

At Zero

A play

CHARACTERS:

SPEEDY: A young girl. age 6-10

ELLEN: A woman. Pretty, but tired around the edges.
20's -30's

"MAC" (Edward Mackenzie): A retired aerospace
engineer. A little gruff. 60's-70's

WES: A man. Iraq/Afgan war veteran. 20's-40's

PUBLIC ADDRESS / MISSION CONTROL (pre-recorded voice-
over only)

SETTING:

A campground on the edge of the Kennedy Space Center, Florida. This is one of the many camping parks that have sprung up around the Space Shuttle launch site that cater to people who have come to watch rocket launches.

An entire R.V. is parked upstage right with the side door facing the audience. There is a fold-up card table and several chairs outside the R.V., downstage right. There is a rusty charcoal grill and a misc. assortment of household items strewn around giving the appearance of a lengthy occupation. (Clotheslines, a potted geranium, some kid's toys, etc.) There is a tree stump downstage left.

Everything is slightly shabby.

Act I – Early Morning

(“Thus Spake Zarathustra” begins to play. Speedy, dressed in a homemade astronaut costume of tinfoil and cardboard, exits the R.V. carrying an American flag tied to a broomstick. As the music plays, Speedy bobs and weaves across the yard, climbs the tree stump, waves the flag over her head. Ellen appears in the doorway of the R.V. in a satin nightgown. She sits in the doorway with coffee.)

ELLEN

Speed. Speedy. Get your ass down, honey.

(Ellen lights a cigarette.)

SPEEDY

I’m on the moon.

ELLEN

You’re on a stump, Speed.

SPEEDY

I’m one-sixed gravity.

ELLEN

Are you.

SPEEDY

We own the moon!

ELLEN

Down.

SPEEDY

It’s mission critical.

ELLEN

Down. Come eat your lucky charms.

SPEEDY

I want astro-charms.

ELLEN

It’s the same thing. Get down.

SPEEDY

No, it's not.

ELLEN

Poppop doesn't want you up there.

SPEEDY

The marshmallows are different, orange comets, yellow moons, green planets...

ELLEN

What about pink hearts, kiddo? Don't you like pink hearts?

SPEEDY

Yuck.

ELLEN

They taste the same.

SPEEDY

They don't.

ELLEN

I'll eat them for you. Down.

(Mac enters from stage left, carrying a few bags.
Speedy runs over and jumps on him.)

SPEEDY

Poppop!

MAC

Woah now.

(Mac drops his bags and swings Speedy around.)

SPEEDY

We own the moon! I went on a ee-vee-aye.

MAC

Alright. You see any Darth Vaders?

SPEEDY
(uncertain)

N...no.

MAC

You keep your eyes peeled.

ELLEN

Speedy. You. Cereal. Go.

(Mac puts Speedy down and she runs over to the table where she sits on the ground and starts to take off her space suit.)

ELLEN

(shyly)

Did you get everything?

MAC

Almost. Rite-aide wasn't open yet. Have to go back.

ELLEN

(frowns)

Hmp.

MAC

Well, what do you want me to do about it?

ELLEN

Nothing. (beat) Nothing! (to Speedy) Speed honey, go eat your breakfast. (pause, then to Mac) You're going back later?

MAC

Maybe.

ELLEN

I could go.

SPEEDY

I'll go.

ELLEN

You can't go.

MAC

Why not?

SPEEDY

Yeah, why not?

ELLEN

Mac!

SPEEDY

My boots are stuck!

ELLEN

Hold on. (to Mac) It can't wait.

MAC

Alright. Just me. I'll go.

(Ellen bends down to help Speedy with her boots. Mac puts his bags on the ground and pulls a string of decorative lanterns out of the bag. Mac can't help sneaking a peek at Ellen as she's turned around.)

ELLEN

(grins)

You need something, Mac?

MAC

(Mac looks away, embarrassed)

Found these at the dollar store. Put 'em up, maybe. Make things a little more festive.

ELLEN

Oh really. Festive. (to Speedy) Stop squirming.

SPEEDY

(stage whispers to Ellen)

It's stuck!

MAC

No sundress today? What happened to the beach? (Mac makes a ridiculous flapping motion with his elbows.)

ELLEN

You-know-who didn't do her homework.

SPEEDY

I did the math.

ELLEN

(melodramatically)

The reading Speed. The reading.

(Speedy makes a face.)

ELLEN

I don't want you to get further behind.

MAC

Speedo! 12 times 18?

SPEEDY

216.

(Mac flourishes his hands at Speedy in mute approval.)

ELLEN

I don't know how she does that. (to Speedy) How do you do that?

(Speedy shrugs.)

MAC

Runs in the family.

ELLEN

Here's the deal: three pages and then we go down to the beach and look at flamingos.

SPEEDY
(solemn)

Deal.

(They shake hands formally. Mac is still trying to figure out how to untangle the lanterns.)

ELLEN

You going to join us?

MAC

No. I need to work out a few things.

ELLEN

Things? Nice things? We like nice things, don't we Speed?

SPEEDY

Yeah! We like nice things.

MAC

(Mac shakes the tangled lanterns.)

Do you see this crap? The country's going to hell in a hand-basket.

ELLEN

Mac.

MAC

Nothing but crap anymore. You know what really kills me?
"Buy American. Buy American." Idiots.

ELLEN

Mac.

MAC

Nothing's made in America. This isn't made in America.

SPEEDY

Yeah! It's not made in America!

ELLEN

Lanterns?

(Mac throws all the lanterns back in the box.)

MAC

Ship it all overseas to make a cheaper VCR. Stupid.

SPEEDY

What's a veeceearr?

ELLEN

You're showing your age, Mac.

MAC

(frustrated)

You know what I mean. It's like a DVD, Speedo. (Speedy remains blank. Mac gestures abstractly.) Movies? Netflix?

SPEEDY

Ooooooooooh.

MAC

It wasn't like this twenty years ago. Still had a little pride, still had an edge, you know why?

ELLEN & SPEEDY

(in unison)

..."because America is the greatest country in the history of the world." (they laugh)

MAC

That's right! Hah! Go ahead, you two laugh. But when Speedo here is the first President of the Moon, we'll just see who's the greatest!

SPEEDY

Yeah! Yeah! I want to be president of the moooooooooooooon! President! President!

(Speedy grabs her flag again and starts running circles around the stump chanting.)

MAC

(Mac starts singing the presidential anthem)
Da daht da dah, dat da dah da dah da daht da!

SPEEDY

President! President! President!

ELLEN

(angry)

Speedy! Stop running! Christ, Mac, stop it!

SPEEDY

President! President! President!

ELLEN

Speed! You get inside, right now, and eat your cereal, right now!

SPEEDY

But I...

ELLEN

No backtalk! Now!

(Speedy looks to Mac)

ELLEN

Don't look at him!

MAC

You heard Ellen.

SPEEDY

Ok.

(Speedy hands the flag to Mac and enters the R.V.)

ELLEN

Use the milk that's already open! Speed? You hear me?
(Ellen lights another cigarette.) Jesus Christ Mac, that
kid, that kid runs so wild.

MAC

You're hard on her.

ELLEN
(stubborn)

She's wild.

MAC

She's a kid.

ELLEN

You don't know what it's like. I should have put her on
Ritalin.

MAC

Come on now.

ELLEN

I'm serious.

MAC

What?

ELLEN

I mean it.

MAC

You can't "drug her up" just because she wants to run
around.

ELLEN

It could be ADHD.

Says who?

ELLEN

The school nurse. In Phoenix.

MAC

That's bullshit.

ELLEN

I don't know. (pause) Wes wouldn't go along with it anyway.

MAC
(startled)

What?

ELLEN
He said he didn't want a zombie for a little girl.

MAC
He did?

ELLEN
(snorts) Yeah, easy for him to say.

MAC
When was this?

ELLEN
When was what?

MAC
You, talking to Wes.

ELLEN
It was nothing.

WES
What?

ELLEN
Mac, it's not important.

MAC
Since you... came down here?

ELLEN
No!

MAC
When did he call you?

ELLEN
It doesn't matter!

MAC
I want to know.

ELLEN

I can handle him.

MAC
(Mac just stares.)

ELLEN
Oh, I don't know! Mac! Three years ago, ok? Maybe it was four years ago. He called on Christmas. Asshole.

MAC
Oh.

ELLEN
And I don't need you winding her up, Mac.

MAC
She'll grow out of it. She's a great kid.

(Mac plants the flag back in the stump. He makes a weak attempt to make it hang nicely.)

ELLEN
(a little sad)
Yeah.

(A loudspeaker cuts in with a whine. Ellen claps her hands over her ears and winces.)

LOUDSPEAKER
Good morning campers! We are at T-Minus 23 hours, 18 minutes and counting! Weather conditions are nominal and mission control is reporting they are on track for tomorrows launch. Have a great day!

ELLEN
God! I hate that thing!

MAC
Ellen...

ELLEN
They're such... nerds about it. "Weather conditions are nominal?" Nominal? What is that? Why can't they just say "the weather is clear" or "sunny"? (Ellen displays her arms like Vannah White putting on sunblock and then beams a radiant smile at Mac.)

MAC

(frowns)

That's not what it means.

ELLEN

Oh? So what does it mean, Mr. Rocket Scientist?

MAC

It means according to plan.

ELLEN

That's stupid.

MAC

They've been planning this launch for... years, Ellen. You can't just "show up" one day and hope it all works out.

ELLEN

Spare me, Mac.

MAC

There are people over there who work their whole lives for just this one moment. You have to have a plan. I mean, in my office we'd spend months just working on...

ELLEN

I don't care.

MAC

(hurt)

What?

ELLEN

I don't care. Mac. I don't care about your "nominal conditions" or your "launch doors" or your "space patios" or your stupid booster rockets!

MAC

Fine.

ELLEN

It's a waste of money.

MAC

That's fine.

ELLEN

And what's the point, anyway?

MAC
(painfully)

It's the space program.

ELLEN
It's stupid. (pause) They should spend it on other things.

MAC
Like what?

ELLEN
I don't know. Art, maybe. The subway.

MAC
The subway.

ELLEN
(vaguely)
Yes. Like the Moscow subway. It's full of paintings and statues and things.

MAC
Paintings.

ELLEN
Yes! They have a chandelier at every stop. I like it.

MAC
What do you know about Moscow?

ELLEN
National Geographic.

MAC
What about the moon?

ELLEN
(gently)
There's nothing up there, Mac. I like chandeliers.

MAC
(stubborn)
We need a space program.

ELLEN
We need a lot of things! We need jobs! We need clothes! We need houses! (pause) Some of us need Viagra. (deliberately wicked) Fuck the moon.

MAC

(angry)

You think the cold war was a joke? We got our edge from...

ELLEN

(pouting)

Oh stop it, Mac. Just stop it. Nobody cares. I didn't mean to make fun of your stupid booster rockets.

MAC

It's not about the rockets, Ellen.

(Long pause. Mac goes back to untangling his lanterns.)

ELLEN

You'll go back when they open?

MAC

Do I have a choice?

ELLEN

Mac...

(Mac ignores her, focusing on the lanterns.)

ELLEN

Come on Mac. I'm sorry. (pause) I want to hear about it. Tell me about the rockets.

MAC

No.

ELLEN

Tell me. Please. I'll be good.

(Ellen sits up attentively. Her robe parts to show a little leg.)

MAC

Seriously.

ELLEN

Yes.

MAC

The solid rocket boosters?

ELLEN

Yes, those. Tell me about those.

(Ellen gets up and crosses to Mac. She fixes his the collar on his shirt while he's talking.)

MAC

You've seen them.

ELLEN

I think so.

MAC

It was part of my job, you know. The heat exchangers.

ELLEN

Was it hard?

MAC

They, uh, provide the extra thrust needed for

ELLEN

The extra thrust?

MAC

Yes, they push the orbiter to the breakaway position so it can reach...

ELLEN

What position?

MAC

The breakaway position.

ELLEN

What happens then?

(Mac turns away suddenly, angry.)

MAC

Stop it.

ELLEN

(irritated)

Run out of thrust, Mac?

MAC

We made a mistake.

ELLEN

That's not very nice.

MAC

It's still true.

ELLEN

(conflicted)

It's not like I don't appreciate everything ...you've done, for us Mac, I'm just... I'm appreciative.

(Ellen puts her hands on Mac's chest and pulls close.)

MAC

Ellen...

ELLEN

You don't have to be so cold, Mac. Speedy loves those rockets. We could... stay a while. There's no reason to be so cold. I just... I like to be warm.

MAC

It's the last launch, ever.

ELLEN

And I'm here. With you. Now.

(Ellen goes in for a kiss.)

MAC

Wes is coming home.

ELLEN

(stunned)

What.

MAC

I got an email yesterday. He's coming home.

(Ellen backs away.)

ELLEN

He can't.

MAC

Discharged.

He's out? ELLEN

MAC
Didn't say why.

ELLEN
(Near panic)
When? Here? He's coming here?

MAC
Tonight. Sometime.

ELLEN
Did you talk to him?

MAC
I don't have a number.

ELLEN
What did he say?

MAC
I don't know Ellen, he didn't write much, he's been discharged and he's coming here.

ELLEN
Did he go home first?

MAC
I don't know.

ELLEN
Where did he go?

MAC
This is my retirement.

ELLEN
Oh my god.

MAC
I didn't ask for this.

ELLEN
He can't come here!

MAC

It's the last one. Ever.

ELLEN
Shit. Oh shit. Shit shit shit.

MAC
Don't cuss.

ELLEN
Fuck you!

MAC
Listen Ellen, we just... we move on.

ELLEN
(laughs)
Oh, you're good. That's a good one Mac. Move on. Good one.

(Ellen lights another cigarette with shaking hands.)

MAC
Calm down.

ELLEN
I am calm.

MAC
We pull together. Like a family. We'll work it out.

ELLEN
Oh, you're good. You're amazing, you know that?

MAC
What?

ELLEN
You sit there and shake your head at me and say "oh, Ellen, we'll work it out" like you're King Fucking Solomon.

MAC
Ellen...

ELLEN
Fuck you and your rocket ships.

MAC
(angry)
The space program is not...

ELLEN

Leave it alone. Nobody cares!

MAC

You can take that attitude right back to the bus station!

ELLEN

(Laughs)

Oh Mac. The bus station. You'd like that, huh? Dump us off at the corner, dust your hands off?

MAC

He's my son.

ELLEN

He's my husband!

MAC

Some wife.

(pause)

MAC

I shouldn't have slept with you.

ELLEN

I need this Mac. It's true, I need this. Speedy needs this.

MAC

What about Wes?

ELLEN

Wes who? It's been six years! Speed doesn't even know what he looks like.

MAC

He's my son.

ELLEN

We could... go. Drive away.

MAC

No. No. This is my last chance. I promised Speedy.

ELLEN

I don't care, let's go!

MAC
It's the last one, Ellen. Ever.

ELLEN
Mac!

MAC
What do you expect me to do?

ELLEN
Hold me.

MAC
You're kidding.

ELLEN
No.

MAC
I can't.

ELLEN
Can't?

MAC
Won't.

ELLEN
Coward.

MAC
It was a mistake.

ELLEN
(Inflamed)
A mistake? Now I'm a mistake? Is Speedy is a mistake?

MAC
That's not what I...

ELLEN
Fuck you Mac!

MAC
Don't even start with me! Did I ask for this? Did I invite you here? Did you even think?

ELLEN

(grabs her things off the table)
I hope you love that rocket ship Mac, I really do, because
you can shove it right up your ass!

(Ellen stomps over to the RV and slams her way in. Mac
watches her go. He picks up the tangled lanterns,
drops them. Picks them up again, turns them over a few
times and drops them again. The sound of muted
shouting from inside. Speedy flies out the door a
moment later, holding a cereal bowl.)

I didn't do anything!

Hey Kiddo.

Poppop?

Yeah?

I ate all my cereal.

That's a good job kiddo.

I ate the hearts and everything.

Good job.

(pause)

Poppop?

Yeah?

Did you build that? (she points at the horizon)

The Shuttle?

SPEEDY

Yeah.

MAC

Ah. Well, I built a machine that built some parts that built the shuttle.

SPEEDY

Oh. Did you get to name them?

MAC

Name them? Hah, no. Ah, I guess technically you could say, it would be called a "secondary thermal coupling unit".

SPEEDY

(struggles to say this)

Secondary thermal coupler unit.

MAC

Yup.

SPEEDY

When did you go into space?

MAC

Space! Hah, Speedo, no, look, there's only a handful of people who have ever gone into space.

SPEEDY

Why?

MAC

Because... it's... dangerous and it's expensive and... well, because.

SPEEDY

Can I go?

MAC

Someday.

SPEEDY

When?

MAC

When you're older.

SPEEDY
But you said this is the last one.

MAC
It is.

SPEEDY
Can I go on this one?

MAC
No.

SPEEDY
Which one can I go on?

MAC
I don't know.

SPEEDY
But there will be other ones?

MAC
I don't know. Speedo. There will be other ones.

SPEEDY
You promise?

(Mac hesitates.)

ELLEN
(From the doorway.)
Speed. Come in here. I want you to do your book.

SPEEDY
Dora?

ELLEN
Yes, come on. I need to talk to Poppop about your birthday.

SPEEDY
Really!

MAC
You better head inside.

SPEEDY
Ok!

(Speedy runs to the door then pauses on the steps.)

SPEEDY

Promise.

MAC

104%.

(Mac nods. Speedy enter.)

ELLEN

More promises.

MAC

That's not fair.

ELLEN

No, it's not. (pause) Are you sure?

MAC

About what?

ELLEN

Wes. Coming here, not going home first.

MAC

I got the email.

ELLEN

He didn't call me.

MAC

Maybe he doesn't have your number. (They both know this is a lie.) You moved around an awful lot...

ELLEN

The service would know. I still get the checks.

MAC

(sighs and deflates a bit)

I don't know Ellen. Maybe he did go home first.

ELLEN

Shit.

MAC

That's your business. That's... I... I have no part in that.

ELLEN

Thanks.

MAC

I didn't ask for this.

ELLEN

We could start a club. I didn't ask for this. I didn't ask for this dot com. (Ellen pokes through the tangle of lanterns.) Lanterns.

MAC

I wanted it to be like it was. We had these, family cookouts when Mary was still alive. Every week.

ELLEN

All of you?

MAC

It was family.

ELLEN

(waves at the horizon)

Did you come down here back then?

MAC

The shuttle?

ELLEN

Yes.

MAC

Some. I'd have come to every one if I could. There's nothing like it.

ELLEN

With your wife.

MAC

She was a love.

ELLEN

I remember.

MAC

She never cared much about the shuttle, but that women moved heaven and earth to make me happy.

ELLEN

I remember.

MAC

She liked you, you know. Loved Speedy.

ELLEN
(firmly)

Speed doesn't remember.

MAC

So it goes.

ELLEN

Yeah.

(pause)

MAC

I'm not proud of how things turned out, Ellen, but Wes made the choice to stop writing. He did that. Not me.

(pause)

MAC

I used to call them up once a month and ask where he was, but they couldn't tell me much. He was listed as "active" and that's about it. I gave up trying after a while. I figured he didn't want to be found.

ELLEN

He's home.

MAC

Looks like.

ELLEN

He's going to know.

MAC

Of course he'll know. He already knows, likely. Did you write him?

ELLEN

I should have left.

MAC

You did.

I mean, for real. ELLEN

You had Speedy. MAC

I don't know why I did it. ELLEN

Because it was the right thing to do. MAC

Look at me! (pause) Look at this! (waves at the shabby R.V.) ELLEN

(points out at the horizon) MAC
Look at that.

Oh, Mac. I could have been someone! School! I could have gone to school. I could have had a job. A real job. ELLEN

Jobs don't mean anything. MAC

I wouldn't know. ELLEN

That's just poison, Ellen. Your work is what you love. MAC

Love. ELLEN
(bitter)

Listen to me. I spent my whole life working for an aerospace company. Company job, company card, company life. May and me even had a company house out in Sacramento. 40 years in an office with no windows, designing a sub-assembly of a sub-assembly of a sub-assembly. And that was it. I don't know anything else. If I looked at it that way, it would kill me. (pause) But I don't. Somewhere out there, on the edge of the ocean, is the most beautiful, complicated, expensive, powerful machine ever built, and

tomorrow morning 500,000 thousand gallons of rocket fuel will explode and send a little spark of life up into the sky.

ELLEN

Mac...

MAC

I'm not perfect, Ellen, I have failures. But it all falls away next to that. Four and a half billion years, clawing out of the muck, just to make that spark.

ELLEN

See, that's why I like you.

MAC

What?

ELLEN

You're a poet. Sort of.

MAC

(smiles)

Come on now...

ELLEN

Wes will be here.

MAC

He left us, Ellen. All of us.

ELLEN

What will he...

MAC

(gently)

I don't know.

ELLEN

Mac, what if he went home first?

MAC

Then you'll deal with it. What's home to him anyway? He could have come back after his first tour. He didn't. Wouldn't. What am I supposed to do? Turn him away? I can't. He's my son.

(Ellen contemplates this for a few minutes and stubs out her cigarette.)

ELLEN

I want to take Speed into town later. I promised her ice cream.

MAC

It is her birthday.

ELLEN

I need the car.

MAC

Ok.

ELLEN

Some money would help.

MAC

We talked about this.

ELLEN

It's her birthday!

MAC

Yes. And she's a beautiful young lady.

ELLEN

Mac. Please.

MAC

Ice cream?

ELLEN

Ice cream. Ice cream! God damn it Mac. Ice cream.

MAC

I'm not mean Ellen, I'm on a fixed income here.

ELLEN

I know.

MAC

I'd like to do more...

ELLEN

I know!

(pause)

MAC

You hear back from those folks in Saratoga?

ELLEN

I don't know. Maybe. Wes is back. I don't know.

MAC

Well.

ELLEN

Mac?

MAC

Yes?

ELLEN

(stiffly)

I never said "thank you", you know?

MAC

You're family.

(Ellen starts crying.)

MAC

Whoa! Hold up there, easy. Shhhhhh, shhhhhh. Easy now.

ELLEN

I'm just such a mess. I didn't mean for it to be like this..

MAC

It's ok.

ELLEN

(Ellen gets the hiccups)

It's not. (Hic) It's all gone and I (Hic) screwed up and (Hic) Wes is coming home and I (Hic) look awful and (Hic) Speedy doesn't even know (Hic) him and I can't even buy (hic) her (Hic) an ice cream cone and (hic) and (Ellen sobs.)

MAC

(miserably)

I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

ELLEN

Why are you sorry?

MAC

I wanted to delete his message. Just pack us up and drive away.

ELLEN

We can't?

MAC

No...

ELLEN

I'm afraid of him Mac.

MAC

I know.

(pause)

MAC

We'll just see, Ellen.

ELLEN

Ugh. (laughs) I need to tell Speedy. How do I tel Speedy?

MAC

I bet some ice cream would help.

(Mac fishes out his wallet and hands Ellen some money.)

ELLEN

Thanks Mac. (shy) I... should stop by the pharmacy too.

MAC

Yeah. Better do that.

ELLEN

What about you?

MAC

Me? I'm ok. I'll just clean up a little. It's going to be a big day. Birthday party, welcome party, launch party.

ELLEN

I love parties.

MAC

You should see your face. Quite a sight. Here.

(Mac digs out a handkerchief and wipes the side of Ellen's face.)

ELLEN

Oh! I'm a mess.

MAC

You're ok.

(Ellen grabs Mac's hand and holds it against her face. A long pause. Mac starts to pull away.)

ELLEN

Mac! (Ellen presses up against Mac, holding him by the belt and whispers something in his ear.)

MAC

No. (Mac starts to turn away.)

(Ellen grabs Mac's face in both hands and plants a heavy kiss. Mac struggles for a moment, then softens. Eventually, they break apart. Ellen whispers into Mac's ear again, longer this time. Ellen breaks away.)

(Ellen walks into the R.V.. Mac stands for a long moment in heavy thought. He follows Ellen into the R.V..)

A few moments later Speedy pops out the door holding a coloring book and crayons. She looks around for a minute and finally settles down on the ground and starts to hum and color the book.)

(Wes appears upstage left. He is dressed in worn military fatigues and has a backpack that has seen a lot of use. He has an over-grown military haircut. He approaches Speedy and looks around for a minute, unsure.)

SPEEDY

Hello.

WES

Hello.

Why? SPEEDY

I'm taking a break. WES

Why? SPEEDY

I was tired. WES

Why? SPEEDY

I don't know. WES

(Speedy considers this.)

Did you see the space shuttle? SPEEDY

No. WES

It's over there. (she points) Poppop says, we have to get up early risers tomorrow, to see the launch. SPEEDY

Yeah. WES

I'm going to ride one someday. SPEEDY

You're going to be an astronaut? WES

Maybe. I might be president instead. SPEEDY

Oh. WES

It's special. Like me. SPEEDY

WES
You?

SPEEDY
Tomorrow is my birthday.

WES
Oh.

SPEEDY
And it's the last one, too, ever.

WES
The last one.

SPEEDY
Poppop says it's the end of an error.

WES
Yeah.

SPEEDY
You don't want to help color?

WES
No.

SPEEDY
Ok. You can do this part if you want. (she points.)

WES
No. I'll just watch, if that's ok.

SPEEDY
It's ok.

(Wes watches. The R.V. starts to creak, rhythmically.
Wes looks at it, thoughtful, but doesn't get up.
Speedy starts to hum a song as she colors.)

- long slow fade to black-

Act 2

(It is evening. The lanterns have been hung around the R.V. and put out a weak glow. The door of the R.V. opens and out marches (in order) Speedy, Ellen, Wes and Mac. Each of them has an arm full of barbeque necessities. Wes has traded his fatigue jacket for an "I (heart) Florida" t-shirt and a paper party hat. They set their items on the folding table. Mac starts to fill a cooler with beer and soda cans.)

MAC

You want an orange soda?

SPEEDY

Yes please.

(Mac drags a grill out from behind the R.V., making a lot of noise. The others sit awkwardly as Mac takes a long time getting set up. Ellen stares fixedly at Wes.)

MAC

Who wants a hotdog? Wes? Ellen? How about you, Speedo? Hotdog?

SPEEDY

Can I have two hotdogs?

MAC

One at a time. Wes?

WES

All set.

MAC

How about it Ellen?

(Ellen shakes her head.)

MAC

Wes, why don't you and Ellen get the buns laid out.

(Wes fishes a package of hotdog buns out of the pile on the table and offers them to Ellen. Ellen stares coldly at Wes for a long time. She finally reaches out

Woah now.

(Wes un-crouches and walks over to the fallen table. He sets the table and a chair straight and he sits down. As an afterthought, he removes the party hat.)

MAC

What the hell was that?

ELLEN

That son of a bitch hit me.

MAC

Let's all just calm down now.

(Mac crosses to Ellen and gently separates Speedy, who clings to him.)

ELLEN

I'm not staying here with him. Stop crying!

MAC

Let's talk about this.

ELLEN

I'm not staying, you can't make me stay.

WES

Go.

MAC

Wait a minute.

WES

Go. You want to go, go!

ELLEN

I will! Mac. Mac!

MAC

Alright. (Mac gives Ellen his keys.) Where are you going?

ELLEN

I don't know. Away from here. Anywhere. Away from him.

WES

You're not going to Phoenix.

(everyone freezes)

ELLEN

That's none of your god-damned business! Asshole. Fucker.

WES

There's no reason to go to Phoenix.

ELLEN

You don't know anything about it.

WES

It's where my house used to be.

ELLEN

Asshole!

WES

It's too bad. I liked that house.

(Ellen starts crying.)

ELLEN

You are such an asshole. You fucking asshole.

SPEEDY

Ellen?

ELLEN

Be quiet.

MAC

Come on, Speedo.

(Mac scoops Speedy up and takes her to the door of the R.V.)

MAC

(unsure of sure who he's talking to)

I hear shouting, I'm calling the police.

(Mac goes inside with Speedy and closes the door.
There is a long pause.)

WES

Why?

ELLEN

They took it, Wes. They took it.

WES

Why?

ELLEN

The sheriff showed up one day and handed me a piece of paper and said we couldn't stay anymore. And they hauled everything outside and dumped it on the sidewalk. No hard feelings, he said. It's just my job.

WES

Yeah.

ELLEN

I tried, Wes. You think I didn't try? Two jobs. One job. No jobs. I told them about you, I said, he's a **soldier**. And, there must be a mistake, if you just would wait, I can sort this out, talk to someone. But they didn't listen, Wes. They wouldn't listen.

WES

You didn't call.

ELLEN

(outraged)

Who? You? You!? You think I could call you? You think I could just dial up your commanding officer? "Oh, hi there General, it's Ellen. You remember, Ellen, the cute one from airport? I'm having this tinsey-wincey little problem with the bank, so if you wouldn't mind, could you please find my fink husband, who, oh by the way, hasn't spoken to me in three years, and put him on the phone? Oh sure! I'll hold. I couldn't find you, Wes, asshole, where have you been? Where did you go?

WES

It's complicated.

ELLEN

Fuck you. Getting dumped out on the street in front of your house is complicated. Hitch-hiking across the country with a kid is complicated. Wondering how you're going to eat with no money, no job, no house, no fucking asshole fink husband, is complicated!

WES

You're angry.

ELLEN

No. I'm not angry. Angry, was way back in Phoenix. Mad? That happened was somewhere in Tallahassee eating out of a dumpster. What I am right now, in Florida, is furious.

WES

I'm sorry.

ELLEN

(looses her steam)

Sorry? (tears well up) You're sorry? That's it? You're sorry?

WES

I wanted to see Samantha.

ELLEN

Speedy. You have to call her Speedy. She hates Samantha.

WES

Speedy?

ELLEN

It's from the cartoons. She got it in her head she was Speedy Gonzales. It just stuck.

(long pause)

ELLEN

Where did you go?

(Wes struggles to find a way to explain.)

WES

It's like Las Vagas.

ELLEN

Vagas?

WES

There's nothing out there.

ELLEN

It's a city! Of course there's something out there!

WES

There's no place to stop.

What? ELLEN

It's not real. WES

What do you mean? ELLEN

No water. No food. They have to truck it all in. WES

You went back to Vagas? ELLEN
(confused)

No. Not Vagas. Iraq, Afghanistan. Spain, once. WES

Why didn't you come home? Or call me. Or write me. ELLEN

I didn't know what to say anymore. It didn't seem all that real. WES

That hurts, Wes. ELLEN

(pause)

How'd you find Mac? WES

The internet. ELLEN
(scoffs)

Oh. WES

I didn't do it on purpose Wes. ELLEN

Yeah? WES

ELLEN

I got laid off at the hotel. It got really bad in Phoenix.

WES

Yeah.

ELLEN

I had unemployment for a while.

WES

Yeah?

ELLEN

The mortgage payments started ramping up, and they... they took the house.

WES

What about my pay?

ELLEN

The bank takes most of it. Speedy needs things, I need things, I... I have to live. It's not enough.

WES

Oh.

ELLEN

We were idiots to buy that place, Wes. Three bedrooms. I couldn't even get a short sale. Did you read any of my letters?

WES

No.

ELLEN

Why not!

(Wes shrugs. Pause. Wes looks around.)

WES

This is nice.

ELLEN

(Ellen makes a face.)

Yes.

WES

Real nice of him to let you stay.

ELLEN
Yes, it was.

WES
I'll have to thank him for that.

ELLEN
(Nervous.)
Speedy, she follows him around all day. He's turning her into a little space unit.

WES
Chip off the old block.

ELLEN
Last year it was dolphins. (Makes dolphin wave motions.)

WES
I haven't been to one of these since I was 18.

ELLEN
Mac is really into it.

WES
I was too.

ELLEN
Spaceman Wes.

WES
You got it.

(pause)

ELLEN
What's going to happen?

WES
The rocket will go off.

ELLEN
With us.

WES
I don't know.

ELLEN

You really quit?

WES

Really. (pause) Did you save any of my stuff?

ELLEN

I sold everything.

WES

Even your ring?

ELLEN

I sold that first.

(pause)

WES

I guess I'll get a job. That's what people do, right?
That's what people do. Get jobs?

ELLEN

You can't stay here.

WES

I thought you were leaving.

ELLEN

I might. I don't know what I'm doing.

(pause)

ELLEN

Will your checks keep coming?

WES

(Laughs)

That's for officers.

ELLEN

Shit. You have responsibilities, you know.

WES

Sam.

ELLEN

Speedy.

WES

Speedy.

ELLEN

What do you think?

WES

I think she looks like you.

ELLEN

Funny.

WES

I mean it.

ELLEN

Lucky for her, then.

WES

Funny.

ELLEN

I mean it.

WES

I guess it is.

ELLEN

I'm sorry I slapped you.

WES

You can't ever do that again.

ELLEN

We were so young, Wes!

WES

Yeah.

(The campground intercom crackles to life again.)

VOICEOVER

Good evening campers! We at T-Minus 9 hours and 4 minutes until lift-off! Don't forget to set your alarm clocks! Mission Control is reporting they are on track for launch and conditions are nominal! Have a great evening!

ELLEN

I hate that.

WES

These guys love it. Part of the show.

ELLEN

What about you? Mac says it's the last one.

WES

I've had enough rockets. I'd rather go fishing.

ELLEN

Really?

WES

Yea. Bagdad was great for fishing.

ELLEN

You're making fun of me?

WES

No, I'm not. Saddam had these big man-made lakes all around the royal palace, you know? He stocked them with catfish, but it all went wild during the war, and the fish got to be real monsters, 80 pounds 90 pounds. They would eat anything you threw in there, hotdogs, fruit loops, anything.

ELLEN

You fished with fruit loops.

WES

You have to work really hard to keep them on the hook.

ELLEN

(laughs)

WES

It was funny, you know? Bagdad all these different groups mixed in the there, Sunnis and Shia, Baath party guys, "the coalition", us, and everybody hated each other. We'd drive around the city and every neighborhood was like a mini fortress, walls, guards. But there was this one secret spot over by the airport, where you could get down to the edge of the lake and it was magic. You had to climb over a fence and push through some weeds, and boom! There was everybody fishing. It was like the normal rules didn't apply down there, because we were all playing hooky. Guys would share gear, swap lures, talk about fishing. It was a secret spot away from the rest of the world and nobody wanted to ruin

it. You could sneak down there and fish and nobody would bother you.

ELLEN

Did you catch any?

WES

It was hard to get good equipment, you know? But if you got one on the hook, all the other guys would crowd around you on the river bank and start shouting and cheering. (Wes uulates) Allah, Ackbar! It was hilarious.

ELLEN

That sounds like fun.

WES

And then I'd get back in my Humvee and go on patrol and the same guys would shoot at me.

ELLEN

How could they be the same?

WES

You never knew. Might as well be.

ELLEN

Did you eat them?

WES

The fish?

ELLEN

Yeah.

WES

...there's a lot of shit in the water over there. Fuel, ammo casings. Depleted uranium, that kind of thing.

ELLEN

Oh.

WES

It was no big loss, they were just tough ol' monster catfish. But the local guys, they got a real kick out of eating Saddam's personal catfish. I think you have to grow up there to really get it.

ELLEN

I should feed Speedy.

WES

Yeah.

ELLEN

She gets cranky if she says up too late.

WES

(teasing)

Her too?

ELLEN

We need our beauty sleep, Wes.

WES

She looks good. You're really good with her.

ELLEN

I try. She's smart, you know?

WES

Runs in the family.

ELLEN

That's what Mac says. I hadn't noticed. In the men.

WES

We have other talents.

ELLEN

Oh really.

WES

I'm excellent at carrying things.

ELLEN

Carrying things?

WES

You name it. Boxes, old tires, sandbags, mortar rounds. I'm great with mortar rounds.

ELLEN

I'm all out of mortar rounds.

WES

Well, I'm your guy, if you decide to stock up.

ELLEN

I'll keep that in mind. (Ellen eyes Wes.) You're a lot bigger.

WES

Took my vitamins. You look the same.

ELLEN

(laughs)

I look like shit, Wes.

WES

You're more... yourself than you used to be.

ELLEN

Me, myself and I. We travel together.

WES

Triple threat.

ELLEN

Believe it.

(pause)

ELLEN

Are you staying the night?

WES

Can I?

ELLEN

I think Speedy would like that.

WES

Only her?

ELLEN

Will you go get them? It's past Sam's dinner time, we should eat.

(Wes moves to the door of the R.V. he pauses. Ellen and Wes share a long moment of silence. Wes goes inside.)

Ellen picks up a few scattered items and places them back on the table. Ellen picks up a sweater and puts

it on. As she does, she pulls her hair out of a necklace she wears. She pulls out the necklace to reveal a dangling gold wedding ring. Ellen flips it over in her hand for a minute, then tucks it back between her breasts.)

(Mac, Speedy and Wes exit the R.V.. Ellen takes Speedy by the hand and gets her settled at the table, and starts to put a plate of food together. Wes and Mac avoid eye contact.)

ELLEN

Sit. Everybody sit. We're having a meal. Sit.

(Mac and Wes sit. Ellen serves food to Speedy.)

ELLEN

(to Speedy)

Napkin.

MAC

How was the flight?

WES

It was fine.

MAC

Was it a Boeing?

WES

I didn't notice.

MAC

Airbus?

WES

I don't know.

MAC

The new Airbus is a joke. They got the lift ratios all wrong.

WES

I didn't notice.

ELLEN

(to Speedy)

Slow down, Speedy. Chew.

MAC

Management really dropped the ball on that one. Should have modeled the hydraulics on the DC10.

WES

Maybe you should write them a letter.

MAC

I see.

WES

Do you?

ELLEN

We saw 18 flamingos today. Right Speed?

SPEEDY

They hold their wings like this- (she demonstrates)

MAC

Do you know why they're all pink, Speedo?

SPEEDY

No.

WES

It's because they're full of shit.

MAC

That's enough of that!

WES

Sorry, I meant they're full of shrimp. That's what I was going to say, shrimp.

SPEEDY

Shrimp?

WES

Yeah, you see, they walk around with their heads upside down and backwards, and they snatch all those little shrimp right out of the water and gobble them down. And the more shrimp they snatch, the pinker they get. That's how you can tell how many shrimp they've swallowed. How pink they are.

SPEEDY

I tried to catch one but they flew away.

ELLEN
She chased them right into the water.

MAC
You shouldn't do that, Speedo.

ELLEN
We had our flip flops on.

(pause)

MAC
So tell us Wes, what are your plans?

WES
My plans?

MAC
We were wondering if you would stay to see the launch.

SPEEDY
The space shuttle.

WES
I hadn't thought about it.

SPEEDY
(overly careful to say "an")
It's an historic event.

ELLEN
At least until tomorrow.

MAC
What about school?

WES
No.

MAC
Law enforcement?

WES
No.

MAC
You have to do something.

WES
No, I don't. I'm taking a break.

SPEEDY
You could stay here.

MAC
He can't stay here. There's not enough room for him here.
There's no more beds.

SPEEDY
I could share mine.

ELLEN
No you can't Speed.

WES
I was thinking I should take Ellen and Speedy off your
hands.

MAC
I don't know about that.

ELLEN
No!

WES
It's been swell of you to take care of them, Dad.

SPEEDY
We have to go?

MAC
They can stay right where they are.

SPEEDY
We have to get up early for the shuttle!

ELLEN
You don't get to decide for me.

MAC
You can't walk in here and expect...

WES
(deliberate)

It's not like I don't appreciate it, Dad, I'm just... appreciative.

(Ellen and Mac freeze.)

WES

I didn't know you'd take such good care of Ellen.

MAC

I don't like your tone.

WES

I bet you tucked her in every night.

MAC

That's enough!

WES

A goodnight kiss.

MAC

You shut your mouth.

WES

Thanks, Dad.

ELLEN

I'm taking Speedy into town for ice cream.

WES

Sure, Ellen.

ELLEN

Speedy, get your shoes. Let's go.

SPEEDY

I'm not done!

ELLEN

Finished, you're not finished.

SPEEDY

I'm not finished.

ELLEN

We have to go.

SPEEDY

Can I have another hotdog?

ELLEN

Later. Let's get ice cream.

(Speedy puts on her flip flops.)

SPEEDY

Can I bring my flag?

ELLEN

Sure honey.

(Speedy gets her flag out of the stump and walks over to Wes.)

SPEEDY

Do you want ice cream?

WES

No.

SPEEDY

I could save some.

WES

It's ok. I had some already.

SPEEDY

Ok.

(Speedy and Ellen start to exit hand in hand, stage left. Speedy pauses.)

SPEEDY

We're all going to watch the shuttle launch?

MAC

Go on, Speedo.

(They leave.)

WES

What's the flag for?

MAC

She likes to hold it out the window. People honk at her.

(Wes takes a slow drink of Speedy's orange soda.)

MAC

What are you doing?

WES

Coming home. Visiting my dear old Dad.

MAC

Bullshit. You need to knock this crap off. You left a hell of a mess behind you, mister.

WES

(softly)

Oh sir, yes sir.

MAC

Don't pull that shit with me. You left that girl all alone with a baby and disappeared.

WES

I did my duty.

MAC

You ruined her. Broke her damn heart.

WES

That's none of your business.

MAC

And what about Speedy, Wes? The bank bounced them out on their tails because you weren't around to do anything about it.

WES

They got every dime I made.

MAC

That's not enough.

WES

Mac to the rescue.

MAC

That girl needs a father.

WES

Which one?

MAC

Yours.

WES

You look like you're doing fine.

MAC

You think that's funny? Just show up here like this? What are you doing?

WES

(suddenly serious and sad)

I went to Sacramento before I came out here. I wanted to see her.

(pause)

MAC

Was that the first time?

WES

Yeah.

MAC

They do a good job. Tidy. Nice lawn.

WES

Yeah.

MAC

We buried your Mom up there, too.

WES

I saw.

MAC

I sent you a letter.

WES

I read it.

MAC

She missed the hell out of you, Wes.

WES

It came three weeks late. Lost, somewhere.

MAC

Ellen came up for the funeral, brought Speedy. I think she was too young to understand.

WES

I'm glad they're together.

MAC

You need to think about that.

WES

What?

MAC

(points to where Ellen and Speedy exited.)
That girl gave everything up for you, stepped right in when you needed her, and you left.

WES

I had to go.

MAC

The first time.

WES

I had a choice?

MAC

It's not prison.

WES

I couldn't stay.

(pause)

MAC

Your mom helped out until she got sick, you know. Loved Speedy.

(Pause. Wes looks around.)

WES

Where did you pick up this rig?

MAC

Atlanta. (bitter) My pension folded up in that subprime bullshit. I cashed everything left in and moved down here.

WES

Nice view.

MAC

I couldn't stand being there, in the old house, to tell the truth. Wes, I'm proud of you for joining the service, I really am. But if you're home for good we need to settle some things.

WES

(nods)

This is the part where you tell me you think it's best if I keep moving along.

MAC

You're damn right it is.

(pause)

WES

Samantha is my daughter.

MAC

Do you even care, Wes? Really? Because I don't think you do. I think you're here to stick it the old man one more time.

WES

You?

MAC

Me. You're broke, Wes, bankrupt. Ellen can't stand you, Speedy doesn't know you. You've got no job, you've got no home. What the hell is your plan? Do you even have a plan?

WES

I don't need one.

MAC

Bullshit. This country was built on plans. (points) That shuttle was built on plans.

WES

Good riddance.

MAC

You're pathetic.

WES

I'm not the one creaming my shorts over a toy.

MAC

She's not a toy.

WES

Oh that's right. The mighty engineer. 104%. Do you know where your engineering went? Right smack into the side of the side of the world trade center.

MAC

That's not true.

WES

Oh yeah, thank god you devoted yourself to a lifetime of better machines.

MAC

My work is aerospace.

WES

Predator drones! Satellite targeting! Long range strikes! Bam! Fuck you, brown people!

MAC

Shut up.

WES

Is that a wedding party, or a terrorist clam bake Sarge? I dunno Private, fuck 'em if they can't take a joke!

MAC

Shut up!

WES

Whew, war was never so much fun since good ol' Ed Mackenzie came along. Thanks dad!

MAC

You don't know your ass from a hole in the ground.

WES

I sat in one.

MAC

You want an award?

WES

Do you see that? Do you see your precious fucking space shuttle out there? Don't you ever wonder *why* it's the last one? You blew it old man! You had every chance in the world and you blew it on cable t.v. and microwave ovens and coca-cola and porn. You deserve to lose this.

MAC

Go fuck yourself.

WES

You still think you know what's best for the whole world, Dad? Because, unlike you, I've seen it, I've been there, and they don't give a shit about your space program.

MAC

Ellen's right. You don't belong here.

WES

Ellen? My wife Ellen?

MAC

You don't know a thing about marriage.

WES

I know something about fucking my wife.

(Ellen enters. She freezes.)

WES

Where's Samantha?

ELLEN

I left her in the car.

MAC

He knows.

WES

I've known.

ELLEN

He doesn't know anything.

MAC

You have to leave.

WES & ELLEN

Me? (they look at each other)

MAC

I didn't ask for this.

WES

I can't take you seriously.

ELLEN

What about Speedy? You can't throw her out!

MAC

You're not my problem! This whole thing is rotten.

ELLEN

Rotten enough for you to fuck.

MAC

Get out!

WES

Knock it off. You think this impresses me? Do I look impressed? Do you see a merit badge? You know what? I don't even care.

ELLEN

You don't care. You never cared.

WES

Why should I? Am I supposed to be afraid of him? He's no threat. Kick me out? He can't.

MAC

You watch it, now.

WES

Or what? You'll fuck her again? You think you're the first? Or the last?

ELLEN

You're awful. You know that?

MAC

Stop this.

WES

I want Sam back.

ELLEN

You can't have her.

MAC
(pleading)

It's for the girl, the shuttle launch, please, son, it's the last one.

ELLEN
I don't care about your stupid rocket ship!

WES
She never got it.

MAC
Ellen, it's the last one. Ever. Can't you understand?

ELLEN
There's always more! Of everything!

WES
There! You see why I still love her? Always optimistic.

ELLEN
Don't you say that!

MAC
What about Speedy?

WES & ELLEN
I'll get her.

(nobody moves)

MAC
For the love of god, you can't leave a kid alone in a car.

(Mac stomps off.)

WES
When were you going to mention you're fucking my dad?

ELLEN
Wes...

WES
Maybe it slipped your mind.

ELLEN

Six years! You've been gone six years! Asshole.

WES

He's my dad.

ELLEN

I'm not made of ice.

WES

You should have said something.

ELLEN

You didn't read my letters! (pause) Or did you? You did. You fucking did. You fucking did, didn't you!

WES

I'm leaving.

ELLEN

Good.

WES

I thought we could start over.

(Ellen laughs.)

ELLEN

Try the Taliban.

WES

They don't work that way.

ELLEN

I'm starting to sympathize.

WES

Come with me.

ELLEN

I don't think that's a good idea, Wes.

WES

I guess not.

ELLEN

Why did you say that!

WES

What?

ELLEN

You still love me?

(Wes struggles to answer.)

ELLEN

Did you ever?

WES

It was hard after Samantha died.

ELLEN

Yes, it was.

WES

I couldn't feel my own body.

ELLEN

I was there.

WES

I owe you for that.

ELLEN

You're lost.

WES

You're not?

ELLEN

I'm right here! Damn it Wes! I'm here!

WES

I shouldn't have come.

ELLEN

What about Speedy?

WES

I'll figure something out. A job.

ELLEN

And Mac?

WES

Selfish prick. He's been like this his whole life. Likes to play the big man.

ELLEN

He needs you!

WES

What about you?

ELLEN

I can't stay with him.

WES

You could.

ELLEN

His heart's not in it.

WES

Is yours?

ELLEN

Asshole! Jerk! You can't just stomp back in here after six years and say you love me. It's not fair! It's not fair!

(Mac hurries back in.)

MAC

I can't find her!

WES

What?

MAC

I can't find her, she's gone!

-blackout-
ACT 3

(It is nighttime somewhere on a beach or maybe a desert. The sky is blue-black with a hint that dawn is approaching. The stage is bare except for a single pole with a public address speaker mounted on it.)

(Ellen enters talking on a cellphone. She is wearing hiking boots. She is clearly tired and limps slightly, favoring one foot.)

ELLEN

Yes. (pause) Yes. Number 17. (pause) I will. (hangs up)

(Mac enters with a flashlight)

MAC

Anything?

ELLEN

They're sending a car out. They won't do an amber alert unless we're sure she didn't run away.

MAC

Are we?

ELLEN

No.

(Ellen takes a step and makes a face.)

MAC

What happened to you?

ELLEN

I want to keep looking.

MAC

You need a break.

ELLEN
(angry)

I'm fine.

MAC
You can't walk all night.

ELLEN
I can.

MAC
This isn't your fault.

ELLEN
I didn't say it was.

(Pause. Mac steps forward to hug Ellen but she breaks away.)

MAC
What I said before...

ELLEN
I'm going down to the water again.

MAC
She wouldn't go in there.

ELLEN
Accidents happen.

(pause)

MAC
Are you pregnant?

ELLEN
No.

MAC
Because if you are, I should..

ELLEN
I'm not pregnant.

(pause)

ELLEN
I'm sorry, Mac.

MAC
Ok.

I'm not. ELLEN

Let's just forget it. MAC

Ok. ELLEN

(pause)

Ellen. MAC

Yes? ELLEN

You don't have to leave. MAC

Who? ELLEN

Any of you. All of you. MAC

I don't think that's going to work, Mac. ELLEN

(The P.A. crackles to life with a whine.)

P.A.

The time is T-Minus 30 minutes and counting. We are now switching live to Mission Control.

MISSION CONTROL

(beep) Main engine controller preflight check.

I can't believe this. ELLEN

I'll go check down at the viewing stands, there's a big crowd, someone might have seen her. MAC

Wes should be on his way back. ELLEN

MAC
Alright.

ELLEN
Meet us here?

MAC
Tell him... tell him I said...

ELLEN
No. No. Tell him yourself. We... You're not, I just can't.

(pause)

MAC
I didn't mean it Ellen.

ELLEN
Neither did I.

MAC
(sighs)
Hell of a thing.

ELLEN
I wanted it to be real. Does that count?

MAC
It does in my book.

ELLEN
Just for once.

MAC
I might move on to the Keys for a while, after this. Change
of view. Dolphins.

(Mac makes dolphin motions.)

ELLEN
Go on, Poppop. Go find Speedy. I'll wait for the car.

MAC
I'll find her.

(Mac starts to leave. He pauses.)

MAC

I know it doesn't mean much coming from me, but I think you're every bit as good as Samantha.

ELLEN

Thanks Mac.

MAC

Better, really.

(Mac leaves.)

(Ellen sits down to rest for a moment. She digs through a handbag and pulls out a cigarette and lights it.)

(Wes enters with a flashlight.)

WES

Hey.

ELLEN

Any luck?

WES

You smoke?

ELLEN

Sometimes.

WES

Since when?

ELLEN

Six years.

WES

You should quit.

ELLEN

I like it too much.

(Ellen sighs and stubs it out.)

WES

I went up as far as the highway, nobody knew anything.

ELLEN

She wouldn't go that far.

WES

It's bumper to bumper all the way in. They're all crazy to see the shuttle.

ELLEN

Birds of a feather.

WES

What are you doing?

ELLEN

Waiting for you. Mac is checking the stands.

WES

Well. I'm here. Let's go.

ELLEN

We have to wait. The cops are sending a car down. (Ellen starts laughing.)

WES

What?

ELLEN

They told me, most children are kidnapped by family members and I should check with my relatives.

WES

Do we have any other relatives?

(Ellen shakes her head.)

ELLEN

Oh God, Wes! What if something happened to her? I couldn't stand it!

WES

She didn't say anything to you?

ELLEN

I can't remember, I was too upset.

WES

It's not your fault.

ELLEN

I didn't say it was my fault, I said I couldn't stand it.

(pause)

ELLEN

What? You've never seen a woman cry before?

WES

I'm sorry.

ELLEN

You are such a jerk, Wes. I mean it, you are such a jerk.

(Ellen blows her nose.)

ELLEN

How do you do that?

WES

Do what?

ELLEN

Stand there like a god-damned fence post. Did they train you to do that?

WES

I don't know. Maybe.

ELLEN

Well stop it. It's pissing me off.

WES

I'm sorry.

ELLEN

Come on. Let's keep looking.

WES

We should split up.

ELLEN

Why did you marry me?

(Wes stiffens.)

WES

I didn't know what else to do.

ELLEN

I was so in love with you Wes.

WES

I know.

ELLEN

I told myself you were doing it for us, when you joined up. I told myself, this was our chance to get out of Phoenix, to have a real family.

WES

I had to go.

ELLEN

It would have been ok, I think, if you had written back to me. Not event a phone call, just a note. Hi Ellen. I'm still here.

WES

I tried!

ELLEN

Wes.

WES

I started letters, hundreds. I never finished any.

ELLEN

Why?

WES

It's complicated!

ELLEN

Stop it.

WES

I don't know how to explain it.

ELLEN

Bullshit!

WES

I had Sam over my shoulder.

ELLEN

She was my friend too, Wes. My best friend.

WES

I know she was.

ELLEN

I felt like a thief.

WES

You're not a thief.

ELLEN

I was in love with you for a long time. A long time before she died.

WES

I knew. I think Sam knew. She never minded. She loved you too.

ELLEN

There was this secret, rotten, part of me that was happy she died. Happy to have you all for myself.

(pause)

ELLEN

You think I'm terrible.

WES

Speedy needed someone. She was so small.

ELLEN

If I could wish Sam back I would.

WES

Me too.

ELLEN

Did I scare you away?

WES

I didn't know what I was doing. Sam was dead. I don't know anything about babies.

ELLEN

We could have made it work.

WES

Coulda woulda shoulda. Everything reminded me of her. The house. The grocery store. Samantha.

ELLEN

Speedy.

WES

Speedy. We should go.

(Wes starts to leave.)

ELLEN

I gave it all up for you, Wes. I left school.

WES

Did I ask you?

ELLEN

You had your own way.

WES

You came every day, you fed Speedy, you made me go outside.

ELLEN

Up Wes, up! We're burning daylight! Get off your ass! Go mow the lawn.

WES

I liked the lawn. I could manage the lawn.

ELLEN

I liked it when Speed was too fussy to sleep, and you'd put her in the car, and look at me and say "Hey Ellen, let's go check the desert." And we'd drive for hours, up and down those back roads.

WES

Yeah.

ELLEN

I loved those nights. Nothing but us and the whole desert, lit up by the moon.

WES

I kissed you in the desert.

ELLEN

You kissed me in the desert.

(pause)

Wes, I want my own baby.

ELLEN

I'm a soldier.

WES

You're taking a break.

ELLEN

(Ellen takes a few steps, wincing with each one.)

What's wrong?

WES

It's nothing. It's nothing! I got sand in my boots.

ELLEN

Let me see.

WES

No, it's fine.

ELLEN

Sit down, let me see.

WES

I'm fine.

ELLEN

I don't want to carry you back.

WES

You're not going to.

ELLEN

I know a few things about sand in boots. Please.

WES

(Warily, Ellen sits on the ground. Wes gestures with his hand. Ellen slowly raises the offending boot up. Wes clamps Ellen's boot between his knees and works on the knots.)

WES

The funny thing about sand is, nobody thinks it matters. If you broke your ankle, you'd sit there, scream your head off.

(Wes wrestles the boot off and shakes it upside down.)

WES

Sand? People walk on sand for days.

(Wes carefully pulls off the sock.)

WES

Gets in between your toes, like glass. A million little cuts.

(Wes dusts off Ellen's foot and gently blows between her toes.)

WES

You don't even notice how much it hurts until you can't bear to take another step.

(Long pause. Wes abruptly gets up and walks away, thwacking Ellen's boot against his thigh to get any remaining sand out.)

ELLEN

How was it?

WES

It wasn't all bad. (beat) Boot camp was just like the movies. I kinda of liked it, to be honest. All jacked up, badass haircut. I quit worrying. (sly grin) My last visit home, you couldn't keep your hands off me.

ELLEN

(sniffs)

You looked good.

WES

So off I went.

ELLEN

Off you went.

WES

"Winning hearts and minds".

ELLEN

Good job.

WES

Ellen, when I got there, we had already spent four years blowing that country to shit, what did they expect?

ELLEN

What did you expect?

WES

To be a hero? I don't know. I fresh off the boat, and they threw me right into a real deployment. Not like those dicks from the National Guard.

ELLEN

What's wrong with them?

WES

They don't even leave the Burger King courtyard in the Green Zone.

ELLEN

You wanted to be somebody.

WES

Ooorah.

(Wes picks at the laces of Ellen's boot.)

WES

I spent my first tour at this tiny little outpost in the middle of nowhere surrounded by HESCO's and sandbags.

ELLEN

Is that bad?

WES

(shrugs)

On good days, I'd stand behind one rock wall and staring at another rock wall, and try not to drop dead from heat exhaustion.

ELLEN

It sounds nice.

WES

Bad days, they'd send us out to look for "insurgent activity". And when they say "insurgents" they mean "anyone who's pissed off you spent the last four years blowing their country to shit". Which actually means, "everybody".

ELLEN

Oh.

WES

It wasn't that bad. Mostly we'd drive around in those stupid Humvees and try to find a weapons cache that didn't exist and hope nobody shot at us. Or hit us with an IED. There were IED's, fucking, everywhere.

(Wes laughs)

WES

Fuck, half of them are leftover land mines we dropped on them. Or the Soviets, or the Turks, or the Iranians or the Kurds, or who the fuck knows. That place has been fucked since always. You know the worst part? They tried to pretend like, it's all normal. The Green Zone had all this crazy strip-mall shit in it to make it look like home, but that just made it worse. I'd forget how weird it was, and then suddenly look around and realize I'm sitting in an air conditioned shipping container, eating a happy meal and watching "Dancing With the Stars" on satellite t.v., only, I'm be surrounded by a hundred other guys with body armor and loaded weapons.

ELLEN

I always pictured you in a trench, or something.

WES

They don't do that any more. (pause) It felt like nothing ever changed over there. We'd do same thing every day, over and over and over and over and over again. They'd send us out to clear a road, and then the next day, we'd clear it again. And again. You do that enough, and you start to doubt yourself. Why? Why am I here? Why am I really here? Are they lying to me? Because I know we're lying to them... What am I doing? Freedom? I'm not defending anybody's freedom, I'm just wandering around the desert, sweating my ass off, and giving candy to street kids.

MISSION CONTROL

(beep) Holding for launch readiness poll, all sections.

ELLEN

We sent you letters.

MISSION CONTROL

(beep) Shuttle launch team is go.

WES

I know. I have them.

MISSION CONTROL

(beep) Forecast team is go.

ELLEN

Did you read them, Wes?

MISSION CONTROL

(beep) Fire suppression team is go.

WES

Afghanistan was worse.

MISSION CONTROL

(beep) Mission control is go.

WES

I started counting things obsessively, like the number of Humvees in the convoy, or ammo clips in the rack or time until my next rotation. You know, like, ok, ok, 2 weeks, 3 days, 5 hours. That's pretty good. I probably won't die. (beat) Oh? What's that Lieutenant Fucknut? 1st platoon just ran over a car bomb? Well, shit. How about that? That's three the month, 18 for the year. Let me see, 16 platoons doing three patrols for 15 miles a week, times 64 guys divided by 8 casualties and 6 wounded equals... fuck!

(Wes shakes his head like he's trying to clear a ringing noise.)

ELLEN

Wes...

WES

You get this amazing sense of clarity about your situation. Just don't die, Wes. That's all that really counts. Just don't die. Don't die in this shit box little country for no good reason. Don't. And then you think, whoa, calm down, boss, have a happy meal. But the next day, it's back in the Humvee and these little thoughts start creeping back in.

What if I die? I probably won't die. There's only been a few thousand American deaths, that's not really that many. Wait a minute, fuck that, that's, that's, actually that's a lot. And we killed a metric shit ton of them, that's why they're so pissed. And you get so busy thinking about your legs getting blown off by and IED and wondering if would be better to sit on top of your body armor to try and save your balls, you stop paying attention and BOOM! JESUS FUCKING CHRIST What the fuck was that? What's that, Lieutenant Fucknut? It was just another car bomb? Well, fuck that.

MISSION CONTROL

Perform apu pre-start.

WES

Fuck it. Better them than me. It could have been me. Nah, nah, it's fine. Come on guys, back to base. Let's have a cheeseburger.

MISSION CONTROL

Close inboard f&d valve.

(Wes becomes agitated and starts to pace.)

WES

What's that Lieutenant? 7am patrol? Alright, you know what, fuck it, gimme the 240, it's my turn on the big gun. Fuck these guys anyway. Two more weeks and I get to go on leave. I can sleep for a week, drink some booze, hit up the bars, check out a woman who's not wearing a fucking burkka! Holy shit do I miss... And then it happens:

The whole world does that crazy slow-motion motion thing, and a ball of white fire punches us, and the Humvee goes up in the air and everything gets flares out and gets really, really quiet because your eyes refuse to take any part in this shit.

MISSION CONTROL

Start ssme purge

WES

So while your body is trying to get it's shit together and decide if you're dead or not, your brain has about a million and a half years to think everything over, and it's real simple.

(Wes stops and faces Ellen.)

You asshole, says your brain. You had 2 weeks left. You've been here for years, and this is what we're doing? You were going to go home. You were going to go home, and meet your daughter, and put your life back together and mow the lawn. You were going to go home. You were going to go home and you were definitely going to fuck your wife. You are such an asshole.

MISSION CONTROL

Begin mps gimbal profile

(Wes starts pacing again.)

But then the world speeds up again, and the Humvee slams down out of the air so hard the rear tires blow right the fuck off the chassis, and we skid so far down that road I don't even know where the actual bomb was.

MISSION CONTROL

Start main fuel valve heaters.

WES

Am I hurt? Oh Christ, I think we're ok. Thank fucking Christ for this shitty fucking Humvee, you wonderful fucking piece of shit. Am I deaf? No, no! I'm not deaf, I can hear Lieutenant Fucknut screaming at me. What?

MISSION CONTROL

Verify body flap to launch.

WES

Is this an ambush? I've heard about this, they light an IED off under the first truck and then you get hit from all sides. Who the fuck put that there anyway? What the fuck were they thinking? What the fuck did I do to them? I didn't do anything to them. That's fucked up. Fuck. I'm still alive. Fuck. Have some water. Fuck. Keep moving.

MISSION CONTROL

Terminate ssme purge.

WES

Check the corners fucknut! Don't let us get boxed in. HOLY FUCK THAT KID HAS AN AK-47! Where the fuck did he get that? Yes, him, over there! Shit, where's the safety, shit, the safety, the safety.

MISSION CONTROL

Perform srb forward lockout

WES

No, no, I can't shoot a fucking kid. But he has a gun! Why is he point a fucking gun at me? What? What do you mean it's just a toy? It's a rifle! No, him! Over there, him!

MISSION CONTROL

Ground power removal.

WES

It's a toy? THE FUCK. Are you the dumbest fucking kid in the entire fucking world? You stupid shit. I have the most advanced, personal weapon system on the entire goddamned planet pointed at your head, you stupid shit.

MISSION CONTROL

G.l.s. go for auto sequence.

These bullets cost \$45, each, asshole! Go away! Get the fuck out of here. Stop pointing that at me. I swear to fucking God, if you don't stop pointing that fucking thing at me, I will. I will shoot you. It's a toy. It's just a fucking toy. You're 10 years old you stupid fuck, what if I kill you? Why are you still pointing a fucking rifle at me?

MISSION CONTROL

High point bleeder valve closed.

(Air warning sirens from the shuttle launch begin to sound and merge seamlessly with the sound of Muslim call to prayers.)

WES

I swear to God, if you don't stop pointing that thing at me, I will. I will kill you. I swear it. I'll fucking kill you! I'll unload this fucking thing right at you! What if I killed him? What if there's another bomb on the ride home? I WISH THIS GOD-DAMN PRAYER FUCKING MUSIC WOULD STOP!

MISSION CONTROL

Remove safety inhibitors orbiter is clear for launch.

(Wes collapses, shaking. Ellen comes to him.)

WES

I can't get it out of my head. I hear when I dream.

ELLEN

Wes.

(Wes cries. Ellen holds him, stroking his head.)

(They kiss. Mac enters, carrying Speedy's limp form, she is wrapped in the American Flag.)

ELLEN

Oh no no no, oh god no.

(Ellen rushes to Speedy.)

MAC

Shhhh. She's sleeping.

(Ellen rushes over and takes Speedy's sleeping body and cradles her.)

(pause)

MAC

I found her in the viewing stands, she was afraid we would leave before the launch.

ELLEN

She was alone?

MAC

They all thought she belonged to someone else.

(Pause. Wes pulls himself together and gets up to look at Speedy sleeping in Ellen's arms.)

ELLEN

She's gone Wes.

WES

What?

ELLEN

I buried her because you couldn't. I stood there with your mother on the edge of Sam's grave and we waited for you to come, but you never did. It was so green. I could taste it in the air, it was so green. (beat) Everyone left finally. But we waited, and the whole time Speedy lay there crying. We never said anything, we just down looked at the fresh

dirt and waited. Your mother finally reached down and pulled Speedy out of the basket, "she needs to go home now." That's all she said to me, "she needs to go home now." And she put the baby in my arms. I think she knew what was coming, with her chemo and...

(Mac covers his face, stricken. He suddenly looks very old.)

ELLEN

(to Wes)

Your mom was like that. I was so afraid. Of death. Of life. I found you that night sitting in the closet, holding on to all of Sam's sweaters. I fed Speedy and I rocked her to sleep, and then I crawled into that closet with you and I rocked you and I felt your heart beat, and I pulled you down on top of me, and I kissed you, and you cried and then I cried, and then we made love under that pile of sweaters in the dark.

WES

Why did she die?

ELLEN

I don't know.

WES

Sometimes, I think it's just a joke. You know?

MAC

It's not a joke. It's not. You do your best. Do you understand? You make... plans, you set benchmarks. Read the manuals. You look down the road and you say, yes, yes, it's a hell of a lot of work, but I can do it, because... it's worth it. You work and you work and you save and you pick out a spot... (Mac glances around and falters, choked up.) ...where you can finally catch your breath for damn minute... but it's gone... and it's not coming back... and there's nothing you can do about it. What then? What happens?

ELLEN

You wait for the rocket to go off.

WES

Yeah.

MAC

Yeah.

(Mac and Wes look at eachother.)

Do you love me? ELLEN

Maybe. WES

Is it me? ELLEN

What do you mean? MAC

(Ellen searches their faces.)

Who am I supposed be? ELLEN

You're Ellen. WES

You're family. MAC

(pause)

I'd also like my boot back. ELLEN

(Wes realizes he's still holding Ellen's boot and puts it down. They all laugh.)

I haven't been up this late since... a long time. MAC

Early. We're up early. ELLEN
(firmly)

Sam looks good. WES

Beauty sleep. That's the trick. ELLEN

I'll try it. (pauses) Look, I... MAC

ELLEN
Speed. Speedy, wake up. The shuttle is going to launch.

SPEEDY
What?

WES
It's time.

MAC
It's the last one, Speedo. Don't miss it.

(Speedy stands up, rubbing her eyes. She clings to Ellen.)

SPEEDY
It's the end of an error?

ELLEN
There will be others.

MAC
Not like this.

(All four move down stage to stand in a line, facing the audience. Speedy takes hands with Ellen, shyly all four hold hands.)

ELLEN
Something better, then.

WES
Like what?

ELLEN
Maybe the moon.

MISSION CONTROL
Ten

MISSION CONTROL
Nine

MISSION CONTROL
Eight

MISSION CONTROL
Seven

Six MISSION CONTROL

Five MISSION CONTROL

Good luck! SPEEDY
(waves)

Four MISSION CONTROL

(As the countdown reaches 3, there is a heavy rumble that grows increasingly louder and light flares in a narrow horizontal line over them, then spreads wider and wider, and brighter and brighter until the stage is awash in white light.)

Main engine start MISSION CONTROL

Two MISSION CONTROL

One MISSION CONTROL

-blackout-

Statement of Objectives:

Overall, I like it. There's a few bumps in the road, mostly Wes' act three breakdown rambles on for much too long and Ellen's character arc would benefit from a sharper focus.

I'm (still) hesitant to have written an adult stage drama that requires a young child for a major role, but hey, that's life, and I think the major theme of the play requires high stakes.

At this point in the process, I'd like to narrow the focus of the play a bit. I wrote this play from an experiment in a genuine three-way conflict. I think it has made for some snappy dialogue, but perhaps leaves the audience unsure of who to "root" for. Maybe this is unnecessary- the couple of readings I've done in front of different people have produced radically different interpretations of who is the protagonist. Maybe that's a good thing- but I think I need to make some serious "author's intent" choices at this point and decide what message I want to leave the audience with.

If accepted into the O'Neill NCP, I'd like to work with a cast and director and do a series of rehearsals with each of the three adult characters framed as the "protagonist" and see what shakes loose.

So it goes.

What I **want** is the play to be a rough metaphor for 2012 America- if the audience leaves the theatre without speculating on the nature of progress and war, then I've failed as a writer.