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**The 'Theatre of Horror': exploring the underutilised horror genre in
modern theatre**

**Horror has been a dominating genre throughout the centuries captivating both
novelists and the film industry, but is it a genre that is 'dead' for the theatre?**

Emily O'Donnell

Masters by Research
Creative Writing

The University of Huddersfield

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INTRODUCTION: (424)

Horror films have been enthralling the public since at least Georges Méliès's 1896 film *Le Manoir Du Diable – The Devil's House* (Rhodes, 2017), and in recent years *IT* (Muschietti, 2017) made \$694.2 million making it the ninth highest-grossing film that year, as well as the highest-grossing horror film to date (Rawat, 2017). Taylor Grant noted that "...modern horror films were born from Le Théâtre du Grand-Guignol..." which was a famous theatrical movement in France between the 18th and 19th Century (Mynhardt & Johnson, 2017, 1724). Considering that theatre inspired the film industry to pursue the horror genre, it poses the question of why this genre has become underutilised within the modern day theatre.

It is first necessary to define horror. In her book, Cherry (2009) says this about the genre as a whole:

In defining the horror genre perhaps its most important characteristics are the modes of affect that horror films are intended to create in their audiences. It is these emotional and physiological responses that remain consistent while other characteristics and generic conventions evolve. (p.52)

Cherry observes that it is difficult to break the genre down into subcategories because there are many variables and interpretations. In a paper Jolene Noelle Richardson (2015) attempted to define the genre of horror by using three subcategories: 'arousing the audience', 'monsters and the monstrous', and 'bodies, gore and tactile responses – spectacle'. Taking Richardson's research as inspiration, for the purpose of my analysis I will be focusing on these subcategories: the 'Theatre of Horror', Arousing the Audience, Monster and the Monstrous, Gore and Body Horror, and The Spectacle, to determine whether horror is 'dead' for the theatre or not. I decided to focus on these areas because I believe they will best highlight the usability of the 'Theatre of Horror', including: how directors manipulate the performance area, the portrayal of the antagonist, the use of bodily mutation, and the use of sound and lighting. I will also focus on my own work¹ in terms of my inspiration and how I want to impact my audience.

¹ *The Strings of My Heart* is about a couple, Jason and Arianna, who move into an abandoned farm house. In Act One Arianna physically abuses Jason and locks him in the house with the piano. At the end of the play Jason spirals into madness and strangles Arianna with one of the piano strings. *The Crucified Cat* is a short play about two girls, Ellis and Esther, who use an Ouija board and connect to a spirit, Sarah. It becomes apparent that Sarah and Esther went to the same school but it was Ellis who bullied Sarah and consequently caused her to commit suicide at the age of eleven. Before long the game becomes out of control and Sarah's spirit travels out of the board. At the end Ellis can hear someone in the house. She shuts herself in the wardrobe with a knife. The curtains close to her screaming.

PART ONE: The 'Theatre of Horror' (527)

Horror is a genre that has transcended the generations and yet the question of why people desire to be scared is still pondered by many critics. Gander (2015) has this to say about the fear stimulation:

When a person is afraid, the amygdala, an almond-shaped set of neurons in the brain, triggers the “fight or flight” response, causing palms to sweat, pupils to dilate, and ensures that the body is pumped with dopamine and adrenaline.

This creates a chemical reaction within the body forcing the heart to pump faster than usual. If exposed to extreme emotional stimulus it can take time for the effect to dissolve and for the body to start functioning normally, however, when people experience this rush of feelings within a safe environment it unleashes a sense of security, thus creating a place between pleasure and fear. Catherine Rees makes this analogy about horror within the theatre:

...the audience delightfully indulge in the sense of suspense and horror, responding both emotionally and physically— rapid heartbeats, jumping at sudden shocks and the occasional gasp or scream— an experience akin to enjoying a roller coaster ride (Jones, Poore & Dean, 2018, p.62).

It is important to draw one's attention to the fact that not every individual will enjoy a horror performance, just as not everyone enjoys rollercoasters. This is a generalisation and not applicable to every audience member, whereas many will feel exhilarated, for others it will be too much, and some highly sensitive people could even be driven to panic attacks or fainting. Prior to this, Rees states that:

The unique combination of live action, and ghoulish special effects, has the potential to create a claustrophobic and immersive experience, whereby the audience are compelled to live within moments of horror, without the escape offered by putting down a novel or switching off a film (Jones, Poore & Dean, 2018, p.62).

Frankly speaking, by exposing a highly sensitive person to a live and inescapable horror production, it will force the individual into a 'fight or flight' response and could potentially result in the aforementioned affects. If the fear factor is overpowering certain audience

members will be unsatisfied, which could explain a divide in the public's perception of this genre.

Horror has been prevalent in various mediums for centuries and it is, perhaps, less obvious to the modern day audience how it was publicised throughout history as a form of entertainment. Such forms include, but are not limited to: beheadings, crucifixions, stonings, burning at the stake and gladiator tournaments. Gordon (1997) noted that the: "horror play was an essential feature of modern life as the gladiator contests... and the guillotine beheadings had been in other times" (p.22). Historically, people became accustomed to celebrating when 'witches' were burnt at the stake, but once these incidents ceased the crowds still had the option to witness hangings. The last public hanging in the United Kingdom was in 1868 and, as a result, the public were left to battle with their own dark thoughts and desires, finding relief in the theatre (King, 2017). Throughout World War I and II the theatre persisted in entertaining their audiences. Nonon, the company manager of the Grand Guignol from 1951 to 1954 and 1961 to 1962, said this when reflecting on horror in theatre: "before the war, everyone felt that what was happening on stage was impossible. Now we know that these things, and worse, are possible in reality" (Gordon, 1997, p.33). He said this before the Grand Guignol closed its doors in 1962. The public enjoyed witnessing horror within the safe walls of the theatre throughout war time, however, once they had witnessed true horror first hand they became unentertained by the 'Theatre of Horror'. Since this period the genre has become underutilised within this medium, however, certain productions have managed to surface proving that, "...while horror isn't the most prevalent genre on stage, it does exist" (Mynhardt & Johnson, 2017, 1734).

However, one example of horror in theatre is *The Woman in Black*, which has dominated the West End for over thirty years, becoming the second longest running play after *The Mousetrap* (1952). It is also the fourth longest running show, with *Les Misérables* (1985) and *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986) as its predecessors. Within the top ten running shows in the West End only three are plays and *The Woman in Black* is horror, suggesting this genre can still be popular.

PART TWO: Arousing the Audience (1458)

Arousing the audience can refer to a wide combination of emotions, from excitement to pure fear, caused by dopamine and adrenaline rushing through the individual, but the beauty

of beholding live theatre lies within the unity of the patrons, as “the audience shrieks, gives solace, and becomes a coherent entity” (McEvoy, 2007, p.271). When writing for the ‘Theatre of Horror’ the author is required to think carefully about creating a spooky atmosphere, by using the characters and location, in order to unite and arouse the audience through their transition into horror.

The characters often embark on a journey that differentiates the ‘normal world’ from that of the ‘horror world’, which is frequently considered by the audience to be spooky or creepy. A great example of this is Jeremy Dyson and Andy Nyman’s play *Ghost Stories* (2019). Before the performance commences Dyson and Nyman write: “the audience pass into the auditorium through dark tunnels. On the walls are random numbers, chalked at varying intervals: 6, 79, 19, 11, 92, 20, 48, 1, 32” (148). They directed the theatre company to manipulate the space in order to create a creepy atmosphere within the auditorium, allowing the ‘horror world’ to extend throughout the theatre, thus including the audience in the experience. This, coupled with the fact that the first character to appear walks through the auditorium, breaks the fourth wall and invades the audience’s space, is a perfect example of how theatre can progress beyond other mediums and create a scarier and more immersive experience. However, techniques like these are not always possible to recreate. Theatres are not always able to alter their appearance for the sake of the show and are limited to how they can manipulate the space, meaning that this whole atmospheric section could be cast aside, if they even agreed to produce it.

A more secure route of action for the author is to manipulate the stage as opposed to the entire theatre. Stephen Mallatratt’s play *The Woman in Black* is a prime example of how to take control of the space onstage. *The Woman in Black* was first staged in a medium sized theatre in Scarborough in 1987 before it was transported to the West End in 1989. Since then it has remained in the Fortune Theatre which can hold only 432 patrons, thus giving it an intimate atmosphere (Needham, 2012). The company also affects the audience’s senses by turning the heating down to make them uncomfortable. *The Woman in Black* was based on Susan Hill’s novel where the protagonist, Arthur Kipps, a solicitor, is sent to Eel Marsh House to order the estates. While he is there he encounters the Woman at the property and soon learns that if you look upon her a child will die. Despite frequent and vague warnings from the townsfolk Kipps decides to spend the night at the house. Hill states in the novel that it is only accessible in accordance to the tides and describes the “startling beauty, the wide, bare openness of it” (2012, p.67) forming an idyllic scene for the reader. However, it soon becomes

apparent that this beautiful landscape is the protagonist's prison. In the play Mallatratt uses various contraptions to distort reality, making pieces of furniture move of their own accord and allowing certain items to create sound on cue, thus giving him the freedom to create jump scares for the audience and forcing them into a 'fight or flight' response. This combined with the fact that Kipps, and therefore the audience, cannot leave Eel Marsh House intensifies the fear factor in the show.

The Woman in Black was a big inspiration when I wrote *The Strings of my Heart*. I spent the majority of the play victimizing Jason by having Arianna physically and mentally abuse him, as well as keeping him prisoner in his own house. Whereas the location itself is not spooky or disturbing, it is made clear that the couple live miles away from anyone and Jason's own family does not know where he is, thus arousing the audience's suspicion of Arianna and masking the true antagonist in the play. I felt that Jason had to be locked inside the house with a spirit and decided to appoint an inanimate object as its body, thus creating a spooky atmosphere when establishing a bond between Jason and the piano.

In *The Strings of my Heart* the location is not explicitly spooky, instead of using the location to arouse the audience I focused on key moments delivered by the characters, from the ever growing tension between the couple, the use of the postwoman, and the obvious influence of the piano. When creating a scary atmosphere it is not necessary for the author to create undesirable locations at all. In Rebecca Lenkiewicz's play *The Turn of the Screw* (2013), based on Henry James's 1898 novel, the ominous atmosphere is created by the young children, Miles and Flora, and the ghosts, Miss Jessel and Peter Quint. This play is about a new Governess being charged with caring for two children but it escalates when she suspects that ghosts are trying to claim them. In Act Two, when the children should be asleep, Miles enters the Governess' room. Miles declares that he shall check her heart beat and "...puts his ear to her heart... Now he raises his head... He kisses her on the lips... Now Miles puts his hand on her breast..." (1110). This act, performed by a young child, has the capacity to repel the audience and create an uncomfortable atmosphere. Moreover, because Lenkiewicz uses the characters to create this tension, rather than props or set design, it becomes possible for all theatre companies to recreate the desired effect.

Audience arousal can happen across the genres of theatre, from the rush of excitement when Elphaba rises up through the song Defying Gravity in *Wicked* (2006) to the violent shock when the house falls apart in *An Inspector Calls* (1945), but in order to create a terrifying and scary scene the 'fight or flight' response should be engaged for an elongated amount of time.

The 'In-Yer-Face' theatre of the 1990s often utilised violent and disturbing imagery onstage. Playwright Sarah Kane was listed in this category and her play *Blasted* (1995) is a perfect example of how using dark subject matter, such as rape and torture, coupled with violence on stage can create a horrific atmosphere. In *Blasted* Ian takes his ex-lover Cate to "a very expensive hotel room in Leeds" and whereas Cate is "amazed at the classiness" Ian simply says: "I've shat in better places than this" (Kane & Urban, 2011, p.3). He then proceeds to try and bed her, despite her reluctance, while claiming that he loves her. It is clearly shown in the speech that Ian is trying to manipulate her into having sexual relations with him, which is reiterated by the fact that he says "I love you" nine times within the script without Cate saying it back. Kane writes:

IAN "...undoes his trousers and starts masturbating...)

CATE: I don't w- want to do this.

IAN: Yes you do." (p.14).

In a later scene when a soldier appears at their room Cate manages to escape but Ian is held hostage. In Scene Four, the soldier then "pulls down Ian's trousers, undoes his own and rapes him" and "when the soldier has finished he pulls up his trousers and pushes the revolver up IAN's anus" (p.49). *Blasted* was described by critics as a "Disgusting Feast of Filth" (Iball, 2008, p.1). She did not care for the boundaries that were considered socially acceptable, nor did she shy away from eliciting negative emotions from the audience to the point where some members of the audience walked out. Although this creates a very different atmosphere to the other aforementioned plays, it still arouses the audience but in such a way that, instead of thrilling the audience, the horror on stage, actually repulsed some theatre goers.

While I did not set out to create this exact effect within *The Crucified Cat*, I did experiment with how long Ellis and Esther could play with the corpse, thus elongating the negative effect within the audience, as well as creating a spooky atmosphere in the end scene when Sarah enters the house. It is important to build and drop the tension when writing a chilling horror play, and all of the aforementioned plays are great examples of how to manipulate the location or characters in order to create a spooky atmosphere.

When writing an atmospheric scene for a horror audience the author, and director, needs to clearly think about whether or not the effect would be practical. As already stated, the practicality of *Ghost Stories* could be impossible for certain theatre companies to recreate in an effective way, thus increasing the possibility for this tense scene to be removed from certain performances. Because *The Woman in Black* has had the security of being in one theatre for a

long period of time, it is easy for the stage hands to manipulate the theatre space. Whereas the directors have proven that it is possible to tour this show, it could completely change the dynamics within the audience, because if they broke out into nervous hysterics the actors would have to re-engage up to 1,500 patrons instead of 432. Both of these scripts could prove difficult to create the desired effect, encouraging directors to not produce these plays, thus making them underutilised within the realms of touring theatre. Alternatively *The Turn of the Screw* and *Blasted* are good examples of how creating tension through the characters is an easy technique for actors to recreate. Instead of being over reliant on the set or the theatre space itself the directors can focus on the casting and trust the actors to carry the tension, thus encouraging directors to reuse these scripts. However, the horrific content of something like *Blasted* is so extreme it can repel a large percentage of the potential audience.

PART THREE: Monsters or the Monstrous (794)

Monsters and the supernatural have been a prominent factor within story telling for centuries, from the use of ghosts in Charles Dicken's *A Christmas Carol* (1843), to the whimsical human eating plant in the stage musical *Little Shop of Horrors* (1982), to the creature in the film *The Shape of Water* (2018). Two 'monsters' that have been prominent throughout the centuries are Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1823). These monsters are prominent across the realms of literature, cinema and the theatre, which has led to multiple theatrical interpretations. When creating a 'monster' the author has full artistic licence over how to physically and psychologically represent their character. In his book, Michael Chemers (2018) writes:

Playwrights and other makers of culture are responsible neither to the scientific rigors of psychologists nor to the evidentiary rules of historians – they create what they hope will be powerful emotional or intellectual experiences for their audiences... (p.10)

Within the fields of literature and big budget films the creators are almost completely free to make whatever they desire, however, onstage there are limitations.

Theatre is restricted to use only props and costumes, therefore, when a 'monster' is particularly distorted, directors will have to use other methods. In Ross Wilmeth's play *Dracula: The Harker Journals*, he uses a combination of action and speech to create successful scenes with the monster Dracula (2018). In Act One Scene Two Mina informs the audience

that she saw Lucy with a “dark figure beside her... All I remember were two red eyes like coals glowing back at me” (p.36). The effect of having this spoken instead of performed means that the directors are not plagued with having to design a prop to do this, thus allowing all theatre companies to re-enact this scene. Alternatively in Act Two Scene Two, Wilmeth writes: “Dracula turns into a bat and flies out the balcony” (p.129). This section displays the iconic transformation scene, allowing the audience to witness Dracula vanishing before their eyes. Whereas this is a more complex scene, there are many possible ways to re-enact it, such as: trap doors, smoke machines, blackout i.e. These portrayals of Dracula both describe and demonstrate the characteristics of this monster in a way that dehumanises him, but also possible for the actor to perform, thus creating an effective piece of theatre.

Not all horror scripts have to include a monster to be considered thus, in fact, many authors create a monstrous person to fuel fear. *The Turn of the Screw* uses this technique in a subtle and thought provoking manner, using the characters of Peter Quint, Miss Jessel and the Governess. In Act One Lenkiewicz leads the audience to suspect the ghosts and enhances the tension whenever they are seen or mentioned, however, in Act Two she suggests to the audience that the Governess herself could be unstable. The fact that she is constantly complaining of being unwell and having a headache could suggest that the character is an unreliable narrator, as she could be delusional. At the end Lenkiewicz demonstrates that she is slowly losing herself in this scenario, until she is finally face to face with Quint. The stage directions read: “the Governess puts her hand over Miles’ mouth... Miles twitches, he is fevered, he screams... She lets her grip weaken and he flops lifeless out of her arms” (1615). The death of Miles is left ambiguous, allowing suspicion for both Quint and the Governess, almost leaving no protagonist at the end of the play and encouraging fearful shock. This is reiterated by how the Governess talks to Miles before she realises he has died: “I’m taking the pain away, Miles... We can be peaceful now. The pain has gone” (1615). Even though, within the context this is an understandable remark, it potentially creates distrust between the audience and her.

I experimented with the use of an unreliable narrator with Jason in *The Strings of my Heart*. Having him constantly reach for the whiskey bottle throughout the show suggests that he might not have a clear head, however, when he has submitted to the role of the antagonist he drinks only water. Establishing Jason as a protagonist and then transforming him into the monstrous character, offers the audience empathy and then fear, similarly to the Governess in

The Turn of the Screw. One way I achieved this was at the end of Act One when Jason seizes the keys, unlocks the door and escapes out into the auditorium.

Then he ducks down and starts to crawl. She [Arianna] can no longer see him. He crawls to the back of the auditorium. She sees him, sprints up to him, quickly grabs him by the hair and starts dragging him across the floor back into the house (p.65).

I created an elaborate chase scene because it affects the audience in three ways: (i) many audience members will not be able to see Jason and therefore it adds to the suspense, (ii) it allows for the fourth wall to be broken, and (iii) after this scene Arianna's character mellows as she transitions from the monstrous character into the damsel in distress. By breaking the fourth wall the audience are forced to be immersed in the action, causing them to transition from spectators to participants, while the actor imposes on their physical space.

I previously mentioned that often authors create the 'normal' and 'horror' world, but there is also the 'fictional' world and our own 'reality'. Within the realms of the theatre it is possible to blur these boundaries because, "unlike a monster in a novel, short story, poem, or even a film, a theatrical monster does not merely exist in the mind – it lives" (Chemers, 2018, p.2). The fact that there is not a barrier between the actors and the audience is an important factor to consider within the genre, which was what I wanted to highlight when writing the this scene.

PART FOUR: Gore and Body Horror (714)

One of the most significant developments of horror in theatre is the Grand Guignol - 'the French Theatre of Horror'. It was founded in France in 1894 but Max Maurey, director from 1898 to 1914, was the one who altered the focus to the spectacle of the 'Theatre of Horror' (Gordon, 1997). Maurey worked closely with playwright Andre De Lorde, a regular horror playwright for the Grand Guignol from 1901 to 1926 (Gordon, 1997). Their interpretation of the 'Theatre of Horror' made a radical change for the theatre industry, and "during the sixty-year period of its existence... the French theatre of horror gained a status of a legendary theatre which dealt with horrors and terrors of the human mind" (Jurković, 2013). France had been exposed to real horrors as a form of entertainment, as guillotine executions were available for the public to witness until 1939, so Maurey's audience would have had the option to witness publicized deaths and therefore possibly desired to see these horrors within the theatre.

Jurković (2013) said: “the audience willingly becomes a part of the violence performed, drawing a parallel with reality and the very possibility of real horror.” It was Maurey’s vision for the audience to discover their own internal darkness and physically struggle with it inside the auditorium, forcing them into the ‘fight or flight’ response.

While the Grand Guignol thrived by using the blood and eyeballs from animals, and freshly guillotined corpses to achieve the realism of ‘body horror’, 21st Century playwrights are limited to using realistic props and fake blood (Gordon, 1997). An example of how these limitations can be problematic is Jack Thorne’s *Let the Right One In* (2013). Thorne based this play on John Ajvide Lindqvist’s (2004) novel about a relationship between a young boy, Oskar, and a female vampire, Eli. In the play, when she confesses to him what she is “...tiny pearls of blood appear in dots all over her skin... Her eyes now flow with blood and her clothes are becoming soaked with it” (975). The physical representation of, what appears to be a young girl, leaking blood from her every pore is chilling and highly disturbing. Whereas in a film this can be achieved through computer-generated imagery, at the theatre the only things that can be used are props or tricks. I contacted Thorne and asked him how he achieved this scene, to which he confessed that he did not know how this could be done. In order to create this onstage a blood effect specialist would be needed, it could be possible to seep blood from clothing, but making her skin and eyes flow with blood would be very difficult to achieve. While these stage directions display a terrifying image, it is practically unfeasible for many theatre companies, especially amateur productions, as poorly made effects could easily turn a horrific scene into a comedic one.

While writing *The Crucified Cat* I thought seriously about the technicalities of using body horror onstage, while also creating a memorable scene. After the girl’s first encounter with the spirit they go outside and discover Ellis’s brother’s cat dead on the floor. The stage directions read:

ESTHER turns back around and pokes the cat harder than she anticipated. When she brings her stick away a little blood squirts out of the dead animal. ESTHER screams and then immediately bursts out with a nervous laughter... The intestines unravel themselves and stretch to the floor (pp.96 & 97).

This scene expresses the girl’s childish and yet sadistic nature as they mutilate an innocent creature, daring each other to ‘touch’ or ‘poke’ it. This is not the time of the Grand Guignol, and societal sensibilities have shifted. I could not use a real cat in my play, however, a realistic

animal could be made for the purpose of this scene, containing latex and tissue paper for the intestines and fake blood. This would create a convincing dead cat, thus increasing the opportunity for the audience to feel disgusted. The fact that the animal is already dead is important because if the animal were dying the girls would be torturing it, which could make the audience more disgusted at the girls than the creature.

The use of 'gore' and violence can be found within various genres of entertainment and it ranges in intensity, from the dramatic need for survival in the film *127 Hours* (2010) to the farcical Black Knight in the film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975), to the throat slitting stage musical *Sweeney Todd* (1979), and to Shakespeare's play *Titus Andronicus* (1593). Even though highly sensitive people may be uncomfortable with body horror, they are able to view these scenes because they are portrayed in particular ways, be that through the use of comedy or musical numbers, or the fact that it only lasts a short length of time. Within the 'Theatre of Horror' body horror can be stretched out and used to extremes, which can be off putting to potential audience members. Also the technical limitations of many theatre companies makes these effects difficult to pull off successfully, all of which contributes to the lack of horror onstage.

PART FIVE: The Spectacle (1061)

The spectacle has become a large factor in the majority of shows in the West End, including Richard O'Brien's *The Rocky Horror Show* (1973), Stephen Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979), and Andrew Lloyd Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* (1986), all of which have horror elements. The spectacle of a show can cover a wide range of factors, however, I will primarily be focusing on the use of sound and lighting, which can be very important in the theatre industry. Rees states that:

The use of stage lighting and theatrical effects can also be employed to further unsettle the audience, controlling how much they can see and when, concealing as well as revealing, and creating a tension and suspense as the audience's imagination can be exploited to fill gaps and conjure their own horrific visualisations (Jones, Poore & Dean, 2018, p.62).

When writing for the stage, or even the cinema, it is impossible to know how effective the sound effects will be, therefore it is easier to create simple sound effects in a prominent way.

Lenkiewicz provides a perfect example of this in *The Turn of the Screw* when the Governess is teaching. Lenkiewicz writes: “the children dust off their slates and start chalking letters again. The sound of the chalk against the slate is annoying... Flora [and Miles] put up [their] chalk... The sound continues. Now it stops” (672-689). This technique may be simple but it is very effective within a live theatre environment, as the audience can be exposed to various soundscapes and dynamics to either scare or entice them. The scene sound effect changes the dynamics between the characters and the audience. Before this event the Governess is convinced that she can see someone watching them. She asks Miles if he can see them but he complains about the sun being in his eyes and does not answer her question. Lenkiewicz plants a seed of doubt in the audience’s mind and allows it to linger, that is until they hear the ominous sound of the chalk. Even though this does not scare them, it has the capability to create a great amount of tension.

In an interview about *The Woman in Black*, Hill said: “it’s the little things that get you... Less is more” (Needham, 2012). Mallatratt embodies this, and thrives on experimenting with “the periods of calm” which “become progressively shorter as the story builds up to the ghostly encounters with the Woman in Black” (Tan, Wignell & O’Halloran, 2016). Similarly to Lenkiewicz, Mallatratt experiments with the use of sound and silence, however, he does this in order to create a jump scare for the audience. The prime example of this is the sporadically used ‘scream’, especially in the nursery room scene. In this scene Arthur is walking very slowly towards the nursery door and the only noise is that of a rocking chair, which resembles the sound of a beating heart. When Arthur approaches the door the rocking chair stops, plunging the auditorium into complete silence. Arthur stretches out his hand and the second he places his hand on the door handle the Woman screams. Throughout the scene before there is a loud soundscape of noises, however, within this scene all that can be heard is a rocking chair moving on its own. This forces the audience to strain their ears because of the juxtaposition of atmospheres and, when the sound effect is taken away, they are forced into a ‘flight or fight’ response. This is the moment the Woman screams.

This “less is more” approach has proven successful in *The Woman in Black* and *The Turn of the Screw* and, therefore, I took this as inspiration for *The Strings of my Heart*. I decided to only use a piano as the haunted object because, not only could I make violent noises with the lid, thus simultaneously creating a jump scare and revealing that it can move without aid, but I could also manipulate its musical nature easily and successfully. Cherry (2009) said this about the musical scores that accompany horror:

Certain musical cues have thus become tropes of the genre and are thus subconsciously recognized by the audience, creating certain feelings of horror and expectations of dread (p.70).

Jason was unable to finish his horror score until he killed Arianna, thus ending his own horror story. This is foreshadowed through the repetition of the middle section of the piece, but also through the vibrating piano. At the end, the piano's vibrations become a part of the piece and Jason creates this effect by bowing the strings with the weapon he used to kill his wife. It also resembles Jason's descent into madness, as the piano becomes increasingly loud and then plummets into silence at the end when Jason says: "now this is a finished piece" (p.81).

So far, the discussion has primarily focused on sound, however, manipulating the lighting is also a viable way to create a scary spectacle. In Act One of *The Woman in Black* Arthur is alone in the house. The lights turn off and the stage plunges into darkness. This is effective within the theatre because, by constantly using bright and dramatic lighting, it forces the human eyes to adjust accordingly and when they are turned off it will take a certain amount of time to readjust. The audience will, therefore, not be able to see the stage, thus presenting an opportunity for the Woman to enter unseen behind Arthur. He then quickly lights a candle, allowing the audience to view a small illuminated area of the stage. He turns one way and then the other, straight into the face of the woman. The audience have the opportunity to become tense and, even though they may suspect what is about to happen, it ends in a satisfactory jump scare.

The Crucified Cat is short and I felt, because of this, I needed to create a piece of theatre that could be used in a minimalistic way, therefore there are no elaborate scene changes or large props, only a dead cat. I used the sound of the jar scraping across the floor and lighting to add tension. In Scene Four Sarah's ghost appears outside Ellis' window. Ellis runs offstage to obtain the kitchen knife but when she comes back she cannot see Sarah. It is at this moment that the lights go out. Ellis quickly finds a torch. Later Ellis hears Sarah inside the house, so she drops the torch and hides in the wardrobe. "The picture frame suddenly tumbles to the floor. Silence. The door-like handles on the wardrobe drop down. Silence. The torch turns off. Silence" (p.110). The effect of only using the torch as a source of light is, not only to highlight the areas of the stage that I want the audience to watch, but to increase the tension. Potentially, the audience could be frantically looking around the space for someone, or something, to jump out at them, thus providing a scary atmosphere and a startling jump scare when Ellis screams. This effect would be easy for any theatre company to reproduce.

Within contemporary theatre, the ultimate spectacle is a desirable trait for the audience to behold, whether that is witnessing a chandelier falling from the roof, bizarre costumes, or characters flying through the auditorium. However, when these skills are transferred to the 'Theatre of Horror' it is usually to engage the 'fight or flight' response, which includes the danger of repelling certain patrons, making horror less viable.

CONCLUSION: (346)

Even though the horror genre is considered popular in film and literature, it is still less common in theatre. As previously stated, *IT* took \$694.2 million, however, more mainstream films can easily make double this figure within one week. Because the theatre can only produce a limited number of performances a year, directors probably search for a safe script that will make guaranteed money from their audience. Perhaps the comparatively less popular genre of the 'Theatre of Horror' is as much to do with the expectations of the theatre-going audience, as to some of the practical restrictions, however, there is evidence within the scripts I have discussed that proves this form of theatre is effective. I strongly agree with Grant when he said that "theatre is an intimate setting, and in my opinion, perfect for the horror genre. I would love to see more of it produced" (Mynhardt & Johnson, 2017, 1736). Personally, I believe that the theatre has a greater opportunity to scare its audience than any other form of entertainment for several reasons: (i) there is no protective layer between the audience and the horror, (ii) the use of sound versus silence and light versus darkness can be more prominent, (iii) the use of ingenious contraptions, props or costumes have the potential to dazzle the audience, and (iv) the actors can abuse their power, thus fuelling the 'fight or flight' response. In a film the audience are safe knowing that the antagonist cannot physically touch them, stand in front of them and stare or sit next to them, whereas at the theatre there are no boundaries, meaning that they could use direct speech, walk into the auditorium, or even place a hand on a patron. This changes the role of the audience from spectators to participants. However, despite all of these effective attributes, this genre is still underutilised and there is no explicit answer to why that is.

I recently submitted *The Strings of my Heart* to Just Some Theatre Company and Peter Stone, the producer, said: "there is certainly a need for a new play like this on the theatre scene and I hope you find a suitable company for the piece." Horror has been successful in the theatre

before, and *The Woman in Black* proves that it still can be, it just needs someone to take a risk in a way that captures the audience's attention.

Horror on stage is something very special indeed and something that cinema cannot get close to (Nyman, 2014).

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The Strings Of My Heart

A two act play for theatre by
Emily O'Donnell

Characters:

JASON HOLLAND

ARIANNA HOLLAND

POSTWOMAN (voice over only)

Act One Scene One

Curtain.

There is a bare living room and a kitchen in darkness.

Enter JASON. He turns on the lights and walks around the rooms. He walks over to the window and opens the curtains. He runs his finger along the window sill and looks at the dust it has collected before wiping it on his trousers. JASON quickly checks the floorboards in the living room until he finds one that is slightly loose. He carefully pulls it up and places some money underneath before putting the wooden plank back. He quickly stands back up just before ARIANNA enters.

ARIANNA: Well?

JASON: It's a lot bigger than the old house.

ARIANNA: All it needs is a woman's touch.

JASON: That's what you said about me when we first met.

ARIANNA: You can't be right every time.

ARIANNA and JASON exit and re-enter carrying an almost thread bare lively floral patterned rug. They bring it to the living room and roll it out.

JASON: What is this?

ARIANNA: What does it look like? I got it in case the heating cuts out.

JASON: Why should it?

ARIANNA: Don't you like it?

JASON: It's just very colourful.

ARIANNA: It might be the only thing keeping us warm some nights.

JASON: Looks like it's a bit worse for wears.

ARIANNA: It will fit right in with us then.

ARIANNA and JASON exit and then re-enter with a small chest of drawers. They set it down.

ARIANNA: I think it should go there. (*Pointing.*) No to the left a bit. Jason, look at where I'm pointing. It's nowhere near.

JASON: It's not easy to move this thing on my own.

ARIANNA: For god sake, just put it there.

JASON sets down the chest of drawers. ARIANNA and JASON exit and then re-enter. ARIANNA carries in a small bookcase and JASON brings two boxes, one saying BOOKS and the other saying ORNAMENTS.

JASON: Where shall I put this?

ARIANNA: In the corner. We can deal with the small things later.

ARIANNA and JASON exit and then re-enter with a sofa. They try to get it through the door but they struggle. ARIANNA keeps pushing it and nearly gets it stuck.

JASON: Hang on a minute, hang on. Flip it.

ARIANNA turns it so that it is on its arm rest.

JASON: No, I said flip it.

ARIANNA: I did flip it.

JASON: I meant the other way.

ARIANNA: You didn't say that!

JASON: It's not going to fit this way is it, my little firecracker?

ARIANNA: Don't snap at me Jason.

JASON: Well, I thought it was obvious that we shouldn't turn it this way.

ARIANNA: Then tell me, what am I supposed to be doing?

JASON: If we kind of tilt it towards the door, then we can get the front legs through.

ARIANNA does as instructed and they manage to get the sofa inside.

JASON: It's in.

ARIANNA: We'll have to remember that trick for when your mother comes.

ARIANNA let's go of the sofa and JASON goes to set it down.

ARIANNA: No. It needs to be more this way. (*They move it.*) Yeah, that's better. Actually no, it needs a little bit more this way. (*They move it.*) Maybe it looked better where it was. (*They move it back.*) Perfect.

ARIANNA and JASON exit and then re-enter. JASON is struggling with a record player and a table while ARIANNA brings in a box marked RECORDS. They both place their items before exiting and then re-entering. ARIANNA has a box marked KITCHEN while JASON wheels in a piano. ARIANNA starts to unpack the box she was carrying.

JASON: I hope she survived the move. Arianna, where can I put her?

ARIANNA: Upstairs in the spare bedroom.

JASON: There's no way we can get her up the stairs.

ARIANNA: Where else are we supposed to put it?

JASON: How about in here?

ARIANNA: Do we really want it in the living room?

JASON: I would like to be near her.

ARIANNA: Jason, it's a piano, not a woman.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) Don't you pay any attention to her. She's just jealous of you.

ARIANNA: How about we put it in the room under the stairs?

JASON and ARIANNA start pushing the piano into the cupboard.

JASON: There's no way she... it will go in that cupboard.

ARIANNA: You just don't want it to. (*Pause.*) I don't think it's going to fit.

JASON: What now?

ARIANNA: Just put it wherever you want.

JASON places the piano in the living room. Then he lifts the lid and starts to play.

JASON: I think she's even stayed in tune. No move could harm you, my muse.

ARIANNA: Unfortunately. I'm tired. Can you put the things in the boxes away tomorrow? It shouldn't take you too long. (*Holding up a small mug.*) Are you ok with having tea in this mug?

JASON: That's nothing compared to what we had in Japan. I swear the mugs could only hold one mouthful.

ARIANNA: Do you want some tea?

JASON: I'd rather have coffee.

ARIANNA: We don't have any.

JASON: I could always drive to the shops and get us some if you want, my little firecracker?

ARIANNA: Just have tea.

Beat.

sfx: Owl noises.

JASON: What's that?

ARIANNA: It'll just be an owl.

JASON: An owl? Are you sure?

ARIANNA: I don't know. Why?

JASON: It was just a bit of a strange noise.

ARIANNA: Don't tell me you're scared of a little bird.

sfx: Owl noises.

JASON jumps.

ARIANNA: Wow, you really are a city boy aren't you? Even cats don't jump as much as you.

JASON: I can't help it. I have a bad feeling about this place.

ARIANNA looks down disheartened and exits. JASON guiltily chases after her.

Act One Scene Two

Enter ARIANNA, she is dressed for work. She walks over to the kitchen, stepping on the loose floorboard and making it squeak. She looks at it and then carries on. She writes a note and leaves it in the kitchen. Then she goes to the front door and reaches into her bra for the keys. She unlocks the door, walks through and locks it.

Beat.

Enter JASON.

JASON: Arianna? She must've gone already.

(Reads the note.) Looks like I'm in charge of tea. Oh, and I have to put the boxes away.

(To the piano.) Sorry girl, I've got jobs to do today.

JASON goes to the cupboard, opens a bottle of whiskey and pours himself a glass. Then he walks over to the curtains and opens them. He stands in front of the window for a while with his hand pressed to the glass. He finishes his whiskey in one gulp and then walks back over to the kitchen.

JASON: I shouldn't, but I will.

JASON pours himself another glass.

JASON: It was when I went to Japan that I really got into whiskey. I thought it tasted really smooth. Very expensive but almost worth it. The whiskey over here is nothing in comparison, not even the stuff you can get at Waitrose. I'd say the closest you can get are the really expensive Scottish brands but we can't afford that right now. *(To the piano.)* I'd offer you some but you're already legless. Get it? Because you're on wheels, you have no legs? *(Pause.)* I thought it was funny. *(Pause.)* What do you say to some music?

JASON goes to the collection of records and starts looking through them.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) I think you'll like this one.

JASON goes to the record player, puts one on and then starts putting the rest of them away. Next he moves onto the books.

JASON: The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Mine. The Shining. Definitely hers. I hate that book. The Exorcist. Hers. My jaw still hurts from whacking down on the chair in front in the cinema. God, I wish they didn't post it all over the news. The Neverending Story. Mine but I'll try hide it at the back somewhere so that she believes I finally got rid of it. Sophie's Choice. Technically hers but I'm going to put it on my shelf seen as I've read it more. Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy. Hers. Oh my god! Jonathan Livingston Seagull! I thought this got lost somewhere!

JASON smiles half-heartedly and puts it at the back of the bookshelf. He reaches for the box of ornaments and places each one on top of the bookcase. Next he pulls out a photograph frame.

JASON: I always liked this picture. (*To the piano.*) Do you remember this?

The lid of the piano shuts. JASON turns and stares at it in confusion.

JASON: (*Looking back at the photograph.*) It must have been two Christmases ago since this was taken. (*To the piano.*) Arianna's dad stole me away for most of the night and we sat playing you. He seemed quite interested in learning how to play. I don't see why he didn't learn before. How long did you live with him? (*Pause.*) Seems strange to me that in all that time he never thought about getting someone to teach him.

sfx: Floorboard creaking upstairs.

JASON looks up. He sits completely still and listens for any other noises.

sfx: Floorboard creaking upstairs.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) What was that? (*Pause.*) That noise. (*Pause.*) It came from upstairs. (*Pause.*)

sfx: Floorboard creaking upstairs.

JASON: Surely no one can be up there. (*Pause.*) There's no way to get in.

sfx: Floorboard creaking upstairs.

JASON: Hello? Hello?

Exit JASON. The piano lid raises on its own. JASON re-enters.

JASON: Nothing's there. It's probably because it's an old house. An old depressing house. God, so depressing.

sfx: Floorboard creaking upstairs.

JASON looks uneasy and goes back to the cupboard to pour himself another whiskey. He then goes back to the box and continues to put things away. He pulls out a letter.

JASON: I completely forgot to reply to this.

He takes a pen and a piece of paper and writes a letter.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) How does this sound?

Dear mum. The new house is ok, it has some nice views. I'll talk to Arianna about the possibility of you coming up to visit. We have a spare room so maybe you could even stay the night? Hope to see you soon. Miss you. Love Jason.

I've always hated writing letters, but it's not like I can call her. (*Pause.*) I don't have my phone anymore.

sfx: Floorboard creaking.

JASON looks uneasily upstairs.

JASON: Would you please stop doing that?

A song comes on. JASON listens to it for a while and then goes over to the piano to try and pick out the melody. It isn't long before he can actually play along with the record.

JASON: I don't know if this is a good or a bad thing but songs like this are so predictable. You always know what the musician is thinking, where they're going to take the song next. In some ways it's good because anyone can join in, but they don't make you feel anything new. You've heard it all before.

The song comes to an end but JASON continues to play. He varies the composition and experiments with different structures.

JASON: But they always finish their songs too early. I never understand why. It's like they reach a certain point and they feel that society is ordering them to draw it to an end. It'd be like reading a book and stopping at the climax. Don't you agree, my muse? A true musician shouldn't listen to anyone. Hell, my dad didn't.

Finally JASON finishes the song and smiles to himself.

JASON: The ending should always come in a way that you don't quite expect to hear, leaving you wanting more.

He goes back to the box and keeps placing ornaments. Lastly he brings out a small wooden statue. He stops and looks at it in great detail. Eventually he decides not to place it on the shelf and drops it back in the box instead.

Beat.

Then he takes the box upstairs. Exit JASON.

Act One Scene Three

The door unlocks and ARIANNA enters. She locks the door behind her, taking her keys and placing them in her bra. She walks to the coat rack with her coat. On the way she steps on the loose floorboard. JASON enters.

JASON: You're home early, my little firecracker.

ARIANNA: I told you I'd be home at six.

JASON: Is it six already?

ARIANNA: What's for tea?

JASON: Oh my god, I'm sorry. I completely forgot.

ARIANNA: Jason, we agreed that if you were staying at home writing your music all the time then you would organise the tea. I can't be expected to go to work all day, every day and then come home to make you food.

JASON: It won't happen again Arianna, I'm sorry. Why don't you go sit down while I get tea ready?

JASON scuttles over to the kitchen and starts preparing tea. ARIANNA stands still.

ARIANNA: Work was awful, thanks for asking.

JASON: I'm sorry, I meant to ask. Why was it awful?

ARIANNA: It took me two and a half hours to get there. It was ridiculous. There were loads of sheep at the bottom of our road and I had to wait for them to move. Then there was a lorry that broke down on the main road into town. I didn't make it in on time and that bitch Janet had a go at me. I'd pack that job in and try get one closer to here but I can't do that while you're pissing around with your music. How is the new piece coming?

JASON: I haven't really had time to look at it today. I was busy putting all the boxes and stuff away.

ARIANNA: That took you all day? (*Looking at the way he is preparing the food.*) How are you managing to go this slowly? It's a simple meal, Jason. At this rate I'll never get my tea.

ARIANNA storms into the kitchen and takes over.

ARIANNA: If you want to do something useful for a change you can at least cut the veg. If those sheep block the road again tomorrow we might end up with lamb for tea.

JASON: Well, that wouldn't be too bad.

ARIANNA: Jason, it took me one hour and seven minutes just to get into the village.

JASON: I did say the house is a bit out of the way.

Beat.

ARIANNA: What are you doing?

JASON: I'm cutting the carrots.

ARIANNA: You're not supposed to do them like that. You're supposed to cut them into strips.

JASON: I'm sorry, you didn't say that's what you wanted.

ARIANNA: How are we supposed to eat carrots like that in a stir fry?

JASON: Does it really matter?

ARIANNA: If you went to a restaurant you wouldn't get chunks of carrot in with your noodles, would you?

JASON: When I went to Japan they did them like this in everything. My mum does it like this too.

ARIANNA: I'm not your mother.

JASON: Arianna, it's just us eating.

ARIANNA: What are you saying? That we are not important enough to eat stir fry the right way?

JASON: No, no, no. But surly, seen as we're both hungry, it'll do.

ARIANNA: I'm the one who's hungry, Jason. I've been in work all day. All you've been doing is moving books onto shelves. That is nothing compared to the day I've had.

JASON: That wasn't what I was saying, Arianna. I just meant –

ARIANNA: You just wanted to belittle me and make me feel small. All I want is a little bit of understanding and compassion when I get home.

JASON: I understand that, but what does that have to do with the shape of the carrots in the noodles.

ARIANNA: It's not the carrots, Jason. It's what the carrots represent.

JASON: What are you talking about?

ARIANNA: You should know. You're the one who is saying that what I do all day is futile and pointless.

JASON: I never said that.

ARIANNA: You were implying it.

JASON: I wasn't implying that at all. I'm only asking why the carrots have to be cut in a certain way when it's just for the two of us eating.

ARIANNA: I'm not talking about the fucking carrots, Jason. I'm saying that nothing I do is ever good enough. I find this beautiful house for us. You're not happy with it. I go out to work to earn money. You doss about all day waiting for me to come home and serve you. I have needs Jason. I need you to understand me.

JASON: Arianna, I don't even understand the argument any more.

ARIANNA: You never appreciate me and the things that I do.

ARIANNA throws the carrots off the chopping board and picks it up. She then brings the chopping board around and swings it at JASON's cheek. JASON is sent hurtling to the floor.

ARIANNA: I'm a woman, Jason. I need more.

ARIANNA gets down on the floor and holds JASON in her arms.

ARIANNA: I need love, Jason. I need you to love me as much as I love you.

Beat.

Act One Scene Four

Enter ARIANNA. She is dressed for work and on her mobile. She goes to the kitchen, walking over the loose floorboard and making it squeak. She looks at it and then carries on.

ARIANNA: I can't talk very loudly daddy. Jason's still asleep. (*Pause.*) No, not yet. (*Pause.*) He says he's struggling to write it. (*Pause.*) I'm making just about enough money for the both of us, but I'm not sure if that will last much longer. I don't suppose there's any chance you could give us a small loan, just until Jason gets

back on his feet? (*Pause.*) Look, I'm trying to get ready for work. (*Pause.*) I'll call you later. (*Pause.*) I don't know, maybe you can visit next month sometime when we're more settled. (*Pause.*) I've got to go.

(*Hangs up the phone.*) Can't give us money. Of course he can give us money. He just doesn't want to.

She walks into the kitchen and puts her phone down. She then grabs a piece of paper and starts to write a note. She goes to the front door and reaches into her bra for the keys. She unlocks the door, walks through and locks it, forgetting to pick up her phone.

Beat.

There is a knock at the door. No one hears it.

Enter JASON. He has a visible bruise on his cheek from the night before. He walks into the kitchen.

JASON: (*Reading the note.*) I get home at six. There is steak in the fridge and chips in the freezer.

(*To the piano.*) Guess I should keep an eye on time today, huh girl?

A single string on the piano starts to vibrate.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) Don't cry for me, my muse. I deserve it.

JASON walks over to the piano and starts to mess around with the string. The lid on the piano bangs at the same time as the POSTWOMAN knocks on the door. JASON doesn't notice the door.

JASON: I don't get where that draught is coming from.

JASON goes to the window and draws back the curtains. There is a figure outside. JASON quickly shuts the curtains and tries to catch his breath.

PW: Hello? Is anyone in there?

JASON: Who is it?

PW: I have a parcel for a Mrs Arianna Holland. I did knock.

JASON walks over to the front door, reaches out his hand and grabs the door handle. It is locked.

JASON: Oh... erm... There's a shed round the back. Could you just leave it in there?

PW: But you're supposed to sign for it.

JASON: I'm sorry, I can't come to the door right now.

PW: It'll take less than a minute.

JASON: I can't come to the door.

PW: For f – (*Pause.*) Fine. There are two letters here as well for Mr and Mrs Holland. Should I post them through the letter box or just put them with the parcel?

JASON: I'll take the letters.

PW: (*Mutters.*) Pleasure talking to you, prick.

JASON walks over to the door and looks through the frosted window. The POSTWOMAN posts the letters through the letter box.

JASON: Thanks. I'm sorry about all of this, but you know how it is.

PW: Yep.

JASON: Aren't you a little young to be working at the post office?

POSTWOMAN exits.

JASON: Ok. Nice talking to you.

JASON picks up both of the letters and puts them on the kitchen table. He then goes to the cupboard to make himself a whiskey. He sees ARIANNA's phone. He picks it up and looks at it intently. He tries to turn it on.

JASON: Locked.

JASON tries putting in a few numbers. He fails.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) You got any ideas?

JASON puts it down on the table and then looks at the letters. He opens one and smiles once he has read it. Then he reads the one addressed to him and, disheartened, puts it down on the kitchen table.

JASON: Fuck.

The piano whines. JASON takes the pen and starts looking at the first letter.

JASON: (*Writing on the letter.*) I guess if we do this... that's not too bad. She'll probably comment though.

The piano whines louder.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) What do you want now?

JASON plays with the string until it stops vibrating. Then he sits down at the piano and starts to play random tunes to test the string.

JASON: I should probably work on my song.

He plays the middle section of his piece. He plays it beautifully but when he tries to continue it, it loses something. Then he starts hitting wrong notes and it sounds fragmented and discordant. He stops playing.

Silence.

JASON starts to play the piece again. This time he makes mistakes in the section he had already written. He stops.

JASON: It shouldn't be this hard.

Silence.

JASON sighs. The he plays the piece again. He makes it through the section he had already written but, once again, cannot continue the piece. He stands up in anger and goes to open the curtains. He stares outside.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) What am I doing wrong girl? You think I should stop this freelance composing crap and get a real job, don't you? (*Pause.*) Maybe you're right. (*Pause.*) I just wish I hadn't lost those six months. I'd probably be on top of things by now. Not trapped.

He places one of his hands on his cheek. He starts to breathe a little heavily. Then he tries to open the window. It's locked. Disheartened, he walks into the kitchen to fill his whiskey glass. He takes a sip and calms his breathing down before walking back to the piano. He plays the piece again, slower this time. When he gets to the last bit he tries lots of different notes. He tries sharpening, flattening, augmenting notes but he cannot find his ending. The music gets progressively more intense and harsh and he starts hammering on the keys. The piano's string starts to vibrate. JASON stops playing and the piano falls silent.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) Sorry girl, I didn't mean to hurt you. I just don't understand why this is so hard. My dad could do it and he was a bastard, a brilliant bastard. Why can't I do this? I'm not asking to be rich and famous, I mean it would be nice, but I'd be happy enough if I could just make enough money to see us through.

JASON tries the piece again but still gets stuck in the exact same place. He sighs and put his head down softly on the keys.

sfx: Floorboard creaking upstairs.

JASON: You can piss off too!

JASON looks over to the phone again. He picks it up and stares at it.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) I get so confused. She tells me that she loves me but is that really true? It feels more like she needs me, but I don't know why, it's not like

I make any money. I don't see how anyone could need me. But I need someone.
I need anyone.

He presses the emergency call button.

JASON: Hello? (*Pause.*) Police please. (*Pause.*) Hello, yes. I need to report... a burglary.
(*Pause.*) This morning. (*Pause.*) Yes, it's the location that I am calling from.
(*Pause.*) Ok, how long will it be until someone can come out? (*Pause.*) You
need to come earlier than that. (*Pause.*) Fuck. No, don't bother.

JASON hangs up the phone.

Act One Scene Five

The door unlocks. JASON remembers that he has left the letters on the table and quickly runs over to them and hides them in the drawers. ARIANNA enters. JASON stuffs her phone in his pocket. She locks the door behind her. She takes her keys and places them in her bra.

ARIANNA: Hello darling. You haven't seen my phone anywhere, have you?

JASON: No.

ARIANNA walks to the coat rack with her coat. On the way she steps on the loose floorboard. JASON is putting tea on the table.

ARIANNA: I'm worried it might have fallen out of my pocket somewhere.

ARIANNA sits down at the table. She takes a bite and smiles.

ARIANNA: How was your day?

JASON: It was ok.

ARIANNA: Did you get anymore of the song finished?

JASON: How was your day?

ARIANNA: I hate those bloody sheep.

JASON: What, no lamb for tea? Can't you just sound your horn? Surely they'll move.

ARIANNA: What do you think I was doing? The just stood there chewing grass, staring at me. I hate animals. When I was little it was always dad who used to get out of the car and chase them up the road. That is until the incident we had when one of them decided to rip his hood straight off.

JASON: Have you tried doing that?

ARIANNA: Are you crazy? You never know what those sheep are thinking.

JASON: Oh, you just reminded me. A parcel arrived for you today. The postwoman scared the life out of me. She must've knocked and I didn't hear, but I went to open the curtain and she was stood just outside the window.

ARIANNA: Why?

JASON: No idea. She was probably looking for somewhere to put the parcel. I asked her to leave it in the shed.

ARIANNA: Did you talk to her?

JASON: Not really. Apart from telling her where to put it. She didn't half scare me though.

ARIANNA: Let's see what all the fuss was about.

ARIANNA leaves the table, gets the keys from her bra, unlocks the door and goes to the shed. JASON stands up to clear the table. He notices that she has left the door wide open. He stares through it. He closes his eyes and takes big strides towards it. The piano starts vibrating. JASON stops on the threshold. He turns round to look at the piano. ARIANNA's bag is on top of it. He looks back outside to check the coast is clear and then he advances towards it. He opens the bag and starts to rummage through it. He takes the phone out of his pocket but decides against putting it back. Instead he takes out a book of stamps from her bag and puts them in his pocket along with her phone.

sfx: Floorboard creaking upstairs.

JASON: Shhh!

He closes the bag and moves back just in time. ARIANNA enters.

ARIANNA: It had better not be a house warming gift from your mother. The bins don't get taken until Friday.

JASON: Well, she's gotten lonely after Cassie ran off with that American guy. I actually wrote her a letter yesterday. I was wondering if you could post it for me tomorrow.

ARIANNA: I don't go past a post box.

JASON: Maybe we could invite her over soon?

ARIANNA: Not right now. Maybe in a month or so when we've settled down. It'll give us enough time to get the doorways widened for her convenience.

ARIANNA opens the parcel. It is full to the brim of candles.

ARIANNA: Wow, these got here quickly.

ARIANNA starts placing them around the room and lighting them. JASON peers into the endless parcel.

JASON: How many did you buy?

ARIANNA: When the power goes out we'll be prepared.

JASON: There's a difference between being prepared and burning the house down.

ARIANNA hands him the matches. JASON starts lighting the candles and ARIANNA places them around the room. When they have finished ARIANNA turns off the lights.

ARIANNA: It looks perfect.

JASON starts sniggering.

ARIANNA: What?

JASON: Nothing. It's just that there was a tradition in Japan years ago where people would gather together in a room and light one hundred candles. They would sit around telling ghost stories and each time one was told they would blow out one candle, then when the last story is finished they are left in darkness. This kind of reminds me of that.

ARIANNA: And you did that when you went there, did you?

JASON: Of course I didn't. I made a polite excuse and left. You know I hate ghost stories.

ARIANNA: Well, I did not buy one hundred candles.

JASON: It can't be far off. (*In an eerie voice.*) Once upon a time, there was an ordinary couple. One day they decided to move to a house. It was a dark, dreary –

ARIANNA: Dreary?!

JASON: Dreamy, I said dreamy, abandoned old farm house in the middle of nowhere. (*Blows out candle.*)

ARIANNA: Now you're just being silly.

JASON: The woman decided to cover the house in candles. Pillar candles, taper candles, tea light candles and votive candles.

ARIANNA: Why do you know so many names for candles?

JASON: But nothing could illuminate the dark secret within the house. (*Blows out candle.*)

ARIANNA: And what dark secret is that?

JASON: The house is haunted. (*Blows out candle.*)

ARIANNA: (*Lights candle.*) Why is it haunted?

JASON: I don't know. I guess the ghosts have unfinished business or something. Isn't that the normal plot line?

ARIANNA: You suck at telling ghost stories.

JASON: Hey, I'm trying.

ARIANNA: Well, maybe I should take over from here.

JASON: Be my guest.

ARIANNA: The house is haunted by a woman who roams the upstairs hall completely naked. (*Blows out candles.*)

JASON: Naked?

ARIANNA: Naked.

JASON: Ok, I can go along with this. Why is she naked?

ARIANNA: That's simple. She drowned in a bath tub.

JASON: How did she drown?

ARIANNA: That is not so simple. (*Blows out candle.*) She was a pleasant woman, kind and polite. One day she met a man. He was handsome, rich, all the qualities a lady wants from a man.

JASON: So not me then?

ARIANNA: No. She hoped that one day he would take her hand in marriage. She was completely under his spell and would do absolutely anything for him. There was just one person who stood between them. Her father. (*Blows out candle.*)

JASON: Did he not like the man?

ARIANNA: He saw the man for who he really was. A cheating, lying, son of a bitch who would use his daughter and then cast her aside like she was nothing. He demanded that his daughter should never see him again. One day they eloped. (*Blows out candle.*) He took her out of civilisation completely and brought her to this very farm house. (*Blows out candle.*) They consummated their love in the bedroom. She couldn't be happier, feeling that this act secured their engagement. She skipped happily into the bathroom to run a bath. As she was getting herself comfortable the man walked into the room. (*Blows out candle.*) She blushed, feeling embarrassed about him seeing her naked body, and then feeling amused because he had already seen it. He sat on the floor next to her. He takes her wrist and uses a letter opener to make an incision on her left hand. It wasn't too deep but the blood still trickled into the bath giving it a red hue. She screams in freight. He grabs her throat and lifts her forwards. He whispers something in her ear. (*Blows out candle.*)

JASON: What?

ARIANNA: Nobody knows, but once the words had been spoken he fled the house and never looked back. (*Blows out candle.*)

JASON: Wait, he didn't kill her?

ARIANNA: She completed the act herself. She lowered herself into the blood bath, never to surface again. (*Blows out candle.*)

JASON: She drowned herself? But surely that's almost impossible to do. Your automatic reaction is to come up for air.

ARIANNA: A strong willed woman who has been betrayed by the man she loves is capable of anything.

Beat.

ARIANNA: Now, she roams the corridors upstairs awaiting her revenge. (*Blows out candle.*) She can tell when men are lying and when they do she whispers something in their ear. What is it? Who knows? But the second they hear it the skin on their hands open up and no matter how hard they try they cannot stop the bleeding. (*Blows out candle.*) Their tongues slide down the back of their throats and they start choking. (*Blows out candle.*) They stoop to the floor unable to breathe. She

leans over them and watches in fascination as they finally pay for their sins. (*Blows out candle.*) She wants to rid the world of liars. (*Blows out candle.*) She wants to rid the world of cheaters. (*Blows out candle.*) She wants to rid the world of men.

ARIANNA blows out the last candle. It is pitch black. JASON runs over to the light switch and turns it back on.

sfx: Floorboard creaking upstairs.

They both look up.

JASON: Is that a true story?

ARIANNA: First owls, then postwomen and now creaky floorboards. What's going to be next?

JASON: Is it a true story?

sfx: Floorboard creaking upstairs.

JASON quickly looks up.

ARIANNA: (*Sarcastically.*) Yes, it's true.

JASON: You're kidding me, right?

ARIANNA: Sure, why not. But maybe you shouldn't go upstairs on your own.

sfx: Floorboard creaking upstairs.

JASON looks up.

ARIANNA: Are you scared?

JASON: No.

ARIANNA: That's funny, you've never minded about the ghost we have in the piano.

JASON: Your Grandmother doesn't bother me.

ARIANNA: It's my great great Grandfather actually.

JASON: I thought it was your Grandma. The piano was given to her and she stuck around to be with it.

ARIANNA: That's not the story at all. You should know it by now, Daddy tells it every Christmas.

JASON: Daddy's drunk every Christmas. He's drunk every day.

ARIANNA: He can afford to be drunk every day. You can't.

JASON: He thought my mum was you last time we had them both over! He kept telling us that it was proof that he would stay young forever.

ARIANNA: Well some of the stories he tells are true.

JASON: Only a lie detector could tell you which ones.

ARIANNA quickly goes upstairs. JASON stands still for a moment, switching his gaze between the ceiling and the piano. Then he jumps into action and takes the letters from the drawers. Then he places them under the floorboards along with the stamps and phone.

sfx: Floorboard creaking upstairs.

ARIANNA comes downstairs holding a small painting and the ornament.

ARIANNA: The naked ghost says hi by the way. She's looking forward to you going upstairs. I found this as well. I was wondering where this was.

ARIANNA places the ornament on the shelf. JASON marks this.

Silence.

ARIANNA then shows JASON the painting.

JASON: (*Looking at the painting.*) What did you need that for?

ARIANNA: Dramatic emphasis. My great great Grandmother, Clarissa, was the first owner of that piano. The piano was given to Clarissa as a wedding present from her husband.

JASON: I know this part of the story. She married her childhood sweetheart.

ARIANNA: Yes, and she was very happy about it all.

JASON: But then one night her husband's lover came to her door.

ARIANNA: Not just his lover, his pregnant lover.

JASON: I tended to tune in and out after this.

ARIANNA: That I can believe. She explained that her name was Bessie and that she was due to have my great great Grandfather's child. Naturally, Clarissa was shocked. She thought her husband loved her.

JASON: Just because he cheated doesn't mean that he didn't love –

ARIANNA: Are you going to let me finish this story? My great great Grandfather had not told her that he was married until Bessie had announced that she was pregnant, and then he left her in search for a new mistress.

JASON: The husband came back that night and they were both there, right?

ARIANNA: Clarissa had made a magnificent feast laid out for him. He ate every last mouthful as the couple chatted as normal. When the meal had finished Clarissa admitted that she had a friend over and they had made the dinner together. Bessie walked through the door at that moment.

JASON: The husband died that night because Bessie had poisoned him. Clarissa could never forgive herself for what happened so she killed herself a few days later.

ARIANNA: Wrong. He did die that night and it was from food poisoning but it was a planned murder by the both of them. Even though the police tried to pin the murder on them they could never gather enough evidence. But it was the night of the murder that a single string on the piano started to vibrate. It is said that it is my great great Grandfather weeping, trapped in this prison until the ends of time.

JASON: So, wait, that's why the piano whines?

ARIANNA: You've heard it?

JASON: You haven't?

ARIANNA: I guess the ghost likes me.

JASON: You're lying again, aren't you? That's not how it ends. I'm sure she felt so much remorse that she killed herself.

ARIANNA: Maybe that's how you wanted the story to end, but I'm telling you the truth.

JASON: It's obviously not a true story. If it was the ending wouldn't keep changing.

sfx: Floorboard creaking upstairs.

ARIANNA: Look Jason, that story has been passed down my family for years. Surely if you've heard the piano whining, then that means the story is true.

JASON: No, one of the strings is loose, that's all.

ARIANNA: If you say so.

Act One Scene Six

The painting is sat on top of the piano. Enter ARIANNA, she is dressed for work. She walks over to the kitchen, stepping on the loose floorboard making it squeak. She looks at it. She then carries on and writes a note. She goes to the front door and reaches into her bra for the keys. She unlocks the door, walks through it and locks it.

Beat.

Enter JASON. He walks into the kitchen and pours himself a glass of whiskey. Then he reads the note.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* Wow, she's given very clear instructions today. Here, listen to this. *(Reading the note.)*

The oven needs to be on at two hundred at seventeen minutes to four, and that's when you need to start preparing the chicken. You need to put the chicken in at twelve minutes to four on two hundred. Potatoes go in at eighteen minutes past five. And then the carrots need to be on half heat at twenty-three minutes to six.

(To the piano.) Do you think I'll actually be able to manage that?

The string starts vibrating in the piano. JASON hesitates.

JASON: Don't be daft Jason, it's just a loose wire. You know that.

JASON cautiously walks over to the painting. He stares at it.

JASON: You're not helping.

JASON takes the painting and puts it somewhere else. He stands back to look at it. Then he decides to turn it around. He then cautiously walks back to the piano and starts playing with the string. It falls silent.

JASON: See, nothing to worry about.

The lid then shuts. JASON takes a few steps backwards.

JASON: Ok genius, then why does it do that? There's obviously a draught. But there can't be a draught because I've looked. Ah! But there was nothing about the lid in Arianna's story.

The string on the piano starts vibrating again.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* Ok, you're really not helping your case here. If you carry on like this then I'm going to go sit upstairs where I can't hear you.

JASON turns to exit and the piano stops. He turns around to look at it.

sfx: Floor boards creaking upstairs.

JASON looks up and then looks at the piano. The lid rises on its own. JASON goes for the door. He places his hand on the door handle and tries to turn the handle. It is locked. He bangs his head against the door. He looks around the room. He walks over to the window and prepares himself to punch it. Something stops him. He walks back to the door again and tries the handle, knowing the results will be the same. He lowers himself to the floor and sits at the foot of it.

JASON: For God's sake, Jason. Get a grip! I just need someone to talk to who isn't either Arianna or you. Then I'll be fine. Phone.

JASON walks over to the loose floor board and takes out the mobile. He sits down on the sofa.

JASON: Ok. Password password password. Her birthday? So that is the... 10th of November... 1983? *(Typing.)* One zero one one? No. *(Typing.)* One nine eight three? *(Typing.)* Maybe it was 1984? *(Typing.)* Ok then, what about my birthday? No. What else could it be? *(Typing.)* One two three four? I guess that's a bit stereotypical. Our wedding anniversary. That is... July. Shit. July 2004, I think. *(Typing.)* 2004? No. July... 17th! *(Typing.)* One seven zero seven. *(Typing.)* Maybe it was August. Shit. I've locked it.

JASON presses the emergency call button and places it up to his ear.

JASON: Hello? *(Pause.)* Police please. *(Pause.)* Hello, yes. I have heard some strange screeching noises, I'm concerned that someone is in trouble. *(Pause.)* Last

night. *(Pause.)* No I'm sure it was a woman. *(Pause.)* Ok, that's great. Would you be coming to see me too? *(Pause.)* But what if you need a statement? *(Pause.)* Oh. Never mind.

JASON hangs up the phone and sits quietly for a few seconds. He manages to pick himself up, puts the phone under the floor boards and then reaches into his jeans pocket for the book of stamps.

JASON: Fuck. She only has one stamp. I wonder...

JASON walks back to the floorboard and takes out one of the envelopes. He carefully peels off the stamp. He then takes some glue and a new envelope and sticks it on the front.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* Think I'll get away with that? *(Pause.)* It's worth a shot. Then at least mum will know where I am. *(Pause.)* I just need to take my mind off everything. I guess I should get some more work done.

JASON wanders over to the piano and then starts playing the middle section but he struggles with the ending.

JASON: Maybe I should try writing the beginning instead.

JASON starts playing around with different openings. He plays it and then adds the middle section onto the end.

JASON: Not quite the effect I wanted.

He starts again, playing something completely different.

JASON: I like that, but I don't think they will. How do you write scary music? Again Jason, again.

He starts playing again but gets distracted by a letter falling through the letterbox.

JASON: Wait. Wait!

JASON runs over to the door. He turns the handle, forgetting that the door is locked. He then opens the letterbox so that he can see.

JASON: Can I give you a letter to post?

PW: You again? Look, I'm not a post box. I deliver letters.

JASON: Go on. Couldn't you help me out? Just this once.

PW: If you want to post a letter then go down to the post office.

JASON: You'll have to go back there anyway. Please, help me out.

PW: (*Starts to leave.*) Look, I have a busy enough day without having to run your errands too.

JASON: I'll pay you.

PW: How much?

JASON: Five pounds.

PW: Get stuffed.

JASON: Ten pounds?

PW: That won't buy my time.

JASON: Fifteen pounds?

PW: I'll do it for thirty.

JASON: Thirty to post a letter? I'll give you twenty.

PW: How important is this letter to you?

JASON: Come on, meet me halfway here. Twenty-five.

PW: Thirty or I'm leaving.

JASON lifts up the floorboard, takes some of the hidden money and puts it in his pocket.

JASON: Ok.

PW: Where's the letter?

JASON takes his hand out of the letterbox and brings out the letter he had written to his mum. He takes a pen, makes some changes to it and then places it in the envelope with the old stamp glued on it. He pushes it back through the letterbox.

PW: The money?

JASON posts the money through the letterbox.

JASON: Have you done something to your hair?

PW: No.

JASON: It looks different then yesterday. But that might be because I can't see you properly.

PW: Ok then. Think you need a hobby. Cheers for the cash, nice doing business with you, prick.

JASON: Ok. I'll see you tomorrow.

JASON bends down to pick up the other letter. He looks at the front of it.

JASON: Oh god.

He puts the unopened letter under the floorboard. The piano vibrates.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* Look, I know it's just a loose string, you know it's a loose string so stop trying to freak me out! *(Pause.)* I don't want to read the letter. *(Pause.)* I know what it's going to say.

JASON walks into the kitchen and fills his whiskey glass.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* Right, let's try this piece again. *(Pause.)* I really do hope so. I need to finish it soon.

He starts to play the piece from the middle but, once again, he struggles with the ending. He sighs and then immediately tries again. The same thing happens. He is more irritated than usual. He stops playing and looks back at the floorboard.

Silence.

The piano starts to vibrate.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) Ok, I tell you what, I'll cut you a deal. If I read that letter then you're not allowed to keep making that whining noise. Then I'll know for sure if Arianna's just messing with me. Agreed?

The piano stops vibrating. JASON takes the letter and goes to sit down. He reads it and instantly regrets it.

Silence.

The piano vibrates. JASON quickly spins to look at it and then it stops.

JASON: Shit.

The piano lid shuts.

JASON: Bugger.

In anger JASON takes the letter, rips it up and throws the pieces aside.

JASON: This just finishes off the letter I got yesterday.

sfx: Floor boards creaking upstairs.

JASON looks up at the ceiling. Then he decides to go back to the piano and plays the middle section of the song but he keeps making mistakes. He gets more and more frantic until he gives up and slams down the lid of the piano. It vibrates.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) Sorry girl, but you started it. How am I supposed to do this? I can't finish this piece of shit by the end of next week and if I don't... Oh god, what will she do then? How will I cope? I have to finish this.

JASON tries his piece again. He looks determined and confident with the middle section and he starts to believe he can do it. But he still doesn't. With his confidence shaken he tries the piece again but this time it sounds more melancholy. In the end he stops playing and stares at the fragments of the letter. He collects them carefully and puts them under the floorboards. He takes out the mobile again. He tries a few different codes but, once again, has no luck at all. In despair he puts the phone back. Lastly he picks out the book of stamps.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* At least I managed to send my mum that letter. *(Pause.)* I need to save this stamp so I can send my score off. That's if I'll even have a score to send off. What will Arianna say if they fire me for not delivering on time? *(Pause.)* I need to finish this. This would all be easier if we still had a laptop. Then I could just email my score over instead of having to wait for the post. *(Pause.)* How am I supposed to hand it in myself? *(Pause.)* I don't have a car. Plus, you're missing the part where I get out of here.

JASON walks over to the door and aggressively tries to open it.

JASON: *(Pause. To the piano.)* I don't have a key. *(Pause.)* If she comes home to a broken window she'll be really cross. *(Pause.)* It's not worth the risk. *(Pause.)* Of course I'll be here when she gets home. I'm always here when she gets home. Always.

Act One Scene Seven

The door unlocks and ARIANNA enters. She locks the door behind her. She takes her keys and places them in her bra. JASON is busy in the kitchen.

JASON: Hello, my firecracker. Tea will be ready in a few minutes. How were the sheep today?

ARIANNA: I set off earlier so that I could get there on time. Not a sheep in sight. I've no idea where my phone is. I might have to just buy a new one.

ARIANNA walks to the coat rack with her coat, stepping on the loose floorboard as she does.

ARIANNA: That squeak really annoys me. Did you manage to get any of the song finished today?

JASON: It shouldn't be long now.

ARIANNA: We need to do some food shopping this weekend. And we need to get some new things for the house. Don't even get me started on the bills.

The piano starts vibrating.

JASON: We really need to get that piano looked at.

ARIANNA: Why?

JASON: It's been doing that all day.

ARIANNA: Doing what?

ARIANNA steps on the squeaky floorboard again. Exasperatedly she kneels down on the floor and inspects the floorboard.

JASON: Stop teasing me. It's been vibrating all – What are you doing?

ARIANNA: I can't stand that squeak.

JASON: It's just because it's an old house. Leave it. I'll take a look at it later.

JASON quickly walks over to ARIANNA but it is too late. She removes the floorboard.

ARIANNA: What the hell? My phone is in here.

JASON: Teas ready.

ARIANNA: Jason?

JASON: Can you get some plates out?

ARIANNA: Why is my phone under the floorboards?

JASON: Oh... well... you see... in Japan they have this supposition where you have to put something valuable under the floorboards to bring good luck to the house.

ARIANNA: Would you shut up about bloody Japan for two seconds! Why did you take my phone?

JASON: Well... erm...

ARIANNA: (*Picking up the money.*) There must be a hundred pounds here.

JASON: Seventy.

ARIANNA: Do you know what we could do with seventy pounds, Jason? (*Picking up the letters.*) And what's this?

JASON: Can't we just have our tea?

ARIANNA: This one has my name on it. It's been opened. Did you do this?

JASON: Arianna...

ARIANNA: Did you do this? (*Opening it.*) Why have you written all over my bank statement? Why did you open it in the first place? And why the hell is it under the floor board?

JASON: Well... I thought that maybe we could open a joint bank account. Seeing as I depend on you for so much now I thought that it would make more sense if we had one place to keep all our money.

ARIANNA: (*Picking out another letter and reading it.*) Jason, tell me this is wrong. Work are giving you one last chance. I thought you were on top of this?

JASON: I may have gotten a little sloppy over the last six months or so.

ARIANNA: Six months?

JASON: I might not have been keeping up with my deadlines. It's fine. It's fixable.

ARIANNA: (*Picking up the ripped up letter.*) What's this?

JASON: Ah...

ARIANNA: (*Reading the letter.*) Why did you hide these from me?

JASON: I didn't want to worry you.

ARIANNA: When were you going to tell me, Jason? When you get sacked for not producing the work? When we get a letter through asking us to go to court? Or maybe you weren't even going to tell me then. Maybe you were going to wait until the moving van pulls onto our drive and then they get to tell me that the house has been repossessed. It says this is the final warning before it goes to court. Is that why you were looking at my bank statement?

JASON: We can fix this.

ARIANNA: We?!

JASON: I mean I, I can fix this. If I can get this song finished by the weekend then I can send it off on time and then we'll be able to pay it off. Well, pay a bit of it off.

ARIANNA: How can we get the house, which we have only just moved into, repossessed? Do you ever think for yourself? Why didn't you tell me this before we moved?

JASON: Because you really wanted to move and I couldn't bear to tell you.

ARIANNA: No, we needed to move. I didn't want to move. I loved our old house and you were the one who practically threw us out of it. And now, here we are again. You lying to me. Although, you taking my phone, my letters, my money, and hiding them in my own house is low, even for you.

JASON: It really looks a lot worse than it is.

ARIANNA: You know I hate it when you lie to me. I thought we agreed that life would be different here. I thought that we would move on from all of this, but it looks like you can't do that, can you Jason? Will you make us move from this house too?

JASON: It was just a few letters.

ARIANNA: A few letters that could determine whether we will still have a roof over our heads by next year. Do you want this marriage to work?

JASON: Arianna...

ARIANNA: Do you want this marriage to work?

JASON: Of course I do. Look, I know you're scared but everything will be alright, my little firecracker.

ARIANNA: Do not call me that. I had my dad on the phone the other day. I was worried about money. My job isn't well paid Jason and with you pissing about with your composing thing I figured we could do with some extra cash, so I asked if dad could give us a loan. He said no.

JASON: Oh...

The piano starts vibrating.

ARIANNA: Is that all you have to say?

JASON: Well...

ARIANNA: How do you expect this marriage to work if you keep lying to me? How can I believe you Jason? How do I know that one day you won't just get up and leave? I wanted a new start. We needed a new start. And this is what you do to us? To me!

JASON: Arianna –

ARIANNA: We needed to move.

JASON: No, you wanted to move.

ARIANNA: Okay, I wanted to move. And why was that Jason? What would pull me away from our beautiful old house? Go on, say it. Say it!

JASON walks over to the piano and starts messing about with the string.

ARIANNA: What are you doing?

JASON: I can't stand it when she does this.

ARIANNA: Do you honestly believe that making up excuses will get you out of this argument?

JASON: I'm not trying to get out it. I just can't deal with this racket.

ARIANNA: What racket, Jason?

JASON: You don't hear that?

ARIANNA: Stop it Jason! Stop it now! Listen to me. Why were you lying to me?

The piano vibrates louder.

ARIANNA: Why lie to me?!

The piano vibrates even louder.

ARIANNA: Why?!

JASON: (*Shouting over the sound of the piano.*) I didn't want to worry you!

ARIANNA: Don't shout at me!!

ARIANNA takes the wooden ornament from the book case and hits him around the head with it. She goes to do it again but stops herself. The piano falls silent. She kneels beside him on the floor and starts stroking his hair back.

ARIANNA: I don't want to fight anymore Jason. I can't fight anymore. This is supposed to be a new start for both of us, and I'm not doing a very good job of it am I? I'm sorry Jason, I'm so sorry. I just love you so much. I don't want you to leave me. I want you to stay here with me. I love you. I really do love you. I love you. (*Kisses him.*) I love you. (*Kisses him.*) I love you. (*Kisses him.*) You know that, don't you? Kiss me.

JASON kisses ARIANNA lightly on the cheek.

ARIANNA: Again.

This time JASON kisses her on the lips but there is no passion.

ARIANNA: Again.

JASON kisses her on the lips again. The kiss is longer this time but there is still nothing there on his part. Instead ARIANNA gets passionate. She locks his head in place and kisses him. She pushes him onto the table and pins him down. She reaches for his t-shirt and starts violently pulling it over his head. JASON is physically struggling underneath her. He keeps looking to the door and the piano, trying to decide on what he is going to do. ARIANNA takes off her top. The keys are still in her bra. They seem to be causing her discomfort. She takes them out and drops them down. JASON watches this. The piano starts to vibrate.

ARIANNA: You promise never to do anything like this again, right? I'm going to try harder at this marriage but you still need to pull your weight too. I can't be expected to do everything on my own. I need you. I need you, Jason.

JASON looks down at the keys and with determination he pushed ARIANNA off him and reaches for them. He bolts to the door, unlocks it and exits all before ARIANNA has realised what has happened.

JASON runs out into the auditorium as fast as his injuries will allow him. He is screaming for help. ARIANNA regains herself, takes a knife from the kitchen and follows him. He ducks in and out of the audience members, hiding from her. Every time she makes a move, he manages to move further away. ARIANNA starts screaming at him to get inside but he keeps running. Then he ducks down and starts to crawl. She can no longer see him. He crawls to the back of the auditorium. She sees him, sprints up to him, quickly grabs him by the hair and starts dragging him across the floor back into the house. Once they are at the door she throws him on the rug and turns back to lock the door.

Blackout.

Curtain.

Act Two Scene One

Curtain.

JASON is asleep on the sofa. There is an empty bottle of whiskey on the floor next to him. Enter ARIANNA, she is dressed for work. She walks into the kitchen, walking over the loose floorboard making it squeak, and goes to write a note. She looks over at JASON. She walks up to him and lightly kisses his forehead. Then she takes the bottle into the kitchen and throws it into the bin, waking JASON with the almighty bang. He startles and sits bolt upright. He looks at ARIANNA. She doesn't return the glance. She takes the note she was writing and puts it on the table next to him. Then she goes to get her coat. She heads for the door and unlocks it. She opens the door and starts to walk through it but pauses on the threshold. She turns back to look at him. She sighs, walks through the door and closes it behind her. This time she does not lock it.

Beat.

JASON waits quietly for the sound of the door locking, but he never hears it. He looks down at the note she has left him. He reads it and looks confused. He starts to slowly walk over to the door. He stretches his hand towards the door handle and turns it. Instead of opening the door he lets go of the handle and stands back in shock. He walks over to the cupboard and gets himself a glass of whiskey. The piano starts to vibrate.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* Don't do that. I am not in the mood.

The piano vibrates louder.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* I told you to stop doing that!

The piano falls silent.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* Okay, let's just suppose for a minute that it's not a loose wire and that there really is a ghost inside you, then why the hell are you bothering me? *(Pause.)* Oh, now you stay quiet. You're a great help.

sfx: Floorboards creaking upstairs.

JASON: For god's sake. Both of you, stop distracting me. I need to think.

JASON walks back over to the table and puts his untouched whiskey down. He takes the note and re-reads it. He puts it back down and holds his head in his hands.

JASON: I'll do some work for a bit. Maybe that'll clear my head.

JASON walks over to the piano. The lid shuts.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) Oh come on.

He lifts the lid. It shuts again. He opens it. It shuts. He opens it. It shuts. JASON gets angry and pounds his fist down on the piano. It starts vibrating.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) What do you care? Why should you give a damn about my pathetic life?

JASON walks over to the door and puts his hand firmly on the door handle. The piano stops vibrating. JASON pauses.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) What am I supposed to do now? Tell me. (*Pause.*) Ok.

(*Reading the note.*) I'm scared Jason. I'm scared that one day I'll wake up and you'll have left me. I don't mean to hurt you, I'd never want to hurt you, but I don't know how to make you stay. Do you want to stay with me? I'm afraid of what the answer to that might be. Jason, I'm so sorry, for everything. I always blamed you for this marriage but really I am half to blame. Maybe if I paid more attention to you then you wouldn't have cheated on me, maybe you would, I don't know. I've already lost you, haven't I? I won't blame you if you do leave me. If you want to leave, then leave. I won't stop you. Know that it will break my heart to see you go but I can't make you stay anymore.

Oh god, what do I do now?

The piano starts vibrating softly.

JASON: (*Pause. To the piano.*) Of course I love her. She's my wife. (*Pause.*) I know she loves me, she just has an odd way of showing it. She has her good days

when I honestly think that things could work out between us, but those days are getting fewer and fewer. (*Pause.*) I probably think about leaving her on a daily basis now, but that's normal, right? Every couple feels like that every once in a while. Our marriage is fine.

JASON places his fingers on the piano and starts to play. No sound comes out of it.

JASON: What the hell?

JASON bangs harder on the keys. The piano lid closes. He tries to open it but he can't.

JASON: (*Pause. To the piano.*) No, no, I refuse to answer any more of your bullshit questions until you answer mine. What the hell do you want from me?

The piano starts to vibrate.

sfx: Floorboards creaking upstairs.

JASON: (*Pause. To the piano.*) Thank you, I guess. At least I know that someone is watching over me.

The piano falls silent.

JASON: (*Pause. To the piano.*) She was called Jude, the neighbour. I didn't love her or anything. It was just nice having someone else to talk to. Believe it or not, I still loved Arianna and I didn't want to hurt her. It didn't really work out that way, did it? (*Pause.*) You don't know what it's like with her. (*Pause.*) I used to have real friends, you know. Good friends. I didn't just sit around all day talking to different pieces of furniture. (*Pause.*) And just look at me now, my only friend is a piano.

The lid opens. JASON smiles and places his fingers on the keys. He starts to play the middle section of his piece. He tries to continue it into the next movement but, once again, he struggles.

JASON: *(Pause. To the piano.)* I think I still love her. She makes it bloody impossible at times. *(Pause.)* Why is this so hard? I should be out of that door already. But I can't move. *(Pause.)* She makes it out to be my decision if I chose to stay but I can't leave. It's not possible. *(Pause.)* I'll be worse off if I leave because I have no money and nowhere to stay. She knows that. She's been playing me for a fool.

The piano starts vibrating.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* If I stay here then I have somewhere to live, I have food to eat and I have you. If I go, I'm completely on my own. *(Pause.)* I guess I am thinking about leaving her.

The piano falls silent.

JASON: It says a lot about me when I already have a bag packed for a time like this. I've been waiting for this moment for years. A new start. A new chance. If only she hadn't found that money. I should've kept it somewhere safer. I'm such an idiot.

JASON wanders over to the door and opens it wide. He takes in a deep breath.

JASON: I'm free. I'm free. I'm... but it means nothing. I can't leave.

JASON slowly shuts the door.

JASON: Today is no different from any other day.

The piano starts to vibrate softly.

JASON: *(Pause.)* How could I love someone like that?

The piano starts vibrating on different notes.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* What do you mean I'm the victim? How am I the victim? I was the one who cheated on her. She has every right to feel the way she feels. *(Pause.)* Because I was unhappy. *(Pause.)* I guess that was her fault in a roundabout way. *(Pause.)* Maybe I would have been happier if she hadn't been in the picture then. That's definitely true for the day she found out. But none of this means that I am the victim. *(Pause.)* You're insane if you believe that.

sfx: Floorboards creaking upstairs.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* I'm an idiot, a fucking idiot, for staying. Go on, tell me. *(Pause.)* See, even you say so. But I deserve it. *(Pause.)* Yes I do. *(Pause.)* You're impossible. *(Pause.)* I already answered that. *(Pause.)* I said yes.

The piano lid starts banging its lid.

JASON: *(Pause. To the piano.)* I'm not lying. *(Pause.)* Shut up. *(Pause.)* Shut up! Shut up!!

JASON heads for the door again.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* I don't need to listen to this.

The piano starts banging louder and louder. He opens the door and looks outside. He walks through it. He comes back inside momentarily.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* Fine! No!

The piano falls silent. JASON hesitates.

JASON: No, I don't love her. Not anymore. *(Pause.)* I don't know why I stay, I just do.

JASON pulls away from the door but leaves it open. Exhausted, he walks over to the piano and rests on the stool. After a pause he starts playing the middle section of his piece again. He

makes lots of clumsy mistakes and the piece drags on longer than it should. The piano lid slowly closes. Silence. JASON looks over to the ornament. He walks over to it and picks it up.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) I should have left that night. Do you remember what happened?
 (*Pause.*)

He places it back but turns it so that it's on its side.

JASON: (*Pause. To the piano.*) Maybe you're right. Maybe I am the victim. All this time I was scared of this, but it should have been her I was scared of. I begged her, but she didn't stop. I don't remember much of that night, just the sight of blood, the smell of vomit and dampness in my jeans. That was when I noticed, the doors were locked.

JASON turns around to face the door. He heavily breathes in the outside air.

JASON: She's trapped me even now. I need her to free me just as she needs to trap me. She always wins. I am the victim.

The piano starts vibrating using different strings to make an eerie sound.

JASON: (*Pause. To the piano.*) What? (*Pause.*) Really? (*Pause.*) I can't do that. (*Pause.*) No. I can't do that. (*Pause.*) Don't talk like that.

JASON slams the door shut.

JASON: If only she hadn't taken the money from under the floorboards, I could have used that to get away. (*Pause. (To the piano.)*) How could I get it back? (*Pause.*)

sfx: Floorboards creaking upstairs.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) Shh! Keep your voice down! She might be listening.

sfx: Floorboards creaking upstairs.

JASON: *(Pause. To the piano.)* You can't be serious. Are you really trying to convince me to kill my wife? No, I don't need her money that badly.

JASON walks towards the door and opens it wide. He stands on the threshold looking out.

JASON: Shit.

JASON closes the door again and walks back into the room.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* Let's just suppose that Arianna wasn't around anymore, just suppose, what would that mean for me? *(Pause.)* That's true, but I'll have no way of keeping up with the money she makes. *(Pause.)* That's a good point. And it would be nice to not have to deal with her madness anymore. What am I saying? I can't do this. I can't kill my wife, can I?

The piano starts to play the middle section of JASON's piece. JASON listens intently. The piano stops after the middle section. All is silent for a few seconds and then the piano starts vibrating again.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* You're right and you've always been right. She doesn't love me. She needs me.

The vibrating gets even louder.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* I should have listened to you. I should have listened to you from the start. Then I wouldn't have wasted my life chasing the freedom I knew she wouldn't give me. And now...

The piano falls silent.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* I'll listen to you now. *(Pause.)*

The lid of the piano starts banging softly.

JASON: *(To the piano.)* Like that? Really? I don't think I have the stomach to do that.
(Pause.) No, I can't do that. What would I tell the police? *(Pause.)* It's too risky.
I wouldn't be able to clean up the mess.

The lid of the piano starts banging louder and louder.

JASON: *(Pause. To the piano.)* I guess... maybe... yes. What if there was a cooking
accident? A cooking accident that went wrong. If I left the gas on and all the
candles were lit.

JASON starts lighting the candles.

JASON: She gets home. She's thinks I'm being romantic. The room is littered with
candles. Tea is on the table. Then flames engulf the house. I escape but my poor
Arianna is locked inside. Coughing as the smoke fills her lungs. Her hair sets
on fire and it slowly burns into her skull.

JASON finishes lighting the candles and turns the lights off.

JASON: *(Pause. To the piano.)* Why not? *(Pause.)* Oh, I didn't think of that. I guess fires
are hard to control.

The piano bangs its lid faster and faster.

JASON: *(Pause. To the piano.)* Ok, what if... what if... what if she fell down the stairs.
She stands on the top step. She has her hands full. Suddenly she loses her
balance. I wouldn't be behind her. Definitely not. She just happens to trip on
her own. She falls from the top all the way down to the bottom. And when she
hits that final step her neck breaks. I hear the screams from the kitchen but I
can't do anything but watch her fall.

The piano starts vibrating.

JASON: No, no that's not good enough. I want her to suffer more. Suffer the way I have. I've got it. I could drown her in the bath, just like her story. She gets home and we make passionate love in the bedroom. Then she has a bath. What happened in the story? Oh yeah, he cut her hand with a letter opener. I could do that. No, I could start at her wrist and work my way slowly up her vein. I could reach her elbow. I could even go further. So far that she bathes in a bath of her own blood. Yeah, I like that.

sfx: Floorboards creaking upstairs.

The piano starts vibrating louder and louder.

JASON: No, it's not good enough. I could use a knife. Stab her in the chest. Watch her body spasm as I pull my knife in and out. Or I could use a rope. Strangle her. Then I could see the light die in her eye. Or I could attack her with everything she's thrown at me. Or I could use my bare hands. Hit her. Beat her. Strangle her. Make her suffer, suffer as much as I have. I want to see her face twisted with fear. I want her to know that I killed her. I want to see her face when she dies. The face I've dreamt about. I want to feel her final breath.

The piano vibrates painfully loud.

JASON: I want... I want!

The piano makes a horrible noise as one of the wires snap. The sound echoes inside the piano for longer than it should. JASON walks towards to it and opens the lid. He pulls out the loose wire and looks at it intently.

JASON: (*Neutrally.*) She will submit to me tonight.

JASON takes the wire from the piano and puts it in his pocket. He walks over to his untouched whiskey and pours it down the sink, replacing it with water. He then starts chopping some carrots to put in the pan. When he's finished he puts it on the hob but doesn't turn it on. Finally he takes his glass of water and waits.

Silence.

Act Two Scene Two

ARIANNA opens the door. She spots JASON, looks at him for a few seconds and then throws herself on him.

ARIANNA: I've been planning what to say to you all day if you hadn't left but now I've gone blank. I'm just so happy you're still here.

JASON shifts his weight from one foot to the other. ARIANNA pulls back and stares at him.

ARIANNA: Jason, why did you stay? (*Silence.*) It's ok. Don't answer that. What matters is that you're here.

JASON takes a drink of water. ARIANNA looks around. She walks over to the door and locks it. Then she walks into the kitchen.

ARIANNA: Did you make tea? What are we having?

ARIANNA walks over to the kitchen. She lifts the lid of the pan.

ARIANNA: Carrots. You forgot to turn them on. What are we having them with?

JASON: It's not carrots.

ARIANNA: What?

JASON: It's what the carrots represent.

ARIANNA: What are you talking about?

JASON walks towards the piano slowly. ARIANNA looks in the oven.

ARIANNA: You haven't put anything else on.

JASON: I couldn't decide.

ARIANNA: Couldn't decide what else to make?

JASON sits at the piano and the piano starts to vibrate.

JASON: What to do for the ending.

ARIANNA: The ending to your song? What does that have to do with cooking tea? Why don't you sit back, relax and I'll make you something.

JASON: What do the carrots represent, Arianna?

ARIANNA: What?

JASON: What do the carrots represent?

ARIANNA: What are you talking about, Jason?

JASON: I want us to be honest with each other.

ARIANNA: I don't understand, Jason.

JASON: We need to be honest with each other.

ARIANNA: I've always been honest with you.

The piano starts using different notes to create an eerie sound.

JASON: Why would you let me leave this house? You need me. You need me here. So you arranged it. Arranged it so that I couldn't leave even though I wanted to.

ARIANNA: Are you saying you wanted to leave?

JASON: How could I stay with a woman like you?

ARIANNA: You were the one who chose to stay.

ARIANNA starts to leave. JASON grabs her firmly by the arm.

ARIANNA: What are you doing? You're hurting me.

JASON throws her onto the sofa.

ARIANNA: What the fuck, Jason? What's gotten into you?

JASON: You will sit down and listen to me. You are my life. You are my world. You are everything to me. And do you know why? Because you took everything else from me. Before you I had friends, I had friends that I saw every week. You took them away from me.

ARIANNA: No, they moved away from you.

JASON: I am doing the talking. (*Pause.*) Then there is the matter of my mother. I haven't seen her for two years. Every time I wanted her to visit us there was always an excuse.

ARIANNA: Jason, you could have still seen her on your own. You could have gone to her today.

JASON: How?

ARIANNA: That's not my problem.

JASON: You cut me off from everyone and kept the pieces for yourself. You were the one who drove me into Jude's arms.

The piano then attaches these eerie sounds to the middle section of JASON's piece.

Music que: The Final String.

ARIANNA: How dare you?! How dare you spin this on me? Yes, things were hard but I would never have cheated on you. I loved you, why would I hurt you like that?

ARIANNA walks away and JASON follows her.

JASON: If you had at least left me the money I'd saved I could have gotten away from you.

ARIANNA: The money you kept from me.

JASON grabs ARIANNA firmly.

JASON: There you go. Not listening again. I'm doing the talking. You will listen.

ARIANNA: Jason, you're hurting me.

JASON: It's not nice is it? The feeling that all the power in your body has just fallen through a sieve. (*To the piano.*) Is this the kind of thing you had in mind. (*Pause.*) You're right. She deserves more.

ARIANNA: You're scaring me.

JASON lets go of her. He picks up the pan and looks at the carrots.

JASON: I expected married life to be full of silly little arguments but no couple argues like us. Now, tell me, what do the carrots represent?

ARIANNA: Stop this now.

JASON: What do the carrots represent?

ARIANNA: You having an affair.

JASON: No they don't. I'll tell you what they represent. For me they represent you never forgiving me for what happened. You made me believe that I deserved this. I stayed because I felt I owed it to you, but now I realise, the only one who deserves this is you.

ARIANNA: Then you should have left. I won't stop you anymore.

JASON: For you the carrots represent a night you will never forget.

ARIANNA: What are you talking about?

JASON takes the ornament and studies it.

JASON: (*To the piano.*) I was an idiot for staying with her after this, but this was the turning point, the night that my love turned into guilt. You have made me see, it's not my fault at all. It's hers.

ARIANNA: Who are you talking to?

JASON: Do you remember what happened that night? Because I don't.

JASON walks over to the piano and runs his hands slowly along the top of it. He picks up the loose wire.

ARIANNA: I've had enough of this Jason. Tell me what's going on.

JASON takes the wire and twists it around both of his wrists.

JASON: *(Pause.)* She agrees with me. You haven't suffered as much as I have. She says you deserve more.

ARIANNA: Who agrees with you? What are you talking about? What are you doing with that?

JASON: Once upon a time, there was a married couple who loved each other very much... or so they led people to believe. But they never saw what happened behind closed doors. *(Blows out candle.)*

ARIANNA: Stop this.

JASON: You see, she was a beast to him. She cut him off from his friends, from his family, from his life. *(Blows out candle.)*

ARIANNA: I'm being serious Jason. I'll call the police.

JASON: She treat him so badly that one day he fell into the arms of another woman. Things became easier for the both of them... that is until the day that she found out. *(Blows out candle.)*

ARIANNA: You cheating bastard! It wasn't my fault you stuck your dick in the neighbour!

JASON: That night she beat him half to death. Again and again she beat him. He laid on the floor, not being able to see anything but blood before his eyes. Not being able to smell anything but the smell of his own urine. Not being able to taste anything but the taste of his own vomit. *(Blows out candle.)*

ARIANNA: I'm not listening to this.

ARIANNA walks towards the door. JASON stands in her way.

ARIANNA: Move. Now.

JASON swings back his fist and punches ARIANNA. He sends her crashing to the floor.

JASON: The wife was so delusional about the affair, which was her fault, that she decided to buy an abandoned old farm house in the middle of nowhere. *(Blows out candle.)*

ARIANNA stumbles to her feet and heads for the window.

ARIANNA: Someone help!

ARIANNA makes it to the window and successfully manages to open it. She lifts her trembling body onto the window sill and tries to climb through. JASON casually walks over to her, takes her by the waist and carries her away from it. ARIANNA kicks and bites and screams but JASON is unfazed by this. He throws her down onto the rug.

JASON: The house was dreary, old, dark, gloomy but above all isolated. Absolutely perfect for what he had instore, where nobody can hear you. (*Blows out candle.*)

ARIANNA starts to crawl towards the stairs but JASON takes her by the ankles and drags her backwards.

JASON: You see, he had a mistress. A mistress that nobody knew about. And she helped this man, this poor man, to see his own potential. (*Pause.*) She convinced him that he no longer loved her. I say convinced, it was something that he already knew but he didn't want to admit it. But she helped him.

ARIANNA: Who?

JASON: My muse. My girl.

JASON straddles ARIANNA on the floor. He takes both her wrists in his hand. He puts the other one on her throat.

JASON: One day the wife gave the man the option to leave. She left every door unlocked and every window open. You would think that the man was happy that he could live happily ever after. But you forget one thing.

JASON drags ARIANNA up off the floor by her hair.

JASON: The man was broke. (*Blows out candle.*) Even though the door was open to him, quite literally, he was still trapped. He spent all day agonizing over what he should do. Until his muse gave him the greatest idea. All his problems would be solved if she wasn't in the picture and if I had money. (*Blows out candle.*)

ARIANNA: Somebody help me!

JASON: But how could this man get everything that he wanted? Do you want to tell her or should I? (*Pause.*) That's right, my girl. And now our little story has come to an end. All that's left is to deliver the last bar.

JASON stands behind ARIANNA. She screams and hits him with everything she's got. She manages to pull away from his grasp but not enough to escape. He pulls her back with ease and strangles her with the piano string. ARIANNA drops to the floor. JASON walks over to the piano and listens intently. When it has finished JASON takes the loose wire and bows the other strings. He pulls away.

Silence.

JASON: Now this is a finished piece.

JASON blows out the remaining candles on the piano.

Curtain.

The Crucified Cat

A one act play for theatre by

Emily O'Donnell

Characters:

ELLIS LINES

ESTHER REEVES

SARAH MAY PRIESTLY

BROOKE LINES (voice over only)

ELLIS' MUM (voice over only)

Scene One

Curtain.

There is a bedroom and a garden. ELLIS and ESTHER are sitting on the floor of the bedroom drinking from a bottle of VK. ESTHER is wearing a hockey hoodie with her name on the back.

ESTHER: So, what else happened last night?

ELLIS: To be honest, I blacked out after that. I can't remember a thing.

ESTHER: I don't see how you can get that drunk.

ELLIS: Not all of us can be the good Christian girls, Esther. Remind me, does your dad know what you're up to today? It was really funny at the start of the night. There was only me, Lucile, Gareth, Fionne and Tommy so we ended up getting the Ouija board out.

ESTHER: You know those things are fake right? People just mess around with it by moving the dial.

ELLIS: It's not called a dial, it's a planchette. And I bet you've never used one anyway.

ESTHER: Don't tell me you've got one?

ELLIS: You don't need the actual board. All you need is a bit of creativity.

ESTHER: I'm not playing, if that's what you're trying to get me to do.

ELLIS: You don't play with it, you use it.

ELLIS exits.

ESTHER: Well I'm not using it, Ellis.

ESTHER sighs and then walks over to the collection of photograph frames. She picks up one of the photographs with the two of them on it. She runs her finger tips over it before putting it back. She then inspects the others. ELLIS enters holding a punch of paper, two pens, some blue tack, a glass jar and a notepad. She sits on the floor and starts writing letters on each page.

ESTHER: You can't be serious. I'm not using that thing Ellis.

ELLIS: Stop being a pussy. It's stupid saying that you don't like something if you've never tried it.

ESTHER: I've never tried jumping off a cliff but I don't think I'll like that. Look, I don't believe in this sort of thing. And even if I did my dad would kill me.

ELLIS: Who's gonna tell him? My parents are away all weekend.

ESTHER: What about Brooke?

ELLIS: He's out with Kyra. Come on, you're not really gonna make me do this alone are you? That's going against the first rule of the game.

ESTHER: Since when do you ever care about rules?

ELLIS: Either sit down or go home.

Hesitantly ESTHER sits down and ELLIS gives her a pen.

ESTHER: I'm only staying because I don't want you playing on your own. I still want nothing to do with it.

ELLIS: For the last time Esther, you don't play with an Ouija board. We need numbers one to nine, the alphabet, yes, no, hello and goodbye. Get cracking.

ESTHER does as instructed.

ESTHER: Do we really need a 'goodbye'?

ELLIS: You have to say goodbye to the spirit before you stop playing, otherwise you could trap them. It'll be fun, I promise.

ESTHER: Famous last words.

They both finish writing on their papers and ELLIS blue tacks them all to the floor.

ESTHER: Now what?

ELLIS: Rules.

ESTHER: She's got all serious all of a sudden.

ELLIS: It's a serious game.

ESTHER: You said it wasn't a game.

ELLIS: Look, we'll be connecting to the spirit world and it's just easier for everyone involved if we do these few simple things.

ELLIS gets out her phone.

ESTHER: Ah yes, the rules are so important that you've forgotten them.

ELLIS: Hey, I've only used it once or twice. I can't be expected to remember everything. Here, ok. It's very important that we never take our hand off the planchette unless we have said goodbye first. Never use the board on your own on your own. Never insult the spirit. Don't use the board if you've... never mind about that one.

ESTHER: What?

ELLIS: If you've been drinking.

ESTHER: (*Getting up.*) Oh no, we can't play. What a shame. Oh well, maybe next time then.

ELLIS: Sit down. We've only had a bit. It's not like we're drunk or anything. Don't ask when you're going to die. Don't ask questions about God.

ESTHER: Why not?

ELLIS: I don't know. It doesn't say. The rest of these just look to be repeated, or stupid. Ok, long story short, don't let go of the planchette.

ESTHER: You mean the jar?

ELLIS puts the planchette down and places her hand on it. She looks over at ESTHER until she does the same.

ESTHER: I want it known that I want no part in this. I'll just sit here and watch.

ELLIS: You can take notes. Just write down every letter that comes up, so long as it's not against your religion to write.

ESTHER: What happens now?

ELLIS: It's time to summon the spirit.

ESTHER: How do we do that?

ELLIS: (*To the board.*) Is there anybody there?

ESTHER: Is that it? That's all we do?

ELLIS: Shh.

They wait in silence. ESTHER starts moving the planchette.

ELLIS: Look! It's moving. (*Reading.*) F... U... C... K... O... F... F. Esther! Stop it. This is serious. (*To the board.*) Is there anybody there?

They wait in silence.

ESTHER: No one seems to be around. They probably saw your face and died again.

Silence.

ESTHER: How long do we have to wait?

ELLIS: Until we connect to a spirit.

ESTHER: I'm going to die of boredom before that happens. Or embarrassment.

ELLIS: Shut up and concentrate.

They wait in silence. The planchette starts moving on its own.

ELLIS: (*Reading.*) Yes.

ESTHER: You can't mess with me by using the same joke I pulled on you, Ellis. Give it up already.

ELLIS: (*To the board.*) Were you human?

ESTHER: Are you really going along with this?

ELLIS: It says yes.

ESTHER: I know it's you Ellis.

ELLIS: I swear it's not me. Why don't you ask a question?

ESTHER: I told you, I'm just here to watch.

ELLIS: Pussy. (*To the board.*) Are you a boy?

ESTHER: (*Reading.*) No.

ELLIS: (*To the board.*) How old are you?

ESTHER: Eleven. Jeez.

ELLIS: (*To the board.*) What's your name?

ESTHER: (*Reading.*) E... S... T... H... E... R. Esther? We have the same name.

ELLIS: Hang on. (*Reading.*) E... L... L... I... S. Ellis. She's just repeating our names. (*To the board.*) What is your name?

ESTHER: (*Reading.*) S... A... R... A... H. Sarah.

ELLIS: (*To SARAH.*) Are you a good spirit?

The planchette wavers in between 'yes' and 'no'.

ESTHER: What's happening?

ELLIS: I'm not sure. Stop panicking. It's moving. (*Reading.*) D... E... P... E... N... D... S. Depends.

ESTHER: What's that supposed to mean? Maybe we shouldn't be doing this.

ELLIS: It's fine. Stop being such a pussy. (*To SARAH.*) What year were you born?

ESTHER: Didn't you hear me?

The planchette wavers again, more violently this time

ESTHER: It's doing that thing again.

ELLIS: I can see that.

ESTHER: I really think we should stop.

ELLIS: You should've left when I gave you the chance. Hey, it's moving. (*Reading.*) 2003.

ESTHER: Wait, that's the same age as us. (*To SARAH.*) How did you die?

The planchette wavers again.

ELLIS: You can't ask that!

ESTHER: Why not?

ELLIS: We don't want to anger her. I thought you said you weren't going to ask questions anyway.

ESTHER: Why isn't she answering?

ELLIS: You've probably annoyed her. Ask her something else.

ESTHER: This is stupid.

ELLIS: (*To SARAH.*) Are you alone?

ESTHER: (*Reading.*) Yes. A... L... W... A... Y... S. Always.

ELLIS: What does she mean by that?

ESTHER: I'm not sure.

ELLIS: (*To SARAH.*) What year did you die?

ESTHER: You said I wasn't allowed to ask anything like that.

ELLIS: It looks like she likes me more than you. (*Reading.*) 2... 0... 1...

The planchette wanders over each number in turn.

ESTHER: 201? Why's she doing that?

ELLIS: She must not have finished yet.

ESTHER: Has she forgotten?

ELLIS: Who would forget the day they died? It'd be like forgetting your birthday.

ESTHER: (*To SARAH.*) Was it 2010? 2011? 2012? 2013? 2014?

ELLIS: (*Reading.*) Yes.

ESTHER: 2014? She's the same age as us. Or at least she would have been if she were alive.

ELLIS: What are you saying? Do you think we knew her or something?

ESTHER: Maybe. (*To SARAH.*) Where did you live?

ELLIS: (*Reading.*) N... O... W... H... E... R... E. Nowhere?

ESTHER: How can you live nowhere?

ELLIS: I really don't think she likes you. (*To SARAH.*) Where did you live?

ESTHER: (*Reading.*) H... E... R... E. Here? She lived in this house?

ELLIS: Don't be blonde Esther. I've lived here all my life. I'm sure I would've noticed if there had been a dead girl sharing my room.

ESTHER: But she said here.

ELLIS: She'll mean this area, numbskull.

ESTHER: Do you think we could have known her?

ELLIS: I don't know. It's a pretty big city. She could have gone to any school around here.

ESTHER: (*To SARAH.*) What school did you go to?

ELLIS: Hey, I'm meant to be the one asking the questions. You're supposed to just be the scribe.

ESTHER: I can't help it if you're not asking the right questions.

ELLIS: (*Reading.*) U... N... O. Uno? As in the card game?

ESTHER: Maybe it's meant to be 'you know'.

ELLIS: How are we supposed to know what school she went to?

ESTHER: Maybe she went to one of our schools. To say you were all hyped up to do this you're being really sassy.

ELLIS: Ok then genius, which school?

ESTHER: (*To SARAH.*) Did you go to Benton Close Primary? Why isn't she answering?

ELLIS: (*To SARAH.*) Did you go to Black Woodmoore Juniors?

ESTHER: Ellis, why isn't she answering?

ELLIS: (*To SARAH.*) Which school did you go to? (*Reading.*) Uno. I guess we'll just have to try and think for ourselves. Did you know any Sarah's in your school?

ESTHER: Obviously. Sarah's a pretty common name. (*To SARAH.*) What's your last name?

ELLIS: (*Reading.*) U... N... O. You know.

ESTHER: I don't like this.

ELLIS: You changed your tune.

ESTHER: It's just too weird. You made your point, I believe in them, now let's put it away.

ELLIS: Esther, can't you see how amazing this is? We have connected to a spirit that we could have gone to school with. We're not stopping now.

ESTHER: Ok, fine.

ELLIS: Really try to think of every person you knew named Sarah.

ESTHER: That's impossible. I can't be expected to remember every person I went to school with. I don't think I know the names of everyone in my year at the moment. She might not have been at my school, she might have been at yours.

ELLIS: (*To SARAH.*) Did you used to do any afterschool clubs?

ESTHER: What are you doing?

ELLIS: I'm seeing if we had anything in common.

ESTHER: (*Reading.*) H... O... C... K... E... Y. Hockey. What if...?

ESTHER let's go of planchette and walks over to the collection of photograph frames.

ELLIS: What the hell are you doing?! I told you not to take your hand off!

ESTHER: I'm just getting something.

ELLIS: Get back!

ESTHER picks up a photograph of ELLIS and her hockey team. Then she goes back to sit down and puts her hands on the planchette.

ESTHER: Ok, ok, sorry. It was just for a second.

ELLIS: When I played it with Lucile that was the one rule you were never allowed to break.

ESTHER: Nothing bad has happened.

ELLIS: It could have!

ESTHER: Well, if it does then I take the responsibility. Here, look at this.

ELLIS: What of it?

ESTHER: This was our school against yours.

ELLIS: She might be in this picture.

ESTHER: Name every member of your team.

ELLIS: Cassie, Grace, Beth, Helen, Amelia, me... god, I don't remember her name.

ESTHER: Let me see. That's Hayleigh Bull.

ELLIS: Is it?

ESTHER: Yeah. Don't you remember? You stole a red cloth from drama and kept throwing it over her face claiming that you were the bull tamer.

ELLIS: Oh yeah. What ever happened to her?

ESTHER: She asked to be transferred to the other side of the year.

ELLIS: Louise, Francesca and Maria. Your turn, miss detective. Who was on your team?

ESTHER: Ruth, Jessica, me, Annie, Lulu, Tamara, Megan, Rachael, Ellie and... and... I don't remember her.

ELLIS: The one with the short black hair and braces? (*To SARAH.*) Is this you?

The planchette wavers.

ELLIS: (*Reading.*) M... A... Y... B... E. Maybe.

ESTHER: She's just messing with us. This can't be her.

ELLIS: You really don't remember her? Anything at all?

ESTHER: No.

ELLIS: Look at her. She's stood like a mile away from the rest of you. Were you guys not friends or something?

ESTHER: Ellis, I really don't want to play anymore.

The planchette moves.

ELLIS: What question did you ask her?

ESTHER: I didn't. (*Reading.*) M... U... R... D... E... R... E...

ELLIS: Murderer? Holy shit.

ESTHER: This is a joke. This has to be a joke.

ELLIS: (*To SARAH.*) How did you die?

ESTHER: I can't do this Ellis.

ELLIS: (*Reading.*) M... U... R –

ESTHER: I'm being serious Ellis.

ELLIS: (*Reading.*) – D... E... R... E... R.

ESTHER: I can't breathe.

ELLIS: (To SARAH.) How did you die?

ESTHER: I need to go outside.

ELLIS: S... U... I... C... I... D... E. Suicide.

ESTHER takes her hand off the planchette.

ELLIS: What are you doing?

ESTHER runs off.

ELLIS: L... E... A... V... E. Leave.

The planchette starts rattling violently, so much so that ELLIS removes her finger. *It stops.*

Scene Two

ESTHER and ELLIS enter in the garden.

ELLIS: What's wrong with you?

ESTHER: I told you I wanted to stop. I needed some air.

ELLIS: Ok, ok. Chill. (Pause.) You know, if you wanted to you could stay over? Just me, you and Sarah.

ESTHER: Not funny.

ELLIS: I'll bring the *wine*, you bring *the beer* and Sarah can bring the spirits. Come on Esther. That was funny.

ESTHER: Maybe you should come stay at mine tonight?

ELLIS: And miss having the house to myself? You've got to be kidding.

ESTHER: I don't want you to be left alone.

ELLIS: I tell you what, if you really want to do something for me go to Tesco and pick up a copy of Ghostbusters. Then if things get super spooky up here I'll know what to do.

ESTHER: You're a bitch, you know that?

ELLIS: Some people say it is one of my best features.

ESTHER: (*Under breath.*) I wouldn't say that.

Silence.

ELLIS: Look, the asshole will be back tomorrow so if anything does happen he can deal with it.

ESTHER: What's he done now?

ELLIS: This morning there was a huge spider in my room. So naturally, I was screaming and Brooke came bounding in my room to find out what was going on. When I showed him that huge disgusting thing he picked it up with his own bare hands and took it into his room. He's put it in a little container and he feeds it like it's a pet or something! He says that he's gonna keep it as insurance and if I don't do what he tells me then he's gonna let it loose in my room.

ESTHER: What kind of things do you have to do?

ELLIS: Who knows? He's such a child.

ESTHER: He's older than you.

ELLIS: You wouldn't be able to tell would you?

ESTHER: You need to get him back.

ELLIS: How?

ESTHER: How do I know? He's your brother.

ESTHER kicks something lightly with her foot. She looks down and sees a dead cat. She screams and runs back towards the wall of the house. ELLIS follows where her eyes went and then does the same.

ELLIS: What the fuck was that?

ESTHER: I don't know. We should go back inside where it can't see us.

ELLIS reluctantly walks towards the cat, closely followed by ESTHER.

ELLIS: It looks like a cat.

ESTHER: No cat looks like that.

ELLIS: Fuck! It's Momo!

ESTHER: Your brother's cat? Oh no. He's going to be crushed when he gets home.

ELLIS: She's completely sliced in half. What do you think happened?

ESTHER: I don't know. Maybe your parents ran her over?

ELLIS: That's dull. Come on, make something up. Tell me the gruesome way the beast fell.

ESTHER: It got bitten by a dog.

ELLIS: Is using your imagination against your religion?

ESTHER: I don't see you coming up with any ideas.

ELLIS: A spaceship came down, abducted her and did weird experiments on her. They intend to turn themselves into cats and take over our world. They put Momo back as a warning.

ESTHER: I think you've watches Ghostbusters too many times. Should we bury her?

ELLIS: I'm not holding a funeral for a stupid dead cat.

ESTHER: I'm not thinking about giving it a service. I just thought we should bury it so your brother doesn't see.

ELLIS: Ok then, go pick it up.

ESTHER: I'm not picking it up. You do it.

ELLIS: How are you supposed to bury it if you won't pick it up? I dare you to poke it with this stick.

ESTHER: You can't be serious. I'm going nowhere near it.

ELLIS: Come on, it's not that gross.

ESTHER: How would you know?

ELLIS: You're just too much of a scaredy cat.

ESTHER: Har har, very funny. I just don't want to poke a dead cat with a stick. What's wrong with that? Or should I be asking what's wrong with you?

ELLIS: You used to stroke her all the time when she was alive.

ESTHER: That's different. She was alive then.

ELLIS: You're such a pussy.

ESTHER: Don't give up your day job.

ELLIS: Just get on with it.

ELLIS holds out the stick to ESTHER and she takes it. ESTHER turns and starts walking slowly towards the cat. She gets close to it, looks down and recoils a little.

ESTHER: I can't do it.

ELLIS: I knew you wouldn't. I shouldn't have even bothered daring you. Give me the stick. I'll show you how it's done.

ESTHER pulls the stick back and starts to walk towards the cat again. She turns her head so that she can't see the helpless creature. Then she bashes her stick around the ground trying to find it. In the end she opens her eyes and lightly touches it.

ESTHER: There.

ELLIS: You call that a poke? Do it again.

ESTHER turns back around and pokes the cat harder than she anticipated. When she brings her stick away a little blood squirts out of the dead animal. ESTHER screams and then immediately bursts out with a nervous laughter.

ESTHER: I did it.

ELLIS: Atta girl. I'm a little surprised to be honest, I never thought you had it in you. Guess it's my turn now then.

ELLIS walks confidently over to the dead cat. She squats down next to it.

ELLIS: I think you poked the lung, it's completely collapsed. Right, what are you gonna dare me to do?

ESTHER: I think you should touch it with your finger.

ELLIS: Ok then, here goes.

ELLIS reaches out her hand and touches the cat. She squirms a little after she has completed her dare but not too much.

ELLIS: Your turn again. Now I want you to pick it up.

ESTHER: Dream on.

ELLIS: I touched it so it's your turn, unless I win?

ESTHER: How high do I have to get it?

ELLIS: All of it needs to be off the ground.

ESTHER looks back towards the cat. She walks towards it and kneels next to it. She reaches out her hand and places it on the cat's paw. Her whole body shudders but she starts to pick it up. It rises slowly from the ground with its insides dragging along behind.

ESTHER: There?

ELLIS: Higher.

ESTHER does as instructed. The intestines unravel themselves and stretch to the floor.

ESTHER: Oh God.

ELLIS: That's so grim. Go on, a bit higher.

ESTHER: What, do you want me to get all of the... off the ground.

ELLIS: Yep, every inch of it.

ESTHER lifts it as high as she can and the intestines manage to lift above the ground.

ELLIS: That's good enough.

ESTHER drops the cat and shakes all over in nervous excitement.

ELLIS: Oh god. She's totally messed up.

ESTHER: Is that her heart?

ELLIS: Didn't think she had one. Ok, I'll do my last dare and then we can call it a day. What should it be?

ESTHER: I know exactly what I want you to do.

ELLIS: What?

ESTHER: It's awful. Are you sure you're up to the challenge?

ELLIS: Go on.

ESTHER: Pick the cat up and put it near Brooke's window, then he'll see it when he opens his curtains.

ELLIS: Esther Reeves, you are the daughter of Satan in an angel's wrapper. This will totally get him back for the spider.

ELLIS makes her way over to the cat menacingly. She bends down and picks it up by its tail. All its insides start falling out.

ESTHER: You're not really going to do it are you? I was only joking. (*Silence.*) Ellis, come on. Don't.

ELLIS: If you're too squeamish then maybe you should wait inside.

ESTHER: Ok, fine. I don't want to be a part of this.

ESTHER does as instructed and goes into the bedroom. ELLIS, holding the cat, exits.

Scene Three

ESTHER grabs the bottle of VK and downs as much of it as physically possible. Then she walks over to inspect the photograph of the hockey team. ELLIS enters.

ESTHER: Did you do it?

ELLIS: He gonna be scared shitless when he gets back. Come with me.

ESTHER and ELLIS exit. They re-enter momentarily. ESTHER walks straight back over to the bottle of WKD and drinks some more.

ELLIS: Think it's too much?

ESTHER: Was the coat hanger really necessary?

ELLIS: I couldn't get her into that pose without it.

ESTHER: It looks like Momo is the God of Cats, being crucified and everything.

ELLIS: Hopefully she won't come back to life in a few days. I have never been so excited for Brooke to come home.

ESTHER: It was nice knowing you. Keep me posted for your funeral dates.

ELLIS: It was your idea.

ESTHER: I just meant for you to leave it on the floor by his window. And even that was a joke!

ELLIS: You should've said.

ESTHER: I did say!

ELLIS: This is so much better than what you told me to do.

ESTHER: I should probably get going. If I stay you might find something else against my religion to play with.

ELLIS: How is a dead cat against your religion?

ESTHER: It's not really but it's hardly very Christian-like to play with something that's no longer living, let alone the fact that you recreated the most iconic scene in the bible with a cat.

ELLIS: You're just upset that my idea was better than yours.

ESTHER: You keep telling yourself that.

ELLIS: Shit!

ELLIS quickly sits down on the floor and places her hand on the planchette.

ESTHER: What are you doing?

ELLIS: I just realised that we never said goodbye. You're not supposed to take your hands off the planchette without saying goodbye. You're leaving them trapped in the board and if they get angry they can break free.

ESTHER: Oh god.

ESTHER sits down quickly and places her finger back on the planchette.

ESTHER: Is she still there?

ELLIS: (*To SARAH.*) Is anybody there? (*Reading.*) Yes.

ESTHER: (To SARAH.) Are you Sarah? (*Reading.*) Yes.

ELLIS: Thank god.

ESTHER: Say goodbye to her now. I really don't want to do this anymore.

ELLIS: Don't tell me you still don't believe in them.

ESTHER: I do believe in them. That's why I don't want to use it.

ELLIS: (To SARAH.) Are you angry with us?

The planchette wavers.

ESTHER: (*Reading.*) M... A... Y... B... E. Maybe. What do we do now?

ELLIS: Maybe if we keep talking to her for a bit then she might be fine.

ESTHER: We should never have started this.

ELLIS: (To SARAH.) Are your parents alive?

ESTHER: (*Reading.*) Yes. (To SARAH.) Where are they now?

ELLIS: (*Reading.*) S... A... D. Sad? (To SARAH.) She said where are they, not how are they?

ESTHER: (*Reading.*) Sad. (*Pause. To SARAH.*) Did you go to my school? (*Reading.*) Yes.

ELLIS: (To SARAH.) Did you know Esther? (*Reading.*) Yes. (To SARAH.) Were you friends?

The planchette wavers between 'yes' and 'no'.

ESTHER: What are you doing?

ELLIS: (To SARAH.) What did you think of Esther?

ESTHER: Don't ask her questions like that!

ELLIS: (*Reading.*) N... I... C... E. There you go. She thought you were nice.

ESTHER: Thank god! I was so worried, I don't remember her at all.

ELLIS: What were you afraid of?

ESTHER: I don't know. I was just overthinking, I guess.

ELLIS: Because that is not like you at all. Pussy.

The planchette moves.

ESTHER: *(Reading.)* B... I... T... C... H. Bitch? But she said I was nice a minute ago.

ELLIS: *(Reading.)* E... L... L... I... S. Ellis. What the fuck? Is she calling me a bitch?
 (To SARAH.) What the hell did I do?

ESTHER: *(Reading.)* U... N... O.

ELLIS: *(To SARAH.)* Stop it already with the 'uno' crap! Why are you calling me a bitch?

ESTHER: *(Reading.)* S... U... I... C... I... D... E. Suicide? I don't understand.

ELLIS: *(To SARAH.)* Why didn't you like me, bitch?

ESTHER: *(Reading.)* H... O... C... K... E... Y... M... A... T... C... H. Hockey match.
 (To SARAH.) Do you know Ellis?

The planchette moves and loudly scratches the floor.

ESTHER: *(Reading.)* Yes. Ellis, what happened?

The planchette moves.

ESTHER: *(Reading.)* U... N... O. *(To SARAH.)* What happened? *(Reading.)* U... N... O.

ELLIS: *(To SARAH.)* Come on brace face. What happened?

ESTHER: *(Reading.)* U... N... O.

ELLIS: *(To SARAH.)* How did you die?

ESTHER: Ellis...

The planchette scratches on the floor.

ELLIS: *(To SARAH.)* How did you die?

ESTHER: Ellis. Stop!

ELLIS: *(To SARAH.)* How the fuck did you die?

ESTHER: *(Reading.)* U... N... O.

ELLIS takes the U, N and O and rips them up.

ELLIS: *(To SARAH.)* How did you die?

ESTHER: *(Reading.)* S... I... C... I... D... E. Sicide? It's meant to be suicide. You ripped up the 'u'.

Beat.

ELLIS: That's enough. I'm done with this shit. We're saying goodbye now.

The planchette wavers.

ESTHER: *(To SARAH.)* Why did you kill yourself?

ELLIS: Esther, leave it.

ESTHER: *(Reading.)* B... L... L... I... E... D. Bllied? Bullied. *(To SARAH.)* Who bullied you?

ELLIS: Esther!

ESTHER: *(Reading.)* H... C... K... E... Y. Hckey? Hockey. *(To SARAH.)* Was it someone in the photo?

ELLIS: Leave it Esther.

ESTHER: *(Reading.)* S... T... I... C... K. Stick? Hockey stick. *(To SARAH.)* What are you talking about?

ELLIS: She's insane. Let go, Esther.

ESTHER: *(To SARAH.)* Tell me what happened. *(Reading.)* No. *(To SARAH.)* Why not? *(Reading.)* No.

ELLIS: *(To SARAH.)* Goodbye.

ESTHER: *(Reading.)* No.

ELLIS: *(To SARAH.)* What the hell? Goodbye.

ESTHER: *(Reading.)* K... I... F... E. Kife? Knife.

ELLIS: (To SARAH.) Leave.

ESTHER: (Reading.) W... A... R... D... R... B... E. Wardrbe? Wardrobe.

ELLIS: (To SARAH.) Get lost.

ESTHER: (Reading.) D... E... A... T... H. Death.

ELLIS let's go of the planchette.

ESTHER: Put your hand back!

ELLIS: No. I said goodbye. If she wants to get trapped then let her. That's not my problem.

ESTHER: (Reading.) H... C... K... E... Y... S... T... I... C... K... B... E... A... T. Hockey stick beat? Someone from the other team, they beat us. (Reading.) No. (Pause. To SARAH.) Did someone attack you?

The planchette wavers.

ELLIS: Let go now.

ESTHER: (To SARAH.) Who?

ELLIS: Don't make me drag you away from it.

ESTHER: (Reading.) B... I... T... C... H. Bitch. B... L... L... Y. Bully. M... R... D... E... R... E... R. Mrderer? Murderer. M... Y. My? T... R... N. Turn.

The planchette moves to the four corners of their homemade board. When it get to the last corner it starts shaking violently and the lights start to flicker. ESTHER screams but leaves her fingers on the planchette. ELLIS kicks the jar away from ESTHER's hand and runs to her side. The lights flicker on. The girls stay motionless for a few seconds. ESTHER turns to look at ELLIS and quickly walks to the other side of the room.

Silence.

sfx: phone ringing.

ESTHER looks at her phone.

ESTHER: *(Answering the phone.)* Hi Daddy. I'm on my way now.

ESTHER looks at ELLIS and then exits. ELLIS looks down at the board. She quickly picks up all the pieces of paper and tears them in half. Then she takes them and throws the paper out of the window. She turns back and looks at the jar. She picks it up and exits.

Scene Four

It is dark outside.

ELLIS enters. She walks slowly over to the photograph from earlier. She takes the photograph out and turns it around so that she can't see it. She walks around the room conscious of someone watching her. Next she walks over to the window sill and stares out of it for a bit. Then she takes out her phone and looks at it. She brings it up to her ear.

BROOKE: *(V.O.)* Hey, it's Brooke. I can't get to the phone right now so do the thing when you hear the thing.

sfx: Beep

ELLIS: Hey Brooke. Sorry to bug you but... but... the heating has gone off again and I don't know how to set it. So, could you come home when you get this? Thanks.

ELLIS hangs up the phone a little disheartened. Then she brings it up to her ear again.

MUM: *(V.O.)* What do I do? Speak? Now? Ok. Hi, this is –

sfx: Beep

ELLIS: Hi mum. I was just wondering how your weekend was going? Hope you're having a good time. Call me whenever.

ELLIS hangs up the phone again. She starts staring out of the window again.

sfx: Phone ringing.

ELLIS answers the phone.

ELLIS: Hello?

ESTHER: (*V.O.*) Hey Ellis. Did I leave my bible bag at yours?

ELLIS: Why would you have brought it here?

ESTHER: (*V.O.*) Because my parents thought I was going to the library and they said that it was a good time to do some quiet reading. I think I left it near your bed.

ELLIS lifts the blankets from the bed and looks underneath.

ELLIS: It's here.

ESTHER: (*V.O.*) Thank goodness. Can I pop in and get it tomorrow before church?

ELLIS: You're gonna wake me up on a Sunday morning? Sod that! I'll put it on the door mat round the back.

ESTHER: (*V.O.*) What if it rains?

ELLIS: Then that'll teach you not to lie to your parents.

ESTHER: (*V.O.*) I'm sorry I ran off earlier. Dad wanted me home.

ELLIS: It's fine.

ESTHER: (*V.O.*) Look, what happened today was kinda scary. I hold my hand up and say that I definitely believe in them now but please can we not use them again.

ELLIS: Chicken. (*Pause.*) Agreed. I think something was playing a practical joke on us, that's all.

ESTHER: (*V.O.*) I hope so. You know, when I got in my dad came up to me and sniffed me. Literally sniffed me. I thought he could smell the alcohol on my breath but no. He told me that I wreaked of the devil.

ELLIS: What the hell?

ESTHER: (*V.O.*) I know right. Only a few more years before I can move out of this hell hole. I'd better start practicing my walk for when I'm selling myself on the street to pay for my rent. (*Silence.*) That's when you're supposed to reassure me that I will get a job. (*Silence.*) Ellis? Are you still there?

ELLIS: It looks like there's someone in my garden.

ESTHER: (*V.O.*) There can't be. It's probably just a weird shadow or something.

ELLIS: I don't think it is.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Where is it?

ELLIS: Over by the tree.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Just ignore it. It'll be a trick of the light.

ELLIS: I swear there's someone out there.

ESTHER: (V.O.) You're just imaging things.

ELLIS: I can see the back of a person, Esther. I think it's a woman.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Are you sure?

ELLIS: Of course I'm fucking sure! She's on her hands and knees on the grass.

ESTHER: (V.O.) What's she doing?

ELLIS: I don't know. It's like she's looking for something.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Probably the medication the hospital gave her. You'd have to be insane to be out in weather like this.

ELLIS: What should I do?

ESTHER: (V.O.) I'd say just stay put for now. She'll probably wander off in time. All your doors are locked right?

ELLIS: Yeah, I locked them after you left.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Is Brooke back yet?

ELLIS: No.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Are you sure it's not him?

ELLIS: She's not tall enough. Wait.

ESTHER: (V.O.) What?

ELLIS: She's digging. She's digging up the grass with her bare hands. Shit!

ELLIS drops down onto the floor.

ESTHER: (V.O.) What's happening?

ELLIS: She looked right at me!

ESTHER: (V.O.) What did she look like?

ELLIS: Why the fuck does that matter?

ESTHER: (V.O.) If you know what she looks like then you can report it to the police.

ELLIS: But what if she's still looking?

ESTHER: (V.O.) There's no way she'll get in if all the doors are locked. Stand up and look.

ELLIS stands up.

ELLIS: She's turned back round. Wait. Esther! What the fuck? This isn't funny!

ESTHER: (V.O.) What?

ELLIS: Don't give me that shit. You scared the life out of me.

ESTHER: (V.O.) What are you talking about?

ELLIS: I can see your hockey hoodie from here. It's got your name on it.

ESTHER: (V.O.) It can't be.

ELLIS: I figured out your little prank, very funny. Now stop it.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Ellis, it's not my hoodie. I've got mine here.

ELLIS: Cut the shit Ellis. I know it's you.

ESTHER: (V.O.) I swear on my life, it's not me. Ok, I'm going to hang up now and I'll call you straight back on the house phone to prove I'm at home.

ELLIS hangs up the phone and almost immediately it rings again.

ESTHER: (V.O.) See.

ELLIS: Oh my god!

ESTHER: (V.O.) What? What is it?

ELLIS: She's got the cat. She's burying the cat.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Do you think someone saw what we did today?

ELLIS: She's put it in the hole.

ESTHER: (V.O.) They might just bury it and then leave.

ELLIS: Now she's covering it. Esther, she's looking right at me.

ESTHER: (V.O.) What does she look like?

ELLIS: Oh god. She's smiling at me.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Call the police. Call them now.

ELLIS: Don't hang up! Don't leave me alone!

ESTHER: (V.O.) You need to call the police.

ELLIS: You call them.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Ok, sit tight.

ELLIS: Don't go anywhere!

ESTHER: (V.O.) I won't I promise. (To DAD.) Dad! Call the police.

ELLIS: She's walking towards the house!

ESTHER: (V.O.) She won't get in. (To DAD.) Someone's trying to break into Ellis' house.

ELLIS: What if she does?

ESTHER: (V.O.) She won't. (To DAD.) She's home alone and doesn't want me to come off the phone. There's no time for that just call them now!

ELLIS runs offstage and then appears momentarily with a kitchen knife. She runs back to the window.

ELLIS: I can't see her.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Has she gone?

ELLIS: Where is she?

ESTHER: (V.O.) Dad's on the phone now and mum's grabbing her keys. We'll be over as quick as we can.

The lights cut out.

ELLIS: The lights have gone off.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Have you got a torch?

ELLIS: I can't see anything. I don't know where she is.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Ellis, do you have a torch? Get the torch out.

ELLIS runs towards her chest of drawers and pulls out a torch. She turns it on.

ESTHER: (V.O.) We'll be there as soon as we can.

ELLIS: What if Sarah is still here?

ESTHER: (V.O.) Stop thinking about that dumb board game, Ellis.

ELLIS: What if it is her?

ESTHER: (V.O.) My Dad's got through to the police. They're sending a car around now and we're our way. (Pause.) They want to know what she looks like. Can you give any form of description?

ELLIS: Sarah.

ESTHER: (V.O. To DAD.) She's wearing a hockey jacket that says Esther on it. (To ELLIS.) We need a description Ellis.

ELLIS: Short black hair.

ESTHER: (V.O. To DAD.) It's a woman and she has short black hair. (To ELLIS.) You're doing great Ellis. We're just coming off the ring road so we'll be there soon. Is there anything else you can tell the police about her?

sfx: The front door slamming.

ELLIS drops the torch and crouches under the window.

sfx: Floor board creaking.

ELLIS: She's in the house.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Get out. Get out now! (To DAD.) She's in the house.

sfx: Floor board creaking.

ELLIS: I can't. I don't know where she is. Oh god. Oh god.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Dad says hide. Hide until the police get there.

ELLIS puts the phone on the window sill. She then opens the wardrobe and climbs inside, still holding the knife.

ELLIS: I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Sorry for what?

ELLIS: Sarah.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Ellis? Talk to me!

ELLIS shuts the door.

The door creaks open and a crack of light is let into the room. The door then shuts again.

ESTHER: (V.O.) Ellis, are you OK? Answer me. What's going on?

The phone hangs up. Silence. The picture frame suddenly tumbles to the floor. Silence. The door-like handles on the wardrobe drop down. Silence. The torch turns off. Silence.

ELLIS screams.

Curtain.