

Pocket Universe
~ A One Act Play
Written by Chris Cluff

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CAST

CASEY – 40s, female / any gender. Wry, guarded, competent.

RILEY – 40s, female / any gender. Emotional, impulsive, funny. Casey's friend.

MORGAN – 50s, male / any gender. Pragmatic, sarcastic, calming presence. Casey's sibling.

DAD – 70s. Heard only in recorded voicemails.

If genders are adjusted, adjust script to accommodate.

SETTING

A basement; fully finished in classic late-80s suburban style: wood paneling along the walls, low ceilings, and thick carpet that's seen better decades. A dehumidifier kicks in and out during the Act.

A mismatched but comfortable couch faces a small TV stand topped with an original Atari console and a stack of game cartridges—Asteroids, Pitfall, Missile Command.

One corner holds a games shelf overflowing with board games (Risk, Trivial Pursuit, Guess Who?), VHS tapes, and old photo albums.

The space is crowded but lovingly curated: movie posters from Back to the Future, Ghostbusters, and early Tragically Hip concerts peel slightly at the corners.

A lava lamp glows faintly on a side table; a milk crate filled with vinyl records leans against a dusty stereo.

Everywhere are little 80s tchotchkes—a Magic 8-Ball, a View-Master, a Garfield mug—giving the basement a warm, nostalgic, lived-in feel that holds more history than its owner wants to unpack.

SYNOPSIS

Pocket Universe is a one-act dramedy set in a late-80s suburban basement packed with relics: Atari games, mixtapes, lava lamps, and boxes no one wants to open. Casey, guarded and capable, has agreed to clear out their childhood home after their father's death. Riley—Casey's funny, impulsive best friend—arrives to “help,” turning the clean-out into an accidental excavation of memory. When Casey's sibling Morgan shows up with paperwork and unspoken history, the three are forced to confront what the family hid during their mother's long illness—and what Casey never fully understood. A cootie catcher filled with dad jokes, a still-working Motorola flip phone, and a hidden stash of hospital mementos lead to a stunning discovery: hundreds of numbered paper cranes and a phone line their father quietly kept active for years. In the end, Casey chooses connection over silence, leaving a message into the dark—a small, brave call back into love.

TRANSITION into SCENE 1

During the transition into this scene **How Soon is Now?** by **The Smiths** plays on the CD player. Casey organizes boxes. Moving one box from one pile to another. Grabs boxes from a room offstage. Packs a few items into a large construction sized garbage bag. Lot's of pausing and thinking. Never quite satisfied. Starts over and over. Music fades, then V/O plays. Casey continues to move about during V/O.

DAD V/O #1 — New Phone

(Breathless, excited, giddy.)

Casey!

Guess what?!

Got myself one of those new portable phones.

It's a Motorola.

Got you one too.

Will definitely need you to help me with it.

Oh and it snaps shut-

(Phone hangs up.)

DAD V/O #2 — New Headache

(Still breathless, excited, giddy, and embarrassed.)

Casey!

Me again.

Mkay I won't snap it shut this time.

Didn't know it would hang up.

Manual's thicker than a Sears catalogue.

Probably won't even fit on the book shelf.

Anyway—this is me... testing it.

Again.

I'll, uh... catch you on the...

flip... thing.

Later.

BEEP.

ACT I SCENE 1 - Cootie Catcher

CASEY *(Grimacing, turning on several lamps.)*

(They open flaps, rummage: old CDs, tangled cords, random junk, etc.)

*(Drops in a CD- **I Melt With You** by **Modern English**, bops to the first few bars. A knock / door chime. turns down music.)*

CASEY

Come innnn! COME ON DOWN. *(To self.)* You're the next contestant on "This place might have asbestos!"

(Riley comes down the stairs and is stopped by stacked boxes.)

RILEY

WAAAAHSUUUUUP. (*Leaning in. Yelling over music.*) Holy shit, you building a fort or something? Can I help? I can go back upstairs and grab a coupla hockey sticks, a blanket and a few couch cushions—

CASEY (*Turning down music.*)

Don't.

RILEY (*Fades off.*)

...will have to take the plastic off 'em first ... anyhoo I brought chips. And hummus, in case we suddenly become people who eat vegetables. (*Riley sets the grocery bag on the table, notices the boxes, grabs a Dr Pepper from the fridge, opens it, slugs it back.*)

RILEY

Quite the archaeological dig you got going on down here. (*Riley rummages in the box, starts pulling out old cassette tapes.*)

RILEY

Ooooh. Bleh. Wrong. Wrong, wrong, so wrong—look! (*Holds up a mixtape.*) “Casey’s Summer of Bad Decisions. 1985.” Care to tell me about them? Was I one?

CASEY

Give me that— (*Grabs it.*) thought I threw those out.

RILEY

You tried. But I saved 'em. (*Smiles.*) You're welcome.

CASEY

We're supposed to be cleaning, not curating my teenage humiliation.

RILEY

I'm multitasking. (*Holds up a bright neon scrunchie and a WHAM Make It Big tshirt.*) Oh dannng—didn't this belong to Amanda? The one you swore wasn't your girlfriend but who called you every night for like a year?

CASEY

It wasn't like that. We were... (*Beat.*) Fine. It was exactly like that. (*Takes scrunchie, puts it in hair and puts on t-shirt.*) God. Why did I keep this stuff?

RILEY

Because you never throw anything out. Ever. (*In a deep dad voice.*) “Hold on to the important things kiddo, everything else can live in a box.” (*Glances at the pile of boxes then notices Casey staring at them.*) Until now, apparently. Sorry.

CASEY

Yeah. Well. (*Sits back on heels.*) My brother wants the house cleared. He's doing the real estate and legal stuff so... (*Shrugging.*) I said I'd deal with my crap and then with his ... with my Dad's things.

RILEY

Noble. Brave. Mildly foolish. Have you even started on HIS stuff yet?

CASEY

(Looking around the room.)

RILEY

Casey?

CASEY

(Points to big stack against the wall.) Not yet. It's still in boxes. And bags. My brother thinks this will be good for me. Whatever that means.

RILEY

Well... maybe it will be. Sometimes you gotta face the troll under the bridge ... The beast under the stairs? ... *(Sighs.)* The boxes in the basement. *(Beat.Shrugs.)* CATHARSIS!!

CASEY

(Stares. Grim. Pointed.) Pretty sure my troll worked too much to notice me walking past him.

RILEY *(Pulling something else out.)*

Oh ho ho—look what we have here— *(Holds up a floppy disk.)* An honest-to-God floppy disk. *(Wiggles it in mid air.)* Sure is floppy. What's on it? Your secret diary? A virus? Pac-Man fanfiction?

CASEY *(Grabs it.)*

It's probably just homework. Or a computer game I never beat. *(Sighs.)* This is exactly why I didn't want to do this with you.

RILEY

Because I'm fun?

CASEY

Because you're a distraction. You pick up everything like it's treasure.

RILEY

Like it's a treasure?! It IS treasure! Look— *(Digs again, gasps.)* CASE. CASEY. *(Holds up an old folded piece of paper.)* A cootie catcher. Awww from middle school. Look at all the doodles! That's your handwriting! Geez, only you would write "Return to Casey. No questions asked. Mostly."

CASEY *(Takes it, reluctant smile.)*

I can't believe you found this. You remember Ms Cranz? She hated these things.

RILEY

"NEIN! Pud away der... der flippy-flappy fortune macheen! Ziz iz MADT clazz, not a carnival zircuzz!"

CASEY

"If I hear vun more znap—just VUN!—I vill replaze recezz vit frakshunzz until you cry."

RILEY / CASEY *(Laughing.)*

"Enough! Ze next cootie-catcher I zee goez in der garbage... UND perhaps alzo YOU, if you keep teztung me!" *(Laughing.)*

RILEY

And paper bangers. The frickin boys were relentless with them.

RILEY (*Grabs it. Starts messing with it.*)

Pick a colour.

CASEY

No.

RILEY

C'mon.

CASEY

... red.

RILEY

R, E, D. Pick a number.

CASEY

7.

RILEY

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, (*Opens flap.*) "I'm reading a book about anti-gravity. It's impossible to put down."
(*Beat.*) (*Both laughter.*) What the hell? You filled this thing with Dad jokes? Where's the fortune? That is a really terrible joke...

CASEY (*Some tears.*)

My dad made it for me.

RILEY

Oh...

CASEY

S'ok.

RILEY

(*Beat.*) ...but, you seriously kept this thing? Sorry, I know I know that's a bad question.

CASEY

He made it for me. Said it was "a scientifically proven joke delivery system."

RILEY (*Laughs.*)

That is such a Dad thing to say. Pretty much a dad joke about dad jokes...

CASEY (*Opening the other flaps.*)

Mhmm.

RILEY

So... a portable dad?

CASEY

Pretty much. Pocket-sized reassurance.

RILEY

And terrible jokes on demand. He really covered all the bases.

CASEY

He said a good joke could chase away anything.

RILEY

Bad jokes or dad jokes- I know I'd feel like running away. *(Beat, smiles.)* Even monsters?

CASEY

Especially monsters.

RILEY

Did it work?

CASEY

Sometimes.

RILEY *(À la Ms Cranz.)*

UND ZE UDDER TIMEZZ?

CASEY

No more Cranz ... please.

RILEY

Right.

CASEY

The other times ... *(Softly.)* he just told another joke.

(Beat.)

RILEY

(Reaching back into a box, pulls out a piece of pink paper.) eeeeeEEE *(Bouncing, squealy.)* “Meet me by the soccer field after class— I have something to tell you.” *(Teasing.)* Ooooooh. Scandal. Definitely not from your Dad.

CASEY

It was about borrowing a jacket. It wasn't scandalous.

RILEY

You sure? Because your cheeks are doing a very specific shade of “teen angst red.”

CASEY

Chasing boys was a short lived experimental stage. I got over it.

(Beat.)

CASEY *(Laughs despite themself.)*

(Softens.) I just... I didn't think it would feel like this. Going through his things.

RILEY

Heavy?

CASEY

Yeah. *(Beat.)* Heavy and... weird. Like I'm poking around in someone else's life, somewhere I don't belong.

RILEY

It was ... er, IS... hmmm *(Beat.)* was your life too, you know.

CASEY

Maybe. But it feels like I am trespassing inside my own childhood.

RILEY

Damn Case, this is your life. At least some of it.

CASEY

Some of it. Sometimes. *(Looks around.)*

RILEY

What?

CASEY

I'm cleaning up after someone who never really finished anything. Never saw things through. Never got it right. Not even ... not even after-

RILEY

OR it's someone who didn't know how to.

CASEY

Same thing.

RILEY *(Disagreeing gently.)*

Not always.

(Riley kneels beside Casey, pulling another odd object from the box.)

RILEY

Okay, I'm sorry. One more thing and then I'll behave. *(Holds up a cracked Magic 8-Ball.)* Remember when you used this to decide if you should skip math class?

CASEY

I always skipped math class.

RILEY (*Shakes Magic 8-Ball.*)

Will things turn out okay? “Outlook not good.”

CASEY

Fuck. Yeah. Figures. Story of my life.

RILEY

Or... maybe the 8-Ball’s just defective. (*Softer.*) Case... you don’t have to do this alone. (*Casey hesitates, then nods.*)

CASEY

Alright. But can we actually CLEAN now? No more time capsules.

RILEY (*Crosses heart.*)

Fine. (*Beat. Finds another object.*) OH MY GOD—

CASEY

Riley!

RILEY

Okay, okay. Cleaning. Look at me cleaning. (*Tucks an object under arm.*) I’m just keeping this one. For scientific reasons.

CASEY

I knew this was a mistake. This sucks enough without you being an idiot.

RILEY

Yeah, but I make it fun.

CASEY

Give it to me. (*Holds out hand.*)

RILEY (*Holds out left hand. Slowly opens. Then right hand. disarming grin.*) (*Slowly hands over flip phone.*)

It's heavy eh? Could barely hold it in my armpit...

CASEY (*Presses a button, phone lights up weakly then they snap it shut.*)

RILEY

You’re kidding me! It still turns on?

CASEY (*Unfazed.*)

This thing survived three moves and one trip through the washing machine. Of course it still works. (*Riley squints at the tiny screen.*) There should be two of them. (*Rummaging.*) My dad bought us both

one. Motorola Star TAC. Cost him like \$2000 bucks for both of them. Don't even want to think about what the service plan cost him.

RILEY *(Tries grabbing phone.)*

Any games on it? Damn, you bedazzled it. That's totally radical ... Gnarly? Dope..? Nope.

CASEY *(Beat.)*

“Catch you on the flip phone.”

RILEY

What?

CASEY

He said that. He wanted to stay in touch. Stay close. *(Beat.)* He'd say “Catch you on the flip phone.”

RILEY

(Pivoting.) I swear I saw “New Voicemail.”

(Beat.)

CASEY

Well. That's... misleading. My father and the concept of “new” haven't been on speaking terms for a while. Probably telemarketers. Vintage telemarketers.

RILEY

Retro spam. Do you have a charger? *(Starts digging through boxes.)*

CASEY

Upstairs. In the kitchen—

RILEY

Where? *(Already in motion.)*

CASEY

Junk drawer.

RILEY *(Halfway upstairs.)*

Wicked!

CASEY *(Stares at phone. Opens it. Soft glow.)*

SCENE 1 to 2 TRANSITION

During transition **Casey** puts in a CD, **Wake Me Up Before You GoGo** by **WHAM!** plays. **Casey** builds a fort out of Dad boxes and items in the basement with enough room for two people to sit cross legged . While building, voice overs play. **Riley** returns with a charger, blanket, couch cushions, and a couple of hockey sticks from upstairs. Plugs in phone and Christmas lights to illuminate the inside of the fort. **Casey** and **Riley** sit together in the fort. Music fades, V/O plays.

DAD V/O #3 — Pocket Dial at the Grocery Store

(Rustling, shopping cart squeaking.)

Where the hell did they move the peanut butter to—

Wait... Shit!

Why is this calling someone?

Hello.

Casey?

I didn't mean to—

BEEP.

ACT I SCENE 2 - Tamagotchi**RILEY**

Just so we're clear, if this collapses, I want "death by IKEA architecture" on my obituary.

(Another knock / chime. Morgan enters, slightly damp, holding takeout coffee carriers.)

MORGAN

Riley.

RILEY

Morgan.

MORGAN

Tam.

(Casey winces. Riley notices. Long Beat. Riley excuses herself.)

RILEY

I gotta go pee. *(Walks towards the basement bathroom.)*

CASEY

(Firm.) Use the upstairs bathroom.

RILEY (Quick pivot.)

I'll just use the upstairs bathroom.

MORGAN

Here's your coffee. *(Beat. Sigh.)* It's just a nickname Case. Like saying CASE.

(Casey makes space for Morgan to sit inside the ramshackle fort.)

Don't like it.

CASEY *(Sips.)*

Geez...

MORGAN

It's a reminder I used to cling to Dad—

CASEY

Like a barnacle.

MORGAN

GEEZ.

CASEY

You were five.

MORGAN

And Dad hated it.

CASEY

(Morgan's expression shifts—something long-held rising to the surface.)

He didn't hate it.

MORGAN

That's not how I remember it.

CASEY

MORGAN

I remember you hanging off Dad while he cooked — literally wrapped around his leg like a tiny koala—with ABSOLUTELY no sense of personal space. He'd hum that off-key “cooking song” of his, trying to stir spaghetti with you being dragged around the kitchen floor.

The “cooking song”.

CASEY

MORGAN

Mom would sit at the table, smiling that soft, tired smile. On good days she'd tease him — “Careful, Chef, Casey's steering again.” Most days she just watched you two, like it made her feel steadier. This one time, Dad reached for the wooden spoon, and you grabbed his wrist to “help.” Only you pulled too hard on his old Casio watch — the cheapie beeping one he loved — snapped it right off and hit the linoleum. Everyone froze. Mom gasped. Dad looked at the broken watch, then at mom and me, then back at the watch. And instead of getting mad, he grinned and said, “Well... looks like time's up.” Mom laughed. Dad scooped you up in his arms like nothing was broken at all. And for one small, warm kitchen moment, it felt like everything was okay.

CASEY

I remember that cooking song. I loved that song.

MORGAN

He actually had a few songs. One for shaving, one for cooking, and one ... well, one that sometimes he'd hum when he was alone in his study.

CASEY

The cooking song was Girl from Ipanema, shaving was Axel F... don't know the third.

MORGAN

You weren't really around for that song.

CASEY

What does that mean?

MORGAN

You couldn't always be around.

CASEY

Couldn't? That's not how I remember it. You would lock me in my room!

MORGAN

Well shit Case, please share, how do YOU remember it?

CASEY

We were good. Then we weren't. And then you stopped being my brother.

MORGAN

I don't think... I don't...*(Beat.)* all's I'm saying is that you didn't SEE everything.

(Casey looks up. The air shifts.)

CASEY

What the hell?

MORGAN

I wasn't pulling away from you. I was pulling away from... everything else.

CASEY

That's not an answer.

(Morgan takes a breath.)

MORGAN *(Slowly.)*

Do you remember when Mom still had good days?

CASEY

(Small smile.) She used to braid my hair. She used to leave notes in my lunch. She used to—

MORGAN

Yeah. Those were the parts you saw. The parts they wanted you to see.

(Casey looks confused. Morgan's voice softens but doesn't break.)

MORGAN

I saw ALL of the days and more of the bad days than you did. And not because I was braver. I was the one still awake at night when things went wrong. I was doing homework in the livingroom. I was grabbing a snack in the kitchen. I was ... I was standing in the hall ...

(Casey frowns, Morgan hesitates—this is heavy, but necessary.)

MORGAN

...the night she forgot who Dad was.

CASEY

Wha?

MORGAN

You were asleep on the couch down here. I went to get water and found her in the hallway, pressed against the wall, breathing like she'd run a marathon. She looked right at Dad and screamed— screamed like he was a stranger who had broken into the house. And it didn't stop.

(Casey freezes.)

CASEY

She... screamed?

MORGAN

It went on for hours. Dad was losing his mind. He couldn't find her pills. She had stashed them in the house plants. She thought the neighbours were stealing her meds.

(Beat.)

MORGAN *(Laughing sadly.)*

She threw a vase at him. Missed by a mile. Dad tried to calm her down, but she kept shouting, "Where's my husband? Where is he? Where is he?" I'd never seen Dad scared before. Not like that. Not even after she passed.

(Casey swallows hard, trying to process.)

CASEY

I... I don't remember that.

MORGAN

You weren't supposed to. Dad carried you upstairs so you wouldn't wake up. After he got Mom settled. After she stopped shaking.

(Morgan pulls at a loose thread on the blanket.)

MORGAN

And that wasn't the only thing. A couple weeks later I surprised her— *(Voice tightens.)* trying to leave the house at two in the morning. Barefoot. Winter. Saying she needed to “find the right Casey,” because she thought you were an impostor.

(Casey in disbelief and grief.)

CASEY

She... she said THAT?

MORGAN

She wasn't herself. None of it was her fault. But it was terrifying. And Dad—*(Beat.)* Dad carried it like a secret bomb. He didn't want you afraid of her. He didn't want you to be accidentally hurt by her. And, he didn't want you to see her like that.

(Casey's voice is small.)

CASEY

Why didn't he tell me?

MORGAN

Because you were his Tamagotchi. *(Little smile)* Needing attention wasn't a bad thing to him. It was... a sign you were still okay. Still a kid. Still soft in a world that was getting very difficult, very fast.

(Casey is near breaking.)

CASEY

Why couldn't he tell me?

MORGAN

Mom was going piece by piece. Dad couldn't keep up. And I...

CASEY

So you pulled away because you saw the scary parts?

MORGAN *(Part brutal honesty, part apology.)*

I pulled away because I was scared she wouldn't remember ME next...

(Beat.)

(Silence, thick, suffocating. Casey wipes their eyes with their sleeve.)

CASEY

I wish...I wish you'd told me.

MORGAN

I wish Dad had told BOTH of us. But we were ‘the kids’ and he thought he was the one drowning. We all were.

*(A pillow collapses on **Morgan’s** head.)*

MORGAN *(Straight face.)*

This is exactly the kind of structural failure Dad would’ve blamed on “gravity being dramatic.”

CASEY - *(Laughing through tears.)*

Remember the fence that he built? “It’s not falling — it’s settling. Engineers call that settling.” He really did say that.

*(Another piece of the fort swings loose, precariously close to **Casey’s** head.)*

MORGAN

Ya see? Settling.

CASEY

Settling.

MORGAN

Ya know, he always said you stuck close because you “knew what mattered.” That’s also why I am doing the paperwork and you are stuck down here dealing with the “everything else in boxes”. *(Sigh.)* Paperwork doesn’t matter. These things do.

CASEY *(Back to organizing.)*

I thought he was annoyed by me.

MORGAN

Never. He was terrified of messing you up.

(Beat. Both siblings sag together.)

CASEY

So... Tamagotchi wasn’t an insult?

MORGAN *(Smiles softly.)*

No, never. It meant you were the one thing that kept beeping- asking for connection when the rest of us shut down.

*(**Casey** sets their hand over **Morgan’s**.)*

CASEY

Okay. But if you call me that in public, I swear I’ll—

(Toilet flushes upstairs.)

Alright weirdos let's get to wor-

RILEY (Rushing downstairs.)

GO WASH YOUR HANDS!

CASEY & MORGAN

(Beat. Riley starts to protest.)

I'm going to wash my hands.

RILEY (Running back up stairs.)

GAWD. I could kill you both.

CASEY

Tamagotchis aren't really all that threatening. Try harder next time.

MORGAN *(Laughing)*

(Casey groans and shoves him lightly.)

I'll be back at the end of the week. Probably will have more documents for you to sign. Catch ya on the flip ...*(Beat)* side Case. *(Heads upstairs.)*

MORGAN *(Pulls out folder.)*

What was the third song?

CASEY

Dunno! Don't remember. *(Beat.)* Something by R.E.M I think. *(Door slams.)*

MORGAN *(From upstairs.)*

SCENE 2 to 3 TRANSITION

During transition **Everybody Hurts** by **REM** [acoustic] fades in. **Casey** lays out paperwork and focuses on one particular document. **Riley** comes back down. Shows that their hands are washed. **Casey** shows the document to **Riley**.

Music fades, then V/O plays.

DAD V/O #4 — The Apology Call

Hey, Casey.

Just calling to say sorry...

for uh all the weird messages.

This phone's got a mind of its own. Heheh

I'll, uh... catch you on the flip side, kid—

(machine interrupts: "You have reached...")

Oh come ON—

BEEP.

ACT I SCENE 3 - Paper Cranes**RILEY**

I LOVE THAT BATHROOM! There's a fridge, a heater, and a TV. Gah ... I sat way too long- (*Dancing around.*) Oh tingles, tingles, right foot, left foot.... (*Walks back to the stairs.*)

CASEY

Jesus you ARE weird. (*Still looking at the document.*)

RILEY

Maybe. Okay, feeling is coming back in my butt. Uhhhh, so, I found something. And before you accuse me of snooping: I wasn't! I dropped the remote on the floor and it slid under the bathroom cabinet, and I chased it. With dignity. Mostly.

(*Casey looks up, confused.*)

RILEY

Don't. Freak.Out.

(*Beat.*)

RILEY

It was taped under the sink. Like... taped taped. Like "Please don't find me" taped.

CASEY

Why would I freak out?

RILEY

Because I was just in your bathroom for, um, well, ... a NORMAL amount of time.

CASEY

Riley. How long were you in there?

RILEY

Thirty minutes.

CASEY

THIRTY?!

RILEY

In my defence— you have a TV in there! A fully functioning bathroom TV! Who DOES that? I got sucked into a rerun of Jerry Springer and I couldn't just—leave. Had to find out the results from the lie detector AND the DNA test.

(Casey rubs their temples.)

CASEY

So you were... watching TV, in the bathroom? For a half an hour?

RILEY

Like a civilized adult, yes. But then the remote slipped out of my hand and skidded under the sink and—*(Beat. Inhale.)*—I found THIS.

(Riley holds up a clear, freezer bag, tied up with several hospital bracelets. There are puffy heart stickers, scratch and smell heart stickers, and other assorted shapes and sizes of hearts on the outside of the bag. Casey freezes.)

CASEY

What is that?

RILEY

That's the thing! I have no blinking idea. But it was shoved way back under the cabinet, like someone hid it there on purpose. And I swear I wasn't snooping—

(Casey cradles the bag carefully, sitting down. Riley watches, quieter now.)

CASEY

(Deep breath.) Heart stickers... my Mom used those on my lunches.

(Riley nods.)

RILEY

Open it.

(Casey peels off the bracelets, opens the bag, and pulls out a photo.)

CASEY *(Flips the picture over and over.)*

'A Place For Precious Things'
A place for precious things

like paper cranes and coloured string,
 a folded note, a plastic ring,
 a heart shaped box to hold so tight,
 childhood dreams and golden light,
 a feather from a bluejay wing,
 a dried up flower from verdant spring,
 all safe in a place for precious things.

To Nancy, my most precious thing.

CASEY

It's a picture of me and Morgan with my mom. I think my dad wrote the poem.

(Casey's breath catches. Examines remaining contents.)

CASEY

I...I didn't know she had these.

(Riley sits down, beside Casey.)

RILEY

And she hid them really well. In the safest spot in the bathroom. Under the sink! The one place no one cleans because everyone is afraid of the spiders..

(Casey pulls out a hospital bracelet.)

CASEY

Why would she put them there?

RILEY

Maybe because she spent so much time in that bathroom. With the TV. And the heater. And the padded mats. And the—*(Laughing softly.)*—the mini-fridge? Damn, your dad went hard on the upgrades huh?

CASEY *(Smiling. Remembering.)*

Yeah... it was basically her little apartment. Dad tried to make it comfortable... wanted her to feel safe there.

(Riley nods.)

CASEY *(Whispering.)*

Why didn't Dad... Why didn't ANYONE show me this?

(Riley watches gently.)

(Casey pulls out: A paper crane, a dried flower, a troll doll.)

RILEY

My mom came home with a few cranes. She visited your mom a lot. I swear she has 6 or 7 of them on her night stand. Each one has a number on it. The last one says 'lucky number seven'...

(Casey closes their eyes, holding the crane gently.)

CASEY

I don't remember any of that.

RILEY

That's okay. I do, a bit. My mom brought casseroles to your dad. So, I ended up in hospital waiting rooms way more than any kid should.

(Casey lets that land.)

RILEY

Case, you were sick all the time, like cartoon sick.

(Casey's eyes well.)

CASEY

But, why didn't Dad show me this?

RILEY

Maybe he meant to. Maybe he couldn't. Maybe he didn't know about it. Maybe he hoped you'd find it when you needed it most. Maybe he knew you'd be the one to ... uhh clean up. Gah, that didn't sound the same outloud.

(Casey sets the items on their lap, overwhelmed.)

RILEY *(Sitting shoulder-to-shoulder.)*

Hey. HEEEEY! I'm sorry I found it by... uh accident... by watching TV on the toilet for half an hour.

(Casey laughs through tears.)

CASEY

Only you could "accidentally find" something like this because you got sucked into a Jerry Springer episode.

RILEY

I contain multitudes. And Jerry really is the best "baby daddy" detective.

(Casey leans against Riley lightly.)

CASEY

Thank you. For finding it. For... remembering.

RILEY

Always. That's what I'm here for. To keep the important stuff close.

(Casey nods, clutching the bracelet.)

RILEY

I don't know if I should tell you this. But seeing all this— (*Gestures to the freezer bag.*) —it feels like maybe... maybe this is the moment... can I tell you something?

(Casey braces themselves.)

CASEY

Tell me.

(Riley takes a breath. Their voice softens.)

RILEY

One time, when your mom was in the hospital for a long stretch. You were six or seven. I went with my mom to see her.

(Casey nods faintly.)

RILEY

Anyways, that day...your mom had one of her bright days. You know, she seemed like herself. She was determined—absolutely determined—to make something for you.

(Casey grips the photo harder.)

RILEY

She made that crane... well maybe not THAT crane, but she made a crane. And then a couple more... She made so many cranes. "Do you think Casey will like this one?" She'd say. Then she made two more and ask, "Do you think Casey will like these ones?" She made so many cranes. Like she needed to finish them before ... before-

CASEY

Before what?

RILEY

Before she could come home.

(Casey's eyes shine.)

CASEY

I don't remember any of this.

RILEY

She didn't finish.

(Beat.)

CASEY

She couldn't finish...

RILEY

But she kept making them.

(Casey looks at the photo again. Softer now.)

CASEY

...That sounds like her.

(Riley nods.)

Lights fade.

SCENE 3 to 4 TRANSITION

During transition **This Woman's Work** by **Kate Bush** fades in. Casey walks to the basement bathroom and comes out with a construction sized garbage bag. Opens a bag and is stopped. Reaches in and pulls out a paper crane. And then more. And then handfuls. And then pours them all out.

Music fades, then V/O plays.

DAD V/O #4 — Fighting the Voicemail Prompt

Casey, it's—

(machine: "Please leave your message after the tone.")

DAD. I am leaving a message! I-

(machine: "Please leave your message after the tone.")

STOP SAYING THAT!

(machine: "Please leave your message after the tone.")

I want to talk about your mom.

(machine: "Sorry you are having difficulty. Please call back at a later time.")

No, wait—

BEEP.

ACT I SCENE 4 - Auto Deposit

RILEY

There must be hundreds of them..

(Casey sets the crane carefully on their knee.)

CASEY

So... she made these for me?

RILEY

Uh huh, for you. All of it.

CASEY *(Checking the side of several cranes.)*

121, 436, 99, 776, 994 ... 994 *(Staring at the pile of cranes.)* Riley... what is this?

RILEY

I... *(Shaken.)* I knew she made a few. To keep her hands busy. But— *(gestures at the overflowing tub)* Not like this. Not... this many. *(Pulls out her phone.)* Hold up, I'm gonna message my mom. Ask her about it.

(Casey lifts a handful of cranes.)

CASEY

555, 17, 634-

RILEY

'kay my mom says 'Hi Casey'. So *(To Casey)* "Hi Casey" And she says that the cranes were a part of her therapy. A few each week to keep her mind busy. And to keep her hands moving.

(Casey with eyes fixed on the cranes.)

CASEY

(Picks up crane #994.) 994. How long was she there?

(Riley hesitates.)

RILEY

Some days she'd fold nonstop. Other days, well other days not so much. My mom missed two of my birthdays because she was helping out your dad with chores and grocery shopping. Her other days were spent at the hospital with your mom.

(Casey buries their face in their hands briefly, then lifts a crane — one of the more worn ones, creases almost translucent.)

CASEY

How long was she there?

RILEY

Probably close to two years, on and off.

CASEY

Two years..? Hundreds of cranes. *(Soft.)* She was counting something. Keeping track of time... after time stopped making sense.

RILEY

Yeah. *(Shifts more cranes aside.)* Case... this pile has to be in the high hundreds. Eight hundred? Nine? She almost made it to a thousand.

(Casey absorbs that — a delayed gut-punch.)

CASEY

(Small, cracking.) She was there that long?

RILEY

She didn't stop trying. Even when things got bad. This was her way of holding on.

(They sit with this for a moment — the quiet is heavy, not empty. Riley reaches for a stack of bills nearby.)

RILEY

There's something else. I didn't want to jump into it while you were— *(Indicates the cranes.)* —but you should see this.

(Casey takes the paper without looking yet.)

CASEY

It's just a bill.

RILEY

Look at the names. Casey scans. Freezes.

CASEY

This is Dad's phone plan. But— (confused) My old number is on here. From high school. Why is it still being billed?

RILEY

Because he never cancelled it. He kept paying for both phones. Right up until—.

(Casey grips the bill in one hand, a crane in the other.)

CASEY

He told me he'd shut that line down. He said, "You're on your own plan now — I'll close the old account."

RILEY

He didn't. He left it open. Month after month.

(Casey swallows hard — suddenly the room feels smaller.)

CASEY

So Mom was folding these... alone... trying to keep her mind together... And Dad—

RILEY

Dad kept a door unlocked. Just in case you ever needed to walk back through it.

(Casey sits on the concrete floor, overwhelmed — cranes all around them.)

CASEY

Both of them... trying to send signals I didn't even know were there.

RILEY

Not everyone calls for help out loud. Some people fold it. Some people pay for it quietly every month. But it's still hope. Just... quiet hope.

(The basement door opens upstairs — footsteps.)

MORGAN *(Shouting down.)*

Hello basement dwellers— I found something labeled "IMPORTANT PAPERS," which, knowing Dad, means it's either taxes from 1997 or a takeout menu.

(He appears at the bottom of stairs, sees the cranes, the phone bill, the silence. Stops.)

What did I miss?

SCENE 4 to 5 TRANSITION

During transition **Everybody Hurts** by **REM** [acoustic] fades in Casey lays out paperwork and focuses on one particular document. Casey tries to organize the cranes. Morgan sits on the bottom step and watches. Riley eventually stops Casey and directs them back to the fort.

Music fades, then V/O plays.

DAD V/O #5 — The Meltdown

Casey.

It's Dad calling.

Heh, right. You know that.

Well, that's it.

I'm taking this phone back.

IT called my dentist, IT called someone in Saskatchewan—

I never touched a god damned button!

(exhale; softens)

Trying here, kiddo.

...

Trying here.

...

Casey

...

I really am trying.

...

I really am.

...

Catch you on the flip side, kiddo.

...

Line's always open if you want to talk.

...

No rush... I'll wait.

...

Love you.

BEEP.

ACT I SCENE 5 - Motorola**MORGAN**

Okay. So. (*Scans the room.*)

(*Beat.*)

We can deal with this.

(*Beat.*)

The cranes. The phone thing. We pack it, we label it, we—

Label it?

(MORGAN stops.)

I'm just trying to keep this from getting worse.

It already was.

(Beat.)

Did you know about these?

This?

All of this? The cranes, the phone, ... the hospital?

I didn't know how to explain it, without sounding...

CRAZY?

Yeah. That. And, *(Beat.)* responsible.

We don't have to solve everything tonight.

(Morgan nods, frustrated but trying.)

He kept calling me too.

(Casey stiffens slightly.)

Left lot's of messages.

The messages were... all over the place.

Pocket dials. Wrong buttons. Half a joke. Half a sentence. Sometimes funny. Sometimes just noise.

CASEY

MORGAN

CASEY *(Quiet.)*

MORGAN

CASEY

MORGAN

CASEY

MORGAN

RILEY

MORGAN

CASEY

RILEY

CASEY

You never knew what you were gonna get.

MORGAN

And I didn't know how to answer that.

CASEY

(Beat. That's enough.)

Neither did I.

MORGAN

(Breath. Pivot.)

So we close the account.

CASEY

No.

MORGAN

Case—

CASEY

Not yet.

(Riley lifts a gentle hand toward Morgan. He backs off.)

(Casey looks at the phone in her hand.)

CASEY

Says, I missed one call. One message I didn't check.

(Beat.)

CASEY

Just one.

(Morgan doesn't interrupt.)

CASEY

I told myself I'd call back. After work. After things calmed down. After he sounded... clearer.

(Beat.)

CASEY

And then every time after that, it felt late... TOO late.

RILEY

Late for what?

CASEY

For not having called sooner.

(The truth lands. No one rushes it. Casey flips the phone open.)

(Casey thinks, then dials the number.)

RING. *(Phone rings somewhere else in the basement. Ringtone is **Girl From Ipanema**.)*

RING. *(Phone rings somewhere else in the basement.)*

RILEY

It's down here. I think it's—

(Riley starts toward the piles.)

CASEY

No.

(Riley stops.)

CASEY

Let it ring.

(Phone rings somewhere else in the basement. The sound is coming from inside the fort. Buried. Wrapped. Still alive.)

RILEY

Case—

CASEY

I know. Let it go to voicemail.

(Riley nods. Trusts her.)

RING.

RING.

(The ringing stops.)

VOICEMAIL (V/O)

Hey, you've reached Mike's phone—
or Dad's phone.

You know who you're looking for.

I'm not available right now.

Leave a message and I'll get back to you.

Catch you on the flip side.

(BEEP.)

(Casey exhales.)

Dad...*(Beat. It's too much, she hangs up.)*

CASEY *(Starts to leave a message.)*

Sooo... do we keep the number?

MORGAN

(Casey looks at him. Clear. Present.)

Yeah.

CASEY

(Beat.)

We keep it.

(Riley exhales.)

(Morgan nods once, then quietly straightens a crane beside **Casey**. He heads upstairs.)

(Riley stays.)

You okay?

RILEY

No.

CASEY

(Beat.)

But I did the thing.

CASEY

Yeah. You did.

RILEY

(The phone in Casey's hand gives a faint low-battery buzz.)

Pocket-sized reassurance.

CASEY

Terrible jokes included.

RILEY

And one line... always open.

CASEY

(The Christmas lights glow softly. Glow from the phone remains in black out.)

BLACKOUT.

SCENE 5 to END TRANSITION

During transition **Good** by **Better Than Ezra** fades in.

Music fades, then V/O plays.

CASEY V/O #6 — Pocket Universe

VOICEMAIL (O.S.)

Please leave your message after the tone.

(BEEP.)

Hey, Dad.

It's Casey.

I found the cranes.

All of them.

I didn't know they were there.

Don't know for sure WHAT they are.

I don't really know what to do with them yet.

I keep trying to figure out
what you were holding together
and where I stepped back.

I know you kept trying.

I know I stopped.

I don't know if you were waiting.

Or if you were just trying to keep the line alive.

I don't know if the messages were for me.

Or if you were just... hoping I might be there.

Somewhere.

I don't know how to start this
without wanting to fix it
or explain it
or make it sound better than it is.

I just didn't want to stay quiet anymore.

Or stay away.

So I'm calling.

That's all I've got right now.

Catch you on the flip side.

Love you.

BEEP.

Outro Music: **Good** by **Better Than Ezra**

The end.

If you're interested in:

- producing the play
- staging a reading or workshop
- classroom / educational use
- festival submission questions

Please reach out chrisjcluff@gmail.com

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