

Mattie and the Professor

by

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CAST LIST

ERNEST WHITE White. A sixty year-old instructor of speech and theatre at a large urban community college in Memphis, Tennessee. He is in the process of cleaning out his office after taking a forced retirement.

DR. ANGELA MERRIWEATHER Black. Thirty-five years old. She served in the military, started college at twenty-four, taught college at twenty-eight and is Department Head at thirty-five. She is a sharp-looking woman who intends to be Dean soon. She struggles to serve the students as well as administer a tight budget.

ROBERT BLUHM Black. Twenty-eight years old. He is bitter that he had to grow up without a father and blames WHITE, who was the teacher when his father, TED BLUHM, collapsed and died while giving a speech in class twenty years ago. He imagines that his father ordered him to look after his mother after he was gone.

MATTIE BLUHM Black. Fifty-five years old. No advanced education. She grew up admiring those who went on the line for civil rights but was never one for the front lines. Like her husband, TED BLUHM, she is concerned about the education of young people. She is about twenty years younger than her late husband. She never remarried and never watched the tape of her husband collapsing in the classroom until a scene in this play.

LYDIA WHITE, ERNEST WHITE's twenty-eight-year-old daughter. She is taking classes at the college in the summer as she prepares to go to the university in the Fall. She had taken some time off school to work as an au pair in Europe.

TED BLUHM Black. Fifty-five. He appears as a memory from 1995 and speaks as a participant when a video plays. However, he doesn't actively interact with any of the other characters and doesn't use any period props or scenery.

CLEO DONALDSON A dentist who was TED'S best friend. ROBERT stayed with CLEO and his wife Rose when his father was in the hospital. CLEO is in love with MATTIE. He has been MATTIE'S protector of sorts since Ted's death. He thinks he has been a father figure to ROBERT. He is patronizing but not in a terribly offensive way. Intellectually he is WHITE'S equal and under other circumstances they might have been good friends.

SCENE ONE.

The set has four acting areas: The classroom, ERNEST WHITE's office, DR. ANGELA MERRIWEATHER's office, and MATTIE BLUHM's living room. Key pieces of furniture create the character of each area. There should also be an area to bring up a special on TED BLUHM as he speaks from the past. Lights up on WHITE's office. A video is playing as he sifts through DVDs and VHS tapes.

Lights up on TED BLUHM. He is seen as a 55-year-old black man in 1995. He is engaged in teasing banter with his (unseen) 8-year-old son. ERNEST WHITE is "watching" it on a video monitor on a rolling cart that has a camera attached to it.

TED

Who's the man? You're the man, You're the man. Who's the man? Who? Tell me again, who's the man? You're the man. You got it son? Who's taking care of momma? Who? You. Tell me again. Say, "I'm the man. I'm takin' care of momma." That's it son. Robert's the man. Robert's lookin' after his momma.

DR. ANGELA MERRIWEATHER knocks and enters.
WHITE shuts off the machine and lights fade on TED.

MERRIWEATHER

White, every time I walk in here you have more stuff, not less.

WHITE

I'm emptying the drawers and cupboards; it just looks like more.

MERRIWEATHER

Yeah, well I have a deadline and you're watching movies.

WHITE

I can't just throw out the videos without reviewing them.

MERRIWEATHER

I think you might have the only VHS player on the campus.

WHITE

I have a 3/4" player, also.

MERRIWEATHER

A what?

WHITE

Before your time.

MERRIWEATHER

White, you took the buy out. Retired. We bought. You're out. Let go. Leave already.

WHITE

I'm going to miss your wit.

MERRIWEATHER

Behind every joke is just a kernel of truth.

WHITE

I'll nibble on that a bit.

MERRIWEATHER

What is that you're watching?

WHITE

I ran across the tape of Ted Bluhm, the student who collapsed and died during my speech class.

MERRIWEATHER

Ah, yes, White's legendary killer speech class. Before my time, also.

WHITE

What should I do with it?

MERRIWEATHER

With what?

WHITE

The tape.

MERRIWEATHER

Throw it out. Throw all this stuff out.

WHITE

It was his own tape. It has family stuff on it. Besides, it's the tape of the man's last moment among us. I can't just toss it.

MERRIWEATHER

You can't toss anything.

WHITE

The man died. It's the last image of him on this Earth.

MERRIWEATHER

What was it, ten, 15 years ago?

WHITE

Twenty.

MERRIWEATHER

Good Lord. How would you ever get it to anyone who cares?

WHITE

I have records.

MERRIWEATHER

Why am I not surprised?

WHITE

Maybe his wife no longer lives there or is remarried or something.

She looks at him with suspicious amusement.

MERRIWEATHER

You've already checked, haven't you?

WHITE

Maybe.

MERRIWEATHER

Mr. White, Mr. White, you think too much about things.

WHITE

Well, I can't just stick it in the mail, anyway. It deserves more consideration.

MERRIWEATHER

Sure, go in uniform. Drive up in a college car. Take a partner. Salute. Just get this office emptied out.

WHITE

No need to make fun of me. I'd just prefer to give it to her in person.

MERRIWEATHER

Okay, do whatever you want. But remember, they're taking over this office whether you're ready or not. You know the date.

SHE leaves. WHITE picks up a sheet of paper and picks up the phone to call MATTIE BLUHM.

SCENE TWO

Two days later. MATTIE BLUHM's modest home in Orange Mound in Memphis, Tennessee. Orange Mound is considered the first black planned neighborhood community in Memphis. It was developed probably to contain the growing black middle class but it became an incubator for talented black leadership in music, politics, culture, and the arts. The lights come up on a well-kept living room. MATTIE, fifty-eight, is in the kitchen (OS). She seems much older than she is. The doorbell rings. Robert ignores it. After a few moments it rings again.

MATTIE (OS)

Robert, will you get that? Robert?

She enters from the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron.

ROBERT

I've got it...

MATTIE

G'on then.

ROBERT starts to speak but MATTIE stops him.

ROBERT

Ma.

MATTIE

Turn off the music.

ROBERT

Come on, now.

MATTIE

He just wants to talk to me..

She looks at him her mouth open a little. For a moment she is lost. The doorbell rings again. Lights up on WHITE at the door. He backs up and looks at the house number and his sheet of paper to verify the address. He looks back to the street at his car and pushes the remote button to set his car alarm once more to be sure.

Pinteresque silence. We see their actions as if under a microscope. WHITE rings the bell again. ROBERT peeks through the curtains.

A SILENCE.

MATTIE allows ROBERT to help her back to a chair. She smooths her clothes. ROBERT sits.

The lost look is on MATTIE's face again. ROBERT speaks very gently.

ROBERT

You heard what you wanted to hear. Let it go.

MATTIE is near tears. WHITE places the package with the videotape by the door and leaves. Sound of car.

SCENE THREE

MATTIE's house. The next day. WHITE stands on the stoop, phone in hand. Phone rings in MATTIE's home. MATTIE and ROBERT stare at it. WHITE puts his phone away. He picks up the package from where he left it the day before. He puts it in a more prominent place. Leaves. Sound of car driving off.

ROBERT picks up his keys and kisses his mother on the cheek after hearing the car drive off.

ROBERT

I won't be late.

He peeks through the curtain, satisfied that WHITE is gone. He walks out and takes the package and leaves.

SCENE FOUR:

WHITE'S office. WHITE is sifting through DVD's and marking on them with a pen. MATTIE knocks. The door is soundproof as it was formerly a music practice room.

WHITE

Come in.

(louder, annoyed at the door more than the caller.)

It's open!

He rises and opens the door.

MATTIE

Mr. White?

WHITE

Sorry to yell. These doors are soundproof. It's an old music practice room.

MATTIE

I see.

WHITE
Padded walls. Ha, ha.

MATTIE
I thought my hearing was going.

WHITE
What can I do for you?

MATTIE
I'm Mattie Bluhm ...

WHITE stammers and tries to clear a place for her to sit.

WHITE
Come in, please! Sorry for the mess. I'm moving out. What am I saying? It's always this way.

She stays in the doorway.

MATTIE
I need to ask you to stop calling me.

WHITE
Oh?

MATTIE
Robert doesn't like it.

WHITE
Robert?

MATTIE
My son.

WHITE
Ah yes! I remember him from Ted's speech.

MATTIE
I don't want any trouble..

WHITE

No. Of course not.

MATTIE

We're quite content.

WHITE

(babbles)

Of course. I had no intention of upsetting anyone. I won't call again. Tell your son to rest easy. I'm just a silly old teacher cleaning out my office. Look at all this stuff. Whew! You should hear my boss. Did you get my package?

MATTIE

Well, thank you for your time and consideration.

She turns to leave.

WHITE

I thought maybe you were his younger sister or something.

MATTIE

Dr. White.

WHITE

Just Ernest. I don't have a doctorate degree.

He pulls open a drawer and takes out a gun.

MATTIE

Mr. Ernest. Oh my god!

WHITE

No. Oh my gosh, no. It's Ted's. He used it for his speech on gun safety. I didn't want to bring it to your house but you should have it. Sorry to startle you. I've never even shot a gun.

MATTIE

No. You keep it.

WHITE

Maybe they could use it as a prop in the theatre.

(She makes no move to take it. He fumbles with it. She jumps back. He puts it away.)

So, you're his wife.

MATTIE

Widow

WHITE

Of course. I meant ..

MATTIE

We met in your classroom.

WHITE

I'm bothering you.

MATTIE

Yes, well, now we understand.

WHITE

Of course.

MATTIE

I wish I could be more, hospitable.

WHITE

Well, it hasn't consumed me or anything.

MATTIE

That's good.

WHITE

I don't mean to suggest that I took it lightly. That didn't come out right..

MATTIE

Yes. Well, I need to be going.

WHITE

Did you watch the tape?

(She freezes)

I thought you should have it.

MATTIE

Why?

WHITE

Maybe it was a bad idea after all these years.

MATTIE

Yes.

WHITE

Of course. I didn't mean to suggest... Sorry. I'm sure it would be painful to watch. Lord knows what it shows.

MATTIE

You never watched it?

WHITE

Just a little bit. When I was cleaning out my office. There's some of your family at home on it. You should watch it.

MATTIE

And now you're retiring.

WHITE

My last semester.

MATTIE

Could I see the room?

WHITE

Room?

MATTIE

Where Ted died.

WHITE

Did you watch the tape?

MATTIE

Thank you for taking care of his things. I still have his backpack. Fifty-five years old and he was like a school kid.

WHITE

I shouldn't have just left it on your doorstep..

MATTIE

It's all right.

WHITE

I hope it wasn't too much of a shock.

MATTIE

Shock?

WHITE

You watched it?

MATTIE

I should be going.

WHITE

I'm so sorry. I should have called you right away. I just thought he would be all right. That he would call you himself.

MATTIE

It was a long time ago.

WHITE

Who did I think would call you? I was so stupid. I just went on with class like it was a minor disturbance.

MATTIE

You didn't know.

WHITE

So how did you find out? I always wondered.

MATTIE

Find out?

WHITE

That Ted was in the hospital.

MATTIE

That boy, Terry, who went with him found my number in Ted's wallet.

WHITE

Students have always been two steps ahead of me. They just never knew it. I wonder what ever happened to him?

MATTIE

Who?

WHITE

Terry. Surprised me. I took him for a slacker until you told me what he'd done. He never mentioned it.

MATTIE

He wouldn't.

Door opens ROBERT enters. He now stutters a bit.

ROBERT

Come on, Mother. It's time to go home.

WHITE holds out his hand. Robert ignores it.

WHITE

You must be Robert.

ROBERT

Come on now, Mother.

MATTIE

Robert, I'll be ready in a minute.

ROBERT

I don't think this is a good idea, Mother.

WHITE

Would you like to sit down? Sorry, I was cleaning out my files.

ROBERT

Come on, Mother! It was very nice to meet you, sir.

WHITE

We theatre folk can be such pack rats.

ROBERT

You need to shred personal information. You had no right ... leave us alone. Please.

MATTIE

Robert!

ROBERT

Seriously.

WHITE

Let's start over. I'm Ernest White.

ROBERT

I know you.

WHITE

I just wanted to know how things were going.

ROBERT

We're fine.

MATTIE

Robert, he came to the funeral.

ROBERT

I remember.

MATTIE

Robert, I asked to see the room. Mr. White? Robert?

ROBERT

Mother, let's just go.

WHITE

We did everything we could.

ROBERT

You even left the room. Hardly a glimpse, hardly a glimpse of you in your little movie.

WHITE

I went to call for help.

ROBERT

You should have helped him.

MATTIE

Robert, that's enough!

ROBERT

I remember you up in the balcony.

WHITE

In the balcony?

ROBERT

At the funeral. You were up in the balcony.

WHITE

I didn't want to intrude.

ROBERT

Well, you intrudin' now.

WHITE

Why don't you both sit down?

MATTIE

Robert.

ROBERT

Did she ask you to come to our house?

MATTIE

I'll see the room some other time.

ROBERT

Well, Mr. White. Did you watch the video?

WHITE

I was here. I saw the actual event.

MATTIE

Maybe some other time, Mr. White.

ROBERT

Why did you give it to us?

WHITE

I meant to put it in your father's backpack with the rest of his things.

ROBERT

Instead you kept it?

WHITE

Yes.

ROBERT

So why give it to us now?

WHITE

I couldn't bring myself to throw it out.

ROBERT

You need to watch it.

WHITE

Okay.

ROBERT

My dad could have been saved. You taught communication for years; you must have heard dozens of CPR speeches.

WHITE

Hearing a speech isn't the same as being trained. I wasn't concentrating on the content as much as I was the presentation.

ROBERT

What does that mean?

WHITE

No. I never learned CPR.

ROBERT

I'll bet you learned after that.

WHITE

No.

ROBERT

Wow. You know, Mr. White, there are good Samaritan laws. You could have done something. Anything.

MATTIE

Robert, please.

WHITE

No. Wait. You're taking this all wrong.

ROBERT leaves followed by his mother who shrugs an apology. MERRIWEATHER approaches as ROBERT and MATTIE leave.

MERRIWEATHER

What was that all about?

WHITE

I'm not sure.

MERRIWEATHER

They looked upset.

WHITE

I guess they were.

MERRIWEATHER

Why?

WHITE

The Bluhm's.

MERRIWEATHER

Who?

WHITE

Son and widow of the deceased Ted Bluhm.

MERRIWEATHER

And?

WHITE

And, Jesus, I don't know. I took the tape to her house.

MERRIWEATHER

Why were they here?

WHITE

Upset them, I guess. I should have figured.

MERRIWEATHER

So why were they here?

WHITE

I called her. Just to see if she got the tape.

MERRIWEATHER

Oh.

WHITE

It's not like it sounds.

MERRIWEATHER

How does it sound?

WHITE

I don't know, like maybe I'm some sort of stalker.

MERRIWEATHER

I wasn't thinking that at all.

WHITE

Maybe. I guess her son thinks so. Never knew. Jesus, how was I supposed to know that public speaking could aggravate a heart condition?

MERRIWEATHER

Really?

WHITE

Seriously. Foley sent me an article about it afterwards.

MERRIWEATHER

Well, wasn't he a sweetheart?

Jesus, you mean you really can die up there?

WHITE

There were nursing students in the class who tried to help him. It was during the summer session. No one was in the main office. This was before we carried phones. No one was around. I had to run to my office to call and, I guess he was too far gone.

MERRIWEATHER

I told you to just mail the thing and forget about it.

WHITE

Like I said, I just wanted to see how things were going. Tie up loose ends.

MERRIWEATHER

No one gets to tie up loose ends. Pack up. Leave.

WHITE

Maybe I'm not really ready to go.

MERRIWEATHER

Too late. The new austerity. You've sold out.

Robert re-enters

ROBERT

I want to apologize.

WHITE

Dr. Merriweather, this is Robert. Robert "Bluhm" right?

ROBERT

Right.

WHITE

This is Dr. Angela Merriweather, our department head.

Merriweather puts out her hand to shake.

MERRIWEATHER

Mr. White tells me that your dad was one of his students. I was just hearing his story.

ROBERT

I've only watched the movie.

MERRIWEATHER

Movie?

WHITE

Inside joke.

ROBERT

Coming soon on dvd.

MERRIWEATHER

How nice.

ROBERT

Sad, really. That's about the only image I have of my father. Dropping behind a desk before being wheeled out by paramedics.

WHITE

I didn't think to turn off the machine.

MERRIWEATHER

Mr. White is famous for his recording equipment.

Robert flares for a moment and recovers.

ROBERT

What do you know? You're probably right. Anyway, I just wanted to apologize for intruding.

MERRIWEATHER

Sit for a minute. Mr. White, clear a spot. Good lord you theatre people collect a lot of crap.

ROBERT

No. Mom's waiting for me.

WHITE

She ...?

ROBERT

She came on the bus but I'll take her home. She's downstairs in the lobby.

MERRIWEATHER

Just give us a few minutes. Tell us about your father.

ROBERT

I have nothing more to say.

WHITE

I went to the funeral.

ROBERT

I saw you.

WHITE

Oh?

ROBERT

The white guy. People talked.

MERRIWEATHER

Why don't you have a seat?

ROBERT

Who was the guy who went in the ambulance with my father?

WHITE

My lesson in snap judgements. I thought Terry cut out of class after your dad collapsed.

MERRIWEATHER

Terry?

WHITE

It was the summer session. Class was three hours long. After they took Ted out I took roll and a couple of students were missing. I figured they were slackers but I found out later Terry went to the hospital with Ted.

ROBERT

You didn't come back for a long time.

WHITE

I met the ambulance at the street so I could show them to the classroom.

ROBERT

You have an answer for everything.

WHITE

Do you think this was some kind of minor thing for me?

ROBERT

Yeah. I do.

WHITE

Because. Never mind. Anything I say will be wrong.

ROBERT

You came to the funeral, and there it ended.

WHITE

I asked that they recognize your father at graduation.

ROBERT

Because he died in your class?

WHITE

Because he was a middle-aged veteran returning to school

ROBERT

Oh. When was this again?

WHITE

1995.

ROBERT

July twenty third. What was my dad's major?

WHITE

Well,

ROBERT

Yes?

WHITE

Speech was a required course for most majors.

ROBERT

Just say you don't know.

WHITE

I don't know.

ROBERT

You see, that's the problem.

WHITE

There's only so much one teacher can do.

ROBERT

You made a quick exit and came back later with the paramedics and finished class. No one even discussed what had just happened. Did you even call my mom to let her know?

WHITE

You sure studied that tape. I just wish you had some idea of what was going on in my head while I was with the 911 operator and the paramedics.

ROBERT

Did you call my mom? Did you even tell the class that dad died?

WHITE

I don't recall. Of course I did. No, I didn't call your mother.

ROBERT

You managed to find her now but didn't think to call her when my dad was dying on your floor?

ROBERT shakes his head

WHITE

I'm sure they thought ...

ROBERT

Just another guy who couldn't hack it. Only this one died instead of dropping out.

MERRIWEATHER

Now just a minute.

ROBERT

You don't count.

MERRIWEATHER

Excuse me?

WHITE

You weren't there.

MERRIWEATHER

Whatever. Listen, I just stopped by to see how your move is progressing. They're breathing down my neck to get your stuff cleared out of here. They need room for all the high tech garbage that will be obsolete tomorrow. Chop chop!

She starts to leave.

WHITE

At your service!

MERRIWEATHER

Nice to meet you, Mr. Bluhm. If you decide to enroll, stop by my office. I think we can work out a nice package for you, given the situation.

ROBERT

No thanks.

(he starts to leave as Merriweather exits)

I'll leave you two to your fun and games.

WHITE

Your mother made you come back up here, didn't she?

ROBERT

Have a good day.

WHITE

No, seriously, your mother seems like a very nice lady, and you have some kind of chip on your shoulder.

ROBERT

A few classes with my father. You go to his funeral and now you're going to analyze my family.

WHITE

I went to your father's funeral because he died in my class. Just paying my respects.

ROBERT

Right.

WHITE

At his age, even as a veteran, maybe especially as a vet, it must have taken some strong willpower to start college.

ROBERT

Mr. White, I have no doubt that you have gone to the funeral of every student who died in your classroom. You are a devoted teacher.

WHITE

That tape has nothing to do with my teaching. Maybe you studied the wrong tape.

ROBERT

You're kidding, right?

WHITE

I'm saying that I'm a tiny speck of dust in all of this. You seem to have fixated on me for some reason. This could have happened in any class. I suppose we should have CPR training, but we don't. We'd all like to think we're making a difference, but when it comes right down to it, sometimes the best response is to call for help. I have no idea what prompted your dad to enroll in college or what quirk of fate put him in my class. If there is any god in heaven, he would have collapsed and died while fishing the Ghost River. I was cleaning out my office. I found your dad's tape. I had the class contact sheet.

(MORE)

WHITE (CONT'D)

I thought your mother should have the tape. I left your mother a message. She left me a message. I left her another message. Finally, I went to the address on the sheet. Why are you making such a big deal of it?

ROBERT

Seems you're the one making a big deal of it. Sorry I upset you.

WHITE

I am not upset! I was just trying to reach your mother.

ROBERT

Yeah, I got that. Why not Dad's little boy? You remember Dad talking about him, don't you? You remember him standing there beside the coffin, don't you? Why not reach out to him also?

WHITE

I wish I had an answer.

ROBERT

Why are you so interested in my mother, anyway?

WHITE

What?

ROBERT

Out of all the nutty speeches you must have heard, why are you going after us?

WHITE

Excuse me?

ROBERT

Because you're a professor?

WHITE

I am not a professor.

ROBERT

'Cause you're white, White?

WHITE

Maybe we could talk about this some other time.

ROBERT

Go figure.

WHITE

I promise you, my intentions are those of a gentleman and a scholar.

ROBERT

Ah! She's part of your research.

WHITE

I didn't say that. Just the natural curiosity of a scholar.

ROBERT

Are you going back over every odd ball situation you've had just to see how things have worked out? You must have heard hundreds of wacky speeches.

WHITE

This one kinda pulls away from the pack.

ROBERT

So you've forgotten every speech except that one?

WHITE

Hardly.

ROBERT

You're only curious about my dad's family?

WHITE

Sort of.

ROBERT

Why?

WHITE

Maybe I do feel a little responsible.

ROBERT

Ah! (We're making progress.)

WHITE

I didn't realize that the stress of delivering a speech could trigger such a response.

ROBERT

But you're the professional. I'm sure you have experienced the stress of performance.

WHITE

Yes. And I realize how it increases with age.

ROBERT

Lot on your mind, eh?

WHITE

Maybe you just become more and more aware of how much concentration goes into making it all seem easy. I wanted students to know that the hard work pays off. That's hard to do in one class for one month in the summer.

ROBERT

So you ragged my dad into pushing himself into a heart attack.

WHITE

Your dad had active military combat. You give me way too much credit.

ROBERT

So what's your story?

WHITE

Sorry?

ROBERT

You married? Kids? What landed you here?

WHITE

Graduate school. A job. The rest is really none of your business.

ROBERT

You seem to have made it my business. No wedding band. Do you date?

WHITE

What's with you?.

ROBERT

Listen, White. Why don't we just make a little deal. You stay away from my mom, and I don't enroll in your class.

WHITE

You forget. I'm retired.

ROBERT

That's right. I did forget. Well, I'm sure you'll think of something else for me not to do. Have a good day. Gotta get downstairs. My mom's probably getting antsy. Ya know?

Robert turns to leave

WHITE

Robert. Let it go.

(Robert faces away)

ROBERT

The thing is Mr. White, it's such a struggle for us. You know, my dad never hit me. Not once. He was plenty worried that my mouth would get me in trouble, but he never hit me. He said he probably would have if he woulda been younger. But he was older. Wiser. He'd been to VietNam. He knew that hittin', torture n' shit just didn't work. You know what he thought would work? Love. Yeah, that's it. He taught me to love my momma. He was a lot older. He said he'd probably go long before her so he needed me to look after her. Shit. I bet he never knew he was putting all that on an eight-year-old boy. Anyway, that's what I intend to do. Look after my momma.

WHITE

I promise you I am no threat to you or your mother. Our stories just got mixed together twenty years ago.

Robert turns around

ROBERT

Good having this little chat. Moms always know best, don't they?

ROBERT walks out whistling.

SCENE FIVE:

The classroom. MATTIE walks into the classroom center stage. There is a lectern on a table. MATTIE walks to the lectern and clutches the sides. Lights fade up on TED in a special. He appears as he would have in 1995. HE again talks to his son.

TED

C'mon, boy! You wanna go fishin' this weekend don'cha? Who's the man? You da man! Give me five! Down in the bayou we had to smack alligators from the boat. Whatcha gonna do if an alligator comes along? Who da man?

The light fades on them as MERRIWEATHER enters.

MERRIWEATHER

Hello.

MATTIE

Is this the room?

MERRIWEATHER

The room?

MATTIE

Where my husband had class.

MERRIWEATHER

Sorry. I don't know. I wasn't in this department then.

MATTIE

Did Mr. White teach in this room?

MERRIWEATHER

He may have.

MATTIE

But it was a room like this one, right?

MERRIWEATHER

I suppose.

MATTIE

Why did he record it?

MERRIWEATHER

I'm not sure what you mean.

MATTIE

Why did he make movies of students?

MERRIWEATHER

I think they were supposed to watch them and evaluate themselves.

MATTIE

I suppose. But doesn't that make it more stressful for students?

MERRIWEATHER

Seems anyone with a phone is making some kind of movie these days.

MATTIE

But in 1995?

MERRIWEATHER

I see what you mean.

MATTIE

He had a heart condition, you know.

MERRIWEATHER

Yes, Mr. White filled me in.

MATTIE

Is this where Ted would have been standing?

MERRIWEATHER

Maybe.

Robert stands at the doorway.

ROBERT

I was looking for you, Mom. You ready?

MATTIE

Robert, this might be the very room

ROBERT

Let's go, Mother.

The women exchange sympathetic looks.

MATTIE

I'll be in touch. I still have a few questions.

ROBERT

Tell Mr. White to enjoy his retirement. He doesn't need to be concerned about us.

MERRIWEATHER

He means well.

ROBERT

So many well-meaning people. Sometimes I can't keep them all straight.

MERRIWEATHER

Let me know if I can help.

ROBERT

With what?

MERRIWEATHER

Whatever you're here for.

ROBERT

Your man White called us. That's the only reason we're here.

MATTIE

He called me, Robert, not you.

ROBERT

Stop acting like this is none of my business!

MATTIE

Well, you'll have to wait a bit longer for your turn.

ROBERT

He feels guilty. He wants your forgiveness. You're easy. He's going to have to put a little effort into me.

MATTIE

Thank you, Dr. Merriweather. I don't want to miss my bus.

ROBERT

Mother, I'm taking you home.

MATTIE

I can take care of myself.

She leaves.

ROBERT

Thank you for taking care of this, Dr. Merriweather.

He leaves.

SCENE SIX:

White's office. He is on the phone leaving a message.

WHITE

Hello Ms. Bluhm, or Robert. Ernest White here. Sorry about today. I didn't mean to upset anyone. I got to thinking about others in the class. I wonder how they have remembered the, uh, well, the incident? Anyway, no need to call me. I just wanted to apologize.

Lights up on Mattie's living room. MATTIE picks up. She was monitoring the call.

MATTIE

I'm here, Mr. White. Sorry, I get a lot of sales calls. People scamming widow ladies.

WHITE

I understand. I don't mean to be a bother. I just wanted to say I'm sorry about today.

MATTIE

We can speak.

WHITE

Oh, I thought..

MATTIE

Mr. White, what can I do for you?

WHITE

I want to apologize and assure you that I won't bother you or Robert, anymore.

MATTIE

Mr. White. I've told you before, I really do appreciate you remembering us.

WHITE

Robert, not so much.

MATTIE

Robert is just being Robert.

Maybe we should meet for coffee or something.

Silence

WHITE

I'd be happy to, but really, it's not necessary.

MATTIE

Mr. White. You wanted to talk to me. I don't mind.

WHITE

But if it's going to upset your son.

MATTIE

You can talk to him some other time.

WHITE

How about Friday?

MATTIE

What about your classes?

WHITE

It's my last semester. My classes are online, anyway.

MATTIE

Speech?

WHITE

No. Theatre. I used to teach speech online, though. I even developed the course.

MATTIE

No more?

WHITE.

No. After twenty-five years they determined I was not qualified. Long story.

MATTIE

That would be fine.

WHITE

Should I pick you up?

Mattie is charmed for a moment by the idea of a "date."

MATTIE

You've made a good start.

WHITE

Oh?

(pause)

Ms. Bluhm?

MATTIE

I can manage. Where should we meet?

WHITE

How about the Trolley Stop.

MATTIE

I'm sorry. Where is that?

She subconsciously stretches out her leg and smooths her dress.

WHITE

On Madison, near Orleans. Are you sure you don't want me to pick you up?

MATTIE

What time?

WHITE

Let's say in the afternoon. Maybe one o'clock?

MATTIE

I'll be there.

WHITE

Great! Thanks. You sure I shouldn't come by?

MATTIE

What?

WHITE

I'd be glad to ...

MATTIE

I can find it.

She hangs up the phone and goes to a mirror. She studies herself, trying to find the woman that so charmed Ted. She examines her figure. Robert enters and stares at her. She smiles, hums, and goes into the kitchen.

SCENE SEVEN:

Merriweather's office. Merriweather and CLEO DONALDSON, Ted's best friend, are seated.

MERRIWEATHER

Let me see if I understand you correctly. You were Ted Bluhm's best friend. You have maintained a close relationship with Mattie Bluhm because... because.

CLEO

Because he was my best friend.

MERRIWEATHER

And you've come to me because you think that Earnest White isn't a guy your ward should be seeing or something?

CLEO

Ward?

MERRIWEATHER

I just don't understand what you want from me. Have you talked to Mr. White or Ms. Bluhm about this?

CLEO

My wife and I have discussed it.

MERRIWEATHER

And I'm supposed to do what?

CLEO

You're his supervisor. He needs to understand that what he's doing is out of line and unprofessional.

MERRIWEATHER

In what way?

CLEO

I think you know exactly what I mean.

MERRIWEATHER

I'm slow. Spell it out for me.

CLEO

Dr. Merriweather, we're generations apart. I suppose I'm concerned about certain appearances that mean nothing to you. But please don't treat me like I'm some kind of relic.

MERRIWEATHER

Just walk me through it.

CLEO

I don't intend to sit idly by while someone takes advantage of Mattie.

MERRIWEATHER

Where are you getting this idea?

CLEO

Her son has explained Mr. White's "persistence" to me. I don't doubt that Mattie is charmed by the attention but we both know what is going on here.

MERRIWEATHER

Go on.

CLEO

I think you understand perfectly well what I mean.

MERRIWEATHER

Oh?

CLEO

Why else would he have worked here all these years?

MERRIWEATHER

What in the world are you suggesting? Maybe he's just fascinated with culture, generally. Not just ours. Maybe he likes it here. Maybe he couldn't find anything else. Maybe this is what god intended for him. I really have no idea what you're driving at but from where I sit it seems like a lot of meddling.

CLEO

Dr. Merriweather, we are both professionals. We have struggled hard for success but we are each standing on the shoulders of people who have fought and died for our opportunities.

MERRIWEATHER

Aside from the fact that this is of concern to neither of us, I find your tone sexist and condescending. You have no idea about my struggles and I'm finding myself less and less interested in yours.

Cleo rises as ROBERT enters without knocking

MERRIWEATHER (CONT'D)

Excuse me!

ROBERT

I need some help.

(to Donaldson)

What are you doing here?

MERRIWEATHER

Well, calling for an appointment or knocking would be a good start.

ROBERT

Sorry.

MERRIWEATHER

Sit down. Talk.

ROBERT

I've had enough talking. Tell your man White to leave my mother alone.

MERRIWEATHER

Sweet Jesus. What do you two talk about?

CLEO

If you'll excuse me now.

ROBERT

They went out.

MERRIWEATHER

Out? Thank you for your concern, Dr. Donaldson.

CLEO

Please don't be flippant about this. My friendship with Robert's mother is very deep.

MERRIWEATHER

I see that. Now, if you'll finish excusing yourself, I'll take the next caller. Yes, Robert, your therapist is standing by.

Cleo stands.

CLEO

Thank you for hearing me out.

MERRIWEATHER

I'm hearing you but you don't seem to be out.

Cleo shakes his head and exits.

ROBERT

It's all behind my back.

MERRIWEATHER

Whoa. Back up. You're talking about Ernest White? The man you seem to think was responsible for your bleak childhood?

ROBERT

You all think you're so much better than me. I know your kind.

MERRIWEATHER

Mr. Bluhm, you are so out of line and so wrong.

ROBERT

College woman. Had it all handed to you.

MERRIWEATHER

Either calm down or leave this campus immediately.

ROBERT

I don't want him seeing my mother.

MERRIWEATHER

Back up a minute. I'm a veteran just like your daddy was. Only thing I caught on earlier. Started college at 24, and I was teaching college at 29. Two years to finish a PhD and now, voila, at 35 I'm a department head pushing toward being a dean. What's your story, friend?

ROBERT

(ignoring her question)

GI Bill and mommy and daddy. Hell of a safety net.

MERRIWEATHER

You know nothing about my parents. You can bet they had the same fears as any black parents. They keep us off the street and away from gangs and cops.

ROBERT

Of course you're gonna take "White's" side in this.

MERRIWEATHER

Side in what? The man is retired at the end of this semester. Let him alone. He's finished.

ROBERT

White folks sure know how to game the system.

MERRIWEATHER

Listen, I have a department to run. I've been patient enough with your concerns.

ROBERT

Yeah, he gets to fake his way through a career and then draw a pension on the backs of men like my dad. Institutionalized racism.

MERRIWEATHER

Without white folks there's no racism to discuss. What's your point?

ROBERT

So it's a white problem?

MERRIWEATHER

You bet it is.

ROBERT

Well, he's finished all right. He should have been finished a long time ago.

MERRIWEATHER

Oh?

ROBERT

Interesting that he is suddenly unqualified to teach speech after my dad drops dead in his class. You all covered up for him.

MERRIWEATHER

Where in the world are you getting this information?

ROBERT

You deny it?

MERRIWEATHER

I wasn't even in this department, but Mr. Bluhm, it's hardly your business. The State is enforcing new standards. Mr. White simply didn't have the requisite graduate hours in communication.

ROBERT

Unqualified, eh? Yet he taught the class for twenty-five years.

MERRIWEATHER

He had qualifications for other work.

ROBERT

White privilege, so to speak. If he was black he'd have been out on the street. Why didn't they take him out of class when he let my dad die on the floor?

MERRIWEATHER

Well, since I was in junior high school when all this happened, I'd need to do a little research.

ROBERT

Would you do that?

MERRIWEATHER

I'm joking. Mr. Bluhm, students come back and check on their old mentors all the time. Don't you think teachers are sometimes curious about how their former students are doing, as well?

ROBERT

So he called my mom to see how dad was doing?

MERRIWEATHER

Mr. Bluhm, even if Mr. White were still employed here, you have unrealistic ideas about what I can and can't do.

ROBERT

I grew up with everyone, especially white folks, assuming that my mother was another single black woman with an illegitimate son.

MERRIWEATHER

And I grew up with everyone, especially white folks and guys like you, assuming everything was handed to me because I'm a Black woman. Where are we going with this? It's not our problem.

ROBERT

He's making it my problem.

MERRIWEATHER

You're what, twenty-five, thirty years old? Your mother seems perfectly able to care for herself.

ROBERT

I made a promise.

MERRIWEATHER

You and your surrogate daddy. What kind of care does she require? She seems to be in perfectly good health and is a fairly young woman.

ROBERT

Dr. Donaldson is no daddy of mine. No one is going to take advantage of her!

MERRIWEATHER

Who is trying to take advantage of her?

ROBERT

Mr. White, Dr. Donaldson. There have been others.

MERRIWEATHER

Have you talked to your mother about this?

ROBERT

Don't think I don't know what you're trying to do.

MERRIWEATHER

Yep, I confess. I'm trying to recruit you.

He stares at her and then laughs.

ROBERT

I must seem pretty silly to you. You with military service and a PhD. And only a few years older than me.

MERRIWEATHER

Okay, I was out of line. I shouldn't have pulled your chain.

ROBERT

No, seriously. What have I done with myself?

MERRIWEATHER

Robert.

ROBERT

I repair copy machines.

MERRIWEATHER

Nothing wrong with that. Someone has to do it.
Seriously, it's wonderful that you're looking after your mother. But it's probably time to move on.

ROBERT

You're right.

MERRIWEATHER

Your mom could live another thirty or forty years.

ROBERT

We have a dog.

MERRIWEATHER

Okay. Look, I got sidetracked. I think you should discuss this with your mother.

ROBERT

She doesn't seem to realize how wrong this is.

MERRIWEATHER

The story I have so far is that Mr. White left a message with your mother. She left a message with him. He left another message and after a couple of days without hearing from her he went to your house. No one answered the door and he left the recording. He came back another time and still no one answered the door. Your mother came to his office, and you came shortly after to find her.

(MORE)

MERRIWEATHER (CONT'D)

Now you tell me they're dating or something? So what? They are each about the same age and single. What am I missing here?

ROBERT

So it's okay for teachers to use private student information to hook up?

MERRIWEATHER

Hook up?

ROBERT

Don't act dumb.

MERRIWEATHER

I have no idea what you think is going on, and I certainly don't know what you expect me to do about it anyway.

ROBERT

You've been advised.

MERRIWEATHER

So you're here to give me advice? Mr. Bluhm, I'm going to have to insist that you leave this campus.

ROBERT

Whatever.

MERRIWEATHER

Is there anything else?

He leaves. She thinks for a moment. Phone rings. She sees it is White on the caller i.d. She laughs and answers.

Merriweather interracial geriatric dating service, Merriweather speaking.

Lights fade.

SCENE EIGHT

MATTIE's house. She is watching the video cassette of her husband's introductory speech. The video on the screen doesn't need to be clear or understandable.

Special light comes up on TED. He is answering a student's comment about his speech.

TED

Ms. Charlene, you should know that "old guy" Richard Pryor is about my age. Also, that "washed up" comedian" was just given The Mark Twain Prize, the highest honor for humorists, at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. But that's why we're here, isn't it? To learn.

MATTIE

(interjects)

Or die trying. Ted, you were a student, not the teacher. Let the poor kids alone!

TED

In the month that I was born, a mob of sixty from the Los Angeles Naval Reserve Armory beat up everyone perceived to be Hispanic, starting the week-long Zoot Suit Riots.

MATTIE

Ted, the kids don't want to hear that mess!

TED

Two were killed in race riots in Beaumont, Texas, and thirty were killed in race riots in Detroit, Michigan. Can anyone guess the year? What? The sixties??? No. I'm not as young as I look.

MATTIE

1880, you old buzzard!

TED

Okay, Nazi's were rounding up Jews in Amsterdam and exterminating ghettos in Poland. 1959? No, sorry, this happened when World War Two was breaking out. No one? One more hint: W.E.B. Du Bois became 1st Black member of National Institute of Letters.

TERRY (VO ON TV)

Who?

TED

My people, my people. I was born in June of 1943. In 1961 I joined the Navy. There were more race riots and John Kennedy was sworn in as president.

(MORE)

TED (CONT'D)

Those who like me might call me Trustworthy Ted. Someone who dislikes me would probably think of me as Tenacious Ted. I'd call myself Triumphant Ted because I'm finally going to get a college degree. Now, as you can probably tell, the major turning point in my life was joining the Navy. Not for the reason you might think. Yes, I saw the world: Europe, Asia, Africa. I heard many languages and accents. I met people who had never seen a black man before and people who had never seen a white man. But the real turning point in my life was when I met this woman.

*(He holds up a picture of his youthful wife,
MATTIE.)*

Na, this isn't my daughter. This is my wife.

MATTIE

Come on back here, you old fool, I'll still make that heart pound..

TED

Just like that I found myself going from a footloose bachelor to a man living with the most beautiful woman on Earth.

MATTIE

Ted, Ted, Ted you have those kids thinking I was Mother Theresa.

TED

I have a little boy. Here's his picture. Eight years old. Everyone be thinking I'm his granddad.

MATTIE

Yep, granddaddy, daddy all rolled into one big lover of a man.

TED

As you can probably tell from my Aaron Neville voice, I come from the land of four seasons: crawfish season, Mardi Gras Season, hunting season, and football season: Louisiana. My family moved to Walls, Mississippi while I was in the military, and I now live with my wife and this little guy in Orange Mound. My friends, we are all lucky to be here with each other. Please be gentle with the old man.

MATTIE

Ted, I have to move on now. Twenty years is a long time. I would have grown old with you but it wasn't meant to be. We gotta help Robert move on, too.

Light up on White, in his office.

WHITE

We'll have questions and answers later on our graded speeches. Chat after class if you want. And finally, last in last out. Terry, tell us your story.

MATTIE

It's the boy who went to the hospital with Ted!

TERRY (VO ON TV)

Sorry I was late, y'all. Major turning point in my life was getting my car stolen.

(Nervous laughter)

Pissed me off because fuckin' cops always be racial profiling and then I got to thinking that the little shit punk who took my car probably looked like me. That made me stop and think, "am I profiling?"

(More laughter.)

The big thing that happened in February of 1976 is standing in front of you today. That's right, me! I came into this world.

*(Holds out his hands as if fending off
applause.)*

Someone who likes me would call me Terry the Tongue. Those who don't like me would probably call me Terrible Terry. I'd call myself Talented Terry.

WHITE

Sorry, Terry, I forgot to switch tapes. You'll have to look on ...

She turns off the machine. Closes her eyes. Special fades on TED and WHITE. She opens her eyes, picks up the phone., calls White.

MATTIE

Hello? Mr. White? This is Mattie Bluhm.

WHITE

Good to hear from you. I was just watching a tape of Ted.

MATTIE

You have one of his tapes?

WHITE

Actually, it was another student's tape.

MATTIE

I didn't realize you had other tapes. Could I see it?

WHITE

Of course. I could put it onto a DVD for you.

MATTIE

Thank you. I hate to be a bother,

There are stacks of VHS tapes and DVD's. The pile seems to have grown with each scene.

WHITE

I might have one or two stuck away somewhere...

He chuckles as he looks at the piles

MATTIE

I'd love to see Ted's classmates.

WHITE

I didn't start keeping file copies until 2000 or so, but I might have some that students didn't pick up.

MATTIE

Wonderful! Robert needs to remember his daddy.

WHITE

Mattie?

MATTIE

Yes?

WHITE

I'm sorry if I was out of line the other day.

MATTIE

It was lovely. Heavens, no need to apologize.

WHITE

I know, but I should have asked.

MATTIE

Goodness, Mr. White, we're not exactly school kids.

WHITE

Yes, well, you're welcome to come here and look at them any time.

ROBERT enters. MATTIE ends conversation quickly.

MATTIE

Thank you anyway, but we're not interested.

Hangs up.

ROBERT

Who was that?

MATTIE

Just someone with family portraits or something.

ROBERT sees the VHS tape in the machine.

ROBERT

When you gonna watch the other one?

MATTIE

I'm not going to.

ROBERT

So let's just move on now, ok?

MATTIE

What do you mean?

ROBERT

This man just wants to use us.

MATTIE

Mr. White?

ROBERT

He's probably going to have some big retirement party, and he wants to trot us out to make himself into some kind of classroom hero.

MATTIE

Hero? Your dad died.

ROBERT

Right. And I don't plan to let him make it like he did anything to prevent it.

MATTIE

I really don't think that's the kind of place where teachers get much of a send-off. Besides, what could he have done?

ROBERT

Watch the tape.

MATTIE

It looked like a nice class.

ROBERT

Watch the one where he collapses and they carry him out on a stretcher.

MATTIE

Robert, I don't want to watch that.

ROBERT

He should have known CPR. He should have called you. He didn't do anything! Watch it!

HE gets the other tape and pushes the tape into the machine.

MATTIE

Robert, no! I don't want to see it!

ROBERT

Mom, I'm telling you, you can't trust that man.

MATTIE

Robert! That's enough!

ROBERT

Why do you think he wanted us at the graduation? Honorary degree for dad. Shit. Wanted you and me standing there like the fuckin' Kennedys.

MATTIE

Robert, I won't have that talk in this house!

ROBERT

Goddamn them and their high and mighty tokenism.

MATTIE

You don't use the lord's name in vain in this house.

ROBERT

I see how you've been wearing make-up now, dressing a lot nicer.

MATTIE

Robert! Stop!

ROBERT

I can take care of you, mother.

MATTIE

I can take care of myself.

ROBERT

I need to take care of you. It's what I'm supposed to do. It's what dad wanted

MATTIE

Robert, you were eight years old. He was just trying to make you feel grown up.

ROBERT

Hell of a thing to dump on an eight-year-old boy. Mom, he was fifteen years older than you. He had a bad heart. Don't act like he was just babbling nonsense to a child.

MATTIE

Robert, I am not even sixty years old. Stop acting like I have one foot in the grave. Now if I want to go out with friends or even on a date, it's none of your business. We can't just live out our lives like those old grey garden women.

ROBERT

I don't have any idea what you're talking about.

MATTIE

At least they had a glamorous life before the cats and raccoons took over.

ROBERT

Well, that clears up everything.

MATTIE

You act as if your father and I never discussed our age difference.

ROBERT

Oh? And what did he have to say?

MATTIE

Robert, it's been twenty years.

ROBERT starts to say something but turns and leaves in a huff. MATTIE picks up her husband's dog tags from a folded American flag beside Ted's picture. As the special comes up on TED She speaks.

Well, Ted. This is a fine mess you've made. Would you mind having a talk with that son of yours and explain all of this? He's smart. Like you. Hell, if you really wanted him to take care of me why didn't you tell him to go to college? Be a doctor or an engineer? What was a little boy supposed to think? All he has ever done was save his little money and bring it home to me. He's done everything he can to make sure I don't want for anything.

Phone rings. She doesn't answer.

SCENE NINE:

White's office. WHITE is packing things. But there are more tapes and DVD's than ever. He sifts through the boxes trying to find something from Ted's class. He puts a tape into the machine. A student speech.

JEROME (V.O.)

My mom give me the bird after I squashed my hamster. Now people all be giving me birds. It was an accident, my hamster. He was called Whitey. He was white.

(MORE)

JEROME (V.O.) (CONT'D)

No offense Mr. White. And that's about all. It's fun and relaxing to watch parakeets. Do I have any questions?

applause. Special up on TED

TED

What did you mean when you said that your Shell Parakeet was one half life size? Does it stay small because of the cage?

JEROME (V.O.)

That's what my book say.

(He holds up the book with a picture.)

"Shell Parakeet." Under the picture it say "one half life size."

(TED laughs in the awkward silence and then applauds. JEROME brightens up, enjoying the attention.)

Do I have any more questions?

TED

You have any birds that talk?

JEROME (V.O.)

I'm glad you ask. Yes.

TED

You should have brought one!

JEROME (V.O.)

Na. He talk like family. Like, "I wanna sex you, baby."

MERRIWEATHER sticks her head in his office in time to hear Jerome's comment. WHITE quickly shuts off the recorder. Special fades on TED.

WHITE

Thank you, Mr. Gorman.

MERRIWEATHER

White's greatest hits?

WHITE

Looking for keepers.

MERRIWEATHER

You really think they watch those things?

WHITE

I suppose not. I don't really do it for them.

MERRIWEATHER

Oh?

WHITE

They'd like to believe it, though. Wouldn't they?

MERRIWEATHER

What?

WHITE

That we're here for them.

MERRIWEATHER

Your own amusement?

WHITE

Probably.

MERRIWEATHER

So, in your spare time you watch reruns?

WHITE

Just cleaning things out.

MERRIWEATHER

Need to do that with my phone. Too many pictures take me down the rabbit hole of loser lovers. When will your office be ready for the IT guys to move their equipment in?

WHITE

I'm trying to find some video of the guy who died - Ted.

MERRIWEATHER

Oh?

WHITE

Yeah. His wife asked me if I had anything else.

MERRIWEATHER

She came by again.

WHITE

Really?

MERRIWEATHER

Looking for you. I think she's a little sweet on you, you old charmer.

WHITE

How's that?

MERRIWEATHER

Just a woman's instinct.

WHITE

Did she say what she wanted?

MERRIWEATHER

No. Just wanted to visit, as near as I could tell. The son of hers is a piece of work, though.

WHITE

Yeah. Sorry I opened this can of worms.

MERRIWEATHER

No, White, don't back down, if you're interested. Brother wants what's best for his mom. He'll come around. You're a decent old cuss, educated, and retired. I say go for it.

WHITE

Get out of here.

MERRIWEATHER

So why are you sitting here watching old movies of her husband?

WHITE

She asked me to.

MERRIWEATHER

Let me get this straight. You're retired. We have a deadline to get this office cleared out. So you decide to sit here and watch again what most of us don't want to see once?

WHITE

I'm easily amused. Seeing them reinvent themselves as a public person is fun. As a shy guy, I can relate. The Bluhm's have very few pictures or video of Ted. I told them I could put a dvd together.

MERRIWEATHER

Has his mother seen "the tape", yet?

WHITE

I don't think so. I don't think she wants to. She'd just like to see some shots of Ted interacting with the other students.

MERRIWEATHER

And what do you want?

WHITE

Hmm. Good question.

MERRIWEATHER

I thought so. You're a little sweet on her, too, aren't you?

WHITE

Don't you have a department to run?

MERRIWEATHER

Look at Mr. White, chasing after a little brown sugar.

WHITE

(laughs)

You have crossed the line now.

Phone rings. He doesn't answer.

MERRIWEATHER

You need to get that?

WHITE

*(Hesitates, then answers in a manner to
dismiss MERRIWEATHER)*

Ernest White. Oh, hello Ms. Bluhm.

END OF ACT I

ACT II

SCENE ONE:

Mattie's home. MATTIE and WHITE are watching the old DVD of TED'S class. They laugh about Jerome's speech. ROBERT enters. He has been drinking.

MATTIE

Oh my goodness, I remember Ted telling me about that boy!

WHITE

I don't think Jerome ever figured out what was so funny.

*He leans in close to the screen, putting his hand on
MATTIE'S shoulder. He picks up the remote and presses
the pause button. Special comes up on TED.*

WHITE (CONT'D)

There he is, right there! Trying hard not to laugh.

*WHITE notices ROBERT. WHITE pulls away from
MATTIE but she doesn't pull away from him. Special
fades on TED.*

WHITE (CONT'D)

Good evening, Robert.

ROBERT

Well, isn't this cozy?

MATTIE

Your supper's in the oven, Robert.

ROBERT

Well, isn't that peachy? Did you two already eat with candle light and glasses of wine?

MATTIE

Robert, hush!

Mr. White just brought us a tape of your father's speech class.

ROBERT

Of course, I was just teasin' ya, ma. Aren't you looking fine, though? How ya doin' Mr. White?

WHITE

Trying to get my office emptied. Watching these old tapes of students keeps me from getting the job done.

ROBERT

So, you gonna get another job?

WHITE

Not sure, yet.

ROBERT

What are you, like fifty-five?

WHITE

Ha! Try sixty.

ROBERT

Well, how about that. Same age as ma.

MATTIE

Excuse me, Robert, I'm not sixty!

ROBERT

Damn close.

WHITE

I remember thinking how young she was when I went to your dad's funeral. Twenty years shows a lot more on me than it does on her, despite your attempt to win me over.

ROBERT

Yeah, you got me there, Mr. White. I got get up early in the morning to slip one by an old brainiac like you.

WHITE

Well, I'd better get back to the office and finish up.

ROBERT

Na, Mr. White, stick around. They don't make you work day and night, do they? I'm gonna grab a bite, hit the shower, and then we can have a nice visit.

WHITE

No, really, I'd better be going.

ROBERT

Were you ever married, Mr. White?

MATTIE

Robert! Now get on into the kitchen.

WHITE

It's ok, I don't mind. Yes, I was married once. I have a daughter.

ROBERT

What happened? Your wife die performing for you?

MATTIE

Robert, Have you been drinking?

ROBERT

Yeah, so what? You want to hear my speech, Mr. White? No, I've never been to college. I never had a father to take me to Boy Scouts, show me how to tie knots, go fishing, or fix stuff. I bet your daddy watched all your band concerts, took you to church, helped you collect coins or rocks or stamps or some such shit. You probably had brothers and sisters that played ball with you and made army forts, all kinds of cousins who went to the lake with you in the summer and exchanged presents at Christmas. Me?

(MORE)

ROBERT (CONT'D)

All I had was my daddy until I was eight years old. Told me to look after my momma and then died in your class.

ROBERT clutches his stomach and rushes from the room.

MATTIE

I am so sorry. I really don't know what to say.

WHITE

It's all right.

MATTIE

He's not himself. He's been drinking.

WHITE rises and holds his hand out to MATTIE.

WHITE

That's why we drink.

They walk toward the door.

MATTIE

Robert will get through this.

(ROBERT appears in the doorway, unseen by the others.)

You're a sweet man. Please let me know if you find anything else.

MATTIE kisses him on the cheek. WHITE sees ROBERT, pulls slowly away and leaves.

SCENE TWO:

The classroom. It is empty except for LYDIA WHITE. She is taking a few classes as she prepares to attend the University of Memphis in the Fall. She is studying in the empty room before her class. ROBERT enters. They are about the same age.

ROBERT

Excuse me.

LYDIA

It's all right. I'm just cramming.

ROBERT

You a teacher?

She laughs.

LYDIA

I guess I'm old enough.

ROBERT

I didn't mean that.

LYDIA

Oh, cause I'm white?

ROBERT

Sorry I bothered you.

LYDIA

I was just teasing.

ROBERT

Fun place.

LYDIA

I'm taking a couple of classes here. Going to U of M in the Fall. How about you? You a teacher?

ROBERT

Hardly.

LYDIA

So, you waiting on someone?

ROBERT

Sort of. My dad went here years ago. Sorry. You're trying to work.

LYDIA

It's okay, I'm mostly just killing time.

ROBERT

What are you studying?

LYDIA

Biology. Required for my degree.

ROBERT

I see.

LYDIA

I live close by. And it's cheaper. My dad taught here so I get a discount.

ROBERT

Ah! My dad was a student so I don't get shit. Sorry.

LYDIA

What does he do?

ROBERT

He was a vet. Viet Nam. Actually, he started pretty late in life. He never finished a degree or anything.

LYDIA

What does he do now?

ROBERT

He's dead.

LYDIA

I'm sorry.

ROBERT

Yeah, actually he died right here in this room. He was doing a speech in speech class and just keeled over.

LYDIA

Oh my Gosh.

ROBERT

Yeah, his teacher just retired. Funny thing, this dude just contacted me and my mom.

LYDIA

Oh?

ROBERT

Said he wanted to give Mom my dad's recording from speech class.

LYDIA

Wow.

ROBERT

White. Mr. White. Like "Breaking Bad." You had Public Speaking?

LYDIA

Uh, sure. At my other school. Last year.

ROBERT

Good thing. Killer course here. Ha ha.

LYDIA

So he gave you the recording and ...?

ROBERT

Beats me. Mom's a little over the top by his attention. White's white, not that it makes any difference.

LYDIA

So they're, like, seeing each other?

ROBERT

What do you mean by that?

LYDIA

Just curious.

ROBERT

I take care of my mom.

LYDIA

Oh? Is she sick?

ROBERT

No college teacher is going to sweet talk her and break her heart.

LYDIA

Back up. Are they like dating or something?

ROBERT

Call it what you want. She goes to his office, and he comes to our home. It's just because he was the last one with my dad. But the guy didn't do shit to try and save him.

LYDIA

Yeah, I think I heard something about that.

ROBERT

Na. It was twenty years ago.

LYDIA

Oh right. Of course. So you must have been a little kid. How do you know what happened?

ROBERT

The guy recorded everything. Dad's speech, students rushing to help him, Even chit chatting with one of the paramedics who used to be one of his students.

LYDIA

That was all on the tape?

ROBERT

Yeah. He forgot to turn off the recorder or something.

LYDIA

Must have been hard for you to watch.

ROBERT

Mom won't watch it but I've watched it over and over.

LYDIA

Crazy.

ROBERT

Excuse me?

LYDIA

I just mean it's a crazy story. I didn't mean ...

ROBERT

I get it.

LYDIA

So I should avoid this White's class, eh?

ROBERT

I don't know. Now that I've met him, he seems okay.

LYDIA

I'll have to look him up on "Rate My Professor."

ROBERT

Huh?

LYDIA

You can see what students say about your teachers. Online.

ROBERT shifts toward the door.

ROBERT

I need to get it all straight in my head.

LYDIA

Pretty unusual thing to happen. People are already scared of speaking in public.

Robert relaxes, moves back in.

ROBERT

I wonder how many people now think you can actually die of stage fright? Most of the students in his class be around forty years old now with families of their own. Now you got me thinking about whether they've told their kids about the man who died giving a speech in his speech class.

LYDIA

What are you scared of?

ROBERT

Uh?

LYDIA

Your dad didn't really die of stage fright.

ROBERT

Yeah, but I heard public speaking can really stress you.

LYDIA

So what stresses you?

ROBERT

I guess meeting people like you.

LYDIA

I'm pretty scary.

ROBERT

I mean educated and moving up. I'm not going anywhere.

LYDIA

Oh?

ROBERT

(shrugs)

Least I've never been in trouble. Never went to jail. That's sayin' something.

LYDIA

Yes.

ROBERT

For a black guy. So what do you figure? There were maybe eighteen people in the class. Each of them told their families about the dude who dies giving a speech. Gotta figure each of their family members told someone. Probably every time someone took a speech class in their families someone mentioned that a guy actually had a heart attack and died giving a speech. So, thousands of people out there telling folks that a guy died of fright giving a speech.

LYDIA

Your dad didn't die of fright.

ROBERT

Yeah? Tell that to all those folks runnin' around tellin' others he did. Now that's some kind of funny. Dad would get a kick out of that. Sort of a poster child for public speaking avoidance. So, what's your story?

LYDIA

Story?

ROBERT

We all have a story. Why you here at your age? Divorced? Trying to support kids with a better job?

LYDIA

No. I just took some time off.

ROBERT

To do what?

LYDIA

Traveled a bit abroad.

ROBERT

Daddy sent you out to see the world, eh?

LYDIA

I worked as an au pair.

ROBERT

What's that?

LYDIA

Lived with families, looked after their kids, did chores. Learned about their cultures.

ROBERT

Rich folks?

LYDIA

Somewhat, I suppose.

ROBERT

Where?

LYDIA

Istanbul. Ireland.

ROBERT

There's an Istanbul in Ireland?

LYDIA

Sure. Funny man. Greystones. In Ireland. And Istanbul, Turkey.

ROBERT

Oh, I see. Think I could be an au pair?

LYDIA

Probably not.

ROBERT

Cause I'm black.

LYDIA

No.

ROBERT

Cause I'm a man.

LYDIA

Probably.

ROBERT

Cause I don't have education.

LYDIA

It's just a woman thing, usually.

ROBERT

Why?

LYDIA

Taking care of children just fits women better.

ROBERT

So what could I do?

LYDIA

I don't know, Peace Corps or something.

ROBERT

Wouldn't I have to go to college or do they need copy machine repairman?

LYDIA

I'm not sure. Listen, I have to get to class. I'll do a little research on the Peace Corps and maybe we can chat again.

ROBERT

You think I don't know how to Google shit up?

LYDIA

I didn't mean that.

ROBERT

Or maybe you just want to see me again.

LYDIA

Yeah, that's it. Bingo.

She leaves. ROBERT stares after her. Goes to the lectern as if to present a speech.

ROBERT

Good morning class. Did you ever wonder what becomes of these recordings of our speeches? Thousands of VHS tapes that never made the cut for conversion to DVD's lay melting in attics. Mr. White says they are used to help us evaluate our performances but my research shows that it's all a crap shoot. If you're lucky you might have a teacher who is amused enough by what you do that you end up learning something. I'm Robert Bluhm and this morning I want to describe to you how I watched the blood drain down inside the face of my dad as he made a speech in class. No, he wasn't embarrassed or particularly nervous. He experienced a cerebral hemorrhage of some sort. My mom wouldn't watch the movie but I watched it many times. My speech is called, "The Mystery of My Dad's Death and How My Mother Laid Down With the Enemy."

WHITE stands at the classroom door, unseen by ROBERT.

Did you ever watch a man die? Even on tape?

*Special comes up on TED. Lights fade. Blackout.
Intermission.*

INTERMISSION

After intermission, action is continuous.

WHITE

Maybe your dad's heart was too strong for the arteries it was filling.

ROBERT

You're the teacher, teach..

WHITE

Maybe I should have watched the tape.

ROBERT

Did you grade it?

WHITE

Yeah. Gave him an "A." Anyone dies delivering a speech deserves at least that.

ROBERT

Why didn't you watch it?

WHITE

I started to.

ROBERT

Why'd you stop?

WHITE

Seemed too personal.

ROBERT

People take pictures of corpses in caskets.

WHITE

Usually not to share with others.

ROBERT

Were you going to watch my dad or yourself?

WHITE

Probably both. More myself, I guess.

ROBERT

Why?

WHITE

Seems more useful to see ourselves when we don't know we're being recorded.

ROBERT

So why let students know?

WHITE

Courtesy. Maybe it wouldn't even be legal to not let them know.

ROBERT

Nah, public place.

WHITE

Not exactly. The classroom has a certain expectation for privacy. Besides, we're studying the results of planning and practice.

ROBERT

Isn't what you do the result of "planning and practice?"

WHITE

Of course.

ROBERT

So why not watch it?

WHITE

I guess the lines got blurred on this one.

ROBERT

Yeah. No way to practice for a student dying in front of your class, huh?

WHITE

I should have been better prepared.

ROBERT

Scared, huh? Fight or flight. Seems like you flew, Doc. Walk away from a problem you can't solve.

WHITE

Why did you watch it?

ROBERT

It was my dad.

WHITE

Glad to be of some use.

ROBERT

So who watches the tapes?

WHITE

Tapes?

ROBERT

The ones you made for all your students.

WHITE

No idea. Just you, maybe. Me. Our comfort. A little evidence that we were here.

ROBERT

Are you scared to watch them?

WHITE

Scared?

ROBERT

Yeah, like maybe you're not as good as you think you are.

WHITE

Not really. I guess I might cringe a little that I wasn't able to help them do better. Your mother was the first one ever to ask to see them.

ROBERT

Don't you feel like you're violating privacy or something?

WHITE

That's my job.

ROBERT

To violate?

WHITE

To put you under a microscope.

ROBERT

Me?

WHITE

Students in general. We're all taking a close look at ourselves.

ROBERT

Even if they don't watch the tapes?

WHITE

Sometimes it's just a matter of knowing we're on the glass and the light is on.

ROBERT

Is that what you're supposed to be doing?

WHITE

I'm not sure. I think that a speaker really needs to have an understanding of something if they expect their audience to understand it.

ROBERT

On the other hand, we really don't need to understand how something works before we use it.

WHITE

I suppose not for some things.

ROBERT

But if you want to introduce yourself to an audience you really need to know yourself?

WHITE

Yes. I think so.

ROBERT

So, you heard my speech. Do I know myself?

WHITE

Like most of us, you're working on it.

ROBERT

Kinda hard to cheat in this class, isn't it?

WHITE

Oh?

ROBERT

I mean the camera doesn't lie. You either know this shit or not.

WHITE

I suppose some are pretty good actors.

ROBERT

Liars?

WHITE

Yes, professional liars.

ROBERT

You like my mother, don't you?

WHITE

(caught off guard)

Of course. Sure. Why shouldn't I?

ROBERT

You know what I'm talking about, Doc. You're not that good of an actor.

WHITE

She's an attractive woman with a good head on her shoulders.

ROBERT

And that's really why you called us, isn't it?

WHITE

Meaning?

ROBERT

Meaning you were cleaning out your files, found my dad's recording and grabbed it as an opportunity to call on my mom. You remembered how young and pretty she was when you went to my dad's funeral.

WHITE

I guess I'm not a very good actor. I really thought she was coming to my class that last day to see me. Turns out she wanted to thank Terry for going in the ambulance with Ted. We all have stories playing in our heads.

ROBERT

You still think she's pretty?

WHITE

She's a very attractive woman. Yes..

ROBERT

Maybe things get serious between you and my mom. Let's say you move in together. What happens to me?

WHITE

Seems we're getting way ahead of ourselves

ROBERT

Yeah.

ROBERT cold-cocks WHITE in the jaw and leaves. End of scene.

SCENE THREE

WHITE walks to his office. LYDIA is waiting at the door.

LYDIA

Hey Dad, guess who I met... what happened to you?

WHITE

Teaching is now a contact sport.

LYDIA

I thought you didn't have any more classes.

WHITE

Private tutoring.

LYDIA

Are you all right? Should I get help?

WHITE

Mostly a bruised ego.

LYDIA

Oh?

WHITE

Thirty years of glowing evaluations and now this.

LYDIA

Who did this?

WHITE

Hell hath no fury like a son defending his mother's honor.

LYDIA

What?

WHITE

Long story.

LYDIA

Oh shit..

WHITE

Oh?

LYDIA

I met the guy.

WHITE

Lucky you.

LYDIA

Come on, we're calling the campus police.

WHITE

(Rubs his jaw.)

I'm all right.

LYDIA

He shouldn't be on campus. Why did he hit you?

WHITE

He's fine. Just working through some issues.

LYDIA

Why is he here?

WHITE

Why do we visit graves or put markers up on the highway where friends and family died?

LYDIA

So he watches the tape over and over and now keeps coming back to the room. Strange duck.

WHITE

You make it sound a lot worse than it is..

LYDIA

And you have a thing for his mother. Professor-student affairs have certainly changed.

WHITE

Her husband died in my classroom.

LYDIA

Well, if that's your criterion, it's a pretty limited pool of applicants. So is junior mad about his father or that you're seeing his mother?

WHITE

Kiddo, I teach speech and theatre, not psychology. I'm not "seeing" his mother.

LYDIA

We need to press charges.

WHITE

Just a minor crime of passion. I'll get over it.

LYDIA

You need to at least report it.

WHITE

He'll get arrested.

LYDIA

So? That's what happens when you assault someone.

WHITE

I really don't want to aggravate him any more than I already have.

LYDIA

Don't be an enabler.

WHITE

I'll think about it.

(phone rings)

Ernest White. Oh, hello Ms. Bluhm.

Lights up on MATTIE in her living room.

MATTIE

Mr. White, I am mortified. He had no right to do that.

WHITE

No. It's all right. Just a misunderstanding.

MATTIE

I promise you, I'll take care of this.

WHITE

He was just trying to look after you. Listen, I'm with a student right now, can I call you back?

MATTIE

There's no need. This has gone too far.

WHITE

Maybe tomorrow morning we can talk. Please tell him that I'm okay. I didn't even make a report. Just bruised a little.

MATTIE

I can take care of this.

WHITE

Sure. We'll talk later.

Lights fade on MATTIE. WHITE hangs up. Silence

LYDIA

Really?

WHITE

What?

LYDIA

A misunderstanding? For god's sake, Dad, you were assaulted!

WHITE

The oppressed class..

LYDIA

Dad, shut up!

WHITE

Excuse me?

LYDIA

I don't need another lecture about "the medium is the message." That guy smashed your face. He wasn't smashing the one percent power class.

WHITE

He feels that the system has destroyed ..

LYDIA

Dad, no! I don't want to hear any more of that bullshit. When someone is predisposed to reject the message any reason will do.

WHITE

I expect that..

LYDIA

Expectations just set you up for disappointment.

WHITE

I'm the one who's supposed to be jaded.

LYDIA

Dad, I can't just stand by while you are made into someone's punching bag. Besides, you just pretend to be jaded. You'll always be a softy for the underdog. If your students spent half as much time preparing their speeches or whatever, as you do worrying about whether you gave them the grade they deserved they'd all be ivy leaguers when they left here.

WHITE

Another child defending a parent's honor. To quote Mattie Bluhm, "I'm capable of taking care of myself."

LYDIA

Except that in this case the law has been broken. Did you hear anything I said after "punching bag?"

WHITE

I see. Here we are part of a nation of laws. But in Mattie's house there is some kind of tribal instinct?

LYDIA

For god's sake, Dad, if you're interested in Mattie Bluhm ask her out. To hell with her son. That guy has some fantasy that he is fulfilling his father's dying command. He's freaking Oedipus with full knowledge. He needs a doctor not a teacher. But I can understand that you don't want to press charges if you want to keep peace with his mother. Just be honest with yourself.

WHITE

It's my fault. I initiated all of this.

LYDIA

You are the victim here, Dad. All you did was try to check on the family of a man who died in your classroom. You were not responsible for his death. You did nothing wrong. You're a good Samaritan who got carjacked.

WHITE

I had no right to meddle. Especially after all these years. That young man grew up without a father. His mother lost her husband. It was just one less student for me. Every class drops by at least twenty five percent by the end of each semester.

LYDIA

Don't be facetious..

WHITE

Sorry.

LYDIA

So why did you call her?

WHITE

There are no witnesses, anyway.

LYDIA

Why did you call her?

WHITE

It's not like I've never been hit before.

LYDIA

Why. Did. You. Call. Her?

WHITE

I was drunk. Lonely. Insane. I don't know. Leave it alone.

LYDIA

He'll be back. Any idea what his next move will be?

WHITE

I can take care of myself!

LYDIA

Fine, Dad. You do that. You and Mrs. Bluhm just pretend you can stand on the beach, pick up seashells, hold hands, and let the tide embrace you.

WHITE

Ah, that's it. We should each be grateful that we have at least one adult child to nurse us through.

LYDIA

Excuse me while I go punch Mrs. Bluhm in the face.

She shakes her head and leaves.

SCENE FOUR

WHITE'S office

MERRIWEATHER

Mrs. Bluhm says you made a report to the campus police.

WHITE

Yes.

MERRIWEATHER

You want to talk about it?

WHITE

Not really.

MERRIWEATHER

White, you're retired. Why are you doing this? Clean out your office and get out of here.

WHITE

I was assaulted by an intruder on campus. I'd feel terrible if someone else were hurt.

MERRIWEATHER

Ernest, Robert Bluhm has never been in any kind of trouble. His mother is very upset about this.

WHITE

Sorry.

MERRIWEATHER

Sorry about what? That you can't seem to let go? That maybe your one last hope that you made some kind of difference didn't pan out?

WHITE

What is that supposed to mean?

MERRIWEATHER

Stop it with this nutty fantasy. Embrace this life for what it is and quit trying to shape it into some kind of noble mission.

White! Are you listening? Those people have made a very comfortable life without you. As far as they're concerned Mr. Bluhm could have died anywhere. You are nobody to them. Just a guy who happened to be there when the man collapsed.

WHITE

I was responsible. I was the teacher.

MERRIWEATHER

You are nothing! Just a little bit of a membrane between them and ...

WHITE

Yes?

MERRIWEATHER

For god's sake, White. You're going to waltz out of here, and I'll have to clean up this mess.

WHITE

A membrane between?

MERRIWEATHER

Forget it.

WHITE

Go on, say it. A membrane between them and chaos. And that makes me a nothing?

MERRIWEATHER

You're a dreamer. White, you know that our campus police are the real deal, right?

(He shrugs)
(MORE)

MERRIWEATHER (CONT'D)

A report to them is the same as a report at our friendly local precinct. He'll probably be charged.

WHITE

He should be.

MERRIWEATHER

So this is how you show how much you care?

WHITE

I made a mistake. I never should have called her.

MERRIWEATHER

We're making progress.

WHITE

But she left me a message that she was willing to talk.

MERRIWEATHER

About what?

WHITE

She said she couldn't watch the tape.

MERRIWEATHER

So?

WHITE

She still wanted it. Maybe she still needed some closure.

MERRIWEATHER

You, White, you! You need some closure.

WHITE

Maybe we both do.

MERRIWEATHER

Why in god's name would she want to watch the life drain out of her husband?

WHITE

You knew I was going to give it to her

MERRIWEATHER

I told you to throw it all out. You were determined.

WHITE

I've just tried to do the best I could.

MERRIWEATHER

No, White, if you really cared you let people just get on with their lives. You really have an over-inflated idea of who you are. Nobody wants to take speech class and certainly nobody expects ..

WHITE

I'm listening.

MERRIWEATHER

Nobody expects ..

WHITE

You're absolutely right. Nobody expects. And that's the beauty of it. No expectations. It's something we all create together. Every class is filled with people who get a chance to reinvent themselves. Don't you see the beauty in that? And for one group of eighteen students twenty years ago, a fifty-five-year-old man stood in front of them and died doing what he loved.

MERRIWEATHER

Making a freaking speech about cleaning a gun? White, you're an idiot.

WHITE

No. Making a speech about walking down a surprise path. Taking delight in the wonder of the universe that this particular group came together in the summer of 1995 to be with him when he left this world.

MERRIWEATHER

Mr. White, you are one deluded old man. Finish cleaning out your office and enjoy your retirement.

(WHITE gets up to leave)

And don't call, write, or visit the Bluhms.

WHITE

Yes m'am!.

He leaves.

SCENE FIVE

MATTIE and ROBERT are talking on the stoop.
WHITE has been sitting in their living room for a long
time.

MATTIE

Robert, we can't just let him sit there like this.

ROBERT

I really don't care. Probably thinks he's getting some disease.

MATTIE

Please, just tell him you're sorry.

ROBERT

It doesn't matter.

MATTIE

It matters to me.

ROBERT

Why? You said yourself that you could take care of yourself.

MATTIE

You know that's not what I'm talking about.

ROBERT

Daddy told me to take care of you and he told you to keep me out of jail. Seems we've
both come up a bit short.

MATTIE

Just apologize. That's why he's here. He wants to work this out.

ROBERT

You won't see me on my knees before that man.

MATTIE

Robert, he's been sitting there for a half hour waiting for you to come home. He just wants to talk man to man. Apologizing is my idea.

ROBERT

Well he should have thought of this before he turned me in.

MATTIE

Just talk to him. I don't know why you have to be this way.

ROBERT

It's how I've been taught, Momma. You said to hold my head high. I had a daddy who loved me and planned to stay with me and be a father to me my whole life. I wasn't supposed to let it show when white teachers shook their heads in pity at another black child with a single mother. I wasn't supposed to give an inch. Let them find out for themselves who I was and who my daddy was. Then let them try to scramble and make up for their snap judgements. You played me, Momma. You made me endure their condescending shit just so you could get the satisfaction out of seeing their confused embarrassment when they found out my daddy was a decorated war veteran. And lord have mercy Momma, how I loved you and your proud self. Now when this man, a white man, comes 'round here thinking he knew my daddy when all he did was spend a few hours of classroom time with him, I just like to throw up.

MATTIE

Robert, he watched your father die.

ROBERT

He had no right to!

MATTIE

Maybe God wanted it this way. Maybe God put that sheet of paper in his hand.

ROBERT

And this is where I curse your God and you slap me and make me repeat some nonsense about God in my mother's house.

MATTIE

No, Robert. This is the part where you go in and tell that man thanks for being there when your daddy decided that every one deserved a piece of the American dream. This is the part where you say thank you for caring enough to make that video.

ROBERT

So you finally did it.

MATTIE

Yes.

ROBERT

And what did you see?

MATTIE

I saw a man struggle because he didn't know what to do. A man who made lesson plans and carefully thought about the relationship he had with a group of people he barely had a chance to know who didn't know what to do. I saw students who might have been in their first year of school helping nursing students who probably waited until the last possible moment to take public speaking class. They were all trying to save your father's life. I saw a paramedic come into the room who lit up when he saw Mr. White because he had been his teacher, too. Whether you admit it or not, that man was there when he was most needed even if he didn't know what to do. I saw that young man Terry follow the paramedics out of the room trying to help any way he could. There wasn't a person on that tape who wasn't trying to do everything they could to save your father's life. And if that's not what you saw on the tape, then I feel very sorry for you.

ROBERT

All right, I'll go in. Then we're finished with this guy.

MATTIE

Robert, let me make this clear, you are not the one to decide who I will or won't see.

ROBERT

So this is the thanks I get.

MATTIE

Excuse me?

ROBERT

I've sacrificed everything.

MATTIE

Robert, Mr. White is not the enemy. It's time for us to move on.

ROBERT

Mother!

MATTIE

Robert, I'm suffocating, aren't you?

ROBERT tries to embrace her.

ROBERT

No, Mother..

MATTIE

I can't breathe. I need room to breathe.

ROBERT

I'm not the enemy either.

MATTIE

Can we just move on?

ROBERT

It's not what Dad would have wanted.

MATTIE

For god's sake Robert, we have no way of knowing what your father would have wanted. The only thing we can be sure of is that he would want us to be happy.

ROBERT

And we're not?

MATTIE

No Robert, I'm not. There's something missing. I'm not sure what it is but I know that if I keep going the way we are, I'll never know.

ROBERT

I'm sorry, Mother.

MATTIE

You resent that he was the last one to be with your father. You want it to be you cradling your father's face. You look at that tape and want your father to be calling for his son. Instead he was surrounded by people you didn't know.

(MORE)

MATTIE (CONT'D)

I'm not sure who you imagine them to be, but all we know is that they were students and a teacher who were brought together by circumstances beyond either of us. Robert, we have to get on with our lives.

ROBERT

No! Lovers, playmates, nurses, accountants, preachers, housewives. I never expected them to be real people. No, Mr. White is not the man I imagined him to be. Even after seeing the tape and after twenty years I can't change it. The man I've created is the man he'll always be to me.

MATTIE

I met him before I saw the movie so I matched the movie with the man. You'll have to live with your never-ending hopeless effort to match the man with the movie.

ROBERT

It's not a movie, mom. It's the recording of an actual event.

MATTIE

No. It's a movie. We all follow a script. Mr. White's script might not have matched yours, but he was doing what he was trained to do, and he is continuing to move his story along in the best way he knows. Our story has stalled, and now we are just minor players in his script. Robert, please, can we start following our own script?

ROBERT

So this is how it ends?

MATTIE

Oh Robert, we've turned into a couple of sad old spinsters. We've failed each other by holding onto each other. That was your dad's tape. It wasn't meant for either of us.

ROBERT

It's all I have of him.

MATTIE

No Robert, there's so much more that you have. Every cell in your body has him in it. Everything else is just stuff.

He leaves. MATTIE enters the house.

MATTIE (CONT'D)

My son is unable to see you, Mr. White. But we appreciate it that you came by.

WHITE

I shouldn't have reported it.

MATTIE

No. You shouldn't have. I think we're finished now.

WHITE

My daughter thought it should be reported. My boss didn't. You'd think it would be the other way around.

MATTIE

Oh?

WHITE

Zero tolerance for violence in the workplace.

MATTIE

My son is not violent. I think you should leave now.

WHITE

Impulse. He doesn't know me.

MATTIE

He was offended and lashed out. What could you possibly accomplish by having him charged? He was hitting the man in the movie.

WHITE

My daughter was defending me too, I suppose..

MATTIE

No. I doubt it.

WHITE

Really?

MATTIE

We can't let others tell us how to feel.

WHITE

I'll see what I can do to drop the complaint.

MATTIE

Mr. White, you've done quite enough. Please leave now.

WHITE

Of course. I'm sorry.

He starts to leave.

MATTIE

You have a beautiful singing voice.

WHITE

What?

MATTIE

Your singing. It's very nice.

WHITE

How?

MATTIE

I could hear you all the way in the front of the church.

WHITE

My daughter is always mortified. I only have one setting, I guess.
How can our children be so protective of us and yet so embarrassed by us?

MATTIE

Love is strange.

WHITE

Good movie.

MATTIE

Oh?

WHITE

A movie about an old gay couple.

MATTIE

I was thinking of our children.

WHITE

Of course. You know, when I was in school, junior high school, I had a friend who was black. Probably only two, maybe three black families in our town then. She and I ran around together, but there was never any chance of us seeing ourselves as a "couple." Now, looking back, no, come to think of it, a white guy did take her to the prom. I suspect he was just trying to make a show of how non-conformist he was. I wonder what she thought?

MATTIE

No need to wonder. Any girl is delighted to go to the prom.

WHITE

I suppose I should have asked her. Just, back then, you only saw yourself going with someone who you'd marry and have a family with.

MATTIE

And ...?

WHITE

Yeah, and who knows? So you watched the tape.

MATTIE

I did.

WHITE

Should I put it onto a DVD for you?

MATTIE

I threw it out.

WHITE

Oh.

MATTIE

The book is always better than the movie, anyway.

WHITE

Our stuff. Clutter.

MATTIE

Don't call it that.

WHITE

So you watched it once, and then threw it out?

MATTIE

It was nothing I hadn't been playing in my head already. Over and over. Not like Robert, though. My place of refuge was his place to find injustice.

WHITE

What will he say?

MATTIE

It wasn't his. It wasn't mine, either.

WHITE

But Ted's speech.

MATTIE

We have the other tapes. And we still have each other. Robert and me, I mean.

WHITE

Of course. Well, I have a couple more boxes to move out of my office. Time to turn in the keys. Would it be all right if I called you in a couple of weeks? Just to see how things are going?

MATTIE

I'm still angry at you for turning in Robert.

She kisses him on the cheek. They embrace. He leaves.

SCENE SIX

ROBERT and CLEO are sitting in the living room. Mattie enters as the lights come up. CLEO rises.

MATTIE

Oh my! You startled me.

ROBERT

Mother,

CLEO

Let me handle it, Robert. Mattie, we only mean to help.

MATTIE

Where's Rose?

CLEO

She didn't want to be here.

MATTIE

No doubt.

CLEO

This isn't what you think it is.

MATTIE

What do I think it is?

CLEO

You think we're opposed to you having a relationship with Mr. White.

MATTIE

Why would I think that?

CLEO

That's not it at all.

ROBERT

I was only trying to do what Dad wanted.

CLEO

None of us were prepared for what happened. It brings out the best and the worst. I'm afraid I fit into the latter category. I should have listened to Rose.

MATTIE

Oh?

CLEO

Yes. She told me to stay out of this.

MATTIE

Yet here you are.

CLEO

Trying to fix up the mess I've made.

MATTIE

What am I supposed to say to either of you?

ROBERT

We only want to respect the memory of Dad.

MATTIE

Look at me. I'm a woman with needs and desires like any other woman.
Why are you making me say this?

ROBERT

I was a kid.

MATTIE

Robert, you can't be your own father. You think I haven't struggled with this myself? It's nice to think that Ted is waiting for me in some eternal home but I have many more years to live in this one. I'm not wired for sainthood. I am wired to be a part of a family. I am wired to work as a team. I am not wired to be treated like a porcelain doll on a shelf.

CLEO

We have always included you in our family gatherings and vacations.

MATTIE

Cleo, you are dear people. Please don't think I'm being ungracious.

CLEO

Mattie, Ted. You owe it to him.

MATTIE

Whoa, slow down. What are we talking about now?

CLEO

We both know full well.

ROBERT

How can you just forget Dad?

MATTIE

Good question. Even if I wanted to, how could I? It's not possible. And that's my concern, not yours. That's what pains me: to start a new relationship carrying Ted with me. But I was with him every single night he spent in the hospital.

ROBERT

What about me?

MATTIE

You were with Cleo and Rose.

ROBERT

I needed to be with Dad, too.

MATTIE

I share his nights. Me. Me alone. I'm sorry Robert.

ROBERT

He was my father. Not Mr. White and not Dr. Donaldson.

MATTIE

This will always be true.

ROBERT

And he will always be your husband.

MATTIE

That's enough now, Robert.

Robert leaves.

CLEO

Well, that went well.

MATTIE

Cleo, I know you love me and you want to do right by me.

CLEO

Mattie.

MATTIE

Cleo, you're going to have to let go.

CLEO

Mattie.

MATTIE

No. I will not let this moment slip by.

CLEO

What? You think this is some sign from god?

MATTIE

I have no idea.

CLEO

He's divorced.

MATTIE

Please.

CLEO

He's white.

MATTIE

Cleo, you're embarrassing yourself.

CLEO

So, this is the end?

MATTIE

End?

CLEO

Of us. How can you just toss out Robert and me? We've been with you through it all.

MATTIE

You're right. I never could have overcome the burden of all that grief had I not had Robert. And you and Rose.

CLEO

I've dreamt of you.

MATTIE

Cleo, don't.

CLEO

Give me a chance.

MATTIE

Cleo, I never once never believed that Ted's "suffering is over" or that he's in "a better place." What I believe is that he is on my team, a major character in my story. It was his choice to be a college student at the age of 55. Because of his choices, Mr. White recorded the most precious painful moment any woman could imagine. Ted and I are working together on this. I am grateful that you and Robert have been there for me but there comes a time when our stories have a change in plot. We have to say yes, and move the story forward. Can you do that? I can.

Cleo leaves

SCENE SEVEN:

ROBERT is in the classroom. LYDIA enters.

LYDIA

Hey.

ROBERT

Oh, hi. Been awhile.

LYDIA

Dad said you were here.

ROBERT

Yeah.

LYDIA

How did you find out?

ROBERT

It wasn't hard. A name. Google. Mapquest.

LYDIA

I was never good at being sneaky.

ROBERT

Why didn't you tell me?

LYDIA

I guess I didn't want your opinion of me to be shaded by your opinion of my Dad. He's not a bad guy, you know.

ROBERT

Except for hitting on my mom.

LYDIA

Don't you think we should give the kids some air?

ROBERT

You're making fun of me.

LYDIA

No. I'm making fun of my dad. He actually would wait twenty years before finally making an effective pass at a woman. He probably kept that contact information so he'd have it when he finally worked up the nerve. My mom said she had to finally ask him out.

ROBERT

So your mother ...

LYDIA

They split up. I was younger than you were when ... Well, Dad can be a bit difficult. Warn your mother.

ROBERT

I can be a bit difficult myself.

LYDIA

Never noticed. So, what are you doing here?

ROBERT

I'm going to register for a couple of classes. Didn't want to wait as long as Dad did.

WHITE is seen rising from behind his desk. The office is engulfed in tapes, books, and DVD's.

He places his keys on the desk, puts some DVD's into his briefcase, takes an unseen item out of his briefcase and places it in his pocket. He is now dressed in a business-type suit. He leaves his office and checks to be sure the door is locked. Lights fade on office.

How about you? What are you up to?

LYDIA

Just helping my dad finish clearing out a few things. He can hang around the rest of the semester. No classes or anything. I'm getting ready to start at U of M.

ROBERT

Still gonna be a teacher?

LYDIA

I think so. Elementary. You?

ROBERT

Maybe a two-year degree. Physical Therapy.

LYDIA

You'll do fine. Too bad you won't have Dad for speech. Sorry.

ROBERT walks to the lectern. Lays his backpack on the table.

ROBERT

You ever heard of performance art.

LYDIA

Sort of.

ROBERT

My teacher said it's performance that doesn't necessarily have a story or a beginning middle and end. It might affect each audience member in a different way.

LYDIA

Teacher?

ROBERT

High school. Funny to be standing here where dad did his speeches. I wonder what happened to the recording equipment?

LYDIA

I don't think any one besides Dad ever recorded speeches. He used to wheel around his equipment on a cart. Besides, these days, you know.

She holds up her phone.

ROBERT

Yeah.

LYDIA

Need me to record you?

Robert pulls out his phone.

ROBERT

No. I'm good. I've already been practicing. I'll make my own movie.

LYDIA

What's it about?

ROBERT

How to never be an orphan.

LYDIA

Hmm, interesting. I'll see you around.

The stage darkens as LYDIA walks down center into a pool of light as the rest of the stage goes dark. She dials her phone. Lights up on MATTIE in her living room as she listens to her answering machine in ROBERT's voice.

ROBERT (V.O.)

We can't take your call right now but please leave a message at the sound of the tone and I'll get back with you as soon as possible.

Beep sound.

LYDIA

Hello? Mrs. Bluhm? This is Lydia White. I'm a little worried about Robert. Call me if you get a chance.

Lights fade on MATTIE .

ACT III SCENE ONE.

White enters the classroom with a box.

ROBERT

Hello Mr. White. Thanks for fixing things up for me. I wanted to take one last look.

WHITE

Sure. Glad to.

ROBERT

Yeah. I don't think I'll be back again.

WHITE

I withdrew my complaint.

He sets his box down.

ROBERT

It's not that. I just need to finish things up and move on.

WHITE

Here it is.

He takes the gun out of the box and puts it back.

ROBERT

Thanks, Mom didn't want us to have it.

WHITE

I didn't know what to do with it.

ROBERT

I never had one. I guess that was something Dad would have helped me with later.

WHITE

Maybe. I never owned one, either.

ROBERT
Does it work, I wonder?

WHITE
Yeah, it does.

ROBERT
You tried it?

WHITE
Yeah. I shot my camera.

ROBERT
You what?

WHITE
It was an accident. I bought some bullets for it. I was going to try it out. Instead, I shot my camera dead.

ROBERT
Why?

WHITE
At first I thought it could be left as a prop. But it's a real gun. Not a good idea if it actually worked, eh? It's a wonder no one heard it. My office is an old music practice room. Soundproof. I'm sort of starting to understand why some people are fascinated by guns. Cool power.

ROBERT
You're weird.

WHITE
So I've been told.

ROBERT
So you bought bullets just to try it out?

WHITE
Yeah. Dumb, eh?

ROBERT
Dumb.

WHITE

So now it's yours and my camera is dead.

ROBERT

I appreciate it. That you saved it for me.

WHITE

I didn't know what else to do with it.

ROBERT

Thanks.

WHITE

Say, Robert? I need to move my books out. Merriweather keeps calling me about them. Could you give me a hand with them?

ROBERT

Sure. Where are they going?

WHITE

My garage. No one wants them. I tried. Seems everyone is pulling down anything they need from the internet. Even the theatres don't want them.

ROBERT

Sad.

WHITE

But true. No big deal, I guess.

ROBERT

I'll go get them. Are they ready?

WHITE

No. It doesn't need to be today. She just wants the room to be ready when they're ready. Could be a month. Could be a year.

ROBERT picks up his phone.

ROBERT

I know a couple of guys that can help. I might not be around.

WHITE

That's OK, don't bother. I just want to take a couple of boxes with me now.

Lydia stands for a moment at the door. She is confused.

ROBERT

Sure, Doc, I can help with that.

WHITE

I'll go get the other box.

He leaves without noticing LYDIA. ROBERT sets the phone up to record himself. He holds the gun and prepares to make a speech..

ROBERT

Robert Will Never Be an Orphan, Final Draft.

LYDIA

I'm a little slow, but I figured it out.

ROBERT

Your dad will be back in a minute. He's the star. You want to be the audience?

LYDIA

Robert.

ROBERT

Yeah?

SHE picks up his phone.

LYDIA

Your performance art.

ROBERT

Like it?

LYDIA

Sad.

ROBERT

Yeah.

LYDIA

Did it help?

ROBERT

No.

LYDIA

Well, Dad didn't save your father but he'll save you.

ROBERT

You think? This is his final exam.

LYDIA

Oh?

ROBERT

It's the only way my life will mean anything.

LYDIA

Dad already told me everything.

ROBERT

It was none of his business.

LYDIA

It's what he's trained to do.

ROBERT

He brought this all on himself. We didn't need or want him in our lives.

LYDIA

All that might have been. Dashed dreams. Poor baby.

ROBERT

I'm part of the package whether y'all like it or not.

LYDIA

You sure are. Why were you recording it?

ROBERT

I wanted a special place on the shelf.

LYDIA

Isn't that sweet?

ROBERT

I guess you can't really plan that sort of thing.

LYDIA

Interesting little film project. Glad I didn't stick around to be your cinematographer.

ROBERT

Would you please give me my phone?

LYDIA

No.

ROBERT

It won't change anything.

LYDIA

You won't have your performance art without your phone to record it. You're making a film, not street performance.

ROBERT

Give me my phone. Now!

She aims the camera at him.

LYDIA

It's hard to watch ourselves; especially when we go off script.

ROBERT

Give it to me..

LYDIA

I don't think I will.

ROBERT

Like all those recordings of your dad's students. Just random images stacked in piles for whoever comes across them to make of them what they will. We all end up in a digital heap, anyway.

LYDIA

I want you to picture your dad standing at that lectern. Picture the students in the room with him. And my dad. Forget about the rest. Now picture what's on your phone. Not a terrorist. Not a lone gunman with issues. Just a scared little boy that never got over losing his daddy. And guess what? Just like you I can see my dad go down. Just like you. But you know what? I'm not looking for someone to blame. I'm kinda proud of my dad. Weren't you a little proud of yours?

ROBERT

I don't want to be an orphan.

LYDIA

Well, I gotta admit, you figured out how to prevent it.

ROBERT

I was only eight years old.

LYDIA

Yeah, but now you're twenty-eight. What do you think of your dad? What kind of a man was he?

ROBERT

I really don't know.

LYDIA

What we see on these videos is just a snapshot of the men we love.

ROBERT

I was only eight.

LYDIA

Yes, you've said that many times. But if you really want to know who Ted Bluhm was you're going to have to look inside yourself. You are the evidence that he was once walking these hallways, not some videotape.

ROBERT

Give me my phone!

LYDIA

How about we accept them as heroes and call it a day?

ROBERT
Heroes?

LYDIA
Yeah. They were both willing to die for us.

ROBERT
Your dad didn't die.

LYDIA
I said he was willing to die.

ROBERT
For me?

LYDIA
No. For me.

ROBERT
How's that?

LYDIA
He is wired to do everything for me. Don't flatter yourself.

ROBERT
Like I am for my mother.

LYDIA
I don't think so.

ROBERT
What's that supposed to mean?

LYDIA
I'm not sure we're "wired" to look after our parents.

ROBERT
It's what my dad wanted.

LYDIA
Not quite the same thing.

ROBERT

So you think my mom is "wired" to look after me? And this is how she does it?

LYDIA

Maybe letting our parents get to where they want to be helps us get to where we need to be.

ROBERT

Can I have my phone, please?

LYDIA

I once told Dad that I wanted to be rich so he could quit his job. I didn't think he had the confidence to try it alone.

ROBERT

Try what?

LYDIA

I don't know. Fixing stuff, writing, acting maybe. Funny, though. Me. Here he is retired, and I haven't even made it halfway through college. How am I going to help him? I'm still living in his house.

ROBERT

I live with my mother.

LYDIA

Yeah. Is this a bad thing, really? I mean we're kinda working as a team. Why should we feel guilty?

ROBERT

I need my phone..

LYDIA

Back when your dad was here, it was probably really unusual for there to be a gun on campus or cameras recording you. Now everyone's trying to go viral. Is that what you expected? Someone would take your little pathetic movie and send it all over the world?

ROBERT

No!

So?
LYDIA

Just give me my phone.
ROBERT

Sorry.
LYDIA

Your dad will be back any minute.
ROBERT

Good. You'll have the gun and Dad will have the camera. Just like old times.
LYDIA

This isn't what I planned.
ROBERT

I can relate.
LYDIA

Guns and cameras.
ROBERT

She holds up the phone. He doesn't take it.

So what's the plan?
LYDIA

I guess mother knows best.
ROBERT

She drops the phone in a mop bucket.

ROBERT shrugs, walks away leaving phone

SCENE TWO

Classroom. WHITE is standing at the lectern, His briefcase is open on the table. He sets his phone on a small tripod to record his speech. He adjusts his tie and starts recording.

WHITE

When I was a boy my father did many things with me. I wasn't very nice to him. He made me hoe a large garden and pay for anything I wanted beyond food and basic clothes. He didn't know anything about maintaining a car or anything mechanical around the house. But he had a nice little workshop, and he taught me to putter. He also taught me values. And honesty. I'd like to show this little movie to my mother, but she died last month. Now I'm an orphan. I know what Robert means about not wanting to be an orphan. There's never a good age to be one. It's not that I no longer have to worry about the care of my parents, it's just that now, no one exists with an innate urge to care for me.

(HE stops. Goes to the camera, picks it up, and looks at it a moment. Deletes the video. Starts again, trying to structure a proper speech.)

My father never said he loved me. At least not that I remember. Can I see a show of hands. How many had fathers who told you he loved you? Hmmmm, a couple of you ladies. No men? The first time I told Dad that I loved him, as an adult, anyway, was well after he was well along on his climb to the top of Mount Alzheimer. I was staying at my parents' house. Dad entered our bedroom and stared awkwardly at us in the middle of the night while my wife slept. His mouth opened and closed like a fish as he stared at us. Finally I said, "I love you Dad." He turned and walked away. After that I decided to tell him it often, but he never seemed to understand what I was saying, and he never replied to me. Mom put an alarm on the bedroom door so she'd know if he got up in the night. So I started telling my mother that I loved her. At least she could respond. I'm not sure she ever said it first, but she always replied in kind when I said it to her.

(ROBERT appears in the doorway behind the lectern. He is holding the gun.)

This must be some kind of life cycle. We're taught that we start out being cared for and end up being cared for. But I'm not sure it really works like that. We care for our children until we die. I'll always be daddy, the caregiver.

ROBERT

Maybe Dad died just a little too young to realize that.

WHITE

Oh?

ROBERT

That a child really couldn't be a caregiver. Not in a really wired way. It would be nice to think that we're programmed to care for our parents, but we're not. We really have to work at it.

WHITE

Yes. One day I changed my daughter's diaper right after changing my father's. It wasn't the same. Not at all.

ROBERT

Your dad?

WHITE

Early onset Alzheimer's.

ROBERT

You were repulsed?

WHITE

No. Not really. Dad's was more of a duty, an obligation.

ROBERT

And your daughter?

WHITE

I don't know. It was instinctive, I guess. My grandmother, though, was different. She was in her late eighties, caring for Dad like he was her little boy. She looked after him for ten or fifteen years while my mom worked. I saw her, my grandmother, go into mother-mode with dad's brothers, also. I think you're right. It's an instinct that's always there.

ROBERT

I guess we sort of short-circuited. Cancelled each other out.

WHITE

No. Your mother is trying to preserve your family. So was my grandmother, I think. She knew Mom had to work. I still had younger brothers at home when Dad was stricken. Mothers especially will do just about anything to preserve the family. Even the nasty, over-bearing ones. They want us to survive.

ROBERT

Some mothers smother their children.

WHITE

Some children smother their mothers.

ROBERT

Yeah.

WHITE

Fear of failure, I suppose.

ROBERT turns and starts to leave. He stops. Turns around. Walks back toward WHITE. He puts the gun in WHITE'S briefcase. MATTIE appears in the doorway. Special comes up on TED and then fades into black.

END OF PLAY