man in the bed next door,
a ketamine drip just to quiet the roar,
bone metastases taking their toll?
I promised myself I'd keep control.
So every new scan is the Big Wheel spin,
a game-show smile while they wheel me in:
a few more months of fear and debt,
or the beginning of the end we haven't met yet.

JENNIFER and NORA
Now I'm taking life in six-month bites,
counting up the days, pushing through the nights.
Life is hard, but I'm still standing here,
writing code and music, facing down the fear.
Every single day with my wife by my side,
another chapter written, and the book's still open wide.

JENNIFER
One day I'm fine, the next I'm in the dark,
looking for a reason, looking for a spark.
Dignity in the exit if the pain gets too deep.
Until that day comes, I've got promises to keep.

Six-month bites.
Just another day with my wife.
Another line of code.
Another song.
Still here.

Scene 31: Fine

JENNIFER: (*from the piano, to us*) Here's what nobody tells you about almost dying. Afterwards, you still have to buy groceries.

♪ Fine, How Are You?

(*Bright twin fiddles, a bouncy two-beat swing. A grocery store. JENNIFER with a basket. A FRIEND swoops in for a hug by the frozen peas. Somewhere in the background, THE ADJUSTER pretends to read a cereal box.*)

JENNIFER
Ran into an old friend by the frozen peas.
She hugged me hard and said,

A FRIEND
Oh, honey, tell me, please,
how've you been? It's been forever! What is new?

JENNIFER
So I looked her in the eye, and I told her true:

I'm fine! How are you?
Lost the house, lost the plot,
and the dog moved in with the realtor too.
Oh, I'm fine! Don't you worry,
I'm just peachy through and through.
I'm fine, fine, fine.
How are you?

(*A pharmacy counter. A PHARMACIST counting pills. THE ADJUSTER behind a display of reading glasses.*)

Then the pharmacist was counting out my pills
like a blackjack dealer dealing out a hand of ills.

A PHARMACIST
How's your day been, hon?

JENNIFER
With a friendly little wink,
and I said, "Oh, gosh, let's see now, I think..."

I'm fine! How are you?
Got a scan lit up like a pinball machine,
and a bill so big it's got a zip code too.
Oh, I'm fine! Don't you worry,
I'm just peachy through and through.
I'm fine, fine, fine.
How are you?

(*Hot fiddle solo, then steel. THE ADJUSTER is caught dancing and stops.*)

(*THE LANDLORD sidles up, tears a page from his ledger, and tucks it into JENNIFER's basket. She reads it: thirty thousand dollars. She folds it very small, puts on her biggest smile, and carries on.*)

(*The sidewalk. A NEIGHBOR flags her down.*)

Then my neighbor flagged me down, said she'd had an awful week:

A NEIGHBOR
Broke a nail, the Wi-Fi's slow, and the faucet's got a leak!

JENNIFER
So I dropped my bags right there and I took her by the hands,
said, "Oh, sweetie, that's so much. Sit down. I understand."

(*Slows down: voice and steel guitar, sincere. To us.*)

'Cause "fine" is just a door you close real kind,
so nobody has to see the mess inside.
Most folks only want the short reply,
and honey, that's all right.
But if you ask me twice, and you mean it too,
pull up a chair, I'll put the coffee on for you.
It's a long one.
I'll tell you true.

JENNIFER and COMPANY (*full swing, extra bright*)
I'm fine! How are you?
Lost the house, lost the plot,
and the dog sends Christmas cards from the realtor's too.
Oh, I'm fine! Don't you worry,
I'm just peachy through and through.
I'm fine, fine, fine...

JENNIFER (*stop-time, spoken, gentle, to the audience*)
No, really. How are you?

(*The band kicks back in for a big swing ending.*)

COMPANY
Fine, fine, fine!

JENNIFER (*spoken, chipper*)
Okay, bye! Love your shoes!

Scene 32: The Pad Thai

Night. The couch. JENNIFER finishes the last bite from a takeout container, glances at the lid, and freezes. Written on it in Sharpie: NORA'S. Down the hall, a door closes. Quietly.

JENNIFER: (*to us*) So I did what any grown woman would do.

♪ Lawyer Up, Hit the Gym

(*JENNIFER on the couch with a laptop and an empty takeout container. A lone concertina.*)

JENNIFER (*spoken, deadpan*)
Long-time lurker, first-time poster.
On mobile, sorry for formatting.

(*Boots stomp in. The COMPANY floods on as THE INTERNET: a pub full of strangers with opinions and pints.*)

Throwaway account for obvious reasons.
Me and my wife go way back, you see.
We've weathered every storm and every season,
and she's the best thing that ever happened to me.
Well, last night I ate the last of her pad thai,
and she's been kinda quiet. I can't figure why.
So I'm asking all you good people of the thread:
A-I-T-A? And here's what they said:

THE INTERNET
Lawyer up! Hit the gym!
Delete your Facebook, the outlook's grim!
There's red flags flying from every mast!
N-T-A, so divorce her fast!
Way, hey, hit reply!
Nine thousand strangers say kiss her goodbye!

JENNIFER
Then the replies came rolling in like thunder,
nine thousand upvotes by the break of day.

A STRANGER
INFO: did she label it? What'd the lid say?

JENNIFER
A fella made a timeline and a pie chart.
Somebody's cousin had the same thing happen.

ANOTHER STRANGER
Now she's living in a van out in Spain!

ANOTHER STRANGER
This is how it starts, mate!

JENNIFER
And I scrolled until I couldn't feel my brain.

THE INTERNET
Lawyer up! Hit the gym!
Delete your Facebook, the outlook's grim!
There's red flags flying from every mast!
N-T-A, so divorce her fast!
Way, hey, hit reply!
Nine thousand strangers say kiss her goodbye!

JENNIFER
Edit: wow, this really blew up.
Edit two: my inbox is a war.
Edit three: no, I'm not gonna leave her.

(*Stop-time. NORA is in the doorway.*)

Edit four: she's standing at the door.

(*Voice and concertina, sincere.*)

But you don't know her, internet.
You weren't there in the waiting rooms.
She stayed through every year that fell apart
when anyone else would've moved.
And you want me to leave her over noodles?
Pal, I'm lucky that she's here.
So I'm logging off to buy her a double order,
and I'll be groveling for a year.

(*THE INTERNET hushes. A comment gets pinned.*)

NORA (*spoken, reading it off her own phone*)
Hi, it's the wife. She's an idiot. I love her. She owes me two.

THE INTERNET (*triumphant*)
Y-T-A! Y-T-A!
Buy her dinner, and buy it today!
Take them red flags down off the mast!
Hold on to that woman, and hold on fast!
Way, hey, hit reply!
Nine thousand strangers just changed their reply!

JENNIFER (*spoken, deadpan*)
Final edit: she ate my fries.
We're even.
Thanks for the gold, kind stranger.

Scene 33: We Take Turns

Friday evening. Their kitchen. On the laptop, the service from their temple streams with the sound turned low. Two mugs. NORA holds a pill bottle at arm's length, then close up, then at arm's length again.

NORA: They print these smaller every year.

JENNIFER: They don't.

NORA: I know.

♪ *We Take Turns*

(*JENNIFER takes the bottle gently and reads the label to her. NORA lets her.*)

NORA (*the Thirteen melody, from her side now*)
We were thirteen at Danny's party,
and you stood against the wall.
You were the first thing I was sure of.
You still are, after all.

JENNIFER and NORA
And we take turns.
When I can't stand, you hold me up.
When you fall, I'm there.
We take turns carrying
what neither one can bear.
Nobody keeps the score here.
Nobody's paid or owed.
We just take turns, love,
down the same long road.

JENNIFER
You stayed the year they took the kids.
You stayed when I came apart,
when the cancer and the medicine
made a stranger of my heart.
You could have walked a hundred times.
There were doors in every wall.
And every time you stayed, love,
like you never saw them at all.

And I've held the crutches twice now,
both ankles, one by one.
I've sat in all the waiting rooms
till the waiting rooms were done.
And now the light is leaving,
and you're scared of where it goes,
so I'll learn to tell you colors:
every yellow, every rose.

NORA
Don't you make me out a hero.
I've been scared the whole way through.
I spent senior year on a lifeline,
learning how to talk to you.
When they took the boys, I stayed because
I'd have hated to be gone.
Now the light is going out on me,
and you're the one who keeps it on.

JENNIFER and NORA
And we take turns.
When I can't stand, you hold me up.
When you fall, I'm there.
We take turns carrying
what neither one can bear.
Nobody keeps the score here.
Nobody's paid or owed.
We just take turns, love,
down the same long road.

(*Stripped back: voice and piano.*)

JENNIFER
I lost my mind, and you kept it for me
till I could find my way.
You're losing the light, so I'll keep it for you
and read it to you every day.
Thirteen years old, I let you go.
I'm never doing that again.

NORA
I know.

JENNIFER and NORA (*full band and strings*)
So we take turns.
When I can't stand, you hold me up.
When you fall, I'm there.
We take turns carrying
what neither one can bear.
Nobody keeps the score here.
Nobody's paid or owed.
We just take turns, love,
all the way home.

JENNIFER
I've got you.

NORA
You've got me.

JENNIFER and NORA
We take turns.

Scene 34: Hope

JENNIFER: (*from the piano, to us*) This next one isn't mine to sing.

(*She gets up and leaves the piano bench empty.*)

♪ *Hope*

(*Night. A hallway. At the end of it, a small room with nothing in it yet. NORA alone in the doorway.*)

NORA
The dust is settling in the hallway light,
a silhouette where shadows used to play.
I found you in the mist one hard night,
still holding onto everything you never got to say.
My fingers trace the timber of the floor,
counting the breaths between the latch and door.

But hope is not a ghost I'm chasing down.
It's the pulse beneath the ash and stone.
It's the only name that keeps me on this ground,
a hollow branch that's turning back to bone.
I'll let the bitter river turn to gold,
and find the summer in the winter's cold.

I used to build the fences high and thick
to keep the memory from the morning frost,
but every clock I tried to keep or kick
just showed me what I'd gained within the cost.
Now I'm walking with the weight upon my back,
turning every canyon into a track.

But hope is not a ghost I'm chasing down.
It's the pulse beneath the ash and stone.
It's the only name that keeps me on this ground,
a hollow branch that's turning back to bone.

(*JENNIFER comes down the hall and stands with her.*)

NORA
It wasn't a choice to lose the light.
It was the dark that chose my name.
But I'll be the spark within the night,

NORA and JENNIFER
turning the sorrow back to flame.
Let the sky open up its arms to me!

NORA
But hope is not a ghost I'm chasing down!
It's the pulse beneath the ash and stone!
It's the only name that keeps me on this ground,
a hollow branch that's turning back to bone!
I'll let the bitter river turn to gold,
and find the summer in the winter's cold.

Hope.

(*The light holds on NORA in the doorway of the small room.*)

(*A beat. NORA goes to the table and sets a small chair beside her own. JENNIFER comes back to the piano. Neither of them says anything about it.*)

Scene 35: The Letter

Morning. JENNIFER comes in with the mail and sorts it standing up: bill, bill, catalog. Then an envelope that stops her cold. Upstage, THE ADJUSTER's fluorescent tube flickers on, and the CREDITORS lean in with him. She turns the envelope over and reads the return address. The tube goes dark, and they settle back.

JENNIFER: (*relieved, almost laughing*) Oh, thank God. It's just work.

(*She sits down to open it.*)

♪ *Before I Broke*

(*JENNIFER opens it. A VOICE reads it, pleasant and corporate.*)

A VOICE (*spoken*)
We regret to inform you that your position has been eliminated as part of a restructuring.
We thank you for your contributions.

(*Slow, intimate piano. JENNIFER alone.*)

JENNIFER
There once was a time
when I was brave.
Then the world happened,
and something inside me gave.

For all the good it did,
I walked as far as I could,
and if I had it all to do again,
I know I never would.

I've come so far. I've lost so much.
So many names cut into stone.

It's too heavy to look back at all,
so I keep my eyes locked on the road,
and I don't dare turn an inch.

'Cause before I broke, I would have believed
that life had hope, that it all had meaning,
that love was a wall nothing could get through,
that the ones you love can't be torn from you.
Before I broke.
Before I broke.

Then I got sick, and they took the boys.
It all came down without a noise.
Now I trudge on with my broken wife,
two mourners at the wake of our own life.

I've come so far. I've lost so much.
It's too heavy to look back at all,
so I keep my eyes locked on the road,
and I don't dare turn an inch.

'Cause before I broke, I would have believed
that life had hope, that it all had meaning,
that love was a wall nothing could get through,
that the ones you love can't be torn from you.
Before I broke.
Before I broke.

(*Strings, low toms, the voice straining.*)

I lost my dream job, then all my dreams.
I lost my house, my dog, my family.
Lost everything that ever meant a thing to me.
Now I'm broken, and I'm waiting to be free.

(*Quiet.*)

Before I broke, I would have believed
that life had hope, that it all had meaning.

(*NORA comes in, without a word, and takes her hand.*)

But some nights her hand finds mine in the dark,
and for a moment I almost believe,
like I did before I broke.

Scene 36: Break Me

Continuous. Under the door slides another envelope. Then another. Then a knock: THE LANDLORD, the same warm smile. He opens his ledger, tears out a page, hands it to JENNIFER, and goes.

JENNIFER: (*reading it; to us*) He kept score. Thirty thousand, when he called it due. (*a beat*) Sixty, now.

♪ *Break Me*

(*A hammer rings on stone. A slow, heavy foot stomp. The COMPANY hums low, like a chain gang. JENNIFER still has the letter in her hand.*)

JENNIFER
Here comes another letter:
"We regret to inform you…" Yeah, I know.
I'd paper every wall with 'em
if I still had a wall to call my own.
You want the job? Already gone.
You want the house? Sold it for a song.
Come and take whatever's left,
but bring a thimble. It won't take long.

I already heard the crack.
I already hit the ground.
So tell me where you're gonna knock me
when I'm already all the way down.

So go on and break me.
Go ahead and take your swing.
I'm already in pieces,
and you can't break a broken thing.
You can't sink me past the bottom.
You can't drop me through the floor.
So go on and break me.
What're you waiting for?

You ever see a bottle shatter
on the edge of a hardwood bar?
It don't come out any weaker.
It just learns where its edges are.
So swing again; I'll scatter
glass and gravel, grit and sand.
You want to break me any smaller,
you'll need a smaller hammer in your hand.

I already heard the crack.
I already hit the ground.
So tell me where you're gonna knock me
when I'm already all the way down.

JENNIFER and COMPANY
So go on and break me.
Go ahead and take your swing.
I'm already in pieces,

and you can't break a broken thing.
You can't sink me past the bottom.
You can't drop me through the floor.
So go on and break me.
What're you waiting for?

(*Drops to voice and a lone slide guitar. Sincere.*)

JENNIFER
Before I broke, I had so much to lose.
I'd lie awake and count it every night.
Now there's nothing left to guard,
and I'm sleeping just fine.
They say rock bottom like a curse,
but I'd been falling for so long,
it's the first thing in years that held,
the first ground I could stand on.

JENNIFER and COMPANY (*full band, stomping, the gang answering*)
So go on and break me.
Go ahead and take your swing.
I'm already in pieces,
and you can't break a broken thing.
I'm standing on the bottom,
and it's solid to the core.
Already broken. Unbreakable.
What're you waiting for?

(*The stomp stops. One last hammer ring.*)

JENNIFER (*spoken, deadpan*)
Take your time.
I ain't goin' anywhere.

(*CLAIRE appears, holding the football out, sweet as ever. JENNIFER looks at it. The Good Grief melody, on piano alone.*)

JENNIFER
So keep the football, Lucy.
Keep the whole damn field.
I'm done running at a promise
that was never real.
I'll keep my love for them instead.
That's one thing you can't pull away.
You can keep the football, Lucy.
I'm walking off today.

(*She walks off the field. CLAIRE is left holding the ball.*)

Scene 37: Highly Capable

A Saturday. JENNIFER in bed with the laptop. Upstage, THE ADJUSTER under his tube, turning pages.

JENNIFER: (*to us*) Every time I post a song, I write his letter for him in my head. I've written it a hundred times. (*a beat*) You want to hear it?

♪ *Highly Capable*

(*A chicken-pickin' Telecaster lick. The lights go gaudy, like a game show. THE ADJUSTER gets up from his desk and strolls downstage like a host. The COMPANY wear T-shirts that say HIGHLY CAPABLE.*)

JENNIFER
Say a letter comes from the Rock, and I read it lying down.
Says a man who's never met me thinks I'm the hardest worker in town.
He saw a song go up one Saturday, five minutes, click and send,

THE ADJUSTER (*reading, delighted with himself*)
"The claimant's highly capable."

JENNIFER
Well, why thank you, friend.

I've been called a lot of things,
but never that before,
so I had it printed on a T-shirt,
and I wore it to the store.

(*Stop-time.*)

Well, I wore it to the door.

JENNIFER and COMPANY
'Cause I'm highly capable.
It's written in my file.
I can lie in bed for twenty hours
and do it with some style.
I can drag and I can drop
for five minutes in a row.
I'm highly capable, honey.
The insurance told me so.

JENNIFER
I can rate my pain from one to ten, and I've never once said one.
I can fill the same form fourteen times and thank 'em when I'm done.
I can beat a childproof bottle on the second or third try,
and I walked out to the mailbox, made it back by the Fourth of July.
Used to run a server farm for a company you know.
Now I run a heating pad on medium, nice and slow.

I've been called a lot of things,
but this one's here to stay,
so I put it on my LinkedIn,

(*Stop-time.*)

and I took a nap that day.

JENNIFER and COMPANY
'Cause I'm highly capable.
It's written in my file.
I can lie in bed for twenty hours
and do it with some style.
I can drag and I can drop
for five minutes in a row.
I'm highly capable, honey.
The insurance told me so.

JENNIFER
By his math, five good minutes makes a full-time working week,
so I'm an Olympic diver every time I hit the sheets.
And I bet there's a fella with a camera in a Buick down the block,
and if I take the trash out on a Tuesday, that's CrossFit on the clock.
And he's counting all the energy drinks they air-drop by the crate,
so he's sure I'm running a tech incubator where the founders all work late.
But the truth is, it's enough caffeine to kill an elephant dead
just to keep me up till noon, and by one I'm back in bed.

(*Drops to voice and pedal steel. Sincere. The game-show lights fade.*)

And the thing is, he ain't wrong.
I'm capable. Just not the way he thinks.
I can take the worst year of my life
and make it something you can sing.
I had five good minutes Saturday,
and I didn't waste 'em, see.
I spent every one on a song for you.
Put that in the file for me.

JENNIFER and COMPANY (*full band, rowdy, gang vocals*)
'Cause I'm highly capable.
It's written in my file.
I can lie in bed for twenty hours
and do it with some style.
I can drag and I can drop
for five minutes in a row.
I'm highly capable, honey,
and now the whole world knows.

(*The fantasy pops. Plain light. THE ADJUSTER is back at his desk, reading something else entirely. No letter. JENNIFER in her own bed, the laptop on her knees.*)

JENNIFER (*spoken, to us*)
It never came.
Not yet.

Scene 38: The Notebook, Again

A closet. NORA drags out a cardboard box that has been in every closet they've ever had and sets it down in front of JENNIFER. On the side, in old marker: SCHOOL.

NORA: Keep, toss, or pretend we never saw it?

JENNIFER: (*already opening it*) Keep.

(*NORA leaves her to it.*)

♪ *Unspoken Cost*

(*Felt piano alone. JENNIFER finds the spiral notebook. She opens it. TEEN JEN is suddenly at a school desk again, writing, three feet away.*)

JENNIFER
I found you in a notebook
on the edge of the night,
an English class assignment
with the sources cited right.
They asked for Yeats and Shakespeare,
so you let them hold the door,
and you slipped the truth right past them.
Nobody looked for more.

You said behind you stood a man
with his morals all in place.

TEEN JEN (*soft, not hearing her*)
Behind me lies the life of a man…

JENNIFER
You never once called him "I," love.
You never gave him your face.
One road was happiness, you wrote,
the other, innocence lost,

TEEN JEN
To one side lies happiness at unspoken cost…

JENNIFER
and you set the word "unspoken"
right in front of "cost."

You didn't need me to tell you.
You already knew the toll:

the ones who raised you turning cold,
the name, the work, the home,
the stares, the pointing fingers,
the thing you feared you'd be.
You knew exactly what it cost,
and you walked on through to me.

And for five minutes, sweetheart,
nobody looked twice.
I moved through rooms like water.
I was no one, and it was nice.
Then a headache in twenty-eighteen
that nothing else could touch.
They gave me steroids by the handful,
and they gave me far too much.
The face I'd walked through fire for
went somewhere I can't find.
You got your wings for five minutes,
then only in my mind.

Now I hold it through the movie,
and I hold it on the drive.
I count the stick-figure doorways
like it's how I stay alive,
'cause somewhere there's a man who thinks
that room is his to keep,
and you saw him coming too, love,
back when you couldn't sleep.

(*Strings out. Voice and piano. TEEN JEN looks up, as though she almost heard something.*)

You asked the night to hide you,

TEEN JEN
Oh, sweet night, hide me in your cloaked arms…

JENNIFER
to carry you into the dark.
It did.
You were right about the dark.
You wrote it's nobler to take the arrows

TEEN JEN
'Twas nobler to bear the slings and arrows…

JENNIFER
than to hide behind a smile.
You were right. I took them,
every single mile.
Three years after the car,
and you wrote better than you knew.

(*Full strings, swelling. The two melodies at once.*)

JENNIFER
I won't tell you it was worth it,
and I won't say it was wrong.
You saw every stone along the road,
and you walked it all along.
I'm the one you were afraid you'd be,
and I'm the one you'd choose.
You knew exactly what it cost,
and you walked on through.

TEEN JEN (*at the same time*)
Behind me lies the life of a man,
morals intact, skills in demand.
Ahead is a fork in the road,
and I will take the road less traveled.

(*The instruments fall away. For the first time, TEEN JEN looks straight at JENNIFER, and sees her.*)

TEEN JEN
Here I stand.

JENNIFER
Still here.

Scene 39: Carry Me

Night. JENNIFER at the table with the notebook closed in front of her. Her phone buzzes. Then again. Then again.

JENNIFER: (*reading*) Ruth: "Called and got your voicemail. I'll keep calling." (*Buzz.*) Casey: "Mom says call her. Also, call me." (*Buzz.*) Nora's family, the group chat: "Sunday dinner. Have you eaten? Doesn't matter. Come eat." (*Buzz.*) Hal: a link, and "Don't open this at work." (*a beat*) I don't work.

(*She opens it anyway, and laughs: the same laugh as his.*)

(*She puts the phone face down and looks around at the empty chairs. She doesn't cry. She almost laughs.*)

♪ *Carry Me*

(*JENNIFER at the table with the empty chairs. Around the edges of the stage, in their own pools of light, far away and close at once: NORA, RUTH, CASEY, NORA's family, HAL, and TESS, Jennifer's sister by blood. Behind them, at the very edge of the dark, the CREDITORS. Each time one of Jennifer's people sings, the CREDITORS back away a step, until they're gone.*)

JENNIFER
I was born to a mother who didn't choose me,
signed away to strangers from the start.

Then the ones I learned to call my own let go,
and they took my children with my heart.
There's no stone that bears their names,
no grave to lay a flower on.
How do you grieve the ones still breathing
who decided you were gone?

Then I married into kindness I had never known:
a table with a chair already set.
No one asked me where I came from,
just how I'd been, and had I eaten yet.

JENNIFER, NORA, RUTH, CASEY and NORA'S FAMILY
And they carry me
when I can't carry on.
They carry all that's left of my life
when everything else is gone.
Not by blood, but by choosing,
every single day,
they carry me,
and they won't walk away.

JENNIFER
I went looking for my blood when the doctors needed answers.
I saw my own eyes in a stranger's face.

(*HAL lifts a hand. Beside him, TESS does the same. Past them, at the far edge, three more pools of light: MAGGIE, SAM, and one with nobody in it.*)

Then I lost them almost faster than I found them.
Just my father and one sibling hold that place.

(*MAGGIE's and SAM's lights go dark. The empty one stays lit.*)

Now there are stones that bear their names,
and I lay the flowers down.
I found my blood just long enough
to lose it to the ground.

ALL
And they carry me
when I can't carry on.
They carry all that's left of my life
when everything else is gone.
Not by blood, but by choosing,
every single day,
they carry me,
and they won't walk away.

JENNIFER
If they ask me who my people are,

I won't answer them with blood.
I'll name every one of you

(*spoken, looking at each of them in turn*)
Nora. Ruth. Casey. Hal. Tess.

who stayed, and called it love.
'Cause I was never chosen,
not once, not by my own,
till you gathered up my pieces,
and you carried me home.

ALL
And you carry me
when I can't carry on.
You carry all that's left of my life
when everything else is gone.
Not by blood, but by choosing,
every single day,
you carry me,
and you never walk away.

JENNIFER
You carry me.

ALL
All that's left of me.

JENNIFER
You carry me
home.

(*The pools of light around the edges fade, one by one, until NORA is the only one left. She comes to the table and sits down beside JENNIFER. At the far edge, the empty light is still on. Nobody turns it off.*)

Scene 40: The Lights

Evening. NORA sets the table: two plates for the two of them, and two more at the chairs by the door. She doesn't say anything about it. Far upstage, at the very edge of the light, THE LANDLORD waits with his ledger. Nobody looks at him. JENNIFER goes to the front door, opens it, and props it open.

NORA: Leave it?

JENNIFER: Leave it.

♪ *I Left the Lights On* (*Finale*)

(*JENNIFER and NORA sit side by side. Every other chair is empty: Louise's, Leah's, the small one for Hope, the Whitcombs', Claire's, and the two by the door, set with plates: Owen's and Theo's. The hook by the door is empty. A few soft celesta notes, like the music box.*)

JENNIFER (*to the two chairs by the door*)
It was never your fault, not any of it.
You were never too much to keep.
And I never stopped loving you, not for a day,
not awake and not asleep.
They took the chance to tell you,
so I said it the only way:
one song at a time, and I left them here
for whenever you find your way.

And you won't have to knock.
There'll be nobody home.
But I left the lights on
in every song I wrote.
Whatever you were told,
whatever you decide,
it's all still here, love.
Come inside.

(*Louise's melody, from #3. NORA hums it under her.*)

She'd say Walt was waiting, just like he said he'd be,
and thirty-two years was nothing to eternity.
Well, I'm waiting too, as long as I'm allowed,
and when I'm not, the songs will wait.
They're waiting now.

(*Strings out. Voice and piano.*)

I know what it is to knock on a door
and hear nobody come,
so I built you a house out of all that I was,
and I left every light on.

(*Strings return, warm, not loud. One by one, the windows of the house light up. YOUNG JEN and TEEN JEN appear in two of them.*)

JENNIFER and NORA
So you won't have to knock.
There'll be nobody home.
But I left the lights on
in every song I wrote.
If you came late, you're not too late.
Whatever you decide,
it's all still here, love.
Come inside.

(*The music box plays the lullaby. JENNIFER sings it, very simply, to the two empty chairs. NORA takes the harmony.*)

JENNIFER
Little train, little train,

running through the night,
past the hill and past the river,
past the last streetlight.

JENNIFER and NORA
When you wake up, I'll be here.
When you're grown, you'll still be mine.
I'll leave a light on at the station.
Follow the line.

(*Piano alone.*)

JENNIFER
The lights are on.
Come in.

(*Instead of a blackout, the house lights come up, slowly, all the way, on the audience. The stage stays lit too. Nobody turns anything off. The door stays open.*)

End of Play

Song registrations

Every number is registered with ASCAP (Mulein Studios). Theaters can use these work IDs for performance reports and cue sheets.

#	Song	ASCAP work ID
P	I Left the Lights On (Prologue)	940070363
1	Trainwreck	940102965
2	The Mirror	940103031
3	Louise	940103063
4	Thirteen	940103074
5	Keep Clear	940103097
6	The Notebook	940103124
7	Road Less Traveled	940103146
8	June Snow	940103167
9	The Party	940103192
10	Giving Up	940103211
11	Leah and the Boys	940103239
12	Another Night	940103260
13	Fluorescent Moon	940103280
14	Ghost in the Machine	940103304
15	The Winter Coat	940103309
16	Ruth's Blessing	940103313
17	Sport Coat at the Door	940103336
18	Turns Out It's Genetic	940103363
19	The Photograph	940103388
20	Small Euphorias	940103414
21	Curtains Up, World	940103436
22	Open Source	940103475
23	Silver Tongues	940103502
24	Frozen in the Light	940103525
25	Good Grief	940103561
26	Spy in the Boys Club	940103998
27	Javert in a Cubicle	940104029
28	Alive in the Breeze	940104048
29	The Crossing	940104072
30	Six Month Bites	940104101
31	Fine, How Are You?	940104116
32	Lawyer Up, Hit the Gym	940104131
33	We Take Turns	940104144
34	Hope	940104166
35	Before I Broke	940104180
36	Break Me	940104201
37	Highly Capable	940104215
38	Unspoken Cost	940104226
39	Carry Me	940104269
40	I Left the Lights On (Finale)	940104317