

The Wind Phone

By

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Cast of Characters

ELLEN GRAY (Mid-50s) Lives in the suburbs. Married, mother to two.

JENNY MITCHELL (Early 60s) Her older sister. Professional humanitarian aid director and professor

PATTY MITCHELL (80s) ... Their mother. Uses a walker.

The Place

The Mitchell home located in an upscale suburb north of Chicago

The Time

Late winter/early spring, 2013

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ACT ONE
SCENE ONE

Late morning. The main floor (living room and dining room) of an early 20th century house decorated in an upscale but out of date style. A few chairs remain but it has an empty, moved-out feel. A few small to medium pieces of abstract modern art from the 50s and 60s are on the walls. One or two may have small portrait lights over them.

The kitchen is offstage. In one corner is an organized stack of packed boxes, taped shut, with neatly typed pages on the exterior. There may be a table with an organized work space with packing material like a roll of bubble wrap, tape, box cutter, etc. In another corner are numerous old dusty boxes and items, as well as a large plastic garbage can. A slimline-style phone with long cord rests on an end table in a dark corner. A short flight of stairs leads upstairs. Voices can be heard off stage.

ELLEN
(Offstage)

Mom. Just hold the railing.

PATTY
(Offstage)

I am.

ELLEN
(Offstage)

Give that to me.

The front door swings open and Ellen shoves a walker laden with colorful bags inside and then quickly exits. She pushes the walker with such force it hits a packing box and teeters, perhaps tipping over.

PATTY
When is Jenny coming? I keep forgetting. Is she here?

PATTY and ELLEN enter. With an overnight bag slung over one shoulder, Ellen is walking backwards as she guides Patty

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inside. Patty is wearing a bright, stylish coat, bold scarf, hat and bracelets. Ellen is dressed practically but with a girlish flair.

ELLEN

No. I don't know. She kept changing the time. Or her flight kept changing.

Ellen pulls the hat off Patty's head.

Give me your hat and coat.

PATTY

(Patting her hair)

Is my hair okay?

ELLEN

It's fine, Mom. Give me your arm so we can-

Ellen helps Patty get her coat off.

PATTY

-Wait. My bracelet is caught...okay. Where's Jenny? Is she here? When is she coming again?

They have gotten the coat off and as Ellen turns to hang it up she stumbles over the tipped walker and box.

ELLEN

Shoot! Ouch! Darn it.

PATTY

Oh, honey. Are you okay? Oh, I'm sorry.

ELLEN

Mom. I'm fine. You didn't do anything. Stay right there.

During the following Ellen shoves the box aside, straightens the walker back up, pushes it toward Patty, and hangs up her coat.

Just sit down. Use your walker. I've set you up there. I'm going to bring things to you to decide about. I've taken care of most of the items of objective value, you know. Stuff you can research the value of-

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PATTY

-The art. I don't want to sell any of the art.

ELLEN

(She's heard this before)

I know. What we need to do is go through the personal items. *(She gestures towards the dusty boxes)* You know, the baby books and photo albums and old, I don't know, old homework and toys and stuff. You know, sentimental value things. Closing is Thursday, so we have to do this now. This weekend. So, sit down.

PATTY

No. I want to look in the kitchen for that plate before I forget.

Patty looks downstage at the "4th Wall" and sees what is a large abstract painting.

Oh my. Oh, my but I love this painting! Can I take that?

ELLEN

Take what? Oh no. Mom. It's huge. You don't have room for it at Evergreen.

PATTY

Oh, but I love it. It was Fredrick's favorite. It was before its time.

ELLEN

I know, Mom.

PATTY

It was considered provocative, even dangerous, because it was different. It's was your father's favorite, you know. A seminal work.

ELLEN

I know, Mom.

PATTY

That's why we...I...we never...well, you know. Can I take it?

ELLEN

Okay, but where would you hang it? It fills the entire space.

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Ellen exits upstairs with the overnight bag.

PATTY

But what are we going to do with it? Why don't you take it? Please?

Ellen returns.

ELLEN

-Mom, I can't-

PATTY

-Why are the windows open?

ELLEN

The windows aren't open. It's freezing out.

They both look at the windows, which are open.

Okay. I did not leave those windows open.

PATTY

Maybe it's a ghost!

ELLEN

I did not leave those windows open. Did I? No. Did I?

PATTY

Oh, dear. I hope my forgetfulness isn't catching.

Ellen crosses to close the windows.

Oh, don't close them. It feels like something. Not the same old Evergreen air.

ELLEN

Okay. Fine. Whatever. Until Thursday, you're still paying the heating bill.

JENNY enters from the kitchen, coming in from the backyard. She is dressed in well-worn clothes designed for practicality, cargo pants, industrial parka, flat walking shoes.

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JENNY

Mom!

PATTY

You ARE here! Oh, honey!

Patty and Jenny embrace for a long moment.

JENNY

Mom, you're here! I didn't know you would be-

PATTY

-Oh, honey! My big, big girl. My world traveler. Look at you!

JENNY

Hi, Mom.

PATTY

Oh, my goodness, but you are so beautiful. Just look at you. I almost forgot how beautiful you are. Ellen, she's here!

ELLEN

She sure is. Hey, Jen.

JENNY

Hey, El.

PATTY

My babies. Come here. We're together! All together, here. Come here, sweetie.

She waves Ellen into the group hug. The three hug, rock back and forth, and then all begin to laugh.

Feel that? It's the years just melting away!

They break apart.

ELLEN

I could have picked you up. I thought you were going to call when you got in.

JENNY

Oh, it's not that hard. Getting from Point A to Point B.

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PATTY

But you're coming from JAPAN! Right, it's Japan?

JENNY

Yes. And Mom, you and Dad traveled.

PATTY

Oh, I suppose. It's all a blur now.

ELLEN

And it's been awhile since I've traveled the world. Like, never. Not like you. So, how was the flight? Where is your stuff? I can't imagine flying so many hours. Once Bob had to take a trip, he flew to Portland, he threw his back out just sitting for four hours straight.

PATTY

Oh posh. She knows what she's doing, right, sweetie? And she's here! You're here. It's been so long. What is it? Three years? Four?

ELLEN

Six. Six years.

PATTY

Really!? Well, time flies, I suppose.

JENNY

I know. I'm sorry. It's been forever. I just-

PATTY

-Oh, never mind! You're here now. Now, I want the news. All your adventures.

JENNY

Oh boy. That's a lot. (*Glancing at Ellen*) So Mom, you're going to help us pack everything up?

Ellen rolls her eyes and shrugs behind Patty's back.

PATTY

You bet I am. It's my stuff too!

ELLEN

Some of which will be gotten rid of, right, Mom?

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PATTY

Right! I'm going to be good. *(To Jenny)* So, Jen. Any new adventures? Awards? Books coming out?

ELLEN

Mom, do you want some water? Something to drink? You should drink. *(To Jenny)* UTI's are a thing.

JENNY

Okay.

ELLEN

Or do you want to eat? Water and something to eat?

PATTY

Oh, it's too early to eat. I had breakfast at Evergreen. Water is fine.

ELLEN

Okay. *(She starts to exit)* Don't say anything good before-

JENNY

(To Patty)

-Mom, I made tea. It's strong, Turkish tea. Really, really good.

ELLEN

You made tea?

JENNY

Yeah. Why? Was I not supposed to use the kitchen? Is that a condition of sale? There was still some stuff in there, so I thought-

ELLEN

-No. I just...how long have you been here?

JENNY

I dunno. Half an hour?

ELLEN

You could have called me that you arrived. That you got here. I was waiting until I had to go get Mom.

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JENNY

I didn't know.

ELLEN

I texted you to that number you gave me.

JENNY

Okay. I know. I'm sorry. I landed, I got an uber, I got the key from the garage and came in. And then I made tea! You don't have to act like-

PATTY

-Girls-

ELLEN

-I'm sorry-

JENNY

-No, I should have called. I know-

PATTY

-Stop. Doesn't matter.

ELLEN

-Sorry. I'll get the tea. Don't say anything good until I get back.

Ellen exits.

PATTY

Oh, honey. It is so good to see you.

Patty waves Jenny in for another hug. Releases her. Hugs her again.

JENNY

Mom. Stop!

Patty finally releases her and they sit.

PATTY

Oh my. So much to catch up on. So now you're still in New York, right? I mean, living there. Right? That's right?

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JENNY

Yes, still in New York.

PATTY

And you're still at the place, your university?

JENNY

Yes, yes. I finished up the semester and the grant came through, so it's been back to Japan for two months. I got a grant to fund this field-

PATTY

-About your disasters?

JENNY

Not my disasters. How natural disasters affect people in the long term.

PATTY

Yes. Yes, you told me that. I forget sometimes.

JENNY

I know. It's okay.

PATTY

(Whispering conspiratorially)

I am getting old, you know.

JENNY

(Whispering back)

I heard.

PATTY

I show everyone at Evergreen your books. Yaya, she's a day nurse, she even borrowed one!

JENNY

Which one?

PATTY

The African one.

JENNY

Sudanese.

PATTY

Yes, the one with the little black boy on the cover. She's a Muslim gal. Her parents are from there, Sudan!

JENNY

So, you're making friends? You're comfortable and all?

PATTY

Oh, it's fine. They do everything, which is ridiculous. I can make my own bed.

JENNY

But isn't that when you fell? El said you were making your bed when-

Ellen returns with tea and some cookies on a tray.

ELLEN

-Mom, you cannot make your own bed! That's why we pay them. I mean, you remember, that's how you fell, right? *(To Jenny)* She's still getting used to the routine. Right, Mom?

Patty shrugs and spies the tray.

PATTY

Oh god, I always hated this tray.

ELLEN

Sorry.

PATTY

Oh no, sweetie. I just...oh, I think my filter is just floating away. More and more I just say what I think and damn the torpedoes.

JENNY

And now we know you hate this tray.

PATTY

It's Asian. Your father picked it up years ago in some gallery. But Asian doesn't work with contemporary. It's just not a good fit. Too ornate. And honestly, I always found it lacked passion. Emotion. Now, our Kline. That had emotion! Where is it?

Patty looks around.

ELLEN

(Quietly)

You sold it, Mom.

A moment.

PATTY

(To Jenny)

So, how is New York? I loved New York. So did your father. All the buying trips. The galleries. Do you ever get a chance to get to any galleries? Is the Marlborough still there? I think that's where your Dad and I got the Gottlieb.

JENNY

Don't know, Mom. I don't really do the art scene much.

PATTY

Of course not. And it was so long ago. New York and London. Twice a year. Do you ever get to London?

JENNY

Not many natural disasters in London, Mom.

PATTY

Of course. Of course not. *(To Ellen)* Do we still have the Gottlieb?

Ellen shakes her head.

(Sudden gasp)

Did you sign me out? Oh, sweetie! Did you? I didn't.

ELLEN

Shoot!

They both jump up, clearly alarmed.

JENNY

What?

PATTY

Oh no!

ELLEN

It's a thing. At Evergreen. You have to sign out or...well, it's protocol and they get really upset if you don't.

Ellen pulls out her cell phone and begins dialing. Patty has risen and, not using her walker, crosses to the phone in the corner. She picks it up and prepares to dial.

PATTY

Ellen, what's the number? They get so upset if... *(she has put her ear to the phone)* ...why is there no dial tone? Sweetie? There's no-

ELLEN

-Oh, Mom, that phone's busted. There's the phone in the kitchen but I'm just calling now... *(Into cell phone)* ...Yes, Andrea, it's Ellen Gray, Patty Mitchell's.... yes, Mom's with me.... yes.... I know.... I'm sorry.... I realize that.... I'm so sorry-

PATTY

(Loudly)

-tell them we forgot.

ELLEN

(Holding up her hand to shush her)

-Yes, she's with me...you have my cell.... yes, she's going to stay here until Sunday. I told Michelle and.... yes, I'm bringing her back Sunday.... After breakfast so.... yes, sorry again.

She ends the call.

JENNY

What are you, Mom? On parole? Geez!

ELLEN

Don't do that. You don't know. Evergreen is awesome. They just have safety protocols. You can't just leave things wide open or things can happen.

Ellen crosses and slams the windows shut. Patty and Jenny exchange a look.

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JENNY

Sorry.

PATTY

Thank you, sweetie. It was getting cold in here.

ELLEN

And Mom, you need to use your walker all the time, even if you're just walking across a room.

PATTY

Yes, you're right. I'm sorry.

ELLEN

You could easily fall again.

Patty takes a long sip of tea and a nibble of a cookie.

PATTY

(To Jenny)

So, Jenny. Tell us about wherever you're coming in from.

ELLEN

I've gotta call Bob.

She exits into kitchen.

JENNY

Whoa. What the hell did I say?

PATTY

(Shrugging lightly)

Oh, you just criticized Evergreen. She feels very guilty and so the place has to be above reproach to make her feel better. It's quite understandable.

JENNY

It's quite annoying.

PATTY

Well, that too but you know your little sister. She likes things tidy so let her be. Now, you. You're coming from Japan.

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JENNY

Yes.

PATTY

How marvelous! How's Japan?

JENNY

Very Japanese.

PATTY

Well, of course it is! Just tell me you didn't bring me anything. You just heard my take on all things Asian art.

JENNY

You're just a crazy old gal.

PATTY

I am! So?

JENNY

So, I was in Otsuchi. They were hit by the 2011 tsunami. Just over fourteen hundred confirmed dead or missing. Ten percent of the town's total population.

PATTY

Oh, my goodness. So many. Terrible.

JENNY

It's coastal and mountainous. Gorgeous. But still ravaged.

PATTY

I can't imagine living through a tsunami.

JENNY

Sometimes the living after is the harder part. I mean, that's what my research is exploring. The emotional aftermath. How people cope. Unique ways of surviving after great loss and trauma.

PATTY

Survivor's guilt?

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JENNY

Some. And Mom, it's okay if you don't read the books.

PATTY

I read them!

JENNY

They're very academic. I understand.

PATTY

They're wonderful. Some of the statistical parts I may skip over a tiny bit but they're wonderful.

JENNY

So, Mom, tell me about Evergreen. Is it good? You making friends?

PATTY

It's fine. It's boring. The people are old. You tell me about your life. Japan. Trauma. Research. That's interesting. Not adult diapers and weak coffee. So talk.

JENNY

Well, okay. My work. Well, in Japan, death is...the living and the dead still seem to be linked. I'm trying to refine this part of it, but it keeps slipping away from me. There is certainly a cultural east versus west component which is why I might not be getting it right yet. But it goes beyond typical grief as we know it in the west. There's this connection I can't quantify. It's like this huge presence in their lives but I can't flesh it out. It's so frustrating! It's like trying to grab air.

PATTY

Dead men tell no tales?

JENNY

I wish they did 'cuz I'm getting only half the story. Oh! You'll like this!

PATTY

What?

JENNY

One of the reasons I went to Otsuchi is that a man has an old type phone booth in this huge backyard of his. Now, this phone is completely dead. And he, well, he invited people to use it. To call anyone they lost in the tsunami.

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PATTY

And someone answers on the other end?

JENNY

Oh, no. The phone is completely dead. No one answers, Mom.

PATTY

Sort of like mine?

She points to the busted phone.

JENNY

Exactly. All you need is a phone booth and a natural disaster. But anyway, people go Otsuchi to talk to their dads, their moms, their husbands, whoever died in the tsunami. A lot of people's bodies were never even found. So, people come from all over to talk to their dead family members.

PATTY

And no one is on the other side?

JENNY

Nope. And now thousands of people have come to this place.

PATTY

Just to talk to no one.

JENNY

Just to talk to someone who isn't there anymore. I mean, one woman comes and talks to her husband to complain about his mother. Another gal comes over a hundred miles once a week to discuss with her sister what she's cooking, shares recipes. Some people just cry.

PATTY

I don't know if I would want to do that. No. Maybe I would. Maybe I would do it.

Ellen enters.

ELLEN

Do what?

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

PATTY

Talk to someone dead on the phone.

ELLEN

Ok? I think I missed something.

JENNY

It's this thing in Japan.

ELLEN

Oh. So, you and Mom are talking about your work?

JENNY

Geez, El. We were just catching up. I don't not tell you about my work. It's just not stuff you can sum up easily.

ELLEN

Ok! Fine. So, what about this phone thing in Japan?

PATTY

It's fascinating.

JENNY

Oh, it's just there's this old phone booth in this town and people started using it to call their relatives who died. In the tsunami. In Japanese, it translates sort of as the telephone of the wind. Or the wind phone in English. It's not a direct translation but basically.

PATTY

That's so poetic.

ELLEN

It should really be called the Tsunami Phone.

JENNY

I didn't name it. I just learned about it and was telling Mom.

ELLEN

It sounds like it doesn't serve a real purpose.

JENNY

Well, it serves something because hundreds of people have used it.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

PATTY

What do they say? Do you know?

JENNY

A documentary crew has recorded some of the conversations. Done interviews. The grief is palpable but there is also this healing which comes afterwards.

PATTY

We even have our own version. *(Points to the phone)* Finally, something busted serves a purpose, right? I know! Let's us call someone. Who you wanna call?

JENNY & ELLEN

(In unison)

Ghostbusters!

They all laugh.

ELLEN

Alright, enough. We need to get started. Because there's a lot to do.

PATTY

That's right. *(To Jenny)* Ellen's right. We should get started. What do I unpack first? You know, it's rather exciting! I wonder what we'll find! *(To Ellen)* So. What's the plan, captain?

ELLEN

Everything you can see, I've already mostly dealt with.

Ellen crosses to the corner where the boxes are neatly stacked and labeled.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

All of this I've already sorted, researched, labeled with estimated value, and who gets what. It's taken forever.

JENNY

Wow. Look at all this.

Peering at one of the lists on a box.

JENNY (CONT'D)

I'm surprised you don't have Polaroids and hand-drawn renderings. You should be a reality show. "Ellen, The Professional-Past-Packer-Upper"

ELLEN

Well, someone had to do it and since I've been the only one here for the last few decades, I got elected.

PATTY

Girls.

ELLEN

Sorry.

JENNY

Sorry. It all looks great. Very organized.

PATTY

You've done so much. I'm so proud of you. Of both of you. Oh, it's so good to have you back here, Jen-

ELLEN

-Mom, I love you, but this will go a lot faster if you just listen.

PATTY

Yes. Yes. I'm sorry. You go. Not another word from me.

ELLEN

A lot of this we've decided. For sure. Right, Mom?

Patty nods her head, clearly NOT speaking. Ellen crosses to the corner and begins methodically pointing to individual boxes.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

The silver, linens, and Limoges china. For me, because I do holidays. The Eskimo carvings and the one small Bosse sculpture for you.

JENNY

(To Patty)

Mom! Thank you! I love that-

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PATTY

-Oh, you always did. I knew that. Even when you were-

ELLEN

-Hush! The two of you! *(To Jenny)* You get an Arbus and I get one. Bob wanted the old record collection. Mom, you said he could sell whatever on eBay.

PATTY

He was so excited to find that old Deep Purple album. He told me-

ELLEN

-Mom, come on!

JENNY

You're messing with the plan, woman!

PATTY

I AM! Sorry. We're shutting up now. Jen, honey, shut up! You keep talking. It's very contrary of you.

ELLEN

Thank you. So, all this, all this has been dealt with. What we need to clean out is all the personal stuff. *(Gestures to other corner)* All your kid stuff. Stuffed animals, you have like a million Tiger Beat magazines. My stuff. Mom, there are boxes of photos. Papers. I don't know what to do with it all. There's stuff from Grandma and Grandpa even. And Mom, we ARE going to throw some stuff out, okay? *(She pulls out the large plastic garbage can)* We cannot keep every scrap from our entire lives, right?

PATTY

Right.

ELLEN

This place can't be a shrine to the last fifty years.

PATTY

Right. Not a shrine. Check.

ELLEN

(To Jenny)

You either.

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JENNY

Check. I don't do the whole shrine thing anyway. I'm very not-shrine. I'm more a big ol' shredder and bonfire girl.

ELLEN

All right, girls. Who's ready to dig in?

Jenny and Patty raise their hands.

END SCENE ONE

SCENE TWO

Much later in the day. The living room is strewn with boxes, stacks of photo albums, papers, toys, and a number of Barbie dolls. Ellen has on a t-shirt from the 70s with a teen idol on the front (Like David Cassidy, Donny Osmond, or Bobby Sherman) and is teetering around in a pair of platform shoes. Jenny is wearing a plaid skirt over her regular pants and she has multiple costume jewelry brooches pinned to her sweatshirt. Patty, in a pair of pajamas, has on a hat clearly from the late 50s-early 60s. There is a large pizza box containing a mostly eaten pizza, a roll of paper towels, soda cans, and a half empty bottle of wine on the coffee table. Patty and Jenny have mismatched glasses with wine, Ellen, a can of diet soda. They are all laughing.

PATTY

(Pointing to Jenny)

And then you said...and then you said...

ELLEN AND JENNY

(In unison)

"It's just two floors"!

PATTY

And then you let her go!!! You looked at me with those big eyes and let her go!

More laughter.

ELLEN

Oh my god.

JENNY

I can't believe I did that.

PATTY

Swoosh! Right down the laundry chute.

ELLEN

You were so mean!

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JENNY

No, I wasn't! It wasn't mean. The toy room was in the basement! I was doing you a solid! You wanted to get there, I got ya there!

PATTY

Oh my god. When you let her go-

JENNY

-For everyone's information, SHE let go.

ELLEN

Did not!

JENNY

Oh! So DID. You were totally on board.

ELLEN

I was four. I didn't know!

PATTY

(Beginning to calm herself)

Thank god I hadn't done laundry for a few days. Do you remember it, honey?

ELLEN

I think I do. I think I remember landing.

JENNY

I don't remember us planning it, but I do remember your face, Mom. The second I let go and your expression, I knew in that second, I had done a bad thing. But before-

ELLEN

-You thought it was a great idea!

JENNY

It WAS. You were tiny. You wanted to go downstairs to play. We had the laundry chute. You do the math.

PATTY

It is so good to see you both laugh. Together. All of us, together. It reminds me of us.

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JENNY

Yup. We are us, Mom.

Ellen pulls an old school photo out of a pile.

ELLEN

Oh my god. Look at this school picture!

JENNY

Is it the one where it looks like you have a lazy eye-

ELLEN

-with that barrette at my ear.

Ellen hands the picture to Jenny.

JENNY

You look like a 75-year-old drunken Irishman.

PATTY

El, you've always been beautiful but that was not a good day for you. Even a mother can say that.

ELLEN

(Giggling)

It's almost enough to make me start drinking again.

PATTY

Oh, don't be silly!

JENNY

(Handing Ellen her glass of wine)

Here ya go, El. It'll take the sting out.

ELLEN

I don't drink.

JENNY

It's not bad. It's just twelve-dollar Zinfandel.

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ELLEN

Jen, I don't drink.

JENNY

What do you mean, you don't drink?

ELLEN
(Gently)

Jen, you know I'm an alcoholic.

JENNY

No. No. I don't know you're...what?

ELLEN

I don't drink because I'm an alcoholic.

JENNY

Since when?

ELLEN

Well, I stopped drinking a week after my thirty-eighth birthday, October 23rd. It was a Tuesday.

PATTY

I was so proud of you.

ELLEN
(Enjoying Jenny's shock)

More pizza, Jen?

JENNY

That was, like, over fifteen years ago. Why don't I know this?

ELLEN

I don't know. Why don't you know this?

PATTY

Time for me to go to bed. So, you sisters can talk. Someone grab me my walker so El doesn't blow a gasket.

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ELLEN

I gotcha, Mom.

Ellen helps Patty up and over to the staircase during the following,

Okay, that's good. Just hold on to the railing and take them one at a time. Wait at the top and then I'll bring the walker up.

PATTY

I know. Is my shirt hitched up in the back there?

ELLEN

No. Oh. Yes. Here, I'll get it. There. Okay.

Patty careful makes her way up as Ellen "spots" her.

I love the dinner-in-pajamas thing you have going on, Mom.

PATTY

I know. Isn't it genius? *(Calling downstairs)* 'Night, sweetie!

After Ellen gets Patty to the top of the stairs she scurries quickly back down and hauls the walker up the stairs to Patty.

JENNY

'Night, Mom.

ELLEN

Stay there, Mom. Wait for the walker.

PATTY

(Slightly exasperated sign)

I'm waiting.

Patty exits into the upstairs bedroom with Ellen at her side. Jenny looks at her wine and quickly finishes her glass. She slides the bottle behind the leg of an end table. She then reaches for a can of soda.

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PATTY
(*Offstage*)

Don't fuss.

ELLEN
(*Offstage*)

I'm not fussing.

Ellen returns.

ELLEN

Hey.

JENNY

Story, please.

ELLEN

Mommy Happy Hour was taking an ugly turn. The boys were young, I was at home, there was a group of us subdivision moms that would get together. We had a great excuse. Mommy burnout and all. And it was a playdate so they kids were getting socialized. And no one had to drive because, well, we were subdivision moms. First it was only Thursdays. Then Wednesdays. Then, I started having my own personal Mommy Happy Hour every afternoon at four, then three. Then two. Then I fell down the stairs.

Ellen and Jenny both look at the staircase.

JENNY

Like Dad used to.

ELLEN

Only ours was much bigger. And I was holding Kyle. He was okay. Babies bounce. But I knew. The second I hit the floor, I knew was becoming Dad. Well, I was on the road. So. October 23rd.

JENNY

I had no idea.

ELLEN

I know.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

JENNY

I'm proud of you.

ELLEN

Thanks.

JENNY

Why didn't you tell me?

ELLEN

I was going to. But, well, I was embarrassed, I think. It made me feel like I was weak.

JENNY

Oh, El! You aren't-

ELLEN

-I know, I know. Everyone tells me. But the upside of feeling that way was that I got A LOT done. I was super-Mom there for a while. I went at it; our life was going to be not our (*gesturing between her and Jenny*) life. I was really motivated. Made a ton of money for the PTA. So that business degree finally came in handy for something. I know I scared some of the other moms. They told me later.

JENNY

But why didn't you ever tell me? I mean, really?

ELLEN

Well, why is it my job to keep you informed about everything? You don't keep me informed about your life.

JENNY

This again?

ELLEN

What again?

JENNY

Jenny doesn't call enough. Jenny doesn't write enough. Jenny is too busy living her fucking life to be a good sister, good daughter, good person to jump through all your imaginary hoops to qualify as a good sister.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

ELLEN

But you didn't call. For years.

JENNY

I called. And you could have called me.

ELLEN

I bored you.

JENNY

You did not bore me!

ELLEN

Oh please. I so did! You judged me from ten thousand miles away. "Ellen has no life. Ellen doesn't do anything important. Ellen's just a boring mother. Ellen's just a boring housewife."

JENNY

I never said that.

ELLEN

You thought it.

JENNY

How do you know what I thought?

ELLEN

I'm your sister! Of course, I knew what you thought.

JENNY

Alright. Yes. You were a little boring.

ELLEN

I was raising kids! I mean, you spend years watching Teletubbies and see how interesting you are. Sorry I forgot to cure cancer during naptime. My bad.

JENNY

It's not that raising the boys wasn't important but for a while there, we just didn't have much in common. I mean, one time I called you from...god...I don't know, Haiti maybe, and you spent ten minutes talking about how great the book *Twilight* was. The BOOK. Who reads the fucking book?

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

ELLEN

OH! You are such a SNOB. You're just like Dad. And Mom. You're all snobs. It was an escapist read. Sorry I didn't break out the Kafka analysis for you.

JENNY

We were just in different places and...

ELLEN

"And" what?

JENNY

And I thought you were better than that. Than just having kids and doing the fucking PTA.

ELLEN

I'm so sorry to disappoint you. Sorry I didn't become a doctor or...or civil rights lawyer or...Georgia Keefe! And so what? My husband is nice and normal and nice and my kids are normal! Is that so bad? To just be normal? And nice? And happy? HUH?

JENNY

First of all, NO! No one ever said that and second of all, it's Georgia O'Keefe, not Georgia Keefe.

ELLEN

I know it's Georgia....fucking O'Keefe! I misspoke! Bite my boring suburban ass which you clearly don't get or respect or understand or want to understand.

JENNY

I respect you.

ELLEN

BUT?

JENNY

Okay! I don't understand!

ELLEN

What don't you understand?

JENNY

Some of your choices.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

ELLEN

MY choices? You're kidding me. Like what?

JENNY

Like why didn't you leave? You could have left. You should have left! You're SUPPOSED to leave! Why did you come back?

ELLEN

Because. Dad died. Mom was alone. After college, I just came back to be with her for a bit, just to get started and then, well...Bob happened....and anyway, I did what a person is supposed to do!

JENNY

So did I. I grew up. I moved on. Like a person is supposed to do. So why am I the bad guy?

ELLEN

I never said you were the bad guy!

JENNY

But you thought it!

ELLEN

Okay. Yes. You left me here.

JENNY

But you went to college!

ELLEN

I'm not talking about college. I'm talking about before. BEFORE.

A moment.

I was twelve. I was TWELVE. And you left me HERE. You ran. And you didn't come back. You went to college on the other side of the continent, grad school even farther, as far away as you could get, you ran around saving all these other families but from every disaster and earthquake and plague and goddamn tsunami but oh, no, not us. Not me. So maybe I question some of your choices.

Silence.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

JENNY

El, I had to get out. I had to. Dad was already...erratic, you know? And Mom was working and just trying to hold it all together. I think I told myself it would be one thing less for everybody to worry about if I wasn't around. It's not like he was sober enough to notice.

ELLEN

I noticed.

JENNY

Did I ever say-

ELLEN

-No. You never apologized.

JENNY

I'm sorry.

Ellen sits and pulls off her platform shoes.

ELLEN

I was glad you got out. And I lied. I didn't take care of everything. Mom did. I was at college when...you know. When he finally died.

JENNY

But then you came home. For the funeral and everything.

ELLEN

I got why you didn't.

JENNY

Do ya? 'Cuz I sure as hell don't. I just couldn't get on a plane for the funeral. I was in Turkey. People tell me all the time how brave and tough I am. And whenever they do, I think of that stupid apartment in Turkey. How was it? The funeral.

ELLEN

You know. I told you.

JENNY

No. You told me who was there and all but...you didn't tell me really.... was it hard?

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

ELLEN

The hardest part was that it wasn't. I was relieved he was dead...I was so.... relieved. I was so sick of being confused and embarrassed. I was so sick of hating his weakness. I was just sick of it all. Do you know what it's like to be relieved your dad has died?

JENNY

Yes.

Ellen pokes at a box with her foot.

ELLEN

You know, I don't remember squat. About growing up. Junior high. High school. I mean, I remember the buildings and random stuff but...I mean, I have Facebook friends and they remember me and all this stuff about...everything, and I don't. I did so much after school stuff, it was crazy.

JENNY

To stay out of the house.

ELLEN

But I barely remember. I was the president of the Bayside Boosters and I have absolutely no recollection of it.

JENNY

Well, maybe forgetting that one's just a gift from God.

ELLEN

(Smiling)

Jerk.

A moment.

JENNY

What was it like? After I left.

ELLEN

He'd sit in that chair in the living room (*She points to a chair in the far corner, piled high with a few dusty boxes*) You remember. (*Jenny nods*). He'd stare at whatever painting with just those special lights on the painting. In the dark, just that glow, on the paintings. And he would drink and mutter. I never knew about what. I didn't want to know. To hear. If I had to go downstairs

ELLEN (CONT'D)

I'd always make sure I was really quiet or else he would call me in ask if I was okay. I think. I don't remember. I just would be super quiet. And scared. Of what? I don't know really. Although he did hit me once.

JENNY

What? When?

ELLEN

My senior year of high school. I got busted for smoking weed.

JENNY

You got busted for smoking pot?

ELLEN

I got suspended for a couple of days. When I got home, he walked over to me, this black fury on his face. He was, of course, smashed. And he struck me across the face. Whack. He hit me for getting high. It took me a long time to grasp the irony of that. Oh, and my senior day picnic was a red-letter event. He showed up, I'll give him that. Unfortunately, he brought a bottle with him. Got out of the car, walked straight through the entire senior class, parents, teachers...no. Wait. He didn't walk straight. He staggered to me, bottle in hand, across the park. Everyone parted like the red sea or something. Stepped back so they wouldn't have to...be near him, I guess? Anyway, the crowd parted just so he could get to me that much quicker. I believe he had to take a swig along the way. Just to shore himself up.

JENNY

Oh shit.

ELLEN

No kidding

JENNY

What happened?

ELLEN

That's it. That's all I remember. Another black hole.

JENNY

Did he drive?

ELLEN

What?

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

JENNY

Did he drive himself there? Like that?

ELLEN

Nope. No, I guess not. No! I remember. Mom drove him.

JENNY

And she let him-

ELLEN

-Jen. You know how he was. Stubborn. He'd snarl at you, with that look.

JENNY

But Mom could have, I don't know-

ELLEN

-Don't. I don't.

JENNY

What?

ELLEN

Blame her. I can't.

JENNY

She was all you had.

Ellen nods.

Oh, shit. Oh, shit, El. I'm so sorry.

ELLEN

I don't like remembering. I mean, we can't change the past, right? It's fixed. Done. But the one downside is that I don't really remember the fun stuff either. The good stuff? The laundry chute? I say I remember. I don't. My mind wants to. I see you both have it. The memory. But I don't. I pretend. But it's a blank.

JENNY

Well, don't feel too bad. I don't remember shit either.

ELLEN

Really?

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

JENNY

Yes, really. Yes. Well, some stuff. But there're some big black holes where joyful childhood memories should be, I think.

ELLEN

That makes me feel so much better. I thought there was something wrong with me. But it's not natural. Not to remember, is it?

JENNY

El, I think, I dunno. I think a person only has so much bandwidth. *(She spreads her hands to indicate a space)* Anyone fighting for survival has to make choices. A person only has so many energy outlets. I think we both unplugged from the making memory portal to plug into something else. Nature finds a way to endure. You found a way to endure.

ELLEN

So did you.

JENNY

Sometimes I feel like there's this part of me, of us, just floating out there. The Dad side of us. Just beyond reach. Just beyond the horizon. The eternal Dad question through this haze of memories, flashes of moments and tiny kid emotions. I'm sixty but when I think of him-

ELLEN

-Yes. Me too! I don't remember him, like, as me now.

JENNY

It's like your head goes back to being in middle school!

ELLEN

I hate feeling that way. So awkward and nervous. I try not to think about it.

JENNY

Maybe we should. Have you?

ELLEN

Have I what?

JENNY

Um. Okay, in my work, after an event, we tell people it's really important to talk about it. To process it, the details, each moment.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

ELLEN

Oh god. You're talking about therapy.

JENNY

I'm talking about reflecting on-

ELLEN

-It's ridiculous.

JENNY

Here we go.

ELLEN

Life is right now. Not yesterday. Wallowing in stuff you can't do anything about is a waste of time. I don't like waste.

Ellen begins cramming loose papers into the garbage can.

Look at me. Am I running all over the world, chasing down the worst possible situation to try to correct? Am I unable to create and maintain meaningful, intimate connections, like with my immediate family? I mean, am I calling up my dead relatives on a dead phone instead of calling my living relatives on a real phone? NO!

JENNY

I'm here now!

ELLEN

Only because I had to beg you, I begged you to come help me with all of this. I mean, it was kind of time, don't you think? I mean, who took Mom to the hospital after she fell? Me. Who got Mom into Evergreen? Me. Who convinced her to sell the house? Me. Who got the relator, did all this, this....staging, listing, showing-the-house crud? Me. It's always me so, you, being here now, because I fricking BEGGED you, well, gosh, so big of you. Thanks.

JENNY

-I have said thank you a million times-

ELLEN

-I'm surprised you had any energy left to get on the plane after dragging your heels about coming back for SIX YEARS. Oh. Oh, and therapy? You're the one with the screwed-up life and the screwed-up priorities, not me. I have the life people are supposed to have. I have a happy

ELLEN (CONT'D)

marriage, kids, we have a house, friends and neighbors and lots of stuff. I take care of my mother. I take care of everything. So, from where I sit, you, YOU are the one who needs therapy. Because my life? My life is fine. My life is fabulous.

JENNY

Your life is SMALL. It's full of "supposed to" and...and...and well, I face shit head on. You say I ran? That's bullshit. Yeah, I've TRAVELLED. I've travelled the world. For my work. I've gotten my PhD. I've helped save people's lives. I've written four books, all published, thank you very much. I received a stack of awards, not that you have ever cared, they threaten you so much. I've got interesting friends, I've had interesting lovers, I've got a tenured position, and lots of experiences which would blow your hair back. Oh and yes, by the way, I actually have gotten therapy. Because I look things straight in the eye. You just want things to be...straight and narrow. Life doesn't work like that, in case you haven't noticed. You've never liked mess because you've never had the courage to face mess.

ELLEN

Don't you talk to me about courage. So you had an eccentric dad who maybe embarrassed you once or twice in front of your friends. A few times you watched him stumble upstairs after dinner. But then you got out. You didn't get to see the yellow and purple marks up and down his arms from the jaundice. You didn't live most of high school hanging out at other people's houses. You didn't live with the smell of a human poached in liquor. So don't you dare talk to me about facing mess.

A long moment.

JENNY

God. I'm sorry. I'm exhausted.

ELLEN

Me too.

JENNY

I'm going to bed.

She makes her way to the stairs and then turns. She begins to apologize.

El-

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

ELLEN

-Don't worry about it. Me too.

END SCENE TWO

END ACT ONE

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE

Patty is sitting in the living room. It is the middle of the night. She is going through individual photos from an opened box. A few other items from the box are scattered around. A cup of tea sits next to her. Jenny in pajamas, comes downstairs, clearly headed to the kitchen. She stops when she sees Patty.

Mom?

JENNY

Oh, hello, sweetie. Late night snack?

PATTY

You know me.

JENNY

That I do. There're some cookies on the counter.

PATTY

Jenny starts towards the kitchen and stops.

Why are you up?

JENNY

I made some of your marvelous tea. It should go quite nicely with the cookies. Bring me one too.

PATTY

Jenny starts to exit but then stops again.

How did you get down here? Where's the walker? Or that cane that was in your room-

JENNY

-Upstairs.

PATTY

Then how did you get-

JENNY

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

PATTY

-don't tell your sister but I slid down on my butt.

JENNY

Mom!

PATTY

I know! But I knew if I fell she'd kill me so (*bouncing lightly in her chair*) bump, bump, bump, and here I sit.

JENNY

Mom, you are something else.

PATTY

I am. So are you. Actually, get me two cookies. And a warm up.

She hands Jenny her cup and Jenny exits to the kitchen. Jenny returns with two cups of tea and the box of cookies.

PATTY

(Referring to the box)

Very wise. It's nice to have you all to myself for a minute.

JENNY

I know. So, Mom. How are you? Really?

PATTY

Oh. I'm fine. I'm not uncomfortable. I seem to be forgetting more and more. I'm afraid one day I'll wake up and have forgotten everything. Like a blank blackboard, everything erased. But...well...Evergreen is just fine. It is filled with old people though.

JENNY

I'm shocked.

PATTY

You and me both. It is shocking. Coming to the end.

Jenny remains still, listening.

That's nice. Ellen keeps trying to talk me out of it.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

JENNY
What?

PATTY
Getting old. Death. You know.

JENNY
How?

PATTY
Oh, you know. *(Imitating Ellen)* "You're fine. Everyone forgets things. I just forgot this-and-that yesterday." I'll be in my casket and she'll be setting my alarm clock to go off so I don't miss breakfast. Oh, it's fine. She's just better with today instead of yesterday or tomorrow. Uncertainty and chaos are not her strong suit.

JENNY
Me, on the other hand-

PATTY
-Oh, don't get cocky. You're more of an organizer than you think you are, missy.

JENNY
Maybe.

Patty looks at Jenny for a long moment.

What, Mom?

PATTY
You're just so beautiful. And wise. You have become wise.

JENNY
Oh, Mom.

PATTY
Don't "Oh, Mom" me.

JENNY
Okay. Thank you, Mom.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

PATTY

What I love about you, Jenny? You keep learning new things. It's not that easy. People get stuck. Human nature, I suppose. Not wanting to upset the apple cart. I've tried to keep learning.

JENNY

Taking up a new language, Mom?

PATTY

Oh, I wish I could speak Spanish. But no, I think the knowledge I have is pretty much....set, I guess. But you know what I have discovered? Knowledge is different than information.

JENNY

Yeah. I get that.

PATTY

I mean, I think you're much smarter, well, you have more knowledge than I do-

JENNY

-Oh, Mom, you're very-

PATTY

-Don't interrupt me. If I lose my train of thought, I might never get it back.

JENNY

Sorry.

PATTY

See?! Where was I?

JENNY

Knowledge and information.

PATTY

Yes. *(Holds up her finger to insure Jenny stays quiet)*. I'm the one with information. Knowledge is big, but information? Specific.

JENNY

You so remind me of one of my philosophy professors right now.

Patty shoots her a look for her talking.

JENNY (CONT'D)

Sorry.

PATTY

Now, okay, don't say this to Ellen, but we both know I could keel over any day now. Or the rest of the memories or information might just finally go "poof" and then I'm one of the damn droolers in the memory care unit. They call it the "Autumn Leaves Wing." Ridiculous.

JENNY

You got some information you want to share Mom?

Patty plucks a photo out of the box and hands it to Jenny. Patty then leans back in her chair and takes a sip of tea.

Oh, I always loved this picture of Dad. Even in high school, it was high school? Right? Even then, he was so handsome.

PATTY

Yes. High school. And yes. Always. Movie star looks. But not today movie stars. He had that more mature flare. Women would flock to him like butterflies. I'd be standing right there and they would flirt with him. He was very attractive. It used to be called dashing. I always loved that expression. Dashing. They don't use it anymore, do they?

JENNY

No. Never. It's "hot" or "sexy."

PATTY

Dashing is better.

JENNY

Agreed.

PATTY

Women would approach him.

JENNY

Okay.

Patty takes a sip of tea.

JENNY (CONT'D)

Are you trying to tell me he had a roving eye, Mom? That he well, you know. Did he?-

PATTY

-Men too.

JENNY

What?

PATTY

Men would approach him too.

JENNY

Really?! Even back in the day?

PATTY

Oh yes.

JENNY

How did he take that? Men coming on to him! It must have been like something out of Mad Men.

PATTY

He'd get the strangest look on his face. I think it would remind him about what happened during the war.

JENNY

What happened during the war?

PATTY

Oh, we never really talked about it. You didn't, in those days.

JENNY

Talk about what? What happened?

Patty carefully takes another sip of tea.

PATTY

It was so long ago. A different time. Well, Jenny, your father, he, well, he had relationships. Or maybe just encounters?

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

JENNY

What do you mean, relationships? Encounters? What?

PATTY

You father, he went over rather young, you know. It was late in the war. He was young. It had been going on for a few years. The war. World War Two.

JENNY

I know what war he was in. But what happened to him?

PATTY

He never said. Exactly. But I think he had relationships.

JENNY

Wait. Dad and other soldiers. Other...men?!

PATTY

Like I said, you didn't talk about that kind of thing. Sometimes I wonder if they were all...voluntary.

JENNY

You mean, he was...Dad was...assaulted?

PATTY

Fredrick was young and ready to fight for his country and do the right thing and those older soldiers saw he was gentle and different and so to them, he was just...fresh meat to pass around. Men don't just...rape women, you know. Good god, but when people talk about the greatest generation, I want to remind them that not everybody was so goddamn great.

She takes a sip of tea.

For the longest time I thought those soldiers made him like he was, after. That it did something to him. His mind or something. But now I think he was...you know, born that way. Can you even imagine, being a certain way in your heart, in your body, and it's not okay? Having an attraction but then, your first true act of being that way is not with...tenderness but with violence? How confusing that would be. I have come to believe that, from then on, for the rest of his life, every moment, he was a prisoner of war.

JENNY

Why don't I know this! Why did you never tell us? Tell me?

PATTY

I was trying to protect you. You both. I was! Knowledge? Information? It's not this one big thing. It can be tiny scraps you just shove away so you can get through a day. I just had to get through the day. And I think I didn't want you and your sister to think less of him. Or me. Everything was already so, you know. Uneasy. No. Not uneasy. Hard. Anyway, I suppose all this, it's why he was, why he...well...

JENNY

Drank.

PATTY

But he was exciting. In the beginning, he was so dynamic and smart. And he loved when I looked stylish. Took so much pride in me. Even with everything, he would look at me across a room and send me his special smile, the one just for me. Oh, we really had nothing in common, I mean, with our backgrounds. I was a small town girl. He, well, the Mitchell family, they were society, business. Do you even remember them?

Jenny shakes her head.

JENNY

Barely.

PATTY

Good. Terrible people. His mother, Rachel, after having two boys before Fredrick, she wanted a girl. You know what she said to Fredrick? That she wanted him to be a girl and if she had known he wasn't a girl, she would have aborted him. She would chatter on about it like it was funny. One night, they had this huge holiday party and Fredrick was talking, he was so pleased about, oh, I can't even remember what. And he was, oh, just being articulate and passionate and just...ebullient. And his father Calvin leaned back, a cognac in one hand, a cigarette in the other, and shot out, "Hey, Rachel, you always said you wanted a girl. Didn't you notice you actually got one?" And he roared with laughter. Fredrick just....shrank.

I was glad when they died. It hurt Fredrick but I was glad. I knew he would never, could never, win with them. His whole life, he really only had me. Us. You girls and me.

Patty takes a sip of tea.

When he finally passed, I just wanted...I just wanted some peace for all of us. God, I was so tired. So incredibly tired. Is that okay, honey?

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

JENNY

Why didn't you tell us any of this? I mean, it's sort of helpful information, Mom.

PATTY

I did the best I could.

JENNY

Mom, were there ever...other men? Not for you, I mean. Not you but...Dad. Did Dad ever?

PATTY

Sometimes. Once I told him, I snapped at him, "Just control it." How he was. I pretended I was talking about the drinking...but I was really talking about...it. I was so sick of it all. The chaos. I just wanted him not to be him. I regret that conversation.

JENNY

Do you regret staying?

PATTY

Staying?

JENNY

With him. Why didn't you leave?

PATTY

It's very easy to judge yesterday from today. I know today, divorce is everywhere. But then? You weren't there.

JENNY

Actually, I was.

PATTY

He loved you girls. Don't doubt that one moment. I don't want to hurt your feelings.

JENNY

Mom, my feelings are doing a lot of things but hurt isn't one of them.

PATTY

I know you are probably angry by how your dad was. El did see the toughest stuff, I think. You were gone by then. As you should have been, Jen. It was good you weren't here. Don't be hard on yourself. Sometimes I see you being hard on El-

JENNY

-No-

PATTY

-Yes. But watching someone you love drink themselves away? She drew the short straw really. And she survived by keeping her head down and seeing the bright side. Choosing to make a happy life by sheer force of will. No shame in that. Your sister is a very strong woman. It's hard for you to see, but she is. And, even with all his troubles, your father did take care of us. Even after he died, Fredrick kept taking care of us. Oh, I had to start working but-

JENNY

-Mom, you worked before Dad died.

PATTY

Did I?

JENNY

Mom, Dad stayed home and you worked. After he lost his job.

PATTY

Did I? It gets muddled.

JENNY

That doctor's office.

PATTY

Yes. But it wasn't enough. And then he died. And I just didn't have any skills. But we made do. And whenever we got into a real jam, I'd sell... (*struggling to say it*) ...a painting. Every time I had to; I felt such guilt. Because I was really selling a piece of him. But I just couldn't do it all alone. I had to pay for Ellen's college somehow. Bills. The house. And when you needed help with your graduate school. I had two girls doing wonderful things and I just-

Patty looks to Jenny

JENNY

-Mom, you did okay.

PATTY

I don't know. Really?

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

JENNY

I do. Look how well we turned out.

PATTY

Yes. You both did. I am so proud of you. But once I'm gone, he's gone. We carry people inside of us. Like it or not. I don't know if sharing this, this with you, is giving you a burden or lifting one.

Patty, spent, leans back.

JENNY

Mom, have you told Ellen any of this-

PATTY

-Oh no!

JENNY

Okay. But maybe-

PATTY

-No. This is a confidential conversation.

JENNY

Mom. She should-

PATTY

-No. Do you think your sister can hear this? Is ready to hear this?

JENNY

I don't know.

PATTY

I do. Not yet.

Patty and Jenny hold each other's gaze.

You'll know when.

After a moment, Jenny nods.

PATTY (CONT'D)

I'm going back to bed. I should be all jazzed up with all that tea in me but now I'm tired. I'm done.

Patty waves for Jenny to help her up.

JENNY

Okay, but Mom-

They cross to stairs and begins to go up with Jenny's help.

PATTY

-These days I can sleep anywhere. Did you know one morning I fell asleep at breakfast at Evergreen? At breakfast! Right at the table! Who does that?

Jenny walks Patty to her bedroom and returns.

JENNY

Wow. WOW.

She paces around the room.

Oh my god!

She finally flops down in a chair which has been shoved so it faces downstage. She pulls something out from under her. It is the telephone receiver from the broken phone, which had been put in the chair during the earlier unpacking and packing. She holds the receiver in her hand for a long moment. She may laugh to herself. She may not. She finally puts the receiver to her ear.

JENNY

Hey, Dad. It's me. I'm here, helping pack up and, well, for a visit. Last time at the family homestead. Bunker. Whatever this is. Final hours before this place moves on to shelter some other sons of bitches.

It's been awhile. Ha. "Awhile." Years. It's been years.

So. Yeah. So. Mom told me. About you.

She looks at the painting.

JENNY (CONT'D)

Oh god. Wow. I'm not surprised. That is so strange. My dad picture of you just blew apart. And got replaced by you. Fredrick. As a person. Shit, I've spent my life traveling the world, trying to bring order to chaos, and a walking, talking survivor of massive trauma was right in front of me my whole life. Well, they say, write what you know.

My god, of course! Your...your passion for the arts. That's why you loved modern art. It's the confusion of it. The tradition on its head. The rebellion. Because you couldn't use words to explain "you," at least the whole of you was recognized somewhere. Out. Loud. Public and proud. Somewhere. I'm just, finally, seeing you, Dad. The complete picture of you.

Oh, Dad. If those men hadn't...you just might have made it. But you got sucked out into the sea of your fucking pain and left us high and dry. You abandoned us for a bottle and never looked back.

And, like any good parent, you passed that family tradition along. You jumped into a bottle, and I jumped on a plane. I abandoned my family, I abandoned my baby sister, I abandoned my home, I ran like a fucking coward, I never looked back, all I wanted to be was not here, because here meant YOU. Us. This. Living in a shaky, temporary structure always on the edge of disaster. We're two peas in a pod. Selfish motherfuckers who would rather run.

Damn, Mom, if you had just spoken up a little sooner, I could have just stayed put. Hell, if she'd done a lot of things sooner things might have been....different? Better?

But maybe she's right. It is very easy to judge yesterday from today. Which hasn't stopped me from judging her. And you. And me. And El. Dear god, an urgent, global disaster I should immediately have to race to would be so fucking welcome right now.

The only reason why I'm here, really, is Matthew. Yup, Dad, I've got a fella. Math, Matthew, he's given me a place. A safe place. My first truly safe place, Dad.

He's smart. And witty. And gentle. He's sort of old. Well, older than me. And he makes me better. And I know one day I'm going to walk in on him and he's going to be dead. I wasn't there when you died so I'll pay that penance with him. It's coming. I know it is.

I'm sorry I didn't see you. I'm sorry I left. I'm sorry I never came back.

She begins to hang up but stops.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

JENNY (CONT'D)

Thanks for giving me passion. And believing in being fair. And not being afraid of boldness and bigness. I'm pretty sure I'm okay, Dad. Yeah. I think I'm okay.

END SCENE ONE

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

SCENE TWO

Afternoon. The sound of a soft rain can be heard. Coming in, Ellen enters the house, coming in backwards as she guides Patty and Patty's walker through the doorway. Jenny is behind, holding an opened umbrella over Patty's head. Ellen is talking over Patty's head to Jenny.

ELLEN

Boyfriend! I've never even ever heard you use that word.

JENNY

Oh, stop it.

ELLEN

Oh no. You always went all feminist with "partner" or "this guy" or "someone I'm seeing."

They are all now in the house, shaking raindrops off coats, collapsing the umbrella, hanging up coats. Jenny is also carrying a few shopping bags from places like Macy's and a bag of restaurant leftovers

PATTY

She's right.

JENNY

I've never used "partner."

Jenny deposits bags on a table.

PATTY

The Dutch fellow. You called him your partner. For the longest time, I thought you had started some sort of business with him.

JENNY

Oh god! Peter. Ugh. No.

Coats are hung up as Patty sits.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

ELLEN

So, this Matthew.

PATTY

Do you have a picture?

JENNY

Yes.

ELLEN

Let's see.

JENNY

The thing about Math is, well, everyone calls him Math.

PATTY

What's his last name?

JENNY

Math Summers.

ELLEN

Let's see!

Jenny is slowly pulling out a photo from her wallet.

JENNY

Well, the thing is, he's....

ELLEN

...what? He's what?

JENNY

(She struggles and then blurts out)

...Fat. He's really fat. He's short, about five and half feet and maybe, two hundred and fifty pounds. And bald.

ELLEN

Oh!

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

PATTY

Well, the package doesn't matter. It's what's inside.

JENNY

Thanks, Mom. And he's, well, he's black.

PATTY

Really? A black man.

ELLEN

Well, of course he is.

JENNY

What does that mean?

ELLEN

Oh, come on. You've never gone traditional with your guys.

PATTY

El's right. Remember Jimmy? That redhead with the braids?

ELLEN

Dreadlocks. It was Johnny, the Scottish Rastafarian. And there was Jesus.

JENNY

Hey. Jesus was great.

PATTY

He was. Remember, he made baked Alaska. As a junior in high school! Very impressive. Didn't he become a chef?

JENNY

I don't know, Mom.

ELLEN

He did. He works downtown.

PATTY

So, what does Math do? Where did you meet?

JENNY

We met at this conference in New York, he was a featured speaker. He was...he was just...he killed. He owned the room. He was just magnetic. He spoke about how architecture, he's an architect, effects human behavior. It was standing room only. He's very respected and just...well, I went to watch because I was working with a group on creating better emergency housing and so, we met with him afterwards.

Jenny puts her hand to her heart. Patty and Ellen wait.

Fourteen hours later, over breakfast, he took my hand and said, "I'll never be thin, I'll never be unfaithful, and I'll never be inattentive unless the Knicks are in the playoffs."

PATTY

He sounds wonderful.

JENNY

He is.

Jenny hands the photo Patty, who looks at it and then hands to Ellen.

PATTY

He's very handsome, sweetie.

JENNY

Thanks, Mom. When I told him about coming to help with all this, he said, "Freckles." I know, I don't have freckles, but he calls me that, it's a long story. Anyway, he said "Freckles, I carry my baggage on the outside, you carry yours on the inside. Go do some unpacking with your sister."

PATTY

He sounds very intuitive as well.

JENNY

He is. And he was right. There's certainly been a lot of unpacking.

ELLEN

Too much. We're supposed to be packing.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

JENNY

(Casually waving her hand)

We'll get to it, El.

A silence settles over the room.

PATTY

Yes. I think we all should have naps.

JENNY

That sounds great. I'm tired.

Ellen just looks at the floor and then gets up and begins gathering their purchases.

What?

ELLEN

When do you go back?

JENNY

Tomorrow. You're right. Mom, you go up. El, you too. I'll-

PATTY

-Oh no! I'll stay and help.

ELLEN

No. The both of you go. Crash. Jen, you're probably jet lagged-

JENNY

-I'm not jet lagged-

ELLEN

-Well, I don't want to pack with you like this.

JENNY

Like what?

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

ELLEN

Like you get.

PATTY

Ellen.

JENNY

Like I get? *(Rising)* Okay. Good. Fine. *(To Ellen)* You do whatever you want. I'll crash. Coming, Mom?

PATTY

Girls.

ELLEN

Mom! Will you just go take a nap?

After a moment of looking at each girl, Patty rises. Jenny helps her to the stairs, and they go up.

Ellen continuing to clean, her foot gets tangled in the cord of the busted phone, dragging it to the floor along with the wine bottle which Jenny had tucked behind the leg of the end table the night before. Ellen has to get on her hands and knees to wipe up the split wine.

Really, Jen? Are you kidding me?

Resigning herself to sitting, Ellen puts the wine bottle on the floor in front of her while she begins to unwrap the phone cord from her ankle.

Thanks, telephone of the wind. Ya almost killed me.

Now untangled from the cord, the wine bottle and the phone sit on the floor in front of her. Ellen looks at them both for a long moment and then picks up receiver and prepares to dial.

Dialing. You're gonna dial? Really, Ellen? Really?

She hangs up. A moment.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

Okay. Why not?

She picks the receiver up again and randomly jams at the keypad (or dials, depending on model of phone).

(Singing the Empire Carpet song) Five-eight-eight-two-three-hundred, Empire.

She puts receiver to her ear. Through the following conversation, she fiddles with the wine bottle.

Dad. This is Ellen. I'm doing this incredibly stupid thing because Jenny said they're doing it in Japan and I'm not as suburban and provincial as Jen thinks I am so here I am, calling you. I'm being actualized.

So.

You've been dead for a while. Yeah.

I was nineteen. I think I was nineteen. I was a sophomore at college, so I must have been around that. Do you remember? Of course, you don't. You're dead. You're not listening.

I got married. Bob. He has a construction company. He's really relaxed and just kind. He's super calm. I think you'd like him. Maybe. He's good to me so, yeah. But I don't know if you would get each other. I have two boys and they are...

She stops herself. A long moment.

Dad, sometimes I wonder, WHEN I think about you, which is not much if I'm going to be really honest, what you would be like if you had stopped drinking. What kind of grandfather you would have been. And you know what? I have no idea. Because by the time I was actually becoming a person, was when you were becoming...not a person. I was trying to find me and you were getting more and more lost. Lost in booze and the mess of your *(gestures to painting)* own personal selfish chaos. So, I have no idea who you would have been. What you would have thought.

And you took that from me. You took my dad from me. You decided your pain and your pit of whatever that was inside of you was more, was bigger, than my dad.

ELLEN (CONT'D)

I have nightmares that you're still alive. Imagine that. Nightmares about your dad that he's still alive. Normal people don't have those dreams. Normal people have dreams that their parents come back and they say, "Oh, I didn't want to wake up! My dear old daddy was alive and I got to be with him" but Bob has to wake me up if I dream about you. Because the dreams are awful.

And that is what you did to me. Your unpredictable, crazy anger at the world will always be in my dreams. And I haven't decided to forgive you.

She hangs up. She stands, grabs the wine bottle and throws it in the plastic garbage can liner and exits with the garbage to the kitchen.

END SCENE TWO

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

SCENE THREE

It is early morning. Sunny light pours in the windows. The living room is pristine except for the stacked boxes in the corner. Ellen comes downstairs and takes in the room.

ELLEN

Oh my god.

JENNY

(From kitchen)

EI?

ELLEN

Did you do this?

Jenny enters with a cup of coffee. She gently puts it in Ellen's hand.

JENNY

(Exiting back, over her shoulder)

Yup.

ELLEN

When?

JENNY

(Returning with a mug in her hand)

Last night. After our delightful passive aggressive dinner. You know, for the rest of my life, I'll associate Kung Pao Chicken with suppressed rage.

ELLEN

Yes. Alright. I was in a bit of a mood last night.

JENNY

You were a brat. I was a bitch. What else is new?

They both smile.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

ELLEN

And the rest of the stuff in the-

JENNY

-All done. Bob and his buddy Rick are coming for your boxes and stuff. I can't wait to see the hubby. It's been ages. He's a hoot and a half, ya know. He did ask for coffee and Dunkin Donuts though, so one of us needs to run out. Do you really think Bob can get any eBay money for my Tiger Beats?

ELLEN

Ha! He might. He's pretty smart. He loves vintage stuff.

JENNY

I hope so. 'Cuz you are certainly getting to be awful "vintage" yourself.

ELLEN

Screw you, old timer.

Jenny gives her the finger.

You know you're a bad influence on me?

JENNY

Am not! How?

ELLEN

I don't swear.

JENNY

Bullshit. You swear all the time.

ELLEN

Only with you. Only when you're around.

JENNY

(Pleased)

Really? I bring out your bad ass!? That is so sweet.

ELLEN

Oh, oh...go to hell.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

JENNY

No. "Fuck you, Jenny."

ELLEN

No.

JENNY

Say it! "Fuck you, Jenny."

ELLEN

I'm not saying it!

JENNY

Say it!

ELLEN

I'm not going to. I'm better than you.

JENNY

Well, that's true.

ELLEN

No, it's not.

JENNY

Yeah. You are. That's okay. I need something to aspire to.

ELLEN

Oh please. I'm completely ordinary.

JENNY

What?! No! I didn't mean too...I know I...god, I'm sorry. I'm such a bitch sometimes.

ELLEN

No. It's just that...it's not you. It's what you've accomplished. My friends are always wanting to know what country you're in or what crisis you're managing or where you're teaching. You know. I've never been exotic in my life. I mean, even now, you're sixty but still! I mean, even your boyfriend is black!

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

JENNY

El, do you want a black boyfriend?

ELLEN

Fuck you, Jenny.

JENNY

Praise Jesus!

ELLEN

You know, we're both screwed up-

JENNY

-fucked up.

ELLEN

Whatever. But we're okay. I mean, even with everything. I've been a little bratty this weekend, but I...my life is good. And you are, well, amazing.

JENNY

You're amazing. You are an amazing mom and person and wife. And sister.

ELLEN

Sometimes I haven't been a great sister.

JENNY

Really?! Me neither! Imagine that.

A moment.

El. You got dealt a shit hand and you played your cards perfectly. I am so proud of you. From our life you built your life. Not everyone can pull something like that off.

ELLEN

I tried to be more Mom than Dad.

A moment.

Mom did really good by us.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

JENNY

Do you ever wonder why she didn't leave him? She did do-

ELLEN

-Did what?

JENNY

Well, a little bit of enabling and-

ELLEN

-No.

JENNY

But El. Come on. She drove him to the park that day. She did, well, didn't do some things she could have.

ELLEN

What are you saying?

JENNY

Okay. Well. Okay. After Dad died, I still didn't come back.

ELLEN

Really? I'm shocked. I didn't notice.

JENNY

The reason was, well, I think I've been angry for a while. No. I know I've been angry.

ELLEN

Well, yeah. Dad was-

JENNY

-not at Dad.

ELLEN

How can you be mad at me? I've been here, taking care of-

JENNY

-not at you.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

ELLEN

Then who are you....

A long moment.

JENNY

She...stayed. She could have left. She could have. And she never-

ELLEN

-No!

JENNY

No? What do you mean, "No"?

ELLEN

You can feel what you want to feel. I'll feel what I want to. You want to be mad at her, go ahead. Okay?

JENNY
(Gently)

Okay.

A moment. Maybe something physical, a touch or a smile or a shrug.

ELLEN

Remember her hiding American cheese in the middle of meatloaf?

JENNY

Oh god, yes! And pillow surprises.

ELLEN

When she lifted her foot off the gas pedal whenever we drove past a cemetery, and we coasted to the end.

JENNY

The bedtime stories, not from a book, just made up.

ELLEN

When she told off that teacher who whacked you on the knuckles that one time.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

JENNY

Yeah. She did. I forgot that.

ELLEN

And remember sugar sandwiches?

JENNY

Oh my god! On Pepperidge Farm bread. Those were so awful but so good.

ELLEN

She held it all together by sheer will power.

JENNY

I guess....yeah, I guess she did. Sassy broad is a force to be reckoned with. So are you.

ELLEN

You too.

JENNY

Three sassy broads walk into a bar.

Ellen and Jenny both look at the large painting and then look back at each other.

I'm going to call more.

ELLEN

Okay. Me too. I'll try not to be boring.

JENNY

Just keep *Twilight* to yourself and we should be fine.

PATTY

(From upstairs)

I hear voices. I'm coming down.

She arrives at the top of the steps.

No having fun without me.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

Jenny crosses to help Patty down the stairs. Ellen slips upstairs to get the walker.

PATTY (CONT'D)

Oh, thank you, sweetie.

JENNY

Just take it slow.

PATTY

How does my hair look? It feels scrunched up.

Patty arrives at the bottom of the stairs, Ellen right behind her with the walker.

JENNY

We got a system going!

ELLEN

Mom, hold still. *(Fluffing Patty's hair)* There. Okay. Better.

PATTY

Thank you. Oh! Look at everything!

ELLEN

Don't look at me. *(Points to Jenny)* It was all her.

PATTY

It was both you girls.

JENNY

Bob is coming and one of us needs to get him donuts. El, I could run out if-

PATTY

-No. You both go.

ELLEN

Mom, it's just down the-

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

PATTY

No. Both of you.

ELLEN

Mom, I need to-

PATTY

No. I'm going back to Evergreen today, right?

ELLEN

Yes-

PATTY

I need to be alone here. Just me. So, go get food.

ELLEN

Oh! Okay, Mom.

Ellen and Jenny glance at each other.

JENNY

Okay.

They get their coats.

Mom, there's some coffee in the kitchen and I-

PATTY

-Jen, sweetie. I'm fine. Go. Get me an apple fritter.

ELLEN

We'll be right back. Be careful. Use the walker.

PATTY

I've made it eight-five years, sweetie. I think I have another couple of minutes in me.

ELLEN
(*Shrugging*)

Okay.

Ellen and Jenny exit. Patty shoves her walker into a corner and begins to walk around. She exits into the kitchen. She returns with a cup of coffee and crosses over to the window. She opens a window and a breeze comes in. She closes her eyes and enjoys the sensation for a moment. Then her eyes open and she straightens up.

PATTY

Oh!

She adjusts Fredrick's chair from the far corner to face the painting, crosses to the phone, picks it up, and sits down with the phone in her lap. She takes a sip of coffee, settles herself and picks up the receiver.

Hello, Fredrick. It's me. Jenny told me about this thing they do in Japan and, well, I'm trying it. So. Hum. It's very early here. I hope I didn't wake you up. Oh dear. Well, that's silly. Of course, you're up. You're dead.

The girls are fine. Ellen is organizing me; you'll be glad to know. Jenny's back so they've been going at it, but I suppose it's time. I don't like arguing but it's probably healthy. I think they finally got their footing in their lives. We didn't screw them up too much. Well, at least not beyond repair. I really tried after you...left us. Not to bungle things up.

I told Jenny about all of it. What I know. About you. It felt so good to explain you. Before I go, you know? El's not ready. She will be though. I hope. I can't do it for her though.

The funny part is that if you were alive now, we would never have gotten married. You would have been a gay man. Oh my god. To say that. I think I needed to say that. Someone needed to say that for you. Fredrick, you were gay.

I can't say I wish we found each other at another time because then we wouldn't have the girls. And, goodness, well, sex isn't everything. I do I hope you found your kind of love in heaven.

We were really more friends than lovers. And so, as a friend, I do need to say this to you. You left me holding the bag. You did. You made some terrible choices and, sometimes, you were a

PATTY (CONT'D)

real jerk. I was angry at you for a very, very long time. It took me a long time to see that, to feel it. But I was. Yes, I chose to marry you but, come on. The drinking and the, all the stuff that went with it, well, it was selfish, and you hurt our girls. My girls. You hurt my girls. It took me a long time to forgive you for that. Maybe I still haven't? I have to think about that.

What else? Oh. Yes. I was the one who signed that paper. At the ICU. The girls don't know this. The doctors told me you had...how did they put it? "Shut down." All your vital systems and organ failure. They asked me, "What do you want to do?" Going back and changing a million things wasn't an option. So, I had to decide. Another bag you left me holding. I had to pick. Oh, I knew you were already.... gone. Let's be honest, honey. You had been gone for a long time.

What else? I still try to look good for you. Do you see that, in heaven? Or wherever you are? I hope so. Although the Evergreen stylist doesn't do my hair quite right. It looks too old lady to me.

She pats her hair and then leans back and looks at the painting.

So. That's that. This was quite nice.

Looks around.

Time to go.

She looks at the box-filled corner.

I don't have room for any of this anymore. Heck, I was finished with most of it ages ago anyway. I am glad we hung on to your painting though. I wish I had room for to...

She stops. And smiles. She speaks into receiver.

Hold on.

She slowly rises. She crosses to her walker and wheels it over to her chair. She then crosses to where the phone cord is plugged into the wall. Getting on her hands and knees, she unplugs it from the wall. She rises and, wrapping the cord around her hand, she sits and sticks the cord into one of her bags. Ellen and Jenny can be heard off stage.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

ELLEN

(Off stage)

Oh stop. Dunkin Donuts coffee is pretty good.

JENNY

(Off stage)

Oh god, the suburbs have broken you! It's dreck, El.

ELLEN

(Off stage)

You're such a snob. I'm going to get you a pound of the Dunkin Donuts dark roast for Christmas.

PATTY

(Into receiver)

I hear the girls. I'll call you back tonight.

She then hangs up and wiggles the phone into the bag on her walker and sits down. Jenny and Ellen enter, carrying a bag of donuts and a few cups of coffee.

JENNY

Mom, Ellen's picking on me.

ELLEN

Jen's being bossy. They were out of fritters so I got you a Long John.

PATTY

I hope not chocolate! Chocolate gives me-

ELLEN

-Gas. I know. It's vanilla.

PATTY

It's terrible. I eat one Evergreen chocolate chip cookie and I'm tooting for a week.

ELLEN

It's vanilla, Mom.

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

JENNY

Shoot. I kinda wanted to hear the tooting.

PATTY

Oh you! Help me up. I want to check the upstairs one more time.

ELLEN

Mom, I can-

PATTY

Ellen, this is the last time I'm here, right?

ELLEN

Yes.

PATTY

So?

ELLEN

You're right.

Ellen takes the walker upstairs and Jenny guides Patty to the stairs and up. Jenny straightens out the back of Patty's shirt.

PATTY

Thank you, Jenny. El, put my Long John on a plate. I'll be right down.

Patty exits and Ellen and Jenny return to center of living room. They both instinctively look at the large painting.

ELLEN

I've been in denial about what to do with this massive, valuable...albatross. I guess I can stick it in the-

JENNY

-I'll take it for a while.

ELLEN

But it's huge. Isn't your place in New York too-?

THE WIND PHONE_Sergel

JENNY

-I called Math. He's clearing a wall. There's room. But I'm just taking a turn. Down the line, you can have it. I figure we can trade off. You can take it when you're ready.

ELLEN

I'll admit it, I'm relieved. I had no idea what to do with that big thing. I did not want it-

JENNY

-I know. I got it.

ELLEN

You sure?

Jenny nods.

Thanks. And thanks for coming. It was good to see you.

JENNY

It was good to see you too.

They both look at the painting. As the lights begin to fade, Ellen reaches over and takes Jenny's hand. They both smile at each other and look back at the painting. Jenny looks back at Ellen and her smile fades just slightly. She then looks back at the painting.

END OF PLAY