

A GAME CALLED DYING:
PLAYING WITH DEATH AND FAMILY THROUGH PLAYWRITING

by
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A THESIS

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What follows is a creative thesis examining the process of playwriting as a form of self-exploration. This thesis includes an investigation of my experiences with research, the writing process, experimentation, and reflection in order to utilize the artistic process of playwriting to answer questions about my internal world.

This thesis also includes the end result of this process – a full-length original play entitled *A Game Called Dying*. The play serves as an artistic response to my question regarding my childhood and lifelong fascination with vampire literature and aesthetic.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Play: A Synopsis	4
The Vampire: A Human Monster	6
Vampires in the Theatre	9
Beginning the Play	13
Casting the Characters	17
Levity and Gravity	19
Writer's Block	24
"Conclusions" - The End?	28
A Game Called Dying	31
Inspiration Crayon Drawings	99
Bibliography	100

Introduction

We practice research and experimentation in order to expand our own personal understanding of the world and to impart what we find to others after us. We must be driven by our own curiosities as well as an urge to contribute our part to the collection of human discoveries. We hope that what we find will continue on after us; that we will continue living through our realizations. To an extent, the pull of immortality motivates us to leave our mark. In some ways, research stems from our anxieties about life's impending conclusion.

But the universe is vast, stretching outwards as well as inwards. Topics of research need not always focus on the external, as a universe just as vast and complex inhabits each of us, waiting for exploration. As an artist and student of the theatre, my course of research entails thematic and self-investigation through the development of an original theatrical work. Most academic fields utilize processes of experimentation, data collection, and interpretation; theatrical art is no different. Though we traditionally draw harsh lines between empirical experimentation and artistic experimentation, the only real difference lies in our goals. Science, history, and mathematics delve into the intricacies of the outside world – the external stimuli of our past, present, and future. We are hungry to comprehend the world we inhabit.

Equally infinite, complex, and worthy of experimentation is our internal world; that of our elations, biases, and anxieties. Perhaps even that same anxiety that motivates us to leave something behind after we are gone. Often this internal

world can be alarming, terrifying, and illogical. An artist's task, however, is to explore this world, and communicate what he finds through his art. Just as a scientist offers up her results for corroboration, an artist seeks to gain validity by finding harmonies between the varying internal worlds of his audiences. Artistic process in this case *is* the experimentation. The theatrical product is the data. With this thesis, I aim to analyze the data and my process.

Every person contains a multitude of stories that are hilarious, terrifying, and strange. From an early age, I was fascinated by vampires. I never knew if it was something I randomly grasped a hold of, or whether there was something deeper. As a child of 5 or 6 I drew countless crayon drawings of Dracula in all manners of styles. "Christmas Dracula," "Thanksgiving Dracula," and even "St. Patrick's Day Dracula." From preschool until today, I have owned an age-appropriate black cape and fangs. I know this is odd. I also know that this is one of my stories I need to tell: comical, chilling, and weird. As I got older I continued to enjoy vampire books and movies, and eventually started to intellectualize what I found interesting about them. For much of my life, however, this was unconscious: a fascination with fear and death for my entire cognitive life.

For this reason I chose to write an original script for the stage as an exploration of these concepts. I also wanted to contribute to an underdeveloped genre in modern theatrical production while addressing my own personal stakes. A major component of this introduction will explore the playwriting process. Playwriting is a difficult thing because it involves a certain level of blind or

impulsive creativity combined with heavily thought out plot structuring and research. For a play to stand out as “unique” it must be aware of its own context in terms of genre and theatre history. If the playwright has enough contextual literacy, the play can operate as a dialogue with other works in the field, despite attempting to be “unique.”

Nothing is truly unique; it has all been done before. But it is the job of the playwright to understand what moves him and how that passion and those ideas relate to what others have already contributed. Here is where dramaturgical research becomes important. Knowing who you are in a conversation with, across time, can help hone what you want to say with your own work. Additionally, the more information you compile, the more moments of creativity arise out of connections you find personally, historically, and thematically.

As I have grown into a theatre artist, I have learned to examine my own person through the creation theatrical art. I chose to focus on this life-long fascination through drama and research in order to find an answer to my question: How can I utilize the process of playwriting to investigate my own internal world? Specifically with this play, I sought to find out why I am fascinated with fear and the undead. What follows is my theatrical experimentation and exploration into this part of my internal world through the process of playwriting.

The Play: A Synopsis

Before delving into my experience with this process, I think it will be valuable to give a synopsis of the following script. In my play, *A Game Called Dying*, children serve as a microcosm for the issues of human animalism and misunderstood mortality. The play explores the vampire mythos in the context of the modern family drama. We follow two young girls; long orphaned and recently placed under the care of an earnest young couple. The new parents try their best to raise these girls who seem obsessed with play-acting morbidly violent situations. The man's mother comes to visit the girls for the first time, becoming attracted to and invested in their apparent vampirism, obsessively attempting to attain that same sense of belief in order to escape her own fear of death.

Eventually, we see that it is the children's sense of play that, in fact, has kept them alive for centuries. To the mind of a child, it is not logical for a person to cease living. If a friend pretends to die while playing a game, she can easily sit up and play a different game afterwards. Under this assumption, why would you ever bury a person in the ground and walk away? It is all a game, after all. But there is a difference between what a child can believe and what an adult can. The play alternates back and forth between this main narrative plot and several "shifts" in which the characters play a simple family-game while meditating on various issues relating to vampirism. Age and plot dissolve temporarily for these moments in service of opening up thematic discussion, and contributing to the operating metaphor of "play." I have intentionally left these shifts open so as to complicate

both the reality and the nature of the main narrative. By the end of the play, only the girls remain alive, still under the assumption that they have been playing a game throughout.

The Vampire: A Human Monster

To understand where my play falls in the context of its genre, and so as to facilitate a dialogue with previous works dealing with similar tropes and themes, I have investigated the history of the vampire in literature. While countless examples of vampires exist in cultures throughout history, I will constrain my discussion to the literature that has contributed to the modern, western conceptualization of the monster. As this play is an investigation into my personal interaction with the genre, I am restricting my research to the exposure I had during my formative years. This exposure did not include a wide array of cultural perspectives or variance, but at the same time does owe homage to an historical development of the vampire in western literature. For this reason, I will limit myself only to those myths, stories, and media rooted in European and American concepts that directly influenced my playwriting. Sorting through the differences and histories of alternate narratives would depart from the root of my investigation.

The vampire has undergone many transformations and evolutions throughout his history, but the attention to blood, life, and death have remained consistent markers of the vampire tradition. In his book, *The Natural History of the Vampire*, Anthony Masters describes how “many primitive peoples believed that the soul was contained in the blood and it is therefore not difficult to see why they then considered the divine spirit to be the blood of a god” (Masters 153). By externalizing the idea of life into a physical fluid, primitive people sought a way to

manipulate and have control over death. If people die through loss of blood, it stands to reason that procuring more blood would yield more life.

The lust for eternal life, and/or the fear of death has served as a motivator for humans throughout time to find a way around it. In tandem with advances in science and medicine pushing to extend life expectancy, literature has responded to this human tendency with the vampire. As Erik Butler puts it in his exploration of the vampire's transition through literature and film, "the vampire mediated between inside and outside, past and present, and served as an object onto which more general anxiety could be displaced" (Butler 13). Butler's analysis hinges on the notion that the vampire's ability to adapt to evolving culture has solidified its consistent appearance throughout history. Behind this adaptive quality lies the character's effectiveness at personifying our anxious relationship to our own mortality.

The history of the vampire in literature taps directly into our human fears: those of carnality, moral structure, and death. Here, I define fear as the panicked retreat from what we do not understand or cannot control. In this way, the vampire is a monster constructed from our own humanity. Butler explains that "many scholars, observing general apprehension about the dead, have inferred that the vampire is the emanation of some deep-seated truth common to all mankind – an archetype" (Butler 12) Not truly an amorphous "it," he is much more human than he appears. He alarms us because he emphasizes our own proximity to the bestial, the cruel, and the impermanent.

These things inform us, and yet we do not fully understand them. While the vampire arose from folkloric superstitions regarding the anxieties and mysteries of postmortem decay, the monster persists today because he continues to give a face to that which we try to ignore within ourselves. Butler echoes this when he explains how, “by creating non-human – indeed, inhuman – others, humans have long sought a way to reassure themselves that their own identity can be preserved” (Butler 9). We create a “monster” that sustains itself upon our deepest fears so as to externalize them into something we can observe and manipulate in much the same way that primitive cultures attached the idea of life-force to external and tangible blood.

Vampires in the Theatre

We like vampires because they put us into contact and communication with our basest impulses: sexuality, violence, hunger for power, fear of the unknown. Experiencing these qualities as entertainment allows us to engage our fears at a safe distance and possibly come to terms with a fuller conception of humanity. This includes good and bad, angelic and demonic, humane and monstrous. This is why, from Bram Stoker's *Dracula* onward, the vampire has not vacated our psyche, rather he finds new ways to adapt to our changing culture and modes of entertainment. Reinventing the mythos to apply to various niches allows a wide array of viewers to connect more fully to that part of us we would like to ignore. Butler argues that the vampire's constant reshaping engages us because, "instead of giving us a stable enemy, the vampire belongs to multiple worlds, including our own. It therefore reflects an anxiety that we, perhaps, do not know at all who 'we' are" (Butler 9). The intricacies of our make-up combined with our hesitancy at the prospect of confronting our whole selves suggests that in order to know ourselves more fully and find out who "we" are, someone or something must provide a push.

For me, this push can come from the theatre. Dealing with monsters, blood, and darkness on stage, my mind turns to Antonin Artaud, an influential and controversial French dramatist who developed the concept known as the Theatre of Cruelty. He argued that, in regard to theatrical expression, "it is in order to attack the spectator's sensibility on all sides that we advocate a revolving spectacle which instead of making the stage and auditorium two closed worlds, without

possible communication, spreads its visual and sonorous outbursts over the entire mass of the spectators” (Artaud 86). This concentration on the possibilities of heightened communication and experience in the theatrical space makes a strong case to return the vampire to the stage.

Artaud's brand of aggression sought to expose audiences to offensive, violent, and obscene images and experiences in order to create a “believable reality which gives the heart and the senses that kind of concrete bite which all true sensation requires. In the same way that our dreams have an effect upon us and reality has an effect upon our dreams, so we believe that the images or thoughts can be identified with a dream which will be efficacious to the degree that it can be projected with the necessary violence” (Artaud 85). While I am not advocating for Artaud's extremity, his theory has overlap with the idea of the vampire play. The visceral experience of finding yourself confronted with violence and darkness in a shared space can have a profoundly stronger impact than reading a book or watching a film. It seems as if these more pervasive manifestations of the vampire in recent history exist because we feel the need to put a safe distance between ourselves and our monsters. I worry that the vampire is at risk of losing his ability to vicariously engage with our baseness. He has become too close to our deluded sense of humanity.

Modern popular works have removed almost all moral ambiguity, associating vampires with a sense of teenage abstinence. No longer is the vampire frightening or a symbolic exploration of carnality and anxiety. Instead, these new

vampires operate as vehicles for self-deception and denial of our animalistic side, in fact working against their original function. They are vegetarians, apologists, and reformed. Speaking of early film adaptations, Masters explained how “the vampire has been reduced to a figure of fun in the theatre. It was only the early cinema that was to revive him fully and to restore the ridiculed vampire to his former state of demonic power” (Masters 219). Early stage adaptations mostly followed the narrative of John Polidori's original story *The Vampyre*, which introduced the aristocratic and attractive vampire in 1819. However, many of these stage adaptations became farcical, comedic and melodramatic to the point where the character did not inspire fear until he transitioned into a new medium with the advent of film.

However, since becoming a major trope in film, there have been very few modern incarnations of the monster on stage. At the current moment, it is my opinion that a similar phenomenon has occurred with film today. The vampire has morphed from a monster populating horror films to an erotic fantasy almost unrecognizable when compared to his early incarnations. Masters states that “most...modern vampires are psychotic and have abandoned the traditions of their forebears. It is much more likely for your twentieth-century vampire to be a pallid-faced little man with a greasy tie and carpet slippers living in the suburbs than a Gothic monster” (Masters 235). My solution is to bring the vampire back to the stage. The shared space, not as popularly attended as it was before the advent of the motion picture has the potential to inspire fear again. Queuing off of ideas like

Artaud's, I believe that the theatre can inspire the visceral response the vampire character has been lacking through his development in modern literature and film. You can easily close a book or turn off a television. The physical presence and shared space of live theatre creates a more evocative experience that just may help renew the vampire's ability to terrify and engage our mortal anxieties.

Beginning the Play

As I began thinking about my thesis, I was sure about my medium, everything after that was a huge mystery. I knew that I wanted to write a new play as part of my thesis, but I also had no idea what topic I wanted to cover. I began past writing projects because I had come up with an idea that I wanted to write about. This time was different, because instead of writing from some initial inspiration, I started with the need to write a play before I knew what kind of play I wanted to write.

While studying theatre in London during the spring term of 2013, I continued my struggle to settle on a definitive topic. Seeing so many shows in such a short amount of time populated my head with ideas and inspiration, but almost to the point of supersaturating. I found it difficult to settle upon any one concept. Finally, in the midst of a casual conversation with a friend, I brought up my childhood obsession with vampires. She joked that I should I write my own vampire play. Though an off-hand comment, the idea began to grow on me. Almost no other theme or motif has followed me for quite so long as the undead. Additionally, I have had an interest and relationship with vampires throughout my life from a variety of perspectives. I had engaged the topic as a child playing dress-up as well as a critical adult, analyzing the themes of the genre, and everything in between.

But deciding on a topic doesn't necessarily mean you can start writing. Having seen or read so many vampire stories, the idea of writing my own original

and unique one became a daunting task. So much of the vampire genre recycles old archetypes and predictability. At the same time I knew that there was something deeply personal about the topic for me, and digging into that could take me in the correct direction. The topic I chose was not an original one. Plenty of writers have innovated, copied, and beat the genre to death long before I ever got my first pair of glow-in-the-dark fangs. I did not want to write another tired and unoriginal story that had all the same tropes, scares, and turns. Writing in relation to a specific genre is difficult, because there are certain elements that must be present, but there must also be some new departure that establishes originality. The trick is to find out which to keep and which to alter. Without an original perspective, why write it? It has already been done.

The key came after a conversation I had about acting with my advisor, Professor John Schmor. While teaching his course in the Meisner Acting Technique, he often tells a personal story about one of his friend's sons. As the story goes, this little boy began playing a “dying game” with his brother. The brother would pretend to be dead, while the other would cry over his “dead” body. When his parents encountered him weeping near his brother, they were extremely concerned, only to find that the whole thing was just a game. The story aims to underscore the level of commitment to the imaginary that we possess as actors. Children may find it easier to commit to the imaginary at the level, but we still have that potential.

While a circumstance might not be real, believing in them fully can bring the actor or the child at play to the same level of emotional involvement as if they were real. As Sanford Meisner defined it, “acting is *living* under imaginary circumstances” (Meisner 178). The actor details the imaginary situation, and then responds honestly and truthfully to the circumstances. In this case, the boy playing the “dying game” reached a level of emotional investment by committing to the imaginary circumstance that his brother was dead.

While John's point in telling this story served to support the acting technique I was learning in class, the connection between this little boy and my own childhood set my mind spinning towards a possible scenario to begin writing my play. As a child I had played a few games that may have seemed questionable to an adult onlooker.

I remember playing a game of pretend in pre-school, where I was Dracula and my friend was the devil. My dad arrived to pick me up just in time to find me prostrating myself before my friend, swearing my fealty. He asked me what I was doing, and I excitedly explained to him how, since I was Dracula, I prayed to the devil. To me this was not an instance of dark fantasy or even a question of morality, but purely a logical conclusion. If “good” people prayed to “God” then “monsters” prayed to the “devil.” These concepts were merely costumes, color palates, styles. I didn't need to understand the full context of what I was saying or doing, but with the details I knew, I fully committed to my “prayers” to what I only

saw as a stylistic inversion. In fact, I was rather proud of myself that I had been able to take the intellectual leap to arrive at this realization.

But upon describing my “game,” my dad suggested that I play something else. That this “isn't a good game.” Asking him about this instance now, he does not remember it as any kind of upset to him as a parent at the time, but for me, it stands out in my memory as a major shift in my understanding right and wrong, and the ramification of certain aspects of imagination. It was a major moment where I aged in some small way, even for an instant. Up until that moment I felt innocent, free, and explorative. Creative even. After finding out that I had played a “bad” game, certain things began align along moral lines. I caught my first view of an adult perspective on “should”s and “shouldn't”s.

What else is a vampire but a creature that does not operate within the constraints of right and wrong? As a child, I did not expect death as inevitable. I functioned in the moment and played on impulse, not analytical assessment of the ramifications of my actions. This realization prodded me towards the first realization about the play I wanted to write. What if the vampires in my story were not evil or cursed or even infected? What if they simply had not yet experienced that glimpse of adulthood? Perhaps the vampires in my play simply want to play pretend, unaware of the impact their “game.” I began to write a scene based off of the story of the dying game.

Casting the Characters

I had a concept, I had a first scene, but I couldn't continue to explore until I had a grasp of the characters I was dealing with. My choices began to take on personal, historical, and philosophical motivations. Because I knew I wanted to write about children vampires, my primary source of reference was my own childhood. I decided to duplicate my family structure so as to have as much access to exploration of my own childhood fascination as possible. This meant I had an idea of cast size and composition: two children, two parents, and a grandmother. Using this structure enabled me to draw from direct experiences, situations, and family dynamics in terms of crafting character relationships. It also allowed me to embark on a very real and personal exploration, all while writing within the context of a highly fictional supernatural/horror genre.

Philosophically, I take issue with the large disparity between available roles for men and women in the theatre. The fact that we continue to reproduce older works exacerbates this problem by perpetuating works from times of less gender equality. But even new works tend to favor male characters in terms of complexity. If female characters exist in plays, commonly they do so only in relation to a male character. Their defining characteristic tends to be their gender, not their character. This is beginning to change, and I want to be a part of it. Writing a play that concentrates on female characters undefined by a male counterpart serves to help further the evolution of gender equality in the theatre arts.

This is not to say I think we should stop writing about men, only that we should assess our depiction of women in drama. In my specific case, I originally conceptualized my play as a duplicate family structure to that of my own, including two male children based off of my brother and I. However, upon further reflection, I realized that the only reason I had assigned these characters a male label was because that was my default. If I have no plot or relationship based reason to make a character female, I have tended in the past to make them male. In this scenario, there was no reason why these children had to be boys. So, in part, simply to circumvent my own unconscious bias, I decided to tell a story about two little girls.

Levity and Gravity

While much of my discussion so far has been quite serious and bogged down by dark and morbid preoccupation with death, I cannot ignore both the importance of levity in art, as well as its inarguable place within the history of the vampire trope. Humor and camp are just as much a part of the vampire mythos as blood and violence. To ignore the ridiculous would be to risk letting my play fall into the trap of the standard blood and brood-fest that has been the bane of so many incarnations of the vampire. With nothing but angst and baleful meditation the audience can easily become disenchanted. By the same token, an all-out parody or mockery of the silk-caped monster ignores the deep-seated thematic resonance that has kept vampires a part of popular and literary culture for over a hundred years.

In creating a contemporary vampire tale myself, I cannot ignore the history of the absurd, the campy, or the parodied, especially on the stage. Butler notes how “once-imposing and earnest incarnations of the monster, having become well known, can assume an absurd quality unanticipated by their creators. Because vampires exhibit exaggerated traits of the people in the societies where they parasitically exist, their grotesque qualities easily spill over from horror into humor” (Butler 179). This occurred to an extreme extent within the theatre of the early 19th century during the heyday of the vampire craze on stage.

The original aristocratic vampire, Polidori's Lord Ruthven, became the central figure in an exorbitant quantity of stage adaptations throughout Europe.

Masters notes how when the popular vampire “appeared on stage in Paris at the Theatre de la Porte-Saint Martin on June 13th, 1820 ... the melodrama had uniformly bad notices from the critics yet these condemnations completely failed to undermine the play's popularity” (Masters 219-220). The vampire archetype arose in an array of styles ranging from melodramas to farces and operas. For the most part, these performances encountered similar responses as the performance at the Theatre de la Porte-Saint Martin – critical disdain and popular appeal.

This lampoon of the character that had previously inspired fear and foreboding in his literary form detracted from the vampire's initial impact as a personification of mortal anxieties. At the same time, however, the success of these performances demonstrates evolving public tastes, as well as the sway of mass appeal. If nobody wants to see a play about brooding, serious vampires, then that play will not achieve its intended artistic effect – to engage the thoughts and emotions of an audience.

Understanding this history of the vampire on stage helped me decide how I wanted to approach the mood of my play. While vampires on stage seemed to have lost the edge they once had in literature, I think the key rests in acknowledging and engaging with both conflicting histories of audience reaction to the fanged monster. By operating too closely within the confines of the brooding, gothic themes and motifs that inspired original interest, the play would come off as tired, old, and inaccessible.

Taking vampires seriously amounts to “serious art” which I personally find simultaneously callous and ridiculous. It alienates and disallows me from fully engaging with any complex themes the playwright may explore, because I feel talked down to, or talked over. I'm not saying that I want to avoid a sense of sincerity, but without some self-deprecation, any art becomes pretentious and annoying. If I really hope to communicate the ideas and feelings I discovered while working on the play, it is essential that I acknowledge my own pretense.

Theatre, and art in general, is about eliciting an emotional response in your audience. They must be taken on an emotional journey. One way to do this is to allow for interplay between levity and gravity – light and dark – comedy and tragedy. Comedy lifts an audience up, and tragedy lets them drop. If you never lift an audience, you eliminate the experience of a shift. Similarly, floating an audience on a consistent puff of air does not provide for emotional transition. This is not to say that these moments must be decided, or even premeditated, but rather discovered by remaining open to either direction. Humor seems a polar opposite to Artaud's cruelty, but with ends up producing a similar effect. By opening an audience up to laugh, a play establishes a channel of communication and response. They become part of the experience. By sharing a space with the actors, the spectator becomes attached to the characters in a play that they may not if they were only exposed to brutality. Following impulse instead of rigidly defined genre or style has seemed to produce the most interesting writing.

Instead, I found that as I wrote, the moments of humor and tragedy occurred most naturally when I did not aim for them, but followed emotional impulses. Acting teacher and theorist, Sanford Meisner discusses this perspective from the viewpoint of the actor. He likens the text to “a canoe...and the river on which it sits is the emotion. The text floats on the river. If the water of the river is turbulent, the words will come out like a canoe on rough water. It all depends on the flow of the river which is your emotion. The text takes on the character of your emotion” (Meisner 115). Although he refers to the text as a somewhat stationary object, his analysis of the emotional flow of a piece supports the notion of letting a flowing sense of emotion guide you, ebbing and flowing down different paths, as opposed to remaining within the confines of how this type of story is “supposed” to go.

By the time an actor interacts with the text, Meisner is correct; it has become a relatively immobile craft with which the actor may navigate his or her emotional river. The process of playwriting, however, involves many similarities to this notion of the emotional river. The only difference is that the playwright does not have a vessel to ride in. Perhaps an outline could provide some semblance of a raft for the playwright to navigate his emotional venture, but the chords used to bind the logs together are not expertly tied, and the raft has a high probability of totally falling apart. At this point the playwright must tread water until he can cling onto some driftwood and begin to build a new raft.

Julia Cameron uses the metaphor of the river as well in her sourcebook on awakening creativity, as she discusses “the process of finding the river and saying yes to its flow, rapids and all ... we startle ourselves by saying yes instead of no to opportunities” (Cameron 95). At this point, the raft falling apart does not seem as daunting. Like it or not, I am still in this river of emotion, and as long as I continue to follow the current, it will take me where I need to go.

While this metaphor may seem trivial and evasive, a figurative conceptualization really helped contextualize myself within the creative process. It provides a means of understanding the ebbs and flow of creating a theatrical piece, even if that sometimes means feeling like the process has ceased.

Writer's Block

I had written an extended scene. I had reached a climax! What is now the end of Act 1 Scene 1 was complete and I felt happy with what I had written so far. Then I encountered the horrible phase of writing where everything just stops – writer's block. What follows is an excerpt from my journal I kept throughout my playwriting process:

I thought I had a wonderful idea. An original idea that I planned and made sense. I plotted out how things would go, and how to get from A to B. I had my list of thematic and conceptual ideas which I thought would lead to a rich play. As soon as I closed the first act, I barraged myself with questions about why I was even writing this play. Sure, I'm interested in the topic, I like my general idea, but what am I trying to say with it? There are so many cheap vampire flicks that don't offer anything of substance. So often do these forays into the vampire genre simply become installments among countless other entries that disappear into irrelevancy.

To stand out, my story not only has to be original, but it has to speak to human connections. Both the connections between vampires and humans, but also between myself and the vampire. Yes, I have always been interested in vampires. I can explain my interest in an intellectual and academic framework, but why am I tied to it emotionally? Viscerally? I chose to set this play in the context of a family that closely resembles mine. I am definitely trying to answer questions for myself about family as well as engage with my life-long obsession. I start to find the connection as I

start getting engulfed in writing dialogue, but as soon as I step out, I begin to think about the overall plot and thematic thrust and I realize I'm tackling too much.

I need to figure out how to write passionately but also more focused. I'm terrified of writing too directly, so I try to attack the plot and characters the angle of finding out what they have to say. This leads me towards plot twists I hadn't considered, which opens up the door for themes that are different than the original idea. Focus, focus, focus, and writing. That's the key. I'll revisit these thoughts once I have some more. Happy day of neuroses ...

I became locked in a state of self-doubt, confusion, and anxiety. I had projected to finish a complete draft of my play by the beginning of January 2014, but instead that draft was not complete until almost three months later in March. I felt behind and panicked. Every time I tried to sit down at my laptop to write, I felt I had no idea about where to go. After weeks of total inactivity, I knew I had to do something to knock me back into writing.

I decided to attempt to construct an exercise based on my experience with Meisner's acting technique. Meisner concentrated on true listening and responding honestly to what is actually happening in the space. The actor practices this concept through a series of repetition exercises and improvisation with a partner. The other major component to his technique involves intricate preparation of a set of imaginary circumstances including one solitary element of truth. While explaining the goals of his technique, he states, "I wanted an exercise for actors

where there is no intellectuality. I wanted to eliminate all that 'head' work, to take away all the mental manipulation and get to where the impulses came from ... and gradually when the actors I train improvise, what they say – like what the composer writes – comes not from the head but truthfully from the impulses” (Meisner 36-7). I sought to emulate this same sense of creating through impulse in my playwriting by setting my own imaginary circumstances, element of truth, and employing improvisational repetition.

I had left the script at the end of Act 1 with the main plot at a point of tension and fear. I decided that, since I had not written about the parent characters for a while, I would concentrate on their situation. I placed them in the living room after the end of the first scene, and then I began my exercise.

I went alone to a deserted building on the University of Oregon campus in the middle of the night. I found a small place to hide myself deep in the building and turned out the lights. I sat and listened in the dark until I became extremely attentive to each little sound: a creak, a knock, silence. Sitting alone in a dark room was my element of truth. I began to go over the imaginary circumstances of waking up in this room, unsure of what had just happened, but with the circumstances of the previous act swimming in my head. I started to feel paranoid. Every sound seemed like someone who wasn't supposed to be there. I felt threatened but also a little giddy. Then I started to write. I utilized a version of the repetition exercise while constructing the dialogue between the two parents, “listening” to how each line sounded in my head and using that to trigger the impulse for the next line.

Eventually I had written a new scene, and had a much clearer idea of where the story was going.

This experiment ended up as a valuable learning experience for me. I don't know if this exercise produced my best writing, or if it truly honors the concepts laid out by Meisner and his technique, but I do know that by experimenting with these concepts, I was able to break my writer's block. In the same way that this technique had unlocked emotional honesty and creativity in my acting, it opened up my writing and lowered my inhibition by pushing myself out of my own head. It also helped me develop a better sense of these two characters, and where I wanted the story to move.

“Conclusions” - The End?

The funny part about playwriting is that it is never truly complete. As of now I have completed a full draft of the play from start to finish. There are currently no holes or missing pieces and the action makes sense to me from start to finish. However, I have plenty that I want to continue to work on. I want to further investigate the idea of the shifts that I utilized in the script. I want to develop the married couple's characters and relationship further. I also want to clarify certain logistical elements of the world of the play. The great thing is that this script has not yet been produced. Even after production, scripts can adapt and shift, and sometimes change drastically.

Near the end of writing the script, I put together a concert reading where I brought in actors to read the parts in a semi-public setting where I invited friends to listen to the play and give me feedback. I would call this a partially beneficial experience. I took a lot of notes on how certain sections worked or did not work. I monitored the effectiveness of various moments of humor, and was pleased to find many of them meeting laughter.

By the end, however, the feedback that I received did little to help me develop the script further. Mainly this resulted from my lack of preparation for the feedback section. I anticipated that any feedback could help get a picture of audience response. I thought that if I colored their discussion with structure at all, that I would not get their honest opinions. However, with a lack of direction, the discussion focused on elements unrelated to the aspects I was interested in

adjusting. Despite this setback, hearing the script aloud demonstrated strengths and weaknesses in the work I had done.

Throughout this process, I encountered struggles and discoveries. I learned to make connections between what I learned as an actor what I learned as a playwright. While the notion of creating something from scratch seems extremely daunting, I discovered that nothing truly comes from nothing. Every story has roots. The origin of these roots may be different depending on the story, but there is never a shortage of roots that can grow into a fruitful artistic exploration.

Within each and every one of us lies a plethora of moments to explore. Humans have similarities for sure; that is what makes art work. Art operates based on the overlaps between our experiences and perceptions. We respond to art based on our ability to recognize connections between ourselves and others. But at the same time, what pulls us into a story is intrigue and mystery. We want to know about the odd and hidden parts of other people we see.

Rarely in life can we be completely open and honest. Through this process of playwriting, I have discovered that for me, creating an “original” story allows me to open up fully to underlying feelings and impressions I have about what I encounter in my life. Again, this honest and explorative process of myself became my artistic research.

As I move forward after graduation, my future plans include continuing to revise and workshop this play, with the hope that at some point I can see it taken to full production. After some more work, I would like to submit the script either to

playwriting competitions or regional theaters accepting original work submissions.

Whether or not my play will be called “good” or find success depends on many factors. While these are important to keep in mind from an economic and career standpoint, from a purely artistic perspective, the best I can hope for is to create something honest, personal, and engaging. Like what I have learned in acting, it is important to be aware of your work in the context of the job market, but the only sure way to personal success, and even at times commercial success, is to produce work that you care and feel deeply about. For me, learning to write a play has pushed me to be open and honest with myself. Like the vampire throughout literary history, it has helped me explore aspects of myself that I might otherwise choose to ignore.

A Game Called Dying

A Play

By: Thomas Varga

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503-734-9925

CHARACTERS

LILY (5 years old, tiny, giggly, impulsive)
ROBYN (7 years old, sturdy, tough, introspective)
BLAKE (Late twenties, spare, gentle, unsure)
JESS (Early thirties, sarcastic, decisive, playful)
HELEN (Mid-sixties, old-fashioned, judgmental, curious)

SETTING

Living room. A front door, onstage stairway to a second floor, a door to a kitchen, and a couch with a coffee table.

TIME

Current day.

*Casting note: girls should not be played by actual children, but young women. The girls are internally older than their physical bodies. The effect should be apparent, but not too jarring. We should know they are children, and other characters should treat them as such.

Act I

Scene 1.

[In the darkness, the sound of a little girl crying. Lights up on LILY, a five year old girl lying motionless in the center of the room. Her older sister of seven, ROBYN kneels over her with her head on Lily's chest. Robyn is weeping. From offstage we here their father, BLAKE calling for them.]

BLAKE (O.S.)

Girls! Girls?

[Enter Blake on the stairway, coming down from the second floor. He sees the girls on the floor.]

BLAKE

Girls! What's wrong!? Honey! What happened?

ROBYN

Lily died.

BLAKE

What?

ROBYN

See? She's dead.

BLAKE

Lily!

ROBYN

Daddy, why aren't you crying?

BLAKE

I... Lily! Wake up! What is going on?

ROBYN

Daddy?

BLAKE

Lily! No. God! Shit, damn, Lily! Wake up!

ROBYN

Daddy! Daddy! Why are you not crying?

I don't...

You said bad words Daddy... Daddy!

Honey!

Yes Daddy?

Please, just tell me what happened.

Lily died, Daddy. She's dead now, and we have to cry for her.

Robyn!

See, like this. You have to sit on your knees Daddy. And put your head on her. Like this, see?

Sweetie, please. I need to know what happened to Lily. Did she eat something? Did she put anything in her mouth?

Daddy! You're not doing it right! Do it now Daddy! You're hurting her feelings.

[Blake kneels down next to Lily.]

Okay Robyn. Okay. Like this? Is this right?

You need to cry. It's important.

I...

I need to hear you.

...What?	BLAKE
Louder Daddy. What kind of crying is that? Work harder! Do it!	ROBYN
Baby...	BLAKE
I am not a baby. I'm a big girl.	ROBYN
Yes, of course.	BLAKE
Do it Daddy! Why don't you care about Lily? She doesn't matter to you?	ROBYN
Stop it Robyn! Stop it!	BLAKE
She doesn't. You don't care about Lily. You're happy because she's not here anymore.	ROBYN
No! That's not true sweetie. I love her very much. I love her with all my heart.	BLAKE
You're not doing a good job.	ROBYN
	<i>[Blake collapses onto Lily. Enter JESS.]</i>
Blake?	JESS
Mommy!	LILY
Lily!	BLAKE
What's going on Blake? Is everything okay?	JESS
Wha...	BLAKE

ROBYN
[Hugging Jess]

Hi Mommy!

JESS
Hi honey. What are you guys doing?

ROBYN
We're playing.

LILY
Yeah we're playing a game, Mommy.

JESS
Is your father playing, too?

ROBYN
Yes, but not very well. It's because he's big. He forgot how to.

JESS
I see.

BLAKE
Robyn...

ROBYN
Yes Daddy?

BLAKE
Why would you say Lily was...?

ROBYN
Dead?

JESS
What?

BLAKE
Yes.

ROBYN
Because she was dead. In our game.

BLAKE
But you were crying. Really crying.

JESS
What happened?

LILY
Because I was dead. Robyn was crying because I was dead

Daddy. I was dead, Daddy!

BLAKE

Okay Lily. I came in and Lily was lying on the floor with Robyn sobbing over her.

JESS

Oh my God!

ROBYN

Isn't that what you do when someone dies? Right Mommy? That's right, right?

JESS

Yes Robyn, that's right.

ROBYN

See! I told you.

BLAKE

But Robyn. This is a serious thing. You shouldn't joke about it.

ROBYN

I wasn't joking. I was crying.

BLAKE

Well, I mean that's not a good game to play. Don't play that anymore. Okay?

LILY

Is it bad?

BLAKE

Yes.

JESS

No.

LILY

What?

BLAKE

Well, it's not that it's bad sweetheart, you're not in trouble. It's just, maybe you should play other, happier games.

JESS

But it's not bad. Okay? As long as you're not hurting anybody, it is okay girls. Play any kind of game you want to.

LILY
Okay Mommy.

BLAKE
Jess...

LILY
Next time I don't want to die Robyn.

JESS
Yes, Blake?

BLAKE
Not everything is *okay*.

ROBYN
But you're so much better at it. And I'm better at crying.

JESS
As long as they're not hurting anybody.

BLAKE
But don't you think it's a little...

LILY
But it's boring!

JESS
A little what? Wait. Girls, why don't you go upstairs and play. Your dad and I need to have a little talk.

ROBYN
Okay Mommy. Come on Lily. Now I'm the lone warrior and you're the poor young girl who is really good with a sword.

LILY
Okay but can I be the main character this time?

ROBYN
No because, see I'm the one who has the magic spells...

[*Exit girls up the stairs.*]

JESS
Okay. Now what were you trying to say?

BLAKE
Don't you think it's a little weird that they're playing games like that?

JESS

Why is it weird?

BLAKE

I mean it's sort of dark. Do you want our daughters doing things like this on the playground?

JESS

Yes. I do. I want the them to explore their imaginations without people telling them to stay inside the lines.

BLAKE

Okay sure, but they're little girls...

JESS

And it would be different if they were little boys?

BLAKE

No! I'm just saying they're little. They shouldn't be thinking about this kind of stuff yet.

JESS

They're going to have to sooner or later. You do realize that as far as the world goes, we're in the minority here. We get to *decide* when our kids learn about life's grim realities. That's a privilege. I don't want to raise overly-privileged girls, Blake. I want to raise creative women.

BLAKE

So do I.

JESS

Good. We agree then.

BLAKE

I...

JESS

Blake, I'm done talking about this.

BLAKE

Okay, fine. Right, when you're done, it's all over. No more talking.

JESS

Yep. You're right.

BLAKE

Oh great. For once! Jesus Christ, Jess. All I'm saying is that I want to make sure these girls are happy.

JESS

They are. They get along great, and they're in a safe house, and we love them. What else do they need?

BLAKE

You're right. I know. I guess I just don't know what they've seen... I want to protect them. I need to... But I can't do anything about what happened to them before we got them.

JESS

We'll never know, Blake. We don't even know that anything bad happened. They could have been totally fine. But it doesn't matter. All we can do is give them everything we can now. Our love, our support, and parents who don't tell them they're being bad because they're playing a game that makes you uncomfortable.

BLAKE

Okay. Okay yeah, you're right. I'm sorry Jess. Yeah. Yeah... I love you.

JESS

I love you too.

BLAKE

I have to run to the store to pick up the chicken for supper. My mom's shuttle from the airport should be getting here soon. I'll probably be back before she gets here, but if not, could you just let the girls keep playing until I get back. I want to be here when she meets them.

JESS

Sure.

BLAKE

Okay thanks honey. I'll be back soon.

JESS

Yeah, soon means soon, right? I don't want to have to entertain her by myself forever. You know how that could end...

BLAKE

It won't be more than... say...? Well, I need to get the chicken, the potatoes...

JESS

Just go Blake. Come on, get a move on.

BLAKE
Okay. *[Kiss]* Bye!

[Blake exits through the front door. Jess begins pouring a glass of red wine. Suddenly a large crash accompanied by a faint giggle comes from upstairs. Jess looks towards the stairs and misses the glass, pouring the wine all over the table and carpet.]

JESS
Oh shit!

[Jess exits to the kitchen. Enter Lily and Robyn down the stairs. Lily has a stack of crayon drawings featuring monsters and a lot of blood. She begins placing the drawings all around the room. Robyn laughs.]

LILY
Shhhh. We're not supposed to be down here.

ROBYN
Why not?

LILY
Mommy told us to go upstairs. I think Mommy and Daddy are fighting.

ROBYN
So what? Nobody is in here now.

LILY
I want to surprise Grandma with my pictures.

ROBYN
Okay. Are you done now?

LILY
Yes, just this one.

[Lily places one final drawing on the couch. It shows a female vampire levitating over two grave stones. Robyn has noticed the spilled wine and begins to lick it as it drips from the table top. Re-enter Jess with paper towels and stain remover.]

Lily has started sucking her thumb.]

JESS

Robyn! What are you doing!?

ROBYN

Nothing!

JESS

That is not for little girls. That's only for grown-ups.
And don't lick the table, that's dirty. You'll get sick.

ROBYN

I never got sick before.

JESS

Well, in this house we don't lick things okay? The only
things that go in your mouth are food and your toothbrush.
And that includes thumbs Lily.

LILY

But Mommy!

JESS

No buts sweetie. It's time to be a big girl.

[Lily starts to cry.]

ROBYN

It's okay Lily. She's old and she will die soon. Let's go
back upstairs.

LILY

Okay.

*[Exit Lily and Robyn up the
stairs. Jess looks confusedly
after them for a beat. The
doorbell rings.]*

JESS

Yep! Well of course that's now.

*[Goes to open the front door.
HELEN is standing outside with a
small rolling suitcase. She does
not come in.]*

HELEN

Hello Jessica. Where is Blake?

JESS
He ran out to the store to get stuff for dinner.

HELEN
Oh well that was nice of him.

JESS
Yeah it was. We're having chicken; I hope that's okay with you.

HELEN
Fine. Fine.

JESS
Umm. Helen, are you going to come in?

HELEN
Oh yes, I think I will.

JESS
Well, then come in, then. I'm sure it's cold out there.

HELEN
[Stepping inside.]
Oh yes.

JESS
[Closing the door]
Do you want anything? The girls are playing upstairs. Blake wanted to be here when you met them, so I'll just leave them be for now.

[Crossing into the room, Helen picks up the drawing on the couch as she sits down.]

HELEN
No, thank you. What are all of these?

JESS
Oh, I don't know. One of the girl's drawings. I didn't have a lot of time to clean up. I'm sorry. I was actually just trying to get this stain out of the carpet.

HELEN
Who died?

JESS
What?

HELEN
Oh never mind, dear. A joke. A blood stain. *[Re. The*

carpet.]

JESS

[*Laughing politely*]

Oh! No it was red wine. I spilled it literally just before you got here.

HELEN

Well, if you can't get it out, it's not the worst thing in the world.

JESS

We just had the carpets cleaned...

HELEN

A little tarnish never hurt anything. Things tend to look better that way.

JESS

Yeah, well maybe some things, but I'd really rather not have a big red stain all across my new carpet.

HELEN

Suit yourself. When you're my age maybe you'll start to see things more my way.

JESS

Yeah, maybe. Luckily that won't be for a couple hundred years.

HELEN

Careful Jessica.

JESS

A joke.

HELEN

[*Re: the drawing*]

Of course. Apparently the girls don't seem to differentiate between us old folk too much. Death is close enough to both of us. Here we have a nice crayon rendering. Two grave stones labeled "Mommy" and "Daddy." How precious. At least the girl in the middle is smiling.

JESS

What?

HELEN

This drawing here. Haven't you seen it? [*Re: a different drawing*] This one is mostly gore. It's all rather morose. What kind of girls did you get?

JESS
Oh! They're perfectly normal. They're just going through a phase.

HELEN
I see...

JESS
There's nothing wrong with any of these drawings. It's not like they're violent kids or anything.

[High pitched scream from upstairs.]

HELEN
My goodness, what was that?

JESS
[Yelling towards the stairs]
Girls! Please keep it down.

[Another scream and a loud thud.]

JESS
Girls!

HELEN
You are aware that there are other ways of communicating besides having a shouting contest?

JESS
Yes Helen, I am aware. I'll just...

[Jess begins up the stairs. The front door opens. Enter Blake with several bags of groceries. Jess halts on the stairs.]

HELEN
Blake! How are you? So good to see you. Come give your mother a hug.

BLAKE
Hi Mom! How was the flight? Let me just drop these off in the kitchen first.

[Another loud scream from upstairs.]

BLAKE

What's going on?

HELEN

These...daughters you've found are upstairs chopping each other to bits. I'm sure one of them is happy about it at least.

JESS

They're just playing. I was about to go tell them to be quiet. Do you want me to bring them down?

BLAKE

Let me get this stuff started first.

[Exit Blake to the kitchen.]

JESS

Okay. So should I still...?

HELEN

Why not just let them do whatever they want? That seems to be going splendidly.

JESS

You know what? I will.

[Jess returns from the stairway.]

HELEN

You ought to be careful with signs like these. I know it's less likely, considering they're girls, but women have been known to kill. Often it's *mothers* we see putting an end to their own children, but nature likes to work in reciprocals.

JESS

Really Helen, I think you're reading way too much into this. And I don't really need you telling me how to raise my kids.

HELEN

Yes, because you are the expert here.

JESS

I'd like to make my own mistakes if I have any to make, thank you.

HELEN

Of course. So are you going to do anything about that stain?

JESS

Oh! Yeah, I should get on that. Don't want it to set in.

[Sprays the carpet with the cleaner and tries to remove the stain with the towels. It doesn't work.]

JESS

Did you want any wine? I promise to pour more carefully this time.

HELEN

No, no. I never drink wine.

JESS

Okay. Anything else? I'd be happy to go and get you something.

HELEN

Not at the moment, no. Thank you my dear.

[Enter Blake from the kitchen.]

BLAKE

Okay, everything's cooking. Should be ready in a bit. Did you find out what was going on upstairs?

JESS

They're just playing. Don't worry about it.

BLAKE

[Calling up the stairs]

Girls! Come down for dinner! Your Grandma is here!

HELEN

I thought we had a while before it was ready.

BLAKE

Yeah, well you haven't seen how long getting them down here can take. Girls!

HELEN

Do you have them sit at the kitchen table, or do they have their own kid's table?

JESS

They eat at the table with us. I don't see a point in treating them like children. They'll grow up soon enough.

BLAKE
Yeah, and especially now, we really want to make sure they know they are part of this family.

HELEN
How nice. I can't wait to meet them.

JESS
Robyn! Lilly!

HELEN
Do you think, perhaps, you should go upstairs?

[Enter Robyn chasing Lily down the stairs screaming. They both have plastic swords. Once they reach the bottom and see Helen standing in front of them, they freeze in silence.]

BLAKE
Girls, this is your Grandma Helen. She is my mother.

HELEN
Hello Robyn. Hello Lily. It is so nice to meet you.

[Beat of silence.]

JESS
Are you going to say hello to Grandma, girls?

ROBYN
Hello.

LILY
Hello.

HELEN
Good girls. It's important to respect your elders. They always know more than you do. Do you understand?

JESS
Helen, I don't think this is the time for that.

HELEN
There is always time for learning.

BLAKE
Why don't we go eat and we can talk some more at the table. I'm really hungry. How about you, girls? Are you hungry?

*[Still frozenly staring at Helen,
Robyn looks towards Blake.]*

ROBYN

We don't want your dead chicken.

BLAKE

Huh? Robyn, it's not a dead chicken. It's cooked meat. It's good for you. It will make you grow big and strong.

LILY

We don't want to eat deads, Daddy.

HELEN

Is that right?

BLAKE

Lily, it's tasty. It's very good chicken.

JESS

Blake, maybe we shouldn't force it.

HELEN

You don't want to eat dead things, do you girls?

ROBYN

Never.

LILY

It's yucky.

BLAKE

Why don't you just have some bread then? Come on, let's go sit down at the table.

*[The girls look at each other, and
then walk slowly to the far corner
of the room and sit down, staring
blankly ahead.]*

HELEN

What is this?

JESS

I don't know! This has happened every time we try to get them to eat. I feel like they haven't eaten since we got them! Every time we try it's the same story. I'm kind of worried. We've tried all kinds of food. At some point they have to eat!

BLAKE

When they get hungry enough, they'll eat. We can't force them.

HELEN

Quite right. I completely agree.

JESS

I just... Now they won't talk until we're done eating. I don't want them to look emaciated when they go to school. How would that look as new parents?

BLAKE

But you didn't care about them pretending to kill each other at recess.

JESS

That's different.

BLAKE

Oh, okay! Well, let's go eat. Maybe if we don't offer anymore they'll want to eat for attention.

JESS

Tricky!

BLAKE

I hope the airline food didn't ruin your appetite, Mom.

HELEN

Oh me too. Please don't be upset if I don't eat much.

[Exit the three adults into the kitchen. Lily and Robyn come out of their stupor.]

LILY

I'm hungry Robyn. I'm hungry now.

ROBYN

I know Lily.

LILY

Can we eat, please? It hurts.

ROBYN

Not now. We can't let Mommy and Daddy and Grandma see.

LILY

How come?

Because. ROBYN

But I'm hungry now! LILY

I'm hungry, too. ROBYN

So I want to eat. LILY

We are not eating. ROBYN

I hate you. LILY

Stop it Lily. Or I will hurt you again. ROBYN

No you won't. I am strong now. LILY

But I'm bigger. ROBYN

So? LILY

Shut up Lily. Do what I say! ROBYN

No. LILY

Yes! I am the boss. ROBYN

[Lily growls and pushes Robyn to the ground. She leaps on top of her and wraps her hands around Robyn's throat. Robyn easily removes Lily's hands and throws her off of her with amazing strength. Lily flies backwards and hits the wall, slumping down to the floor. Lily puts her thumb in her mouth, defeated.]

You're stupid Lily. Don't do that anymore, dummy! ROBYN

LILY
I'm sorry, Robyn.

ROBYN
That's okay. I still love you.

LILY
I love you too. It didn't even hurt. Robyn, what do I look like?

ROBYN
What?

LILY
Why don't I know what I look like?

ROBYN
Because we're special Lily.

LILY
But why? I don't feel special. I want to know too.

ROBYN
What do you mean?

LILY
I mean you can see me, and I can see you, but I can't see me. How come?

ROBYN
I don't know.

LILY
But...

ROBYN
Maybe we aren't really here.

LILY
But we are. Look. I can see you and you can see me.

ROBYN
That's what you think. Maybe we're not real.

LILY
We are real! I can pick this up. I can throw it. I can break it. I can knock this over. [*Pushes over the coffee table.*] I can hurt you!

ROBYN
Stop Lily.

LILY

We are real. We are. We are...

ROBYN

We are. But what if we were supposed to stop being here a long time ago? What if we're supposed to be gone now?

LILY

What do you mean supposed to? Who says that?

ROBYN

I guess no one. Maybe we get to say. I guess we did, huh? We said we wanted to keep being here.

LILY

So why doesn't everyone do that? Why does everybody else go away?

ROBYN

I guess they could.

LILY

But they don't.

ROBYN

Maybe they don't know that they can. Or maybe they don't want to.

LILY

What do I look like?

ROBYN

Well, you have two eyes, one mouth and a big hairy nose.

LILY

No I don't! You have a big hairy nose.

ROBYN

Do I?

LILY

No... You have a pretty nose.

ROBYN

You do too. We're sisters. We should have the same noses.

LILY

[Staring transfixed]

Your eyes are green. They've got blue sparkles inside. They are beautiful. When I look too hard, I can't look away. I'm

stuck. But it's okay because I like to look. But it's still scary. I can't stop it! What if I start to see something I don't like, Robyn? Or something I don't understand? What if I want to stop seeing? Robyn? Let me go! You're sticking me! I'm stuck! Stop it Robyn, stop it! I will never see other things. Just this and this and this and this! Forever.

ROBYN

That's what we've been doing all this time anyway, Lily.

LILY

[Breaking away]

I know. I hate it.

ROBYN

I love it.

LILY

Why do you think we never died before?

ROBYN

I think we did.

LILY

But we're not dead now.

ROBYN

I think we were having too much fun.

LILY

Too much fun?

ROBYN

Everybody else didn't want to play anymore. They thought everything was real.

LILY

I think everything is real.

ROBYN

That's okay.

[They hug. Lily puts her thumb back in her mouth, but it catches on one of her irregularly long canines, and it begins to bleed profusely. It begins flowing all over the carpet, adding to the red wine stain.]

ROBYN
Mom! Lily's bleeding!

[Enter Blake and Jess from the kitchen.]

BLAKE
Robyn, I thought we said not to play these kinds of games anymore.

LILY
Mommy, look at all the blood!

JESS
What happened sweetie? Let me go get a Band-Aid.

BLAKE
I don't know if a Band-Aid will do it Jess. That's a lot! Lily, what did you do?

JESS
Well, should we call someone?

BLAKE
I don't know. I think we have to.

JESS
Well, I'm going to get something to stop the bleeding.

BLAKE
Okay.

[Exit Jess up the stairs. Helen enters from the kitchen.]

HELEN
What's going on in here?

BLAKE
Lily hurt herself.

HELEN
How?

BLAKE
We don't know.

HELEN
What happened, dearie?

LILY
I was sucking my thumb, even though I'm not supposed to.
Cause I'm a big girl.

BLAKE
[Bending to take a look]
You were sucking your thumb?

LILY
Don't hurt me Daddy. I'll hurt you.

BLAKE
I'm not going to hurt you, baby.

[Lily puts her thumb back in her mouth.]

BLAKE
Don't do that! It's dirty. You'll get an infection.

LILY
I want to.

BLAKE
[Trying to pull it out]
But that doesn't mean you can. Stop Lily, you'll make it worse.

ROBYN
Mommy said we can do what we want to.

BLAKE
Yes, as long as nobody gets hurt. But this can hurt her, so she needs to stop.

LILY
Go away Daddy. It doesn't hurt.

ROBYN
Leave her alone or I'll kill you.

BLAKE
Jesus! What? Don't say that Robyn, that's not nice.

ROBYN
I don't have to be nice.

BLAKE
Yes, you do.

LILY
Mommy said.

BLAKE
She didn't say you can be mean.

HELEN
Everyone should be allowed a little meanness, Blake. You should remember that.

BLAKE
What?

ROBYN & LILY
[Chanting]
Kill Daddy! Kill Daddy! Kill Daddy!

HELEN
[Laughing]
Girls, my goodness.

BLAKE
Mom. Don't encourage them.

HELEN
Pardon me.

BLAKE
Let me see, Lily.

[Blake holds Lily's face still and puts his finger in her mouth. She immediately bites down. Blake yells, trying to wrench his now bleeding hand out of her mouth. Lily holds on with her teeth.]

BLAKE
Oww! Lily let go! Why did you do that! God! That hurts. Stop! Son of a...

[Blake gets his hand free. Enter Jess with a roll of gauze and tape.]

JESS
Okay, here's all I could find. How's the finger Lily? Blake!? What happened?

[Lily has licked all of the blood away and her thumb is totally healed]

LILY

I'm okay, Mommy. All better.

JESS

[Examining it]

What? Really? How did...? Well, alright then. That was odd. Are you okay Blake?

BLAKE

[Taking some gauze for himself.]

I'm fine. She bit me!

JESS

Let's see inside your mouth, sweetie.

LILY

Why?

JESS

Because I need to see how this happened.

LILY

Why?

JESS

Because we don't want it to happen again, and we need to see if there is a problem.

LILY

Why?

JESS

Lily, please just let Mommy see inside your mouth.

LILY

No. I don't want to. You're a big meanie. Go away.

JESS

I just want to make sure this doesn't happen again Lily. Come on, let Mommy see.

ROBYN

She said no.

JESS

This is not about you Robyn. This is between your sister and I.

ROBYN

She was my sister first. You're just our *new* Mommy.

BLAKE

Jess, perhaps you better leave it be.

LILY

Our old Mommy never told us what to do. She was better.

JESS

Oh...

BLAKE

Jess... Don't take it like that. Let's just...

HELEN

A child's truth sometimes bites.

JESS

You know what, Helen? I don't need you coming into my house and telling me how to raise my kids. I know you already went through the whole mothering thing, but that doesn't give you the go ahead to dictate how I do it. I'm sure you made plenty of mistakes, don't think Blake hasn't told me about them. So don't try to get on your high horse and talk down to me like some mindless ninny who can't keep it together. We're learning on the fly, which is as much as you could say. So just... keep your big nose out of the way I parent. You want to make some Mommy choices, why don't you try adoption? Oh wait, I guess that would be hard to have to die before the kid had a chance to grow up wouldn't it? Just... I need another glass of wine.

[Exit Jess to the kitchen.]

HELEN

Well!

BLAKE

I'm sorry Mom. It's been pretty stressful. Could you keep an eye on the girls please? I'll be back. Soon I hope.

HELEN

Yes of course.

BLAKE

Thanks. Jess! Are you okay? Honey..?

[Exit Blake to the kitchen.]

HELEN

Hello girls.

ROBYN & LILY

Hello Grandma Helen.

HELEN

Just call me Grandma. But never Granny. I can't stand that word. It sounds so old.

LILY

Why is Mommy mad?

HELEN

She's mad because she doesn't understand how to be a mother.

ROBYN

Is she dumb?

HELEN

No, your mother is not dumb. She just has a lot to learn. Does your finger feel better, my dear?

LILY

Yes. It never hurt anyway.

HELEN

Really? That was quite a lot of blood. I don't believe it didn't hurt. You must be a strong little girl.

LILY

I'm a big girl. I'm a strong big girl.

HELEN

Yes of course you are. And I'm sure you have very strong big-girl teeth. Why don't you show me those big strong teeth of yours?

[Lily bares her teeth revealing two exceptionally long canines. She growls.]

HELEN

Oh my!

ROBYN

Lily!

HELEN
Where did you get such strong teeth from?

LILY
Umm. I don't know.

HELEN
I guess we never will, will we? Did one of you girls make this drawing? I found it when I came in. It's very good.

LILY
I made it.

HELEN
Did you? It's very colorful.

LILY
Thank you. I have the 64 crayon set. There are 64 colors. It's better than Sammy's at school. She only has the 24 set.

HELEN
Well you are quite the young artist. Who is this person in the middle?

LILY
That's me.

HELEN
Is it? It looks like some kind of monster out of a Bela Lugosi picture.

LILY
That is what I really look like. I went up to a secret planet that changed me.

HELEN
Are you an alien?

LILY
No.

ROBYN
Don't lie Lily. You didn't go to any planet.

LILY
I know. But I did change, Robyn. And you changed too. Don't you remember?

HELEN
How did you change, sweetheart?

ROBYN
Lily is just telling lies. She is being bad.

LILY
No I'm not! You're telling lies Robyn, not me! That's not fair. I'm telling!

HELEN
Better not go in there quite yet. Let's give your parents some time to talk.

LILY
But Robyn is being mean. I'm not lying. I'm telling the truth, I swear!

HELEN
Why don't I go and check on how they're doing?

LILY
Okay.

[Helen folds the drawing and puts it into a pocket. She exits into the kitchen.]

ROBYN
Why did you do that Lily!? Now they will send us away again. Don't you remember last Mommy and Daddy? They said we were little monsters and put us in the rain. Do you want to stand in the rain again with no syrup?

LILY
No.

ROBYN
No! So don't do that!

LILY
I'm sorry. I think Grandma Helen is nice. She likes my big strong teeth. She didn't cry like last Mommy and Daddy.

ROBYN
But we still need to be careful.

LILY
Okay.

ROBYN
Okay.

LILY
I'm not so hungry anymore.

ROBYN
I know.

LILY
I got some syrup!

ROBYN
I know Lily. I saw. Everyone saw. Are you happy now?

LILY
No I want more.

ROBYN
We have to wait.

LILY
But what if that happens again? I don't want to lose mine.
Every time you make us wait, my syrup comes out. It's not
fair.

ROBYN
It will be soon. I will go make the hole ready.

LILY
I don't want the hole. I can be quiet.

ROBYN
We made the hole already. We have to use it. It is safer.
Do you want them to wake up when we go in their room
tonight?

LILY
No.

ROBYN
Then we use the hole. Stay here. Don't let them come
upstairs.

LILY
Okay.

*[Robyn exits up the stairs in a
quiet run. Lily moves about the
room picking up her drawings. She
sits on the couch and lays them
out in order on the coffee table
in front of her. She takes out a
few crayons and begins adding to
one of the drawings. Enter Helen*

from the kitchen. Lily remains engrossed in her work.]

HELEN

I think they'll still be awhile dear. Where's your sister?

LILY

She went potty.

HELEN

Ah, well nature calls. It's been quite nice to meet you Lily.

LILY

Nice to meet you.

HELEN

Do you like it here?

LILY

Sort of.

HELEN

Only sort of? Why is that?

LILY

I'm hungry.

HELEN

Why didn't you want to come to dinner? We have plenty of food in the kitchen. Do you want me to go in and grab you something?

LILY

I said afore, I don't eat deads.

HELEN

What does that mean?

LILY

I don't eat deads.

HELEN

What is a dead?

[Lily carefully puts down her crayon to explain.]

LILY

Deads make me feel broken. And make my tummy burn.

Sometimes, if I eat too much of a dead I start to lose my syrup. I don't know what they are made out of, but they don't talk or move. They're gross. They just sit on the table. They are stinky and gross.

HELEN

So you mean you don't eat meat? You don't like eating things that have died? Are you a vegetarian?

LILY

What is a vegigarian?

HELEN

A vegetarian is a person who does not eat deads. She only eats plants and things like that. Do you like fruits and vegetables?

LILY

I don't eat deads! Fruits and vegibles don't have syrup. They are deads.

HELEN

Then what do you eat? What is syrup?

[Lily points to the bloodstain on the ground.]

HELEN

Is that why you bit your finger?

LILY

No.

HELEN

You mean you need... syrup, from other people?

LILY

Yes.

HELEN

People like your mother and father? Like me?

LILY

Mhmm.

HELEN

Do you need some of mine?

[Lily cautiously approaches Helen.]

...Yes. LILY

How much do you need? HELEN

A lot. LILY

HELEN
[Offering her forearm.]
How about a little now, and a little more later?

LILY
[Taking Helen's arm.]
Okay.

HELEN
It will be a secret.

[Robyn has appeared on the stairs. She watches carefully as she comes silently into the room behind Helen and Lily.]

LILY
Okay.

HELEN
Just a little.

ROBYN
[Hissing]
What are you doing!?

[Lily quickly pulls Helen by the arm down towards her. Lily's face shifts from curious and innocent to cruel and feral as she moves to bite down on Helen's neck...]

Scene 2.

[... a sudden shift. All circumstances instantly evaporate as all three sit on the floor playing a child's board game. Age blends, family blossoms.]

HELEN

So why are you so obsessed with vampires?

ROBYN

I don't really know.

HELEN

How can you not know?

LILY

Of course you do. We watched *The Munsters* and *Abbot and Costello meet Frankenstein* a million times.

HELEN

Okay, but those aren't too frightening. I mean, they're comedies. Almost parodies. It seems like if you were really excited by something like that, the more you learned about the darkness and violence of the rest, the genre would turn you off.

ROBYN

That's true I guess. It's your turn.

LILY

Well, I think of it more as an aesthetic. Like the aesthetic of death.

HELEN

What does that mean?

LILY

Like, I don't think it's so much about being obsessed with the real idea of dying, or violence, or blood or whatever, but more of finding the general aesthetic interesting.

HELEN

But that's sort of incomplete. I mean, how can you totally divorce death and what it looks like?

LILY

Because kids can't totally grasp that idea. It's more of a concept, a word and image than a reality.

ROBYN

That's a spoiled, first world spin on that. Go.

HELEN

I think what she means is that, the less you fully understand something, the more you can concentrate, or even be attracted to sides of it that we're mostly blinded to. A normal adult tends to shun topics like death, because they understand it's finality, and emotions associated with real loss.

LILY

Right, and a kid would be able to find aesthetic delight in it because they haven't felt those feelings or actually seen that it's real.

ROBYN

Still, that is a very narrow sample-size you're talking about. There are plenty of kids who have seen death. Experienced it and felt those emotions. To say that it's a difference between a child and an adult is really just classist. Or racist. Or something.

LILY

Okay fine, how would you define it?

ROBYN

Well, I don't know if I even agree, but I think it would, again, have to be determined by what you've experienced. A privileged adult who has never lost someone would have a lot more in common with a privileged three year old than a three year old in a war-torn country.

HELEN

Really?

ROBYN

Yes!

HELEN

You think that a three year old could understand death better than an adult? Is it my turn?

ROBYN

In those specific conditions, yes! And yes it is.

HELEN

But you have to take brain development into account. You can't just ignore it.

LILY

I wasn't trying to turn this into a global discussion about inequality. I just meant that generally, children have less experience than adults. So a child would be able to look at things an adult might be scared of, and see something different. It's like the inverse of kids being scared of a monster in the closet. Balance.

ROBYN

Who said there has to be balance? That doesn't prove anything, you're just-

HELEN

-Okay! Okay. So why vampires though? What about them specifically?

LILY

Besides the aesthetic?

HELEN

Besides the aesthetic!

ROBYN

I think it's more complicated than that. And we probably can't even realize it as kids. But it sticks with you because of what they represent.

HELEN

And what's that?

ROBYN

Vampires are playing the ultimate game. They make living a game. Because humans live with repercussion. Eventually, everything is final, so we have to live with restraint. With abstinence. Because it all adds up to something, so we better watch what we do. But a vampire doesn't have to. Everything just keeps going on and on, so they can be sexual, violent, greedy, whatever. They can be the sum of the seven deadly sins. Because even things that seem absolute will diminish into an infinite past.

ROBYN (Continued)

People come up with their own version of this with religion or philosophy, to make living with restraint have some ultimate result - some semblance of immortality. Vampires have been part of pop-culture since Bram Stoker published *Dracula* in 1897 because people want to vicariously experience the hedonism that immortality allows. It's like reading erotica. Ha! I guess that's that connection then.

[Beat.]

HELEN
I have to use the little-girl's room.

ROBYN
Okay.

[Helen exits. Robyn takes up the bottle of wine and starts to guzzle it.]

LILY
The little girl's room? Jeez... Hey Robyn, what are you doing?

ROBYN
I'm drinking this.

LILY
But why?

ROBYN
Why not?

LILY
I thought we weren't...

ROBYN
Didn't you hear what I said? We want to live like it's all a game, underneath it all. So it's my goal to do that.

LILY
Okay...But that sort of seems like a lame version of what you mean. Just sort of like an immature adolescent rebellion against yourself.

ROBYN
Fuck you Lily.

LILY
What..?

ROBYN
I don't need this. You don't appreciate shit. You can keep your judgments to yourself. God. Just stay over there.

LILY
Are you okay?

ROBYN
Yes I'm okay. What do you think? I'm weak or something?

LILY

No.

ROBYN

Well then shut up.

LILY

I'm sorry. I just want to make sure you're in control...

ROBYN

I didn't watch out for you all this time to be told I can't keep control by my little sister. I'm fine.

LILY

I know. I'm sorry. I'm here if you need me.

ROBYN

I don't need you! Wait, I'm sorry. I'm not trying to say you don't matter. I love you. Thank you so much for helping me. I know I'm a little bit of a handful.

LILY

No, it's fine.

ROBYN

No I am. I'm a mess. Just remember, I'm being completely real right now. I can't imagine having a sister better than you. You are just so amazing and loving and talented. I believe in you. There is nothing you can't do! Please don't write this off of as babbling. I'm serious. I am so lucky to be tied to you forever. You keep me going.

LILY

Thanks...

ROBYN

No, really. You are what I live for.

LILY

I really appreciate that. I love you too. You're the best big sister I could ask for. Do you want to lie down?

ROBYN

No. Why?

LILY

I thought maybe you were sleepy.

ROBYN

Nah. I'm so awake right now. You know how, when you're really tired, you get into that delirious sort of state,

where everything is funny and clear at the same time?
That's how I feel, but without being sleepy.

LILY

Is that nice?

ROBYN

Is what nice?

LILY

Feeling delirious and clear?

ROBYN

It's great! It's a little bit scary. Everything is as it is. There's no such thing as boundaries. I feel like I couldn't even lie right now if I tried. It's freeing and terrifying.

LILY

What are you scared of?

ROBYN

That I might say something I didn't know was true.

LILY

Like how you want to die?

ROBYN

What?

LILY

You want to die. We have been living for four-hundred years, and I know you're tired of it. It gets old when nothing is new.

ROBYN

Do you want to die?

LILY

Yes.

ROBYN

Are you sure?

LILY

I am sure.

ROBYN

But how do you know? What if it hurts?

LILY

At least it will be something new.

Does that mean it's good? ROBYN

It means we're learning. LILY

Don't we have more to learn? ROBYN

That's not fair. LILY

Not fair? ROBYN

Why should we get so long to learn when everyone else has such a short chance? Part of being human is dealing with the cards we're dealt. LILY

Those are their cards. We've been dealt a different deck. The world isn't equal. Why should we try to force it? ROBYN

I thought you were against inequality... Do what you want. LILY

Do you hate me? ROBYN

I love you. LILY

I love you too. ROBYN

Do you feel okay? LILY

Maybe. ROBYN

I hope so. LILY

Me too. Do you really want to die? ROBYN

I don't know. LILY

ROBYN

Me neither.

LILY

I'm here. If we do, we'll go together. We'll either sit up
or we won't. Don't be scared. We're learning Robyn.

[End of act.]

Act II

Scene 1.

[Lights rise on the living room. There is a large pool of blood on the carpet where Helen stood at the end of Act 1 Scene 1. Blake and Jess are thoroughly bound together back to back, seated on the floor next to the blood.]

JESS

Blake...

BLAKE

What?

JESS

I...uh...I don't know what I'm saying. Never mind.

BLAKE

Well great, neither do I. We agree.

JESS

Okay.

BLAKE

Thanks.

JESS

For what?

BLAKE

For not saying whatever you were going to say.

JESS

You don't even know what I was going to-

BLAKE

-I know I don't. But thanks anyway.

JESS

Of course.

[Beat]

BLAKE

Fucking shit!

JESS

Fucking shit!

Stop it!	BLAKE
What?	JESS
You're making fun of me.	BLAKE
I'm not making fun of you!	JESS
This isn't funny.	BLAKE
No! It's absolutely not funny.	JESS
Then why are you making fun of me?	BLAKE
I'm not making fun of you! I'm agreeing with you.	JESS
You're laughing!	BLAKE
I'm not laughing!	JESS
Yes you are!	BLAKE
Okay I am. You're laughing too!	JESS
Why am I laughing?	BLAKE [Laughing]
It doesn't matter.	JESS
Yes it does! I should not be laughing right now.	BLAKE
Oh okay. You're trying to be all serious now. Mr. big strong serious man knows how to deal with fucked up situations.	JESS

BLAKE

Whoa!

JESS

I just mean this makes absolutely no sense. Why should your reaction make any sense?

BLAKE

Because I need to figure out how to get us out of this.

JESS

Oh okay. Sorry, I'll let you think seriously so that you can save us from mommy.

[Blake turns to look with his mouth open.]

JESS

I'm just trying to lighten the mood!

BLAKE

You're trying to-?

JESS

Your mom is a huge cunt!

BLAKE

Jesus!

JESS

No, not Jesus. A cunt. I know, I wouldn't normally say that. I normally hate using words like that. I mean, calling someone a "cunt" equates weakness or pettiness or general disdain to the female sex organ. And we don't even have other options! Seriously, what else can you call someone that really packs as good a punch as "cunt"? But

JESS (Continued)

you know what? Honestly, it's just such a good word, I can't help it. Your mom is a cunt!

BLAKE

Okay, she's definitely going through some major problems right now, but you don't have to call her names.

JESS

Really? I'm not allowed to react to a psycho who comes into my house, acts like she's the fucking queen of composure and then... And what is this? Blood? What the fuck? She probably slit the girls' throats and chopped them up into little tiny pieces. She's probably cooking them right now. Hey Helen! I'll take them medium rare you fucking-!

Jess. BLAKE

Blake. JESS

Do you think she did something to the girls? BLAKE

Probably. JESS

Why would she do that? BLAKE

I don't know. She's your mom. You tell me. JESS

She's been pretty lonely... BLAKE

Yeah, that makes sense. I know when I get lonely I butcher little kids and tie up their parents. JESS

She's my mom. BLAKE

I know Blake. I'm sorry. JESS

I just want to know what's wrong. BLAKE

You want to help her. JESS

Yeah. You think that's wrong. BLAKE

I don't think that's wrong. JESS

But you don't want me to help her. You think she's gone. There's nothing we can do. BLAKE

I think we don't have a whole ton of options right now. JESS

BLAKE
Besides waiting.

JESS
Besides waiting.

[Lily enters from the kitchen with a bowl and a kitchen knife.]

LILY
Hi Mommy

JESS
Lily! Shhh. Come in here. Come and help us get these off.

LILY
No Mommy. I put them on you.

JESS
You put them...? Why?

LILY
Because Grandma Helen says I get more syrup if I make sure you don't go away.

BLAKE
You're hungry? Well then why didn't you just eat dinner? I've got some maple syrup in the fridge. Just help us get these off Lily.

LILY
I don't want dead syrup.

BLAKE
What is this with dead!? Okay sorry honey. What kind of syrup do you want? Is there another kind?

[Lily approaches Jess and Blake calmly and quietly. She raises the knife and cuts Blake's arm quickly. His binding prevents him from resisting. She holds the bowl below the wound to catch the flowing blood.]

BLAKE
Oww! What are you doing!?

LILY
Grandma Helen said...

JESS
What did she say?

LILY
She said she needed some syrup.

JESS
What are you talking about?

[Lily sips from the bowl, blood staining her chin. She continues filling the bowl.]

BLAKE
Stop it!

JESS
Lily!?

LILY
It's for the game.

JESS
This is not a game!

BLAKE
Lily, you need to call 9-1-1. Do you know how to do that?

LILY
Stop it. You're not playing right.

JESS
Lily stop! Where is Grandma Helen?

BLAKE
Lily. 9-1-1. The phone. This is really hurting Daddy. I'm not playing okay? Please Lily?

LILY
Grandma Helen is playing with us. She's better.

BLAKE
Lily!

JESS
What?

BLAKE
The phone!

LILY
I'm not allowed to press the phone buttons.

JESS
Get your grandma sweetie.

[Taking the bowl away from Blake's wound]

LILY
All done. Bye bye.

JESS
Lily.

LILY
Huh?

JESS
Get Grandma.

BLAKE
The phone!

[Lily exits through the front door.]

BLAKE
What the...

JESS
Are you okay?

BLAKE
No! I'm starting to feel woozy.

JESS
Hold on it'll be okay. Let's try to stand up.

BLAKE
We can't stand up.

JESS
We have to try. Come on. Come on! Are you just gonna sit there and bleed to death? Fuck you. Come on!

[Jess heaves upward and Blake remains seated. Her effort topples them both to the floor.]

JESS
What are you doing? Are you just giving up?

BLAKE
No.

JESS
Yes you are. Stop it!

BLAKE
I'm broken.

JESS
You're broken. Okay. You're broken. Great, now let's get up so we can fix you.

BLAKE
No, I'm... I mean I. I don't know. Okay.

JESS
Okay.

[They both try to stand now. After tremendous effort, they rise to their feet. Helen enters from the front door covered in dirt holding a muddy shovel.]

HELEN
Sit down. I'm not quite ready yet.

[Helen gently pushes Blake, knocking him and Jess off balance and back to the floor.]

BLAKE
Mom. What's going on? Are you okay?

JESS
Is *she* okay? She looks fine.

HELEN
I'm sorry Blake. I really didn't want it to go this way, but you're just so tragically attached to this... unfortunate woman.

BLAKE
What are you doing?

HELEN
I'm taking control.

Of what? BLAKE

She's off her medication. JESS

I don't take medication! HELEN

Well, maybe it's something you should think about... JESS

Mom. I need you to explain. What are you doing? Is this because of Dad? Did something happen before he...? BLAKE

Blake, the less you know the better. HELEN

But I... BLAKE

It will be easier for all of us. HELEN

You know I really feel like this is about all of us. The best for the team. You're a team player Helen. You really are. I just feel the love and support every daughter and law could ask for. Thanks, Mom! JESS

[Helen quickly and forcefully shoves the shovel blade into Jess's stomach. Jess screams in panic. Helen puts her foot on the shovel blade and shoves it in deeper. Blood flows onto the carpet. Helen cuts the binding, and drags Jess to the couch, and with effort, pulls her onto it. Blake is curled up on the floor, growing faint from his wound.]

Mom! What...? I don't understand. Mom? Please, why? I don't... I don't... I don't... BLAKE

I'm so sorry Blake. HELEN

No you're not. BLAKE

Yes I am. HELEN

You're not! What the fuck are you talking about? BLAKE

I am sorry. I wish this didn't have to- HELEN

So do I! BLAKE

You don't understand. HELEN

No I don't understand. BLAKE

You can't understand. HELEN

I won't understand! BLAKE

Stop making this difficult! HELEN

You want me to stop? BLAKE

Yes I do. HELEN

Well I'm sorry. Sorry for getting in the way. BLAKE

Blake. HELEN

Yeah, sorry about that, Mom! Sorry I'm always getting in the way. BLAKE

You're not always getting the way. HELEN

Oh no? BLAKE

No. HELEN

Just now? BLAKE

I didn't mean- HELEN

Blake? JESS

Jess? BLAKE

Hush, you! I'm speaking with my son! HELEN

Fuck you! BLAKE

Blake! Don't say that word. HELEN

Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck shit shit piss cunt and cock! BLAKE

Stop! You know I hate those words. HELEN

I know you hate them. Jess, are you okay? BLAKE

No! You? JESS

NO. BLAKE

Okay fine I'll explain. HELEN

Please don't. JESS

BLAKE
Mom, we need a hospital.

HELEN
See, but they can't know about this if it works.

BLAKE
I won't tell them.

JESS
I will!

BLAKE
Jess!

HELEN
Perhaps it will work on you as well, and we can all just forget this tomorrow.

[Jess, nursing her wound, pulls herself off the couch to the floor and towards Blake. Through Helen's speech they try to crawl, inching towards the front door.]

HELEN
I am alone. There is nothing to care about. Nothing to do. Nothing in that big empty house. It's silent, and I can't bring it back. It's the shell of a family that died. George was the funny one. He kept the house alive after you left, Blake. But now he's... What's the point? God! I am such a sad sack! You know, I didn't even want to go on with it? I was just waiting for everything to just end. Sort of poetic. And pathetic. But you see? I've figured it out. I don't have to give up.

[Blake and Jess have reached the door and are trying to reach the doorknob to open it. They are having difficulty. Helen moves to the door and stands between them and their exit, waving them away from the door.]

HELEN
Did you hear me? Isn't that fantastic?

BLAKE
Mom, I'm going to die. Jess is going to die. And you're definitely going to die. And it just might be in that order. They say a mother should never have to bury her son.

HELEN
[*Picking up her shovel*]
Oh Blake, you're thinking ahead.

JESS
Blake. I'm sorry I was wrong... She's a *crazy cunt*!

[*Enter Robyn and Lily right on
"cunt"*]

BLAKE
What...?

HELEN
I'm going to be a vampire!

[*Beat*]

HELEN
A vampire...

[*All laugh heartily as...*]

Scene 2.

[... a sudden shift. All circumstances instantly evaporate within their laughter as they gather around the coffee table. They are in the midst of playing a card game. Age blends, family blossoms.]

ROBYN
We don't die.

JESS
Okay.

LILY
She means we've never died.

JESS
Yeah, that's pretty clear.

ROBYN
We *can't* die.

BLAKE
Right.

LILY
Oh. Okay. That was easy.

JESS
Did you expect it to be difficult?

ROBYN
Yeah, I guess so.

BLAKE
Why's that?

LILY
It's not normally something people are just going to accept most of the time. We thought this would be a huge deal. Like we'd have to spend all this time proving it to you...

BLAKE
[To Helen]
And so that's why you finally came to visit then? It's your turn.

HELEN
Oh! Actually yes it was...

BLAKE
Wow, I can't say that's a fun thing to hear.

JESS
It is pretty remarkable though, Blake.

BLAKE
I don't think it's fair.

LILY
I'm following the rules!

BLAKE
No, not that. Well yeah that, too! But that you don't die.

JESS
Is it really a question of ethics? I'm more curious about how it works.

ROBYN
We don't really know.

BLAKE
Do you even know how long it's been? Can you remember a beginning or anything? Or have you learned anything? That's what I'm more curious about. What was it like, say... one hundred years ago? Do you think people have changed substantially?

HELEN
You're such a man.

BLAKE
Excuse me?

HELEN
Of course that's what you would be interested in. You know, nostalgia is an exclusively male phenomenon. Why

HELEN (Continued)
would we want to keep living in the past? A man can look back and imagine how amazing it must have been to live in ancient Rome, or the middle ages, or whatever, and then you'll think, hmm... Wow! What would I have been!? Ooh! Maybe I could have been a blacksmith, or a Greek hero, or a knight in shining armor. I don't get to ask that kind of question. I know the answer. I would have been a woman. But I can ask what I *will* be. There is no better moment in history for me to be alive than right now. And now. And

now. These girls can keep on living in the next moment indefinitely. And so can I!

JESS
But you don't even know if it worked.

HELEN
Of course it did. I can feel it.

JESS
But they just said they don't even know how it works.

HELEN
Does that mean *I* can't know?

JESS
I'm just saying they probably have a better grasp on it than you do.

ROBYN
Yeah, I'm not even sure you can make yourself like us. I think it just sort of happened.

HELEN
I did the research. I feel the feeling. I know it worked. I feel more alive than I ever have.

BLAKE
But then are you really living?

HELEN
How do you mean?

BLAKE
If you're not going to die...?

HELEN
Is this a riddle?

BLAKE
The point of living is to procreate and to die. To produce an offspring that may be even better suited to your niche, and then move out of the way to make room for it to flourish. What are you doing? It's like you're coming to a potluck without anything to offer and then eating everyone else's food. You're not living if you don't eventually die.

JESS
Ha! Okay, I get what you mean, but the potluck thing's a little...

LILY

So you're saying that we're not alive? Hello! Nice to meet you. I'm Lily and I'm winning right now. What are you even talking about?

ROBYN

Well, it comes down to how you define living. You're already setting us up to be "dead" by defining your own terms. So if we're "dead," or at least, "not alive," then-

LILY

You can't just say something like that and expect us to all just accept *your* version of the meaning of life. Jesus.

JESS

Fitting.

LILY

What?

JESS

Throwing religion into the mix.

LILY

No! Shit, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to open that can of - but really though, how do you get off saying what the meaning of life is? Go! It's your turn!

BLAKE

It's not my definition!

ROBYN

If we're not alive then what are we? Just existing? Does that mean that we shouldn't be? What's the endgame here?

JESS

What about your point about women? That's looking backwards; we're talking about living perpetually. Looking forwards.

HELEN

Right. What I was getting to was that traveling backwards in time is damnation, traveling forwards is salvation - for women at least. I deserve eternal salvation. I am a Christian.

BLAKE

HA! That's your justification for this? Your own little psychopathic union of religion and vampire erotica? Shit, Mom, I guess Jess is right about some medication...

ROBYN

Okay, right. You're right, okay that's the point of living, from a Darwinist scientific perspective. Got it. But can you call this science? It's magic right?

BLAKE

Magic? Really? This isn't magic, this is just fucked up. I'm dying! Remember?

[Blake points to his blood.]

ROBYN

Well what else is it? You can't articulate some scientific explanation for how someone just doesn't die.

BLAKE

Who says you can't die? I'm not a scientist.

LILY

Oh ho ho! But you feel so comfortable claiming a scientific "meaning of life" as the end all be all, huh?

BLAKE

I still don't think it's fair... Okay fine!

LILY

Yeah, fine!

ROBYN

All I'm saying is we didn't make this choice. We can't do anything about it. And neither can you. Don't turn this into some kind of trial. We're just making the best out of the situation.

BLAKE

Okay, so you're a pragmatist.

LILY

Oh wow, I can see you studied philosophy, professor.

BLAKE

Fuck you.

LILY

Fuck you.

[Jess, who has been reshuffling part of the deck, begins to throw cards out at random all over the floor:]

JESS

Like the young girl needs only a wet kiss,
And time to explore her secret perfume;
We are naked animals breathing warm breezes
In the night.
Never trusting, but lingering and throbbing.
Sexed old prisoners to our long broken hearts.

I wrote it. I don't know what it means. This is the last
thing I'm thinking.

*[The whole deck litters the floor.
Jess silently stands and returns
to her position on the floor near
the door. She lies motionless. The
other characters do not notice
this happen.]*

BLAKE

Okay Mom, I think it's time. I think you should tell us
why.

HELEN

I'm alone Blake. I told you. What's going to happen to me
after I die? Does it matter? What if I don't understand it?

BLAKE

Does anybody? This is the last thing I'm thinking.

ROBYN

There's a difference between understanding and believing.

LILY

This is boring.

*[Lily exits. Blake silently stands
and returns to the door, lying
down next to Jess. He lies
motionless.]*

HELEN

What if I never believe it, and just kept living and
living? That's the key! Death only exists for me when I
die. It's the same for you, right? Sure, we can see the
deaths of others, but we never really know that we die
ourselves do we? I mean for sure? If we do, then we do, but
we wouldn't be aware of it, because we'd be dead. Who's to
say we don't just wake up again and keep playing the game
of life? It doesn't have anything to do with you at all!

Scene 3.

[A return to the circumstances. Blake and Jess lie dead near the door. Helen picks up the shovel, staring at it.]

Grandma Helen? ROBYN

[No response.] HELEN

Grandma Helen. Hey! ROBYN

[No response.] HELEN

You know what you did? ROBYN

But it made sense. I believed it. HELEN

Did you? So what? ROBYN

Believing is all. Right? Believing in something... HELEN

Everything is real if you believe it until you can't. Then it's not. Everything is a game until it isn't. ROBYN

But why? HELEN

Why what? ROBYN

Why is... HELEN

I think it's so we can try things out first. ROBYN

Try things out? HELEN

Before they really happen. So we can practice. So when it's not a game we have some practice. When we have to believe. ROBYN

But I can. HELEN

Okay. ROBYN

So it is real... HELEN

Okay. ROBYN

It is! HELEN

Then you should see. ROBYN

See? HELEN

Test it. ROBYN

I'm afraid. HELEN

Then you're wrong. ROBYN

I'm wrong if I'm afraid? HELEN

[Robyn exits. Helen stands still, looking back and forth between the shovel and the two dead bodies. Lily enters giggling. She leaps onto Helen, toppling her to the floor. Lily bites Helen's neck spewing blood everywhere. Helen begins to resist, but eventually gives up. Blood should squirt and spew, drenching Lily. This can be gratuitous and too long. Lily should be having a lot of fun. Robyn re-enters and stops suddenly, staring at Lily.]

LILY
Robyn! Come play vampires with us. Lookit! Mommy and Daddy are finally playing too. See, Mommy and Daddy are over here. They're the victims. They got killed because Grandma

wanted to be a vampire too. So she drank their blood and killed them. And then she wanted to put them inside the holes outside. And then she didn't know what's next. So I helped. She has to get bited by a vampire after she drinks some blood. So... I helped Grandma! She's going to be a vampire like me and you, Robyn! Robyn, do you want to play with us? I can be the vampire and you can be my god. You can be the devil and I will pray to you.

[Lily, soaked in blood, prostrates herself before Robyn.]

ROBYN

You shouldn't say that Lily.

LILY

Huh? But the devil is my god. Because the vampire hunters pray to God and the vampires pray to the devil. Duh! Don't you know?

ROBYN

Okay, but you still shouldn't say that.

LILY

How come?

ROBYN

Because the devil is evil. You don't want to pray to him.

LILY

Why?

ROBYN

You just don't. Stand up. Don't do that again. That's a bad game Lily. Lily get up!

[Lily stands up, ashamed, like she "accidentally" ate dessert before dinner.]

LILY

Is it bad? Am I bad? I'm sorry. I'm sorry! I don't want to be bad. I didn't know. I just want to play this game. I want to play vampires. Is that okay?

ROBYN

Yes. It's okay. But maybe you can be a nice vampire.

LILY

I can use my super vampire powers for good!

ROBYN

Yes!

LILY

I can kiss people's necks instead of biting them!

ROBYN

...Yes.

LILY

[Kissing their necks]

Okay Mommy. Daddy! Grandma Helen! We're going to play a different game. Hello? What are you doing? Hey! Wake up now. Did you fall asleep? This new game will be more fun. You don't have to lay around the whole time.

ROBYN

Lily...

LILY

Robyn, why are they being boring? I thought they were going to be fun parents now. I want to play a new game. Grown-ups are no fun.

ROBYN

They don't want to, Lily.

LILY

Why not?

ROBYN

Because they're not here anymore.

LILY

Yes they are Robyn. Look! They're here. Look! Can't you see them?

ROBYN

I can see them Lily.

LILY

So they are here. They are! Look! Why aren't you looking. Look at Mommy. Look at Daddy. They're being grumpy and mean they don't want to play. Robyn, come on! You have to wake them up. They listen to you more. Robyn! Okay fine! We'll play by ourselves. You can't come. You're not invited. Go away.

*[Lily grabs Helen by the wrists
and pulls her into a sitting
position, then lets go. Helen
topples over.]*

Oh!

*[Lily pulls Helen up again and
dances.]*

Ring-a-round the rosie,
A pocket full of posies,
Ashes! Ashes!

We all fall down!

*[Lily lets go of Helen's wrists
and they both topple to the
floor.]*

ROBYN

Lily. She's not playing with you.

[End]

Inspiration Crayon Drawings



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