The Dance:

A One-Act Play Exploring Emotional Abuse Through Non-Linear Storytelling

By

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Table Of Contents

Acknowledgements……2

Abstract……5

Introduction……6

Expository Section

Purpose/Goals of the Project……7

Codependency & Emotional Abuse……8

Trauma & Theatre……12

Creative Inspirations……14

The Dance……19

Process Reflection

Struggles/Challenges……80

Changes/Adjustments……81

Moving Forward……84

Bibliography……85

Abstract

The Dance is a one-act play that aims to explore and showcase the harsh realities of codependency and the progressive development of emotional abuse within romantic relationships. The play takes the audience through the relationship between Leya and Keenan, using a non-linear storytelling format to highlight the evolution of their behaviors and abuse. Based on one of my previous works from high school, this thesis project provided me the opportunity to explore trauma-informed storytelling and use theatre as a medium to start a conversation about important, misunderstood issues. The creation of this play was preceded by my own research into the broader topic to ensure I could accurately portray the complexity of those dynamics with the proper scholarly context, as well as an analysis of my creative influences for the project. The culmination of this project also includes my reflective insights into the process, the struggles encountered, and the changes made along the way. I hope my story helps people who have experienced similar situations to remember that they are not alone and that they have the power to keep pushing forward.

Introduction

My high school theatre teacher once told us, “Good stories help people to escape their reality, but great stories help them to understand it a bit better.” I participated in theatre from late elementary school through high school. It is where I found my voice, my confidence, and a community of people that pushed me to succeed. It is also where I witnessed firsthand the power of theatre to bring people together and give them a glimpse into experiences beyond their own.

In my senior year, we had a playwriting unit in which all of us were to create a script, and the director would choose several works to be performed by other students. At the time, I was struggling to understand my recent experiences with relationships and how drastically people can change from how you initially perceive them. This struggle is where the original version of *The Dance* was born, a very short play that shows brief glimpses into a young couple’s relationship and how it fell apart over time, presented non-chronologically. I really enjoyed the experience, and that original work was eventually showcased on stage alongside some of my peers and earned me a finalist spot in the Portland Center Stage Teen Playwriting Competition. After the play showcased, I was surprised by how many people approached me to discuss how they connected with the characters and experiences in my show, and how it helped them to feel a bit more seen.

When it came time for me to decide on a direction for this thesis project, the original play immediately came to mind, and I knew many aspects would translate well into a longer, more focused project.

Expository Section

Purpose/Goals of the Project

When developing the concept for this project, I knew that I already had a foundation from my original high school play that was unique and something that I had been looking to revisit. I had the personal experience of seeing how powerful storytelling and theatre can be in addressing important topics, and wanted to develop my own meaningful piece to help spark conversations. I reflected on which topics I could connect with and whether those topics could transfer meaningfully to a theatre setting.

I realized that a great thing about using non-linear storytelling is that you can highlight differences in behavior that evolved, creating a more direct contrast compared to gradual changes. My initial direction for this project was to explore the concept of codependent relationships and how they develop over time, using the non-linear format to provide those contrasting moments. As the project developed, my scope expanded to also looking at emotionally abusive relationships in general, in the many ways they can present, and incorporating that as well.

One important aspect of this process for me was ensuring I had conducted thorough research to educate myself on the topic and approach it from an unbiased perspective. Abuse in itself is very complex, but emotional abuse can come with its own challenges since it is often so misunderstood. It was essential to ensure that I had enough background on the subject, beyond my personal experience, to portray the story as accurately as possible. I wanted this to be something that the audience could connect with and genuinely draw parallels to what they may have experienced or

witnessed someone else experience. I also wanted to make sure I knew how to present the story in a way that was clear and engaging, and addressed the topic in a way that was beneficial to the audience.

Codependency & Emotional Abuse

In a recent statistic covering emotional abuse reported by the National Domestic Violence Hotline, nearly half of all women and men in the United States have experienced psychological aggression or abuse in a previous relationship. Codependency represents a type of emotional abuse experienced in relationships (both romantic and platonic) that is often misunderstood and underrepresented as a concept. Rachel Mullins, a licensed therapist specializing in relationship dynamics and counseling, defines codependency as "...an unhealthy attachment to another person to such an extent that there is a crippling reliance on the support and validation they receive in that relationship" (2019). This reliance presents itself not only emotionally but behaviorally, as the dynamic morphs the sense of identity and perceived responsibility a person has within their relationship.

Codependent relationships are characterized by their extreme behaviors centered around overt control and reliance on another person to emotionally and physically fulfill their needs. It is important to recognize that both parties in the relationship may be codependent, as one partner's behavior can influence how the other shifts their priorities and attention solely to the relationship (Mullins, 2019). The "codependent partner", or the person in the relationship inciting the emotional abuse,

often exhibits behaviors such as creating justifications or shifting blame to others for unreasonable behavior/actions, lashing out when others try to set or enforce boundaries, or questioning the loyalty of others when they do not give into their demands, along with other manipulative behaviors they utilize to attempt to gain a sense of control in the relationship (Mullins, 2019). The “enabler partner”, the one who feeds into the codependent’s behavior (willing or unwillingly), can come to present with behaviors such as isolating from friends and family to pull all focus to their partner, making excuses for their partner’s behavior, and believing that their happiness will come from “fixing” their partner so they can continue their idealized version of their relationship (Runkle, 2022). The culmination of all these behaviors leads to a toxic and unhealthy relationship dynamic in which one or both partners are constantly prioritizing the other person’s needs and well-being over their own.

The exact reason why people develop codependent behaviors is unknown. However, there have been numerous studies examining what factors make someone more susceptible to developing unhealthy mannerisms or finding themselves in a codependent relationship. Marriage counselor Sheri Stritof explores, in her article "*7 Signs You're Being Emotionally Manipulated in Your Relationship*," that people who exhibit manipulative behaviors may come from dysfunctional families, where they learned the behavior by observing the parental dynamic and associating it with their developing concept of what a relationship looks like (2024). She also comments that these behaviors may also be the result of an underlying mental health condition (high anxiety, narcissistic personality disorder, etc), or simply as a way that the person has

learned how to get what they want. These contributing factors do not excuse emotional abuse or manipulative behavior, but bring more understanding as to how these factors can contribute to the overall issue.

On the opposite end of the dynamic, efforts have been also made towards understanding what makes a person more susceptible to entering an emotionally abusive or codependent relationship, and being a target for manipulative behaviors. Similar to codependent behavior, a link can be made between family dynamics and behaviors exhibited later in life. In his 2024 article, writer Sheldon Reid explains how certain household dynamics have the ability to profoundly impact a person's emotional development. These include living situations where the child has to assume a caregiver role or are expected to make personal sacrifices in the interest of helping their family, or growing up in an environment where emotional expression and communication was viewed negatively (Reid, 2024). Personal development within these dynamics has been cited as a potential reason why some people are more willing to give into the needs/demands of their codependent partners, since it was an established expectation of them growing up, or why they develop the expectation that their emotional needs will not be, or do not deserve to be, met. Victims of emotional abuse also tend to suffer from issues regarding their attachment style and overall self-esteem. Reid elaborates on this, explaining that, "if you feel as if you're unworthy of love, you might go to great lengths to gain approval or to feel wanted." (2024), further cementing why someone would be willing to endure the treatment they receive in a dysfunctional relationship.

The unfortunate reality surrounding emotionally abusive and codependent relationships is that they are frequently perceived as not being “as severe” or “as dangerous” compared to other forms of abuse. Emotional abuse is often misunderstood by those without firsthand experience, leading to harmful assumptions - such as believing that abuse requires visible, physical harm, or that victims could simply leave if they were truly unhappy (Anne, 2025). These assumptions speak directly to the complexity behind understanding this type of abuse and contribute to the widespread minimization of these survivors’ experiences.

As a result of the lack of understanding regarding the overall topic, victims of emotional abuse can find it difficult to share their story and seek the help they need to get out of their current situation. Kurbatfinski *et al.* published an article that interviewed people who reported previously experiencing Intimate Partner Violence (IPV). During the interview, the participants who had endured emotional abuse recalled their experiences of feeling judged by others, “suggesting that abusive partners are chosen or evident and completely ignoring the manipulative and emotional techniques often employed by those engaging in abusive behaviors” (Kurbatfinski *et al.,* 2024). This stigmatized response is yet another emotional barrier that victims of emotional abuse have to overcome when choosing to share their stories, in addition to the psychological effects of the abuse itself.

Commonly, people struggle to understand why someone would choose to stay in an abusive situation. Emotional abuse, however, often works gradually. Just because a relationship is happy and healthy at the beginning does not mean it cannot deteriorate

over time as both parties start to show their true colors (Mullins, 2019). The more that they are utilized, manipulation tactics can chip away at a person's sense of self, especially if they are predisposed to having attachment issues or low self-esteem. As Reid previously discussed, those people may be more likely to blame themselves and may worry that they will not be able to find someone else to love and care about them. It is important to recognize that abusive relationships are often not persistently negative, but intermixed with good moments that the couple shared and the original love for each other. These contrasting moments can make it more difficult for emotional abuse victims to recognize their situation and choose to leave, fearing isolation and judgment from the world around them.

Trauma & Theatre

In representing complex topics such as this, traditional education and media often fail to capture the weight of personal experiences that occur behind closed doors. In her article "Research-Based Theatre and 'Stigmatized Trauma': The Case of Suicide Bereavement", Anneli Silvén Hagström explores the use of theatre in addressing difficult topics "that for reasons of self-blame and shame are usually surrounded by silence" (2020). She concluded that theatre provides an effective window for people to experience perspectives different from their own and better allows them to empathize with people who share that perspective. Additionally, being able to connect with a character and their experiences can help to validate victims' experiences and empower them to share their own story. These findings highlight the potential of research-based

theatre as a powerful medium for addressing complex topics in a digestible and insightful manner.

There are a variety of preexisting plays that deal with abuse and abusive relationships, each in its own unique way and in different contexts of abuse. For example, plays like *Things We Do for Love* by Alan Ayckbourn and *Lethal Indifference* by Anna Barnes are both stories of violent physical abuse and how the victims have to learn to live in order to survive their situations. While both powerful and impactful works, they primarily focus on physical abuse in domestic violence situations and that associated behavior. There are also works such as *Lady in Red*, a UK touring production, and *RED FLAGS* by the advocacy group Sanctuary for Families that explore the complexities of women trying to escape their abusive situations. While these plays do an incredible job navigating the struggles and deceivingly complicated process of escaping from an abusive situation, the audience is brought into these stories towards the turning point of these victims choosing to take action to change their situation, leaving out context regarding the buildup of the relationship and how the characters' behaviors escalated up to this point. After examining these powerful contributions to the overall discussion of abuse, the goal of the play for this project is to fill in the gaps by exploring the relationship development of emotionally abusive and codependent relationships to show how they evolve. By presenting the development of the dynamic in a way that highlights the subtle shifts, contradictions, and emotional entanglements, the hope is that readers will be able to challenge their own misconceptions about emotional abuse and understand the difficulty of these situations from an inside perspective.

Creative Inspirations

As I mentioned previously, this whole project is loosely inspired by the original short play from high school. At the time, I was struggling to understand my own experiences within complicated relationship dynamics, though the original story did not contain a theme as serious as this current version. However, the basis of that story was a crucial starting point. The idea of entering a story in the middle and working to put the pieces together from there really intrigued me from my first play, and I knew I would want to explore it further in a future work if the opportunity presented itself. When I began deliberating the topic for my Honors thesis, the previous play came rushing back to me as something I was proud of and knew I could build on to make an even better story.

Garth Brooks is an amazing country artist who is absolutely beloved in my family, and whose music I have been listening to for most of my life. My favorite song of his is titled "The Dance" and inspired the names of both the original and current play. The song is a beautiful piece that discusses a man looking back on his previous relationship, referring to “the dance we shared beneath the stars above”, a time of love and harmony. However, when the relationship does not work out, he reflects on whether he would have changed anything about how things unfolded if he had known the outcome in advance. He ultimately proclaims that, though he could have avoided the pain of heartbreak, he would have missed out on all the joy and happiness that came from “the dance” and other positive aspects of the relationship.

This theoretical concept of choosing not to change the outcome of what happened, despite the pain or heartbreak it may have caused, in favor of recognizing the good moments that came from it, has always stuck with me. The song also reflects that life's unpredictability is part of the journey, and we never truly know how a situation will turn out, despite how we feel in the moment. For my play, I decided to take inspiration and use the characters' own version of the dance to begin the story. I used the dance not only to act as the seemingly shining moment in the relationship the audience is introduced to, which eventually becomes less positive as they receive more context, but also as an overall symbolic way that a relationship can often parallel dancing with another person. There is time to lead, a time to follow, but both partners must trust and flow with the other person in order to create something beautiful. When the character Leya mimics the dance on her own in the final scene, it is meant to represent her realization that the relationship's "dance" has long since been interrupted and can no longer function in their current circumstances.

It would be remiss not to mention the inspiration I took from the 2014 movie-musical, *The Last Five Years.* Adapted from the original stage production by Jason Robert Brown that premiered in 2001, the story tells the relationship between the characters Jamie and Cathy from their individual perspectives. More interesting, however, is the way the characters alternate songs: Cathy starts the show with her perspective at the end of the relationship, and Jamie starts at the beginning, then they progress through the story from both directions while continuing to alternate. The final song is this beautiful moment, simultaneously showing Cathy's perspective full of hope and

inspiration after their first date, and Jamie writing his goodbye note, ending the relationship entirely. The story puts the audience in a fascinating position, immediately showing the beginning and end of the relationship, and progressively leads them to put together the pieces of what truly happened.

The Last Five Years was one of the first pieces of media that introduced me to what I refer to as “non-linear storytelling”. Instead of starting at the beginning and moving chronologically through the story, an author or storyteller can shape an audience's understanding of how the story will unfold and highlight key moments by choosing to tell the story out of order. I watched the movie for the first time very shortly before I wrote the original version of this play, and became fascinated by the concept of what could happen if you started a story in the middle and worked your way both backward and forward, progressively, until eventually showing the very beginning and end. When considering this thesis idea, I realized that non-linear storytelling could be a powerful tool to highlight how manipulative and abusive behaviors can emerge over time and how unhealthy relationship dynamics develop gradually.

A final overall creative influence for me was Mark Medoff and his play *Children of a Lesser God.* This play was not only a catalyst for where I am today, pursuing a future as an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter, but also for how I choose to present my work as an amateur playwright. The purpose of stage directions in a play, often italicized and in parentheses between dialogue, is to provide an outline for a character's specific reactions or movement accompanying the scene. Take the example below:

KEENAN

Oh my god, are you okay?

(KEENAN runs over to LEYA)

Some playwrights and actors believe that stage directions should be kept as minimal as possible to highlight only the key features and movements, thus allowing actors to devise their own interpretations of the character and fill in the blanks between non-scripted actions/reactions. However, something I realized when my high school theatre department decided to stage Medoff's play in 2019 is that this does not always have to be the case.

One of the aspects I appreciated most about Medoff's work was the way he incorporated both humor and explicit exposition into the stage directions to guide the portrayal of the characters as he intended. Some of my favorites include *(He's bombing),* where the male lead fumbles through a conversation, and *(He makes war noises),* where he talks about his father to a Deaf character. While not essential for Medoff to include, those types of stage directions helped our cast find humor while working through a heavy, cognitively intensive story, and also felt more connected to the playwright and characters. Additionally, he adds moments that offer insight into what the character is experiencing during a scene, such as when he describes the actions of the female lead *(She concentrates on her food, closing him out again).* This style of providing more detail beyond the simple action and indicating some of the characters' motivations throughout the play was a crucial part in fleshing out the characters when we did our production in 2019.

When I developed the original version of my play in 2021, I was truly inspired by how Medoff used stage directions to guide actors' insight into more complex characters without making the overall story too explicit for them to rely on. There are aspects I decided to include to help provide the occasional insight into a character's actions or internal thought process that were not explicit in the dialogue. When I presented my draft to a Portland playwright working with my class on our theatre unit, he attempted to tell me in front of the class that my writing style would not be considered in any professional context and that I needed to standardize it. While part of me was discouraged by this “feedback”, another part also understood that he was not entirely correct. I have engaged with the works of so many incredible authors, such as Mark Medoff, that deviate from the “standard” playwriting practice, and that does not make their work any less valuable or professional. In 2022, I reached the finals of the high school playwright contest held by the same man’s organization, which tried to tell me that my work was not “professional”. Mark Medoff and that man from years ago have stuck with me throughout my creative process as reminders that I have the ability to create something unique, impactful, and professional despite any prevailing opinions of what a play or story is “supposed to” look like.

THE DANCE

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A One-Act Play

by

Grace Sayles

Cast of Characters

Leya Synne:	Woman, early 20s, kind but sometimes unsure of herself, aspiring art student
Keenan Marc:	Male, mid-20s, nepo-baby, charismatic but manipulative
Christiana Lane:	Woman, life of the party, loving and direct; Leya's best friend

Additional Voices

Leya's Mom:	Woman, featured in several voicemails, single parent, bit overbearing but wants what's best for Leya
Financial Aid Assistant:	Gender unimportant, calls from Leya's college regarding tuition payment

Playwright's Note

This play is not presented in chronological order of the characters' relationship. For clarity and usage, refer to the table for the dates of each scene and the scenes listed in chronological order.

Additionally, the play is meant to have two benches, one on each side of the stage, that the characters alternate using throughout the show, depending on whether the scene occurs before or after "the dance" (the opening moment of the show). Those corresponding benches are also indicated in the table below.

Scenes in Order	Month Scene Takes Place
Scene 1 - The Dance	"The Dance" - Mid June 2023
Scene 2 - Called Home	July 2023
Scene 3 - The Argument	Early June 2023
Scene 4 - Home From Work	August 2023
Scene 5 - Offers to Move In	May 2023
Scene 6 - Fight After Mom Calls	September 2023
Scene 7 - After Dinner with Mom	April 2023
Scene 8 - School Issues	October 2023
Scene 9 - The First "I Love You"	March 2023
Scene 10 - Coffee with Christiana	November 2023
Scene 11 - Opening Up	February 2023
Scene 12 - Merry Christmas	December 2023
Scene 13 - First Meet	January 2023 - First Meet
Scene 14 - Breakup	January 2024 - Breakup
Scene 15 - End	After Breakup - Solo Dance

Chronological Order	Scene #
January 2023	Scene 13
February 2023	Scene 11
March 2023	Scene 9
April 2023	Scene 7
May 2023	Scene 5
June 2023	Scene 3
June 2023	Scene 1 - "The Dance"
July 2023	Scene 2
August 2023	Scene 4
September 2023	Scene 6
October 2023	Scene 8
November 2023	Scene 10
December 2023	Scene 12
January 2024	Scene 14 + 15

Before "The Dance"	After "The Dance"
Left Bench	Right Bench

SCENE I

(The stage is empty aside from the benches placed on either side of the stage, the lights slowly rise center stage. KEENAN and LEYA enter from opposite sides on a warm June evening. KEENAN smiles brightly and extends a hand out to her as slow music begins to play. LEYA seems to hesitate for just a moment before giving in and joining KEENAN. The two of them move into a slow, coordinated dance. KEENAN leads her firmly, but they seem to flow together as they move. As they start to slow, KEENAN breaks the silence.)

KEENAN

How did you get to be so beautiful?

LEYA

(Sarcastically)

Practice.

(They laugh, but LEYA falters slightly. KEENAN notices.)

KEENAN

Leya…I know that things haven't been perfect recently. And maybe we've both made some mistakes along the way.

(Beat)

But I want to make you happy, my dove.

LEYA

Keenan, I-

KEENAN

(Interrupting)

I love you, with everything that my heart has, Leya.

(Pleading)

Please…please give me another chance to show you that.

(They still, and he waits for her answer. A million thoughts swirl in LEYA's head as she stares at the only man who has ever cared for her. She decides and pulls KEENAN into a kiss. They pull away, but remain close.)

LEYA

There have to be changes, Keenan.

KEENAN

(Quickly)

I can. I'm going to. Whatever you ask.

(LEYA smiles as she grabs KEENAN'S hand.)

LEYA

Let's go home.

(KEENAN spins her around and playfully carries LEYA offstage as they both laugh, a hopeful beginning to a new era in their muddied relationship.)

SCENE II

(The voicemail notification begins to play on an empty stage.)

VOICEMAIL

You have one unread message from July 3rd, 2023.

(*Beep*)

KEENAN

(*Entering the stage, slightly panicked, as if he's unable to catch his breath, leaving the voicemail for LEYA.)*

Leya…hey, it's me again, you're not responding to my texts. Please I -

(Heavy breathing)

Leya, you need to come home. Please. This is different. I need you. Please.

(The voicemail ends with a beep. KEENAN moves into a fetal position on the floor, at the end of the right bench, with his back to the rest of the stage. His head is down, as he slowly rocks himself back and forth. LEYA enters the apartment from the opposite end, visibly frustrated.)

LEYA

(Calling out)

Keenan? What the fuck!?

(She doesn't see KEENAN as she begins to set her stuff down, still shouting out. KEENAN doesn't move.)

What happened to that whole "not spamming me while I'm out" conversation? Keenan, I have to be able to go out and enjoy an evening with my friends without -

(*LEYA finally turns and sees KEENAN in his distraught state. Her demeanor immediately changes to concern as she rushes over to him.*)

Hey, hey, hey, what's wrong? What happened? Are you okay?

(*She sits on the floor in front of him, KEENAN continues to keep his head down, crying and unable to speak*.)

Baby, talk to me, please. Please.

KEENAN

(*Slowly lifting his head, his face is full of sadness and fear. It's obvious he's been crying for a while*.)

I'm sorry… I didn't - I didn't want to tell you to come home, I just…I just -

(*He begins to cry again, falling forward into LEYA.*)

LEYA

(*Holding him*)

Shh..shh..hey, it's alright. I'm here, I've got you. I've got you.

KEENAN

You just make me feel so safe…

LEYA

(*Sighing, and pulling KEENAN tighter to her*)

You are safe, Keenan. And I love you. I'm not going anywhere.

KEENAN

(Looking up at her, tearfully)

Promise?

LEYA

(*Smiling*)

Promise.

(LEYA kisses him gently and continues to hold him for a moment. She then carefully stands and helps KEENAN to his feet, still weak. They slowly make their way offstage, LEYA's evening plans long since forgotten.)

SCENE III

(The voicemail plays between scene transitions.)

VOICEMAIL

You have one unread message from June 6th, 2023.

(*Beep)*

CHRISTIANA (VOICEMAIL)

Hey, babes, it's Chris! Either you've had your head stuck in a bucket of paint, or that new boy-toy of yours is working out nicely.

(She laughs.)

Seriously, Ley, we're way overdue for a night out. Let me know when you're free, love you!

(LEYA enters the stage as the voicemail plays, dressed up and ready to go out with friends for the evening after not seeing them for a few weeks. As she fixes her hair, the front door closes shut, and KEENAN is heard from offstage.)

KEENAN

Baby?

LEYA

In here!

(She continues to fiddle with her outfit. KEENAN enters, admiring her.)

KEENAN

Well, what do we have here? Don't you look lovely.

LEYA

(Blushing)

Thank you, thank you.

(He kisses her)

KEENAN

(Settling himself in on the left bench)

We usually stay in on Friday nights, though. Did you change your mind? I could call Steven and see if he could snag us a last-minute reservation; he still owes me one.

LEYA

That's very sweet, but I've already got my plans for the evening.

KEENAN

(Pauses, looking at her, confused)

What do you mean?

LEYA

Ladies' night, remember? Bar hopping, cute dress, the works.

KEENAN

(Deadpan)

You never told me you were going out.

LEYA

(Laughing slightly, jokingly)

Well, that's simply not true.

KEENAN

(Dark)

Excuse me?

LEYA

(Looking up, realizing he's taking the situation seriously)

I did let you know. Wednesday, when we made the plans, and I reminded you yesterday.

KEENAN

Oh, so I'm just a liar? Got it, great.

LEYA

(Taken aback)

Kee, that's not what I said. I'm sorry you don't remember me saying something, but now you know, I guess.

(She goes back to fixing her hair timidly.)

KEENAN

(Sitting down, pouting)

Fine, whatever.

(Staring down at his phone, sulking)

Who's going to be there?

LEYA

(Again, a bit taken aback by his question)

It's just me, Chris, and some of the girls.

KEENAN

(Suddenly looking up, a new anger in his eyes)

Oh, so who's the liar now?

LEYA

What?

KEENAN

You *just* told me you were going to -

(Exaggeratedly)

"Ladies Night".

(LEYA stands there silently, not understanding his point. KEENAN rubs his face, annoyed.)

You said "Chris and the girls", do you really think I'm stupid enough to miss my own girlfriend saying she's leaving to go hang out with other dudes?

LEYA

(She stares at him, bewildered.)

Chris. Christiana.

(Beat)

I'm going out with *Christiana* and the other girls.

KEENAN

(Scoffing, not acknowledging her correction to his statement)

Oh yeah, like that's any better.

LEYA

What the fuck is that supposed to mean?

KEENAN

It's not my fault that every time you go hanging out with her, you start acting all -

(Gesturing towards her)

Like this!

LEYA

(Challenging him)

Like what, Keenan? Like I want to go see my friends and have a good time, god forbid without your presence?!

KEENAN

Like dodging around, making sneaky plans you don't tell me about so you can go hang out with those man-hating low-lives!!

(They stare at each other in silence, LEYA astounded.)

LEYA

You're unbelievable.

(She turns quickly and begins sifting through her things, grabbing her tote bag.)

KEENAN

(Realizing what's happening)

Leya, what are you doing?

(She doesn't respond or acknowledge him.)

Leya, please, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that. I'm just scared of losing you. You're the only good thing I've ever had in my life.

(She struggles with this statement for a moment, but stands up with her bag. KEENAN continues, pleading.)

Please. Please, where are you going?

LEYA

(Trying to remain confident in her exit)

The park, my mom's…I don't know, just anywhere but here right now!

(She turns to leave again, but his statement stops her.)

KEENAN

Oh, your mom, right. What's she given you, Leya? She's given you nothing, nothing! Your dreams have meant nothing to her!

(LEYA winces, a hurtful truth under his harsh words.)

You want the world, Leya? Let me give it to you, please!

(Walking up to her, pleading)

I know that we have something worth fighting for. I'm sorry, just please…please stay.

(LEYA's conflicting emotions rage inside of her. She doesn't want to let go of the only person who has shown her love in a long time. After thinking in the silence for a moment, LEYA steps away and sets her tote next to one of the benches. She still looks hurt, and angry, and turns to walk offstage, KEENAN silently trailing behind.)

SCENE IV

(The voicemail begins to play between transitions.)

VOICEMAIL

You have one unread voicemail from August 22nd, 2023.

(Beep)

KEENAN (VOICEMAIL)

Hey, baby. I'm on my way home, just wanted to give you the heads up. I'm beat, so don't think I'll be going out tonight. See you soon.

(The voicemail ends with a beep. LEYA comes on stage, tidying around the apartment. We hear the front door slam shut as a tired-looking KEENAN comes on stage. LEYA beams at him and moves over to greet him.)

LEYA

Welcome home, love!

(She kisses him on the cheek and takes his bag to the counter.)

KEENAN

(Plainly)

Thanks, babe.

LEYA

How did the meeting go today?

KEENAN

(Sitting down on the right bench)

Went fine, could have been an email.

LEYA

Go figure. Were you able to get those changes pushed through?

KEENAN

(Sighing)

Yep.

LEYA

Well, good, I know you've been working hard on that proposal!

KEENAN

(On his phone, not really paying attention to her anymore)

Uh-huh.

LEYA

Are you hungry? I can go ahead and either make the chicken we have left in the fridge, or we could order in if you're not feeling it.

KEENAN

(Rubbing his eyes, slightly irritated)

Ley, I just walked in. Can we cool it with the interrogation for a bit?

LEYA

(Surprised, but apologetic)

Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to.

(She moves off-stage briefly before coming back with a beverage she'd made, handing it to him.)

KEENAN

(Taking it)

Oh…thank you.

(Going back to texting on his phone. LEYA tries to look busy while continuing to tidy. KEENAN speaks up, still distracted.)

How was your day?

LEYA

It was good! Super busy. Had some errands to run, finally finished up that realism piece I've been working on, so I'll turn that in on Monday.

(She turns to KEENAN, still on his phone, waiting for him to respond. After a moment, he notices and looks up.)

KEENAN

Oh, yeah, that's great. Glad you got that done.

(Going back to his phone)

LEYA

(Smiles)

Thanks. Had some time to pick up around here too. I know we've gotten behind the last few days.

KEENAN

I can have my dad send Iselda on Sunday, too, if you'd like.

LEYA

Oh, no, I think I managed to do a half-decent job.

KEENAN

(Taking a quick glance behind him at the apartment)

Yeah, it should be fine.

(Beat)

I'm gonna need to look at those documents before I head in tomorrow. Can you grab them for me?

LEYA

(Standing)

Sure, are they in your bag?

KEENAN

You tell me, you're the one who picked them up.

LEYA

(Confused)

I did?

KEENAN

You didn't?

LEYA

No, you said you were fine to swing in after work.

KEENAN

Why would -

(Grunts frustratedly)

Leya, I *need* those for my meeting tomorrow, okay? God, why the hell do I have to handle everything myself?!

(Begins to pace around the room)

LEYA

(Apologetic)

I'm so sorry, hun, I didn't realize.

(Quickly scrambling for a plan)

The meeting is in the afternoon, right? I can grab them from the printer's tomorrow morning before my class and bring them to the office before it starts.

(Timidly)

Would that be okay?

KEENAN

(Taking a deep breath, rubbing his eyes)

Yes, darling. That would be fine.

(He sits back down on the bench and sighs. LEYA moves to sit next to him.)

LEYA

I should have communicated better. I'm sorry.

KEENAN

(Taking her hand)

It's alright.

(Slumping down a bit)

Work has just made me so exhausted lately. And I love taking care of us both, but you have to recognize that it's a lot of work.

LEYA

(Feeling guilty)

I do. And I appreciate you so much for how hard you work. I'm sorry if I haven't shown that enough. I don't want you to think you have to take care of everything either.

KEENAN

(Lightening a bit, brushing away her hair)

Thank you, my dove.

(Beat)

I'd take some of that chicken if you're up for it.

LEYA

(Standing and giving a kiss on his head)

Of course.

(She smiles and exits to the kitchen offstage. KEENAN rests for a moment before grabbing his work bag from the counter and exiting in the opposite direction.)

SCENE V

(LEYA re-enters the stage, headphones on, waiting for KEENAN to meet her in the park. As she sits down on the left bench, she hits play on the message her mother left her this morning.)

VOICEMAIL

You have one unread message from May 28th, 2023.

(Beep)

MOM (VOICEMAIL)

Hey, Ley, it's Mom. I just saw your text.

(She pauses and lets out a sigh.)

Listen, baby, I can't give you the money. Moving out, chasing after what you want, is great, but this is the exact situation I was concerned about. If you're not making ends meet now, how do you expect to continue supporting yourself without an actual career? And if you're not able to get yourself through this, then you need to start making decisions about what's truly important to you, baby.

(She pauses.)

You're strong, Leya, smart too. I love you. Call me back if you wanna talk about this more.

(LEYA yanks her headphones down, frustrated at her mother's unwillingness to help. KEENAN approaches from behind her, she doesn't notice.)

LEYA

(Mumbling to herself)

Fucking great.

KEENAN

(Hearing her, joking)

Good morning to you too, sunshine.

LEYA

(Slightly startled by his sudden appearance, trying to cheer herself up)

Hey. Sorry, that wasn't towards you.

KEENAN

(Taking a seat next to her)

I assumed so. So what's up?

LEYA

(Tapping her phone on her lap)

Just mom being mom, go figure.

KEENAN

Ah, that tracks.

(Beat. LEYA stares off into space, wondering how she's going to get herself out of this one.)

You wanna talk about it?

LEYA

(Sighs)

She just can't let go of the fact that I *love* my art. She's already decided that I'm going to fail and is just waiting for me to come crawling back to her.

KEENAN

(Listening)

Your talent is no secret, my dove. I'm not sure why she can't see it.

LEYA

(Giving him a small smile)

Thanks.

(Beat, her anger brewing)

Those bastards jacked my rent.

KEENAN

Again??

LEYA

Yep.

(Scoffs)

If I didn't know any better, I'd say they were trying to run me out of there. Guess I'm not exactly an A-class tenet.

KEENAN

Greedy bastards.

(Taking her hand)

I'm sorry you're going through that, hun. And your mom?

LEYA

(Shaking her head)

Essentially boiled down to "I told you so", and deciding not to loan me the money.

KEENAN

Geez…

LEYA

Guess it's time to start looking for another side-hustle.

KEENAN

That's putting a lot on your plate.

LEYA

(Shrugging)

What choice do I have?

KEENAN

(Thinking for a moment, then suddenly)

You could move in with me.

LEYA

(Shocked)

What?

KEENAN

You could move in.

(Turning to face her)

I want you to move in!

LEYA

(Hesitant)

Keen, that's a big step, I don't know.

KEENAN

I know it's sooner than we planned, but when you think about it, seems pretty straightforward to me. Makes the money part a non-issue.

LEYA

I really appreciate what you're offering, I do. But I can barely afford my dingy little place, there's no way I'll even be able to cover half my portion for where you live.

KEENAN

(Smiling)

When did I say anything about paying?

LEYA

(Putting her hand on his face)

You're the best, but I'm not going to take advantage of you like that. I can find something else!

KEENAN

Right before all the college students are also searching for summer apartments?

(LEYA deflates a bit, not having considered that previously.)

There's more than enough space for the both of us.

(Sarcastically)

And we both know I have to work *so* hard at my dad's company.

LEYA

(Laughing slightly)

Being the boss's kid comes with some perks, I suppose.

KEENAN

It has its moments. I would love to see you focus on your art and get to see your beautiful face every morning.

(Brushing her hair back)

Come on, Ley. Say yes.

(LEYA stares for a moment, unsure how to even process his sudden offer. Thoughts of how her mother would react and if it was too soon. But her situation left her with few options, and she longed to be closer to KEENAN.)

LEYA

(Finally decided, smiling)

Yes.

KEENAN

(Beaming, kissing her hand)

Then let's go home then, shall we?

(The couple happily stand and make their way out of the park and into the sudden new chapter of their lives that was beginning.)

SCENE VI

(The stage is quiet, from off-stage we hear LEYA checking her voicemail.)

VOICEMAIL

You have one unread message from September 28th, 2023.

(Beep. LEYA comes onto the stage, listening to the message on speaker phone, thinking that she's home alone.)

MOM (VOICEMAIL)

Hi sweetie! It's mom. Geez, I just can't seem to get a hold of you these days.

(Chuckling to herself)

I get it, I do. You've got big adult things you're working on now, that's good! …that's good.

(As if trying to convince herself.)

Anyway, I'm trying to figure out if you're going to join us for Thanksgiving here in a bit. I know the family misses you, and obviously, I miss you. I'm sure that Keenan would like to spend some time with his family for the holidays…

(After a moment of hesitation)

But we can also discuss him joining us if that's not the case. But I would really, really love you to be there, hun. Just let me know, I'll text you the details. Love you! Miss you!

(The voicemail ends with a beep. LEYA stands there looking conflicted, happy to hear her mother's voice yet feeling unable to bridge that connection. Suddenly, KEENAN appears from offstage.)

KEENAN

Who was that?

(LEYA jumps, not expecting him to be home.)

LEYA

(Flustered)

Oh hey. I thought you weren't going to be home for lunch today?

KEENAN

(Catching her dodginess)

Meeting got canceled.

(Walking up and gently grabbing her phone, she gives without resistance. KEENAN looks at who sent the message, and gets agitated.)

Really, Ley? We've already been over this.

LEYA

(Defensively, trying to explain)

I know, it's just-

KEENAN

(Interrupting)

It doesn't matter! That woman brings nothing but problems.

LEYA

(Firmly)

She's still my mother.

KEENAN

Well, she sure doesn't act like it, does she?

(This wounds LEYA; she shrinks into herself a bit.)

LEYA

(Meakly)

She just wanted to know if we were coming for the holidays. I haven't seen her in months, it's not a crime for me to talk to her.

KEENAN

(Irritated)

Why must you insist on making everything harder for yourself? For both of us?

LEYA

(Shutting down)

Sorry…

KEENAN

(Sighs, and shifts his tone, softening to comfort LEYA)

I know this is hard for you. But you have to remember why we agreed about this in the first place. Your mother chooses not to open her eyes to see your talent, or my love for you, or a world outside of whatever pre-planned future she tried to design for you.

(Brushing her cheek)

It makes me so sad to see you get hurt, my dove. I'm only trying to spare you from more heartbreak.

LEYA

(Resting her hand on his, teary-eyed)

I know…I just don't understand why me being happy isn't enough for her.

KEENAN

There are many selfish people in the world. But we can't allow them to stop us from being our true selves.

(Smiling down at her)

Right?

LEYA

(With a weak smile)

Right.

(KEENAN raises LEYA's phone again and taps the screen.)

PHONE NOTIFICATION

Message deleted.

(KEENAN hands her back the phone.)

KEENAN

(Trying to lighten the mood)

Would you like to go to the gallery tonight? I hear they have a guest exhibit in town for the week.

LEYA

(Perking up slightly)

I'd like that.

KEENAN

Wonderful. Go get dressed then.

(They lean in for a kiss before LEYA moves offstage. KEENAN watches her leave, giving a sigh and rubbing the back of his neck before exiting in the opposite direction.)

SCENE VII

(The voicemail begins between scene transitions.)

VOICEMAIL

You have one unread message from April 13, 2023.

(Beep)

MOM (VOICEMAIL)

Hey, it's Mom again. Are you two coming over at six or six-thirty? I need to know when to put everything into the oven. Took me two months to find out you even *had* a boyfriend, who knows when you'll give me another chance to actually meet him!

(She laughs)

I'm excited for you, Ley-Ley. Just communicate details, please? Love you!

(Beep. We hear the door slam from offstage, the couple home from their dinner. LEYA enters first.)

LEYA

(Lets out a heavy, but relieved sigh)

That woman is a pain in my ass, but damn can she cook a good meal.

(KEENAN enters behind her, noticeably a bit off.)

KEENAN

It was delicious.

(He moves to sit on the left bench as LEYA settles in.)

LEYA

She used to make that for the two of us all the time when I was growing up.

(Stops to turn and smile back at KEENAN)

I think you made a very good first impression.

KEENAN

(Smiling)

I'm glad I didn't disappoint.

(His face drops a bit, LEYA catches this and moves to sit next to him.)

LEYA

Did you not have a good time? I thought that things went pretty well…

KEENAN

The dinner went fine, it's just…

(He struggles to find the right words.)

LEYA

My mom?

KEENAN

(Sighs)

She seems great, really. But I really wish we could have talked about something *other* than my family's money.

LEYA

(Cringing)

I'm so sorry. I think she's just excited I met someone who may meet her standards of being able to "take care" of me.

KEENAN

(Taking her hand)

And I will. Just rubbed me the wrong way.

LEYA

I understand. I'm sorry again that she made you uncomfortable. I'll talk to her.

KEENAN

It's alright.

(Beat)

Can I be honest, Ley?

LEYA

Of course.

KEENAN

I'm really not a fan of how she talks to you either.

LEYA

What do you mean?

KEENAN

It's just pretty obvious that she still sees you as a child, and that's how she acts towards you, too. I couldn't believe how many times she dismissed you when you tried to tell her about your classes.

LEYA

Yeah…things are usually easier when we both ignore the fact that I'm in school for something I actually enjoy instead of whatever she thought I'd be. Like a nurse…or a lawyer…

(Laughs slightly to herself)

Or actually successful.

KEENAN

Hey now, this is what I mean. Don't let her make you feel like your accomplishments don't mean anything. Just because this isn't the path she tried to choose for you doesn't mean it's the wrong path.

(He kisses her hand.)

You're a brilliant and talented woman, Leya. You don't deserve that.

LEYA

(Sheepishly)

I guess I hadn't really thought about it like that before.

KEENAN

I know she's your mother, and I'll treat her with nothing but respect when we're around. But maybe we can work on moving some of that negativity out of our lives? Then figure things out from there.

LEYA

(Nods)

Maybe you're right.

KEENAN

(Kissing her forehead, then staring into her eyes deeply)

She's lucky to have a daughter like you.

(LEYA produces a sad smile, leaning into KEENAN as they sit in silence. After a moment, KEENAN kisses her forehead and stands.)

I'm beat. Shall we?

(LEYA smiles up at him and takes his hand before following him to bed offstage.)

SCENE VIII

(LEYA walks on stage, looking a bit worn out and messing with her phone. As she sits down on the right bench, she hits play on the voicemail she received.)

VOICEMAIL

You have one unread message from October 27th, 2023.

(Beep)

FINANCIAL AID ASSISTANT (VOICEMAIL)

Yes, hello, I'm calling for Ms. Leya Synne from the university billing office.

(LEYA tenses, and her face drops. The voicemail continues.)

Unfortunately, we have yet to receive your tuition payment for the Fall term. Until that outstanding balance has been resolved, you will be unable to register for your courses for the Winter term. Please give us a call back if you have any questions.

(The voicemail ends, and LEYA slams her phone into her lap, before putting her head in her hands with defeat, knowing she was in an impossible situation. As she attempts to calm herself, KEENAN enters from the opposite side.)

KEENAN

You okay, Ley?

(LEYA visibly tenses, but tries to play it off.)

LEYA

Oh…yeah, I'm alright. How was work?

(KEENAN doesn't respond, and instead arches an eyebrow at her while sitting down. LEYA sighs, worried he'll become upset if he believes that she is hiding something.)

LEYA (CONTINUED)

(Indicating to her phone on her lap)

It's the university again; my financial aid came up short. They won't let me register for classes until it's handled…

(She brushes her hand through her hair.)

KEENAN

Damn, how short we talking?

LEYA

Doesn't matter, I'll figure out a way to handle it.

(KEENAN stays silent again. She sighs.)

Four grand.

KEENAN

(Scoffs a bit)

Four grand? Darling, that's not an issue, just tell me where to send the check.

LEYA

(Taken aback)

Keenan, I can't take your money. I can figure this out.

KEENAN

But why deal with all the extra stress?

(Taking her hand)

Your future is part of our future together. Call it an investment if it makes you feel better.

(He grins)

You've come too far to back out now.

(Genuniely)

Let me do this, Ley.

LEYA

(Meeting his eye, still a bit timid)

You really mean it?

(KEENAN smiles and pulls her in for a kiss. LEYA has lightened up by the time they pull away.)

KEENAN

How could I say no to you?

LEYA

(Relieved)

Thank you, Keenan.

KEENAN

Of course, love,

(Tucking some hair behind her ears)

I'll always take care of you.

(KEENAN stands and helps LEYA up.)

Come on, I'm starving.

(The two walk off together, with LEYA's mind filled with hope by the kind gesture, hoping it means a turning point for their relationship.)

SCENE IX

(The voicemail begins between transitions.)

VOICEMAIL

You have one unread message from March 15th, 2023

(Beep)

KEENAN (VOICEMAIL)

(Drawn out)

Gooooooood morning, my angel! I know you've got a long day of classes ahead of you, but once that is said and done, I'm gonna need you to put on your cutest dress, doll yourself up, and be ready for me to pick you up at six o'clock sharp! I've got a big surprise for you. Until tonight, my dove, have a good day!

(The voicemail ends with a beep. The couple enters from offstage, mid-conversation. They've just come from a fancy dinner, art gallery, and an evening stroll to end it all off. LEYA can hardly contain herself.)

LEYA

That has to be one of the most beautiful galleries that I've ever stepped foot in. I mean, those are the types of work that I've been studying for years.

KEENAN

(Amused by her enjoyment ramblings)

Well, now that I have someone to go with me, we can go there anytime you'd like. My father's known the gallery owner for years, apparently.

LEYA

It was amazing. I mean, that place is filled with raw inspiration and talent, just so beautiful!

KEENAN

Well, even with all that art, I could barely manage to keep my eyes off of you.

LEYA

(She shoves him playfully.)

You tryin' to flirt with me or something?

KEENAN

(Grinning)

Probably.

(They sit down on the left bench, enjoying the clear night. KEENAN wraps his arm around LEYA, and she leans in.)

LEYA

Seriously, though, thank you. The dinner, the gallery. Tonight's been amazing.

KEENAN

You're amazing, I'm glad you finally gave me the chance to spoil you.

LEYA

(Insistently, trying to explain herself)

But I don't *need* you to spoil me, and I don't want you to think that's what I expect from you.

KEENAN

And I know that. And I also know that you deserve to be spoiled, Ley, and I'd spend all the money in the world if it means I get to see you smile.

(He tucks a piece of hair behind her ear. He gets quiet, sentimental.)

I've never met anyone like you. You understand me, understand what it's like to deal with a fucked up family. I don't know how the hell I made it this long without you.

(They pause in the moment, not breaking eye contact, before KEENAN leans in for a soft, passionate kiss. They pull away, but remain close.)

I love you, Leya. Literally falling into your life has been the best thing to ever happen to me.

LEYA

(LEYA is shocked, but touched by his overwhelming affection. She reaches up and kisses him again.)

I love you too, Keenan.

(The couple smiles at each other happily. KEENAN stands and offers his hand.)

KEENAN

Ice cream?

LEYA

(Grabbing his hand and jumping up)

Don't have to ask me twice!

(LEYA and KEENAN make their way offstage together and into the night.)

SCENE X

(The voicemail begins between transitions.)

VOICEMAIL

You have one unread message from November 19th, 2023.

(Beep)

CHRISTIANA (VOICEMAIL)

Hey, Ley-Ley! Listen, I am just so excited to finally see you. We have so much to talk about. Please, please, please don't forget, Gentries on 8th Street, 2 pm! And I swear to god girl, if you try to cancel on me again, I'm showing up at your house and dragging you out here myself.

(She laughs, jokingly.)

Love you! See you soon.

(CHRISTIANA and LEYA walk in together, each holding a coffee cup in their hand. CHRISTIANA seems delighted to finally see her friend, but LEYA is obviously tense and reserved. As they come to sit on the right bench, CHRISTIANA attempts to jump-start the conversation.)

CHRISTIANA

I'm just so excited for the chance to catch up finally! I want to know everything.

LEYA

(Clearly not as enthusiastic, but gives a small laugh)

Yeah, no, me too. Man, um…I don't know, things have just been really busy. School, projects, you know.

CHRISTIANA

(A bit apprehensive about her answer, but going along with it)

No, for sure. So excited to be finally away from that whole mess.

LEYA

For sure

(There's a clear tension between the two as LEYA continues not to engage in their small talk. A moment of silence falls between them, until CHRISTIANA attempts to move along the conversation.)

CHRISTIANA

And uh…how's Keenan?

(LEYA tenses a bit.)

It's almost been a year together for you two, right?

LEYA

(Fidgeting with her coffee cup)

Mhmm, in February.

(They sit awkwardly in the silence for another moment before CHRISTIANA sighs.)

CHRISTIANA

(Bluntly)

Ley, what's going on with you?

LEYA

(Looking up at her, confused)

Huh?

CHRISTIANA

I just mean…you've been so M.I.A. recently. And when I am able to finally catch you,

(Indicating to their current conversation)

It's like I'm talking to a wall.

LEYA

(Shrugs)

I'm sorry, I've just been busy with real-life stuff, I guess.

CHRISTIANA

No, I get that, I have too. It's why I feel bad that the two of us have been so disconnected recently.

(Grabbing her hand lovingly)

LEYA

(Smiling)

It's fine, I've got Keenan to keep me company.

CHRISTIANA

(Letting go and looking down at her cup)

Right…

LEYA

What?

CHRISTIANA

(Contemplates her words for a moment)

Look, I'm not trying to overstep…there are just some things that you've mentioned about your relationship with Keenan that don't sit right with me.

LEYA

What do you mean?

CHRISTIANA

(A bit timidly)

Promise not to be mad?

LEYA

(Rolling her eyes)

For christ sake, just spit it out, Chris.

CHRISTIANA

(Takes a deep breath, and stares at her friend gently)

You haven't been yourself, Ley. Not since you got together with him. The only time I even got to meet him, he dragged you away from the party after you'd barely even been there. Hardly said a word to anyone.

LEYA

(Shrugging her off)

Crowds make him nervous.

CHRISTIANA

I can understand that. But he's also making those choices for you even when he's not around. He's made you leave early every time we've been together.

LEYA

(Defending him)

He doesn't *make* me do anything, he just misses me…

(CHRISTIANA sighs for a moment, LEYA won't meet her gaze.)

CHRISTIANA

(Trying a different approach)

Do you guys argue?

LEYA

Every couple argues.

CHRISTIANA

True…what do you argue about?

LEYA

(Fidgeting with her hands nervously)

Just usual things. When I forget to do something or clean something…sometimes he's having a bad day and just comes home in a mood.

CHRISTIANA

So he usually makes you think that it's your fault?

LEYA

(Scoffs)

To be fair, usually it is. But I'm learning how to be a better partner, how to support him. He's patient with me.

CHRISTIANA

And how does he support you?

LEYA

Too many ways to count, honestly, he's really saved me. My school, our home, he works so hard for both of us.

CHRISTIANA

Those are all great, but I meant more…I don't know, like on an everyday basis?

(LEYA stares at her, not understanding.)

Does he make you feel loved?

LEYA

(Plainly)

He loves me.

CHRISTIANA

Leya, I know you haven't been with many people before. There's nothing wrong with that.

(Scoffs)

Luckily for you, I've found myself in plenty of bad situations over the years. Enough to realize some of the things that you may not be recognizing through those rose-tinted glasses.

LEYA

(Rolling her eyes)

You sound like my mother.

CHRISTIANA

I know you two don't always see eye to eye, but maybe she's right. I'm worried about you, hun. I really, really don't want to see you get hurt.

LEYA

Get hurt? I'm perfectly fine, finally getting to enjoy a relationship for once.

CHRISTIANA

But if the relationship is causing more harm than good, is it really the best place // to keep investing your time into?

LEYA

// Jesus, why is everyone so against me being happy for once?!

CHRISTIANA

Leya, it's not that. I'm happy that you're happy. I just want to make sure you actually…are happy.

LEYA

(Frustrated)

Well, I am, okay? I finally have someone who cares about me.

CHRISTIANA

(Slightly hurt)

You have a lot of people who care about you. People who will be here for you if you need anything, no matter what. People who are trying to help you.

(LEYA struggles with the statement for a moment.)

LEYA

I don't need help, I'm doing just fine. *We're* doing just fine.

(Finally making eye contact with CHRISTIANA)

Just leave me alone.

(LEYA stands up and storms off stage.)

CHRISTIANA

(Stands and watches her leave)

Leya, wait!

(She's gone. CHRISTIANA stares down at her cup for a second, solemnly, before exiting in the opposite direction.)

SCENE XI

(The voicemail begins to play during the transition.)

VOICEMAIL

You have one unread voicemail from February 2nd, 2023.

(Beep)

KEENAN (VOICEMAIL)

Hey you! Listen, I've been having such a great time hanging out with you, and I honestly can't wait to see you again.

(Clears his throat)

Like maybe this Friday? I can meet you at "our spot" in the park.

(Laughs slightly)

Let me know, I'd love to see you.

(The voicemail ends with a beep. The couple walks in together, hand in hand, during one of their earlier dates in the relationship. They're smiling and happy, admiring the beautiful day around them. LEYA laughs as they enter the stage.)

LEYA

(Continuing their off-stage conversation)

There is no way! If my mother knew I did half the shit *you* did as a teenager, she would have lost it.

KEENAN

(Laughs with her, guiding her across the stage)

Well, that's the thing, isn't it? If they don't find out, it essentially means that it never happened in the first place.

LEYA

Feels like half the time I was already in trouble before I had the chance to actually *do* anything.

KEENAN

(Exaggerated shock)

You? Getting in trouble??

(He gasps.)

LEYA

(Laughing)

Get out of here!

(She jokingly pushes KEENAN onto the left bench, before sitting next to him.)

It's not like I was a "bad kid". Every punishable offense was just a capital crime with my mother.

KEENAN

(Jokingly)

Geez, can't wait to meet her.

(LEYA tries to give a half-smile, but KEENAN realizes that his joke didn't land. He takes her hand.)

Hey, hey, I'm sorry. Not funny. I didn't mean it like that.

LEYA

(Shaking it off)

You're fine, you're fine…

(Thinking)

She's just stubborn, too determined for her own good.

KEENAN

(Jokingly bumping shoulders with her)

Sounds like someone else I know.

LEYA

Yeah, you're not far off.

(Looking at their hands)

I think you'll like her.

(Scoffs)

And she'll be happy that I'm finally bringing home *a man* for her to meet.

KEENAN

Well, if she raised a woman as special as you…

(He kisses her hand.)

I'm not worried.

(They smile at each other, sharing the moment.)

LEYA

So,

(Returning to their original conversation)

How did Mr. and Mrs. handle their perfect angel of a son?

KEENAN

(Laughing)

In short? They didn't.

(LEYA tilts her head, silently urging him to continue. KEENAN sighs and leans back into the bench.)

Well, you mix a father that's too busy with cocktail parties, a mom who's far more interested in the cocktails, with a child they'll never admit wasn't a part of the original game plan…

(Beat. KEENAN turns and gives a small smile, a hint of sadness poking through.)

The good thing about hired help is that they didn't really have much of a hand to play when it's all said and done. Most things were easier for everyone to ignore than pretend to give a shit about.

LEYA

So your parents just…what? Didn't do anything about it?

KEENAN

That would require them being around for longer than a family photo or a holiday gathering.

(Reflecting)

Nope. Most of the time, it was me and whatever help they threw enough money at to semi-tolerate me.

(They sit silently for a while before LEYA speaks up.)

LEYA

My uh…

(She clears her throat.)

My dad wasn't really around either. Or, at all, I guess.

(Chuckles slightly)

KEENAN

Damn, Ley. I didn't know.

LEYA

(Rejecting his pity)

Usually no reason to talk about it. He was there, then he wasn't. According to my mother, we just weren't something worth fighting for in his eyes.

KEENAN

(Quickly)

Who wouldn't want to fight for you?

(He smiles, and she gives him a small shove with a smile.)

LEYA

(Playfully)

Shut up.

KEENAN

(Grabbing her hand)

Well, I personally have no plans on going anywhere, dysfunctional families be damned.

LEYA

(Resting her head on his shoulder)

Who needs ‘em anyway?

(Looking up at KEENAN)

I’ve got you.

(They smile and sit for a moment. After a moment, KEENAN kisses LEYA’S hand and helps her to stand, before casually moving offstage.)

SCENE XII

(A quiet settles over the stage. LEYA reenters slowly, wearily. She moves to center before checking over her shoulders, making sure that nobody is around, that he isn't around. She gives a small sigh before moving to sit at the right bench. LEYA takes out her phone, checking over her shoulder one more time as she slips her headphones on and hits play.)

VOICEMAIL

You have one unread message from December 25th, 2023.

(Beep)

MOM (VOICEMAIL)

(A weary sounding happiness)

Hey Ley-Ley…it's mom again…

(Beat. She sighs)

I know that you've been dodging my calls…and my texts. Truth is, I probably deserve it.

(Gives a small chuckle)

We both know that I've never been good at knowing when to quit. But you're still my little girl, and I will always love you.

(Sniffles)

And I will always want what is best for you. But over everything else, I want you to be happy. And I'm so sorry that my actions have made it seem otherwise.

(LEYA begins to shrink into herself, fighting back the tears welling in her eyes.)

MOM (VOICEMAIL CONTINUES)

You should never feel like you have to choose between the people you love.

So…whether it's with or without *him…*

(She clears her throat.)

Keenan. It doesn't matter anymore. I just want to see my little girl, and make sure that she's okay…

(Holding back tears of her own)

I love you, Leya. Merry Christmas.

(The voicemail ends with a beep. LEYA sits there with tears streaming down her face, unable to move or breathe. She wants to scream; *she wants to be with her mother. As endless thoughts spin through her head, her phone gets multiple notifications in a row. LEYA looks down at her phone blankly, slowly wiping her eyes and exiting.)*

SCENE VIII

(In the transition, LEYA grabs a stack of canvas paintings offstage. There should be one canvas that has already been torn, but kept out of the audience's view until after it's called for in the scene. LEYA walks into the park with her artwork and a small "For Sale" sign that she starts to display on the right side bench. As she begins to get set up, a voicemail plays.)

VOICEMAIL

You have one unread voicemail from January 2nd, 2023.

(Beep)

CHRISTIANA (VOICEMAIL)

Hey babes! I figured you're already down at the park, but I just wanted to call and say hi. I'm heading into work. If you end up needing something warm, I'm sure I can sneak you a tea; it's cold as shit out there right now. Just remember that the money isn't worth the frostbite, so don't try to play the tough guy. Talk to you soon, mwah!

(After setting up, she tends to one of the pieces, doing some light touch-ups. From offstage, we hear male voices laughing.)

MALE VOICE

Go long!!

(From offstage, a football is thrown directly towards LEYA's makeshift stand with KEENAN running after it. Both KEENAN and the ball crash into LEYA's stand, knocking over paintings and her in the process.)

KEENAN

(Recovering)

Oh my god, are you okay?

(He rushes to help LEYA to her feet.)

I am so, so sorry.

LEYA

(Sarcastically, wincing)

Yeah, really great. Thanks for that one.

KEENAN

(Apologetic)

I'm truly sorry. My friends often-

(Louder, directing towards offstage)

-don't think before they choose to do something stupid!

(KEENAN picks up the football and lazily throws it back offstage.)

LEYA

(Softening)

It's all good. Think I'll live.

KEENAN

(Smiling)

Well, that's a relief.

(They lock eyes for a beat, before KEENAN suddenly notices the surrounding mess.)

Oh geez, I am so…

(He starts scrambling to try and set the artwork how it was.)

LEYA

(Starting to pick up and check her pieces for damages)

Don't worry about it, really. Probably what I get for using a bench.

KEENAN

(Taking a closer look at one of the canvases)

You made these?

LEYA

Yep. Sure did.

KEENAN

They're beautiful.

LEYA

(Slightly surprised)

Oh.

(Smiles)

Thank you.

(Beat. He smiles back before noticing a torn canvas under the bench. His smile falls as he reaches for the painting.)

KEENAN

Shit…

LEYA

(Trying to play it off)

Eh, it's alright, probably not the vibe of the clientele around here anyway.

KEENAN

(Pulling out his wallet)

How much?

LEYA

(Realizing)

Oh, no, it's okay. It was an accident.

KEENAN

(Insistently)

An accident I caused, now how much?

LEYA

(Laughing, but serious)

I'm not going to take your money.

(KEENAN stares at her intently, but she doesn't budge.)

Really, put it away.

(KEENAN pauses, before putting his wallet back into his pocket, and picking up a different piece nearby.)

KEENAN

(Examining the piece)

Y'know, art is a valuable thing.

(Glancing at the torn canvas)

Something so beautiful doesn't deserve to be destroyed.

(Beat. KEENAN clears his throat, then smiles.)

Well, if you won't let me pay for my damages, maybe you'll let me buy you a coffee instead?

LEYA

(Slightly shocked)

Oh wow.

(She thinks for a moment, then smiles.)

I've never been one for coffee, though.

KEENAN

(Taking this as accepting his invitation, excitedly)

Trust me, this new place that opened is *to die* for. You'll love it.

LEYA

(Drawn in by his enthusiasm, smiling)

Well, alright then.

(LEYA leans down to start collecting her canvases, KEENEN kneels to help.)

KEENAN

(Pausing)

I'm Keenan, by the way.

(He extends his hand to LEYA.)

LEYA

(Taking it)

Leya.

KEENAN

(Repeating it softly)

Leya.

(They smile and finish stacking the canvases. KEENAN picks up the pile and heads to exit, pausing to gesture to Leya to follow him as she grabs her bag from the bench. She smiles, before following his exit.)

SCENE XIV

(LEYA enters, checking her phone with her headphones on. She is at her lowest, entering the new year without any of her friends or family with her. She checks her messages as she sits down on the right bench to begin painting.)

VOICEMAIL

You have no unread messages as of January 2nd, 2024.

(LEYA stops for a moment, looking down at her phone with a look of sadness, doubt creeping into her mind through the isolation she felt. She shakes her head and begins painting, her headphones on, trying to block out the world around her. After a moment, from off-stage, KEENAN starts to call out for her.)

KEENAN

Hey Ley…

(LEYA is unable to hear him over the music. After a beat, more irritated.)

Leya. Leya!

(She continues to paint, oblivious. KEENAN stomps into view of the stage, holding a video game controller, clearly irritated, and notices her headphones.)

For fuck sake…

(KEENAN angrily stomps over to LEYA and rips her headphones off her head, obviously causing some discomfort in the process.)

LEYA

(Startled)

Jesus Christ!

(Whipping around to look at him)

What the hell is your problem? That fucking hurt.

KEENAN

Well, I tried calling for you.

LEYA

There are a lot easier ways to get my attention like a normal–

(LEYA looks at KEENAN, obviously irate, and decides she's not in the mood for another fight. She sighs and goes back to idly working on her painting.)

What did you need, Keenan?

KEENAN

The stupid Wi-Fi disconnected from my console *again*. I need the password.

LEYA

(She stops painting, clearly annoyed, and rubs her eyes in frustration. This is clearly a conversation they've had many times before.)

Well, I don't control the internet company, and the password is in the *exact same place* that we've always kept it. Small blue notebook, top drawer in the office.

(She continues to paint.)

KEENAN

(Sighs exaggeratedly)

UGH! Can't you just come do it? I don't know which one it is!

LEYA

(Slightly appalled)

I'm in the middle of something, and I just told you exactly where to find it. There is no reason you can't manage.

(KEENAN stares at her darkly, not saying a word. LEYA holds firm, trying not to back down this time.)

Can I get back to my project? Please.

(He glares for a moment, realizing that she's not caving, and rolls his eyes.)

KEENAN

Yeah, fine, whatever.

LEYA

Thank you.

(LEYA reaches for her headphones from beside her as KEENAN begins to make his way out of the room, not recognizing she hasn't put them on yet.)

KEENAN

(As he's leaving, under his breath)

Stupid bitch…

(LEYA hears and immediately sees red. Dropping her headphones and supplies, she stands to face him.)

LEYA

What did you say?

KEENAN

(Turning around)

Didn't say anything.

LEYA

A bitch?! Really?? You're going to call me the bitch, after walking in here and acting like a spoiled, bratty child!?!

KEENAN

For fuck sakes, Leya, I didn't call you a bitch. Though based on how you're acting right now, that label *would* be pretty fitting.

LEYA

(Swirling in her rage)

No! Nuh-uh, I'm not doing this again.

(Stepping up to him)

You do not get to tell me what I did or did not fucking hear!

KEENAN

(Calm, too calm)

I said, 'I'll figure out which'. So maybe-

(Picking up her headphones off the seat)

You need to lower the *fucking volume* on these things so you can actually hear when people are -

(Throwing her headphones to the ground, exploding)

Fucking talking to you!!!

(They stare at each other in the ringing silence, as LEYA looks between the headphones and KEENAN. She shakes her head and steps away.)

LEYA

I'm done.

(Beat)

I don't need this. And I don't need you.

(LEYA furiously grabs her tote bag and begins to throw all of her art supplies into it, not bothering to look up.)

KEENAN

Oh, you're done? Great. You think you just fucking get to walk out of here?

(She continues to pack her things, refusing to meet his gaze. KEENAN becomes more irate.)

LEYA

Yep.

KEENAN

After everything I've done for you, you're just gonna run away like a coward?

LEYA

I owe you nothing.

(Grabbing the canvas she was working on to leave)

KEENAN

(Grabbing the other end of the art piece)

Oh yeah? So your tuition, roof over your head, still chasing after some half-baked dream.

(Raising his voice)

I am the only reason that you're standing here, and not sitting on the street corner begging for someone to buy this crap.

LEYA

(Tearing up, trying to leave)

Go to hell.

(She moves to struggle for the painting, and KEENAN digs his fingers into it, ripping the canvas material, then pushes hard against it, causing LEYA to fall to the ground hard. Silence. LEYA takes a moment to grab her head and looks up at KEENAN in horror, crying. He remains motionless, expressionless.)

KEENAN

Wanna leave? Go ahead.

(Cold)

You obviously have *everything* you need to make it on your own.

(After a beat, KEENAN turns and exits the stage without another word or glance. LEYA remains on the floor, tears streaming down her face as she attempts to process what just happened. The lights slowly fade from the stage until it's only focused on LEYA, as soft, familiar music begins to play.)

SCENE XV

(LEYA stands to the sound of the somber melody floating through the air. As if back to that night, she mimics the movements of her and KEENAN's dance, as if he were still there during a time she felt as though she actually had control over her life. As she spins herself in, she realizes that she is completely alone and drops her hands. She knows that she cannot continue the dance alone; the damage that has been done is far beyond what she could ever repair. With a quiet, choked sob, she lowers herself to the floor and begins to cry. The lights and music fade and stay as such for several moments. In the darkness, three rings of a phone can be heard. It stops. From the other end of the phone, LEYA speaks out in broken whisper.)

LEYA (OVER THE PHONE)

Mom…

(She sniffles)

I think I need help.

(Lights Out.)

Process Reflection

Struggles/Challenges

This project was a massive undertaking for me, and I am still in disbelief that I was able to see it through to completion. This was mainly due to my extenuating life circumstances, particularly the death of my older sister in March 2025. Less than six months into the development of this project, my world was completely turned upside down after years of struggles with her substance abuse. Some of the themes of my project are closely related to her experiences and what I had witnessed over the years, which made it even more difficult to continue development on this thesis.

With the support of my professors, I was able to make my way through the last few weeks of that Spring term, and spent the Summer in a dissociative state trying to understand the trauma I had been through. I decided that I did not want to put my graduation timeline at risk and returned to Western Oregon University for my senior year in the Fall. I was unable to work on my thesis at all during that period. But over the next couple of months, I tried to chip at it piece by piece when I could. Especially with a project dealing with such complex themes, I was very concerned about pushing myself too far and causing extreme distress to my mental health. Every day has been a struggle, but I received some amazing support from my professors and internship mentor this past term, which gave me the space to focus on the project and on myself.

There were so many times that I wanted to give up, and I knew that, to a certain extent, I had the right to after everything that I had been through. But anyone who knows me knows that I am nothing if not stubborn, and I knew that I had come too far

to let myself throw in the towel. With the immeasurable support from my friends, family, and professors, I have been able to work my way through this trauma slowly and see through the completion of this project. I also knew that my sister would want me to succeed, even if she was not going to be there to see it, and to keep fighting for these dreams I have held onto for so long. I think about my sister and miss her with all my heart every single day. I have continued to fight to honor her memory and the amazing people who have helped me get this far.

Changes/Adjustments

When I began my research for this project, I wanted to dive into the dynamics behind codependent relationships, which I would classify as a sub-category of general emotional abuse. The complexity of how both partners contributed to the dynamic, and how their behaviors fed off each other to continue fueling a toxic relationship, was very intriguing to me and did not feel well represented in the general media. However, as I continued researching and outlining the original script, I realized it would be difficult for me to accurately portray that specific dynamic type within such a limited scope. The information I was able to find was not always valuable in helping me to develop my interpretation, and I chose to shift focus towards emotionally abusive relationships as a whole while still integrating what I had learned about codependency to use as well. This shift allowed me to create a more relatable narrative with commonly experienced elements of abuse, while also touching on some aspects related to codependency that are not typically discussed as thoroughly.

Another aspect I had to consider early in the drafting process was how I would ensure the audience was able to understand what was happening in the midst of the time jumps between scenes. In the original high school play, I simply had the characters sit on one side's bench if the moment occurred chronologically after "the dance," and on the other side's bench if it occurred before. However, that play was much smaller, and I realized I would need another cohesive way to cue the audience to where we were at in the story, and to help them understand that the narrative was not occurring in order. This felt especially important considering that I was deliberately moving from the middle of the relationship, and alternating between scenes set before and after that opening moment until we see the beginning and end of the relationship.

My solution was to continue using the specific benches for the corresponding scenes, while also adding the voicemails the audience would hear at the start of each scene. I remembered my grandparents' old phone and the answering machine that would announce, "You have ___ unheard messages from date" before playing the voicemail. This approach felt like the perfect way to not only indicate dates to help the audience follow along, but to include more characters who were not seen on stage but drove the plot forward. With each scene only a snapshot of the couple's lives, it also helped fill in the gaps of what had occurred since the previous scene, leading up to the scene the audience was watching. I am aware that it is fairly atypical for phones today, especially cell phones, to have that type of prelude before checking the voice messages. Still, it worked well as a way to subtly add cohesion to my overall narrative, so I decided to run with it.

My original intention was to have only Leya and Keenan as characters who appeared on stage. This mirrored the way my original play was written, and I thought it would work well to ensure that the romantic relationship remained the focus and helped highlight the isolated aspects of codependent relationships. The addition of the voicemails was my way of adding some diversity to the characters in the show instead. However, as I was developing the end of the show, I recognized that an aspect of the dynamic I was missing was the common experience of a victim being confronted about their relationship by a friend or family member. It is implied that Leya's mother has negative feelings towards the relationship, but it was not originally planned to include a scene in which Leya attempts to defend her relationship. These moments of concern and attempts to get someone to see the reality of their situation are a common occurrence for anyone who's known someone in an unhealthy dynamic, and can lead to much confusion about why the victim chooses to defend their partner and stay in the seemingly obvious negative environment.

Coming to the realization that I had not planned for such a scene felt like a massive oversight and immediately prompted me to start brainstorming how I wanted to handle it. I initially considered keeping with the phone/voicemail theme and having the conversation with Leya and Christiana be just Leya on stage, with Christiana's voice coming over the speakers. However, this felt both visually unappealing when considering the practical blocking of the scene and a bit impersonal for how intimate the rest of the show is. Eventually, I decided that having Christiana physically be in the scene would be much more impactful, and wrote her in as the only other on-stage character in

the show. In addition to having that scene/conversation representation in general, it also worked out that suddenly introducing a new character on stage after most of the show would likely draw the audience's attention and put more emphasis on the scene itself as a pivotal turning point.

Moving forward

This project was an insane challenge for me at a very unpredictable time in my life. While it often felt more like a burden than a passion, it kept reminding me that I could create, achieve, and keep moving forward. Diving into the characters of Leya and Keenan gave me time to step away from my own reality and focus on someone else's problems for a while.

Currently, I do not plan to move forward with developing my script into anything official, and I do not anticipate it reaching a broad audience. I am aware that many improvements could be made to the script and my skills as a writer. However, I am very proud of what I have been able to create and how far the project has come from my little high school assignment. Maybe one day I will have the opportunity to revisit the play, perhaps even see it performed. But for now, I intend to take some much-needed rest and then put all of my energy into my interpreting work. Thank you for taking the time to read my work, and I truly hope you enjoyed it!

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