

The Café on Main
By Jeff Perlman

We open on a late afternoon in Stony Brook. The golden hour light bathes the town in a warm glow. ALI and DANIEL walk slowly down Main Street, past the shops closing for the day. They've been quiet for a moment, comfortable in the silence. As they stroll past the familiar landmarks, their shared memories intertwine with the present, creating an unspoken bond that needs no words. The air is filled with the scent of blooming flowers and the distant hum of evening traffic, evoking the essence of countless afternoons spent together.

[ACT 1; SCENE 1]

ALI (*playfully bumping his shoulder*): A penny for them.

DANIEL (*looking over, confused*): For what?

ALI: Your thoughts. You were miles away.

DANIEL (*smiling*): Not miles. Just years. I was thinking about when we used to walk this same route after school.

ALI (*nostalgic*): You always insisted on walking me home, even though my house was in the opposite direction from yours.

DANIEL: Worth the extra twenty minutes.

ALI (*teasing*): Even in the rain?

DANIEL (*with mock seriousness*): Especially in the rain. I got to share my umbrella.

(They pass an old cinema, its marquee advertising a classic film festival.)

ALI (*pointing*): Oh wow! They're showing "Breakfast at Tiffany's" this weekend.

DANIEL: Your favorite.

ALI (*surprised*): You remember that?

DANIEL (*simply*): I remember everything about you, Ali.

(*There's a quiet moment between them, broken as ALI looks away*)

ALI (*gesturing around*): So, tell me what you love about this place. Help me see it through your eyes.

DANIEL (*reflecting*): It's not just the place. It's the... continuity. Everywhere I look there's meaning.... See that bench? (*He points*) Mr. Romanelli, my fourth grade teacher, sits there every morning with his coffee and Newspaper. Has for forty years. And I get to say hello and get the score of last night's Yankees game. And every spring, Mrs. Torchio from the florist puts fresh tulips in all the planters. Same colors, same arrangement.

ALI (*gently*): Predictable.

DANIEL (*shaking his head*): Reliable. There's a difference. Beautiful too and I get to look forward to it all year. (*We hear a car pass. DANIEL waves*) Carla's kids. My dad filled their first prescriptions when they were born. Now they come to the counter and tell me about school.... a school I went to.

ALI (*watching him*): They have a crush on you.

DANIEL (*self-deprecating*): They have a crush on the lollipops I keep behind the counter.

ALI (*stopping, turning to face him*): No. It's you. You remember their names, their favorite colors. You see people, Daniel. Really see them. (*A charged moment between them.*)

DANIEL: Well, I see you. Sometimes I'm not sure you want to be seen.

ALI: Maybe I'm afraid of what you'll see.

DANIEL (*stepping closer*): Nothing about you could ever scare me, Ali.
(*They're interrupted by the bells of the town hall clock striking six.*)

ALI (*suddenly playful, breaking the tension*): Race you to the cafe? Like we used to?

DANIEL (laughing): We're not teenagers anymore.

ALI (*already backing away*): Scared you'll lose, old man?

DANIEL (*feigning offense*): Old? I'll show you old!

(*ALI takes off running, her laughter trailing behind her. DANIEL follows, shaking his head but smiling. They reach the cafe. Both are slightly out of breath but laughing.*)

ALI (*victorious*): I won!

DANIEL (*breathing hard*): You had a head start. Completely unfair. Plus, you take my breath away...it's not a fair fight.

ALI: Life's unfair. Gotta take your advantages where you find them.

(*They linger outside the café. The mood shifts, becomes more contemplative.*)

DANIEL (*softly*): You know, I daydream a lot...about you.... I imagine a life here. For both of us.

ALI (*curious, playful*): Oh yeah, what does it look like? This imaginary life?

DANIEL: Simple. Good. Maybe a small house near the water. Weekend mornings at the farmers' market... maybe a bowling league?

ALI: A bowling league? Really?

DANIEL: Why not? We can have matching shirts that advertise the pharmacy.

ALI: I can see it now....Maple Pharmacy...strikes, spares and drugs. Has a ring to it.

DANIEL: I think it would be fun...

ALI: What else? What does our house look like?

DANIEL: In my imagination it's old, with a front porch, lots of character, wood shingles...wildflowers everywhere.

ALI: Sounds nice...

DANIEL: You'd have your writing desk by the window. I'd have a garden out back.

ALI (*surprised*): You think I write?

DANIEL (*with certainty*): I know you do. You've kept journals since we were twelve. And your postcards... they're like poetry. You're a writer...you just haven't admitted it yet. You have a gypsy soul and endless layers...it's bound to come out in words. And I can't wait to read every one.

ALI (*touched that he's noticed*): Wow...I don't...I don't what to say.

DANIEL (*thoughtful*): I just hope...

ALI (*finishing his thought*): That I'll stay here...

DANIEL (*nodding*): That you'd want to.

ALI (*looks away for a moment to gather herself. She turns to DANIEL and looks at him intently with unexpected seriousness*): Your dreams are so beautiful...you see things so clearly....I wish I could see things like you do.

DANIEL: I think you can...if you let yourself...

ALI (*is quiet for a long moment*): We should go in before Jimmy comes out with his broom...

DANIEL (*Offers his hand. ALI takes his hand but DANIEL doesn't move*): Just a few more minutes....

(They stand together, hands linked. Neither speaks, but something has shifted between them – a possibility that wasn't there before. They enter the Café and the stage goes dark)

[SCENE 2]

(Lights up in a dark café. Nothing fancy, just a few wooden chairs and tables adorned with flowers. We see a 70ish man, JIMMY, in a work apron carrying a broom. He stands next to a table and looks over the audience.)

JIMMY: The artist Eve Babitz once said that women want to be loved like roses. They want their lover to remember the way they held a glass.... They want to haunt. *(touching the table's surface)* Eve Babitz was right. And the special ones do. They stay with us... Sometimes for years. Sometimes forever. *(JIMMY begins to sweep the floor.)*

This is the Cafe on Main. I opened this place in 1972. That's a long time ago. I was a kid in those days.... I spent every dime I had getting this place open so the stakes were high. Failure-- as they say-- was not an option. It was unthinkable. I made a promise, you see.

(JIMMY walks over to a wall and points to a poster of a young man with a guitar, mid-performance, his face lit with passion.)

This is Phil Fabrizio. My best friend since fourth grade...had a voice like no other. By nineteen, he'd already opened for the Stones when they played the university up the street. Talent scouts were circling. Everyone knew it was just a matter of time before he would be the headliner. *(pause)* Phil used to joke that when he made it big, I'd have to name a sandwich after him. "The Fabrizio"—ham, provolone, and jalapeños. A God-awful combination. We had this plan. He'd tour, make records, and when he needed a break from the madness, he'd come back here and play acoustic sets on weekends. This place would be his sanctuary. Then Vietnam took him. Just like that. Three weeks before the end of his tour.

(JIMMY touches the poster and stops to take a breath)

So, I took out a loan I couldn't afford, worked three jobs and slept on a cot in the back room for two years. And every morning, I'd look at his picture and say, "Phil, we are going to make this happen." I've kept this picture up, front and center, for 50 years now. Memories are all that's left of him. Nobody else around here remembers Phil. His parents are long gone.

So are his friends. But I remember. And if someone asks—and they hardly ever do—I get to tell his story—the story of what could have been. *(beat)* From the start I had a plan for this place...I wanted it to be cozy and casual, the kind of place where people could come and relax. Oak tables built to last. Fresh flowers from the florist two doors down. Comfortable chairs... nothing fancy at the Cafe on Main. It's a simple vision, nothing unique. Like a million other little cafes. But that's ok, it's what I wanted. Then and now. *(Beat)* On the walls, you can see my personality. What I value. These walls contain my thoughts...my dreams...my aspirations.

(JIMMY walks over to the wall and reaches for a photo of Thurman Munson in a Yankees uniform. He takes the photo off the wall and looks at it.)

I loved Thurman...like no other ballplayer...Thurman Munson was grit personified. He was this regular guy, a little thick around the middle, not especially good looking, not chiseled like some of the guys today...but he would find a way to win. And he was a leader too... teammates and opponents respected him. They knew he would never, ever give up. *(pause)* So, whenever a little rain falls in my life, I look at Thurman's picture and I find the will to go on...a day at a time.

(JIMMY puts the photo back on the wall and walks to the center of the cafe)

From the beginning I've had a favorite table, right up front near the picture window overlooking the flower box which also overlooks a parking lot. But never mind...it's a cozy spot. Or so I hear...it's not as if I get to sit there. I'm too busy working. But I imagine it's cozy. People seem to flock to it. As they should. *(JIMMY walks over to the table.)* Lots of things have happened at this little table since 1972... I always saw my job as providing a space for people to meet. I think what we do here is important.

(JIMMY walks over to a jukebox and hits a few buttons. The lights dim. We hear music. Lights out.)

[SCENE 3]

(Lights up in the Café. We see DANIEL and ALI sitting at a table. DANIEL is 23, handsome in an understated way. ALI, also 23, is radiant.)

DANIEL: I still can't believe you're here. I've missed you, Ali.

ALI: It's only been six months. That's barely enough time for you to grow a beard. *(ALI reaches for his face which has a few days growth).*

DANIEL: So, what's next? Are you going to be here long?

ALI: I don't know, probably not. There's so much to see Danny.

DANIEL: I know.

ALI: Well, if you know you should come with me.

DANIEL: I wish I could, but it's not that simple Ali.

ALI: My love, it's all going to be here when you get back. Your mom and dad, the store, this place, this town. Nothing ever changes in Stony Brook. It's like there's a law...we are the town that time forgot.

DANIEL: Well, that's mostly true. But didn't you notice, there's a new pizza place on 25A and the record store is now more of a head shop.

ALI *(laughs)*: You will never get a better offer than coming with me, wherever we go.

DANIEL: I know that. *(There's an awkward silence.)*

ALI: I think I'm going to leave next week.

DANIEL: You just decided, didn't you?

ALI: I did and that's the beauty of my life, Daniel. I can make decisions like that. So can you, but you won't let yourself. Or should I say, you let others stop you.

DANIEL: Those others are my family, Ali. My mom and dad.

ALI: Dan, the store isn't going anywhere. Maple Pharmacy will be here for you when you get back. The neighborhood drug store is not going away.

DANIEL: I had my adventure. It's time for me to learn the business and let my dad go to Boca.

ALI: We had a vacation Daniel, not an adventure. You know there's a difference. Two weeks hiking in Europe and staying in hotels that your dad paid for was a great time, but it wasn't an adventure. Come with me...we'll backpack, we'll wander without a travel guide. Can you imagine? Your mom will plotz.

DANIEL: Come on, don't make fun of my mom.

ALI: I love your mom. I'm just trying to broaden the horizons of her son. (*beat*) If you weren't so adorable, I wouldn't be trying so hard to convince you.

DANIEL (*sighs and looks down*): You are so beautiful. But you know that don't you?

ALI: It's still good to hear.

DANIEL: But it's a little unfair though...everywhere you go... men pine for you...and I just wait here...hoping you come back. And hoping one day, you'll get tired of adventure.

ALI: I hope that never happens.

DANIEL: And there's the rub. My biggest wish is your biggest fear.

ALI: Danny, sweetie... why are you always so serious? Can't we just enjoy some apple pie and each other for however long it lasts? You need to live in the moment, my love. You'll be 50 before you know it. Then 60 and 70 and probably 80. Let's be 23 for as long as possible...don't get old on me. Let's be young and free for as long as we can. (*There's a silence as they look at each other. They've been at this impasse before*)

ALI (*with sudden intensity*): Come with me. Take a chance.

DANIEL: We've been through this...

ALI: (*cutting him off, she moves closer to Daniel*): No, please listen to me. Your parents raised you to be responsible, to be good, to do what's expected. And you are good, Danny. You're so good it breaks my heart. But you're also more than the guy who takes over the family pharmacy. (*beat*) You're the guy who spent an entire night in Amsterdam telling me about every Van Gogh painting in the museum. You're the guy who learned to juggle just to make me laugh. You're the guy who sees magic in ordinary things. It's why I love you... (*her fingers brush against his collar, straightening it out of habit*)

DANIEL (*He looks away for a moment and then turns back to her*): Ali. Please.

ALI (*she takes his hand, interlacing their fingers*) Danny... What's stopping you? Because I know how much you love me. I know you don't want to see me go.

DANIEL: Of course, I don't.... (*pause*) Hey remember last Christmas when you surprised me? You showed up covered in snow, singing carols off-key on my front porch. My mom cried... she was so happy to see you. You stayed for two weeks and it was... it was perfect. We watched old movies and walked through town looking at the lights. Tell me that wasn't an adventure. Tell me that wasn't magic.

ALI (*softly*): It was. Of course it was.

DANIEL: Then how can you walk away from this? From us? You talk about Barcelona and Amsterdam like they're somehow more real than what we have right here. You know how rare this is.... what we have. You must know.

ALI: I know what I'm asking... (*pause*) I know it's selfish. But I'm asking anyway because I believe in us. And I do think this is good for you too. Think about it - we could have that magic everywhere. We could build a life that's ours, not anyone else's version of what our lives should be. (*she*

leans over and kisses him softly) Your parents love you. The store will be here. But only if you want it. It should be your choice, not an obligation. But this moment, right now, this chance - it won't come again. Not like this.... (*beat*) Not with someone like me.

DANIEL: You make it sound like an easy decision. Like there's a choice that doesn't break something precious.

ALI: I know the stakes (*pause*) Danny I do. I'm terrified.... Terrified that one day I'll look at you across the dinner table and all I'll see is the life I didn't choose. Or just as bad - that you'll look at me and see nothing but regret and restlessness. (*touches his face*) We should go. We could build something that's completely ours.

DANIEL: We can do that here. It's not the location, Ali, it's you and me. That's the magic.

ALI: I want to see the world, Daniel. (*There's a silence. The two are exhausted*) Hey, is your dad Ok? I feel like there's something you're not telling me.

DANIEL (*takes a deep breath*): The doctor says he needs to slow down. But you know him – he's at the store every morning at 6, counting inventory, checking prescriptions. (*pause*) He won't slow down unless...

ALI (*touching his face*): ...unless you're here to take over. Danny, I understand. God, I understand. But are you sure this is what he'd want? To see you give up your dreams?

DANIEL (*with quiet intensity*): This isn't giving up. This is... this is choosing. Sometimes we have to make tough decisions. I can't just leave, I have obligations. (*There's an awkward silence.*)

ALI: Maybe someday...I'll be able to stay... (*her voice breaks*) God, I shouldn't say maybe. That's cruel. But I can't help it. (*pause*) Maybe.

DANIEL (*After a long moment, the words coming as if he's just understanding them himself*) I think... I think if you go this time, there needs

to be some understanding. Some closure (*pause*) for both of us. I can't spend my days half-here in my head and half-somewhere with you. And right now... I need to be here. Completely here. I need to be here for my family. (*touching her hand gently*)

Ever since I was little, I've been watching my dad work.... He brought a lot of love to his job. A lot of himself... (*pause*) everyone knew the store would be mine someday. I just thought I had more time. More summers, more time to convince you to build a life here with me. This is a good place to be, Ali. This is a good life for us. I know in my heart it is. (*his voice softens*) Ali, my love for you isn't the question. It never was. Not since the first time I saw you. (*pause*) Truth is, I don't think I can ever shake you. Every time the door opens, I'll look up hoping it's you. And every Christmas, I'll wonder if you'll show up singing.

ALI: Sometimes I think it would be easier if... if we just didn't work.
(*A silence, they are exhausted. She leans forward and kisses him. The table darkens*)

(*Lights up in the café and JIMMY re-appears.*)

JIMMY: Daniel Gold and Ali Musgrave... High school sweethearts...great together but on two very different paths. Ali....full of mystery, impossibly beautiful, an answer. But also... a riddle. She will haunt Daniel and he knows it.... Working here I've learned a few things about love. Every love story has its own arc...some are short stories and some are Russian novels. Ali and Daniel? They're a Russian novel. Complex, beautiful, and... unfinished. Sometimes working here... I catch myself feeling like I'm watching chapters unfold. Page by page.

[SCENE 4]

(*The theater darkens. When the lights come up we see JIMMY standing and an older man, PAUL sitting at the table, reading a newspaper*)

JIMMY: You might think I feel isolated working in this little place. It's been these four walls and that window for half a century...But I can't complain. (*beat*) I've seen a lot in this little place...Dreams. Hope. Sadness. Laughter. Love. All the important stuff.... I didn't miss a thing. It's been a good way to spend a life. (*A few notes from the song Moon River begins to play. JIMMY*

walks to a jukebox, closes his eyes and listens.) What a wonderful song. Only ten lines long, but it says so much. It speaks of wanderlust, the river of life, the passage of time, the longing for the past and I suppose the longing for the future. My jukebox serves as the soundtrack for my customers' lives.

(JIMMY walks over to wall photo of young married couple): This is a photo taken in this café of Paul and his wife Melinda on their wedding day. They got married in the church up the street and before they left for their honeymoon they stopped in for a piece of pie. *(touches photo frame)* They met here a few years before... Melinda was a waitress back in those days. Paul said the moment he saw Melinda he knew he would marry her. Those things really happen. Amazing. *(JIMMY walks toward Paul and refills his coffee)* This is Paul, he's a retired attorney. He may be my favorite customer ever. Just a good man. Nice. Solid. A throwback to a different time. He had this legal secretary. Her name was Diane. They worked together for thirty years. Over three decades you see a lot. And Diane saw nothing but good—tough cases handled well, difficult clients calmed down, quiet acts of compassion done without fanfare. *(sets coffee pot down carefully)* Paul was happily married and lost his beloved wife to cancer. He's never looked at another woman. As for Diane, well Diane was unhappily married. But she was dutiful. She stuck it out. Until her husband left one day with a half-page note thanking her for her cooking and housework. But she wasn't sad. She didn't feel anything for her husband. That happens too. *(straightens sugar dispenser on Paul's table)* Diane hasn't seen Paul for eight years. Until today.

PAUL *(gets up to greet DIANE who rushes over to the table. DIANE is attractive, well dressed, about 15 years younger than PAUL):* Diane, you haven't changed a bit. It's so good to see you.

DIANE: It's good to see you too. You look just like you did on that last day in the office.

PAUL: I wish, but thank you. *(An awkward silence.)* So many times over the years, I thought of reaching out. Calling you or something. I'm so sorry I didn't. I don't know why I never did. You were never far from my mind.

DIANE: It's ok. I'm just glad we're here. And glad I finally got around to emailing you. I meant too so many times over the years.

PAUL: So where do we begin?

DIANE: I want you to go first.

PAUL: Well...not much to tell really. I sold the house...too many memories that came flooding back when I didn't have the office to distract me. I moved to a small condo near the village green. I wake up. Take long walks. Feed the ducks, read the Times, grab coffee and go home. Then I repeat.

DIANE: What about the rest of the day?

PAUL: I text my grandkids, maybe meet an old client every now and then for lunch...oh.. and I paint. I'm learning to paint.

DIANE: That's great Paul. I always thought you had an artistic side. I used to love the photos you took on your vacations.

PAUL: You liked those? I always thought I bored you with my pictures.... Sometimes I try and paint those old photos. I'm not very good, but I'm trying. I find that it helps me lose myself. It passes the time. (*DIANE nods. More silence.*) Your turn Diane.

DIANE: Well, I don't paint but I write. I keep a journal. Just random thoughts, sayings I find interesting. It also passes the time.

PAUL: That's great Are you still in your old house?

DIANE: Yes. It's the only thing I got out of my marriage.

PAUL: It was a nice house.

DIANE (*laughs and nods*): I have a few girlfriends. Not many, but the ones I have...we're close and they keep me moving. We eat lunch, we take day trips, we go to shows, museums, read books and discuss the news of the day. I feel very lucky.

PAUL: Friends are important. I miss having them. I worked so hard for so many years and lost track of all my old friends. The business friends were just that, business friends. So, when I retired that went away. I see a few of the same people at the duck pond and we wave. Otherwise, it's me and my newspaper, my books, and some paint.

DIANE: What about the kids?

PAUL: They have their own lives, as they should, far, far away. I see them on holidays. (*pause*) Melinda was the glue. She was the one who made the plans, kept the calendar, marked the birthdays, and kept us close. When she passed...well you know it just sort of stopped. Life...as I knew it anyway ...stopped.

DIANE: I'm so sorry Paul.

PAUL: Don't be. I had a good run. More than my fair share. I don't feel shorted in any way.

DIANE: Well, I wish I felt the same way.... I didn't have that happy marriage. Not even for a few months... I'm glad you feel blessed. You deserved to be happy.

PAUL: I'm sorry to hear that, Diane. I wish I could have helped in some way. I was never sure what to say or do. I had a feeling you were unhappy. But I wasn't sure where the line was. I didn't want to pry.

DIANE: That's ok. It was so many years ago. Feels like another lifetime....I don't think about it much anymore. As for you.... You were the very best boss anyone could ever hope for.

PAUL: Thank you. That means a lot to me. (*pause*) I was all business. We never got to know each other.

DIANE: Well, yes and no. I observed you for years. I think I have a good idea of who you are.

PAUL: Boring, I'm sure.

DIANE: Not exactly.

PAUL: You know I'm not sure if given a choice that I would do it again. I mean I'm not complaining. The law was good to me. You were very good to me. But I might have chosen a different life.

DIANE: Really, I'm surprised.

PAUL: Oh, I'm not big on regrets. But if I was given a choice, I might have become an entrepreneur or a police detective. Something a little more exciting. I always wanted to build something or solve something. The law was always a little amorphous to me. We settled things. We didn't solve them. We'd win a case and our clients wouldn't collect or feel happy. I'm not sure what it all added up to...

DIANE: Like I said, I'm surprised. Because you were a superb lawyer, Paul. You cared for every client. Whether they had a little case or a big one.

PAUL: Thank you, I think you grade on a curve when it comes to me but I do appreciate it.

DIANE: Well to me, you were the local Atticus Finch. Before of course, they turned him into a racist in that silly sequel.

PAUL (*laughs*): I'm not sure you can improve on *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

DIANE: They couldn't.

PAUL: Sequels are hard.

DIANE: Maybe...

(The Lights Darken. When they come back on. We see JIMMY.)

JIMMY: Paul doesn't know it yet. But Diane is looking for a sequel to her time spent with Paul. He's a smart man, but sometimes slow to see things. Even when they are right before his eyes.

[SCENE 5]

(The lights fade as we JIMMY sweep the floor. When the lights go up we see ALI and DANIEL sitting at the table. Their clothes indicate that time has gone by. You can sense the tension.)

ALI: Thanks for seeing me on such short notice, Daniel. I know you're super busy.

DANIEL: Yeah, well... *(An awkward silence falls over the table.)*

ALI: Dan...please don't be mad at me.

DANIEL: I'm not mad at you Ali.

ALI: So what are you then.... hurt, disappointed?

DANIEL *(nods)*: Keep going.

ALI: I'd rather not. I would like to catch up with an old friend and see how you're doing.

DANIEL: Is that what I am, an old friend? I'm curious. I'd like to know. How am I categorized these days? A kid you grew up with? An old neighbor? A school chum?

ALI: You know you're more than that. *(An awkward silence)* Look, Daniel, if this is too painful I get it. I can slip into town from here on out, see my mom and sister and slide on out. We don't have to see each other. But for the record, I like it when we do. I didn't mean to insult you; you are very special to me.

DANIEL: I wish I knew what to say Ali. I've tried the calm and cool approach...I've done the joking around visits; the I don't give a damn act.... I'm out of ideas.

ALI: How about honesty...why don't you just tell me where your head is at. Tell me how you feel. No act, just be real.

DANIEL (*thinks for a moment.*): You really want to know?

ALI (*nods*): I do. Dan, I don't want us to be like this...

DANIEL: Ok....(*beat, struggling*) Well, let's start off by saying that all these years later I still wake up and go to bed thinking about you. (*beat*) And during the day, I think I see you all the time...in the distance, at the grocery store, coming into the pharmacy, but it's never you. But your face is everywhere. You are in every crowd...but I know you aren't coming home and that I won't be leaving here.... maybe for the same reasons.... You can't stay because you don't feel you belong here and I can't leave because I feel I do. It's a cruel joke. Only you get to be happy, and I get to long for you every day of my life. That's the truth. My truth. I don't blame you, Ali. I am not mad at you. But I am sad. Because I love someone I can't be with. I'm tired of feeling this way and I don't know what to do about it.

ALI (*she reaches across the table and holds Dan's hand*): I love you too. I doI wanted you to come with me. To get out of here...even if just to see what it would be like to cut ties to this town.

DANIEL: Ali, it's not about this town....I love this place, I don't feel imprisoned at all. You know, I might have gone with you if I could have known that the trip would end...but I have a feeling you want to keep going forever and I'm someone who needs to feel (*pause*) rooted. I want a home.

ALI: I could have been your home.

DANIEL: Maybe.... but community is important to me too. Kids, a yard, Little League, barbecues, friends...hanging out in places like this.

ALI: That's just not me...

DANIEL: I know, which is why I'd like this to somehow... end...I can't think about you anymore. It's not healthy. I can't let others in because thoughts of you drown them out. *(pause)* Seeing you today... how beautiful you are... how radiant and special only sets me back. I can't just chuck my life... much as I am tempted too sometimes.... I would...maybe... if I knew we would land somewhere where I can have those things I told you about. But then I'm asking you to be something you're not. And it wouldn't work.

ALI: Are you saying you don't want to see me anymore?

DANIEL *(takes a moment)*: I think so. Yes. *(Silence)* I just want a chance to move on Ali....

ALI: I know.... *(ALI hesitates for a moment then gets up and leaves. The lights go down.)*

[SCENE 6]

When they go up we see JIMMY cleaning some cups)

JIMMY *(walks over to Phil's photo, touches the frame)*: Complications. The human brain... damned if I know the answer. I miss my friend Phil. I feel his absence. He had a presence about him—an aura. It was greatness. You don't see it often, but you know it when you do. We met playing ball when we were kids. Great pitcher, better musician. Some people are just... gifted. *(JIMMY looks at Thurman photo)* Thurman would have loved him. Plane crash took my favorite ballplayer at the height of his career. I thought he was indestructible. I've learned none of us are—not Phil, not Thurman. It's all ephemeral. Life is fleeting. And love... well, love can be elusive. *(The lights go down...when they go back up we see PAUL and DIANE at the table.)*

DIANE: Thanks again, I loved the concert.

PAUL: Really, cause it's old people music. I wasn't sure you would like it.

DIANE: Well, I like old things.

PAUL: Hey, careful now.

DIANE: I'm just kidding...I love the old songs, they still sound great.

PAUL (*looks at Diane for a moment.*): Can I ask you something? It's been on my mind.

DIANE: Of course.

PAUL: This has been wonderful Diane. I've had a great time reconnecting. You're easy to talk to, you've gotten me out of the house and into the world again. I am forever thankful.

DIANE: But... I sense a but coming.

PAUL: But... I'm not sure where this is supposed to go. I'm not good at this.

DIANE: Good at what Paul?

PAUL: Well, I don't know if we are friends or if this is supposed to lead somewhere....this is all new for me... I'm lost Diane. I don't know what you want or expect...and for the record I'm ok with whatever you want. I just like being with you and getting out of the house.

DIANE: You're very sweet. I don't have any expectations. I really don't. I feel comfortable with you. Safe...and that's a big thing these days. I trust you and it's nice to have someone to go out with, to talk about books and movies and the day's events. I'm fine if that's all this is...more than fine. But if you are asking or wondering...then yes...(*beat*) Yes, I'm open to seeing what else we may find with each other.

PAUL (*smiles and looks at Diane for a long moment. He reaches out for her hand*): When I was a young man... a lifetime ago... if I was out on a date with a wonderful and beautiful woman such as yourself, I would gently but confidently be selling myself. I was never pushy, but I knew who I was and where I was going. (*pause, looks at her directly*) But now? I don't know how many good years I have left. I snore. I don't look good without a shirt on. I

get up five times a night, fall asleep on the couch. There are days when my back hurts so much I have to figure out how to tie my shoes. I'm losing hair where I need it and growing hair where it shouldn't be.

DIANE: So what's your point? Because everything you said... your honesty... just makes you even more endearing. Paul, you don't have to sell me. I know who you are. (*touches his face*) Do you think I'm some Victoria's Secret model? I don't go sleeveless anymore, I have night sweats, I use Rogaine and sometimes I look in the mirror and wonder who the old lady is staring back at me. But isn't it wonderful? We're finally comfortable in our skin. We've earned that comfort. You're a good man. That's all that matters to me.

PAUL (*relieved, smiling*): You don't model for Victoria's Secret?

DIANE (*reaches for his hand*): Paul, we don't have to call this anything. Let's just see where it goes. No pressure, no labels. (*PAUL smiles. You can see the pressure come off him.*) Let's just enjoy whatever this is.

(*Lights go down and then up on JIMMY. It's the end of the day*)

JIMMY (*wiping down counter, pauses mid-motion*): Spaces. I've been thinking about spaces lately. The way we inhabit them, choose them, or sometimes find ourselves trapped within them. (*looks around café*) This café is my little space. I know every square inch—the creak in the floorboard by the espresso machine... (*steps on it, it creaks*) The window that sticks when it rains, the corner table that wobbles unless you... (*walks over, folds a napkin under leg*) For many who push through that door each day, this is their third place. They have a home, they have that office where they spend their days, and then... they have this café. I watch them arrive from those cubicles—spaces without windows, bordered by fabric panels decorated with photos of loved ones. Not unlike my wall of customer snapshots. (*touches counter affectionately*) I think of Daniel. He spends his days behind a counter too, like me, but different. A narrow kingdom above a cash register, dispensing relief. His world measured in milligrams. And Ali? Ali chose bigger spaces. The world as home. No walls, no familiar corners. (*returns to wiping*) We all make our choices in the spaces we inhabit. I think there's freedom in knowing every inch of small spaces. (*Lights go down on JIMMY.*)

[SCENE 7]

(Lights go on and we see DANIEL in the café. ALI enters. DANIEL stands when he sees her. He pulls out a chair and ALI sits.)

DANIEL: I'm glad you didn't leave without seeing me.

ALI: I don't like how we left things...I don't want to leave this way.

DANIEL: I know, but I can't live with you coming back and forth, popping in and out of my life. I can't move on and I need to. I need you to leave...so we can move on, somehow. You coming back home every year or so...it's hard. Getting together for a few weeks only to see you leave again has gotten too painful for me.

ALI: *(cutting him off, stepping close enough that their foreheads almost touch)* No, please listen to me. I'm afraid that if I leave, I won't come back this time... I'm afraid that we'll lose each other....and it's hard for me to think of a life without you in it. *(pause)* Your dad is retired...you saved the family pharmacy; you can hire someone to run it and come with me.

DANIEL *(voice thick with emotion)* I like it here Ali. This is my home. This place means a lot to me. I would go with you right now, if I knew we would come back. I have a life here...a history...ties that bind me happily to this place.

ALI: You're choosing this place over a life with me...

DANIEL: For some reason, you've made this an either or decision....I can't just hire someone and run off. I'm in charge of a family business...my dad's legacy and my grandfather's legacy too. The store needs me.... Someone who feels this place... and I love this place, Ali. Please don't make me choose. *(There's a long silence, DANIEL reaches for ALI's hand)* For so long I thought if only I had some super power to get you to stay. Something so special that you wouldn't be able to leave, wouldn't be able to take your eyes off me. But I am so.... ordinary. And you are so extraordinary.

ALI: Daniel, you're the farthest thing from ordinary.

DANIEL (*Waves her off*): Ali...no. Please. I know who I am. I know I'm a good guy. I do. But this is never going to be a level playing field. I see a world in you, I can't look at another woman. And I've tried. I mean nothing would have made me happier than to move beyond this...to stop seeing you in every crowd. To stop hoping you would walk through a door and tell me you couldn't live without me. I didn't want to let go of that. But the years go by. And you don't come back. And when you do, you don't look at me like I look at you.

ALI: You idealize me.

DANIEL: Maybe.

ALI: Definitely. I've never been all that you think I am. Truth is I'm a pretty big mess.

DANIEL (*shakes his head*): I know you're not perfect...I also know how I feel. I know what I see Ali.

ALI: And I appreciate it... I just wish I had an answer. Because I don't want to hold you back. And I don't want to hurt you.

DANIEL: It's love Ali. I can't wash it off.

ALI: I can't either.

DANIEL: I'm not going to ask you to stay. You have to want to be here.

ALI: What if I want the boy but not the town?

DANIEL: Is this place so bad? So boring. So ordinary that you can't be with me and stay here?

ALI: I know you love it here...but this place is more complicated for me than it is for you. You had this idyllic experience growing up.

DANIEL: We grew up together.

ALI: Yeah, but you went home to a loving family and I went home to something very different.

DANIEL: I'm sorry, I'm not following.

ALI: My family wasn't like yours Daniel.

DANIEL: I'm confused, I know your folks.

ALI: No, you don't. (*The room is silent.*) Nothing physical happened to me.

DANIEL: What are you saying Ali?

ALI (*Struggles to explain*): I don't know what to tell you.

DANIEL: Were you abused?

ALI: Nothing physical happened to me. (*More silence*) My parents were unhappy. My house was silent.....there was no love. Just silence, night after night. Year after year. That's all I can say right now.

DANIEL: I didn't know.

ALI: I couldn't tell you.

DANIEL: Well, I wish you had.

ALI: What were you going to do? We were kids, Daniel. You were full of light. I didn't want to disturb that. You were my lifeline.

DANIEL: I would have tried to help.

ALI: I know. But there was nothing you could have done. (*ALI looks away*) You know how when I came over for dinner...I'd never want to leave.

DANIEL: I thought you just liked my parents.

ALI: I do. Very much.....But I also liked hearing forks against plates. Noise...conversations. Your father asking about your day. (*beat*) At my

house, dinner was just the sound of clocks ticking. My father staring at nothing. My mother's fingers tapping on the table. Sometimes they wouldn't speak for weeks, but somehow the silence was louder than screaming.

DANIEL: It's painful here for you, isn't it?

ALI: Yes. It has been. I wanted adventure, I did. That part was real. But I didn't want to wander, I wanted to run.

DANIEL: This is so confusing...I know your folks.

ALI (*shakes her head*) No. No, you don't... they hated each other Daniel. Unhappiness is like a cancer and it ate at them. They did nothing but hurt each other. (*There is a silence, ALI is visibly uncomfortable*) They were like zombies when nobody was looking. It's hard to explain. It was a toxic situation for me and my sister.

DANIEL: I would never hurt you. We are not like that...we never run out of things to talk about.

ALI: It's not that easy. And you don't know that. My parents would have said that about each other too...

DANIEL: It doesn't have to be complicated. (*pause*) Ali, you think of me as some hopeless romantic. I'm not. I know that love is hard. I know it's not all wine and chocolates. I get it. But I also know that I love you with everything I have in my heart and soul. I wish you would let me love you.

ALI (*tears in her eyes*): I don't know how to do that.

DANIEL (*with quiet intensity*): I need you to make a choice, Ali. A real one this time. Because I'm making mine. If you can't decide whether you want to be here - really be here - then don't come looking for me again.

ALI (*reaching for him*): Daniel, please...

DANIEL (*pulling away*): No. I've spent years putting my life on hold, hoping you'd come back and stay. I can't do this anymore. (*DANIEL suddenly turns and storms out of the cafe, the bell above the door ringing sharply as it slams behind him. ALI stands alone, stunned by this reversal. For the first*

time, she's the one left behind. The stage begins to darken except for a spotlight on ALI.)

JIMMY (*stepping into a second spotlight, addressing the audience directly*)
First time I've seen Daniel walk out on anybody. Funny how the tables turn.
Now Ali's the one left wondering...

(Lights fade on JIMMY, leaving only ALI in spotlight for a moment before complete blackout)

END OF ACT 1

ACT 2 SCENE 1

(When the lights go up we see JIMMY sweeping.)

JIMMY: Ali, she's deep as a canyon. And Daniel, well he's as sweet as they come. This is a volatile combination. Hearts get broken, hearts get haunted. *(beat)* She left again, this time for a longer period than usual. Love is hard. Sometimes a winding path. Ali and Daniel walk it differently....

(Lights fade and when they come up it's early morning at the CAFÉ. The place is empty. DANIEL sits at the counter, nursing a coffee. JIMMY wipes down the counter while keeping an eye on DANIEL, who hasn't touched his coffee and looks lost in thought.)

JIMMY *(sliding a plate with a slice of pie toward Daniel)*: On the house.

DANIEL: *(looking up, surprised)* I didn't order pie.

JIMMY: No, but you've been staring at that coffee like it holds the secrets of the universe for about twenty minutes now. *(comes around counter, sits next to Daniel)* So, what's got you looking like you're carrying the weight of the world on a Tuesday morning?

DANIEL: I had a date last night.

JIMMY: And that's got you this down? Must have been some date.

DANIEL: The date was fine. She was... nice.

JIMMY: Ah. "Nice." The most damning word in the English language when it comes to romance. This about Ali?

DANIEL *(surprised)*: Not exactly a secret, is it?

JIMMY: You know, I had someone like that once. Elena. Six months we had together... fireworks. Then she graduated and I never heard from her again.

DANIEL: Did you ever get over her?

JIMMY (*considers this*): You don't "get over" the people who change you. You just... incorporate them. They become part of your story. Some people are lighthouses, Daniel. Fixed points that help you navigate, even when you're nowhere near them. And some people are ships passing in the night – beautiful encounters that aren't meant to last.

DANIEL (*leaning forward, intrigued*): Lighthouses and ships...

JIMMY: Think about it. A lighthouse doesn't move. It stays put through storms, through calm seas, through everything. Its light reaches out across the water, helping sailors find their way home or avoid dangerous shores. But it doesn't chase after ships. It just... stands there, constant.

DANIEL: And Ali is my lighthouse?

JIMMY (*shaking his head*): Can't answer that for you. But ask yourself - when you think about Ali, is she guiding you toward something, or just illuminating what you're missing?

DANIEL: Maybe both.

JIMMY: That's fair. Now, ships - ships are different. They come into port, they're magnificent, full of life and stories from distant places. They dock for a while, sometimes just long enough to refuel, sometimes longer. But eventually, they sail on. That's their nature.

DANIEL: Ali always did have wanderlust. Could never stay in one place too long.

JIMMY: The interesting thing about ships and lighthouses is that they serve different purposes in each other's stories. To the lighthouse, ships are visitors - coming and going, each one different. To the ship, the lighthouse is a marker - something to help them know where they are, even when they're far from it.

DANIEL: So, which one am I in this story?

JIMMY: That's what you need to figure out. Are you a lighthouse, rooted to this place, sending out your light to guide her back someday? Or are you a ship that's dropped anchor for too long, meant to be out exploring other harbors?

DANIEL (*quietly*): I guess I think of myself as the lighthouse. She's the ship. I'm the rooted one. She's at sea.

JIMMY: And that's how it might be. But here's something else to consider - sometimes, after enough voyages, ships get tired. They start looking for a home port, somewhere to belong. And sometimes, rarely, but sometimes... lighthouses get restless. Start wondering what's beyond their stretch of coast.

DANIEL: And how do you know which is which?

JIMMY: That's the million-dollar question, isn't it? Look, son, I can't tell you if Ali is your lighthouse or just a ship that made a deep impression. But I can tell you this – sometimes you got to sail away from the lighthouse to know if you're using it to navigate or just circling it, afraid to go anywhere else.

DANIEL: I felt nothing on that date last night. Not a spark. Nothing.

JIMMY: Sounds like it wasn't the right date. Or maybe you weren't open to feeling anything. (*pauses*) What are you more afraid of – that you'll never find someone who makes you feel what Ali did, or that you will? Because finding someone else means truly accepting she's gone. And that's a different kind of loss.

DANIEL (*quietly*): I told her to leave. That last time. Told her we were over if she did.

JIMMY: Did you mean it?

DANIEL: I thought I did. I thought it would be easier. For both of us.

JIMMY: Moving on is never easy my friend. (*standing up, patting Daniel on the shoulder*) But I can tell you this...life's too short for "nice" dates when you've known fireworks. (*moves back behind counter*) Eat your pie, Daniel. World looks clearer on a full stomach.

(*DANIEL picks up his fork, takes a bite of pie, and seems to consider JIMMY's words as the light shifts and the scene fades. Lights up in the Café, PAUL and DIANE are sharing pie and sipping coffee. Contentment is the vibe*)

[SCENE 2]

DIANE: So...

PAUL: Yes?

DIANE: Did you ever...think about me, you know back in those office days?

PAUL: Think about you?

DIANE: You know...think about me...in a different, unprofessional way.

PAUL: You mean did I ever look at you like something more than my assistant?

DIANE: Yeah...

PAUL: Oh, I don't know. It was so long ago.

DIANE: I know you loved your wife Paul, but every now and then, I thought you might have noticed me.

PAUL (*uncomfortable*): I suppose...I am human.

DIANE: Tell me more.

PAUL: This is very uncomfortable for me Diane.

DIANE: I know, tell me anyway. (*beat*) It's ok...you will still be on the pedestal. I won't think badly of you.

PAUL: Ok.... Well, I liked casual Fridays.... When you wore jeans.

DIANE: Jeans?

PAUL: Jeans. You look great in jeans.

DIANE: Well... that's interesting. I used to spend an hour getting ready, but you liked when I threw on jeans...

PAUL: Yes. And you looked great every Christmas in your red sweater. Oh, and when you dressed up for those client appreciation dinners. You were beautiful.

DIANE: Were?

PAUL: Are...you are beautiful. (*beat*) This is not a comfortable conversation for me Diane. I was very devoted to my wife. But you asked if I noticed, and the truth is I did. I noticed. Every day I saw this beautiful woman who was kind, fun and so good to me and the clients. And I saw a sad woman too. Behind your smile, I saw sadness. And I thought what a waste. She deserves so much more.

DIANE (*Nods*): Yeah..

PAUL: And I wanted to say something ...but I wasn't sure what to say.

DIANE: I know...But you saw me. I mean the real me. I'm joking about my looks. It's all silliness, isn't it? I knew that you saw me as a good person. Someone who had value. And I needed that, because it wasn't happening at home.

PAUL: I did see you. Still do.

DIANE: It's painful to be lonely. I mean really painful. Your whole being hurts.

PAUL: I'm sorry for not saying (pause) something.

DIANE: You don't owe me anything. You were my boss and you were wonderful. Kind and generous. Besides, what were you supposed to do? What could you have said? You were good to me. And that meant a lot.

PAUL: I was also a little distant. I wasn't your friend. And you needed one.

DIANE: Well, I'm glad you're here for me now. And you were there for me back then too. (*beat*) I cherished my time working with you.

PAUL: Me too. (*They sit silently holding hands*)

PAUL: Hey Diane...remember that time you got that perm?

DIANE: I cried for a week.

PAUL: Well, I thought the curls were sexy. You were adorable. Still are...

(*PAUL and DIANE sit in silence for a moment, comfortable in each other's presence. Appreciative of finding kindness and warmth after years of cold and numbness. Lights fade.*)

[SCENE 3]

Lights up on JIMMY. JIMMY wiping a glass, observing a couple across the room, we don't see the couple)

JIMMY: You see that guy over there? Third date. I can tell by the way he's fidgeting—keeps adjusting his shirt collar like it's suddenly two sizes too small. She just casually mentioned an ex. Watch his face crumble. (*leans in, conspiratorial*) Men are ridiculous about sexual history. They want a woman who's confident in bed but somehow magically acquired those skills through osmosis. Like they want someone who can play Chopin without ever having touched a piano. (*polishes another glass*) I've seen it a thousand times. Same guy who brags about his "wild college days" will spend weeks obsessing if his girlfriend mentions one spring break fling. (*chuckles*) Last week, this fella comes in, been married fifteen years. Still gets twitchy when his wife mentions her ex from before they met. Fifteen years! Yet he's calculating bedroom statistics like he's competing in some imaginary Olympics. (*sets down glass*) The real comedy is watching them try to be casual about it. "So how many, uh, relationships have you been in?" They might as well ask, "How many ghosts am I having sex with every time we're together?" As if each previous partner is somehow in the room taking notes on his performance. (*gestures toward the couple*) Look at him now—trying to casually mention the guitar he plays in a band. Translation: "I'm sexy too, right?" Poor guy.

(JIMMY smiles, picks up another glass, lights fade. Lights up as PAUL and DIANE walk into the café, the tension between them palpable. JIMMY glances up from the counter, sensing something is off, but discreetly returns to his work.)
(PAUL pulls out DIANE's chair with stiff politeness.)

DIANE *(once they've settled)*: Are we going to talk about it, or just pretend everything's fine?

PAUL *(with forced casualness)*: I don't know what you mean.

DIANE: Paul, we haven't spoken a word since we left the community center.

PAUL: What do you want me to say?

DIANE: Something. Anything. Your opinion on the weather. The color of my dress. Whether you're ever going to look me in the eye again.

PAUL *(finally meets her gaze. His expression is a mixture of hurt and confusion)* It just caught me off guard.

DIANE: What exactly? That I dated Mark Harrison, or how he talked about us?

PAUL *(struggling)*: Both. *(pause)* You never mentioned him.

DIANE: Because he wasn't worth mentioning.

PAUL: Really? Because the way he talked about you two...*(pause)* "Burned bright" were his exact words.

DIANE *(laughs)*: So it's the intensity that bothers you?

PAUL *(hesitant)*: It's not that simple...Mark Harrison of all people.

DIANE *(confused)*: What does that mean?

PAUL *(uncomfortable)*: He's just so... different from me. Flashy. The sports car, the tan, the country club membership. The ridiculous TV ads...so beneath what a lawyer should be.... "The Mark of Justice"...what does that even mean?

DIANE: Who knows...he's a terrible lawyer Paul...

PAUL: Such a showboat...what did you see in that guy?

DIANE: That was fifteen years ago, Paul. Who knows...I've changed.

PAUL: I know....(*An awkward silence falls over the table*)

DIANE (*leans close and takes Paul's hand*) Look, the truth is... I've kissed a few frogs. And I'm tired of it. You have no idea how crazy it is out there...the dating pool is less "pool" and more (*pause*) "toxic waste dump." And yes, I've made some poor choices. The Mark of Justice being Exhibit A. (*PAUL is quiet, seems to be processing*) Your face is doing that thing people do when they're trying not to ask what they desperately want to ask. I get a sense that you have more questions.

PAUL (*hesitant*): I do.

DIANE (*with forced cheerfulness*): Of course you do! And it's fine. Ask away...and if you want to run for the exit, I promise I won't chase you past the second block.

PAUL: I don't want to cross-examine you.

DIANE: It's okay. The witness is ready.

PAUL: Just two questions.

DIANE: The prosecution may proceed.

PAUL: Why me? Why now?

DIANE: Why you? Because I'm tired of dating men whose emotional depth could fit in a thimble. Why now? Because I'm exhausted. I've been settling for hamburger while dreaming of fillet mignon. I want something better. Something real. It's exhausting being alone, and it's even more exhausting pretending someone's enough when they can barely have a conversation.

PAUL: So, you think of me as fillet mignon?

DIANE: At your best...yes. Today, you're more of a flank steak.

PAUL (*laughs*): Thanks for being honest. You were always so honest.

DIANE (*with unexpected rawness*): No, Paul, I wasn't. I kept a lot of stuff hidden away. I lied to myself for years. That's also exhausting. (*studying him*) You have a terrible poker face.

PAUL: What do you mean?

DIANE: You're disappointed. You don't like that I have a history that doesn't quite fit your image of who I should be.

PAUL: That's not true.

DIANE (*with quiet certainty*): It is. I can see it in your eyes. You had this image of me all these years -the efficient assistant, the proper lady. And now you're recalibrating. (*pause*) It's fine. I'm used to it.

PAUL: I'm sorry.... I know it's wrong. Intellectually, I know your past is your past, and it has nothing to do with us. (*gestures between them*) With this....But I'm still...

DIANE (*filling in*): Judging me?

PAUL: I'm not explaining this well.... (*gathering his thoughts*) When Mark said, "Diane and I burned bright while it lasted,"... with that smarmy look of his...

DIANE (*interrupts*): You felt disappointed?

PAUL (*nodding*): Maybe...and a little jealous... I've never felt jealous before. It's... disorienting.

DIANE (*gently*): There's nothing to be jealous of.

PAUL: When Mark mentioned your past, I realized there are parts of you I know nothing about.

DIANE: Do you really want to know about them?

PAUL: I thought I did. Now I'm not so sure.

DIANE: You need to decide if you can accept that I have a past, Paul.

PAUL: I know everyone has a history.

DIANE: Knowing and accepting are different things.

PAUL: Was it serious with him? Were there others?

DIANE (*reaching for his hand, takes a moment*): My marriage was loveless. You know that. After the divorce, there were a few relationships. A few...Mark was the most serious. But looking back, it no longer feels serious. He taught me what I didn't want...flash and tans and silly sports cars...it's all so stupid...I don't want stupid. (*looking directly at him*) You and I (*searching for words*) this is different. The men in my life were strangers and I had bad judgment because loneliness....loneliness will lower your standards...but I know you...I know who you are... I like that I am sure of you...sure of who you are. I need you to be sure of me.

PAUL (*still processing*): I'm sure of you Diane. And I know we're different. Intellectually, I know that.

DIANE: But emotionally?

PAUL: I'm a work in progress.

DIANE: You're a funny one Paul. I don't know how you can look at a guy like Mark and feel jealous...

PAUL: Well, I'm not exactly Mr. Excitement...

DIANE: Do you think I want flash? (*beat*) But that's not it, is it? You don't like that I've been with other men. You're judging me...

PAUL: I don't know what I'm doing...You said you kissed a lot of frogs...

DIANE: Yeah...so? Do you want to hear about them alphabetically or chronologically?

PAUL: Diane...I think we should change the subject.

DIANE: No, I think we ought to deal with this head on. You'd like to think of me as June Cleaver in sensible shoes... Sorry to shatter the illusion, Paul, but I'm very real. I've been around the block. I'm not proud of it but I'm not ashamed either... I'm an independent woman. I've made mistakes. I believe we learn from experience. It's like that Leonard Cohen song...there's a crack in everything and everyone...that's how the light gets in.

PAUL: Leonard Bernstein said that?

DIANE: Leonard Cohen... (*Paul clearly doesn't know who Leonard Cohen is*) He was a musician, not another ex-boyfriend I didn't tell you about.

PAUL (*laughs...some tension has been released*) We come from different times...my wife was a virgin when we got married. I was the experienced one, which is laughable considering my vast experience consisted of one woman, one time. (*taking a deep breath*) I feel like a relic... like I should be in a museum display: "Monogamous Man of the 20th Century. Do Not Touch." I come from another place.

DIANE: Where life was simpler...

PAUL: Yes, where life was simpler. When men proudly had a double standard, and women pretended not to notice.

DIANE (*laughs*): Can I confide in you?

PAUL: Of course.

DIANE: I need to be able to talk freely to you...

PAUL: I'll do better, I promise.

DIANE: OK...(pause) I lost my virginity when I was very young...and I wish I had waited. It was the thing to do in those days...so I did. Before I was ready. (*pause*) We are only what....15 years apart.... but it was a different generation. I think your generation had the right idea when it comes to intimacy.

PAUL: There were different rules for men.

DIANE: Well...that part was wrong...

PAUL: If I'm honest with you, I'm not sure I'll ever be completely comfortable with this kind of conversation.... but I am willing to try.

DIANE: That's good enough for me. We do need to be able to talk about everything. I promise I will spare you the details.

PAUL: That would be good...

DIANE (*laughs*): Did we just have our first fight?

PAUL (*laughs*): I think so.

DIANE: Where does this leave us?

PAUL: Better than we were an hour ago...I just need you to be patient with me sometimes. While I fumble through all this.

DIANE (*lifts her coffee mug in a toast*): Well, here's to more fights. Because that will mean we are talking about all sorts of tough stuff. I want this to be different...I want us to be different...does that make sense? I've wasted too many years.

PAUL (*looking at her directly*) And I shut down completely...(beat) We both wasted a lot of time, didn't we?

DIANE: Yes, we have. But you know what scares me more than wasting all those years?

PAUL: What?

DIANE: Wasting any more.

PAUL (*PAUL takes this in, something shifting in his expression. He squeezes her hand. quietly*) Let's not waste any more.

DIANE: Agreed. I need you to remember that my past made me who I am. The woman sitting across from you now. For better or worse.

PAUL (*looking at her with genuine appreciation*): Definitely for better.

DIANE (*DIANE smiles with relief. The tension between them has eased, they've found their footing again.*) Should we order? I'm thinking pie.

PAUL: You always think pie.

DIANE: And you always pretend to consider other options before ordering the same thing I do. (*They share a small laugh, finding their way back to the comfort they've built between them. The table darkens.*)

(*When the lights come up, we see JIMMY in the café. JIMMY begins to sweep*)

JIMMY: Like I said, The Café on Main...it's a little world unto itself. But it's not the world. Just a little slice of Stony Brook. *(pause)* Stony Brook's got layers. History. Secrets. Stories. The Setauket Spies—the ones who helped Washington win the war? They were just up the road. The old Country House restaurant...it's haunted by a girl accused of working for the redcoats. They killed her. Imagine that. And then there's Hercules. Not the god—the carving. A full-color figurehead from the USS Ohio, first ship launched from the Brooklyn Navy Yard in 1820. The ship was scrapped, but Hercules survived. Passed from hand to hand, collector to collector, until he ended up on the Montauk Highway as a roadside attraction. That's where the legend started. They say if you kiss his brow, you'll be married within a year. People swear by it. I've never tested it myself... maybe I should. By the '50s, termites had nearly eaten him alive, but a man named Ward Melville restored him. They named the high school after him—not for saving Hercules, but maybe that would have been enough. These days Hercules sits by the water...just steps from here. All that is interesting local history, but it's the kissing the brow thing that people remember. The myth. The magic. They say smitten folks leave this café, wander over to Hercules, and ask for a little advice. Maybe even some mystical intervention. Can't blame them. Who doesn't want a little magic in their lives.

(Lights down and up on DIANE AND PAUL at their table, they are sharing a pie)

DIANE *(blurts out)*: I want that feeling of being in love... the rush of excitement, the anticipation, the passion, the fun, the romance, the yearning.

PAUL: There's nothing like it. But that's for kids Diane.

DIANE: I think it's possible at any age. You've always been an optimist Paul, don't shut that part of life down. Love is out there. It can be like...*(searching for a word)*...it can be like pizza, that last slice in the fridge when you thought there was none left—unexpected but oh so satisfying.

PAUL: Hard to argue with that logic... you sound like a Hallmark card or a Pizza Hut commercial I'm not sure which.

DIANE: I'm not good with words, but I know that love is better than loneliness. It's not even close. (*DIANE stops for a moment, as if considering her next move.*) It's there for us...I know it is. But it's a choice...we have to decide to go all in.

PAUL: Oh my...you would have been a great lawyer...I don't know what to say.

DIANE: You don't have to say anything, just nod.

PAUL (*laughs*): You were right there all those years...but I never really saw you.

DIANE: What are you trying to say Paul?

PAUL: I don't know....(*beat*) when Melinda passed, I was certain I would never love again... and I was OK with that. I had something few men experience...(beat) Loving her was like breathing...it felt natural...and losing her was like losing something elemental...it was like losing the rain. But here you are, and I don't understand it. I don't understand how we could know each other for so many years then lose track and when we meet again it's like seeing you with new eyes. (*silence*) It feels very real...but surreal too.... I just don't know how to make sense of it all.

DIANE: Paul, it's ok to feel again. I think you just go with it...follow your heart.

PAUL: I want to feel again.... I've been numb for so long. Shut off from the world.

DIANE: I know what that's like.... (*beat*) and we can put an end to that numbness. We have a chance to reach for something special...and I want us to take that chance.

PAUL: I don't know what to say Diane.

DIANE: You don't have to say anything...you just have to let go....of fear, of doubt...you need to have faith.

(PAUL reaches for DIANE's hand. The lights go down.)

[SCENE 4]

(Lights up on JIMMY standing with a rag wiping down the bar)

JIMMY: I never found lasting love...lord knows I tried. I had relationships over the years, but not quite the great loves I've witnessed in this Café. I didn't want to settle, I don't think that would be fair, to anyone. Some would say that's a cruel fate for a hopeless romantic...maybe. But I'm not ready to accept that I'll never find love. I have hope. And I'm open to magic. I believe in it.

(The stage darkens. When the lights go up, we see PAUL standing in the pavilion next to Hercules)

PAUL: Well, here I am. It's been what... 45 years or so. Do you remember? I came here to tell you about Melinda. Didn't kiss your brow, but I confided in you and a year later... we were married. *(pauses, takes a deep breath)* She was a good wife. I loved her very much. She's part of me, my history. *(silence)* But I have to let her go now. Not forget—never forget—but I need to say goodbye. Not to the memories, but to the part of me that's been holding on as if she were still here. *(looks directly at statue)* Her name is Diane. I love her. Didn't think it was possible at my age. *(touches statue gently)* It feels like a betrayal sometimes, to love again. But Melinda wouldn't see it that way, would she? She'd want me to live, not just exist. *(pause)* Diane looks at me as if I am a great man. I'm not. But it feels good to be looked at kindly. *(steps back)* Now I have a second chance at love. I have to say goodbye to one love to embrace another. That's what I'm doing here, Hercules. Saying goodbye to the grief that's kept me company. *(touches statue one final time)* So long, Melinda. And thank you.

(Lights fade and go up on ALI standing before Hercules)

ALI: With all due respect, I've been a few places. I've seen some things. Statues of gods and saints who were supposed to have all these powers...did I believe? No, I was there to look. So, I just want to say, that I don't expect anything here. You were a roadside attraction, before you were a legend. I don't think I'm going to find magic in Stony Brook. So, no

pressure Hercules. But honest to G-d I can't shake this boy who lives here. I've been far and wide and still I come back here to my boring hometown for this guy and his crazy, romantic dreams. And all I'm left with is a question. A haunting question...why? How is it possible that you can travel the world and not meet anyone who can compare with your high school boyfriend. Holy crap, I'm such a cliché.

(The lights go dark. When the lights go up, we see DANIEL in front of Hercules)

DANIEL: You must be sick of me by now...and to be honest I'm not so thrilled by you either. Your super powers are lost on me. I mean they don't work do they? *(Long pause)* You are supposed to be this mystical force for love but in reality you are just a good place to come with a six pack of beer and a boom box full of Led Zeppelin songs. *(chuckles)* I'm dating myself Hercules. Led Zeppelin is ancient history and I haven't seen a boom box since I don't know when.... I guess I'm here to say goodbye to a Stony Brook icon. That would be you, old friend. I won't be coming back here again. You didn't work for me...I guess she just wasn't meant to be.

(The lights go dark. When they go up we see JIMMY.)

JIMMY: Not everyone who lives in Stony Brook visits Hercules. I never did. But I think most of us believe in magic. Me, I believe in my front door. I've always held out hope that one day the love of my life would come through the doors of the cafe and that I would recognize her for what she was...my soul mate. Out of the thousands of people who came through the front door of my cafe I believed firmly that I would be able identify my true love. Kind of hokey..and it hasn't happened yet...but that doesn't mean it won't. I still believe...in love. I believe in love, my friend Phil Fabrizio and Thurman Munson.

[SCENE 5]

(Lights up on PAUL and DIANE at their usual table in the café. They've just finished lunch. DIANE is browsing a newspaper while PAUL seems lost in thought.)

DIANE *(looking up)*: You're awfully quiet today.

PAUL *(coming back to the present)*: Sorry. Just thinking.

DIANE (*setting down the paper*): Penny for your thoughts?

PAUL (*with gentle humor*): Inflation's terrible these days. They're worth at least a quarter now.

DIANE (*smiling*): I'll pay the premium.

PAUL (*hesitates, organizing his thoughts*): I had to look for a photo album yesterday. For my daughter - she wanted some old pictures of her mother for a family project.

DIANE: Did you find it?

PAUL: Eventually. But I went through six other albums first. Forty years of life, all those memories, stuffed in boxes in my closet. (*looks at her carefully*) Melinda and I... we had this shared language. Inside jokes from 40 years ago. We could reference something with just a look and we'd both immediately know the whole story.

DIANE (*softly*): That's beautiful, Paul.

PAUL: It was. And it happened so gradually, building this common history. (*with sudden animation*) With you... we're starting from scratch in so many ways. And it's wonderful. Truly. Learning about you - your favorite books, what makes you laugh. It's like discovering a new country.

DIANE: I feel the same way.

PAUL: But sometimes I get tired. Not of you - never of you. But of the effort of building it all from the ground up. (*worried he's offended her*) That sounds terrible, doesn't it?

DIANE: No. It sounds honest. It's exhausting starting over. Learning someone's entire history. (*takes his hand*) We won't have enough time to build what you and Melinda had. We'll build something different. Something uniquely ours.

PAUL (*grateful*): Not better or worse. Just... different.

DIANE: There's something wonderful about starting fresh at this stage of life. We know exactly who we are. No pretending. (*with playful confidence*) I know I'm impossible before my morning coffee. You know you tell the same jokes over and over.

PAUL(*embarrassed*): I do not.

DIANE (*laughing*): The one about the priest and the rabbi? Three times now. It gets funnier every time...but the one where you ask the waitress whether the wine is seedless... you can retire that one.

PAUL (*mock offense*): That's a deal....tell me a story from your past...
(*As DIANE begins her story, PAUL watches her with a mixture of contentment and wonder -the look of a man who appreciates both what he had and what he's found anew. Lights go down*)

(*When the lights go up we see JIMMY in the Café. We hear a few notes of Moon River*)

JIMMY: Moon River...again. Been on my jukebox since I opened the place. I like the Audrey Hepburn version. Andy Williams does a fine job as well. But Audrey, oh she took your breath away. Do you know what my favorite part of the song is? Right at the end she says "hi" very softly, and you melt. Audrey looks up from her window, sees her love and melts the world with one word.

(*The lights dim on JIMMY and when they go up, we see DIANE AND PAUL at the table. DIANE is staring at PAUL as he cuts their pie.*)

DIANE: You look very handsome tonight.

PAUL: Thank you. You always look beautiful.

DIANE: Did you like the movie?

PAUL: It was a little too violent for me. I like the old movies; they told stories back in the day.

DIANE: What's your favorite?

PAUL: I love Butch Cassidy and the Sundance kid. That movie had it all, the Old West, humor, two great stars. I never tire of watching it.

DIANE: You know that it ends in a hail of bullets, right?

PAUL: Yeah. But you don't see the bullets. What's your favorite movie?

DIANE: I love Breakfast at Tiffany's.

PAUL: Really? That's way before your time.

DIANE: Oh, I like the old movies. And I loved Audrey Hepburn.

PAUL: Me too.

DIANE: Do you remember the song from that movie?

PAUL: Of course, Moon River is a classic.

DIANE: It sure says a lot.

PAUL: I agree.

DIANE: I think it tells our story.

PAUL: Really?

DIANE: Yes. The river is a symbol for love. She sings about her love being a dream maker and a heartbreaker. Isn't that what love is all about? It can be a beautiful dream or a heartbreak, sometimes, most of the times, it's both. You sign on for both. But Holly's determined to follow her heart. She's OK with the heartbreak.

PAUL: You've given this some thought.

DIANE: I have. Like Holly I choose to follow my heart. I want to feel it all, Paul. I'm OK with the joy, and I'm OK with the heartbreak and everything in between. Do you want to follow your heart?

PAUL: Yes... yes, I do.

DIANE: Good answer counselor.

PAUL: I'll do my best not to be a heartbreaker.

DIANE: Oh, I know you will be...and that's OK. You can't have love without the tough stuff. Paul please don't worry about the time you have left. Follow your heart my love.

PAUL (*nods and reaches for DIANE's hands*): I promise. I love you, Diane.

DIANE: I know...and I love you too..... Isn't life great?

(*Lights out on PAUL and DIANE; lights go up on JIMMY*)

JIMMY (*surveys his café*): It's funny - I've stayed in one place all these years, watching others drift in and out like leaves on a stream. I'm not complaining. It was my choice, and I would do it all over again. I love it here. I love this place and I love this town. (*beat*) But sometimes (*pause*)

every now and then... I wish that we were given parallel lives so we could take those other roads and see what might have been. That's what gets me about certain songs... they remind us that life is always moving, always flowing.... like a river. (*JIMMY sits at the table pensively pushing the rag along the table*) You know, I've watched thousands of people fall in love in this café. Some love burned hot and fast, others smoldered for decades. Some were over before the coffee got cold, and some lasted a lifetime.

(pauses, looks up at the audience)

Steinbeck once wrote to his son about love—said real love doesn't just disappear. It settles into you. Changes you. Becomes part of who you are. I believe that.... Every love that's passed through these doors has left something behind, even after the people are gone. Like sediment in a riverbed, layer upon layer, shaping the current of this place. I've never stopped believing in that front door. Tomorrow, my customers will be back. And I'll be here. Because in the end, isn't that what we're all looking for? Not just a space, but a place to belong.

[SCENE 6]

(Lights down, when they go up we see DANIEL sitting at the table enjoying key lime pie. He's blissful, lost in the pleasure of the pie. We see ALI walk in and stop. She's watching him...savoring the moment. She steps toward the table).

ALI: Is this seat taken?

DANIEL (*surprised, stands*): Oh, wow. (*He steps forward, hesitates, then gives her an awkward half-hug before pulling out her seat*) I'm....I'm at a loss. (*they sit down*)

ALI: I know... I have something I need to say. Something I need to ask you.

DANIEL: Sure. (*His hand trembles slightly as he sets down his fork*)

ALI: Do you know the song, Moon River?

DANIEL (*surprised, blank look*): Of course, it's my mom's favorite. I know every word.

ALI: That song...it says so much. It's about searching...

DANIEL (*interrupts, he's gathering his bearings*): I know what it's about Ali. It's not just about searching...it's about longing.... I know about longing. (*There's a silence. ALI is unsure. She senses resistance. She didn't expect any*).

DANIEL (*softer*): Sing it for me...you used to sing for me.

ALI (*surprised, pauses, she begins to sing softly, off-key*): "Two drifters...off to see the sights."

DANIEL (*interrupts*): Wait...that's not right. It's off to see the world. It's off to see the world, Ali.

ALI (*nods*): You're right. Very good.....(*beat*) That song makes me cry. Every time... (*beat*) it reminds me of you. It reminds me of us. I went off to see the world. But I realize that we're after the same things....the same rainbow's end.

DANIEL: Waiting round the bend...always round the bend.

ALI (*reaches for Daniel's hands*): You know all the words.

DANIEL: I'm not sure what I know...

ALI: That's not true Daniel. You knew all along about us. I mean you knew. You never had a doubt...Me, I was always full of questions. Always full of doubt.

DANIEL (*pulling his hands back slightly*): You needed to go; I understand that now. Took me a long minute, but I understand now.

ALI: That line in the song...about huckleberry friends. Kind of weird, right? ...You were my huckleberry friend (*beat*)... do you know what that means? (*DANIEL shakes his head no*) I think it means you're the right person for the job, the ideal partner.

DANIEL: Yeah...

ALI: Daniel... You're the right person...I should have known, but I was too young and too afraid. (*silence*) I'm ready now. (*There's a long silence as the weight of ALI's words settle on DANIEL. He's longed to hear this from ALI for as long as he can remember.*)

DANIEL: I want to believe that...But I don't know if I can.

ALI: This time it's different, I'm not going anywhere...*(beat)* I want to be with you.

DANIEL *(he stands. The moment feels overwhelming. He gathers himself and turns back to face her)* Do you know what it's been like? To know you're out there...somewhere...in and out of my life for 10 years.... Ten years, Ali. Ten years of watching friends get married, have kids, build lives... Ten years of turning down dates because they weren't you. Of starting stories with "Ali and I once..." and watching people's faces change to pity when they realized I was talking about someone who left a decade ago. And here I am, stuck....I couldn't move on... because I didn't want to. How pathetic is that?

ALI: Daniel, I--

DANIEL *(continuing, his voice thick with emotion)* Every time my phone rang, I hoped it was you. Every time someone walked into this place, I looked up thinking... maybe. Do you know what that does to a person? To always be waiting? You know what the hardest part was? The happy days. Because they'd come. They would. I had good times... And for a moment, just a moment, I wouldn't be thinking about you. And then...then I'd want to tell you about it. Even after all these years, you were still the first person I wanted to share everything with. I couldn't free myself... *(runs his hand through his hair)* And now you're here, quoting Moon River like it's some kind of password that unlocks everything we've lost.

ALI *(shakes her head in agreement)*: You're right. You are so right. You deserve so much more. This time is different, Daniel. I'm not going anywhere. I want to be with you.

DANIEL: And I want to believe that. *(beat)* But it's hard. It's hard for me Ali... you're still the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. And you terrify me.... I spent ten years learning how to live without you. *(A long silence, DANIEL is thinking)* I need more.... I need to know why this time is different. There are so many gaps...

ALI: Where do you want me to begin?

DANIEL: It doesn't matter; I want to hear it all. Why now? What's changed?

ALI: Ok. *(beat)*...I turned 30. It seemed surreal to be 30....But it didn't bother me, it really didn't. I was in New Zealand hiking...it was so beautiful and I thought—this is it. This is where I'm supposed to be. I was free, living in the moment. *(beat)* *(ALI pulls her seat closer)* But when I turned 33... I felt different. I woke up in a place that should've been paradise and felt... empty. I wasn't restless, I was...hollow.

DANIEL *(softly)*: I know about hollow.

ALI *(taking a deep breath)*: I need to tell you something. Something that's going to hurt to hear.

DANIEL: Go on.

ALI: There was someone. *(Daniel turns away slightly, his body tense)* James....*(beat)* he was...a fellow... traveler. *(DANIEL puts his head down)*. I thought we had a lot in common, but he was like ice, Daniel. The kind of cold that seeps into your bones. Slowly....then all at once. *(Pause)* At first, I saw myself in him. We looked at other people and thought how sad... rushing about...living these ordinary, boring lives. *(pause)* We were the smart ones. We had it all figured out. *(beat)* Down the road from where I was staying, there was this couple... they were older.... I started spending a lot of time with them. They brought calmness to my life. It was the little things.... Coffee in the morning, wine at night, stories.... They told these wonderful stories. Full of warmth...and love. Like your mom and dad...We laughed and my life felt. a little less cold. Their kindness was so genuine. *(beat)* James would laugh at people who found joy in the little things. Called them simple. And it started to eat at me... I was like him and I didn't like it. *(ALI is silent for a moment, she closes her eyes. This is a painful revelation and the pain is still fresh)*

DANIEL *(voice tight)*: Why are you telling me this?

ALI *(fighting tears, there's a long silence)*: I told the older couple about you. We were gardening. We were down in the dirt, and I told them there was this guy back home and I thought about him a lot. *(beat)* I didn't want to spend my next birthday without this guy. *(ALI pauses)* I wanted to see my best friend and my hometown. For the first time, I felt I needed to be right here in this place... our place... with you.

DANIEL (*There's a long, awkward silence as DANIEL processes*): Did you love him?

ALI (*shaking her head*): I thought I did. But how do you love someone who makes you feel cold inside? I kept comparing him to you. The way you remember all the little goofy stuff about people...*(beat)* How you sing off-key when you're happy. How you make everyone feel...*(beat)* warm. *(beat)* I didn't love him, Daniel. But I'm grateful for him. I am. Because he showed me what I didn't want. And what I'd left behind.

DANIEL (*struggling with the information*): This... this is a lot to process, Ali.

ALI: I know. And I'm not telling you this to hurt you. I'm telling you because I want you to understand - I'm not here because I failed to find something better. I'm here because I finally understood that what we had... what we could still have... is the best thing there is.

DANIEL: How did you end it with him?

ALI: He made fun of the old couple because they spent their Sunday's gardening. And that was it for me. He said they were typical... boring. Every time he dismissed something as beneath him, I'd think of you. I'd think of you and realize I wasn't just missing home, I was missing your way...your way of loving the world. *(beat)* I walked out. He didn't try to stop me.

DANIEL: That old couple, they reminded you of my folks?

ALI (*smiles*): They did.

DANIEL (*after a long moment*): I need you to understand something. *(leans forward, speaking carefully)* If we do this... if we try again... I need to know you're not just choosing me because you're tired of being alone. I need to know you're choosing us because you want this life, here, with all its ordinary moments and quiet days. Because that's who I am, Ali. I'm coffee in the morning and stories at night and I like that about myself.

ALI: That's exactly what I want. I've seen the world, Daniel. And it's beautiful. But it's not home. *(beat)* You're home.

DANIEL: This is...I don't know...

ALI (*interrupts him*): I've missed you.... And I'm so sorry it took me this long to understand what I was missing.

DANIEL (*stands slowly. ALI does too. He takes a step toward her, then stops, Picks at the pie with his fork*): Promise me, I'm not this pie.

ALI: What do you mean?

DANIEL: Comfort food. Safe. Reliable.

ALI: That's not what this is—

DANIEL (*cutting her off*): It's not? You had your adventures, dated the exciting... traveler... saw the world. And now what? You're ready to settle for the sweet guy from home?

ALI (*stung*): Is that really what you think?

DANIEL: I don't know what to think. You breeze in here, talking about some guy who taught you what you didn't want. But what about me...what about me do you want? (*leans forward, intense*) Because I remember. (*beat*) Ali, I remember us. The way we'd talk about books until sunrise. How we'd drive for hours just to see a band play. The way you looked at me.. And somehow...somehow you were able to leave all that...(softer) Are you still that girl? ...What happened to that girl?

ALI (*defensive at first*): She grew up! She-- (*stops, reconsiders*) No. That's not right. (*stands, agitated*) You want to know what happened to that girl? She got scared. Because everything with you was perfect. It would have been easy to skip all the steps and just stay here in Stony Brook. Do I remember what we were like? Oh yeah, and it terrified me. (*Ali closes her eyes, searching for the words.*) James was the safe one. He wasn't just cold, Daniel – he was safe. Safe because he never asked anything of me. He didn't care...he couldn't see past his own arrogance. He was the safe choice. (*beat*) Because I could never feel for him what I feel for you...So, I never had to risk anything with him. (*moving closer*) But you? God, you see me. You do. All of me. You always have.

DANIEL: And that's supposed to make me feel better? That you left because what we had was too real? Too good?

ALI: No. It's supposed to make you understand that I'm not choosing you because you're safe. I'm choosing you because you're the only person who's ever made me feel completely vulnerable and completely accepted. And that's terrifying... And breathtaking. (*takes his hands*) You think this is settling? My heart is pounding right now. Just standing here, arguing with you about love or the meaning of an old song - I feel more alive than I did all those years traveling the world.... And I needed to travel the world Daniel, you said you understood that part.

DANIEL (*Softens*): I do...(beat) but this relationship has always been on your terms. It needs to be different...I don't know the word I'm looking for...it needs to be....mutual.

ALI (*nods*): Of course....

DANIEL: That last night, before you left....it felt like a goodbye.

ALI: But I couldn't say goodbye. (ALI reaches for Daniel's face) Look at me, Daniel. I'm not that headstrong young woman anymore.... I'm shaking...I'm saying all the wrong things. I'm fighting for us and failing miserably. But I'm still here. And I'm not leaving because the biggest adventure of my life isn't out there somewhere - it's right here, trying to convince the love of my life that choosing him is the bravest thing I've ever done.

DANIEL (*softening slightly*): And if I say no?

ALI: Then I'll come back tomorrow. And the next day.

DANIEL (*considers this*): You know I can't say no to you?

ALI (*nods and laughs*): I know that...but I don't want to sound full of myself.

(They laugh and the tension breaks. A long moment passes between them. The weight of a decade of longing fills the space.)

ALI: I keep thinking about that song...Moon River...the line about dream makers.

DANIEL: And heartbreakers. *(DANIEL touches ALI's face. His hands linger for a moment on her cheek. The moment feels like a dream come true, with all the pathos of lost time and all the joy of future possibilities. They sit back down at their old table, in their place. The Café on Main.)*

ALI (*softly*): You never finished your pie.

DANIEL (*caught off guard, looks back at the abandoned dessert*): Yeah, well... someone interrupted me.

ALI (*Their old playfulness has returned*): Key lime. Still your favorite?

DANIEL (*small smile forming*): Actually... I hate it now.

ALI (*startled*): What? But you used to--

DANIEL (*deadpan*): Turns out when you eat it every Thursday for ten years, hoping a certain woman might walk through the door... You develop some complicated feelings about citrus.

ALI (*laughter bubbling up through tears*): Oh my God, Daniel. Every Thursday?

DANIEL: I may have been slightly pathetic.

ALI (*moving closer*): Slightly?

DANIEL: You know what's really pathetic? I'm probably going to order it again next Thursday.

ALI (*touching his face gently*): No, you won't. (*beat*) Because I'll be here. And I'm ordering kiwi.

DANIEL (*pulling her close, finally*): You always did have terrible taste. (*softly*) Except in huckleberry friends.

(They laugh, and this time when they embrace, it's lighter - still full of everything they've shared, but now with the promise of new memories to make. And maybe better desserts. DANIEL finally closes the distance between them. When he pulls her in, it's not just an embrace—it's a homecoming. But there's something new in it too: a cautious hope, a careful joy, the kind that comes from knowing exactly what you have to lose and choosing to risk it anyway. Lights down and when they go up, we see JIMMY in his apron getting ready to close.) (Lights up on JIMMY. He stands silent for a moment, surveying his café.)

JIMMY: I love this place. (*Jimmy walks to the table lovingly straightens the chairs*) Those who have found love here believe this café is mystical. It's not. It's ordinary. But there's magic in the ordinary...People ask me if I ever get tired of this place. How could I? Every day I get to witness beginnings. Some days, I think I'm the luckiest person alive, being the guardian of all these possibilities. I may not know what tomorrow brings, but I know it starts when that door opens. We are just one small place, in one small town. But this café matters...and what we provide here is meaningful. (*JIMMY begins to wipe down the table*) There are more love stories to be written in this ordinary space... I've never stopped believing in that front door.

(JIMMY stops, he sees something. We hear a bell ring, someone we don't see is entering.

JIMMY reacts, he slicks his hair back, lights go down).

END OF PLAY

[Version 23 dated 07/27/25]