Prologue

(BRENDA sits. Her eyes closed. Listening to the world)

BRENDA

Sometimes I like to sit and just listen. Listen to the wind through the trees, the sound of a bird calling out to its lover, the sound of every human on earth breathing at once. Just listen. These are things I had no time for before, no time to listen…not really. But the world is a symphony now and I can hear clearly all the things that were difficult before. I listen to my husband trying so hard to be the man I want and need him to be. He tells my daughter a bedtime story and reminds my son to brush his teeth. I hear my children laughing, wondering, playing in the sand on a warm summer day. I hear my friends whispering sweet nothings to a lover, I hear their babies crying, I hear them living.

I can hear everything from here on my little rock far away from it all. I hear all of you, holding your breath when you should exhale. I hear all of you completely unaware of the wonderful precious thing you take into your lungs: life. You don’t have to fight for it like I do. You don’t have to worry about waking up tomorrow and being okay. But, here I don’t worry so much about that. Instead, I just listen.

I guess we are all looking for something here. (she closes her eyes again) If I sit and listen I can hear all the stories. They rush over me like a dark wind. We all have a story, even me. If you will sit awhile and listen maybe you will hear them….so many. So many of them beautiful and wild like the crashing ocean, serene and blue like an unspoken wish. I can’t remember mine though…I can’t--

(We suddenly become aware that MAMA and the NURSES have been watching the whole time. MAMA is an ample African-American woman full of the soft curves of a maternal life. Her face is weathered in the way that all mother’s faces are weathered from too much laughter and too many worries. Her hair is the color of silver, white clouds and she appears just as serene. Three NURSES are with her, they are dressed in white and seem as though they are from another world. NURSE 1 comes over to BRENDA and puts her hand on BRENDA’s shoulder. They share a look that conveys a sense of knowing. This has happened before.)

NURSE 1

It’s time.
BRENDA understands and crosses U.S. where there is a giant oak tree gnarled and ancient. Its arms stretching over the space it is a safe haven and a place of understanding. Brenda goes to it and lies down to sleep. MAMA turns to us. She speaks:

MAMA

These girls. They come and go, come and go like breezes. I try to help them, I do. Some of them just need a Mama, someone to look after them, some of them, well some of them need a lot more. They’re sick, you know. They’ve got a deep illness: cancer, every one of ‘em. Some of ‘em got it real bad, some are just running away. That one, (indicates BRENDA) the one you were just talking to, she’s real sick. Been here awhile. Can’t remember and don’t know how to leave. I’d say she has a lot to hang onto, so we gotta figure out a way to help her let go. Bury her trouble and find her gift. Gotta give her a little kindness along the way. That’s our job. (beat) By the way, I’m Mama. It’s nice to see you all here. (MAMA walks U.S to the Tree. She raises her arms and the space is illuminated. Lights up on a stage nearly empty but for some platforms and the large and looming oak tree. Bathed in the warm light of the Dreamtime, eight women sit and lie about the stage all covered by an enormous white afghan.) This is the Dreamtime. It is a place of rest and of work. It is a safe place where you can find what you’ve lost and bury what you don’t need anymore. People come here when they’re lost and I try to help them, heal them. Some of them find a way back and some of them stay with me and the Tree. (MAMA sits and takes up a crochet needle. She begins her work.) My blanket keeps them warm and safe, my tree is where they can lay their troubles down. They’re sleeping now, but soon they’ll wake. Soon the work will begin. (MAMA sits and begins crocheting the afghan.) The Good Book says, “Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for the Lord’s sake: for when I am weak, then I am strong.” (to GIRLS) It’s time to be strong, little ones. The work begins with song.

(MAMA begins singing the civil rights adaptation of the spiritual “Woke up this morning with mind stayed on Jesus.” The civil rights version goes “Woke up this morning with my mind stayed on Freedom.” She continues crocheting the large white afghan that covers each of the women. She crotches and watches over her “Girls”. They are resting. They are dreaming. They are the quiet before the storm. They lie under her blanket, wrapped and draped in it. Some lie under it exhausted, some hold it over their shoulders and head, some cradle it in their arms like a lost thing. They are “The Girls,” Mama’s wards and she is here to help them, guide them and see them to their end. Now they open their eyes. Mama listens, she hums to herself as she continues to crochet)
CARA
I’m cold.

NURSES ALL
Cold is the first embrace.

CARA
Why am I cold? (happily) Well, at least I’m not running a fever anymore!

DIANA
Where am I? Where is this?

PATRICIA
(holding her chest)
They’re gone. Thank god, they’re still gone.

LUZ
Ay, Dios! Que es eso? Estoy muerto? Is this heaven?

What the hell?

TAMMY

NURSE 1
The dreaming has begun.

BETHANY
This is so totally freaky. I was just like in my house a second ago.

BRENDA
(Standing, looking at MAMA)
Who are you? What’s going on?

She has forgotten.

NURSE 2

MAMA
You can call me Mama.

BRENDA
Mama?

PATRICIA
Where is this? I’m dead. Oh Christ, I’m dead!

MAMA
Nope. You’re not dead…exactly.
NURSE 3

Not dead.

LUZ (making the sign of the cross)

Thank God.

BRENDA

Okay, then where are we?

MAMA

Here.

LUZ

You’re a funny one, aren’t you? Haha. (beat) This must be a dream.

TAMMY

If it is, it’s my dream, cause’ you look just like my auntie.

MAMA

It’s nobody’s dream.

DIANA

Not a dream, not heaven…

MAMA

(correcting her)

Not any one person’s dream.

NURSE 2

The Dreamtime, the place of all dreams, of all creation, all destruction.

(NURSES begin some business, while singing, “When Death Come Creeping in Your Room” Mance Lipscomb)

NURSES

If I was you
If I was you
I would find me a place and pray
If I was you
If I was you
I would find me a place and pray

(They hum the rest)
BETHANY
Look, this is like totally weirding me out. Could you just like tell us what’s going on here? Please? Where are we and where is my Peaches?

Peaches?

TAMMY

BETHANY
My cat!

TAMMY

Oh.

BRENDA (to MAMA)
So, not any one person’s dream but…

but everyone’s dream.

MAMA

DIANA

Everyone’s?

NURSES ALL
Everyone’s.

TAMMY
(referring to NURSES)
Alright, why do they keep doing that!

Oh, never mind them. They’re just here to help.

LUZ

Help with what?

MAMA

With the work.

LUZ
(She makes the crazy head gesture)
The work? The work!? What work?! La Vieja esta loca.

MAMA
Si, pero las muchachas son locas tambien.
LUZ
Great, first I lose my boobs, then I lose my mind. Que great!

CARA
I was just sleeping on the couch. I was having a nice dream.

NURSES ALL
Dreaming.

BETHANY
This is soooo not happening.

BRENDA
This feels so real…and familiar somehow…I’m confused.

LUZ
Hi, Confused. I’m Luz. Nice to meet you. Are you crazy, too?

BRENDA
No. But since we’re making introductions. I’m Brenda.

CARA
(stepping forward. Offering a hand)
Cara.

DIANA
I guess we should all introduce ourselves. Do people do that in dreams…? Anyways, I’m, Diana.

PATRICIA
I’m Patricia.

TAMMY
Tammy.

BETHANY
Bethany. But I’m really more of a Beth.

MAMA
Good. Now everyone knows everyone else. We can get started.

BRENDA
Started? On what?

MAMA
Your beginnings.
Beginning? Beginning of what?

MAMA
Isn’t that the 1 million dollar question! But, no cheating. It’s for you to discover not for me to tell.

BRENDA
Are you always so mysterious? (MAMA laughs) A straight answer might be helpful.

MAMA
All good things come in time.

BRENDA
And, whose “time” would that be? ‘Cause I’m in a bit of a hurry, and--

MAMA
(cutting her off)
You ain’t no more. In a hurry that is.

(NURSES begin again with the song)

NURSES
If I was you
If I was you----

BRENDA
(cutting them off, frustrated)
Does any one have a cigarette?

BETHANY
Brenda…right? Let’s just let her talk. Maybe we’ll totally figure it out, or…

TAMMY
Or maybe we’ll wake up. This is just some weird anesthesia induced hallucination. I’m gonna wake up in recovery with Fernando the handsome male nurse hovering over me and laughing about the crazy things I was just saying. Ooo, Lord, that man was good lookin’.

BRENDA
Recovery…Why would you be in recovery, Tammy? And I’m not joking about the cigarette…anyone?
TAMMY
Sorry. I don’t smoke. Recovery? Did I say, ‘recovery’? I meant re-, re-, damn, nothing sounds like recovery except recovery. What the hell! Why do I even care-- This is just some Freudian hot mess that my mind is makin’ up.

BRENDA
Probably…This is probably just a dream. You’re right.

LUZ
Just una dulce sueno, sweet dream, except it’s not so sweet. *(looking around)* This is sort of a nightmare. There aren’t even any cigarettes!

BRENDA
Right?! Okay, if this is just a dream, that means we should just go along with it and we’ll wake up soon, or at least one of us will.

CARA
Just a dream. Dreams are good, usually.

PATRICIA
Or a vision.

CARA
I like visions.

BETHANY
Some sort of revelation?

CARA
Amazing!

LUZ
Chale!

*(MAMA chuckles a little to herself)*

BRENDA *(to MAMA)*
Do you have something to contribute?

MAMA
All of the above and then some.

BRENDA
More riddles. *(beat. something dawning on her)* We’re here for a reason. Something extraordinary, and we’re definitely not dreaming. I don’t know why I just said that, but I think I’m right.
MAMA

Yes.

CARA

Something extraordinary is happening!

MAMA

Something extraordinary.

DIANA

You’ve got be to kidding.

MAMA

Nope. I think we’re all ready to begin. *(The women are all quiet. Still trying to absorb what is happening to them)* Ladies, we’ve got a lot of work to do, so if you don’t mind, I’m going to get started.

*(The GIRLS look around a little confused by what she means. MAMA goes to a stand US where the shovels are. She grabs a shovel for herself)*

BRENDA

What are those for, Mama?

*(MAMA takes her shovel and goes to the base of the Tree, she plunges the shovel into the earth at the base of the Tree and begins digging.)*

MAMA

Ain’t gonna dig itself up, girls. You might want to help.

BRENDA

Manual labor? We’re having a vision that includes manual labor? Fuck.

BETHANY

*(excited, feeling like she has the answer)*

Maybe it’s like “Karate Kid”. You know, Ralph Macchio? Pat Morita? ‘wax on-wax off’, but instead it’s ‘shovel in-shovel-out’ but really it’s like we’re totally learning karate.

TAMMY

“But really it’s like we’re totally learning karate?” Beth, are you one of those “medical” marijuana users? How in the world would digging a hole in the ground be “like karate”? What the heck are we digging for, anyways? Buried treasure?

MAMA

Y’all find out soon enough. Just do what I ask, child.
TAMMY
Okay. I guess. *(under her breath)* This is the weirdest damn dream I’ve ever had.

(PATRICIA, CARA, TAMMY and BETHANY grab shovels and help out)
CARA (grabbing a shovel)
I guess it wouldn’t hurt to lend a hand. I like digging!

LUZ
Hey, it’s not like it could get any weirder. I say we just help out and see what happens.

(LUZ grabs a shovel and helps, finally BRENDA joins in. MAMA and NURSES begins to hum “Freedom on my mind”, then…)

NURSE 3
The Songlines. Roadmap to their destiny’s. They will help them to their rememberings.

MAMA
Join in, Girls. Singing is good for the soul. Like the good book says:
“Rise up, my love, my fair one, and come away.
For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone;
The flowers appear on the earth, and the time of the singing birds is come!”
So, Sing, Little Birds! Sing! *(looking at the girls)* Now, who’s gonna go first? Brenda?

(LIGHT Shift. Magic is happening, a revealing. We are transported, as THE GIRLS and MAMA dig, a scene shift happens. A coffee shop. A woman and a man. The man is the barista. The woman is Karen.)

BRENDA
Wait a minute…I know that…*(BRENDA stops digging and moves to get a closer look. Karen is laughing and whispering to another woman that we cannot see. The girl we cannot see exists for now, only in the imagination of BRENDA.)* That’s…that’s me. I know that girl. But that was such a long time ago. How is it, why is it that I’m seeing this right now?

MAMA
It’s your beginnings.

(The NURSES enter the scene as well with a faux leopard fur coat and a big leopard print bag. They put the coat on BRENDA and hand her the bag. Once they’re on, BRENDA takes her position in the scene in the place of the once invisible girl.)
BRENDA
Our beginnings? I don’t understand?

MAMA
If you know where you began, then you’ll know where you end.

BRENDA
Where you’ll end? What do you mean?

MAMA
You’d better start. Karen’s waiting for you.

TAMMY (She stops digging to look)
Hey, look at you! What is this, a memory?

Yes, something from my past. 

PATRICIA
Strange…how did it get here?

MAMA
The digging reveals.

NURSE 1
The digging exposes truth.

NURSE 2
A moment from your life.

NURSE 3
Something you need to remember.

MAMA
Something you need to find.

TAMMY
You’re just a baby here, aren’t you?

BRENDA
I must’ve been like 20, maybe 21.

LUZ
What are you wearing?
BRENDA
Leopard. Nice, right? (to MAMA) Karen, huh?

MAMA
Get on with it, child.

(BRENDA begins to pantomime the scene of a coffee shop. BRENDA has a confident, jovial interaction with the barista. KAREN follows, and both meet at benches to continue this scene.)

KAREN
Shit!

BRENDA
What now, Karen?

KAREN
I forgot to tell them I wanted non-fat. I’ve been gaining weight.

BRENDA
Well go back and tell them.

KAREN
It’s too late. They’re already making it.

BRENDA

KAREN
No. It’s okay. I’ll just do some extra laps.

BRENDA
(To barista) Excuse me?

(To barista) Excuse me?

(Pantomime of BRENDA asking barista to remake coffee. Barista obliges.)

KAREN
I can’t believe you just did that! He’ll probably spit in it.

BRENDA
No he won’t. Now, go give him a tip, Karen, and say thanks.

KAREN
(To barista) Thank you so much. I’m sorry-
BRENDA
(To KAREN) That’s enough (to barista) Thanks. (to KAREN) You have to learn how to ask for what you want. And not apologize for it.

I know.

BRENDA
You do this all the time. Look we teach people how to treat us. That’s what my therapist says anyways.

(They laugh)

KAREN
(Teasingly) That’s what I need, therapy lessons on ordering coffee.

BRENDA
Shut up! But it’s true; and you do not have to pay for therapy to get it!

Your coffee is ready.

BARISTA

KAREN
(To barista) Thanks. (pause) And I’m not sorry.

BRENDA
It’s a start. Come on. Are you coming out with Frank and me tonight? Karaoke!

(KAREN and BARISTA exit. MAMA approaches BRENDA.)

I remember that. Why?

MAMA
Something you’re looking for here.

I need time…

BRENDA

MAMA
I know, but it’s important that you do the work. Remember how strong you were? You always spoke your mind.

BRENDA
I’m still strong.
MAMA
Yes, you’re still strong. Come, walk with me.

*(BRENDA and MAMA cross U.S. The tree becomes dark. NURSES enter. They spread across the space, a starry landscape to the empty sky of the stage.)*

NURSE 1
Some come to the dreamtime through sleep.

NURSE 2
Some through sickness or the deep sleep of medicine.

NURSE 3
The stars bring them on their backs.

NURSE 1
The winds take them on their tongues.

NURSE 2
Some are fighting.

NURSE 3
Some are dying.

NURSE 1
Some are waiting to remember they are dead.

NURSE 2
They are dreaming of their time before.

NURSE 3
Trying to find their songlines and go home.

NURSE 1
Only Mama can give them to us, or take them away.

NURSE 2
Only Mama knows who will stay and who will go.

NURSE 3
The songlines will guide them.

NURSE 1
The deep scars of their skin will lead the way.
NURSE 2
Each valley, each precipice has marked its direction on them.

NURSE 3
The songs and the earth will help them remember.

(There is the sound of wind, of chimes, something, or someone coming.)

NURSE 1
We are here to nurse the sick, the lost, the scared.

NURSE 2
We are escorts.

NURSE 3
Fates.

NURSE 1
Be not afraid. We only show the truth.

(The sound of chimes again. NURSES looks up, a shaft of light. They sing:)

NURSES
Look up
Look up to Salvation

Look up
Look up to Salvation

Look up
Look up to Salvation

Lord’s gonna lead the way…

(Light Shift. The GIRL’S wake, pick up their shovels and watch as a hospital room is created. NURSES bring in 2 recliner chairs, and other things. DIANA stands and watches the familiar scene. One NURSE takes a piece of the afghan and places it over DIANA’s shoulders, another takes her shovel and guides her to one of the chairs. BRENDA crosses away from the group, the other GIRLS watch from the Tree with their shovels. The NURSES hand DIANA a red baseball cap and pair of large head phones.)
Are you ready for this, baby?

Yes.

Well, it’s your turn now. (MAMA looks at the scene) You remember this place?

I’ll never forget it.

Why are you here, Diana? This is a chemo room.

It is. A chemo room.

Don’t be afraid.

I’m not afraid.

Really? I am. These rooms always make me feel sick to my stomach. Just the smell.

I can handle it.

Sure. I’m not trying to say you can’t, it’s just…everyone who’s done this knows, this part really sucks.

How would you know?

Because I’ve done this, too.

(DIANA and BRENDA share a look of solidarity. DIANA takes a deep breath and puts on the baseball cap and over that the headphones. Music comes up. MAMA lifts one side of the earphones.)
MAMA

I’m right here if you need me.

(NURSE 1 comes over and says)

NURSE 1

Saline first.

(DIANA nods, secures the headphone back and lowers her head, closes her eyes tight, the music comes down low. NURSE 1 holds DIANA’s chart. She reads from it to the audience:)

NURSE 1

Diana Feldman, age 45. Stage 3b Metastatic Breast Cancer. Double Mastectomy opted for no reconstruction. Treatment Regimen: 3 rounds Chemo with Doxorubicin, The Red Devil. Side Effects: red colored urine, low blood counts, nausea, fatigue, hair-loss, broken heart. 36 Rounds Radiation. Once a day five days a week for 7 weeks. Results: Epidural burns and skin irritation, broken body. 5-year survival rate 41%.

DIANA

There are rules for this place:
1. No peeking
2. This is war, so fight like a soldier
3. Take no prisoners.

The headphones go on, baseball cap, helps with rule #1. Turn on the music. After the saline starts the nurses know not to bother me. I listen. Imagine I’m at a lake, not sure which one, a lake from my childhood. There was a waterfall. We went there a couple times in the summer, on vacation. I remember feeling happy, feeling peaceful, strong. That’s where I go.

The battle starts. Meds start going in. The weapons meant to destroy the cancer. I try to give my body over. I have a life. I love my life. I want to live, so I let the poison in. I don’t peek. I fight. I told the doctors to take my breasts, both of them. Double mastectomy. No reconstruction. I don’t want to keep anything. I just want to live. (The NURSE comes in again and starts another bag of medicine. It is a haunting red color. DIANA glances over almost inadvertently. She sees. She is caught off guard) I accidentally looked one time. I saw the red medicine, poison going into my veins.

It was like...like looking at a wound on your own body. You can’t believe what you’re seeing. It’s as though it’s not part of you, as though it’s someone else’s ugliness. How do you put it together? How do you get your head around...that? You are putting poison in your body. You are sitting there, letting them pump you full of this toxic chemical, because you want to live. You want to live so badly, you’ll do anything, even poison yourself because this IS war, and the 4th rule is don’t lose.
(Light Shift.)

MAMA
(to DIANA) How does that make you feel? Seeing that again?

DIANA
Terrible. It feels like yesterday.

MAMA
It’s over now.

DIANA
The battle. Not the war.

MAMA
No way to know really. But, ain’t that the fly in the ointment. You just can’t let go.

DIANA
Let go of what?

MAMA
This dang picture you have of yourself as a cancer patient, but you’ll have to give that up if you want to live again as anything else. You’re frozen here in this room, while life’s going on without you. Your children are growing up. There are moments of wonder and beauty passing you by at every moment. Don’t leave this earth regretting their absence.

DIANA
Regretting their absence? Why are you talking to me like I’m going to die?

MAMA
I’m just trying to help.

DIANA
Don’t you know that I realize that this moment, this is all I have, this little minute with my daughter, this meal with my kids, this one last kiss goodnight, this might be the last one, or the second to last one and I KNOW that! That’s why I’m frozen in this limbo. That’s why I can’t move on. I know in my soul what lies ahead and I’m scared to go there. I have to hold on. I have to stay here. It’s safe here. I know what here is all about. What sick is all about. I’m not sure what living is anymore. I’m afraid to live, it means I might die. (silence)

BRENDA
(to MAMA and the NURSES)
Tell her she’ll be okay. Tell her she can beat this. She can win.
MAMA
But she won’t. She will pass away. Not today. Not tomorrow, but the cancer will come back, and it will take her. But that’s not losing, baby. That’s just life. (beat) Time to hand it over, Diana.

DIANA
Hand over what?

MAMA
Your old self. Embrace your survival today. Tomorrow is another day.

DIANA
I don’t know how to do that.

MAMA
‘Course you do. Give me your hat.

DIANA
My hat?

MAMA
That hat was meant to protect you, shield you from the pain of life, but you don’t need it anymore. That’s in the past.

DIANA
I’m not ready.

MAMA
No, but you need to give it to me anyways. (A silence. DIANA takes off the cap and looks at it. MAMA crosses to her and places her hands on the hat. She gently takes it from her) Now, this is going in the ground. (MAMA moves U.S to the Tree) Come along, Girls. Time to give this old thing to the Tree.

(The GIRLS follow unsure of what MAMA is talking about. When MAMA reaches the Tree. She takes the cap and drops it into a hole that was already dug.)

MAMA
You need a new way of thinking about yourself, Miss Diana, and now you need a new cap, too. Now, girls, help us cover this thing up.

(The GIRLS all take shovels and begin to help covering the cap over with dirt. DIANA does not help.)

BETHANY (whispering to LUZ)

Diana’s not helping.
MAMA
No, she ain’t. But this ain’t all about her, Beth. Bury your sister’s troubles and find a place to bury your own as well. (crossing to DIANA) I know you don’t understand this right now, but you will. Everyone and everything will die, but it’s the living part that matters most. Now, you gonna have to find a way to do that.

(MAMA beckons the NURSES to come and help as well.)

MAMA
Now, who’s next? (MAMA crosses to PATRICIA) Patricia? Think it’s your turn.

(NURSE 3 crosses to center.)

NURSE 3
Patricia Wheeler. Diagnosed December of ‘08 with Stage 3 breast cancer. She had just moved out to California. Opted for double mastectomy. Treatment regimen: 3 rounds of chemo with Cytoxan. Developed leucopenia or low white blood cell count as a result. Recommended supplemental treatment with Neupogen. Side Effects include: bone pain, spleen pain, fatigue, bleeding heart.

(NURSES spread across the apron. MAMA leads PATRICIA down to them. One of the NURSES hands PATRICIA a shovel)

MAMA
It’s your time, Patricia.

PATRICIA
But I’m all alone.

MAMA
No. I’m here and the girls will be watching. You’ll be okay.

(PATRICIA begins to dig. As she does magic begins to happen. The Nurses begin to attend to her)

NURSE 1
It’s called Neupogen.

NURSE 2
You’ll need to inject it into the port.

NURSE 3
You opted out of installing the port in your arm.
NURSE 1

You chose your heart.

NURSE 1

On the day of surgery –

NURSE 2

Only take what you need to the hospital.

NURSE 3

Do you have anyone who can drive you?

NURSE 1

No one?

(NURSES exit. MAMA’S GIRLS watch from up stage)

PATRICIA

You all know that I was alone through most of this. Surgery is a given. It’s trying to figure out how to manage after that’s... a comedy of errors.

It’s like you’re at the car lot. You know, *imitating a smarmy car salesman* “yadda yadda yadda.” You don’t know what they’re talking about. You try to be polite, because they’re the doctor, and say, ‘yes’ and ‘thank you’ because they are supposed to know more than you.

I decided to have the port for chemo to be put right into my heart. *(BEAT)* They don’t tell you how dangerous it is to put the port directly into your heart if you have a history of heart problems. … my heart?

So there I am; car parts and all, directly in my chest. The medicine, neupogen meant to boost my immune system arrives in a cardboard box at my doorstep. I start reading the directions and this stuff needs to be refrigerated! Refrigerated and it arrives in a cardboard box? Of course, the refrigerator is not working. Well it’s hot in the apartment and the hormones I’ve been on have me sweating. I can’t tell if it’s me or the AC? I’m standing there with car parts, drugs in a box, and a sweaty problem

Well I have to do something. I sit down and try to relax, but all I can think about is that I’m supposed to inject this medicine into my heart. Directly into my heart. I try to remember what the doctor was saying and all I can hear is Car-sales talk. I now don’t know if I’m sweating because I’m nervous or the hormones. So I call the doctor, and *that guy* tells me, “that if I need help that I can call Walgreens, and that they have nurses that will come to your house.” Well! Car parts, drugs in a box, and now a call girl nurse.

What else can I do? Walgreens sends over the first available nurse, Helen. Helen gets here and she doesn’t look much better than I do, and she’s trying to be all sweet and ask
me about my history, and all I can think is please help me inject this rapidly warming poison into my heart. She starts yammering on about the fact that she’s a lung cancer survivor, *she smelled distinctly of cigarette smoke.* I’m exposed. I am literally exposed, shirt off, her fumbling around with the needle and jabbing it into the port into my heart. *She can’t get it in right.* I’m screaming inside my head, *Well I could have done this!* She starts wriggling the thing, and jerking and … I had to get her to stop. I get my call girl Helen off of me, “please stop.” *(long beat)* I look down and see this needle sticking out of my chest. I look at Helen, she looks at me. “I can try again?” I say as politely as I can, “NO THANK YOU.” Helen had done enough and could go back to the neighborhood pimp, Walgreen.

I’m all alone. It’s getting late and I am clearly in a comedy of errors. All I want to do is take a shower because the shower is the best place to cry because it all goes down the drain. I feel the heaviness of my heart wearing me down, and not because of all the car parts hanging out of it. I’m too scared to take a shower; for fear that something that won’t boost my immunities will get in. I decide to go to bed.

“Okay God! … I give it all to you.”

I wait until the next day, propped up by pillows and God. That morning I felt a weight lifted. It’s almost like my own worry was blocking me from helping myself insert this medicine into my heart. I tried again; no Helen, just me and my car parts. Finally. My heart let the neupogen in.

*(NURSES hand PATRICIA a clip board and student, KAITLYN, Enters. They are in a private conference.)*

**BRENDA**

Look. She’s in trouble.

**MAMA**

Let teacher handle this.

**PATRICIA** *(Entering the scene, guided gently by MAMA)*

Now Kaitlyn, tell me again what happened.

**KAITLYN**

I told Jacob that Imani had a boyfriend, and then Imani found out. – So now Imani is mad at me. I’ve felt terrible all day.

**PATRICIA**

You should. *Cut this crap out.* Go and apologize to Imani, then stay out of other people’s business. Don’t be a hindrance. Be a help. One day you’re gonna grow up and have far bigger problems to solve. If you start falling apart now, you are setting a very low bar for your emotional future – and trust me; stress takes a toll on your life.
MAMA’S GIRLS

Uh huh!

KAITLYN

What?

PATRICIA

Say you’re sorry. Mean it. Let it go.

KAITLYN

But!? She’ll know that it’s true.

PATRICIA

Yup. Say…

KAITLYN

I’m sorry.

PATRICIA

Mean it. Take a breath (PATRICIA and KAITLYN take a deep breath. PATRICIA exhales easily.) Let it go. (To KAITLYN) Repeat.

KAITLYN

Let it go. (KAITLYN exits back to MAMA’S GIRLS)

PATRICIA

Let it go… (ALL MAMA’S GIRLS “let it go” with a deep breath. Recess bell rings. PATRICIA cries silently.)

NURSE 1

Let it go.

NURSE 2

Address it.

NURSE 3

Do what you can.

ALL

Let it go.

NURSE 1

Or it stays inside.

NURSE 2

Festering.
Tumors

Of remorse

Of mistakes

Of fear.

Not worth holding on to.

When life is waiting,

changing

reflecting

on you.

PATRICIA
Ok class, who knows the capital of Pennsylvania? Anyone, Bueller? (To MAMA'S GIRLS. BRENDA raises her hand.) You in the back! Yes you. Come to the front. Hurry up, I'm not getting any younger.

BRENDA
Harrisburg.

PATRICIA
That's right. At least one of you is paying attention! Well, what about the rest of you?

(BRENDA gestures for the other MAMA'S GIRLS to follow. MAMA'S GIRLS all line up as school children. Sitting on benches. Recess bell rings again. PATRICIA takes place at head of class as teacher. KIDS, KAITLYN and IMANI are whispering and giggling.)

PATRICIA
Imani whispering is rude. We were going over states and their capitals.
(KIDS pass a note IMANI to KAITLYN.)

PATRICIA
Imani that’s it! It is very disrespectful to pass notes while I’m lecturing. Do you think I need to go over the states and their capitals? Do I need to pass 5th grade? No! Would you like me to call you up to the front of the room, and I’ll sit here and whisper to Kaitlyn. – What is that anyway? Give it to me.

(KAITLYN, rises with note and begins to cross to PATRICIA. It’s a note in the shape of a heart with an arrow going through it. As KAITLYN approaches PATRICIA, IMANI jumps up.)

IMANI
Ms. PATRICIA. Please?! It’s my heart! (silence.) - Please don’t read it out loud. It’d be too–

PATRICIA
Embarrassing. I know. (silence.) Well… I’m holding on to this.

IMANI
I’m sorry.

KAITLYN
Me too! I’m sorry Imani about telling –

PATRICIA
KAITLYN! (gestures breathing) Let it go.

IMANI
I knew it!

KAITLYN
(To IMANI) I’m sorry. I mean it. (To Ms. PATRICIA) And I know you told me to stay out of other peoples business and I was, except for …

MAMA’S GIRLS
KAITLYN! Breathe.

PATRICIA
You heard them. Everybody! (ALL MAMA’S GIRLS as students breathe, PATRICIA conduct the audience.)

IMANI
He knows!
I’m sorry.

PATRICIA

My heart.

Breathe and let it go. (Beat) A heart? Of all things. (PATRICIA gestures for IMANI to come closer.) Imani, come here. You can collect this after school. We can discuss this heart of yours.

MAMA

Come on girls, accept it

(MAMA’S GIRLS make gestures appropriate for their own acceptance. Like grabbing breast, holding heart, holding, holding hands, and so on...)

LUZ

Let go of fear.

I can.

CARA

Live again.

DIANA

Surrender.

BRENDA

Help me.

TAMMY

Love me.

BETHANY

My heart.

PATRICIA

Let it go. (They all breathe.)

MAMA

Let it go, Patricia. (PATRICIA breathes in, breathes out.) I know that you had to do it all alone. But you did it. You’re here and, baby, you’re breathing.
PATRICIA
(Still holding onto Imani’s heart.) I don’t want this anymore. I’m convinced that I allowed my loneliness, my lack of love, my life’s resentment to fester and grow. Thank god for my comedy of errors. At least I know I’m living in a comedy. I didn’t know that I needed neupogen to enter my heart like a poison. I was always so worried about everything. Life has a funny way of reminding you in small ways, like Imani’s note with her childish cupid’s arrow. It was a reminder to let things go. Mama, I really don’t want to worry anymore about what’s going to get in.

MAMA
Lay your heart down. I’ll hold onto it for you, with you.

(PATRICIA takes shovel from NURSE, lays down her heart and covers it with dirt. Patricia takes a deep breath.)

PATRICIA
(To Mama’s girls) Come on girls. It’s so much easier, when your heart isn’t heavy.

(All the girls cross DS to Patricia in congratulations.)

BRENDA
And you didn’t even have to call Walgreens.

(The nurses take the girls’ shovels and moving to the apron mime burying again, as they sing.)

NURSES (singing)
Look up
Look up to Salvation
Look up
Look up to Salvation
Look up
Look up to Salvation
Lord’s gonna lead the way…

(All the girls return to sitting at the Tree, happily)

MAMA
(to Patricia) This takes work, assessing your beginnings, (to Brenda) taking stock.

BRENDA
It’s difficult.

MAMA
I know it is, Baby. Digging, reveals. Take stock of what is important to you.
BRENDA

I know what’s important.

MAMA

You’re remembering. Aren’t those your sisters?

BRENDA

What are they doing here?

MAMA

Watching your son of course. A day on the beach.

(As if remembering) Right.

BRENDA

(As defined by sounds of waves crashing and children laughing. BRENDA’S sisters enter, two Latina women in their 30’s. They are basking in the sun with children laughing, and the lighting of a beautiful afternoon)

MAMA

What happens when you dig a little deeper?

BRENDA

No more digging - (BRENDA crosses DS to her SISTERS and MAMA remains on stage but out of the scene. Quinn is referred to in this scene, no need to cast.) -Quinn that’s enough digging for now. Go and get some water to make a sand castle. (to SISTER) Thanks for watching him. With everything going on right now…. well, having Aunties like you really helps.

SISTER 1

You know that Quinn is my baby.

BRENDA

I know he is. And you’re my –

SISTER 2

Hero?

BRENDA

I was going to say, free childcare. (All laugh)

SISTER 2

Watch it.
BRENDA
I just hope it all works out. I mean…I know we have to do the chemo, but the baby...(She touches her belly) The baby will be alright. She has to be.

SISTER 1
And you, too….We’re here to help. You’re our baby.

BRENDA and SISTERS (To QUINN)
Quinn!

SISTER 1 (to BRENDA)
There he goes.

SISTER 2 (to BRENDA)
And he’s down. That sand castle never had a chance.

SISTER 1(to QUINN)
You’re okay. You can start over. Try again.

BRENDA (to SISTERS)
He’s going to get upset. I’d better get him. (Starts to rise)

SISTER 1 (to BRENDA)
Just wait a minute. He’s okay.

BRENDA (to QUINN)
Good job, Quinn. Keep building. (To SISTERS) I wish he wouldn’t play so far away from us.

SISTER 1
It’s hard to let them go. To let them grow up and fall down sometimes.

SISTER 2
You can’t always rescue them. Sometimes they have to help themselves. You know what I mean?

BRENDA
I’m trying.

SISTER 2
You need to slow down. Take of yourself for once.

SISTER 1
Let us take care of you, let Frank.
SISTER 2
I don’t know why you haven’t quit that job yet. Forty hours a week, Brenda?!

SISTER 1
We can help you and Frank with money if you need it.

BRENDA
I want to work. The doctor said--

SISTER 1 (cutting her off)
The doctor said that he would prefer that you not work!

BRENDA
But that he was not requiring that I stop, until the chemo starts. We need the money, and I need the distraction. I can’t just sit at home all day worrying.

SISTER 2
Well, your family needs you!

BRENDA
I didn’t imagine it would be like this. Everything’s changing so fast.

SISTER 1
You have to decide for yourself. You have to choose to put yourself first.

SISTER 2
We can’t decide for you, Brenda, but we’re here for you and Quinn. No matter what. We’ll always be here for you.

BRENDA
I’m working on it, for Quinn and Frank (touching her belly again) and her. I know I need to be better. I know I need--(Looking out to the sea) There he goes again! Quinn!

SISTER 2
Those sandcastles don’t stand a chance! (They laugh)

(The LIGHTS SHIFT. BRENDA’S SISTERS exit and BRENDA crosses to MAMA who has been watching her the whole time. The other GIRLS are spread across the space sitting and thinking.)

MAMA
You remember that?

BRENDA
Yes.
MAMA
Quinn is a good boy. Your sister’s love him.

BRENDA
Quinn’s the most wonderful thing that’s ever happened to us. He’s the love of my life, aside from Frank. He’s the reason I have to fight this thing, and the baby. (beat) I still don’t understand, Mama. Why am I remembering all of this?

MAMA
Be patient. By and by, baby. Y’know the Good Book says, “Surely God is with the patient.” I think that’s true. Let’s go back to the girls.

(BRENDA and MAMA cross back to the GIRLS. BRENDA stands for a moment in thought and then)

BRENDA
I have a confession to make, and I’m not really sure, why, but I feel compelled to tell you all this: I have breast cancer, just like Diana and Patricia.

CARA
Really?! Me, too. But don’t worry, it’s not that bad.

BETHANY
I had to have a lumpectomy. It totally sucked!

TAMMY
I have breast cancer, too.

LUZ
Yo tambien…I mean, me, too. I had it.

BRENDA
So, we all have breast cancer…what does this mean?

LUZ
We all will be getting new boobies!

(They all laugh)

PATRICIA
It’s funny ‘cause I always felt unhappy with my breasts. I thought they were too small, not perky enough, nipple’s too big.

BRENDA
Right? Then you get breast cancer and it’s like, wait, they’re not so bad.
DIANA
I couldn’t wait to get my mastectomy. I just wanted it out. I wanted to know that lump, this disease that wanted nothing more than to kill me, was gone, was burnt and cut and unable to hurt me anymore.

BRENDA
You felt that, too? It was such a shock when we found out. You think you’d be more attached, but you’re not. You just want it gone. All of that sickness, you want it out of you.

CARA
I just wanted everything to go well. I didn’t care what they did, just as long as I got better. Actually, I kind of feel lucky that I got cancer, it made me appreciate things more.

LUZ
I had them take both breasts.

TAMMY
And then you had reconstruction?

LUZ
Si, senorita! I waited 2 years for the gummies to come in before I had the spacers replaced!

TAMMY
No, shit!

LUZ
Yes, shit! I was not gonna have them put anything inside of me that was less than what my fabulous chichi’s were before!

TAMMY
My god those tissue expanders are so uncomfortable.

LUZ
I know, when my husband hugged me for the first time after surgery, I cried. It hurt so bad.

PATRICIA
They’re hard as stones, aren’t they?

TAMMY
Clearly made by a man, right? I mean, if men got breast cancer as often as women, spacers would feel like comfy pillows and give you an orgasm every time you touched them!
BRENDA
I couldn’t get reconstruction at first, so I had to wear this ugly ass bra with an insert!

BETHANY
They’re like granny bras, right?

TAMMY
Are you kidding me? My granny wears nicer bras than those things!

BRENDA
And god forbid your husband forgets and tries to grab it. Feels like--

PATRICIA and BRENDA
Bird seed!

BRENDA
Right? It’s humiliating. Totally un-sexy.

LUZ
Talk about un-sexy, my spacers looked like 2 square blocks glued onto my chest, but now I have the gummies. They look yummy!

BETHANY
Did they do a good job?

LUZ
Well, my husband is happy! Wanna see?

ALL (but MAMA)
Yes!

(LUZ faces upstage undoes her bra and lifts her shirt so they can all see)

CARA
Wow, those are great and the nipple reconstruction is fantastic.

TAMMY
Do they feel real?

LUZ
Touch them and see.

(TAMMY objectively prods one)
TAMMY
Yeah, they feel squishy like a real boob does, not solid like some of them.

BRENDA
I’m definitely getting a boob job after all this is over.

MAMA’S GIRLS
Whoo hoo, Hell yeah, that’s right.

(LUZ closes up shop)

BRENDA
It’s part of who you are, as a woman, you know? Part of what makes you feel sexual. I mean there won’t be any feeling there, because they took out those nerves with the mastectomy, but I’ll feel better. I’ll feel sexy again.

TAMMY
Shit, and you’ll look better too!

MAMA
She’s already nice lookin’ I’d say about cute as a box full of puppies.

BRENDA
Thanks, but cut the crap, Mama. I want my boob back.

LUZ
Gummies, ladies. It’s the only way to go. (beat) I’ve been in remission for 2 years now…So, why am I here? Maybe, I’m gonna—

BRENDA
Don’t think about it. I mean, who even knows if this is your hallucination? It could be mine, or hers.

CARA
Yeah, maybe you’re just passed out on the beach with a margarita in Cabo!

LUZ
Right. Right. You know when we found out the first time, I laughed. My husband cried and I laughed. I couldn’t help myself…I didn’t know what else to do.

MAMA
The bad times always catch you unawares.

BRENDA
When I first found out it was surreal.
LUZ
I probably would’ve left the doctor’s office if my husband hadn’t stopped me.

BRENDA
Frank and I just fell into action without second a thought. We had to for our baby.

LUZ
A baby?

BRENDA
I was pregnant when I found out.

LUZ
Ay, Dios mio! I can’t imagine…How did you manage?

BRENDA
I just…did. You just push up your sleeves and do it.

LUZ
You sound just like my husband. He’s a doer like you. I’m more of a procrastinator, but not, Juan. I love that about him.

MAMA
Remembering is good, Luz. Your husband has stopped you from doing foolish things more than once.

LUZ
I suppose he has.

MAMA
Grab your shovels, girls!

PATRICIA
Geez, this is ridiculous.

TAMMY
Yeah, my arms are sore!

MAMA
Luz needs your help.

(The NURSES pass out the shovels and MAMA takes LUZ to the scene. BRENDA follows tentatively behind.)

MAMA (indicates an area of the stage)
Do you see the room?
LUZ

Yes.

(Light shift. THE NURSES set the scene. A Doctor’s office. Doctor enters with LUZ’s husband, JUAN, they both sit in chairs. THE NURSES hand LUZ a trendy jacket, a purse and a compact mirror. LUZ puts on the jacket, takes a lipstick out of the purse and uses the mirror to apply it. THE GIRLS watch scattered on the sidelines. BRENDA stands near LUZ and MAMA. NURSE 2 enters and reads:)

NURSE 2

Luz Perez-Hernandez, age 51. Diagnosed Stage 3 Breast Cancer both breasts, opted for full reconstruction. Treatment Regimen: Full mastectomy. 3 rounds of Chemotherapy with Doxorubicin and Cytoxan. Side Effects: Nausea, hair loss, weight loss, loss of spirit. 36 Rounds Radiation, once a day five days a week for 7 weeks. Side Effects: third degree epidural burns, reduced skin sensation, reduced energy, reduced hope. 5 year survival rate 67%.

(NURSE 2 exits scene and stands with others at the Tree watching. MAMA gently leads LUZ into the scene and then stands off to the side with BRENDA. LUZ sits with Doctor and JUAN. Light shift.)

DR. PHILLIP

So, the biopsy is conclusive, Mrs. Hernandez. It is breast cancer, stage 3.

(LUZ bursts out laughing.)

LUZ

You’re kiddin’ me, doc. Breast cancer? C’mon! I feel fine.

DR. PHILLIP

I’m not joking with you. I would never joke about something this serious. You definitely have breast cancer. Now, I’d like to schedule you for a complete double mastectomy as soon as…

(LUZ laughs loudly again)

LUZ

You want to cut my boobs off? Seriously. Nunca en vida he escuchado algo tan ridículo como este doctor Novato y su diagnostico loco. Juan! Juan? Puedes creerle este hombre? Me quiere cortar una teta!

JUAN

(near tears. Very serious)

Listen to the man, mi amor.
LUZ
No, yo no le hare caso a este hombre que claramente--(continuing to speak over him)

JUAN
Mi amor, por favor…por favor…

JUAN
If you would stop for one second and listen.                       LUZ
Always! Always you have to---        No sabe de lo que esta hablando.

JUAN (topping her)
This man is trying to save your life!
Your life. For me, you must stop this stupidity and listen.

BRENDA (Aside to Mama)
She’s fiery. I like her.

LUZ
Ay! Ay, really, Juan? Really? You have to embarrass me in front of this doctor? You
have to make me look like una babosa in front of this…

JUAN
No one is trying to make you look like an idiot, mi amor. No one is trying to hurt you.
We are trying to save you!

(Light shift.)

LUZ
I close my eyes and try to forget that moment. I think that’s what I did while I was there.
I wanted to imagine myself somewhere else like on a cruise ship, far away from this
pendejo doctor and his bull shit diagnosis. (The lights shift again, the sound of an ocean
breeze. LUZ steps downstage and she is now on the deck of a ship. She takes out her
lipstick again and mirror and re-applies her lipstick. She admires herself for a moment in
the mirror. NURSES come and help her into a fur coat and extravagant jewelry.) Juan
and I loved to take trips before all of this. Cruises. We would pick a ship and go. I’ve
been to Costa Rica, Buenos Aires. I’ve traveled the world. It was glorious. (JUAN is now
standing next to her. He puts his arm around her and kisses her cheek.)

JUAN
Mi, amor.

(The GIRLS re-act positively to JUAN. LUZ turns back to them and says:)
LUZ (to GIRLS)
I know, Que hot! Right? (back to the scene)
It’s beautiful isn’t it? The moonlight on the ocean, the salty air on your face.

JUAN
Not as beautiful as you!

LUZ
Well, very few things are as beautiful as me, amor.

JUAN
That’s true. So…shall we walk? There’s still a few minutes before dinner.

LUZ
I would love to.

(They begin to stroll.)

LUZ
Can you believe Esmerelda and that shit head she’s dating? I can’t believe it! It really gets my blood boiling to hear her complain about him. I mean, if you hate him so much, and this is a man only a mother could love, than why do you stay with him? I just don’t get it. I think she just likes to complain.

JUAN
And you like the chisme.

LUZ
Me? Don’t be ridiculous. (He looks at her) Okay. I do like to hear the gossip a little, but just a little.

JUAN
Besides, I think you’ve also been with your share of shit heads in your life.

LUZ
Es la verdad. I can’t deny it. Until I found you. (She takes his face in her hands and kisses him)

JUAN
So, you think I’m okay, huh?

LUZ
Yeah, you’re alright.

JUAN
I’m not like the other men you’ve dated...or married.
LUZ
Not a thing like any of them. It took me 40 years but I finally found you.

JUAN
I’m glad you feel that way, because I have something that I want to ask you (JUAN pulls a small box out of his coat pocket and starts to get down on one knee. THE GIRLS re-act vocally)

LUZ
Ay, Dios! No! (She pulls him from his feet) Juan, no, please, no, not this, not….

JUAN
Not, what? Not (He opens the small box. There is a beautiful diamond engagement ring inside of it) this.

LUZ
Yes.

JUAN
So, you’re saying ‘yes’?

LUZ
No.

JUAN
You’re saying, ‘no’?

LUZ
Aiiii! Juan, You know I don’t—

JUAN
Yes. I know. You don’t want to get married again, but, Luz…

JUAN
I’ve also waited, 56 years to find you. My dear, sweet, beautiful Luz, my light. The woman that made me finally believe that there was someone out there for me, and now that I’ve met you, I never want to let you go.

LUZ
And I never want to let you go, but—marriage…Why do we need to do that. Let’s not change, let’s just keep it like this, forever!

JUAN
No. I don’t want that. I want to call you my wife, for better or worse.
LUZ
Yes, yes, I understand and it’s not the “better” part I’m worried about, it’s the “worse” part that usually gets people. (*She checks herself in her mirror*)

JUAN
Mi amor, listen to me, I will love you no matter what, even if you say no. Even when you’re old and gray and ugly--

LUZ
JUAN!

JUAN
Please say yes.

LUZ
Juan…this is…(*She takes the ring into her hands*) This is…this is a REALLY nice damn ring! Juan, really this looks muy expensive. (*LUZ shows it to the GIRLS*)

JUAN
Only the best for you, my Luz, from now on.

(*LUZ turns the ring in her hands a few times, then slides it onto her finger. JUAN takes her hand, excitedly at first, then looking more closely…)*

JUAN
That’s the wrong finger.

LUZ
I know.

JUAN
Luz.

LUZ
Look, yes, okay?! I say, yes, but that finger needs some time to warm up to the idea.

JUAN
Woman, you will be the death of me.

LUZ
Probably. (*They laugh and she kisses him*) Now, let’s forget all about this and go have dinner. (*Taking out her mirror again. She gazes at herself and asks:* Would you really still love me if I was ugly?*)
JUAN
Yes, of course I would! (he tries to snatch the mirror away)

LUZ
Stop it! (She puts the mirror away. beat) Marriage? Juan, you really have some cajones!

JUAN
We will save you, yet, Senorita Perez.

(They kiss, then walk U.S. and JUAN continues until he exits, LUZ waits CS. Light Shift.)

LUZ
And he did: save me. In more ways than one, from myself and from the cancer. Although sometimes I wonder about the cancer. Don’t get me wrong. I am grateful for my life. I am happy to be able to wake up everyday next to my dear Juan and kiss him good morning and call my grandkids and see my babies, but what I went through to get here…sometimes I wonder if the cure is worse than the disease. I mean, look at me!

BRENDA
What? You look great.

LUZ
Cut the crap!

BRENDA
I’m serious, Luz. I’d never guess that you had breast cancer.

LUZ
So you’d just guess that I was worn out and old, huh?

BRENDA
I didn’t say that.

(LUZ walks away to the Tree, discouraged. She takes at the mirror from the scene and stares into it. BRENDA looks to MAMA, who gestures for her to wait. MAMA crosses to LUZ. BRENDA follows. THE GIRLS also at the Tree, watch.)

MAMA (to LUZ)
You’ve done well. You must be tired.

LUZ (after a moment)
I don’t want to be like this, Mama.
MAMA

I know.

LUZ

I don’t want to feel like this. I’m afraid this pinche disease has taken more than just my breasts. (pause) I’ve never said that to anyone.

MAMA

Nothing’s been taken from you, Luz. Nothing important anyways. After all of this, you’re even better than you were before. Don’t you see that, sugar?

LUZ

No. All I see is an old woman, tired with scars all over her boobies and ugly hair. My hair was never ugly before. It’s the damn chemo. It changed it. It changed me.

MAMA

No, you only think it did.

CARA

I think your hair is beautiful. I’d kill for hair like that!

DIANA

Me, either!

MAMA

You’ve just been lookin’ with the wrong eyes. You’re looking with those woe-is-me eyes instead of those hallelujah-eyes. Doubt, that’s your problem.

LUZ

Well, what have I got to Hallelujah about? I mean, I’m here because the cancer is back, right? You tell me not to doubt, well, I think I have the right!

BRENDA

(to MAMA)

Is she here because the cancer’s back?

MAMA

No, she’s not here because the cancer is back.

BRENDA and LUZ

Thank god!

BRENDA (to MAMA)

So, why is she here?
MAMA
She’s here to bury something and to find something else, just like you. Just like all of you.
(to LUZ) Baby, take that shovel and follow me to the Tree.

(LUZ grabs a shovel and follows MAMA. All the GIRLS also follow and watch.)

MAMA
Now, give me that burden, please.

LUZ
What?

MAMA
I said, give me your trouble, child!

LUZ
I don’t know…Where…What is it? I don’t know what it is?

MAMA
‘Course you don’t. (frustrated) Hand me that mirror.

LUZ
What?

MAMA
You heard me. Give me that mirror. It’s holding you hostage. You want to see new things? Then you’re gonna have to stop looking into the past! (LUZ stands for a moment still unsure of what to do) We ain’t got eternity.

(LUZ goes into her pocket and hands the mirror over)

MAMA
This is the seed of your doubt, the symbol of it. This thing’s been trying to take root in you and cause you all kinds of problems. Now give it to me, so we can bury it. You ain’t got no use for it, and it ain’t doin’ you no good, so it’s time to give it to the Tree.

(MAMA drops the mirror into a hole that was previously dug)

LUZ
I don’t feel any different.

MAMA
No, you won’t. Not yet. You need the gift to fill up that hole where this doubt was trying to take root.
LUZ

BETHANY
This is stuff is getting confusing.

BRENDA
Don’t worry, Luz. I’m sure you’ll feel different soon. (secretly) Bet you could really use a cigarette now, huh?

LUZ
Like a boob needs a bra!

MAMA
Ladies, time to help! Pick up a shovel and cover the hole. Luz still needs our assistance.

(The GIRLS take shovels and bury the mirror. They walk back to the Tree. NURSES are standing with shovels on the apron, they mime covering the seed with the GIRLS while they sing, “Ain’t Got Time to Die.”)

NURSES
I keep so busy
Digging my troubles
keep so busy
Digging my troubles
keep so busy
Digging my troubles
I ain’t got time to die

(When they are finished, the GIRLS relax at the Tree. Some sit and look out, some are resting. BRENDA stands looking out. MAMA is away from them, speaking to us and the NURSES who still stand with shovels on the apron.)

MAMA
They’re on their way.

NURSE 3
Brenda. She has still not remembered.

MAMA
No, she hasn’t given up her burden yet. She’s hiding it. She’s scared.

(Sound of chimes)
NURSE 2
Time is short. The wind is coming.

MAMA
There’s time. There’s time. (MAMA walks back up to the GIRLS. NURSES follow singing:)

NURSES and MAMA
I keep so busy
Digging my troubles
keep so busy
Digging my troubles
keep so busy
Digging my troubles
I ain’t got time to die

(Lights Fade to Black)

INTERMISSION
ACT II

(The sound of chimes as we return to the Tree. Lights come up on the Tree. MAMA sits crocheting and the GIRLS are resting around the Tree. The NURSES stand with shovels ready at the sides, The Girls do not hear the NURSES and MAMA talking.)

NURSE 1
Time is short, Mama. The winds are coming.

NURSE 2
The night approaches.

NURSE 3
She is not ready yet. Ready to leave.

MAMA
She is close. I feel it. Give her time.

(Light shift. The GIRLS wake and turn to MAMA)

MAMA
Got your rest, did you?

BETHANY
After all that digging, I was totally exhausted!

LUZ
Ay, my arms!

DIANA
I don’t think I’ve ever felt so rested. I feel like I slept 100 years.

TAMMY
Really? I’m still tired.

MAMA
I know you’re all a little weary from the work, so let’s try some talk. Tammy, why don’t you start?

TAMMY
Well, I don’t know…I guess I’d start by saying, cancer is strange. There are things that should be little, that surprise you.
BRENDA

Right? I didn’t think about not getting sensitivity in my breast back.

BETHANY

Or losing my period…forever!

CARA

Or losing your sense of taste.

PATRICIA

Or the tattoos!

PATRICIA

I guess, I’m really rock and roll now, right?

BETHANY

They tattooed you?

TAMMY

They tattoo markers on you for the radiation.

BRENDA

They have to make sure they don’t zap anywhere except where the cancer was.

PATRICIA

They use the markers to line up the beam.

BRENDA

It’s a permanent reminder of all the things you didn’t expect.

TAMMY

I did expect to lose my hair. I would get cold so I would sleep with a beanie – because that’s sexy! (all laugh) When you think about losing your hair, you don’t think about loosing your eyelashes. Sexy! (all laugh) With no eyelashes you need sunglasses – you don’t think about that!

LUZ

I know

TAMMY

When they come in, they come in all stubby. Oooh, and then you finally grow some back! -- Your eye itches -- you rub -- and they fall out! And you’re like, “dang it! That was a good one!”

(ALL laugh)
BRENDA
Eyebrows too! Seriously, there is only so much you can do with makeup.

NURSE
Tammy Saunders age 35 diagnosed with Stage 3 breast cancer in April of 2009. After breastfeeding her second child, Tammy found a lump during a self-exam. The cancer had spread like spider veins, making a left side mastectomy her only option. Treatment regimen: 3 rounds of chemo, epirubicin via VAD or vascular access device. 7 weeks radiation therapy. Side Effects: Total chaos.

TAMMY
Nothing is how you expect it to be.

I wasn’t expecting to have cancer. It wasn’t even my doctor that told me that I had cancer. It was someone I didn’t know and didn’t know me. Then they say it, “cancer” and it’s like someone sucked all of the air out of the room. You don’t think about a lot of things as your going through the motions. Even if you try to predict how it’s going to be, you can’t.

MAMA
This is good digging.

(MAMA gestures for JERROD to enter with baby)

TAMMY
You can’t do it by yourself. No one can make you feel better. They can comfort you, they can offer you a blanket, help you get dressed, but that chemo is poison.

BRENDA
You do what you have to do.

MAMA
But there is always help.

TAMMY
I’m always so busy trying to make sure that everyone else is taken care of, that sometimes I forget…

(JERROD holds baby, while stifling tears. Enter TAMMY)

JERROD
She’s been crying all night.

TAMMY
I had wondered where you went. Left me for another woman already? Here, give her to me.
(JERROD gives TAMMY the baby. He sits and begins to cry.)

TAMMY

(To JERROD) Oh Baby, let it out.

(Holding baby and comforting her husband.)

JERROD

It’s just that she looks just like her.

TAMMY

I know. I think about it everyday. Why would God bless us with a beautiful baby just to take her away? And then, as if to remind us of her loss, make her sister look just like her?

(Both look at baby.)

All I can gather is, God has a plan for this girl. Maybe to show us just how precious she is.

BRENDA

You had another daughter? I’m so sorry. I would never want to imagine what it’d be like to lose a child.

MAMA

There is definitely a plan for that baby.

TAMMY

Jerrod, struggles with it still. I do too. It’s just that I can’t have everybody in the house constantly coping. So I stay strong. We’ve got her to think about.

BRENDA

You’ve got you to think about too! Let your husband help you.

TAMMY

(Silence) Jerrod, I want you to go to bed. I’ll finish putting her down. Then I’ll come and hold you.

JERROD

In the bedroom, I do the holding. Because I’m the –

TAMMY

- the man! That’s right. Now you get in there.

JERROD

I love you.
TAMMY
I love you too. – And take off your socks for once!

JERROD
Alright! (exits.)

TAMMY
(TAMMY holds Baby, rocks her.) Big plans for you. And I’ll be here to see them through.

MAMA’S GIRLS
Hush little baby don’t say a word, Mama’s going to give you everything.

(TAMMY crosses US with Baby to MAMA’S GIRLS)

NURSE 1
The Lord doesn’t give you more than you can handle.

Pray.

NURSE 2

Have faith.

NURSE 3

Have hope

ALL

Believe

LUZ
You should let your family help you. After my mastectomy, my husband had to learn how to do the dishes, and the laundry.

CARA
Family is important.

DIANA
My children would take care of me after chemo.

BRENDA
My sisters, my Frank, my son.

PATRICIA
If you have help, let them.
(MAMA and TAMMY cross DS TAMMY lays down and is covered with part of the afghan. TAMMY is holding her baby on her lap and making attempts at trying to put her robe on over her pajamas. Wincing in pain.)

MAMA

Let me help you with that.

(Picks up baby and begins to help with robe.)

TAMMY

No, I can do it. I knew having my breast removed would hurt. But not like this. I can do it.

MAMA

Okay.

(TAMMY tries to put on robe again. MAMA reaches to help her.)

TAMMY

I said, I can do it.

MAMA

Yes, you can. You definitely can do this.

CARA

Great, job, Tammy!

(TAMMY, tries again with the robe, this time MAMA reaches and TAMMY allows the help.)

MAMA

You’re doing it.

TAMMY

(Success! Crying, reaching for Baby through tears.) I can do this. I have to. I have you.

MAMA

I have you.

(MAMA begins to rock TAMMY, humming the tune to follow this scene, “Glory Glory Hallelujah, since I laid my burden down.”)

TAMMY

Mama? Thank you. I’ve been so busy holding others, I forget what it feels like to be held.
(MAMA continues to hold and hum. TAMMY escapes embrace.)

TAMMY

That’s enough now. Thank you. But that’s enough. Mama? Do you mind getting me my day planner?

MAMA

What you gonna do with that right now?

TAMMY

The days are going to pass whether I’m lying here or not. And, there are still things to do.

MAMA

You’re right. The days will pass. You’ll be here. And those events in your planner will happen. Whether you are there or not. – If you don’t let up – more likely you won’t be there.

TAMMY

Mama! Fine. (pause) just remind Jerrod that it’s his turn to count at church-

Baby.

MAMA

TAMMY

-And the baby has a check up –

MAMA

That she’ll make it to.

TAMMY

-and! I don’t know how to do this.

MAMA

You don’t have to. These things have a way. You’re always trying to make life simpler for everyone else, even if that means that it’s more complicated for you. Sometimes, life insists on making you sit down. Let others take care of you. Let me hold you. It’s my turn to care.

(Enter JERROD)

MAMA (To JERROD)

Put your arms around this one. It’s your turn to care too. She needs some convincing that this life; that your life and hers will be okay. You hold onto her and that baby. I want you to help her lay down those troubles. (To TAMMY) Tammy, you have something more precious in your arms to hold onto. Don’t you risk holding onto anything else. Bury this need to do it alone.
(MAMA takes the baby from TAMMY. JERROD helps TAMMY walk to the tree, takes the planner, and places it on the ground. A NURSE passes a shovel and TAMMY’s day planner to JERROD who helps TAMMY hold the shovel and cover her planner with earth. TAMMY crosses back upstage to MAMA’s GIRLS. MAMA speaks to the audience)

MAMA
Bury it. Cover it up and let the Tree take it. Like the old song says “Glory glory Hallelujah, since I laid my burden down.”

(NURSES enter and sing the Negro Spiritual “Glory Glory Hallelujah, Since I laid my burden down”)

NURSES
Glory glory, hallelujah
Since I lay my burden down
Glory glory, hallelujah
Since I lay my burden down
Glory glory, hallelujah
Since I lay my burden down
Glory glory, hallelujah
Since I lay my burden down

All my sickness will be over
When I lay my burden down
All my sickness will be over
When I lay my burden down

(NURSES hum now as they work)

BRENDA
She’ll be alright. She’s got that beautiful baby girl to hold onto.

MAMA
She surely does.

BRENDA
It’s women like her, she reminds me of what I’m fighting for.

MAMA
(Aside) Yes, I’m going to be so proud of how hard you fought.

BETHANY (To TAMMY)
You had a baby to take of while doing chemo? I have a hard enough time taking care of Peaches when I’m feeling well. You’re like so totally awesome.
TAMMY

Thanks.

BETHANY

It’s like we’re always talking about life before cancer. Before we ever knew that anything was wrong. And then there’s like life during cancer; I can’t believe you had a baby. It’s totally is like wax on, wax off. When the boobs are on, you’re so totally like – okay! And then wax those boobs right off, and it’s like, who wants to date me now?

MAMA

This seems like digging talk to me. Come on ladies. The youngest one has something to say about dating after cancer.

TAMMY

It’d better not be about Peaches.

(MAMA’S GIRLS all return to the Tree and start digging. Light shift. A doctor’s office is set with examining table and chairs. Doctor enters looking at charts outside of set room. NURSE 3 read from chart.)

NURSE 3

Bethany Kelly age 24. Diagnosed with Stage 2 breast cancer. Opted for Lumpectomy. Tumor in right breast, 5mm, removed significant amount of tissue, self-respect and feminine identity.

BETHANY

It’s hard to feel sexy.

BRENDA

To feel like a woman.

LUZ

When you’ve lost your (ALL hold their breast)

CARA

In the past they made you feel like a

ALL

Woman

BRENDA

It’s identity.

BETHANY

Sexuality
Sensuality

ALL

A woman

TAMMY

It takes a lot to get it back

ALL

To be wanted.

MAMA

Baby, you will always be a woman.

BETHANY

I know. I tell myself that all the time. But then Beth takes over, that’s what I call myself, and she’s so totally rambling all the time. And it’s just that I’m still young and — well — you know. I want a man. Not just for — well — you know, but a girl just wants to be touched. Not like that, but you know, connected. Lately, I’ve been so craving a man — a connection that I’m reaching for it — a connection anywhere.

(BETHANY waits in Doctors office, fidgeting with makeup. Enter Doctor)

BETHANY
Hello Doctor (To MAMA’S GIRLS) I told you he was totally gorgeous. (To DR. GORGEOUS) So how’s your girlfriend?

DR. GORGEOUS
I don’t have a girlfriend. Remember, we talked about that last time?

BETHANY
Right. Meds! They make me forget things. Silly me.

DR. GORGEOUS
Well your nipple reconstruction went very well; let’s see how you are healing.

BETHANY
You sooo, didn’t ask me about my boyfriend?

DR. GORGEOUS
Oh — yeah- right. How’s your boyfriend?
BETHANY
I don’t have a boyfriend. We broke up. Like totally available. Don’t you remember, I told you last time?

DR. GORGEOUS
And the time before that. (They both laugh.) Always good for a laugh. I’m impressed with the high spirits you’ve kept up. Now let’s check on your healing. (Flips open chart at the same time, BETHANY rips open blouse. (Facing upstage of course) Your chart says – Bethany, you don’t have to take off your shirt just yet.

MAMA’S GIRLS
Whoa! Great work!

BETHANY
Just got excited- You do such good work – The meds?! (DR. GORGEOUS closes chart as BETHANY closes shirt.)

DR. GORGEOUS
Bethany, it’ll happen. But I can’t-

BETHANY
I know it’s just that I’m always at work or the doctor’s office and its slim pickens -- at work! Not here! You’re! – Oh! And I’m 25, my cat Peaches is neglected, and it’s like having two full time jobs dealing with this (grabbing her breast). And sometimes it feels like you’re interested in—

DR. GORGEOUS
I’m interested in your well being and well ... right now, your nipples.

BETHANY
Oh my god – I’ve been doing this all the time. And with my job and the reconstruction and- you’re so cute. –And oh my god! There I go again. I don’t know why I say or do these things.

DR. GORGEOUS
Bethany! – Blame it on the meds! (They both laugh. No, really. Don’t stress about it. You’re fine. With two jobs (points at her breast) it’s hard to focus on your other needs.

BETHANY
So awkward.

DR. GORGEOUS
Not at all. (silence) Let’s get a look at those nipples.

BETHANY
Completely awkward. (Opens her shirt.)
BRENDA
Well yeah, it’s hard to continue to feel womanly when you lose something that so visibly defines us as a woman. Everyone needs to feel connected. My Frank, still makes me feel like a woman.

MAMA
You are connected. And nothing, nothing will make you any less a woman. (To BETHANY) Nothing, will make you feel any less. (MAMA helps Bethany dress)

BRENDA
You’re fabulous!

BETHANY
Thanks. I guess that it’s just not the same.

MAMA
No, it never will be the same.

BRENDA
Even better.

BETHANY
Yeah.

BRENDA
You’re still sexy. Not so good at the small talk.

MAMA
Brenda. (pause, To BETHANY) You are all woman.

BRENDA
(Pointing at BETHANY’S boobs.) Even more.

MAMA
So give it up.

BETHANY
Mama!

MAMA
Give up this worry about attracting a man. Who wouldn’t want you?

DIANA
You’re a catch.
TAMMY
And, Peaches? C’mon! Men love cats.

MAMA
Tammy! *(To BETHANY)* So give it up. Because if you’re holding on to this worry, there’ll be no room to hold a man. It’s time to bury it.

BETHANY
Bury what?

MAMA
Your worry. Your fear that he won’t want you. You’ve got to let go of this fake image, so that when it’s time to meet him, he’ll see only the real you.

*(NURSE hands BETHANY her old chick fillet. BETHANY dangles IT FOR ALL TO SEE.)*

BETHANY
My old chick fillet! I used to wear this on dates… well, most of the time actually.

*(NURSE hands BETHANY a shovel.)*

Just like that? Just drop it in the ground? It’s expensive!

Give it up.

BETHANY *(Dropping her chick fillet in the ground)*
This is way weirder than Karate Kid.

*(They bury the chick fillet as the NURSES sing)*

NURSES
All my troubles will be over
When I lay my burden down
All my troubles will be over when I lay my burden down…

*(BETHANY and BRENDA cross back US with GIRLS.)*

BRENDA
God, I really need a cigarette! *(pause)* So, we’re all here to burying things and finding things, but we’re all still here.

PATRICIA
I know. I’m hungry.
CARA
I can’t complain, I mean this is kind of fun!

TAMMY
Geez, do you always have to be so…

CARA
So….what?

DIANA
Chipper!? 

CARA
Sorry. I was just trying to be positive.

TAMMY
I know, but you know sometimes…well, sometimes things just suck. You don’t always have to look on the bright side.

CARA
I do.

TAMMY
Fine. Whatever. Just tone it down a bit, okay?

(CARA, offended moves away from TAMMY)

BETHANY
I’m kind of scared.

LUZ
(Taking BETHANY’S hand)
Me, too, mija, but I don’t think we’re in danger…maybe…I mean, we’re probably okay. Right?

MAMA
I know that y’all got your panties in a knot, but you’ll have to trust me when I say, that it’ll all be right as rain soon.

BRENDA
But I need to get back to my family. I need to figure this out. Mama, what do I need to do? Tell me.

MAMA
It’s not for me to tell. Look, I know you feel out of sorts right now. I mean after all, you’re going through a truly amazing thing.
BRENDA

Yes, yes, amazing. I know.

(MAMA hands her a shovel)

BRENDA (looking at her in disbelief)

Really?

MAMA

Really.

(BRENDA starts to dig a light shift and Non-baby shower music begins to play “Like a Virgin” by Madonna would be perfect.)

BRENDA

– You hear that? Last time I heard that was...reminds me of my baby shower for my daughter.

(Light Shift. All MAMA’S GIRLS and KAREN step into the scene and act as though they are oohhing and awwing at baby clothes, toys and the like. NURSES come with some pretty costume pieces to put on BRENDA)

MAMA

You were diagnosed after you discovered that you were pregnant with your daughter. Isn’t that right?

BRENDA

Yes. We were so happy to be expecting a sibling for Quinn. You know me – or at least it seems that you do. I’m not one to shy away from a party.

MAMA

(aside) Amazing! The balance between survival and surrender.

BRENDA

What’d you say?

MAMA

Guests.

KAREN

Look at you!

BRENDA

I told you to come and see my new hairstyle.
Is it real hair?

Girl! You know.

You look so good.

Do I?

(BRENDA poses by turning to her side, arching backwards (like a model), tumbles a little - or any action that would permit her wig falling off.)

(Laughing as she helps her regain her balance.) Still looking good!

Right? (Adjusting her wig.) So what did you bring me? (Begins to look in bag.)

Wait til’ it’s time to open gifts.

I know. Right?

How are you feeling?

Tougher than my last pregnancy, but every chemo session is a little bit closer to the last chemo session.

And the baby?

The baby is fine. They take a look at her every week with ultrasound and she’s beautiful. The placenta it keeps her safe, filters everything out.

You look amazing.
BRENDA
Thanks. Hey, let’s join in. We’ve been playing games all day.

KAREN
Okay.

BRENDA
It’s truth or dare. (To MAMA’S GIRLS) She’s in. (To KAREN) So what’s it going to be, Truth or Dare?

KAREN
Um, Truth I guess.

BRENDA
So, who have you been dating?

KAREN
I meant dare.

BRENDA
I dare you to tell us who you are dating. Have you (gestures to belly) done anything to get your own party yet? (She hears something) Oh, my god! This is my favorite part! (singing...poorly, and dancing) Like a Virgin, Oooo, Touched for the very first time, Like a Virgin. When your heart beats so next to miiii----Oooo, Ow, ow, ow (BRENDA hold her back in pain, wincing. The Girls all stand up to help her to a chair)

KAREN
Oh, my god. Are you okay?

(The other girls back off, so KAREN and BRENDA can talk)

BRENDA
I’m fine. Fine. It’s just my back. It’s been killing me lately. I just can’t seem to find a comfortable position.

KAREN
Is that normal?

BRENDA
What’s normal?

KAREN
Have you talked to the doctor about it?

BRENDA
It’s fine. I’m fine. What’s the doctor going to say? ‘You have cancer’??
KAREN
Okay.

BRENDA
Just give me a minute. I’ll be better in a second. C’mon, Karen. Really I’m fine.

KAREN
Okay, Brenda. I’ll wait in the other room. Take care of yourself.

(KAREN exits. MAMA crosses to BRENDA.)

MAMA
(aside) And life goes on, even as we struggle to keep it.

NURSE 1
Brenda Arrieta Killian. Age 31. Diagnosed with Stage 2 cancer when she was 4 months pregnant. Treatment Regimen: Patient endured 3 rounds Chemo with epirubicin and Cytoxan while pregnant. Side Effects: Possibility of birth defects and death of fetus. 5 weeks radiation after delivery. Results: bone pain, chest pain, heart pain. Tumor discovered was unusually large, but possibility of metastasis, or spread of cancer, is statistically low, as removed lymph nodes were cancer free.

NURSE 2
Secretly, covertly, the fear has spread. Quietly it has grown.

NURSE 3
Against all odds. In spite of statistics.

NURSE 1
Fate has turned its wheel.

NURSE 2
Woven its mysterious cloth. A secret destiny awaits. The wind is coming.

NURSE 3
Hush. The others come.

NURSE 1
A lump.

NURSE 2
An Area of Interest.

NURSE 3
Abnormal tissue and cell growth.
Cells growing out of control.

Eternal cells. Tissue that never sleeps.

It only eats.

Eats away at you.

Needle biopsy. Surgical biopsy and extraction.

A lump.

I did a home exam. I felt it. A lump. It was hard, but it didn’t hurt.

I didn’t feel anything. I felt fine. I went into my doctor, had a mammogram.

It doesn’t even run in my family.

But I nursed!

Breast feeding can reduce a woman’s risk of developing breast cancer in families with a history of the disease.

My mother died of this, grandmother, too.

BRCA 1. BRCA 2. What are these words? What do they mean?

Positive BRCA means you have an 80% chance of developing breast, uterine or ovarian cancer over the course of your life.

You have it.
Abnormal cell growth. A tumor.

Cancer.

Eternal cancer.

Forever and ever.

(We hear laughter. THE GIRLS and NURSES are all laughing as they move to their places. It is a warm laughter. The light shifts. MAMA comes and takes CARA. She hands her a shovel)

My turn, huh?

Your turn.

I don’t want to remember this night.

I know, baby, but you need to.

It didn’t feel... didn’t feel—

Happy? I know. That’s the point.

(CARA shovels a bit as the NURSE speaks)

Cara MacAdams. Age 32. Diagnosed with Stage 2 breast cancer, ductal carcinoma in situ. BRCA positive. Opted for double mastectomy with reconstruction. Treatment Regimen: 3 rounds chemotherapy with herceptin. Side Effects: fever, chills, diarrhea, fear of losing self. 25 rounds radiation therapy: 5 days a week for 5 weeks. Results: dry mouth, dry mucous membranes, dry eyes.
CARA
What can you do but laugh? I don’t know. They tell you that you have cancer and most people respond one of two ways. You either cry or you laugh. I was a laugh… I’m going to write a book one day. It’s gonna be called “Cancer is a Joke”. And it is. It’s also terrible and shocking and so inhumane, but if you don’t learn how to think positively about it, you’ll just… I don’t know… cry. Give up, and you can’t do that. You just can’t.

I had a double mastectomy, chemo, radiation. I had the works! During chemo all of my hair falls out and you know, you get cold. So, I would wear these wool, but you know your eyebrows fall out too. It all falls out, (in a whisper, indicating her groin) including down there.

Anyways, my brother is looking at me one day and he says, “You know who you look like? Yertl the Turtle.” (She laughs) Yertl the Turtle! He’s funny, my brother. Now, I wear this scarf all the time instead, helps to distract from the turtle head. You have to laugh what else can you do?

I thought I knew how scary and hard things could get when I was diagnosed the first time. I was optimistic when I had gone 2 years without a recurrence, and then flat out hopeful when at 4 years I was cancer free… but then… I started feeling sick, something wasn’t right. I went in and it had come back. It was in my intestines, my stomach, dangerously close to my liver, my pancreas. GOD! God, I thought, this is how it goes right? Just when you think you have it all under control. Just when you think you’re home free, that’s when it comes and gets ya’. I’m trying to laugh here… I’m trying to see the bright side, but… god… (calling up to a higher power) God! God… you have a nasty sense of humor sometimes.

(The lights shift. It is a clear and starry night. A blanket is brought out by the NURSES. PETER, CARA’s brother comes out to the stage. He brings a large plastic bowl with him, given to him by the NURSES. CARA is led into the scene by MAMA, who also takes her shovel. She sits down on the floor with PETER. He places a cap on CARA’s head. They huddle together under the blanket. CARA is shivering. THE NURSES and GIRLS watch from the Tree.)

PETER
Are you sure you’re okay out here?

CARA (still shivering)
Yyyesss, I’m fine.

PETER (poking fun)
Rrrreally? I don’t think Dr. Munro would approve of this.
CARA
Yeah, well Dr. Murno can shove it!

PETER
Wow!

CARA
What? I have cancer! I’m allowed. (playfully shoving PETER) Besides, I’d rather be freezing my butt off out here with you.

PETER (in his best Southern accent)
Am I that charming, Miss. MacAdams?

CARA (in her best Southern)
Why yes. I do declare you are a delight. (she sighs and then slumps over onto PETER) I am so tired.

PETER (reaching to take her scarf)
Is your head warm enough? Why don’t you put on something war---

CARA (pushing him away)
Hey, leave that alone! Yes, it’s warm enough! I’m fine.

PETER
Well, you look better than last time.

CARA
Yeah? Is it because there’s less puke on my face? I find the green hue really does nothing for my complexion.

PETER
Yeah, probably that.

CARA
Look at all those stars. Beautiful.

PETER
I can’t believe we can see them…

CARA
Remember how granddad used to tell us stories about constellations?

PETER
Geez, yeah. I had totally forgotten about that.
CARA (*in a pseudo serious tone*)
From the murky waters of the swamp the many headed Hydra would come and terrorize the people of the village. A terrible beast with nine heads it would scourge the countryside with poisonous venom, killing everyone it came across. Heroes had come and gone trying to destroy the evil monster, but…

PETER
But the beast seemed unstoppable as it possessed an eternal head that allowed it to grow back its many heads should any of them be cut off…

CARA
Right, so they send Hercules to battle the mighty Hydra.

PETER
And Hera, who hates her stepson, sends the crab to distract Hercules in his battle

CARA
Hercules kicks the crab into the heavens. It glows faintly in the sky because it failed in its mission. (*pause*) They call that constellation, “cancer” (*beat*) You know I had totally forgotten that story until just now.

PETER
Me, too.

CARA
God, I miss him.

PETER
Who, Grandad?

CARA
Yeah. He always knew what to say to us when we were having a rough time, you know?

PETER (*imitating him*)
‘You know, Peter, girls will come and girls will go, but your family will always be here for you, and we think you’re one of the most amazing guys around. Don’t worry, you’ll find, Mrs. Right just when you’re least expecting it.’

(*they laugh)*

CARA (*imitation again*)
‘That’s not fat, Cara. We MacAdam’s just have a healthy layer of insulation. It comes from the centuries our ancestors spent in Ireland. Why our family would’ve frozen to death had they not had some meat on their bones! And then where would you be?’ (*they laugh again*) I wonder what he’d say now?
PETER
He’d say ‘Good job, Cara. We’re proud of you. The MacAdam’s may not have been warriors, but we’ve never been quitters either. You’re not giving up and neither are we.’

(beat) This must be hard.

CARA
I’m fine.

PETER
Really?

CARA
Some days are bad…but I can handle it. You don’t have to worry. It’s all going to work out.

PETER
Look, sis, you can tell me if you’re scared. I can handle it. You’re not alone.

CARA
I know, but some things…some things I have to do alone. I have to carry myself through.

PETER
No, you don’t. We can help.

CARA
I just want to stay positive.

PETER
I know, but, Car…Look, I don’t want to be macabre, but we were in the room with you when the doctor talked about the statistics.

CARA
We can beat the odds. I can beat the odds.

PETER
I’m not saying you can’t…I just…You don’t always have to be so…You don’t have to pretend to be--

CARA
I’m not pretending! I’m fine, really. I’m good. I’m happy. I don’t need to “talk” through my crap. I want to think about the good things not the bad. God, Pete, you’re being a real downer!

PETER
I’m just trying to help.
CARA
Yeah, well, you’re not. Helping.

PETER
Sometimes I don’t know how to help, Car. Sometimes…I’m just sorry.

CARA
Hug me. I need a hug.

(PETER leans over to hug her.)

CARA
That helps. I love you forever, Pete.

PETER
I love you, too, forever and ever.

(Light Shift. A shaft of light on MAMA as she enters the scene. BRENDA comes away from the group by the Tree.)

MAMA (to CARA)
How do you feel?

CARA
Good.

MAMA
No, Cara. Tell me how you really feel?

CARA
No.

BRENDA
She needs to admit that she’s scared. Scared to let go. To see how sick she is.

MAMA
You need to say the words. They won’t hurt you.

CARA
Yes, they will. They’ll take something away from me. They’ll make everything real.

MAMA
Come away.

CARA
No.
MAMA
You have to come away from him, Cara.

CARA
Why?

MAMA
Because you’re hiding there. It’s time to be seen.

(CARA is clearly frightened. Her whole body trembles with fear.
BRENDA rushes to help her. The other GIRLS stand and watch.)

BRENDA
Don’t worry, Cara.

(BRENDA grabs CARA. Holds her tight. Helps her stand.)

MAMA
Now, put her in the light.

(MAMA moves out of the light, and BRENDA helps CARA into it.)

CARA
No. No, I don’t want to!

BRENDA
Please, Cara. It’s for your own good. You have to face this. You have to see it.

(CARA and BRENDA struggle for a moment, but then she is in the light fully)

CARA (The breath taken out of her)
Oh. (She covers her body with her arms.)

MAMA
Let it shine on every part of you, baby. It’ll do you no good to hide anymore. Like the
good book says, “You already have the power of the universe. You must only take your
hands away from your eyes to see it.”

CARA
I’m afraid. I’m too afraid.

BRENDA (reaching out to her)
I can help you. I know you’re frightened but—
We’re here.  
TAMMY

We can help.  
PATRICIA

We’ve been where you’ve been.  
BETHANY

Felt what you’re feeling.  
DIANA

We’ve been afraid, too.  
LUZ

(helping CARA unfold her arms with BRENDA) You can’t run away from this anymore, Cara. You must look at it all, not just the safe parts.

I might die!  
CARA

You might.  
MAMA

I don’t want to die.  
ALL GIRLS

Fear will consume you if you let it.  
MAMA

That’s worse than dying.  
BRENDA

MAMA (looking at BRENDA)
Yes. (to CARA) You must give me your denial. You must see the truth.

We can’t hold on anymore.  
BRENDA

We can’t push everyone away.  
TAMMY

We have to see the future with new eyes.  
LUZ
BETHANY
We have to accept the new path set in front of us.

DIANA
We have to move on.

BRENDA
We have to accept this. (She reaches to take the scarf from CARA’s head. CARA looks at her, frightened. To CARA) Don’t worry, we’re here with you. (BRENDA removes her scarf. Under it is CARA’s naked head and naked heart. CARA breaks down in tears.)

CARA
I can’t do this.

MAMA (MAMA holds her)
You already have. It’s gonna be alright, baby. Everything. It’s okay to be afraid.

(THE GIRLS all rush to comfort CARA. A NURSE comes with a piece of the afghan, and hands it to MAMA, who wraps CARA in it. They all begin to move to the Tree, while talking to CARA, comforting her and applauding her bravery. MAMA hangs behind with BRENDA who stands holding the green head scarf in her hand. She looks at it.)

BRENDA
We have to accept it. Our fate.

MAMA
Yes.

BRENDA
We have to remember our past so we can move onto our future.

MAMA
Yes.

BRENDA
I’m scared, too, Mama.

MAMA
I know, baby, but you are stronger than you know.

BRENDA
(BRENDA steps into the light, then with total recognition) I’m dying.
Yes.

I remember.

You do.

How does this end?

(MAMA puts her arm around BRENDA, taking the scarf from her and moving her out of the light)

You can’t even imagine.

There’s more, isn’t there?

So much more. This is not the end.

(MAMA and BRENDA move to the Tree, and bury the scarf. We see all the GIRLS there, digging already with the NURSES who are singing: “Glory, Glory Hallelujah.”)

Glory glory, hallelujah
Since I lay my burden down
Glory glory, hallelujah
Since I lay my burden down
Glory glory, hallelujah
Since I lay my burden down
Glory glory, hallelujah
Since I lay my burden down

All my sickness will be over
When I lay my burden down
All my sickness will be over
When I lay my burden down

(The NURSES, MAMA and BRENDA stand around the hole the GIRLS have dug in the ground. They look into it as if it holds some secret thing. The GIRLS are on stage as well.)
**NURSE 1**

There is a gift you have inside of you.

**NURSE 2**

One you can only open when you are ready

**NURSE 3**

It hides deep inside the shadow of you

**NURSE 1**

So, that you don’t know that it is there. So well hidden is this gift.

**NURSE 2**

There is no way to find this gift without help. No way to open it before its time.

**NURSE 3**

The pathway that leads to it is dark and stony.

**NURSE 1**

The pathway that leads to it is filled with fear.

**NURSE 2**

The gift is found only when you have walked the rocky pathway.

**NURSE 3**

The gift is opened only once you have faced the fear.

**MAMA**

And you alone will know when it is given, and you alone will know what it can do. It is a gift for you and only you.

**BRENDA**

It is a gift that opens every door and heals every wound.

*(light shift. The Tree, the GIRLS and MAMA)*

**LUZ**

Why are we still here? We’ve all buried all our troubles, and nothing’s happened yet.

**TAMMY**

Baby, I am ready to know what is going on. It is boring up in this place!

**BETHANY**

You mean the physical exercise hasn’t like energized you inner spirit and made you want to like totally “live” again?
PATRICIA
Is that what this is about...wanting to live again? (to MAMA) I WANT to live! I want to! I am sure of that fact. Can I go now?

MAMA
Nope. There’s one more thing you all need. (MAMA stands and gathers the afghan in her hands.) Come here, Children. (THE GIRLS gather round MAMA at the Tree. Waiting.) You’ve all come here looking, looking for something to leave behind, searching for something to take away. Something that would make you stronger, something that would help you in times of worry.

BRENDA
Something that would help us get home.

MAMA
Yes, something to help you home, but you always had it in you with you. You always have home with you wherever you go.

LUZ
Ay, dios mio! Then why are we still here?

BRENDA
Because we didn’t know how to see it. We needed Mama’s help. We needed her to help us remember where it was at. We needed to do the work.

MAMA
Very good. Brenda’s right, you just needed a little help, and now you can all see. You have what you need to go on. Diana, you can move on now (She places a piece of afghan over her shoulders) And when you feel like shutting out the world, open your arms and give your children a hug. Let this piece of me remind you to do that. Luz, you have a new confidence and your husband, who will love you even if you’re ugly, but you’re not ugly, baby. (MAMA places a piece of the afghan on LUZ) Let this remind you of how beautiful and fearfully made you truly are. (to TAMMY) Tammy, Baby, you can ask for help. Let your family love you and treat you like the queen you are. (MAMA places a piece of afghan over her shoulders) And when you feel like you can’t let go, put this around you and let it remind you that you have more to hold onto than just control. (to CARA) You look scared and that makes me happy. (Giving her a piece of afghan) There will be times when you cannot smile or laugh, these are times to hold close the people you love. Let this piece of me, remind you that you don’t always have to smile, and that’s okay. (to PATRICIA) My how you’ve grown! Look at you, so beautiful and confident. (Placing afghan) You can hold onto this and know that whatever troubles you have, you can—

(cueing her in)

PATRICIA and MAMA
Breathe.
MAMA
And let it go. You don’t have to hold onto that hurt anymore. (MAMA kisses her forehead, then to ALL) These are your gifts. These are the things you came to find. You can go home now. You know the way. You have the strength.

LUZ
But what about, Brenda?

(MAMA looks at BRENDA. They share again a look of knowing)

BRENDA
I’m not leaving.

PATRICIA
What? Why?

BETHANY
That’s like totally not fair.

DIANA
Brenda’s worked harder than any of us!

CARA
She’s laid her trouble down as well, hasn’t she? Where’s her gift?

BRENDA
It’s here with the Tree and Mama. I’m home.

CARA
But…but, your children.

BRENDA
I can watch over them from here.

LUZ
You’re so young. I thought—I thought you said none of us were dead!?

BRENDA and MAMA
Not exactly.

BRENDA
I wasn’t ready to accept my passing yet, but now I am. Aw, C’mon guys! Don’t look so sad! I’ll be with all of you wherever you are, just like you’ll always be with me. This was my burden to let down. It was time.
MAMA
Alright, girls, time for goodbyes and then off to the Tree. It’s time for all of you to go.

( THE GIRLS embrace, hug, wish each other well, and then each with their piece of afghan exit Off Stage. behind the Tree. Only BRENDA, MAMA and the NURSES are left On stage. BRENDA crosses to look out at the audience mirroring her position at the top of the play. The NURSES stand with MAMA at the Tree and watch. )

She can leave now.

NURSE 1

Prepare the sky

NURSE 2

The wind is coming.

NURSE 3

MAMA
Yes, the wind is coming to take her home. She’s ready now. She’s whole.

(Light Shift.)

BRENDA
We were all looking for something. Something each of us find in our own time. In our own way. The funny thing is that sometimes the thing we find isn’t at all what we thought we were looking for. I thought I was looking for a cure. I thought I was looking for a miracle, a way to keep to leave this place and keep living but what I was really looking for was a way to go home, a way to say goodbye with dignity and grace, a way to give my family peace because we’re never really gone, just away for a little while. And soon we’ll all be away. Soon we’ll all bury our troubles and find what we’re looking for.

I can hear it now. The sound of my soul leaving the earth. The sound of my last breath. The sound of my gift: This story for you.

THE END