

Spring 2020

## this is the knot in my stomach

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### Recommended Citation

Savage, Violet, "this is the knot in my stomach" (2020). *Senior Projects Spring 2020*. 272.  
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# this is the knot in my stomach

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Theater and Performance  
of Bard College

by  
Violet Savage

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2020



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank my amazing group of collaborators **Philip Carroll**, **Cheyenne Conti**, and **Macey Downs**. **Phil**, thank you for providing us with a beautiful story to tell. I'm so grateful for your patience, hard work, and listening throughout this process. Your incredible talent in writing dialogue made the work easy for me. **Cheyenne**, thank you for being the most supportive scene partner in the most vulnerable piece I've ever performed. I'm in awe of your talent and energy on stage. Hearing you nail that opening monologue every night gave me the confidence I needed to get on stage, thank you for always having my back. **Macey**, thank you for leading us through this process... I'm struggling to find the words to describe the absolute privilege and honor it is to be directed by Macey Downs. Your vision and artistic impulses made this piece such a beauty and joy to perform. Your spirit and guidance in rehearsal allowed for me to feel free to take any risk I wanted. You made the process so much FUN while also executing an awesome piece. I could never have dreamed of a better team to complete my Senior Project with. I've learned so much from working with each of you throughout my time at Bard and I feel so incredibly lucky to have you all in my life. Thank you, thank you, thank you, we'll gorge on ice cream soon.

**Jonathan Rosenberg** thank you for providing such helpful insight into our piece. Your feedback guided us to constantly strive for the best result possible while staying true to our vision and story.

Thank you to **Sarah Jick**, **Stacey Boggs**, **Laura Hirschberg**, and the rest of the production team at The Richard B. Fisher Center who's hard work allowed our piece to come to life.

Thank you to all members of the **Theater and Performance Faculty**. It's been an honor to have studied with such dedicated, passionate, and talented professors over the past four years.

**My family**, thank you for supporting my pursuit of theater throughout my entire life. I am forever grateful for your constant encouragement and love.

Thank you **Lucas Bourguine** for being the most loving partner and always encouraging me to push my boundaries as an artist.

**Jake Stiel**, **Leah Nazar**, and **Lucille Reback** thank you for being my best friends. My time at Bard has been shaped by your endless love and support.

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## **Finding Balance: Developing a Group of Four**

In November of Junior Year Philip Carroll and I decided to partner together to work on our Senior Project after co-directing a production of Dracula. We found that we worked well together during this process and had similar artistic inclinations. I left to study abroad in Rome for the Spring Semester a few months after. Phil and I had a few facetime calls where we bounced ideas around, but nothing really seemed to be generating a sense of passion or excitement in either of us. All we knew was that Phil wanted to write and I wanted to perform, meaning that we were missing a key element; a director. I suggested that we ask Macey Downs to join our team. I always admired Macey's work and thought her energy would be a good balance within our group. Phil approached Macey, but unfortunately for us she had already been asked to collaborate by Cheyenne Conti. When Phil told me this, at first, I was a bit disheartened. I knew him and I would work well together but we needed another element to make our group complete. After more contemplation I had what seemed like a crazy idea, why not collaborate and form a group of four? I had worked with Cheyenne before and knew she was a very talented actor who would be a good addition to our team. While working in a group of four was technically allowed, none of us had ever known of a Senior Project that was completed by a group larger than three people. Naturally we faced some skepticism. Working in a group of four seemed complicated and risky, what if there were too many different ideas in the room? How will each one of us have a sufficient amount of work to do? Despite this, we were all very confident that we would work well together. In our first phone call there was already an easy natural division of roles, Phil had always been interested in writing, Macey was a natural

director, and Cheyenne and I both wanted to perform. However, we agreed that because we were a group of four, all roles would be a collaboration to a certain extent.

### **Where Are We Going and How Are We Getting There?**

Now that we had formed our group it was time to establish what we wanted to explore in our Senior Project. We knew it had to be something that felt important and meaningful to each of us, but didn't have any solid ideas to start. We began our brainstorming process by making lists of things that inspire us, whether that be sounds, pieces of art, movies, TV shows, songs, plays, etc. Naturally these lists were all over the place, but one common element was that all of us included things that were reminiscent of our childhood.

One day Phil sent a message to our group chat describing a feeling he had while in his childhood bedroom, it was something we all could relate to. He described feeling out of touch with elements of his childhood while also feeling nostalgic for these times. All of us understood what he meant although it was ambiguous. We decided that trying to understand and explore this feeling in depth would be the starting point for our Senior Project. We were interested primarily in how memory informs the self. Before submitting our proposals we decided that we were interested in making a piece for only two actors. We chose to do this because we felt that limiting the process to just us would allow for the most focused energy on the piece. This also would provide a challenge for me and Cheyenne. After our proposal was accepted we were assigned Jonathan Rosenberg as an advisor. He proposed we look at The Joint Stock Theater Company to gain context for working in a collaborative form. The Joint Stock Company used a

method of the playwright working in direct collaboration with the director and actors to form their play.<sup>1</sup>

Over the summer Phil and Macey both attended Powerhouse at Vassar where they began workshopping the script. Throughout the summer Macey would send weekly assignments to our group such as conducting interviews or making playlists of songs that evoke a memory for us. During this time I was attending the Spring Comprehensive at Atlantic Acting School. After spending a semester abroad at a school where theater classes were not offered, I felt it was necessary for me to take acting courses before coming back to Bard with the intention of acting in my Senior Project. Throughout this course I was introduced to the Practical Aesthetics acting technique.<sup>2</sup> In my Script Analysis class we applied the method to understanding text. This consisted of writing down exactly what happens in the scene, what each character wants the other to do, and picking an action to match that want.<sup>3</sup> This helped me to fully drop into each scene I worked on. I was able to view the circumstances scenes in a simpler way, thus allowing me to understand the pure human intention behind characters that may have felt far removed from myself.

## **Finding Perspective**

When we returned to Bard Phil had already written six drafts of the script. While this script changed almost entirely before our performance in February the basic structure for our story was there. This was a memory play about two friends, characters 1 and 2, who somehow

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<sup>1</sup> “Inventory of the Joint Stock Theatre Group Archives, 1973-1991.” *Online Archive of California*, oac.cdlib.org/findaid/ark:/13030/kt3h4nc658/entire\_text/.

<sup>2</sup> Bruder, Melissa, et al. *A Practical Handbook for the Actor* Langara College, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.



lost touch. The play was going to start with a monologue, followed by a scene in the present day after they had grown apart, then a series of memories from them as young children through the last time they saw each other, finally another scene in the present day after their first interaction. The script included moments inspired by interviews we had all done. For example, the “Grape Scene” was drawn from an interview conducted by Macey where she asked someone which of the five senses they associate with memory.<sup>4</sup>

Our approach to the rehearsal process for the first few months back on campus consisted almost entirely of just conversation. We would come to the weekly rehearsal with ideas of how this story can evolve and read many drafts of each scene in different ways to discover what worked and what didn’t. One day I was watching “The Mind, Explained” on Netflix, I’ve always loved this series and they happened to come out with an episode that explored memory.<sup>5</sup> Immediately after watching I texted the group chat and said we all needed to watch this together. In writing our proposals we discussed wanting to investigate the reliability of memory, but that idea had been placed on the backburner while developing our script. This episode re-ignited my curiosity in this issue because it addressed the science behind how memory is not reliable. A quote by Donna Addis, a neurologist at University of Toronto, stood out to me, “typically with emotional memories we tend to remember the central aspect so our attention kind of zooms in on the core of that experience so we might forget some of the peripheral details,”.<sup>6</sup> When discussing our own relationship to memory we all thought that we remembered emotional memories better than other memories. However, it turns out that all memories are equally unreliable.

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<sup>4</sup> Carroll, Philip. *this is the knot in my stomach* p. 29

<sup>5</sup> Cole, Adam, producer. “Memory” *The Mind, Explained*. Vox Media. 12 Sep. 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Watching this together opened up the question of perspective within our play. Phil wrote the play envisioning it from 1's perspective, but after we all watched this episode we decided we were interested in investigating discrepancies in memory within our script. We had a few ideas as to how to go about this, one of them being to write two scripts from each character's perspective and alternate them each night of the performance. However, this idea was quickly scrapped for the sake of perfecting the telling of one story rather than getting caught up in the complications of making two different plays. We began investigating how people remember the same event in different ways by conducting interviews. We would ask two people to pick a memory they shared, then interviewed them separately to tell us the story of that memory. Everyone we spoke to remembered details differently, however there were always some moments that were cemented in both people's versions of the story. For example place and physical sensations were relatively consistent. Thus we knew it was important that some details overlap in however we chose to present two sides of the same story.

When we discussed our interest in perspective with Jonathan, he suggested we watch the film *Roshoman*.<sup>7</sup> Something we all took away from watching this film was that everyone's perspective in the story seemed to benefit themselves and their character. We were interested in how people tend to themselves as doing the "right" thing in their own memory of an event. To explore this we spent a few rehearsals playing an improv game inspired by *Roshoman* where we would create a scene with a conflict then perform that scene from the perspective of each character. We began to start working this into our play by investigating the last time they saw

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<sup>7</sup> Kurosawa, Akira, director. *Roshoman*. RKO Radio Pictures, 1951.

each other from both character's point of view. Phil began writing the scene of the last time they saw each other before falling out of touch in two different ways.

### **Why do Friendships End?**

We worked on a few different versions of the last time they saw each other before not speaking anymore. We knew that the conflict would probably be a result of 1 leaving to go to college and 2 staying in the town in Vermont where they grew up. However, nothing we worked on felt strong enough to warrant the end of this relationship. We felt it was important to solidify this moment as it would probably serve as a climax to our play. Figuring out what went wrong could help inform the rest of our piece. One day Macey asked Phil to write a scene that took place in snow, mostly because of her desire to have confetti somehow included in our piece. When Phil brought in the two snow scenes they immediately felt right because at the root of their conflict they were about how 1 and 2 were at different stages of growing up.

We spent many rehearsals developing the story behind each character's perception of this memory. It was important to all of us that even if the full story wasn't shown in the script, we were all clear on both character's sides of what happened that night. At first we found it a bit challenging to balance being equally empathetic to both character's perspectives. In the scene 2 is visiting 1 at college, then 1 asks to leave to go hang out with a boy for a little while leaving 2 alone in the middle of a winter storm. A challenge we were dealing with was that it felt easy for the audience to perceive 1 as a villain if we did not do the work to properly show her story in an empathetic light. We spent hours discussing and trying the scenes in many different ways. As actors it was important that both Cheyenne and myself understood what the story of both scenes

were. For each of our perspectives to be clear to the audience, we had to support the story in our acting. Ultimately we decided that in “1’s Snow Scene” 1 remembers this moment as a time where she was really excited about her new life at school.<sup>8</sup> Her intent was not to neglect 2 she was just caught up in being at a new place in life. To support this story it was important that 2 be not only supportive, but excited for 1 to go have this adventure. When 1 asks 2 if she’s okay with her going to meet this boy 2 immediately responds with an enthusiastic “totally, yes,”. After having been cast as 2, as an actor I had to put aside my bias for my character and envision a world where she was more than happy for her friend. As for “2’s Snow Scene” we struggled with how to make her emotional journey clear.<sup>9</sup> The scene needed to show how 2 felt like 1 was no longer present as a friend in her life and the loneliness that came as a result. Phil had the idea that 1 actually leaves the scene and 2 continues on saying lines as if they were carrying on a conversation, but 1 is no longer actually there.

After presenting these scenes to Jonathan, he liked our idea, but felt as though we needed a moment that made it clear that they were no longer speaking. A small indication that this would be the last time they felt close. He referred us to a New York Times article “How to End a Friendship”. In this article Lauren Mechling writes,

“It was on one of our phone calls that our friendship came to its end — though it took me a few weeks to understand that she was gone. We were chatting on our way to work when she told me she had to take another call and she’d ring me right back. And then she vanished.”<sup>10</sup>

The simplicity of this story hit home for us. As we had discovered from discussing personal experiences and conducting interviews about losing touch with friends, more often than not it

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<sup>8</sup> Carroll, Philip. *this is the knot in my stomach* p. 32

<sup>9</sup> Ibid p. 48

<sup>10</sup> Mechling, Lauren. “How to End a Friendship.” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 14 June 2019.

was simply due to a lack of reaching out. Because the snow scenes ended in a vague way that would make the future of the friendship unclear, adding one more indication that this relationship was at its end was important for our story. In a direct reference to this article we added the “Phone Scene”.<sup>11</sup> Serving as the only scene that would be recurring throughout the play and would end with 2 hanging up and 1 waiting for a call back that she would never get.

### **Femininity on Stage**

After solidifying the conflict we moved on to developing the scenes in the present day, the “Ice Cream Scene” and “Car Scene”.<sup>12</sup> I was beginning to feel more connected to my character and her story but for some reason wasn’t feeling fully dropped in. We were approaching the time where we would need to begin staging the entire show. However, I was hesitant to move forward with scene work until we addressed what I felt to be an issue in the script. The characters, as written, were gender non-specific. This was done intentionally on Phil’s part in order to make this play feel applicable to all. When the text was first presented to our group I didn’t see an issue with this, but after learning more about 2 I felt as though it was vital that her femininity be addressed. I texted our group chat and expressed my concerns, everyone was immediately receptive and agreed to spend rehearsal that day discussing gender within our piece. In rehearsal I shared that because Cheyenne and I are clearly feminine presenting women, gender not being addressed in the piece didn’t feel right to me. In my experience as a performer, it’s nearly impossible for me to go on stage without being immediately gendered by the audience. The audience assumes certain things of you when you

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<sup>11</sup> Carroll, Philip. *this is the knot in my stomach* p. 23, 28, 36

<sup>12</sup> Ibid p. 21, 36

are feminine on stage and this can be very frustrating at times, but I saw this play as an opportunity to seize the narrative. By directly addressing that these characters are in fact young women we could gain control of their stories in a more in depth way.

Everyone agreed, but didn't have immediate solutions. Keeping in line with our method building up to this point, we just started having a discussion about it. This mostly consisted of Cheyenne, Macey and I reminiscing on silly things we did with our friends when we were younger that were inherently gendered. One of us shared an anecdote about calling a friend the night before school to coordinate outfits. We all burst with excitement when this was brought up because we all remembered doing this exact same thing. After laughing about this experience all together Macey turned to Phil and said "I think this needs to be in the show,". After this rehearsal Phil added three additional scenes to the script, the "Skirt Scene", the "Flat Iron Scene", and the "Hickey Scene".<sup>13</sup> The addition of these scenes as well as some adjustment to dialogue made the piece feel like a more realistic portrayal of the experience of growing up as a girl.

### **Getting on Our Feet: How We Approached Staging and Acting**

Because we spent so much time working on developing the context and backstory of this relationship, we only began staging the show a few weeks before our midway presentation. It was very important that each scene be incredibly specific in our acting. Each scene showed these characters at different stages in their lives, from age seven to twenty one. Embodying the physicality of each age was crucial in distinguishing the timeline of the show. A way we

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid p. 27, 29, 32

approached this was by doing improvisations at different ages. This helped us to free our bodies and to find the playfulness in these scenes.

Another acting challenge was making the circumstances and intentions of the characters very distinct from scene to scene. Since the scenes themselves were quite short and the transitions flowed from scene to scene, having clear intentions was vital to ensuring the audience could keep up with the story. Using the script analysis method from the Practical Aesthetics Technique we went through the play scene by scene and picked specific actions for each character in each scene.<sup>14</sup>

Initially we were planning for each scene to have a different prop. However, after showing Jonathan our first few scenes where we were pantomiming (because we didn't have the objects in the moment) Jonathan told us he believed it wasn't necessary to include any props. At first I found this a bit terrifying. Not only did I already feel vulnerable performing a show with only one other actor and no set, now we didn't even have props to rely on to tell the story. It was all on me and Cheyenne. As scared as I was by this prospect, I'm very happy with the decision. Not only did it make for sense for the world of the play which was intentionally vague in terms of time and space, it also challenged me as an actor and pushed my personal boundaries in regards to physicality. This choice also helped to emphasize the importance of having physical snow in the snow scenes, guiding the viewer to see these moments as different from the rest.

Another element that was integral to preparing for this performance was building a timeline of events with the group. This was imperative in establishing context and clarity for each moment of the play. The timeline was incredibly specific; we used this as an opportunity to

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<sup>14</sup>Bruder, Melissa, et al. *A Practical Handbook for the Actor*. Langara College, 2019.

illustrate the lives of these characters in an incredibly detailed way. For example it included birthday parties, when 1 and 2 met each other, when their siblings were born, etc. The timeline also included scenes we had improvised as character building exercises. All these little notes helped us see each of their lives, even though much of it was not even included in the play. In addition to adding context for moments not shown, it provided a deeper understanding of the very short moments in the play. We established that in the “Hickey Scene”, 1 had the hickey because she was at prom with an upperclassman, but 2 was not at the event because she wasn’t invited. This detail allowed for the scene to hold much more gravity for both of our characters. Making this timeline was an extremely useful tool in doing the character work I needed in order to perform this show. The process of laying out all of the essential moments in a character’s lifetime helped me gain a deeper understanding of who she was and why she made the choices she made. The detail oriented work and specificity that went into creating this taught me a lot about how important doing meticulous character work is to being a good actor. Any sense of vagueness or ambiguity toward one’s role will lead to a sense of being lost on stage. Having full confidence in who exactly I was playing in this piece gave me a better understanding of how to improvise as 2, how she would react if something goes wrong, how to fully inhabit her physically, and so on.

At our midway we were reassured that the piece was heading in the right direction. The faculty seemed to respond well and understood the message of the story we were trying to tell. This was relieving going into winter break because we felt confident that we would be ready for the performance in February even with six weeks off. However, we decided to keep to a plan we



had made a few months prior and to come back to Bard early and spend the last few days of break in rehearsals.

### **Unexpected Challenges**

We arrived back on campus January 24th ready for three days of getting back into our groove. Admittedly, we spent much of this time catching up and goofing around with each other. At this point we had all become so close it was almost impossible not to. The chemistry of our group became essential to having a productive rehearsal process. The time spent playing games and sharing stories from our winter breaks was ultimately just as productive as going over the blocking. Our trust in each other was fundamental to building our piece. Once the semester started up again we were rehearsing every day except Mondays and worked scene by scene to specify everything even further.

As an actor I began to face a personal challenge. I was worried becoming too confident in the piece and working on it too much was impacting my performance. I was losing the energy and the spark during this time. I feared that the midway would be my best performance. For the first time I grappled with feeling that I knew the show almost too well. I was proven wrong when about a week before we were to go into tech Jonathan gave us two notes that would force us to rethink the story we were telling. Jonathan told us that he did not like the ending of the “Car Scene” and that the intent behind Cheyenne’s exit during the “2’s Snow Scene” was not clear. Having been so confident in the piece, specifically these two scenes, we were very taken aback by these notes. Even though to an outside viewer these would have seemed like small changes, after having done so much work to settle on an ending that we all agreed on, this felt huge to us.

Our next rehearsal consisted of us discussing how we would proceed with making these adjustments, or if we wanted to make them at all. The first challenge was tackling the “Car Scene” again. In our original ending, before leaving the car 1 asks if 2 remembers a time where 2 made her throw rocks at a hornet’s nest (the “Bee Scene”).<sup>15</sup> The two share a tender moment of nostalgia then 1 leaves. Jonathan expressed that 1 bringing up a fond memory and 2 then engaging in this dialogue felt like we were letting the audience off easy. Having grown attached to this moment we all had hesitations about changing it. We liked this hopefulness, it felt comfortable and safe. However, we were also aware that we were not interested in making a piece that was comfortable. After a frustrating hour of talking but never being able to come up with what felt like a better alternative, we decided that maybe we needed to go back to the beginning of the process. We all got on our shared Google Drive folder and looked at our initial proposals. It had been almost eight months since we last looked at these. We were all struck by how in our proposals we wrote mostly about wanting to investigate how memory informs the self. We started off our process by trying to articulate an uncomfortable feeling of ambiguity towards childhood and our past selves, the knot in our stomach. In creating the world of our play and doing the character work of this relationship, we lost sight of our initial goal. We realized that this play was not about a relationship, it was about two individuals and how their memories together influence who they are. The ending of the play needed to let them be separate. We all knew that these two characters would probably never see each other again and we needed to not be afraid to show that.

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<sup>15</sup> Carroll, Philip. *this is the knot in my stomach* p. 23

This discussion also incited a realization in me about how I felt the play should end for 2. I was struggling with what exactly was so painful for 2 about the snow scenes that led her to not call 1 back. Being mad about one mistake over a boy didn't feel like enough motivation for her to give up on 1. Rethinking 2 as an individual outside of this relationship made me realize that 2 resented 1 for growing up faster than her. Thus forcing 2 to confront her own growth and change as a person before she felt ready. Ultimately, this separation was probably best for both of them, but it doesn't mean the pain 2 felt at the time was ever resolved or ever will be. This pain motivates her to lash out at 1 over a silly joke in the car. We ended this rehearsal running around and playing *Ribs* by Lorde, which would be our curtain call music, on the Resnick speakers.<sup>16</sup> Something about this venture back into our initial reasons for why we needed to tell this story was so enlightening and freeing. We all felt the play had been reinvigorated somehow.

To adapt to these new discoveries we had to make some changes very quickly. Starting with the "Car Scene", we worked on many different ways to end this scene in a way that would be less comfortable for us and the audience, thus in line with our initial proposal. We struggled with this for a while. Having 1 bring up the "Bee Scene" and 2 not responding wasn't working, so we decided to try something completely different. We thought maybe developing a handshake that 1 would begin to do and 2 would not engage in could be a good way to go about this change. It would be something physical and simple. We tried many variations of a handshake that could be initiated while sitting in a car but nothing was working. Then, as a joke, I turned to Cheyenne, pointed my finger and said "ET phone home".<sup>17</sup> I remember Phil and Macey laughing out loud

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<sup>16</sup> Little, Joel, and Ella Yelich-O'Connor. "Ribs" *Pure Heroine*, performed by Lorde, UMG, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Spielberg, Steven, director. *E.T., the Extra-Terrestrial*. Swank, 1982.

and I believe Phil said “that is so stupid”. However stupid it may have been, we knew that the handshake needed to be something ridiculous enough to start with “ET phone home”. The handshake needed to be something that would only be created by two little kids thinking they had just come up with the coolest handshake in the world but actually just completely weird. It needed to be something deeply embarrassing for 1 to do in the “Car Scene” to have the rejection of 2 not engaging hit even harder. When we tried this scene again with 1 reaching out in this way, it was deeply uncomfortable and exactly what we needed. In order to make this bizarre handshake make sense as a bond the two shared we added it in two different places throughout the memory scenes.<sup>18</sup>

The next obstacle was addressing Jonathan’s note about 1 exiting during “2’s Snow Scene”. He suggested it might make sense to have the exit happen while 2 is in the middle of doing a childish act, thus emphasizing the significance of the two growing up at a different pace. We staged it so that 1 slowly left in the middle of the scene, delivering lines as she walked away, and 2 continuing to speak as if the two still were in conversation, but she would be alone. We experimented with a few different ways of taking Jonathan’s note into account. We found that the best version of the scene was having 1 leave more abruptly than before and to cut all of 2’s remaining lines. This version was more successful because it removed all the lines about 1 going to hang out with someone else. That detail was significant to 1’s memory of the event, but not 2’s. For 2, this memory is significant because for the first time she is left alone in the experience of growing up. Having finally reached what we now knew was the right way to end our play, we were ready to move into tech.

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<sup>18</sup> Carroll, Philip. *this is the knot in my stomach* p. 26, 30

## **Tech and Performance**

Our tech process was quite easy considering the absence of a set or props. The only technical element, besides lights, would be our glorious snow. We were beyond excited to finally get to do our play with the snow covering the stage. The first time we ran the final scene with the snow I felt the most connected to 2's experience than I ever had before. The overwhelming sense of awe that I felt being on stage with beautiful white flakes falling all around me emulated the emotional intensity of 2's experience in this scene. I felt vulnerable and scared, but also overjoyed and independent. I discovered in tech that perhaps this final moment didn't have to be just sad or just lonely for 2. When one remembers relationships that they've grown out of, of course there is an element of sadness, but often we reflect on these times with a certain fondness. There's something beautiful and exciting about closing a chapter with someone. It means a new journey for growth as an individual. By being able to fully drop into the scene because of the amazing work of the tech team at Luma, I was able to find the nuances that were necessary to tell 2's story.

On opening night Macey decorated our dressing room with colorful lights, flowers, and notes for each of us. The four of us had developed a routine of all getting ready together during tech week that we decided we would continue during the shows. I had never felt such a strong sense of comradery in an ensemble going into a performance. The trust I had in my playwright, director, and fellow actor allowed for a reassuring sense of confidence each night before performing the show. One of the most exciting elements of performing this piece in front of an audience was the room that was left for improvisation. In certain small sections of the script we

didn't have established text, just guided improv instructions. This unknowing exactly what would happen in some moments kept both Cheyenne and I thinking on our feet and deeply engaged in each scene. During "2's Snow Scene" 1 and 2 play a game called "odds are" where they try to say the same number out loud. In rehearsal we had never landed on the same number, however on opening night we counted down and said the same number for the first time. While this was likely entirely due to chance, this happening on opening night felt like a validation of all the work we had done in order to develop the chemistry of these two characters.

Each performance felt unique to the rest. I felt I had nights where I was better connected than others, as is with any live theater performance, but ultimately I left each performance incredibly proud of myself and my wonderful team.

### **Reflection, What is the Knot in My Stomach?**

Reflecting on the process and outcome of *this is the knot in my stomach* I could not be happier with my Senior Project experience. The Theater and Performance department at Bard has given me a handful of experience in all elements of theater making, not just acting. From the beginning I knew I wanted to act in my Senior Project, but was a bit apprehensive that this would confine me from being able to contribute to other elements of the process. Using the Joint Stock Method to construct our piece allowed me to have a say in the building of our story and characters. I didn't just feel like an actor, I felt like an equal collaborator.

Working in a group of four was the best decision we could have made. We had a very strong support system in each other that we knew we could depend on. Everyone respected each other's ideas in the rehearsal room and we were open to try everything that was put on the table.

This came from an incredibly strong sense of trust. We knew that we each wanted to put forth the best piece possible and believed in each other's artistic vision. Of course this comradery grew stronger with our rehearsal process, but I do believe it stemmed from already having an established sense of community within the department. This group of Seniors has always been incredibly loving and supportive towards each other. I am so grateful to have been surrounded by such incredibly gifted and kind colleagues for the past four years.

What stuck with me most after performing this piece was the amount of people who could name a specific moment in the play that they felt they related to. It made me feel incredibly accomplished to have created a piece that my father, a man who grew up in the 1950's, was able to leave the theater thinking about his own experience with his childhood friends. Even though many audience members may have not understood the exact specifics of the timeline of our piece, no one was left confused by what our story was about.

Our initial intention was to create a play about memory, but through the process exploring relationships became a priority in our piece as well. After thinking about what I took away from working on this show, I've found the message of the piece to actually be quite happy. Losing people you care deeply about is an inevitable part of growing up. As I enter my final months of college I'm forced to confront this feeling more than ever. This piece was about a very sad loss of a friendship, but also acknowledged that this was okay and necessary to develop as an individual.

Thinking about where these characters are now, I know they are fine. They will think about each other from time to time. Perhaps whenever 2 eats a grape a little flash of 1 chasing her around with a frozen grape pops up in the back of her head. Maybe when 1 debates whether

she will wear a skirt or pants she smiles and remembers the high stakes debate with 2. They will always have loving memories of each other, but they will forget to call back. They will go on with their lives, make new friends, new memories, just like everyone else around them who has lost touch with someone they once called a best friend. Maybe at times they will wonder what happened if they had tried harder to rekindle this relationship, but they still won't pick up the phone and reach out. For the rest of their lives this friendship will just remain a tiny little knot in their stomach.



# **this is the knot in my stomach**

## **a memory play**

By Philip Carroll

*1 is alone on stage.*

1

I can feel it still, very tangibly. I spent a lot of time on boats as a kid. We had this small lake just adjacent to our backyard and my dad always rowed me around it for fun. We'd spend a lot of time out there. Me and my dad would talk. It was like our own little world. Every time we went out onto the water I'd always ask him to let me row but he never let me. I began to wonder why. One time, when I am feeling especially driven, I go out into the backyard and see our dinghy floating, tied to the dock. I run over to it and jump in, untying it as quickly as possible and pushing off of the dock. I feel like a pirate, hijacking a boat. It feels good, at first. The boat begins to float further out into the lake. Our house gets smaller, slightly. I realize, pretty quickly, I'm not strong enough to row. I just float there. I get scared, and I panic. I develop this overwhelming fear of what's in the water below me. I don't remember any of this, actually. I think it's just one of those things I've heard so many times I kind of formed it in my head. I can feel it, though. The knot in my stomach. I feel alone. I feel truly lost, scared. I feel helpless. My father came and rescued me. He tells this story a lot now. And he always ends it with "the craziest part was, she wasn't even moving or trying to help herself! If not for the ebb and flow of the water she wouldn't have moved at all!" That's the punchline. It usually gets a laugh.

*1 and 2 meeting each other again for the first time. 2 is working.  
They do not realize each other at first. 1 notices 2 first.*

1

Oh, my gosh, hi! How are you?

*2 ponders 1 for a moment*

2

Hi! Yes, hi! How're you?

1

I'm good, yeah, I'm good. But how about you?

2

Also good, I mean, you know how it is. Just summer job and such.

1

Yeah, of course.

2

Can I get you anything?

*Actors may improvise around this awkward interaction. No matter what, it must include a beat in which 2 pays for a portion of, if not all of, 1's order. In the original production, 2 worked at an ice cream shop and 1 tried to pay with a credit card, but they did not meet the "card minimum" of the shop.*

2

Yeah, well, I'd love to chat more but my boss is an asshole and always gets mad when we socialize too much

1

Damn that sucks

2

Yah it does.

1

But maybe I'll see you around?

2

Yeah, see you around.

1

Would you want to like do anything, while I'm home?

2

Oh, um, yeah maybe. I mean I'm busy, but.

1

Yeah of course.

2

Um, I was thinking about Eli's party tonight.

1

Oh Eli's having a party?

2

Yeah

1

Oh, those are always fun.

2  
Yeah

1  
Yeah, maybe I'll see you there. When is it?

2  
Just text him about it.

1  
Yeah, ok, See you then.

2  
See you.

*Transition memory. 1 revisits the last time they spoke to 2 (1/3)*

2  
Hello

1  
I want to talk to you

2  
Ok

1  
About last night

2  
Ok

*New memory. 1 and 2 throw rocks at a tire swing.*

2  
There it is.

1  
I can't see it.

2  
They're there. Every time I go on the swing they attack me.

1  
My sister is allergic.

2  
Are you?

1  
I don't know. I've never been stung.

2  
I'm not allergic.

1  
That's good.

2  
You ready?

1  
...yeah

*They count down from 3. 2 leads the counting. 2 throws the rock and misses the target. 1 does not.*

2  
Darn.

1  
You missed.

2  
You didn't even throw!

1  
I wasn't ready!

2  
We counted down!

1  
You counted down! I wasn't ready.

2

When are you going to be ready?

1

I'm getting ready right now!

2

Ok, fine, get ready then.

1

I'm trying to!

*Beat. 1 breathes.*

2

Ok, let's get ready.

1

Ok.

2

I'm gonna count.

1

Ok.

*2 begins counting. 1 joins in. They throw and hit the target.  
Moment of tension. Nothing happens.*

1

You're sure there's one in there?

2

Yes! I get stung every time I use the swingset!

1

Do you need my help with this?

2

Yes. I can't do it myself. We need to do this now because I want people to be able to use the swingset at my birthday party. I wanna play the game where you jump through the tire swing and I had a really good plan and it is gonna be really fun but I can't do it without getting stung.

1

Ok.

2

One more try.

*They count down from 3 again. They throw rocks. Moment.*

*New memory. 1 and 2 make a secret handshake. This can last as long as it wants to, but it must begin with the two of them touching their pointer fingers and quoting the line "ET phone home."*

*New memory. 1 and 2 are hiding.*

2

This will work

1

I don't know

2

It will. Trust me. The teachers never look over here.

1

They're going to notice we're not back.

2

Who cares?

1

Yeah

2

See, they're rounding everyone else up but they don't even realize where we are. Once everyone else is inside, it'll be eternal recess for us.

1

That does sound fun.

2

Ok, I'm gonna go get a better look. You stay here and wait for the signal.

*2 stealthily moves from one part of the stage to another. They have trained for this. 1 waits there for a few moments, watching attentively. 2 waits a few more moments and starts making hand signs to 1.*

1  
Um, what's the signal?

2  
*(Hand signs)*

1  
Is that the signal?

2  
*(2 furiously says "no" with hand signs. They re-emphasize what they originally said)*

1  
Just tell me what you want me to do!

2  
*(makes a "hush" motion towards 1)*

*They wait a few more moments. 2 gives 1 the signal. They do not respond. 2 gives 1 the signal again. This time is more exaggerated. They do not respond. 2 stares at 1. After a moment:*

1  
Is that the signal?

*New memory. 1 and 2 lay on opposite sides of the stage. They talk on the phone.*

1  
I want to wear a skirt tomorrow

2  
I don't want to wear a skirt tomorrow

1  
Why not?

2  
I want to wear my new pants tomorrow

1  
Well I want to wear my new skirt tomorrow



I want to wear my new pants tomorrow 2

I want to wear my new skirt tomorrow 1

I want to wear my new pants tomorrow 2

I want to wear my new skirt tomorrow 1

I want to wear my new pants tomorrow 2

I want to wear my new skirt tomorrow 1

I want to wear my new pants tomorrow 2

Well I want to wear my new skirt tomorrow 1

Fine, I'll wear a skirt tomorrow. 2

Yay thank you! 1

But then can we wear a blue shirt? 2

I don't want to wear a blue shirt 1

*Transition memory. 1 revisits the last time they spoke to 2 (2/3)*

Thank you so much for understanding, honestly. Did you get home ok? 1

Yeah I did 2

1

Yeah I was worried about you because of the storm and everything so when I saw your text I felt relieved

2

Yeah I'm completely good.

*New memory. 1 straightens 2's hair with a flat iron. This can go on for a few moments. Eventually:*

2

*(grabbing their neck)* Shit!

1

Oh shit. Did I burn you? Did I burn you?

2

Ooooooooooooooooooooo

1

Oh shit I burned you didn't I?

*New Memory. 1 and 2 get ready for the beach. At some point, the two find a time to do their secret handshake again.*

1

Do you think that lifeguard will be there?

2

Which lifeguard?

1

*The* lifeguard.

2

Yes, they're always working on weekends.

1

*(taking a deep breath)*

Oh my god ok.

2

What, do you have a crush?

1

Uh, yes. Are you kidding me? They're so hot. They've got such great teeth. And their eyebrows my god.

2

I don't know they're just not my type.

*1 reacts with disbelief. They both continue to get ready.*

1

Well we're gonna fall in love and get married and raise a family of Olympic swimmers so its fine.

*1 eats a grape.*

1

Do you want a grape? They're frozen.

2

You freeze your grapes?

1

Not always, but sometimes yeah.

2

That seems weird.

1

No it's good

2

I don't know...

1

No I swear try it!

2

Why do you want me to try it so bad?

1

Cause you'll like it! Come on, just do it.

*2 eats it. They hate it.*

2

Oh god! Ugh! It's like a human finger!

1

*(laughs)*

2

My god this is the worst thing I've ever experienced!

1

*(laughs)*

2

You like these?

1

Yeah they're good!

2

No, it was psychologically similar to eating a human finger. It was horrendous.

1

*(laughs)* I like them! They're refreshing and good in the summer!

2

I can feel the grape in my mouth, still. I can feel myself biting down on it, and it feels like I'm physically repulsed by the whole sensation of it.

1

Ok, ok. I won't make you eat another. All I'm saying is on a hot day, you're sweaty, you're smelly, all you need is to be refreshed, a frozen grape can really do the trick. Maybe you'd like it more with a different kind of grape. I'll have different ones tomorrow.

2

Please, don't. Never do. You know, I've always thought that like, if it came to it, I could eat a person but that grape literally just changed my whole apocalypse plan.

1

Ok, wait, you should be thanking me for dissuading your cannibalism. That's honestly dark.

2

Yeah I doubt I can handle the real thing-

1

If you couldn't handle the grape.

*They laugh. A lot.*

*New memory. 2 puts makeup on 1's neck.*

2

Just tell your mom it was a flat iron burn.

*New memory. 1 and 2 lay in the grass and look at clouds. They can point to show each other what they see, if they'd like.*

*New memory. 1 and 2 lay in the snow*

2

Don't move!

1

AAHHHH it's so cold!

2

Just do it!

1

I want to stop

2

Keep going!

1

I need to stop

2

12 more seconds!

*They wait for 12 seconds*

2

Time!

*1 shoots up, shivering. 2 plays it cool, but is definitely cold*

	1
I have hypothermia	
	2
Come warm up	
	1
I have hypothermia	
	2
You can't get hypothermia that fast	
	1
I have frostbite	
	2
Alright, come warm up.	
<i>They huddle for warmth</i>	
	1
That was not fun	
	2
But it got your heart pumping, right?	
<i>1 checks their heart</i>	
	1
No	
<i>2 laughs</i>	
	1
I think it's frozen	
<i>Beat</i>	
	1
Can we go inside?	
	2
Go inside? On the first snow of the year? What's wrong with you?	

I have hypothermia	1
I was laying there too and I'm fine	2
You're a crazy person	1
What else should we do?	2
Nothing	1
What do you normally do on weekends	2
Usually just hang out with my friends	1
But what do you like, <i>do</i>	2
I don't really know	1
<i>Beat</i>	
Hey, so, do you remember that guy Ethan I was telling you about?	1
Yeah of course.	2
Well, he's been like, asking to hang out all day...	1
Ok	2
And, I mean, I don't want to, like, leave you	1

	2
I know-	
	1
But I just need something to go my way. If he was anybody else I wouldn't.	
	2
No it's ok	
	1
Are you sure?	
	2
Totally, yes.	
	1
You understand?	
	2
Absolutely	
	1
Take my key to go inside.	
	2
I'll wait outside. I like the cold.	
	1
You sure?	
	2
Yeah	
	1
His room is like, literally 2 minutes away so I'll be like right here.	
	2
Yeah	
	1
If you need anything just let me know.	
	2



Ok, cool. Thanks. Have fun.

1

You too!

*Transition memory. 1 revisits the last time they spoke to 2 (3/3)*

1

Good, well, honestly, it was great seeing you.

2

*(no response at first, then:)* Yeah it was.

1

What are you up to today?

2

Not much.

1

Yeah, me neither.

2

Wait, do you mind if I put you on hold for a sec? I gotta answer someone really quick.

1

Yeah, sure thing go ahead.

*2 never resumes the call. Eventually, 1 realizes this and hangs up. They sit in silence for a long time. 2 walks and sits at the edge of the stage. 1 joins them, eventually.*

*2 drives 1. At some point they arrive at 1's home and continue to talk.*

1

I'm so tired

2

Don't worry, you'll be home soon. Are you feeling ok? Do you want to lie down?

1

Um...

Are you feeling ok? 2

I just want to lie down 1

2  
(trying to appease) There's a lever, on the side of...

*1 searches but can't find it*

1  
(while searching) I can't...

2  
You can go to the back seat.

1  
No it's fine I don't want to be a burden

2  
It's no burden.

1  
No it's fine

2  
Are you going to be sick?

1  
No I'm totally ok.

2  
Well if anything changes let me know.

*Beat*

1  
Is this your car? This is a nice car

2  
Thanks

	1
How long have you had this?	
	2
Just a few weeks, actually.	
	1
What happened to your old one?	
	2
Nothing I just could afford a new one	
	1
But that car was awesome!	
	2
It started getting really old and like the engine started to go these past few years though	
	1
Poor sad car.	
<i>1 begins laughing. A chuckle at first, but slowly it grows and it becomes hard for them to hold it in.</i>	
	2
Why are you laughing?	
	1
<i>(laughs)</i>	
	2
<i>(also kind of laughing)</i> what's so funny?	
	1
Nothing, nothing... <i>(laughs)</i>	
	2
Come on, what is it?	
	1
Nothing... <i>(laughs)</i>	
	2

Jesus Christ, come on, what is it?

1

Nothing!

*Beat. 2 is dissatisfied but does not care to pursue 1's secret anymore.*

1

Look out!

*2, terrified, slams on the breaks. 1 holds back laughter.*

2

What? What did you see?

1

...

2

What the hell did you see?

*1 bursts into laughter. 2 fumes with anger*

2

That was a fucking joke?

1

Do you remember the last time I was in your car?

*2 thinks for a moment*

2

What does that-

1

Yes you do, come on. Don't you remember, we went to Weezer's, and-

*2 remembers*

2

Oh my god!

1

*(laughs)*

2

Why are you laughing that is fucked up! That's a fucked up thing to do that was not funny.

1

*(laughing)* yes it was!

2

*(also kind of laughing)* that's a fucked up thing to think is funny.

1

Oh come on, no one got hurt, it's fine.

2

Either of us could have. Could have hurt my car too.

1

Come on, cars don't matter.

2

When you spend thousands of dollars on one they do.

1

You didn't think that was funny?

2

You're fucked up.

1

You thought it was funny last time.

2

That wasn't a joke, you know that, right? Someone almost got hit.

1

No one got hit.

2

Yeah, well, the guy on the bike almost did.

1

Almost, though, almost.

2

You didn't think it was funny at the time.

1

What are you talking about, yes I did! You couldn't see your own face is the problem otherwise you would have thought so too.

2

You're the only person I know that thinks a near hit and run, well not a hit and run because I wouldn't run, but a hit... - you're the only person who'd find that funny. That was not funny.

1

Bec-

2

Besides, why would you think that was a good thing to just spring onto someone like, while I'm going out of my way to drive you home. You know, I'm actually doing you a fucking favor

1

I'm sorry-

2

I could have stayed at the party but you were the one who got too drunk and had to leave immediately and because I felt, for some reason, I had some semblance of responsibility to your well being

1

I'm not normally like this-

2

And because you haven't grown the fuck up I had to drive you

*Pause*

2

I mean, Jesus, that is not how you get people to like you. Ruining their nights and then causing them to crash their car - that is not how you get people to like you. Do you know that?

1

You don't like me?

*Beat*

2

I don't really know.

1

Oh.

2

I don't really know you.

*Beat*

1

The turn's coming up-

2

Yeah, I know where you live.

*Beat*

1

So you liked the party then?

2

I did

1

You thought it was fun?

2

I did

1

Yeah, me too.

2

Oh yeah?

1

Yeah

2

That's good.

*Beat*

1

I'm sorry for, um, laughing at your distress.

2

That's ok.

*Beat*

2

I really don't care.

1

ok

*Pause*

1

So how did you-

2

Just, shut up for the rest of the ride, please.

1

Ok

2

Can you do that for me?

1

ok

2

We're like 2 minutes away from your house just... 2 minutes, please.

1

ok

*Beat*

1

I swear you thought it was funny.



2  
I don't care.  
*Beat. 1 steps out of the car*

1  
Well I'll see you around

2  
Yeah see you

*Beat*

1  
ET Phone home

*She turns and points her finger to 2.*

*2 turns to 1, looks at her finger, and turns away again.*

*Beat*

1  
Here

*1 hands 2 money*

2  
What's this?

1  
For the ice cream.

2  
Oh. You didn't have to-

1  
I wanted to. Have a good night.

2  
You too.

*1 leaves the car. Transition into a memory, now from 2's perspective. 1 lays in the snow. Before 12 seconds has passed, 2 joins her.*

	2
Time!	
	1
I have hypothermia	
	2
Come warm up	
	1
There's 1000 things happening to me right now and none of them are good	
	2
Like what	
	1
I have hypothermia	
	2
I'll help you	
	1
I have frostbite	
	2
I'll help you	
	1
... I have hypothermia	
	2
Odds are you go lick that flag pole over there?	

*A game of "odds are" is improvised. If they get different numbers so be it. If they get the same, 1 must talk their way out of it.*

	2
Uggghh what do people do around here?	

1

Well, when we're not licking flagpoles, there's usually things to do but everything is closed down because of the storm. It's insane you made it here.

2

My car can handle anything.

*2 looks at 1.*

*Filling the silence:*

2

Besides, I wasn't gonna let distance stop us from our first snow celebrations

*Beat*

2

Are you warm yet? I'm fine.

*1 has completely left the stage. 2 is alone.*

*2 looks for 1. They're nowhere to be found.*

*2 explores the space. They kick the snow. They just think.*

*Blackout.*

*For a while. Then:*

*End of play*

Appendix: photos from the performance of *this is the knot in my stomach* by Chris Kayden



“Recess Scene”



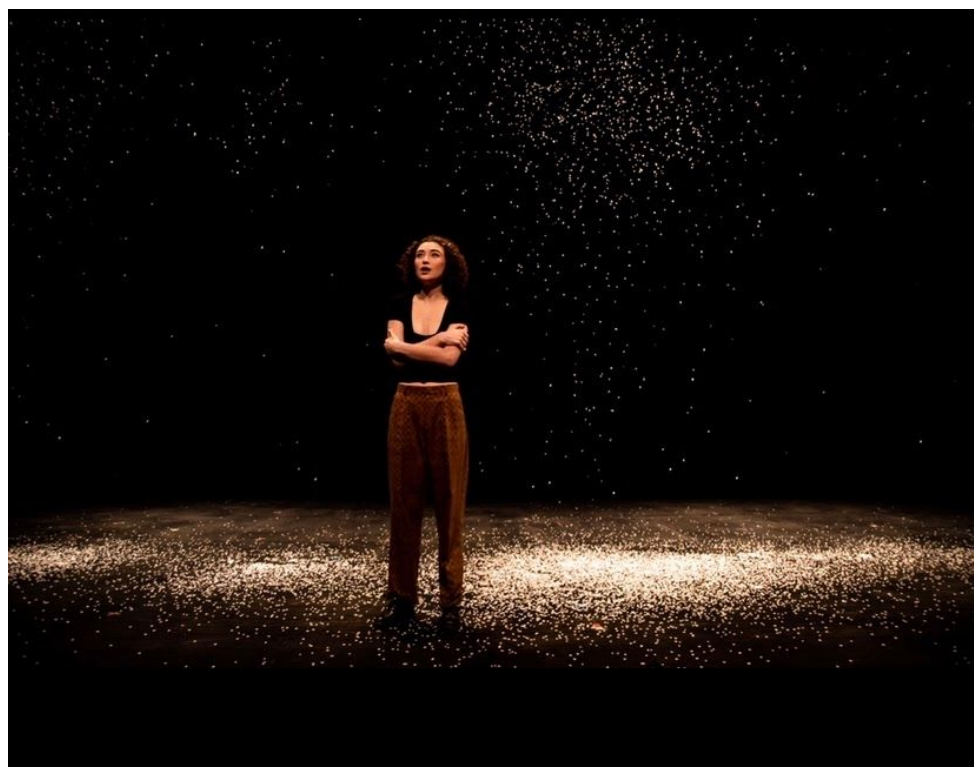
“Flat Iron Scene”



“Grape Scene”



“1’s Snow Scene”



“2’s Snow Scene”

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