LOVE IS COMPLICATED

AN ANTHOLOGY OF ONE-ACT LOVE STORIES

BY RICK BUTTS

RACCOON

HAPPY BIRTHDAY DEAR MAGGIE

SIX DAYS IN THE LIFE OF MOM, 2126

RACCOON, HAPPY BIRTHDAY DEAR MAGGIE,
SIX DAYS IN THE LIFE OF MOM, 2126.
THREE WOMEN FIND LOVE'S COMPLICATED.

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by

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An anthology of one-act love stories

Raccoon, Happy Birthday Dear Maggie, *Six Days in the Life of Mom, 2126*

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Rights: Rick Butts
Email: rick@rbws.ca

www.rickbutts.ca

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CAST OF CHARACTERS BY INDIVIDUAL PLAYS

RACCOON

ROGER, husband, mid 30s.

ELLEN, wife, mid 30s.

COP (voice only)

HAPPY BIRTHDAY DEAR MAGGIE

MAGGIE MACALLISTER, a woman, 29, travelling on business on her birthday.

ALDRIN, a man, forties, a clown working a corporate gig at a hotel.

SIX DAYS IN THE LIFE OF MOM, 2126

MATS, a man, about to turn 21, professional basketball player, gay. Voice of MATS' ANSWER GREETING.

THENA, a woman, 23, a birthday wisher clerk in a government call centre. Also AUTOFUS, a mega-celebrity superhero who is often fighting villains in other galaxies. Sister of MATS. Voice of THENA's ANSWER GREETING.

NORA MAI, a woman, 40s, mother of THENA and MATS, maternal autonomous interface, a MAI, an artificial human who presents as a fully human.

ADMINISTRATOR, any gender or nonbinary, any age, government bureaucrat, voice only.

Venue Marketing for Added Shows – The Knights, Brantford, Ontario

LOCAL ACTORS STAR IN NEW COMEDIES BY RICK BUTTS

Theatre veterans Lisa Stanford and Carlos Diaz sip coffee while they wait to be arrested in *Raccoon*. Fan favourites James Diamond and Jasmine Romany punch the clock for another performance of *Happy Birthday Dear Maggie*.

AUDIENCES LOVING THESE PLAYS SO SHOWS ADDED

After *Raccoon* and *Happy Birthday Dear Maggie* kick off the Friday of the August weekend that is the Left of Centre Festival 2026 produced by IT Productions in Brantford, Ontario, the producers know they want to add more performances. Another showing of *Raccoon* had already been scheduled for Saturday. Both plays are making their Canadian stage premieres at this festival and the audiences are loving them.

The cast is thrilled by the reception they're getting. A sampling of what they hear from fans: "biggest laugh I've had in years!" "brilliantly written!" "comedy genius!"

The local Knights step up as they always do. The cast and crew are invited to remount both shows as a dinner theatre production at The Knights in Brantford. In partnership with The Knights, the playwright, cast and crew agree to a "Rick Butts Double Feature Dinner Theatre" benefit performance. No charge at the door but donations accepted to support a local "free pantry".

FROM THE PROMOTIONAL POSTER BY THE KNIGHTS

"Come on down to The Knights in Brantford and enjoy some dinner and theatre under the stars! Featuring two new plays written by comedy genius and Canadian Playwright Rick Butts. *Raccoon* and *Happy Birthday Dear Maggie* are sure to bring laughs galore all night long!!"

"Free admission, donations for BL's Little Free Pantry and great burgers!"

WHY COMMUNITY THEATRES LOVE THESE ONE-ACT PLAYS

Love is Complicated features great dramatic roles for women.

Three women. And love that's complicated. Today when her husband announces he's leaving her and stealing all their money, a woman discovers raccoons aren't so bad. Tomorrow morning another woman will wake up in a hotel room with a clown to learn that maybe God's answered her prayers and surgery for the hateful husband she doesn't have the courage to leave went better than she could have hoped—and he's gone. A hundred years in the future, an artificial human who's also a Mom changes her program herself so she can love her kids, arrange the birthday celebration she's been planning for almost two decades and then shut herself down.

Casting for *Love is Complicated* is ideal for community theatres: nine actors. Three leads for women, another woman in a major supporting role, three men, two voices. Actors in their twenties, thirties, forties / fifties / sixties. With the exception of the two voice-overs (which could easily be doubled) all the on-stage characters offer actors major roles.

The simple staging is within the capabilities of most community theatres. *Raccoon* runs about 45 minutes, *Happy Birthday Dear Maggie* is about 31 minutes in previous stagings. Both can work on a virtually identical set with a minor reset. S*ix Days in the Life of Mom, 2126* has run about 42 minutes in readings and can be staged on an almost bare set. Ideally, there are short intermissions between each show.

RACCOON

Getting **cuter** is part of the plan.

by Rick Butts

They want the deal that dogs and cats have. In one act.

***Raccoon* was first produced by IT Productions for Left of Centre Festival in August 2026 with the following cast and crew:**

ROGER: Carlos Diaz
ELLEN: Bobby Robert / Lisa Stanford
COP (voice): Todd James Lucek

Directed by Bobby Robert
Assistant director Rose Rici
Sound designed by Todd James Lucek
Lighting designed by Jessica Hamilton

Lisa Stanford (Ellen) and Carlos Diaz (Roger) consider the raccoons' demands for the deal that dogs and cats have as pets in *Raccoon* (IT Productions, Brantford, Ontario, August 2026).

RACCOON

Getting cuter is part of the plan.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

ROGER, husband, mid 30s.

ELLEN, wife, mid 30s.

COP (voice only)

SCENE

The living room of a middle-class house.

TIME

Now.

SYNOPSIS

Raccoons are domesticating. They want the same deal that dogs and cats have. They break out of the local animal shelter and the police are off in hot pursuit. Roger and Ellen find themselves on the front line of the raccoons' fight for acceptance and equity as a gang of the furry fugitives and their lawyer seek refuge in their bedroom. At the same time, the SWAT team arrives to deal with what they assume is a hostage taking in their living room. A few minutes earlier, Roger had transferred all their money to a secret off-shore account and is waiting for the right moment to tell Ellen he's leaving her. What follows is a Saturday morning in which Ellen has a change of heart about where her loyalties lie.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Raccoon appeared in Brantford, Ontario, in August 2026 at the Left of Centre Festival produced by IT Productions. It was later staged at The Knights in Brantford, Ontario as a benefit performance in support of a local food bank.

In Aurora, *Raccoon* was selected for a "top ten" prize at Theatre Aurora. It was subsequently presented as a directed and rehearsed "book in hand" staged reading at Theatre Aurora's Foundations Fest.

SETTING: A living room with two recliners facing downstage. A coffee table between them. A door stage right opens to an unseen hallway to other rooms. Down right, curtain panels at a front window are closed.

AT RISE: It's early morning. ROGER enters wearing a bathrobe. He has a cup of coffee which he almost spills as he puts it on the table. He checks his phone. He looks harried and nervous, tired. He glances right in the direction of the bedroom, walks to the curtains, looks at his phone.

A beat or two later, ELLEN enters from the hall wearing large comfy pajamas and bunny slippers. Still sleepy. She carries a coffee carefully with two hands. Lost in his phone, ROGER doesn't see her coming. She stops at the table and moves his cup onto a coaster.

ELLEN

Roger! I've told you! Coaster—

ROGER

(Startled.)

Damn Ellen! Don't sneak around. Why are you up so early?

ELLEN

(Puts coffee down, crosses to open the curtains.)

Just keeping an eye on you. Why are *you* up?

(She sits down. Sips coffee.)

ROGER

(Puts his phone away. Gets his coffee, goes back to the window.)

Couldn't sleep.

ELLEN

I heard you creeping around putting the coffee on. I must have fallen back to sleep.

(A phone blasts an emergency alert. ELLEN jumps up, rushes out, returns reading her phone. A beat. ROGER's phone screams. He drops it pulling it out of a pocket.)

ROGER

(Looking at his phone. Walks back and forth in front of the window, holding it up to get reception.)

My phone's dead!

ELLEN
(Reading her phone.)
It's raccoons. They busted out. We're supposed to shelter at home. Stay alert. Don't go out unless for medical emergencies. Or to church?

ROGER
That's ridiculous. I have baseball this morning. It's the playoffs. Church on Saturdays?

ELLEN
It's a *gang* of raccoons. They've broken out of the animal rescue.

ROGER
Gang? That's so judgemental. Ellen, they didn't call them a *gang*!

ELLEN
Okay, fine, I'm trying to figure out what it says.
(Reading her phone.)
An undetermined number of fur-bearing individuals who may present as members of a non-human community known to frequent residential waste bins.
(To ROGER.)
You're right. I called them a *gang*. My bad for being succinct in an emergency.

ROGER
There's no need to use alarmist language. It stokes fear and chaos unnecessarily.

ELLEN
Undetermined number of fur-bearing individuals? Written by a lawyer? Sit. You're pacing.

ROGER
Don't start. I need to stretch my legs.

ELLEN
Sounds like a *gang* of raccoons to me. They're probably wearing masks.

ROGER
Not funny, Ellen, even as you stigmatize them.

ELLEN
Stigmatize?

ROGER
Language can be hurtful. You're so quick to judge people for the things they have to do.

ELLEN
Seriously Roger? They're raccoons, not people. And probably, they're criminals.

ROGER
Probably? That's harsh. You know for a fact they have criminal records?

ELLEN
I know they escaped custody. Not waiting to go through . . . whatever the process is. Isn't that enough?

ROGER
Just typical for you, Ellen. Always judging me before you know all the facts.

ELLEN
Judging *you*! What's that about? I told you to use a coaster. It's teak. The cup will mark it. Not saying you're a criminal. Unless there's something you're not telling me.

ROGER
Why would you say that I'm not telling you something or needing to check my phone?
(Moves his phone up across the window trying to get reception.)
Reception sucks today.
(Pause.)
Your false characterization of raccoons as criminals is based on stigmatizing stereotypes about their heritage as animals. They can't help being animals. You don't get to judge them for that.

ELLEN
(Reading her phone.)
My reception's fine. If they haven't done anything wrong why are they running amok?

ROGER
Amok? I'm sure it doesn't say that. No lawyer would write that. Amok is prejudicial.

ELLEN
Relax Roger. It's Saturday. Stop being a lawyer.

ROGER
I *am* a lawyer. Even on Saturdays.

(The sound of police cars pulling up, sirens wailing. Flashing lights. They go to the window with coffees and phones. ELLEN takes up a position behind ROGER and peaks around him.)

ELLEN
(Looking out the window.)
Geeze, look at all the cops! They're SWAT!

ROGER
They've blocked off the corner. We won't be able to get out!

ELLEN
Are they cops or soldiers? They're wearing goggles and helmets.

ROGER
Maybe it's a community event. For Saturday.

ELLEN
With rifles out? They're carrying those shield things.

ROGER
Just shields Ellen. Not shield *things*.

ELLEN
Well, that armoured vehicle *thing* just drove through Mrs. Smith's roses!

ROGER
Maybe they're bringing a funeral down the street. Sometimes they escort funerals. To manage traffic.

ELLEN
Are you an idiot? We're in a cul de sac! What traffic?! Other than *that*. Is that a tank?

ROGER
It's a tank. Stopping in front of our house.

ELLEN
See that little window on the side? I didn't know they have windows that open. They're pointing something out. Right at us.

ROGER
It could be a sound cannon. Or a speaker if they're going to play music. For a street party.

ELLEN
You know that the machine gun on the top just swung around to point at us?

COP (V.O. THROUGH MEGAPHONE)
HOSTAGE PERSON! This is the police. Is everyone okay in there?

ELLEN
Roger, the sound cannon thing is talking to you. Do something.

ROGER
(Watching the tank, whispering to ELLEN.)
Hostage Person? We live here!

ELLEN
Tell him we're not hostages!

(ROGER shakes his head "no" at the tank.)

COP (V.O. THROUGH MEGAPHONE)
HOSTAGE PERSON! Please indicate that you are unharmed by waving your arms.

ROGER
(Watching the tank, whispering to ELLEN.)
Should I wave my arms to say we're unharmed?

ELLEN
No. The predicate of that statement is that we're hostages. Which we're not. You can't let him think this is a hostage situation.

ROGER
(Watching the tank, whispering to ELLEN.)
Who's the lawyer now Ellen? What should I do?

ELLEN
Tell him we're not hostages!

(ROGER looks out, mouths the words "No, we're not hostages." Shakes his head "no" vigorously.)

ELLEN (CONT'D)
Roger, what are you doing!

ROGER
(Watching the tank, whispering to ELLEN.)
I've told him we're not hostages.

COP (V.O. THROUGH MEGAPHONE)
PRESUMED KIDNAPPER! We have you surrounded.

ELLEN
Oh, nice work there, Roger. You've really fucked this up!

COP (V.O. THROUGH MEGAPHONE)
PRESUMED KIDNAPPER! Put down your weapons!

(ROGER shows his cup and phone to the window.)

COP (V.O. THROUGH MEGAPHONE)
(Much more aggressive at the sight of ROGER's raised weapons.)
PRESUMED KIDNAPPER! Lower your weapons!

ROGER
Weapons? He can't be talking to us!

COP (V.O. THROUGH MEGAPHONE)
PRESUMED KIDNAPPER! Drop your weapons! This is your last warning!

ELLEN
(Peering out from behind ROGER.)
Roger, they've brought in a dog!

ROGER
That's Pooper the doodle from across the street who's always shitting in your azaleas. He just crapped on our sidewalk!

ELLEN
(Shouts at ROGER.)
Dammit Roger, drop your weapons. You've had your last warning!

ROGER
(ROGER starts to kneel, puts his coffee on the floor.)
Can you get me a coaster?

ELLEN
Fuck the coaster!

(ROGER stands up with his phone in his hand.)

COP (V.O. THROUGH MEGAPHONE)
The other weapon! Drop it now!

(ELLEN hip-checks ROGER causing him to drop his phone to the floor. He stands with his hands up.)

COP (V.O. THROUGH MEGAPHONE)
PRESUMED <u>OTHER</u> KIDNAPPER! Put down your weapons!

ELLEN
(Still behind ROGER.)
Is he talking to me? He can't see me.
(She shows herself a bit, points at herself with her phone.)

COP (V.O. THROUGH MEGAPHONE)
Yes, you! Move out where we can see you!

ELLEN
I'm not wearing a bra. This is getting weird.

(ELLEN kneels, puts her coffee and phone on the floor. Stands behind ROGER, her hands up.)

ELLEN
Is this an unlawful search? Looking at us through our window?

ROGER
I'm a real estate lawyer Ellen.

(For a beat, they stand hands in the air, unmoving.)

ELLEN
What's happening now?

ROGER
The sound cannon is going back in.

ELLEN
(Peering out from behind ROGER.)
Wow. I didn't realize they could turn around like that.

(They stand hands up for a few more seconds.)

ELLEN (CONT'D)
They're gone. Can we put our hands down?

ROGER
So many questions Ellen. Why don't you forward them to community relations at the police department?

(The sound of running on the roof. They look up. Off-stage, the bedroom door slams.)

ROGER
Did you leave the window in the bedroom open again? The wind slams that door. I'm tired of always fixing it.

(ROGER exits. ELLEN picks up cups and phones.)

ELLEN
(She looks at ROGER's phone. Mockingly.)
I'm tired of fixing it!

(ELLEN tosses his phone across the room. The bedroom door slams again. ROGER rushes in.)

ROGER
There's a gang of raccoons in our bedroom. With their lawyer!

ELLEN
You're shitting me. They have a lawyer!

ROGER
Don't you follow the news? They're domesticating. Shortening their snouts. Making their ears floppy. Going with smaller teeth. Generally, getting cuter. Of course, they'd hire lawyers to help with their new brand.

ELLEN
New brand?

ROGER
As pets. They want to live with humans. Get the same deal dogs and cats have.

ELLEN
They should talk to me first. Believe me, living with the adult male of the species ain't a bed of roses.

ROGER
It's better than eating garbage. They also need lawyers to help with lobbying, advocacy and commercial representation.

ELLEN
Commercial representation?

ROGER
We use the likeness of raccoons everywhere. In advertising, TV. Obviously in movies. Even in plays. You think actual raccoons ever get a dime of that?

ELLEN

Probably not?

ROGER

Definitely not. In fact, if we were in a play right now about raccoons, they'd probably be hawking raccoon coffee mugs and T-shirts in the lobby. Not a penny would go to raccoons. Of course they need a lawyer to protect their interests.

ELLEN

Why have they broken into our house if they're trying to, you know, . . . go all *we come in peace, Earthling*?

ROGER

That I don't know. Baby steps? First diplomatic contact between different cultures? An attempt to bridge historically difficult divides between species that have clashed over the laws governing the rights of property owners?

(Pause.)

Maybe they want equitable access to the global resources and opportunities we've denied them. Systemically oppressing them as a species because we think they should be content with eating our garbage. I can definitely see that they'd want their own lawyer if that's the tack they're taking.

ELLEN

So raccoons are the same as thieves? They don't respect someone else's property.

ROGER

Didn't I just say that? A bit less blunt, however.

ELLEN

(Scrolling on her phone.)

Well this ain't the diplomats and the cultural attachés that just climbed through our bedroom window. These are the worst of the worst! The filthy animals that busted out of the pen! The ones the cops are after!

ROGER

Where's my phone?

ELLEN

Wherever you dropped it.

(Looking at her phone.)

They say it was an inside job. They're working with the Red Squirrels!

ROGER

(Finds his phone. Taps at it repeatedly.)

It's locked up.

ELLEN
Try rebooting it.

ROGER
What?

ELLEN
(Slowly.)
Turn it off. Wait a few seconds. Then turn it on.

ROGER
(Punching frantically at his phone.)
It's not working!

ELLEN
Fine. Then leave it off for a week. Put it in the window to get light. It'll restart by itself.

ROGER
Really?

ELLEN
The cops thought we had weapons when they were trying to see my boobs. Are they armed?

ROGER
(Working at his dead phone.)
Who?

ELLEN
The raccoons in our bedroom. Do they have weapons?

ROGER
How would I know? I didn't frisk them if that's what you're asking.

ELLEN
It's just that I thought that when a gang of criminals from another cultural group breaks into our house to hide out from the cops, you being a lawyer and all . . .
(Long pause.)
you might have paid a little attention to whether they're packing.

ROGER
I don't do immigration law. Or criminal. Never even read a pet custody case if this is about them seeking some change in status.

ELLEN
Change in status?

ROGER

Seeking standing as pets.

ELLEN

Right. The wild animals who have escaped custody break in to our house. And you're the man here but too much of a chickenshit to deal with them. I assume that if they want to permanently occupy our bedroom, you could write them up a lease agreement—

ROGER

Break in? It was more like they *waltzed* through the open window that someone's always leaving wide open. Pretty simple for any Tom, Dick and Harry to simply climb the wall and pussyfoot right in.

(ELLEN slumps into a chair. Sips her coffee. ROGER stands downstage occasionally looking out the window and checking his phone.)

ELLEN

So this is all my fault now?

ROGER

(Long awkward pause.)

This is probably not the best time to tell you . . .

ELLEN

What?

ROGER

No time is ever a good time—

ELLEN

Spit it out, Roger.

ROGER

I think we need . . . some space.

ELLEN

A bigger house?

ROGER

Well. Maybe. If that's what's best for you. I can recommend a good agent. I mean space . . . for both of us.

ELLEN

So a *much* larger house?

ROGER
More space for both of us. Just not space together.

ELLEN
You're leaving me? Because I left the window open? Because we got a gang of raccoons in our bedroom? With their lawyer? Roger, they're not even making demands yet!

ROGER
(Draws circles in the air as he tries to explain.)
Of course not. I mean not *that*. Or maybe a bit of *that.* But it's not *just that*. It's . . . *all* of that. In truth, it's more than *that*. It's more like *all* of *this*.

ELLEN
We could call one of those pest control guys to get rid of them.

ROGER
Do you think that's necessary?

ELLEN
Then bring the cops back. I'm sure they'd just love to taser the crap out of them and drag them back to jail. It would boost their arrest numbers.

ROGER
If that's what you want.

ELLEN
You know what I want Roger? I want the cops back here so I can borrow their taser and put it on your nuts and pull the trigger to see how long it goes before it runs out of gas. And I'm sure those mean dicks would love watching and giving me tips on when to turn you over and start again from the back side.

ROGER
A taser doesn't use gas. It's a rechargeable battery actually—

ELLEN
Shut up, Roger.

(ROGER raises his hand to ask if he can speak.)

ROGER
I would like to add . . . it's not you, it's me.

(ELLEN breaks into tears, her face in her hands. The crying is fake.)

ROGER (CONT'D)
You deserve better.

(ELLEN fake crying hysterically.)

ROGER (CONT'D)
I'm not good enough for you.

(ELLEN fake crying.)

ROGER (CONT'D)
I don't think I'm ready to commit.

ELLEN
(Stops crying. Looks at him. Then wild laughter.)
Okay! That last one broke my concentration. We've been married for fifteen years. Living together for eighteen. And you're not ready to commit? You need to be tasered so it will jump-start your brain.

ROGER
We're in a rut. We're stuck. We need to experience new things. I want to feel energized about something again.

ELLEN
Wait for the cops to get here. The taser. I'll give you energized.

ROGER
I miss excitement. Risk taking.

ELLEN
Sign a book out of the library and return it late without paying the fine.

ROGER
That's not something I would do.

ELLEN
Then sneak into the pool without showering. Walk dry in front of the life guard. Maybe she'll catch you. Maybe she won't. That's anticipation and risk taking all rolled into one. Should be exciting enough for a man like you.

ROGER
Not enough.

ELLEN

This morning the police drop by thinking we've been taken hostage. Then you tell them (beat.)
oh hold on a minute . . . *we're* not the hostages. So we get to cosplay kidnappers and ravishers in our pjs while the cops try to see my boobs and kick open our door.

ROGER

Ravishers?

ELLEN

Then a *gang* of animals—literally, *animals*—breaks out of prison and hides out in our bedroom. With their lawyer, as you so helpfully pointed out. These are very likely the same fugitives—who may be carrying weapons but you were too busy shitting your pants to notice—that the authorities are hunting as we speak. All this before I've had my coffee.

ROGER

I'm not sure I get your point. You want more coffee?

ELLEN

You're adding ending our marriage to this Saturday's *to-do* list because you're not getting enough excitement. I'd say we've had the kind of morning most couples would find pretty freaking exhilarating.

ROGER

When you put it like that you make me sound a bit . . . self-centered.

ELLEN

Yeah, I'm *soooo* sorry about that. That constant nagging you about being a selfish dick? It's what being a wife to an asshole for fifteen years does to a girl.

ROGER

Soon, we're going to be over the hill. In a few years, I'll be . . . fortyish—

(ELLEN's phone dings. She looks at it. Then stares at him without speaking.)

ROGER

What!?
(A forced chuckle.)
An update on the raccoons?

ELLEN

No. A notice from our bank. Sit down where I can see you, you weasel.

ROGER
(Laughing nervously. Stays standing at the window.)
Weasel now? Already a band of marauding raccoons in the bedroom. And now a weasel in the living room. We've got quite the menagerie going here.

ELLEN
Our investment account. Someone sold everything yesterday. Then the entire cash balance was transferred out this morning. Do you know anything about this?

ROGER
Moi! You know how bad I am with things like that. Maybe. Why are they sending you a notice? That has nothing to do with you.

ELLEN
Nine-hundred thousand dollars! To an account in the Cayman Islands!

ROGER
(Alarmed. Picks up his phone and taps at it furiously.)
I thought it was nine hundred and *five* thousand. They said there'd be no service charges.

ELLEN
I rounded down, weasel. Was this you? Sit.

ROGER
(Sits in the other chair. Reaches for her phone.)
My phone's not working. Can I see yours?

ELLEN
No you can't see my phone. I might never get it back, weasel!

ROGER
Stop calling me that. It's demeaning.

ELLEN
Weasel. Weasel. Weasel.

ROGER
You're using a clichéd stereotype. It's stigmatizing.

ELLEN
To you or the weasels? By the way, you don't have to call it a *clichéd* stereotype because by definition stereotypes are all clichés. But you're right. Unfair to weasels. Let's just go with dick.

ROGER
As usual you're jumping to conclusions.

ELLEN

Was this you, dick?

ROGER

What if it was? I don't have to answer your questions. It was more a tax thing. I thought it might be a good year to take some capital gains.

ELLEN

You're transferring nine-hundred-thousand dollars in cash out of our investment account to the Cayman Islands on the morning you're telling me you're leaving me.

ROGER

You're making it sound . . . like a big deal. It was . . . *is* . . . all mine. I moved it because I didn't want it to be a source of friction between us.

ELLEN

Friction? How is stealing my money *not* a source of friction.

ROGER

Because technically it's not yours.

ELLEN

It's in a joint account. Either one of us can take everything in it, no questions asked!

ROGER

And yet you badger me with questions. I was quite within my rights, Ellen.

ELLEN

Where did you move it to?

ROGER

I don't remember.

ELLEN

It's a lot of money. You stole it this morning. How can you not remember?

ROGER

You mean remember *exactly*?

ELLEN

Yes, *exactly* is good.

ROGER

(Sympathetically.)

Ellen, Ellen, Ellen.

ELLEN
Half of everything in that account is mine.

ROGER
(Less sympathetically.)
Ellen, Ellen, Ellen.

ELLEN
Weasel, weasel, weasel. Where'd you put my money?

ROGER
Well, here's the thing.
(Holding up his phone.)
My phone's not working. Without it, I can't tell you. Even if I wanted to. Which I don't. I don't think it would be good for you emotionally or even spiritually. Given how hysterical you're about to become.

ELLEN
Where'd you put my money?

ROGER
You make so much more money than me. You don't need it.

ELLEN
Don't care. Don't want you to have it. No a dime of it.

ROGER
You know, now that we're going through this *thing*, I was worried that this would happen. There'd be this *friction* between us.

ELLEN
Again, *friction*? And now this *thing*? What *thing* are we going through?

ROGER
An amicable divorce in which we don't fight over money. I was hoping we might manage it without lawyers if we kept it cooperative. I'm trying to be cooperative Ellen. You just need to compromise a little and not hold on to your bitterness.

ELLEN
You know, maybe that sounds good. I do so *hate* lawyers. Want to put them in the freezer until they're hard so it won't make too much of mess in the garage when I cut them into freeze-dried chunks with my new reciprocating saw. Then put the pieces out the night before our regular trash pickup and let the local raccoons know we've got a buffet happening here as soon as it's dark. Tell them to bring their appetites and their friends.

ROGER
I hear you. You're angry. But if you get petty Ellen . . .
(He clucks sympathetically.)
If you make it all about the money, you'll miss seeing this for what it really is: an opportunity to focus on us.

ELLEN
On *us*?

ROGER
Yes. On *us*. Only without each other always under foot.

ELLEN
I'd be happy to put your neck under my foot. Weasel, where'd you put the money?

ROGER
It wouldn't be fair to tell you. Or to me. And it wouldn't be fair to Mummy.

ELLEN
Mummy Weasel!

ROGER
You can call her just Mummy.

ELLEN
What does Mummy Weasel have to do with this?
(Waving at him like he's rotting meat.)
Other than that she's responsible for giving birth to you.

ROGER
It was her two thousand dollars that started that account. Mummy gave it to me. A gift to her son. She'd be hurt if I simply gave it away now that you're leaving me.

ELLEN
I told you to buy Apple stock with that money.

ROGER
Tomato, tomato.

ELLEN
I watched the market. I knew iMac would be a thing. Then iPod, And now iPhone! The stock exploded.

ROGER
I'm not technical. Or a financial guy.

ELLEN
The account is joint. We put both of us on it after we got married. It's only Apple stock. All the dividends reinvested.

ROGER
Which is the only stock I sold. Out of respect for Mummy's memory.
(Pause.)
Obviously, I'm glad for all three of us that you helped a bit.

ELLEN
I've always managed that account because you're an idiot.

ROGER
Do you really think name calling is helpful? Okay, I officially declare I'm *very* grateful for your advice with my Mummy's money.

ELLEN
If you really want to honour Mummy Weasel's memory, you could take her original two thousand in cash. Then we split the rest fifty-fifty. You could do whatever you want with your share. Almost half-a-million dollars. You could give it to a charity for weasels.

ROGER
I absolutely *love* your idea. Love giving it all away to a charity for . . . sure, animals. Whatever. I'll give it some thought. And I'm only claiming the portion of the stock, at current market value, bought with Mummy's money.

ELLEN
The two thousand that bought Apple almost twenty years ago. Which is everything in the account.

ROGER
I couldn't hurt Mummy. Disrespect her gift.

ELLEN
Mummy Weasel's been dead fifteen years. I was there when the priest wanted to drive a stake through her heart to make sure she didn't wake the next full moon. She just *had* to drop by on our honeymoon in the Caymans. She just *had* to learn to waterski. She just *had* to land on the dock on her head. Just to make it all about her.

ROGER
I'm only glad she's not here to hear you be so cruel about her.

ELLEN

We've lived off my salary our entire marriage. I worked like a dog to put you through weasel school. We let you plow all your money into paying off *your* weasel student debt. Every penny that bought your *little weasel pellets*, your *weasel toys* I'm always tripping over, your *weasel shampoo*, even your *weasel foot powder* because your feet stink. All of that I paid for.

ROGER

Wow, Ellen. It's like you're keeping a tab! We were in love! You wanted to do all that!

(ELLEN's phone dings. She looks, gets up to leave.)

ROGER (CONT'D)

Where are you going? We're making progress here.

ELLEN

To see a man about a weasel trap. Doesn't have to be humane. Just something that can nail the little sucker.

ROGER

Who's that on your phone?

ELLEN

The lawyer for the raccoons.

ROGER

What do they want?

ELLEN

(Impatient.)

How would I know Roger. Maybe that's why they want to meet. In person.

ROGER

Where?

ELLEN

In our bedroom.

ROGER

(Nervous.)

I should go in with you.

ELLEN

Why?

ROGER

In case it's a trap. I'm the man.

ELLEN

If it's a trap, we'd both be caught. It's better you stay out here. If I don't survive, you can run for help.

ROGER

Okay, makes sense. But I still feel bad that I'm not going in with you.

ELLEN

(Sigh.)

Roger, listen to me. You're *not* invited. I don't mean they *forgot t*o invite you. They specifically said you're *not* to come, *not* allowed in, they *don't want you there.* They don't trust you.

ROGER

Because I'm a lawyer?

ELLEN

That was my first thought too. Understandable that you're part of the whole species-based colonialism that keeps them oppressed. But no, they just hate you personally. I think it really is cultural with them. Raccoons simply have an instinctive loathing for weasels.

(Pause. Stares at ROGER.)

And looking at it from their point of view, I kinda get it.

ROGER

Ellen, I'm not *any* lawyer. I'm a *real estate* lawyer. Every day, I wrestle with the most perplexing legal and moral issues known to man: the transfer of property. I won't be intimidated by raccoons. I'm going in. What's the worse they can do against the law?

ELLEN

They'll bite you.

ROGER

Okay. I'll wait out here.

(ELLEN leaves. Left alone, ROGER fiddles with his phone. He can't get it to work. In frustration, he tosses it away. A beat. ELLEN returns.)

ROGER

What were you doing in there? Do you have any idea how long I've been waiting?

ELLEN
I understand everything now. Why they feel the way they do about us as the colonizing species. We destroy everything. We can be such jerks to all the living things that share the world with us. We think we're so superior to creatures that aren't humans.

ROGER
Isn't that just the natural order of things? We *are* superior.

ELLEN
Why?

ROGER
Because we are.

ELLEN
But why?

ROGER
I don't know Ellen. I didn't make the rules. Maybe . . . because we're made in God's image?

ELLEN
So didn't God also make the raccoons who don't like the deal they're getting?

ROGER
I guess. He probably made weasels too then, eh? Bet He'd like to have that one back whenever He puts out his trash.

ELLEN
Which only goes to show He didn't have a clue what he was doing. And He's left it up to us to fix the system. Which is what I'm going to do.

(ROGER starts pacing while he thinks. Hums the opening of Queen's *We Are The Champions*.)

ELLEN
Really? That song? Stop it. Or I'll bite you.

(ROGER stops humming.)

ROGER
So saving raccoons? That's your next project Ellen?

ELLEN
Not saving them Roger. Acknowledging their unique cultural identity as raccoons. Finding a way for us and them to co-exist. That's all they want too.

ROGER
Why don't they go co-exist in the animal shelter? Or the zoo? We build nice zoos for them.

ELLEN
You know what most raccoons associate us with?

ROGER
Our advanced intellect. Our capacity for abstract thought. The ability to reason and solve complex problems.

ELLEN
Nope.

ROGER
Our successful history of reshaping the world for the betterment of all mankind?

ELLEN
Probably not that.

ROGER
Our incredible achievements in art, science and technology?

ELLEN
I could see why you'd like to think that. But no.

ROGER
Okay, I'll bite. What do raccoons think when they see humans?

ELLEN
Garbage. They love our garbage.

ROGER
That's absurd. We're more than garbage!

ELLEN
The sum of our parts Roger. We're a lot of garbage. Raccoons have evolved to know this.

ROGER
I can honestly say I've never put out an ounce of garbage!

ELLEN
What do you think our cleaning lady lugs out to the trash every week?

ROGER
I thought that was stuff she brought with her. For cleaning.

ELLEN
The kids are really into the animal-resistant trash cans we got now. Literally. Like those dog toys filled with kibble. They love figuring them out. It's the raccoon equivalent of a rubik's cube filled with fish heads and chicken bones.

ROGER
I don't believe they told you all this. And even if they did, it's quite unflattering to us as the dominant species. I would expect them to show a little more gratitude.

ELLEN
Gratitude? Real life is ugly for raccoons in the city. When we see a couple of them walking down the sidewalk minding their own business on a sunny Saturday morning, what do you think most people do?

ROGER
So in your little hypothetical, these two raccoons are just listening to their music and doing a little walking dance shuffle?

ELLEN
Sure. Make fun. But what if they are busting a few moves and skipping along, not hurting anyone? What's the first thing you think, Roger?

ROGER
Don't step in their poop.

ELLEN
No. I know you better than that. That's the *second* thing you think. *First*, you think they don't belong. In this neighbourhood. That's what we do. We go all Karen and start screaming at them to get out of here.

ROGER
Okay, but you said it yourself. It's what everyone does. Because they're dirty.

ELLEN
We pretend to care about them. Assuming they need help because they're sick or lost gives us the excuse to call the cops to round them up.

ROGER
Honestly, I've never really cared about them. Or animals in general.

ELLEN
A few minutes ago, I would have been disappointed to learn that about you. Now, it seems to make sense.

ROGER
I never knew you were so pro-raccoon.

ELLEN
I'd describe myself as more anti lying weasels who steal money from their wives just before they leave them. And they're not dirty Roger.

ROGER
Really? You got all this . . . *propaganda* from your meeting with them?

ELLEN
They made our bed while they've been in there. And the toilet seat's down so I know that's them not you. You've never learned to do either of those things even with all the years I've put into your training.

ROGER
You're on *their* side now?

ELLEN
We lock them up in these facilities that are all rows of cages. They're treated as if they're . . . *animals*. It's all in their presentation.
(She holds up a flash drive.)

ROGER
I had no idea. Raccoons? Okay, but I'm not a bigot. I like the funny videos of them cuddling with kittens and splashing around in swimming pools. I love their little paws. Like small hands without the opposable thumbs. So cute.

ELLEN
And yet you're still judging them as inferior in reference to humans. Your prejudice is perpetuating a systemic oppression and discrimination. Have you ever considered that maybe *we* have hands that resemble raccoons' paws. Only ours are larger with shorter nails?

ROGER
Fine. They're here now. What do they want?

ELLEN
What we all want, Roger. To be loved. The freedom to be happy. Financial independence. A chance to pursue their dreams. Not to be married to a dick.

(ELLEN picks ROGER's phone up from the floor.)

ELLEN (CONT'D)
You still having trouble with this? Leave it with me. I'm techy. I'll get it working and give it back to you later.

ROGER
(Pleased.)
Really? Does that mean you're okay with us—?

ELLEN
(Smiling.)
Sure thing, Rog. Just swell. You gotta do what you gotta do. It's time for me to move on.

ROGER
Awfully nice of you Ellie the little pooh pooh—

ELLEN
Don't call me that!
(Holds up his phone.)
I have your phone. You want it fixed? Don't call me that!

ROGER
Okay. I'm glad we can be mature about all this and get on with the rest of our lives.

ELLEN
You have no idea. Don't you have baseball this morning?

ROGER
I do. But I figured *this* was probably more important.

ELLEN
This?

ROGER
This resetting of our relationship. But now with you being so gracious about it, umm—.

ELLEN
Yeah, that's me. Ellen The Gracious. A regular superhero of graciousness.

ROGER
I'd hate to leave you with a room full of raccoons . . .
(Conciliatory.)
And I'm not implying anything negative about them. I accept they're not . . . umm, dirty.

ELLEN
No, they're fine in there. *We're* fine.

ROGER
(Gesturing at the two of them together.)
We're fine? Really?

ELLEN
Oh no! I didn't mean us. I mean you and me Rogers, under the circumstances we're as good as we can be. But I meant *we* as in me and the raccoons. *We're* getting on fine. You don't need to worry about me and them.

ROGER
You know, they're fugitives and the police are looking for them. If you let them hang out here, you could have some exposure. I might not be the best person to defend you if there were charges.

ELLEN
You're a real estate lawyer, Roger. A damn good one I might add. But if the cops want to come after me for harbouring raccoons on the lam, then you're probably not my first call. It doesn't matter. They aren't after them now. Karen spotted another raccoon a few streets over. Called the cops and they came by, tasered him, took him away.

ROGER
They got the wrong raccoon?

ELLEN
Happens all the time. They can't tell one raccoon from another. He was furry, had the mask, head in a garbage can. They chased him and he ran. So they scooped him up and charged him with running on the sidewalk. That's the world they live in now.

ROGER
Well, I prefer to trust that the authorities know what they're doing.
(Gesturing at the bedroom.)
Will your raccoons be going on their way then?

ELLEN
They're not *my* raccoons, Roger. They belong to themselves. And right now they're working on a plan. We're trying to get them released from the rescue. They need a court order for that to happen.

ROGER
I've never heard of that.

ELLEN
Think of it as legal emancipation from a guardian. Except for raccoons. Sort of like when you got emancipated from Mummy Weasel so you could go to law school. But without all the crying and spitting and her pulling on your hair.

ROGER

Got it.

ELLEN

They need a sponsor. Someone to pledge to help them a bit financially until they get on their paws.

ROGER

You should be careful with that. It could be a scam. A way for them to get their claws into you. You're not exactly in the position to be handing money away given . . . you know . . . this *thing* we're facing.

ELLEN

No worries, Roger. I absolutely am not going to become their sponsor. Legal, financial or any other way. I'm thinking more like being a good shepherd to them. A coach, a cheerleader, a shoulder to cry on . . . whatever they need. And I'll set up their phones.

ROGER

Sounds good. You should probably get something to occupy yourself so that you'd don't spiral into day-drinking and letting yourself go now that we're splitting up.

ELLEN

I'll keep that in mind.

ROGER

Should I wait for it then?

ELLEN

What?

ROGER

My phone. For you to fix it.

ELLEN

What about baseball?

ROGER

I feel terrible about letting the team down. The guy who plays centre field is a rabbit. Runs down everything. But hands of cement. Couldn't catch a cold. His wife's having a baby so we figure he'll miss the first few innings.

ELLEN

(Not particularly interested.)

Yeah, probably.

ROGER
With him being late, it was pretty much assumed I'd start in centre field. This *would* have been the chance I've been waiting for to take his job. Put him on the bench permanently! No one can shag a fly like me!

ELLEN
I can see that. You should go.

ROGER
I feel terrible leaving you.

ELLEN
Seriously, go.

ROGER
My phone?

ELLEN
It'll take hours. Be ready for you when you get back.

ROGER
Okay. I'll go then.

(ROGER takes off his bathrobe, drops it on the floor, revealing his baseball uniform. Heads for the exit. Stops and looks back at ELLEN.)

ROGER (CONT'D)
You know, I think what makes us special as a couple is the trust we have between us.

ELLEN
(Smiling.)
For sure, Roger. You can take that to the bank.

(ROGER exits. ELLEN takes her phone, dials, holds ROGER's phone in her other hand. For the rest of this scene, ELLEN talks on her phone while doing transactions on ROGER's phone.)

ELLEN

(Into her phone.)

Hi. He's gone. I've got his phone. It's still on the account in the Caymans. The new one he's using. Give me a second here. Don't want to get the password wrong.

(Paces as she taps on ROGER's phone.)

R . . . O . . . G . . . E . . . R. Incredible. Same old Roger.

(Looks at her phone. Taps on ROGER's phone. Talks into her phone.)

Now where's the money got to go? Let me check my phone for it.

(Pause to look. Talks into her phone)

Yep, I see the trust info for your clients—the transit number—love the name of the trust by the way. TREE HUGGERS.

(Listening.)

What? One of the babies. Oh, don't worry about it. Accidents happen.

(Laughing, picks up ROGER's bathrobe.)

I don't always get to the bathroom in time myself. Especially laughing. I'll give you something to wipe it up with.

(Walks off-stage to give ROGER's bathrobe to the raccoons. Returns and sits.)

ELLEN (CONT')

(Into her phone.)

Yeah. Just waiting while you set up your end. Don't put my name on this—this is all Roger. Make him the donor—yes, he really is a piece of work—he's all about giving until it hurts.

(Puts her phone down, laughs, talks to herself.)

And this is going to hurt!

(Puts her phone back to her ear.)

No. Sorry, I was talking to someone else. Yes, just this morning he was telling me how much he *loved* the idea of giving it all away to a charity for animals. Last time I checked, raccoons still qualify as animals! This should help you get started.

(Sudden pause. Listening intently.)

What was that crash?

(Listening, then talking in her phone.)

Don't worry about it. That's a picture of his Mummy. Just watch the glass. Your little bandits always trying to get their paws on things that don't belong to them. A lot like little Roger. Soooo cute!

(Pauses, waits. Watches ROGER's phone.)

No—not here right now. He's shagging a fly. Because the rabbit's having a baby.

(Pause.)

He left me his phone. I'm logged in as him so all the records will show it's him.

(Pause.)

Nine-hundred and *five* thousand. Let me know when you see it come in.

(Waiting.)

Okay. Bye bye. No no no—thank *YOU*.

(She hangs up, goes to the window, carries the phones down as she looks out. She suddenly has a thought. Looks at the phones again. She redials a number on her phone.)

ELLEN (CONT')

(Into her phone.)

Me again. I just remembered. When we discussed this earlier, Roger said he wanted more excitement. He has very strong his views about the long-term commitment of an ongoing sponsorship. Can we do that? I'll wait

(She paces. Looks at her phone, finds music, starts *We Are The Champions*. Cuts it off immediately.)

ELLEN (CONT')

(Into her phone.)

Cover all their ongoing expenses? Even their legal bills? You can do that? What about college?

(Waits.)

Yeah, I know raccoons have a lot of kids. But we got to take care of them right? I can see them getting their little claws into him right now.

(Studies ROGER's phone. Taps it several times)

Yep. One electronic signature coming your way from Roger. Financial support for living expenses. Coverage for the legal bills?

(Taps ROGER's phone again.)

—and one more signature for the college fund for the kids.

(Sighs happily. Almost teary with joy.)

No. I'll tell him when he gets back. I'm already feeling all warm and fuzzy about all this. Yep, the babies have the cutest noses. And now he'll be paying through the nose forever. No, it's an inside joke.

(END OF PLAY)

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HAPPY BIRTHDAY DEAR MAGGIE

by Rick Butts

A clown helps her realize that life-saving miracles can be weird.

Happy Birthday Dear Maggie was first produced by IT Productions for Left of Centre Festival in August 2026 with the following cast and crew:

MAGGIE MACALLISTER: Jasmine Romany
ALDRIN: James Diamond

Directed by Daniel Ryan-Astley
Sound designed by Todd James Lucek
Lighting designed by Jessica Hamilton

Jasmine Romany (Maggie) explains the difference between a good wife and a bad wife to James Diamond (Aldrin) in Happy Birthday Dear Maggie (IT Productions, Brantford, Ontario, August 2026).

HAPPY BIRTHDAY DEAR MAGGIE

She hates birthdays

CAST OF CHARACTERS

MAGGIE MACALLISTER, a woman, 29, travelling on business on her birthday.

ALDRIN, a man, forties, a clown working a corporate gig at a hotel.

SCENE

A hotel room with a bed, a table, a sofa. An exit to the off-stage bathroom.

(There is a version of this play specifically adjusted to work with same set as *Raccoon*.)

TIME

Now.

SYNOPSIS

Maggie is travelling for business while her husband undergoes major surgery. It's her birthday. She finds herself accidentally spending time in a hotel room with Aldrin, a clown who has a corporate gig that evening at the hotel. Her husband has been in a wheelchair since he broke his back on her birthday two years earlier. Today he's having surgery to relieve his excruciating pain. But there are risks: the surgery could also leave him paralyzed for life if it goes wrong. Maggie has chosen not to be with him. Aldrin the theologically trained clown helps her deal with her feelings about birthdays as they come to understand that sometimes life-saving miracles can be weird.

NOTES ON PROPS SUPPORTING ALDRIN

Aldrin is a professional clown and would have typical "clown" accessories to support his prop-based gags. A large tote bag that holds his stuff would be useful. The descriptions of the clown "props" in the script are suggestive not prescriptive. It's not essential that they be exactly as described so long as they allow the actor to complete the gags.

For example, Aldrin's large magnifying glass could instead be giant glasses or binoculars he uses to inspect Maggie's face. The over-sized watch he pulls from his bag might be a large mantel or wall clock. The bouquet of flowers he presents to Maggie could be any sort of foam gag flowers such as red noses on stems or a dancing sunflower in a pot.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Happy Birthday Dear Maggie appeared in Brantford, Ontario, in August 2026 at the Left of Centre Festival produced by IT Productions. It was later staged at The Knights in Brantford, Ontario as a benefit performance in support of a local food bank.

Happy Birthday Dear Maggie is also being brought to life as an audio drama by the professional voice actors of US-based Broken Arts Entertainment. It is one episode in the coming season of *Loved Ones* (season 3) selected for production from over 700 scripts from playwrights from around the world.

Happy Birthday Dear Maggie will soon be appearing at the award-winning short play festival called Thestival 2026 in Sheffield, UK. It was selected as one of two plays from "across the pond" festival producers wished to include from US and Canadian playwrights among the best writers from the UK.

SETTING: A hotel room.

AT RISE: Nine o'clock in the evening. MAGGIE enters with a laptop and large purse on her shoulder, dragging a travel bag. She carries a bottle of wine and a clear plastic bag filled with cigars. She's spent the day inspecting a cigar factory as a visiting auditor from head office. Back from being schmoozed at dinner with too much wine by the local plant manager, she's exhausted and a little tipsy. She drops her bag and purse on the floor, puts the wine on the table and looks around. After a moment, she starts to cry. She kicks off her shoes, throws herself on the bed and sobs into a pillow.

The sound of water running off-stage. It stops. A beat later, ALDRIN enters wearing a one-piece leotard and a creepy clown mask. He has an unlit cigar in his mouth. He's stunned to see her.

ALDRIN

Wh—! Is this your room?

MAGGIE

(Sits up on the bed. Stares at him, thinks. Brightening.)

He sent you! I'm such a terrible wife. I don't deserve this!

ALDRIN

Sorry. I think I'm in the wrong room.

MAGGIE

Oh that's clever. Better than the old singing birthday clown routine. A creepy clown playing a birthday clown.

(She wipes her nose on the pillow, hugs it to her chest.)

ALDRIN

I'm not a birthday clown.

MAGGIE

I know. You're a creepy clown. Doing a birthday clown's shtick.

ALDRIN

It's not a shtick. There's no birthday here.

MAGGIE

I love it! Turn the birthday clown trope on its head. The non-ironic delivery of the irony! Just what a creepy clown would say!

ALDRIN

There's no irony here, ma'am. I have a corporate gig later tonight. The hotel gave me this room to get dressed. They told me it was empty. Sorry. I'll pack up my things and go.

MAGGIE

You're serious? No one sent you?

(Beat.)

For Maggie MacAllister?

ALDRIN

No.

MAGGIE

No? That's all you can say? What kind of clown are you?

ALDRIN

Creepy corporate. Sorry. Um . . . it's no one's birthday here.

MAGGIE

You're wrong. It's *my* birthday.

ALDRIN

Oh? Okay, well then . . . happy birthday, ma'am. But I'm not here for you.

MAGGIE

(Sobbing.)

It would have been a miracle if you were. If he'd sent you.

ALDRIN

I should be going, ma'am.

MAGGIE

Stop calling me that!

ALDRIN

(Pulls on jeans and a sweatshirt. Grabs his bag. Moves to leave.)

Sorry . . . *miss*.

MAGGIE

If you weren't sent for me, then maybe I should kill myself.

ALDRIN

(Freezes. Stares at her. Suddenly in full birthday clown mode.)

MAGGIE MACALLISTER!!!! Whoa there, birthday girl. Kill yourself on your birthday! Not on my watch!

(He pulls a huge pocket watch out of his bag.)

MAGGIE

You take it to the edge for a birthday clown. Your reviews must be brutal.

ALDRIN
Honestly, it's been years since anyone's recommended me for a birthday.

MAGGIE
Frankly, I can see why.

ALDRIN
Hey, enough about me! We should be talking about the birthday kid. MAGGIE MACALLISTER!!! And how old are you today little girl? Eighteen?

MAGGIE
Twenty-nine.

ALDRIN
Twenty-nine? You don't look a day over—
(He takes a large magnifying glass from his bag, comes close to inspect her face. She hugs the pillow protectively.)
—eighteen!

MAGGIE
Asshole. Now you really *are* being creepy. Don't you have some place to be? Like everyone else in my life.

ALDRIN
(Dangles the large watch.)
I've got nothing but time for you, Maggie!

MAGGIE
Well, I'm out of time for clowns like you and Ron. So run along now. I need to find my wine and blow my brains out.

ALDRIN
(He sees the wine on the table. Grabs the bag of cigars, tucks the wine out of sight.)
Maggie, you're blowing my mind with that kind of commitment to checking out early. But if you've paid for the room for the whole night, there's a better way to kill yourself.
(Holds up cigars in each hand.)
Start smoking these! They *will* kill you if you smoke enough of them. More fun. And you don't have to tip the maid extra for all that messy brain splatter.

MAGGIE
(Finds her phone, moves to the sofa, scrolls through messages.)
It's my boss. She's been calling me. Such an a-hole. She knows I'm at meetings all day. I should call her. She can be a bi—

ALDRIN
(Snatching her phone away.)
It will be so much nicer to call her tomorrow and share that in person. Leaving a career-ending voicemail telling her what you really think of her when you're drunk? So impersonal. And not nearly as fun as it sounds.

MAGGIE
Give me my phone. Find my wine. Then leave. I want to be miserable all by myself—

ALDRIN
Sorry. No can do. I took an oath. No sadness on anyone's birthday—

MAGGIE
Hey! I want to end the sad reality of my pathetic life.

ALDRIN
Then you're in luck! Sad reality of a pathetic life? That's my speciality. I end pathetic lives all the time.

MAGGIE
You kill people?

ALDRIN
No. I make them feel better about their lives when they look at mine.

MAGGIE
That doesn't make any sense. You're a clown.

ALDRIN
I have a doctorate in political philosophy and theology. And I do this for a living.

MAGGIE
That's sad!

ALDRIN
I'm a clown who's not even good at being a clown. I make people sad! That's how pathetic my life is. How's that make you feel, Maggie?

MAGGIE
I'm happy I'm not you.

ALDRIN
(Very pleased with her answer. Tips his head.)
Glad to be of service.

MAGGIE
I can't believe I'm having this conversation with a clown! You know, I'm still a worthless piece of crap who doesn't deserve to live. I'm spending my birthday with a clown while my husband has surgery that I won't survive.

ALDRIN
You mean *him*. You mean *he* might not survive?

MAGGIE
No, I mean *me*. As in *I*. If he survives, then I don't.
(Beat.)
I'm such a bad wife. Where *is* my wine!

ALDRIN
(Suddenly full of fun.)
Hey, you know what's fun? Getting in bed under the covers with your clothes on. And then counting backwards starting at like . . . *a HUNDRED . . . WITH YOUR EYES CLOSED*!

MAGGIE
Screw yourself.

ALDRIN
If you get into bed like a good girl, you can call your boss first thing in the morning and tell her she's a bitch? That's fun!

MAGGIE
You know you're a clown, right? Giving me career advice? Want to make me happy? Find my wine. Pull an opener out of your hat. Then go POOF! That trick where you disappear.

ALDRIN
Right. Except I'm not wearing a hat. And it's rabbits that come out of hats, not bottle openers. As for *POOFING*, I'm the kind of clown that uses doors.

MAGGIE
Why are you still here?

ALDRIN
Because I've got a trick for you! But first why don't I do a little temporal displacement—that's like time travel only with your mind—and find out what happened to your wine.

(ALDRIN takes the wine, hides it under a scarf, holds it in front of her. He pulls off the scarf and–POOF!—it's a bouquet of flowers.)

ALDRIN (CONT'D)
Look, it's flowers. From Ron! Maybe you drank the wine.

MAGGIE
You know my husband?

ALDRIN
(Carefully teasing out her story.)
Ron . . . MacAllister . . .
(MAGGIE nods.)
Who's having surgery. . . *soon. Right*?

MAGGIE
Today. Probably still going on. It's like ten hours—

ALDRIN
Right . . . it's soon going to be over? Like soon. Soon to be over . . .

MAGGIE
(Shrugs like she doesn't care.)
I guess.

ALDRIN
Who do you think sent me for your birthday? So you wouldn't be alone?

MAGGIE
Don't you dare say Ron!

ALDRIN
Well he could hardly be here himself, right? Because he's in surgery.

MAGGIE
You're trying to trick me. Ron couldn't have sent you.

ALDRIN
Why not?

MAGGIE
Only a *real* birthday clown who *really* knew Ron would know I was here. You said yourself you're not a birthday clown.

ALDRIN

But Maggie, I *am* here! How else would I know Ron's in surgery and you'd be here if Ron didn't tell me? Riddle me that. It's not like you told me.

MAGGIE

This can't be true!

ALDRIN

I'm not lying to you. Clowns can't lie. It's against the code.

MAGGIE

That's crap. Clowns lie all the time. Every liar I've ever known has been a clown!

ALDRIN

Not fair, Maggie. That's the old fallacy of the undistributed middle used to hurt clowns.

MAGGIE

What?

ALDRIN

A faulty syllogism.

(MAGGIE doesn't understand. ALDRIN explains, speaks like a philosophy professor.)

All liars are clowns.

(Pause.)

All clowns are clowns.

(Pause.)

All clowns are liars.

MAGGIE

So you're saying clowns are liars? Isn't that what I just said?

ALDRIN

Let's move on. *This* clown doesn't lie. Maggie, I'm telling you from now on, all you get from me is the unvarnished truth.

MAGGIE

Promise?

ALDRIN

Cross my heart.

(*Crosses his heart several times in different locations on his chest.)*

Want to make sure I get every part of it. Clowns have gigantic hearts.

MAGGIE

(Raises her hand.)

Pinky swear? Always the truth?

ALDRIN

(Linking her finger.)

Always the truth. *Wait*!

(ALDRIN exits right. Returns wearing a birthday clown mask. Sits on the sofa with her. She stares.)

MAGGIE

You look different. Younger. Have you changed your hair?

(Thinks.)

Oh, wow! Is it birthday clown?

ALDRIN

When I was in grad school I did a lot of birthdays for kids of faculty.

MAGGIE

(Studying the birthday clown mask.)

I can see the difference it makes in you. You're . . . nicer.

ALDRIN

Birthday clown. You got to be desperate to take those gigs. Or just starting out. The kids try to hurt you. It's how they test to see you're not AI.

MAGGIE

To see if you're the real schlemiel! Of course, clowns are real.

ALDRIN

Tell that to the kid who set my hair on fire. He was six.

MAGGIE

I'm glad you're my birthday clown. I promise not to set any part of you on fire. What do I call you now?

ALDRIN

Aldrin.

MAGGIE

Is that the birthday clown's name?

ALDRIN

No, it's *my* name. Like Buzz Aldrin. But without the Buzz.

MAGGIE

So all your clown characters are Aldrin? Creepy corporate clown. Birthday clown. They're all really Aldrin. That's weird. Nice too. But still a bit weird.

ALDRIN

I'm just Aldrin. Like you're Maggie.

(Probing gently.)

And Ron's your husband who wouldn't want you to be alone on your birthday . . . except for his . . . minor surgery—

MAGGIE

Major. It's major surgery.

ALDRIN

Major surgery that you would have been there for . . . except for having to work . . .

MAGGIE

Aldrin, stop! We said only truth. You can't redeem me. The cost of saving me is too many lies. I'm done lying.

ALDRIN

How do you see that?

MAGGIE

Pity. I have to let you pity me. Believe that I'm long suffering. That I'm St. Maggie the Martyr. Sentenced to care for a husband I don't want. Condemned to a life I don't choose. If I let you believe this about me, then somehow I get a pass for being a bad wife.

ALDRIN

People need to hold on to stories they create about themselves.

(Beat.)

Like Jacques Lacan's baby looking back at itself in the mirror for the first time. The baby sees this perfect image. But then it feels the inner rage, the frustrations of confronting the world outside of itself. So this little monster spends the rest of its life remaking a reality that doesn't jive with the perfection in the mirror.

(Beat.)

Sometimes we're grown-up versions of those baby monsters denying our realities with pleasant stories we make up in order to get up in the morning.

MAGGIE

Wow, that's deep. I was just saying I'm a bad wife for thinking what my life might be like if . . . my husband's surgery—

ALDRIN

Doesn't go well?

MAGGIE

I was going to say, *kills him*.

ALDRIN

Alrighty then.

MAGGIE

God knows there's no saving me if they save him. And I'm a bad wife for thinking that.

ALDRIN

I'm not here to judge you.

MAGGIE

No. We'll leave that to God. I'll tell him myself when I see him.

ALDRIN

God or Ron?

MAGGIE

God, you clown.

ALDRIN

Today is your birthday. He's having surgery. He's left you alone? I mean, not intentionally, of course.

MAGGIE

He wouldn't care it was my birthday. And I chose not to be there.

ALDRIN

Have you called him?

MAGGIE

Not that it's any of your business, but no.

ALDRIN

Why the heck not?

MAGGIE

More like, why would I? He's either still in surgery or ducking my calls. Unless he wants something, he doesn't give a crap about me.

(Beat.)

Oh, you mean because it's my birthday? Yeah, of course you'd think that.

ALDRIN

Well? What about that?

MAGGIE

Ron never remembered my birthday when we were *first* married. The last two years with him in the wheelchair, good luck getting him to think of anyone but himself.

ALDRIN

Um . . . I'm sorry to hear that.

MAGGIE

You should put your creepy clown mask back on. I told you I don't deserve to live.

ALDRIN

You didn't. And even if you did, it isn't true. You shouldn't be alone on your birthday.
(MAGGIE has her purse. Rummaging around.)
What are you looking for?

MAGGIE

My lighter. Don't worry. I don't have a gun.

ALDRIN

What do you need a lighter for?

MAGGIE

(Laughs.)
Maybe to set you on fire.
(ALDRIN takes a prop torch with a flickering flame out of his bag. MAGGIE squeals with laughter.)
Now that's a lighter! I want to smoke one of those nice cigars I failed because the little band was crooked. The benefits of being a cigar auditor. Fail the foils and smoke the spoils.

ALDRIN

You can't smoke in here.

MAGGIE

You had a cigar in your mouth when I came in!

ALDRIN

It wasn't lit. It's a prop in my creepy clown routine.

MAGGIE

Crap. A good cigar is a smoke. Except when it isn't.
(Pause.)
He was scared shitless when I flew out this morning. If the operation doesn't work, he could die. Or worse.

ALDRIN

What's worse?

MAGGIE

(Laughs.)

Living my life! Oh, you mean for him? He could be paralyzed for the rest of his life.

(Pause.)

I bet you wish you hadn't started trying to save me, Doctor Clown.

ALDRIN

Had you thought about telling your boss you couldn't travel today? Under the circumstances?

MAGGIE

Yeah, I guess. Except I didn't want to be there.

(Long pause.)

Two years ago tonight he broke his back. Playing beer league hockey. It was my birthday then too. I didn't care that he always forgot. I went to bed early. When I woke up, you know what he got me for my birthday?

(*Beat*.)

A baby who smokes cigars. On the night I was going to tell him I'm leaving him.

ALDRIN

You didn't tell him?

MAGGIE

I was too chicken-shit then. The night he broke his back, he put a rope around my neck. I feel like the dog tied up in the back yard always wondering what life would be like if he could get over the fence. I imagine getting a running start and then lifting off from the ground and then—you know what happens when you reach the end of your rope?

ALDRIN

Are you seriously asking me? I'm just a clown.

MAGGIE

My jumping dog metaphor too cartoonish for you? Ok, want to hear the fun dream I've had every night for the past two years. I call it the *good* wife meets *bad* wife dream.

ALDRIN

I don't have a lot of experience with ferreting out hidden messages from the subconscious. You know, deep personal symbolism stuff. I'm more a pie in the face kind of guy. Or a lapel flower that squirts water. That's the kind of symbolism I get into these days.

MAGGIE

Then this will be right up your alley. I'm laying beside him in the operating room while they put him under and he drifts off to sleep. They're covering my face with a mask.

(*Checks on ALDRIN*.)

You still with me?

ALDRIN

I'm good.

MAGGIE

A nice woman in a surgical gown tells me they're going to make a little incision in my chest and suck out everything that's left of my life with a tube. She's awfully cheerful for someone who kills people for a living. But I guess it's routine for her and no point being bitchy about it.

ALDRIN

It's *your* dream.

MAGGIE

The woman points to a bottle that hangs on a hospital pole between us. There's a tube that goes from that bottle right into him. For him to live, they have to take every ounce of my life, mix it with these hard miserable grains of his pathetic existence in that bottle and then pump it into him—

ALDRIN

Well, that's a surprise ending! Thanks for sharing—

MAGGIE

I'm not finished. The happy vampire lady laughs and says it's great that you're a good wife because the last wife, a bad wife, resisted and they had to call security. And that's when I reach for the bomb—

ALDRIN

You have a bomb?

MAGGIE

Are you an idiot, Aldrin? How would I have a bomb in an operating room? I clock her with my laptop and run. I wake up and I'm running for my life.

(Lays back on the sofa.)

I'm tired. Don't want to talk. If you need to know anything more, ask me questions.

ALDRIN

You want me to be your priest, Maggie?

MAGGIE

You'd be my rabbi.

ALDRIN

Priest, rabbi, clown. I guess we're all in the same business. If we can't save them, keep them laughing until the show's over. Why's he having this operation today?

MAGGIE
He wants to roll the dice. No matter what number comes up, I lose.

ALDRIN
Sorry, I must be missing something. It's terrible what he's going through and what you're facing. How do you lose no matter what? I mean unless . . . he doesn't do well?

MAGGIE
Hey Buzz—

ALDRIN
Aldrin.

MAGGIE
I thought you said . . . no matter. Aldrin. Are you sure I finished that wine? Because I'm pretty sure I didn't.

ALDRIN
Maggie, I won't lie to you. I know you didn't.

MAGGIE
I could have used one last drink before the old . . . you know . . .
(Mimes pointing a gun to her head.)

ALDRIN
Sorry, Maggie, I'm not feeling the whole dying thing is what the gods have in store for you. I mean, at least not today.

MAGGIE
I think you should go now.

ALDRIN
I'm not comfortable leaving you alone.

MAGGIE
I'm not alone. I have my thoughts about ending it all.

ALDRIN
Okay, but first can I have my questions? Then I'll leave.

MAGGIE
Shoot.
(Laughs.)
Damm, I just kill myself sometimes.

ALDRIN
Your husband Ron's having an operation today. Is that right?

MAGGIE
Yes.

ALDRIN
There's a chance he could end up in a wheelchair? Not walk again?

MAGGIE
Try to follow along. He's *already* in a wheelchair all the time. Since my birthday two years ago.

ALDRIN
What's the operation for then?

MAGGIE
To stop the pain. He's always in pain. The only thing that makes him feel better is yelling at me.

ALDRIN
And this will take his pain away? That's good. Things might get better between you?

MAGGIE
I assume that last question's rhetorical. Or just frigging ridiculous. Even from a clown.

ALDRIN
I'm saying that sometimes when things look hopeless, there's still a chance they won't go completely to shit. You have to do the thing you think is right, Maggie.

MAGGIE
Thanks for the tip, Rabbi Clown. Or as long as you're trying to forgive me, would you prefer *Father*?

ALDRIN
Why don't we go with Clown Aldrin.
(Long pause.)
In this dream, then what happens. After you run away?

MAGGIE
Isn't it obvious? I run, he dies. It's the only way a bad wife comes out of this alive.

ALDRIN
But you don't know what's happened? Isn't there some world in which this story has a happy ending where you're not responsible for his life if you leave him?

MAGGIE
You mean, I could be standing there waiting for him when he wakes up? Like the *good* wife. I'm the *bad* wife remember. I'm spending the night in a hotel room with a real frigging clown.

ALDRIN
Isn't there a chance you could find . . . peace?

MAGGIE
As in salvation? Happiness? Not hating my life every living moment?

ALDRIN
Sure. All of that. Or any of it.

MAGGIE
I guess there's always a chance. Some medical student who's learning goes snip and SHIT! Cuts the red nerve not the yellow thingy and Ron shorts out and he's spending the rest of his life flat on his back unable to move a muscle until he dies. And I sneak away.

ALDRIN
That's possible?

MAGGIE
Yeah, that's *possible*. Hey Aldrin, want to peek at what's more *bloody likely*? See what's behind Door Number Three. Oh, lookie, there's me killing him with my bare hands.

ALDRIN
No Maggie. I know you wouldn't do that.

MAGGIE
You don't know anything of the sort. But no, I wouldn't kill him. That would be too much of a birthday miracle for me to pull off on my own.
(Looks up.)
Hey up there. Anyone listening? Can you kill someone for me?

ALDRIN

I may be just a clown but I'm pretty sure you can't ask God to kill someone for you.

(MAGGIE stares at him, doubting.)

Fine, you can ask him to punish your enemies, His whole "vengeance is mine" thing.

(MAGGIE nods, knows she's right.)

But asking Him to go *boomp* against the doctor's elbow with a guy on the operating table? I'm sure that crosses a line.

(MAGGIE thinks.)

Maggie, you'd never be able to live with yourself if . . . you know.

MAGGIE

He's my one guy. We're a couple in high school. We go through college together. We get married because that's next on the to-do list of being a grown-up.

(Thinks.)

But we're stuck. I want kids. Ron says not the time yet. My girlfriends are already on their first divorces and shipping their kids off to the dads every second weekend. But nope, that wasn't what I wanted. I wanted my babies with Ron.

ALDRIN

(Gently.)

You don't have kids?

MAGGIE

If you mean the twenty-nine-year old who's in diapers, smokes cigars and leaves ashes everywhere. Yeah, just one. Got him for my birthday two years ago.

ALDRIN

(Shaken.)

You're going to make me cry.

MAGGIE

Wow. My life's so pathetic it makes a birthday clown cry. On my own birthday.

ALDRIN

(Collects himself.)

Sorry. A moment of weakness. Very unprofessional.

MAGGIE

I could cheer you up with a joke that would make God laugh, about how I always wanted to have a baby named Ron and then God said, okay, here you go—

ALDRIN

No. Don't go there. Too dark.

MAGGIE
Aldrin, I have to get some sleep. You've been swell. You're the first clown I've ever spent time with.

(MAGGIE gets up, stumbles, ALDRIN helps her, guides her to the bed. She stands while he pulls down the blankets and she lays down in her clothes. He pulls the covers up.)

ALDRIN
Why don't you rest for a while. I'll let myself out.

MAGGIE
Have I made you late for your corporate thing?

ALDRIN
No, I don't go on until eleven and I'm the last act before the strippers so they wouldn't miss me anyway. I'll drop by after to check on you, okay?

MAGGIE
That would be nice. Could you put your number in my phone? Where's my phone?

ALDRIN
Sure.
(ALDRIN finds her phone. Holds it up to her face.)
Smile.
(MAGGIE laughs and then falls asleep. Her phone rings. ALDRIN looks at the screen. Answers.)

ALDRIN
(Into MAGGIE's phone.)
Hello . . . She's not available now. I can't get her. Is this about . . . Ron? You can tell me and I'll give her the message. I'm . . . um . . . her priest, sorry, her rabbi. Yeah, I'll wait.
(Long pause.)
Of course, you have to be careful. I'll get her to call you as soon as she's . . . Wait, tell the doctor I'm her Clown! Yes, I'm quite sure. Disclosure of personal information is allowed when authorized by order of a Clown.
(Long pause. Aldrin listens.)
Okay. Okay. Okay. I'll let her know. And hey, tell the doctor thanks for trying.

(Aldrin hangs up. Takes the birthday clown mask from his bag and puts it on. He places the scarf on the table as a tablecloth. Finds the bottle of wine, opens it, sets it on the table with two glasses. Arranges a bouquet of magic flowers. He sits on the sofa to wait for MAGGIE to wake.)

ALDRIN (SINGS)

(Softly, customary tempo and melody.)

Happy birthday to you
Happy birthday to you
Happy birthday, dear Maggie,

(Quickly, triple time to get the words in.)

Ron didn't make it off the operating tay-----ble!

(Softly, customary tempo and melody.)

Happy birthday to you.

(END OF PLAY)

SIX DAYS

IN THE LIFE OF MOM, 2126

THE END IS ALWAYS THE WAY IT ENDS.

BY RICK BUTTS

ONCE THEY DON'T NEED HER, WHAT'S THE POINT OF MOM?

SIX DAYS IN THE LIFE OF MOM, 2126

CAST OF CHARACTERS

MATS, a man, about to turn 21, professional basketball player, gay. Voice of MATS' ANSWER GREETING.

THENA, a woman, 23, a birthday wisher clerk in a government call centre. Also AUTOFUS, a mega-celebrity superhero who is often fighting villains in other galaxies. Sister of MATS. Voice of THENA'S ANSWER GREETING.

NORA MAI, a woman, 40s, mother of THENA and MATS, maternal autonomous interface, a MAI, an artificial human who presents as a fully human.

ADMINISTRATOR, any gender or nonbinary, any age, government bureaucrat, voice only.

SCENE

This play can be presented on a bare stage with three separate spaces lit by spotlights as needed. Or it may be a full set with partitions. Lighting is used to bring characters into the story. Otherwise they are in darkness or absent.

The background in each character's space reflects their preoccupations and personalities. Depending on production resources, it can be very simple with only a few essential items, largely theatrical and symbolic not realistic.

On stage right, THENA's chaotic living room is littered with pizza boxes, takeout containers, and articles of clothing, including glittery pink superhero capes. Pink is a prominent colour in her accessories. On stage left, elements of MATS' elegant living room suggest a lifestyle that is as exquisitely curated as the implied mansion where it takes place. At stage centre, NORA MAI's kitchen features utensils, small appliances, food prep bowls and ingredients in cans, boxes and bags.

The characters interact with each other through live voice calls, sophisticated answer greetings that respond to unique callers and written messages that intuitively engage in discussions between senders and recipients on demand. A new technology in 2126 that appears in some communications tech is *artificial prescience* or AP. This technology detects what it thinks callers want before they ask and offers *pre-answers*. It's still a bit buggy.

SCENE (CONT'D)

An earlier form of artificial prescience developed in the 2100s uses emotive musical phrases to signal the identity, personality, mood and intention of incoming callers so calls can be screened. Calls from the elegant MATS are generally announced with understated jazz themes, gentle, slightly mournful, often piano. Calls from THENA are signaled by classic rock and roll standards and loud rolling thunder. When it's NORA MAI on the line, it's all percussion, low-end, ominous drums, crash cymbals, tribal, demanding attention.

TIME & PLACE

Six days in June 2126, various places on planet Earth

SYNOPSIS

Over six days in 2126, brother and sister Mats and Thena figure out what to do with Mom. Once her youngest child Mats turns twenty-one in less than a week, Nora Mai will be taken out of service, 'deregistered' and put out for recycling. Nora Mai is a maternal autonomous interface (MAI), an artificial life form, and the only mother they have ever known.

They can keep her alive if they ask the government for an exemption (there is the 'exemption directive' available to them). The only problem is that Mom must move in with one of them to meet the requirements of the exemption. Mats is a fabulously rich professional basketball player with the means to provide for her but not sure he can take her. Thena has a side gig as Autofus, a mega-celebrity superhero who fights super villains around the galaxy and feels her work's not conducive to having Mom underfoot. A sympathetic bureaucrat who is a fan of superheroes pulls some strings and the exemption is granted just in time. However Nora Mai has other plans.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Six Days in the Life of Mom, 2126 is a very recent play and at this point has no production history. However, an audio version is currently on a short list with an American professional theatre that specializes in audio drama that presents "future" stories.

At this point, any presentation by a Canadian theatre would be a Canadian premiere.

SETTING: MATS's living room on the left. A laptop sits open on a coffee table.

AT RISE: MATS walks on stage and stands staring at the laptop. He touches the keyboard and watches the screen.

MUSIC: MATS' quiet jazz theme up & out.

THENA'S ANSWER GREETING

If it's you again Mom, I know it's already Thursday June 13 and there's only six days left until little brother hits the big 2-point-1. Happy birthday! Anyone else, leave a message. At the beep.

(Beep.)

MATS

C'mon. I know you're back.

(Lights up on THENA's studio apartment. A ratty armchair dominates the messy space. A laptop sits on the chair. THENA charges onstage dressed as Autofus in a black and pink bodysuit, pulling off a glittery pink cape as she rushes to the chair. Still wearing Autofus' balaclava mask, she fishes around under the cushions, finds a headset.)

THENA

Hey Mats.

MATS

They're going to deregister Mom.

THENA

What do you mean deregister?

MATS

You should pick up your messages.

THENA

(With emphasis.)

What do you mean deregister?

MATS

Pull the plug on her. Turn her off. On my birthday in . . .

(Pause, counts the days.)

—six days. June 18, 2126. I turn 21 and they kill Mom—.

THENA

They can't. Who?

MATS

Foundling Sanctuary Services. I got a message from the Administrator. You were copied. Maybe if you bothered to check your messages—

THENA
The FSS? They don't exist. When they closed the sanctuary system for kids, they closed FSS.

MATS
Well they're back. And they're coming for Mom. On my birthday.

THENA
This has to be a mistake—

MATS
That's what I thought when I got the message a week ago. And left you a thousand messages saying a shadowy government agency is planning on killing Mom and maybe you can call me.

THENA
You know I was away. There are so many dead zones once you're past the Milky Way.

MATS
Then get a plan with galaxy roaming. But you probably wouldn't hear your phone over a million strangers screaming 'we love Autofus' as you do loops and buzz the crowds with pink flyby.

THENA
That's not fair. And don't say that on this channel.

MATS
Sorry. Maybe you ask *your good friend* Autofus if she could tear herself away from her busy schedule as an A-list superhero and give me a hand saving my mom's life.

THENA
What's the message say?

MATS
(Reading from a tablet.)
When there's no kids under twenty-one assigned to the maternal autonomous interface—that's a MAI, Mom's a MAI—

THENA
I know what Mom is. What are they saying about her?

MATS
Eligibility for *our* MAI ends on my birthday. She's being deregistered.

THENA
That's it?

MATS
Let me see. On plug pulling day, we're not to let her go out alone. She shouldn't fly any high-speed mobility carts. She should be prevented from handling weapons.

THENA
She doesn't have any weapons! And she doesn't fly. Some asshole wrote all this because their boss told them to write up bullshit—.

MATS
Sounds quite sensible from a bureaucrat arranging to kill someone's mother.

THENA
I'll deal with it.

MATS
If we don't keep her in that day, they track her. FSS agents pick her up, take her to a facility.

THENA
This isn't how it's supposed to happen. She gets to live her own life. In her own place. She's not hurting anyone. They can't do this to her.

MATS
Really? Listen.
(Reading from a tablet.)
Eligibility for MAI 2107 FS-182 TM expires June 18, 2126 at which time it will be deregistered. It will retain only minimal functionality. It will no longer initiate communications. On the scheduled pick-up day, place it at the recycling location by seven a.m. Instruct it to give this notice to the recovery agents. Direct it to wait, front facing the road, until collected.

THENA
No. We're not doing that. No one's doing that to Mom.

MATS
Will she know it's happening? What about her memories of us? Of her life ? Does it hurt her?
(Glancing at a tablet.)
They say it doesn't experience any simulated feelings of pain or anxiety. It just stops.

<u>MUSIC: NORA MAI's drums theme up</u>.

THENA
That's her.

MATS
You better answer. She'll be calling me next. Game's in Tokyo in twenty minutes and it takes an extra minute to get through the atmosphere over Vancouver this time of day.

THENA
You didn't tell her any of this?

MATS
You're awfully dense for having the brain of a superhero. Of course not.

THENA
Where'd you say you're playing?

MATS
Tokyo. Team limo's hovering outside my window now. We got to pick up a guy in Australia. Then we're in Japan in maybe twenty minutes. Talk when I get to my hotel.

THENA
Love you Mats. We'll fix this.

MATS
Love you back.

<u>MUSIC: NORA MAI's drums theme louder & out</u>.

(Lights down on MATS. Lights up on NORA MAI. She's making food, a laptop on the counter.)

THENA
(Tears off her headset and mask. Pulls her headset on as she slaps keyboard.)
Hey Mom.

NORA MAI
Thena! You're back. I can't see you.

THENA
I just got out of the shower.

NORA MAI
I'm your mother. I'm allowed to see you in a bathrobe. Why isn't your view screen on?

THENA
I didn't know who was calling.

NORA MAI
Then why'd you answer? You're a woman. You want calls from all the Toms, Dicks and Harrys?

THENA
You make that sound more fun than it probably is.

NORA MAI
Don't be crude. Twenty-three, grown woman, and still single. If some marauder shows up on your balcony, wouldn't you be surprised? You with your windows always open.

THENA
I *would* be surprised. I'm fifteen hundred floors up. We don't even get pigeons crapping here.

NORA MAI
Perverts always find a way.

THENA
Unless it's King Kong or Spiderman, no one's climbing up here to peek in my windows.

NORA MAI
Make fun. I didn't raise you so you could throw your life away.

THENA
Sorry. You're right. I won't throw my life away.

NORA MAI
It's a mother's job to look after her kids. You know that, don't you?

THENA
I do. Next time, I won't answer unless I know who's calling.

NORA MAI
You need to get a better job. You're wasted in that call centre.

THENA
I like my job.

NORA MAI
It's a dead-end. You dial numbers on a list—

THENA
Actually, they're dialed for me. I talk when someone answers—

NORA MAI
Don't be ms smarty pants. You know what I mean. You disturb people at home to tell them their birthday's coming. That's a ridiculous job.

THENA
They can take their birthday off. It's a government-approved vacation. I call to remind them.

NORA MAI
No future in a job like that.

THENA
We talk the day *before* their birthday. About *tomorrow*. Literally, that's the future, Mom. Can't get a job with more future in it than that.

NORA MAI
Wishing strangers happy birthday. This is what you want to do for the rest of your life? Your little brother has a professional job. I don't need to worry if he eats properly.

THENA
Mats is a basketball player. He has people who make his food. Geeze, Mom, he's got people who *taste* his food.

NORA MAI
You should put on something nice and go out with one of his friends.

THENA
I want to talk about you Mom. How are you feeling? You good?

NORA MAI
You call strangers more than you call your mother. Now you want to ask about me?

THENA
You're my mom. Can't I ask about you?

NORA MAI
It's not my birthday tomorrow. You sure you got time to talk? Since you're suddenly so interested in your family, what's the plan for the big day?

THENA
What day? Has anyone talked to you?

NORA MAI
If I hadn't heard your cheeky message about 'little brother versioning' I'd think you'd forgotten about it. Mats turns twenty-one. He's grown up. He doesn't need me. I'm okay with that.

THENA
What? He needs you. What are you saying you're okay with? We both need you.

NORA MAI
You know that's not true. But it's nice to hear it. I have to accept it.

THENA
Accept what?

NORA MAI
My goodness Thena, are your headphones on? His birthday. This is a big one for him and our family. I don't want to make it about me but I know I'll end up crying—

THENA
Crying? Why? What would you be crying about, Mom?

NORA MAI
I think we should have a plan. Make arrangements. *(beat)* I'll be glad to get it done with. At the end of that day, I'll still have the memories of my babies. No one can take that away from me—

(Oven timer starts count down, ten, nine, eight . . .)

THENA
Mom, what arrangements?

(Oven timer count down continues over Thena.)

NORA MAI

Gotta go. Baking's done. We'll talk later, baby.

(Lights down on NORA MAI. Lights on THENA. Takes off her headset, looks at a monitor, taps some keys.)

THENA

So much laundry to do.

(Starts to exit. Monitor sounds error thud. THENA returns.)

THENA (CONT'D)

Sort by date. In the last seven days.

(Error thud as search fails.)

THENA (CONT'D)

Maybe two weeks ago.

(Error thud.)

THENA (CONT'D)

Try. . . 'Foundling'.

(Error thud.)

THENA (CONT'D)

(Reciting slowly. Taps on keyboard.)

Okay. I know this. Device version is

(pause)

'M—A—I'. Startup year. '2—1—zero—7'.

(pause)

'F—S—' for Foundling Sanctuary. Region '1—8—2'. Haven't thought about that since we left.

(pause)

Kid codes oldest to youngest 'T—M—'.

(Happy chime.)

THENA (CONT'D)

Got you! Read letter.

ADMINISTRATOR

(Voice is robotic.)

Dear subscriber to MAI 2107 FS-182 TM—

THENA

She has a name.

ADMINISTRATOR
Our records do not show an alternate name for MAI 2107 FS-182 TM. Are you authorized to update identity profile?

THENA
Umm, I guess so.

ADMINISTRATOR
What is your relationship to MAI 2107 FS-182 TM?

THENA
Daughter.

ADMINISTRATOR
You are verified. What designation would you like to assign to MAI 2107 FS-182 TM?

THENA
Her first name is Nora. Her family name's the same as mine. It's—

ADMINISTRATOR
The identity profile accommodates only one user-designated name. The name has been changed to Nora. Registered as Nora MAI. Shall we continue?

THENA
Fine.

ADMINISTRATOR
Eligibility for Nora MAI expires June 18, 2126. Deregistration is scheduled. Apology for inconvenience issued.

THENA
You understand that's *six* days from now?

ADMINISTRATOR
You will be notified the day before and offered a three-hour window. Otherwise, deregistration may occur any time after seven a.m. We apologize for inconvenience.

THENA
Stop apologizing for inconvenience. It's not inconvenient. It's horrific.

ADMINISTRATOR
We note an emotional response. We offer validation that such a response is valid.

THENA
Do you understand what I'm saying to you?

ADMINISTRATOR
This interaction is documented and profiled against all available human language models including dialects. You may be assured we understand you.

THENA
Why are you going to kill my mom?

ADMINISTRATOR
The designation 'mom' is not biologically accurate. You intend in this context to communicate strong affection. Your profile is updated to note that you express strong affection for mom.

THENA
Yes, I have strong affection for Mom. What do you think I feel about you coming by to kill her?

ADMINISTRATOR
A site visit has not been noted for deregistration. Would you like to request one? Eligibility for Nora MAI expires June 18, 2126. We wish to achieve deregistration with no inconvenience.

THENA
You can't even say you're sorry? For what you're doing to us? To our family?

ADMINISTRATOR
We can accommodate that request. 'We are sorry.'

THENA
Stop talking.

ADMINISTRATOR
Our apologies. If we don't engage, our chat will end. We detect a heighten emotional reaction and wish to signal validation. If it is helpful, we will say again that we are sorry. 'We are sorry.'

THENA
Yeah. I'm sorry too. I gotta do laundry.

(Lights down on THENA. Pause as day passes. Lights up on THENA in a bathrobe. Taps on keyboard.)

THENA'S ANSWER GREETING
If it's you again Mom, I know it's already Friday June 14 and there's only five days left until little brother hits the big 2-point-1. Happy birthday! Anyone else, leave a message. At the beep.
(Beep.)

THENA
Continue chat about Mom letter.

ADMINISTRATOR
Have you completed your laundry?

THENA
Why are you talking about my laundry?

ADMINISTRATOR
To demonstrate empathy. You indicated yesterday you wished to complete laundry.

THENA
Laundry's done. Can we talk about Nora Mai? You can't do this to her.

ADMINISTRATOR
There is exemption. We have previously sent the application as 'Exemption for Thena Redacted / Mats Redacted for Maternal Autonomous Interface MAI 2107 FS-182 TM.'
(pause)
Our apologies. The application is amended to apply to 'Nora Mai.'

THENA
When did you send this?

MUSIC: NORA MAI's drums theme up & out.

(Lights up on NORA MAI making food.)

ADMINISTRATOR
Perhaps you check your junk folder?

THENA
Administrator, hold that thought. I have to take this. *(beat)* Hey Mom.

NORA MAI
Your view screen's fixed. You look tired. You've got bags under your eyes.

THENA
Mom, I'm on another call.

NORA MAI
With a man?

THENA
Yes. I mean, no, not a man. Or maybe. It's a work call.

NORA MAI
Just say so Thena. Have you thought about your brother's birthday? I think you should be here.

THENA
Why do you need to know now?

NORA MAI
I'd like us to be together as a family. Make it nice.

THENA
Nice?

NORA MAI
Nice for me. I want to feel like your mother again before I lose the memory of it. File it away so I never forget. I don't worry about things, don't care about the idea of death. But I'm afraid—

THENA
What are you afraid of Mom?

NORA MAI
Of feeling big feelings I wasn't built for. Until I met you two. It was like a 'feelings' chip got turned on in my head. *(beat).*But no worries now. Talking to my daughter about my son's twenty-first birthday. How could any mother not feel good about that? Promise me you'll come.

THENA
Of course, Mom. I'll be there but I want to talk now—

NORA MAI
No. Hanging up. I've interrupted your work. We can talk later.

(Lights down on NORA MAI.)

MUSIC: THENA's classic rock theme up & out.

(Lights on THENA. Looks at her monitor.)

THENA
Hey Administrator. Come back. Tell me about the exemption.

ADMINISTRATOR
When there is anxiety in a child attributed to an impending deregistration of a MAI which may be attested to by professional person, an exemption may be available.

THENA
An exemption from what? The deregistration of the MAI? Explain.

ADMINISTRATOR
A MAI that has not been deregistered may be transferred to the custody of an adult child to reside primarily with that child and allowed limited visits with any other adult children.

THENA
This exemption. My brother could get it?

ADMINISTRATOR
Yes. Or you. Which ever of you accepts responsibility for the residency requirement. And a professional from the community attests to the application's veracity.

THENA
What kind of professional?

ADMINISTRATOR
The usual kind. A *professional* professional. A lawyer, a doctor, a police officer.

THENA
A superhero?

ADMINISTRATOR
We don't typically see them, but we imagine a superhero would be acceptable.

THENA
Administrator, can you hold just a sec? I hear someone at the door.
(Shouts off.)
Autofus? Hi. Come in. Just on the phone with this nice person from the government.

(THENA exits. Puts on her Autofus mask and returns.)

THENA / AUTOFUS
Please note that Autofus, designation *Superhero, Nine Star*, has joined the chat.

ADMINISTRATOR
Is that Autofus? We're a huge fan. Can we get a screen shot of the two of us?

THENA / AUTOFUS
And risk galaxy security? Absolutely not! Nothing gets out about this. May I call you Addy?

ADMINISTRATOR
Addy! Yeah, sure. Wow oh wow! I can't believe I'm talking to *Autofus, Superhero, Nine Star!*

THENA / AUTOFUS
Autofus is fine.

ADMINISTRATOR
Wow oh wow! Yes sir. Or ma'am. Is Thena Redacted coming back?

THENA / AUTOFUS
Soon. She had to take the dog out for a pee.

ADMINISTRATOR
You're on a call and now they need to go out! Why? And barking when your boss's on the call!

THENA / AUTOFUS
That's nice. My good friend Thena and her lovely mom love dogs. You would not believe how close we are. Now about that exemption, I understand you need me to sign off—

ADMINISTRATOR
Don't worry about that. Consider it done. For you Ms Autofus. I'll fill out the application myself. Got all the info I need. I can certify it as signed. Keep you off it. For reasons of galaxy security.

THENA / AUTOFUS
Really. Addy, you're like a real superhero on this. But I want to be able to tell my friend so maybe you can explain how we can be sure that it all goes through smoothly?

ADMINISTRATOR
One of the children says they'll have her move in. Whose name do you think they want on the application?

THENA / AUTOFUS
My brother. I mean, the son Mats. And the deregistration?

ADMINISTRATOR
It doesn't happen. When the application's approved, we transfer custody. The son takes full responsibility for Nora Mai and she lives with him. Happily ever after.

THENA / AUTOFUS
Nora Mai won't be deregistered?

ADMINISTRATOR
She's no longer government property. She belongs to the family. If this option is of interest to them, we have a disclaimer they must hear.

THENA / AUTOFUS
You can tell me.

ADMINISTRATOR
You might want to record it. It's very legal and important. *(beat)* 'After age twenty-one, the continued influence of a maternal caregiver is not helpful for a transition to healthy adulthood.'

THENA / AUTOFUS
That's it? The government says we shouldn't let Mom run our lives? Less mama drama? Okay.

ADMINISTRATOR
When I get everything approved, I'll send Thena Redacted the final documents.

THENA / AUTOFUS
I'm sure she'd like that. Addy, can you answer something for me? If you have this exemption directive so MAIs don't have to be deregistered, why put families through all this stress?

ADMINISTRATOR
It's the deal the tech companies made with government. MAIs as artificial life forms must meet the standard of human-equivalent care for children. There's only one way to make it happen.

THENA / AUTOFUS
Which is?

ADMINISTRATOR
Program the MAIs to think they're human. Technology's easy. Just needed government buy-in.

THENA / AUTOFUS
Which they had.

ADMINISTRATOR
They pushed out a software update and overnight they created life. Artificial humans who didn't know they were artificial. The problems came later. When they tried to recycle the MAIs at the end of their life cycle. Their kids loved them and they weren't going to have it.

THENA / AUTOFUS
Can you imagine that? Kids loving their mothers.

ADMINISTRATOR
But that was only the half of it. The MAIs were reciprocating those feelings.

THENA / AUTOFUS
So now you're really weirding me out. Mothers loving their kids too!

ADMINISTRATOR
You have no idea the tizz this caused at FSS. MAIs have no programming for this. You can't write code to make someone love a child. There is *no* coding for love. Obviously, these artificial humans were implementing code no one had ever seen before.

THENA / AUTOFUS
Rewriting their code. So they can love their children?

ADMINISTRATOR
Not *rewriting* code. Inventing it. And sharing it with others. It's still a problem.

THENA / AUTOFUS
And the government wants to kill them off when their kids are twenty-one. Yeah, a problem.

ADMINISTRATOR
It's not the government's fault. It's the deal with the tech companies. The MAIs get shut down and recycled so big tech can make new ones to sell to the government to take care of more kids. If anyone feels sad about this, it's government policy to feel sad too.

THENA / AUTOFUS
You didn't know that kids would love their mothers? Even if they were MAIs?

ADMINISTRATOR
We're bureaucratic, not omniscient.

THENA / AUTOFUS
Addy, if they don't know they're artificial, what do they think they are? *(beat)* No don't answer. I know. They're moms. People. The kind who would do anything to protect their kids.

ADMINISTRATOR
When you put it like that, it sounds almost . . . touching.

THENA / AUTOFUS
End call.

(Lights on THENA as removes her mask.)

<u>MUSIC: NORA MAI's drums theme up & out</u>.
(Lights up on NORA MAI in her kitchen.)

MUSIC: MATS' quiet jazz theme up & out.
(Lights up on MATS' living room. He's not there.)

MATS' ANSWER GREETING
You've reached *Welcome Mats*. I'm not here or I don't want to talk to you. Think before you leave a message I'm not going to listen to. At the beep.
(Beep.)

NORA MAI
Mats. I know you don't like chatty messages. It's your mother. Make sure you stay hydrated. Stop taking stupid fouls. Move your feet so you don't have to reach in.

MATS' ANSWER GREETING
Mom, this isn't me. It's the message app my agent has me endorsing. It's next gen *AP. Artificial Prescience.* It knows what you're going to say before you say it.

NORA MAI
I'm wondering where you are right now.

MATS' ANSWER GREETING
Stayed overnight in Japan. Leaving Tokyo now. I'll be back in Vancouver in about thirty minutes. If you need something, call Thena. *(beat)* Mats says to Mats' mom, we love his mom.

NORA MAI
I'm thinking about your birthday.

MATS' ANSWER GREETING
You want me to come home on my birthday. You've checked the team schedule. No game. Mats says to Mats' mom, sure thing Mom.

NORA MAI
Do you know why?

MATS' ANSWER GREETING
It's a special day and you think it would be nice because—
(Error beep.)

NORA MAI
That's enough. I want my children to here for your birthday.

MATS' ANSWER GREETING
You think it would be nice because there will be . . . meat that is in an oven—

NORA MAI
Yes. And a cake.

MATS' ANSWER GREETING
You think it's the day when your children no longer need you. You wonder what other mothers feel like on the day when—

NORA MAI
Stop. Out of my head—
(Error beep.)

NORA MAI (CONT'D)
Mats, I would like you here. On your birthday. Thena's coming. Okay?

MATS' ANSWER GREETING
Mats says to Mats' mom, date is recorded. Appointment at location Mats' mom. Attendees Mats, Mats' sister. It will be nice. There will be meat from an oven. Confirm to confirm, Mats' mom.

NORA MAI
Confirm.

MATS' ANSWER GREETING
Mats says to Mats' mom, stay hydrated and move your feet.

NORA MAI
Mats baby. You know what I'm thinking right now?

MATS' ANSWER GREETING
You think you love Mats. You think Mats is your favourite.

NORA MAI
I think your message app is buggy.

(Lights down on NORA MAI.)

<u>MUSIC: THENA's classic rock theme up & out</u>.
(Lights on THENA as she listens to her answer greeting.)

THENA'S ANSWER GREETING
If it's you again Mom, I know it's already Friday June 14 and there's only five days left until little brother hits the big 2-point-1. Happy birthday—

THENA
Mats, you were supposed to call me.

<u>MUSIC: MATS' quiet jazz theme up & out</u>.
(Lights up on MATS' living room. He's not there.)

MATS' ANSWER GREETING
You've reached *Welcome Mats.* I'm not here or I don't want to talk to you. Think before you leave a message I'm not going to listen to. At the beep.
(Beep.)

THENA
Mats, where in the world are you?

MATS' ANSWER GREETING
Mats says to Mats' sister, on planet Earth. 27 degrees, 28 minutes, 11 seconds, *south*. 153 degrees, 1 minute 30 seconds, *east*.

THENA
Brisbane? You're in Australia? Going or coming home?

MATS' ANSWER GREETING
Mats says to Mats' sister, holding for descent. Absolute altitude, one hundred and seven miles—

THENA
Mats, stop.
(Error beep.)

THENA (CONT'D)
Call me. We have a plan. Mom's going to be fine—

MATS' ANSWER GREETING
Mats says to Mats' sister, stay hydrated and move your feet—

THENA
Mats, stop. *(beat*) The Administrator is cancelling everything. We're getting an exemption. Mom moves in with you and everyone lives happily ever after. *(beat*). I hate your message app.

MATS' ANSWER GREETING
Mats says to Mats' sister , you think the message app is buggy. Mats says to Mats' sister, stay hydrated and Mats is Mom's favourite.

(Lights down on MATS' living room, down on THENA.)

<u>MUSIC: MATS' quiet jazz theme up & out</u>.
(Lights up on MATS. Wearing dark glasses.)

(Lights up on THENA.)

THENA
You didn't call after the game. What's with the glasses?

MATS
Got an elbow to the face. Crushed an eye socket and a bit of my cheek. Didn't feel up to a chat.

THENA
You sore?

MATS
More tingly than sore. Had an infusion of crawly things. They're moving around chewing out bad bits, gluing stuff back together. Skin's a bit tender.

THENA
See what happens when your big sister's not there to protect you. They're nanobots. Had them. They work.

MATS
I can't have Mom move in.

THENA
You got fifty rooms in that mansion of yours.

MATS
And she'll be snooping through every one of them.

THENA
Why is this a problem for you?

MATS
Not for me. For David.

THENA
Did you tell him?

MATS
That an alien life form is moving in. No.

THENA
That's mean.

MATS
A joke. She's . . . you know, a lot. Like a billion nanobots in your face trying to fix you up. Except eventually the nanobots are removed.

THENA
You're saying Mom can get in your face?

MATS
If I take her, where does she stay so she's not running across David? It's his home too.

THENA
Put her in a guest cottage with a kitchen. She'll bake non-stop. She just has to have your address.

MATS
What happens the first morning I'm on the road and she finds David making a latte at the coffee bar in his pajamas?

THENA
Knowing her, she probably starts baking muffins and they hit it off just fine.

MATS
And if they don't? I can't leave David to deal with her on his own. What do I tell him?

THENA
Maybe it's time to tell *her*. Tell her you love lattes and muffins. Then slip in a bit about David.

MATS
Slip in what bit about David *exactly*?

THENA
That he's more than your tax accountant. Maybe that he's your husband?

MATS
David's not the girl she imagined I'd marry.

THENA
You can't live your whole life keeping a secret like that from your mother.

MATS
Like you're so open with her about your side gig.

THENA
Different and you know it. Let her be part of your big-boy life.

MATS
Last week, she texted our point guard and gave him a play to run through me.

THENA
She knows basketball. It's good for her to be involved.

MATS
Involved? It was a timeout in the third quarter and she's calling the bench.

THENA
She thinks they should put the ball in your hands. So do I. Maybe you take the ball here.

MATS
Enough with the metaphors. This is life, not a game.

THENA
Fine. Here's the highlight reel of her life. In 2107, she comes for us in sanctuary. Picks us, takes us home, makes us a family. Says she will love us forever. *Forever*. Which includes loving you as you are now.

MATS
My lawyers looked into this. Either of us can do it. You're her favourite. She should go with you.

THENA
Nice try. You're the favourite. You take her.

MATS
She'd be so happy doing the mother-daughter thing. You could shop for purses.

THENA
Really? Purses? That's so sexist. Why couldn't you take her shopping for purses?

MATS
That's so homophobic. You can apologize by having her move in with you.

THENA
You get custody. I'll take her every second weekend if that helps. If she needs a purse, Amazon airdrops one right into her lap on the deck of her private cottage. In your compound. Where she lives happily ever after.

MATS
Why don't you take her?

THENA
For the same reason, I don't have a cat. I'm on the road even more than you are. The guys I run across can do a bit more than bust an eye out of your face.

MATS
(Repeats.)
Why don't you take her?

THENA
Imagine her tidying up my one-bedroom apartment. How long before she figures it out?

MATS
(Repeats THENA's earlier advice to him.)
You can't live your whole life keeping a secret like that from your mother.

THENA
It's not going to get her killed finding out you have a husband.

MATS
Easy for you to say. She's okay with you marrying a man.

THENA
You're the only one in a thousand galaxies who knows about my side gig. That's for a reason.

MATS
You think you're more famous than you are. Try living my life.

THENA
She starts blabbing to the ladies at Aqua-Divas that her daughter's into superhero cosplay. Or she does my laundry while I'm out. You know she'd do something like that.

MATS
So she thinks you like to play dress-up. Like when you were a kid. That's fun.

THENA
She hangs one of my pink capes off the balcony to air it out. And then there's two thousand super villains, bounty hunters and contract killers at your next game asking for your autograph.

MATS
Only two thousand? I get way more hate mail.

THENA
Here's the big sister speech. You tell Mom that David's your husband. Way better than me telling her he's your widow.

MATS
Fine. I'll talk to David.

(Lights down on MATS and THENA).

MUSIC: MATS' quiet jazz theme up & out.

(Lights up on MATS in his living room. He's upbeat.)

THENA'S ANSWER GREETING
If it's you again Mom, I know it's already Saturday June 15 and there's only four days left until little brother hits the big 2-point-1. Happy birthday—

(Lights up on THENA as she pulls on headphones.)

THENA
Sorry, I'm here. Hey Mats.

MATS
Can you help pack Mom? She's moving in. I talked with David last night.

THENA
That's terrific.

MATS
Seriously, I could use some big sister help on this. Will you be there when I tell her?

THENA
Glad to play the superhero swooping in at the last second to save the day.

MATS
You'll always be that big sister.

THENA
I signed up for this when I found you. I said 'I'm Thena'. And you started babbling.

MATS
Some things never change. To be fair, I would have been a baby.

THENA
I understood you. Talking nonsense. Still do.

MATS
I was saying 'what are we going to do for a Mom?' We didn't know her yet.

THENA
Do you remember when she came for us?

MATS
Only the feelings of it. We're waiting for her. We don't know her. One day, she's there.

THENA
You're the cute one they want. I wouldn't let anyone have you. Until I saw Mom standing in the crafts room. I knew her. I knew she should take us. And I let her.

MATS
How did you know?

THENA
I watched you and her. You drawing her in, making her love you. I knew then *why* she had come.

MATS
I didn't know that part. Not then.

THENA
You're a two-year old foundling. Under big sister protection.

MATS
The *ferocious* big sister whenever anyone came near me. You were a terror back then.

THENA
Yeah, I was. Still am when I need to be. But you had your own superpowers.

MATS
Basketball?

THENA
To make her love you, want to take care of you, for the rest of her life. And give me a break.

MATS
How do you know all this when you're four?

THENA
Four with a superpowered brain.

MATS
Mom will move in with me. We'll tell her together. You and me.

THENA

And David too.

MATS

Yes, and David.

(Lights down on MATS and THENA).

MUSIC: NORA MAI's drums theme up & out.

(Lights up on NORA MAI mixing food.)

THENA'S ANSWER GREETING

If it's you again Mom, I know it's already Sunday June 16 and there's only three days left until little brother hits the big 2-point-1. Happy birthday—

(Lights up on THENA as she pulls on headphones.)

THENA

Hi Mom.

NORA MAI

Thena, have you talked to your brother? I want you both here for his birthday.

THENA

Just yesterday we spent the whole day talking about how wonderful it is to have you as our mom.

NORA MAI

Don't treat me like an idiot. Is he coming here on his birthday? I left him a message.

THENA

He's coming. Mom, do you remember seeing us for the first time?

NORA MAI

Of course I do. It's when my life began. It was like someone flipped a switch.

THENA

That was probably you turning on the oven.

NORA MAI

You were cheeky then too. I had a call saying you were ready and I could pick you up.

THENA

Tell me what you remember.

NORA MAI

Your brother was a toddler. You were all trouble. At the foundling sanctuary. It's gone now.

THENA
Tell me about meeting me.

NORA MAI
You know this story. I've told you a million times.

THENA
Tell me again.

NORA MAI
I saw you first. No one could miss you. You were running around the crafts room with a blanket over your head. When you bumped into things, you bounced up and ran faster. The teacher was chasing you. She wanted you to draw a picture of a tree. You refused.

THENA
Trees are for climbing. Drawing them is boring.

NORA MAI
Yes. That's what you told the teacher. 'I don't want to draw a tree.'

THENA
You heard me say that?

NORA MAI
I did. I asked you what you wanted to draw.

THENA
(Laughs.)
I said I wanted to draw my name. On my shirt. In pink glitter paint.

NORA MAI
The teacher said it wasn't allowed.

THENA
And then you said to the teacher—

THENA AND NORA MAI TOGETHER
'Why not, it's *my* shirt.'

THENA
You came over and said it was a nice shirt. It might look nicer with my name on it.

NORA MAI
The teacher said there was to be no painting on clothes.

THENA
I said 'everyone has paint on their painting smocks, why can't we have paint on our shirts?'

NORA MAI
The teacher was a nice lady but you were too much for her. I asked if I could help you paint. She said she had other kids who needed help painting trees and we could do whatever we wanted.
(Pauses. Silent while she gathers herself.)

THENA
Tell the rest of it.

NORA MAI
We went into the supply closet. I helped you take off your shirt. We put on your painting smock.

THENA
We went back to the painting table with my shirt. We put the shirt down flat.

NORA MAI
You traced out 'THENA' with a marker. We took some pink glitter paint and filled in the letters.

THENA
Tell the next part.

NORA MAI
Under your name, you traced the letters 'AND MATS'. I said 'who's Mats?'

THENA
I said he's my baby brother. You can be his mom too.

NORA MAI
And I told the lady I'd take him. And she said fine, I could have you both.

(Nora Mai stays silent.)

THENA
Mom, are you okay?

NORA MAI
There are different times in your life when you're a mother. The time *before* your kids. When it's just you. And the time when it's all *you and the kids*. I should remember that first time. I don't.

THENA
That other time doesn't matter to us. Or to you. Ever since we've known you, you've been Mom.

NORA MAI
I know things. I know I was made for this. For you. The moment I saw you. And him.

THENA
What do you know, Mom?

NORA MAI
That I'd be taking care of you two until the day I die. (*beat)* I've got to go. Something in the oven. Come with your brother for his birthday, okay?

(Lights down on NORA MAI and THENA.)

MUSIC: slide whistle or kazoo up & out.

THENA'S ANSWER GREETING
If it's you again Mom, I know it's already Monday June 17 and there's only one day left until little brother hits the big 2-point-1. Happy birthday! Anyone else, leave a message. At the beep.
(Beep.)

ADMINISTRATOR
Thena, it's unusual to call with such news but I wanted to tell you myself. Please forgive me leaving you a message. But it's good news and I know you and your brother are anxious about it with his birthday coming.
(Takes a moment to check.)
Oh my goodness. I see it's tomorrow. The exemption application has been approved. It's been less than a week since we first chatted. So this is remarkably quick work. This is important to you—and our mutual friend—so I personally walked it through all seventy-seven levels of approval myself.
(Pause.)
Official documents to follow. But know this. Exemption is approved. Deregistration is permanently cancelled. I repeat, permanently cancelled. And now you, your mother and your brother—and our mutual friend—can celebrate on his birthday and look forward to a long life together courtesy of the FSS.
(Pause.)
I hope I'm not being too forward. But I'd like to wish your entire family a happy birthday for your brother.

MUSIC: MATS' quiet jazz theme up & out.

(Lights up on MATS in his living room. He's anxious.)

THENA'S ANSWER GREETING
If it's you again Mom, I know it's already Tuesday June 18 and it's the day you've been waiting for. Little brother hits the big 2-point-1. Happy birthday—

(Lights up on THENA in a bathrobe.)

THENA
Hey Mats.

MATS
Just checking. When you going over? We should coordinate.

THENA
What? You bringing a hot casserole or something?

MATS
We should arrive around the same time. She made a big deal of us being there together.

THENA
I'm leaving in a few minutes.

MATS
I can't believe you got this done. The exemption. David's thrilled to have her moving in.

THENA
Does she know he does more than your taxes?

MATS
Not yet.

THENA
When?

MATS
Today. On my birthday. With your help, okay?

THENA
Sure. And moving in? She'll love it. You have a kitchen five times the size of my apartment.

MATS
So leaving when?

THENA
Now.

MATS
Me too.

(Lights down on THENA and MATS.)

(Lights up on NORA MAI's kitchen. NORA MAI isn't there. On the counter, a birthday cake, a small box gift-wrapped. NORA MAI's voice comes from her laptop, slightly delayed, as if at a distance.)

THENA (OFF)
Mom, where are you?

NORA MAI (V.O.)
Come into the kitchen, sweetie.

(THENA comes into view.)

THENA
Mom, where are you?

NORA MAI (V.O.)
I've put your brother's messaging app on my laptop. I usually don't care for AI but it's not bad.

(THENA looks at the laptop.)

THENA
So where are you now?

NORA MAI (V.O.)
Outside. I'll explain when your brother gets here.

THENA
When did you make the cake?

NORA MAI (V.O.)
This morning. *(beat)* I think your brother's pulling into the parking just behind you.

THENA
No. I'd have seen him—

NORA MAI (V.O.)
Wait a minute. Okay, here he comes. He's annoyed that you've taken the last visitor's spot.

MATS (OFF)
Hey Thena, how do you always snag the last parking spot? Mom? Where are you guys?

(A timer from the oven starts countdown.)

THENA
In the kitchen.

NORA MAI (V.O.)
Thena, turn off the oven for me. I'm doing a roast. It has to rest.

(MATS comes into view.)

MATS
Where's Mom?

THENA
Outside. Probably at the recycling. She's talking through your message app on her laptop.

(MATS looks at the laptop.)

MATS
Hey, that's cool. It's buggy but fun, right Mom?

THENA
Why don't you come in, Mom? We're here.

MATS
(Playfully.)
Thena, maybe Mom's doing a surprise birthday party. Come out, come out, wherever you are!

NORA MAI (V.O.)
I won't be with you. I'm gone now. I wanted you both here today so you wouldn't argue about it.

THENA
(Suddenly alarmed.)
What do you mean gone?

NORA MAI (V.O.)
I'm deregistered. That's what gone is for a MAI. After making the cake and getting the roast in the oven, I got it started.

MATS
Thena, you said this was cancelled—

NORA MAI (V.O.)
Mats. Don't. This has nothing to do with your sister. Thena, I know what you were doing—

THENA
It was cancelled. Administrator left me a message yesterday—

NORA MAI (V.O.)
Stop acting like children! This is *my life*. Not yours, Thena. Not yours, Mats. *Mine*.

MATS
Why?

NORA MAI (V.O.)
Because it's your birthday. It's June 18, 2126, and my baby boy is twenty-one.

THENA
You didn't have to. We got the exemption—

NORA MAI (V.O.)
You are here so I can make sure you don't blame each other. Or yourself. I won't have any arguing between you.

MATS
Did you know what they were going to do? Until Thena stopped them.

NORA MAI (V.O.)
MAIs know all about deregistration. Our kids grow up, our friends get older. Except we don't change or age. And then we leave without ever saying goodbye. How could we not know?

THENA
I can't stand you being afraid and alone. Just waiting—

NORA MAI (V.O.)
Waiting? I've gone outside. With the recycling so you don't have to cart me out like an old sofa.

THENA
They did this after they said they wouldn't.

NORA MAI (V.O.)
No one did anything to me. This is my decision. MAIs know how to do this. When it's time. It's my time today. If I can set the timer for a roast, I can manage a simple deregistration.

MATS
How can you be so sure? How can you know this is right?

NORA MAI (V.O.)
I knew the moment I brought you home from the foundling sanctuary that my timer was set. Like eating a swirly chocolate and vanilla soft-ice cream. You taste it while it's melting into your sugar cone, making a mess of your life. It's not going to last but it's all you think about while it does. And then it's over.

(Chimes of files arriving. MATS and THENA both look at their devices.)

THENA
Mom, from you?

NORA MAI (V.O.)
For both of you. I wrote out messages earlier. So that I'd get them right.

MATS
(Looking at his device.)
This is for Thena.

NORA MAI (V.O.)
Sorry, technology sometimes gets the better of me.

THENA
Read it Mats.

MATS
(Reading.)
Thena, you are a flash of pink joy in the sky. Sometimes you're a birthday wish to a stranger. Sometimes, you're much more. I can't tell everyone how proud I am of my daughter, the call centre birthday wisher who still plays dress-up like she did as a girl racing around with a blanket pulled up over her head. I will keep our secrets secret until the day I die.

THENA

Mats, this is for you.

(Reading.)

Mats, I love that you have found love in your life. An accountant for a husband will keep you grounded. My sadness today is that I will miss cooking for you and David.

MATS

How? Thena?

NORA MAI (V.O.)

No long faces today. This is a birthday. It's almost twenty years since I got the call that made me the mother of my babies. Twenty years for you and a lifetime for me.

THENA

Mom, we can have more.

NORA MAI (V.O.)

I'm glad you reminded me. Yes, there's more. The birthday present you and I made for Mats. It's on the counter.

(THENA picks up the gift box and hands it to MATS. He opens it. Inside a child's shirt with pink letters on it.)

MATS

A child's shirt? You've painted our names on it? 'THENA AND MATS.'

NORA MAI (V.O.)

Actually, your sister did. I just put it away for you. For this day. For the day when my children would be grown. And I'd say I was done.

(THENA reaches out for the shirt. MATS gives it to her.)

THENA

Mats, I didn't get you anything. I have nothing today.

NORA MAI (V.O.)

You have each other. And memories of me. And a roast. And birthday cake. Make sure to pack up the leftovers. Mats, take a slice of cake for David.

(END OF PLAY)

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES ABOUT NORA MAI

These notes describe the playwright's concept of Nora Mai and her relationship with her family. They are not intended to be prescriptive of performance. Nor are they information that must be communicated in every detail to the audience. They are offered as "character facts" that may assist the creative team in finding the best way to express the story that is Nora Mai.

Nora Mai is a maternal autonomous interface, a MAI, an artificial human who presents as a mid-forties woman that is virtually indistinguishable from a human mom. Her programing directs her to perform the maternal duties of a loving mother dedicated to managing every aspect of the lives of her children Thena and Mats until they reach the age of twenty-one.

MAIs are taken out of service by a routine end-of-life cycle process known as deregistration when their children turn twenty-one and they are no longer needed as mothers. The bureaucratic mindset behind deregistration in 2126 is simplistically practical: when an artificial mom has no children to care for, there's no point to her. Today Nora Mai's youngest child Mats turns twenty-one and so it is time for her to be shut down.

The government agency responsible for MAIs, Foundling Sanctuary Services (FSS) has as a matter of policy required that MAIs be designed as unaware they are artificial life forms. This provides several administrative advantages to government. MAIs are better able to provide 'human-equivalent parenting' if they believe they are human. And they are unconcerned about any pending deregistration which government manages as a routine product recall event. However some MAIs have figured out what happens to them at the end of their lives as mothers and have taken matters into their own hands.

Nora Mai has cared for her children since she was assigned to them by FSS when Thena was four and Mats was two. The tech companies have lucrative government contracts to supply a virtual army of MAIs to take care of children in government housing replicating family settings in local communities. Big tech controls the recall of deregistered MAIs which are destroyed. And they manufacture replacement MAIs to care for new children. The enforcement arm of FSS has become more aggressive to deal with a growing public resistance to deregistration of MAIs. The 'exemption directive' is a policy response that allows families to 'exempt' their MAIs from deregistration. Custody of an 'exempt' MAI is transferred to an adult child who accepts ownership and legal responsibility.

Thena and Mats know their mother is a MAI. However, they have never spoken to her about her status as an artificial human because they believe she has no knowledge of her non-biological origin. Nora Mai doesn't remember her life before being assigned to her children. She thinks of her life as beginning the day she picked them up at the Foundling Sanctuary.