

Look Pretty and Do as Little as Possible

Keira Smith

BILLY NELSON – racially blind casting. Male, early 30's. Quiet, timid. Struggling with himself throughout the play.

LYDIA NELSON – racially blind casting. Female, late 40's/ early 50's. Bubbly, loud woman. Concerned about her son.

CHARLES NELSON – racially blind casting. Male, late 40's/ early 50's. Stern, rigid. Obviously unhappy with his son.

RICHARD MICHAELS – racially blind casting. Male, mid-30's. The imagined character. Joyful but carries a deep sadness about him.

CORA MICHAELS – racially blind casting. Female, late 20's. Boisterous, elegant. Acts uncaring, however is painfully aware of the world around her.

CHORUS – mixed casting. Ranges from 10-20 people (dependant on company). Dressed in 80's style clothes, all move with purpose.

Disclaimer: All statistics presented in this piece are factual according to unaids.org as of December 2018.

Rationale

I chose to write about this subject because I have an odd fascination with it. As you will learn through this play, it's estimated the death toll for AIDS-related diseases is somewhere in the millions and yet it's no longer considered as present a threat as it once was. When I did more research on the current statistics on the AIDS epidemic, I felt confused as to why some of these facts weren't more widely known. Therefore, I chose to write on the subject to spread more awareness on the subject matter.

My interest in the subject was piqued when I was looking into LGBTQIA history in my own time, through articles and videos, while I was trying to figure out my own identity. At the time, I was confused as to why I had never been taught about it in a school setting. My interest grew when I was looking into different forms of media, like books and films on the subject. These forms of media typically portrayed the epidemic in a sad light and consuming that media made me feel angry at how a huge part of the population was ostracised while they were suffering from this horrible disease. This made me want to get this anger out in some way, so I chose to channel it into this piece of creative writing. It also became apparent in my research that the epidemic affected many homosexual men of colour, however fiction-based media tends to focus primarily on white victims. I've chosen to have my characters' race to be up to the director/ casting director because the story could be told by anyone of any colour and it would still be truthful to the actual events of the crisis and I would hope any director would honour that if taking this piece on as a production.

My target audience for this piece is young people who identify as LGBTQIA+. As a member of this group myself and doing the research for this piece, I wish this part of history was spoken about more in schools; as a part of recent history and a deeper

look into homophobia and how it was more common than it is today. As much as members of the community still struggle today, I think young people in particular tend to forget that there was a generation before us that fought hard for the rights we get to freely enjoy today. I aimed my piece at this particular group in the hopes that the community can become more aware of it's own history and not forget how far we've come.

The style of my piece is contemporary with a linear format. It is contemporary due to the time period it's set in; the mid-1980's America. The story is told from beginning to end with no jump's forwards or back ward s in time, therefore it's linear. I set it here because that's when and where the epidemic was at it's most prevalent and I wanted to tell this story in a simplistic way to highlight the tragedy of events happening one after the other.

I have tried to challenge myself with the language by writing in Americanised English. The play is set in America, therefore this makes logical sense given the time and place. Therefore 'mum' is 'mom', 'ain't' is used a lot as it appears more commonly in America than in Britain. It was a challenge for me to keep up not speaking in a dialect that is not my own, however I also wanted to challenge myself in this way.

My play is an original work, however it is inspired by various pieces of media that I came across through research. The title, *'Look Pretty and Do as Little as Possible'*, is a reference from an order the Reagan Administration (the Presidency at the time) gave to epidemiologists to silence them on the fact that they weren't actively looking for a solution to the crisis. It can also be applied to Billy in his indecision not to come clean to his family about his situation; he doesn't know whether he should act or not.

My basic plotline is also inspired by the plot to a recent film, *1985*, which is about the AIDS crisis also. I was evidently inspired by a lot of my research with some aspects of my play, however I hope that I have taken a different perspective on it; one that looks at the injustice of the situation and how the world is still affected by the epidemic to this day.

Synopsis

Set in 1985 in America at the height of the AIDS epidemic. Billy Nelson is coping with the loss of his partner of thirteen years, Richard, after losing him to an AIDS related disease. Billy is also dealing with the inevitability of his own death by the disease.

December 1985, Billy informs his friend and Richards sister, Cora, that he will be going to his parents for Christmas. He plans to come clean to them about his sexuality, his relationship with Richard and that he is dying. He hasn't seen his family in years and knows this will be a hard trip for him and his family, however he wants to know if his family would accept him as the man he has become; confident and sure of himself and his sexuality.

Upon arriving home, he's greeted by both his loving mother and sceptical father. It isn't long before some uncomfortable questions are brought up by his parents and Billy feels like he must defend himself, his work and his friends.

Meanwhile, Richard appears to Billy as a figment of his imagination that forces Billy to confront the horrible truth that his parents would probably turn him out if they found out he was gay. It wouldn't matter to them if he was love or even if he was dying, they would no longer accept him as their son. This causes Billy to have a breakdown at home.

We end the story at Billy's funeral, in May of 1986. Cora is there, surrounded by the ghosts of others who have lost their lives to AIDS related disease. It is up to audiences interpretation if Billy ever told his parents about his condition or not; either way they are not present at the funeral. Cora must now bury her closest friend alone, as he joins the faceless crowd of dead and becomes just another statistic. The audience are shown facts about the AIDS crisis to raise awareness at the atrocities that took place in the 1980's and how those decisions have affected our world today.

They are confronted with the reality that we are still living in the shadow of this epidemic and that it shouldn't be forgotten.

PROLOGUE

The stage is set with two levels. A walkway stretches the width of the stage across the back. A small set of stairs are located at opposite sides to the far side of the stage. Stored underneath the platform are various furnishings to be used throughout the play. Only CHORUS members enter under here and only the present characters appear on the stage under the platform. Figments of Billy's imagination, namely Richard, have free range of the performance space.

THE OPENING SCENE. This entire section is done through movement with no dialogue. BILLY is with his family, LYDIA and CHARLES. They're frozen in a family portrait. BILLY is in a graduation gown and cap. The screen behind them reads 1973, MAINE, BILLY's parents congratulate him. They exit the stage, leaving BILLY to pick up his suitcase and exit in the opposite direction. He trudges off stage. The screen changes to 1973, CALIFORNIA and changes to depict an airport. CORA and RICHARD enter. RICHARD is sorting out documents. CORA sways back and forth on her heels before getting up close and toying with RICHARD; messing with his hair, poking his cheek, shoving his arm, etc. Richard shoves back, harder, knocking CORA into a group of people behind her. They laugh it off and hug tightly, before parting ways. CORA picks up her suitcases and waves to RICHARD before exiting. RICHARD sees her off before exiting the other way.

The screen changes to read 1980, NEW YORK, accompanied by the New York skyline. BILLY and CORA enter with their suitcases onto the busy streets of New York. They bump into people, causing havoc amongst the disgruntled crowd before bumping into each other. They exchange pleasantries as the crowd disassembles and takes their luggage from them. They offer a handshake and a friendly hug to each other before CORA pulls BILLY along with her across the stage. The screen changes to the brazen logo of Studio 54. The CHORUS returns dancing to the pumping music, the stage comes to life with colour and light. CORA leads BILLY in an awkward dance in the middle of the crowd. BILLY excuses himself to get a drink. RICHARD enters. BILLY's and RICHARD's eyes meet as BILLY turns back around from getting his drink. The dancing in the middle slows as the two stare at each other from across the stage. CORA breaks out of her spell as she runs and hugs RICHARD. BILLY looks away, disappointed. CORA catches RICHARD staring at BILLY and pulls him across the dancefloor to BILLY. She takes BILLY's hand and joins it with RICHARD's. They resume their stares at each other and their now joined hands. RICHARD pulls BILLY into the middle of the dancing swarm as they circle around the couple. They build a routine of small hesitant touches to each other's faces, arms, etc, which repeats in a sequence as the screen fades out and into a night-time scene in New York. This sequence should be figured out by the actors with assistance and input from the director. The CHORUS disappear, and the sequence comes to a stop, to which the couple kiss. They embrace again, with more passion as the CHORUS puts together a living space around them; sofa, coffee table with a phone on top, lamp. The screen reads 1983. The couple pull away from each other. BILLY fixes RICHARD's tie and sees him off to work. He sits on the sofa and pauses. He picks up the phone on the table and begins to dial a number. As he does, his parents reappear on the platform. The CHORUS circle to area around BILLY but remain hidden in shadows, whispering homophobic remarks; queer, fairy, vile, perverted, disgusting. BILLY slams the phone back down on the table clearly

distraught. His parents leave the platform and the CHORUS disappear. RICHARD returns home and rushes to BILLYs side, comforting him and embracing him, repeating his part of their sequence of loving touches. RICHARD leads BILLY offstage by the hand.

The screen fizzles and cracks with the sounds and images of news reports about the AIDS crisis. Quotes that appear include “Those poor homosexuals – they have declared war on nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution.” “Gay cancer” “Gay plague” “GRID”. Everything comes to a silence. The screen flashes APRIL 1984, BILLY and RICHARD enter again. They hold each other’s hands as they sit on the sofa. CORA enters, pacing behind the sofa, nervously. It’s deadly silent. The phone rings, startling the three. RICHARD lunges for it and pulls it to his ear. The audience see his face crumble with despair as he listens to the other side. CORA takes the phone from him and slams it down, she’s shaking. RICHARD buries his face in BILLYs shoulder. BILLY is completely still, numb to the news. He finally reaches out to touch RICHARDs hair, but RICHARD pulls away, stands and barges past CORA. BILLY charges after him and pulls him back. He repeats his part of the sequence. RICHARD doesn’t reciprocate with his own touches. As the screen passes through the days and months, BILLYs sequence becomes faster and frantic. CORA tries to pull him away but BILLY stands firm. RICHARD grows weaker and seems to wilt where he stands under BILLYs touches. The date on the screen stops at 9th SEPTEMBER 1985. Sudden blackout on stage is followed by a slow fade up. BILLY is still repeating his sequence, but RICHARD is no longer there. CORA reaches out to stop BILLYs hands, but he tries to push her off. She fights against him and gets him to stop. He falls to the ground, clinging to her. The stage is silent bar for BILLYs soft sobbing. The two remain like this for a few seconds before separating. The chorus changes BILLY and RICHARDs apartment to just two telephones positioned at the sides of the two staircases. The two make their way to either staircases and sit down. The screen flashes 15th DECEMBER 1985.

SCENE 1

CORA removes her black coat. She picks up the phone and dials a number. She is waiting for a while. Billy finally picks it up.

CORA: Billy! Billy? **(Pause)** BillyBillyBillyBillyBillyBillyBil -

BILLY: Hello Cora! Can I help you?

CORA: Billy! I wanted to ask as it’s getting terribly lose to Christmas now -

BILLY: What?

CORA: What? What do you mean? Christmas!!

BILLY: Oh. I thought -

CORA: Thought what?

BILLY: Well -

CORA: Billy Nelson! You are not missing Christmas with us! You have to come, the girls would miss you.

BILLY: But I'm not family, not really.

CORA: Billy. You're as much part of this family as you always were. The girls know you as well as they knew Ritchie. They're asking for you now, I'll put them on.

BILLY: No!

CORA: Why not?

BILLY: I'm sick.

CORA: They know that, Billy.

BILLY: Yes but it's gotten worse.

CORA: Well they don't need to know that. You don't have to tell them.

BILLY: But they'll figure it out. They're smart girls, Cora. They'll know. And that's why I'm not coming over for Christmas.

CORA: But Billy, we have a tradition! You and Richard would always come over for Christmas and after this year. **(Pause)** After this hellish year, they could really use something normal, something ordinary, like their uncle coming to visit.

BILLY: But I'll scare them. I don't want to scare them.

CORA: Scare them? How will you scare them? **(Pause)** Billy, what's wrong? How bad is it?

BILLY: Worse. Much worse.

CORA: Jesus, Billy. I'm sorry. Never thought about it getting worse. Never wanted to think about it getting worse. **(Pause)** Of course, no travelling for you, especially coast to coast. **(Pause)** We'll come to you.

BILLY: Christ, Cora! I won't even be in New York.

CORA: What? Well, where are you going?!

BILLY: Maine.

CORA: Maine? Why the hell would you...oh. **(Pause)** OH.

BILLY: Yeah.

CORA: Billy.

BILLY: I know, Cora.

CORA: The holiday season!

BILLY: I know, Cora.

CORA: Are you sure?

BILLY: Nope. But I have to. And if I don't do it now, I don't think I'll ever do it. I can't leave it too late.

CORA: No. You can't leave it too late. **(Pause)** I'll come to you. Can't think of you doing this alone.

BILLY: Jesus, Cora! No, I have to do this alone. You stay home!

CORA: Are you sure? It's no trouble.

BILLY: I'll be fine. I can't ask you to do that, Cora. It's too close to Christmas. Stay with your girls.

CORA: Alright, but they at least know you're coming?

BILLY: Yes.

CORA: Were they happy?

BILLY: They were surprised.

CORA: And how are you?

BILLY: I wish he was here. I miss him.

CORA: I know, sweetheart. We all do. Will you tell them about him?

BILLY: Yes. I think so. I should.

RICHARD appears on the platform and descends the staircase down to BILLY. He crouches on the stairs and rests his head on BILLY's shoulder and hugs him from behind, however doesn't disturb the phone in his hand. BILLY freezes at the touch but doesn't interact with RICHARD.

CORA: Oh Billy. Please, call me at any point if you need somebody. You're not alone here.

BILLY: I know. *(Pause)* I better go pack. *(RICHARD leaves the way he came)*
Thank you, Cora.

CORA: Not a problem. We're family. We care for each other.

They both hang up their phones. CORA exits. BILLY pulls on a coat and is handed a suitcase by a CHORUS member. He exits his side as the CHORUS rearrange the set around him.

SCENE 2

BILLY and CORA exit offstage as the CHORUS come on and strike the furniture, replacing it with a living room set. It's old-fashioned and not as stylish as BILLY's apartment and the layout is much different. The set includes a Christmas tree and other decorations. LYDIA is helped by the CHORUS on to a footstool to decorate the top of the tree, conveniently placed by the window. CHARLES sits on the sofa and is handed a remote control and a newspaper. The CHORUS exits. The screen reads '16th December 1985, Maine'. LYDIA is trying to peer out the window as she decorates.

LYDIA: What's the time, dear?

CHARLES: *(Checks the time)* Just past four. *(Pause)* You're lingering.

LYDIA: I'm not.

CHARLES: You are. He'll be on his way now.

LYDIA: What if his plane was delayed?

CHARLES: He would've called if he was delayed. *(Pause)* Lydia.

LYDIA comes down off the stool.

LYDIA: He's coming home, Charles!

CHARLES: I know, darlin.

He goes and hugs her.

LYDIA: It's been so long! It's not just a Christmas card or a phonecall this time. He'll be here!

CHARLES: (*More to himself*) Yeah, can't remember the last time he came home.

LYDIA: (*Hears him. Breaks away from him.*) Charles.

CHARLES: What?

LYDIA: You better cut that out before he gets here.

CHARLES: Well, I'm sorry Lydia but he knows what he's done. All this time with only calls and letters. Completely ungrateful.

LYDIA: Stop it.

CHARLES: And not much to those either. How are you, mom? I'm well, mom. Not up to much, mom. He's been 'not up to much' for a goddam decade now.

LYDIA: He'll have had his reasons. We haven't really bothered to keep contact either. He's always been a quiet boy. Never really fit in here. (*Pause*) You've never bonded with him. That's your problem.

CHARLES: We never had anything in common! He hated the outside. Hated the cold. Preferred the indoors with you or a book or a movie. He's always been your mama's boy.

LYDIA laughs at that.

CHARLES: To be honest, I thought he'd follow that Carla girl back to California.

LYDIA: Cora. And she's not his type. Too loud. He prefers bookish quiet girls.

CHARLES: How the hell do you know that?! There's been no mention of a girl before.

LYDIA: Maybe he has one now.

CHARLES: And not told us?

LYDIA: Well *(Pause)* He's sensitive.

A car can be heard pulling up. LYDIA hurries to the window.

LYDIA: He's here!

She runs to the door. BILLY enters the space, shivering. LYDIA engulfs him in a hug.

LYDIA: Billy!

BILLY: Hey mama!

She releases him. CHARLES approaches and BILLY straightens up. CHARLES pats BILLY's shoulder.

CHARLES: Hey, son.

BILLY: Hey, dad.

Pause.

CHARLES: Come on, get your coat off. Don't trail snow into the house.

SCENE 3

BILLY and LYDIA settle on the sofa. CHARLES sits in the armchair. LYDIA takes BILLYS hands into her own.

LYDIA: How are you, baby?

BILLY: I'm good, mom.

LYDIA: Was your flight ok?

BILLY: Great, mom.

LYDIA: Jesus, you're cold! Do you want coffee?

BILLY: Coffee would be great, mom. *(He goes to stand.)* Let me help.

LYDIA: No no, baby! You stay right there!

LYDIA leaves for the kitchen. BILLY and CHARLES sit in awkward silence.

CHARLES: It cold in New York?

BILLY: Yeah, pretty cold now.

Pause.

BILLY: How have you and mom been?

CHARLES: Good. Good. Ya know, we were already expecting your big letter this year. But this is much nicer.

BILLY: Yeah. (*Long pause.*) Thought it was time I came home for Christmas.

CHARLES: About time too. How long has it been now?

BILLY, bewildered, tries to say something in return but LYDIA returns with a tray and a coffee pot, sugar and three cups. The boys visibly relax upon her return.

LYDIA: Help yourself.

CHARLES AND BILLY: Thanks darlin/ Thanks mom.

She puts down the tray on the coffee table. She hugs them both to her. The three pause to enjoy the moment before LYDIA settles back into her seat and pours out the coffee.

LYDIA: How's work been, baby?

BILLY: Works good. Sold a commission to a small company. Worked with them before. Think they're planning the performance for May.

CHARLES: So, still writing?

Pause.

BILLY: Yes.

CHARLES: How's the money?

BILLY: It's good. I get by.

CHARLES: You could do a lot better then get by.

LYDIA: Charles.

CHARLES: What? He could!

BILLY: It's ok, mom.

CHARLES: Billy, I'm just trying to -

LYDIA: How're friends, Billy? What about that Cora girl?

BILLY: Cora's good. Her family's good.

LYDIA: Family? She has kids?

BILLY: Yeah. Two girls.

Pause.

LYDIA: Good for her.

CHARLES: You ever think about kids, Billy?

BILLY: Not really, dad.

CHARLES: Not really?

LYDIA: Charles.

CHARLES: You got a girl, son?

RICHARD appears on the platform and descends from it to stand behind BILLY during the next part of dialogue.

CHARLES: Me and your mother were just talking about it. You know, me and your mother had you for a good few years by the time I was your age. There's never been any talk of anyone like that and your not getting any younger.

LYDIA: We're not wanting to push, but we'd love grandkids someday Billy.

RICHARD puts his hand on BILLY's shoulder. BILLY flinches, composes himself and comes back to the scene.

BILLY: Sorry, there's been no one.

SCENE 4

CHORUS enters and rearranges the living room set into a kitchen set. BILLY is cleaning the dishes from the coffee earlier. LYDIA enters, pats him on the back.

LYDIA: I've set up your old room. Hope it's okay for you.

BILLY: It's fine, ma.

LYDIA: It's all clean.

BILLY: Thanks ma. **(Pause)** I'm sorry I haven't really been around so much, ma.

LYDIA: Oh don't worry, sweetie. It's fine.

BILLY: But. With how dad was acting.

LYDIA: Ignore him. We're happy you're back baby.

BILLY: Happy to be back, ma. I missed you.

LYDIA: I've missed you too, baby. **(Pause)** You feeling alright.

BILLY: Uh...works been crazy. Life in general has been pretty crazy. I don't wanna bore you with it.

LYDIA: You can always talk to me if you need anything, sweetie.

BILLY: I know, ma.

Pause.

LYDIA: Can I get you anything, baby?

BILLY: (Pause) Your famous hot chocolate would be great. If that's ok?

LYDIA: Anything for you, Billy.

She goes to boil some milk over the stove.

LYDIA: How is New York.

BILLY: Busy. Couldn't be more different from home.

LYDIA: Good. I think it's better for you. Agrees with you more.

BILLY: Yeah?

LYDIA: Yes. I never wanted you to be stuck here. I think the Big City suits you better.

BILLY: I think so too.

LYDIA: Are you anywhere near those riots though?

BILLY: Riots?

LYDIA: I see it on the news. People who made their decisions but now want to hold our President accountable for their mistakes! Honestly, they should have known there'd be consequences for their actions.

BILLY: Mom! You can't say that...

LYDIA: Why not? They're only looking for something else to blame.

BILLY: They're not protesting for no reason. People are dying!

LYDIA: I know that!

BILLY: Yeah, well I see that!!

Long pause.

BILLY: I live in that area, ma. And they're hurting and scared and no one is willing to help them. No one who can really help, anyway. They can't afford healthcare, they're losing their jobs and they are dying! And it's like no one cares. They're just wanting someone to notice them as people. They're all so scared, ma. They don't know what's going to happen to them.

LYDIA: Billy...

BILLY: I'm sorry, ma. I didn't mean to blow off. I've just-

LYDIA: Have you known anyone that's...

BILLY: Yeah. I have. I've lost a lot of people, friends. They didn't deserve it.

LYDIA: Oh, baby.

She hugs him. They hold each other for a while. They separate and she finishes the hot chocolate. She gives it to him. She continues.

I hate thinking of you in the middle of all that. **(Pause)** Have you lost anyone else?

CHORUS enter and surround BILLY.

CHORUS: Tell her?

Tell her.

No.

Yes!

She won't care.

She loves me.

She'll push us away.

What would she think?

Would she tell dad?

The neighbours?

Her friends?

I'll have to leave.

How dare I take my filth here.

How dare I.

How dare he.

He wasn't supposed to die.

Now what am I supposed to do?

Don't think I'll have to wait too long anyway.

Let's not say anything.

She'll just worry.

The CHORUS quickly disperse.

BILLY: No.

Pause.

LYDIA: Ok.

There's silence between them. BILLY takes a sip of his hot chocolate.

BILLY: Just as good as before. No coffee shop in New York could beat your hot chocolates ma.

LYDIA: Thank you, baby.

BILLY: I'm gonna head to bed. *(He kisses her cheek)* I love you, ma.

LYDIA: I love you too, Billy. Goodnight.

BILLY: G'night.

BILLY exits. LYDIA stands in the kitchen silently for a few moments, looking at the door.

LYDIA: They don't deserve to die. No-one deserves to die. Their poor mothers.

SCENE 5

Next morning. BILLY is fixing his breakfast, CHARLES enters, fixes himself with coffee and sits at the table. The tension is thick between them. They avoid each others eyes.

CHARLES: Morning.

BILLY: Morning.

BILLY yawns.

CHARLES: Rough night?

BILLY: Uh. Yeah. Just not used to the bed.

CHARLES: That's stupid.

BILLY: What?

CHARLES: Well, it is your bed.

BILLY: (*awkward*) Yeah. Guess it is.

CHARLES *gets up to move.*

CHARLES: I'm gonna go get dressed.

BILLY: Okay. (*Pause*) Hey, dad?

CHARLES: What?

BILLY: Now this is gonna sound bad but I need you to listen, ok? (*Pause.*
CHARLES *gestures for him to continue.*) Look, I don't want to just tip toe around you while I'm here. I know I haven't been around the past few years but I just wanna spend the holidays with you guys, ok?

CHARLES: Billy -

BILLY: Please dad. I know I've been a real lousy son to you and mom. I've hurt you both and now here I am, I've come out of nowhere and I can only say sorry. I really am sorry dad. But can we please put it behind us?

CHARLES: So you want to do this now, huh? You'd think you didn't even want to be here.

BILLY: Not if you're being like this!

CHARLES: Billy!

BILLY: Well, I don't feel welcome! I feel like you don't want me here! Would you rather I left?

CHARLES: William!!

BILLY *goes to speak but stops himself.*

CHARLES: Is this how people treat their folks in the Big City? All this talk back? My father never stood for that from me and I won't take it from you, got it?

BILLY: Yes sir.

CHARLES: Good. Now, don't tell your mother about this. You'll only upset her.

BILLY: I won't.

CHARLES: (*sits back down*) Would you really have left? Just now.

BILLY: No! Of course not.

CHARLES: Then why kick up the fuss?!

BILLY: (*Pause.*) I don't know.

CHARLES: Is everything alright at home?

BILLY: Yes.

CHARLES: You sure?

BILLY: Yes.

CHARLES: Then what's up?

BILLY: Nothing.

CHARLES *doesn't believe him. He sighs.*

CHARLES: You know, when you were little you always were so happy to see me. Everytime I came home from work you'd come running up to me and give me a hug. We'd play catch in the garden while your mom cooked. We'd go in and have dinner then you'd get your book that you got from the library. You loved reading. You'd go through a book in around a week. You'd read in the corner, sometimes aloud. The teachers always said you needed to be more confident in your reading. That one in third grade, Miss Yule? Suggested you reading aloud to improve your confidence. Normally you'd do it with mom but sometimes she was busy so you'd do it with me. And I was amazed! I was never much for reading but you wouldn't just read, you'd tell a story! You know what I mean? You would say it in a way that would just...you

know! I could see it! Everything you would describe I could see! Right in front of me! In my own living room! I thought it was amazing!

BILLY: Dad...

CHARLES: And then I thought, why couldn't we do that anymore? I remember it so clearly, you stopped all at once you got to middle school. You'd read in your room instead. You didn't want to play catch with your dad anymore. I had to get used to the shit on TV after dinner. Parents get used to all those little things, you know. My old man would be embarrassed to hear me say that. But it's not just moms, dads get used to those little things too. And it hurts to have that go away for us as well. We just don't kick up as much fuss about it as moms do. Then you left, as soon as you could get out of here, you left. And that hurt even more because even if we had nothing to talk about I could still see you everyday. But then that was gone too. And a parent can't help but blame themselves for that. I kept thinking, did I hurt you? Scare you away?

BILLY: No dad.

CHARLES: Then tell me. What did I do wrong?

BILLY: Nothing dad. I'm so so sorry.

They hug. Awkwardly. But they eventually relax into it. CHARLES takes a moment to compose himself.

CHARLES: I'm shit at showing it, I know. But I do love you, my boy. No matter what.

BILLY: No matter what?

CHARLES: No matter what.

RICHARD enters with CHORUS, chanting 'No matter what', becoming gradually louder and louder. They go suddenly silent as RICHARD reaches BILLY.

RICHARD: I'll love you, no matter what.

RICHARD kisses BILLY's brow and the CHORUS swarms around RICHARD, taking him away. BILLY and CHARLES are left alone once again.

BILLY: I'm sorry dad.

CHARLES: Don't bother with that anymore.

Silence.

SCENE 6

CHORUS enter and exchange the living room set for a bedroom set. **RICHARD** lingers along the perimeter as this happens. The bedroom is quite immature, belonging to a 21-year old **BILLY**. However, it has been subjected to meticulous cleaning. There's a clinical feeling to it. **BILLY**, **LYDIA** and **CHARLES** come forward. **BILLY** and **LYDIA** exchange a peck to say goodnight. There's a hint of a nod between **BILLY** and **CHARLES**. **BILLY** gets ready for bed. He is stripped down to his undershirt and boxers and pulls on a dressing gown that's hanging in the room. He looks over his old room, fiddles with some knick knacks scattered around.. **RICHARD** appears, leaning against the staircase, which serves as a wall to the room, smiling at **BILLY**. In this scene, **BILLY** cannot see **RICHARD** unless specified but responds to any touches from **RICHARD**.

BILLY: You think this was a good idea? I'm not so sure anymore. I really wanted to believe that they would be ok with it. But dad. Just what he said today. Godsakes.

RICHARD pushes himself off the wall and stands behind **BILLY**. He reaches his arms around **BILLY** and pulls him into a comforting embrace. He lays a kiss on **BILLY**'s shoulder. He keeps his head there and **BILLY** can lay his head on **RICHARD**'s head. The couple sway gently.

BILLY: It'd be easier if you were here. They'd love you. Everyone loves you. You're one of those annoyingly beautiful people that's got the looks to make anybody fall in love with you. Then, on top of that you were probably one of the nicest people I had ever met. I never felt like I had to prove anything to you. You took everything in your stride, nothing seemed to faze you. You've always known what to say. Mom would love you instantly. You'd spy that picture of her in the hallway, of her on her wedding day. You'd make some comment on how lovely she looks. How she still looks. Then she'd be smitten. You wouldn't have to try to win her over. Dad, though. Dad's trickier. You'd really have to try and impress him. But you'd share a beer with him, tell him you work for a big marketing company and he'd be won over too. Because you always win people over. You're always so sure of yourself. Always known what to say. Even when you got really sick, you never lost what made you, you. You always were trying to make the situation seem better than it was and I stupidly believed it.

BILLY breaks the embrace and sits on the bed. RICHARD follows and sits next to him. He takes BILLYs hand into his own.

BILLY: But then we'd tell them about us. What we mean to each other **(Pause)** and what's going to happen to us. Because my family ain't like your family. Sure, you didn't even think about talking to your parents but you at least had Cora and your nieces. I thought maybe mom would be ok but. I don't even know. Disappointed? Heartbroken? Would she care that we loved each other? Would she just be upset at the thought of me dying? Would she blame herself? Would she finally believe my dad when he says that I spent too much time with her growing up, that she somehow made me this way? Would she feel guilty? And dad, dad would call us every name under the sun. I remember when it was rumoured that one of the football players at my school was gay. My dad was furious. He wanted me to change schools but mom talked him out of it. **(Pause)** But then today; I don't think I've ever heard him open up so much. I always thought I disappointed him. Would he miss me? Pity me? Feel sorry for me? Be embarrassed, ashamed, devastated, hurt, scared? Would they be there at the end? Would they bury their son, knowing what and who he was? Not many parents would. Your parents wouldn't. Maybe they wouldn't either. **(Pause)** Maybe they'd be so disgusted at us that they'd cuss us out of the house. They'd hate and despise us like we were this disgusting thing that dared to come into their lives. And in the end they wouldn't care that they'd never see me again. I would be left in the ground and they'd have nothing to say about it. Because as long as I was alive and in love with you I would no longer be their son.

BILLY is softly weeping. RICHARD tries to pull him in for an embrace but BILLY cannot be moved, stuck in his train of thought.

BILLY: I'd hate them for that. They do not get to call me or you dirty. How dare them. How *dare* them! They would call us wrong and sinners and that we deserve to die and I would hurt them for it. **(He reaches out to RICHARD, acknowledges him, takes him by the face)** Because we weren't dirty. I loved you so much and for some reason you loved me back. I miss you so goddam much. **(He breaks down)** I'm scared to die, Rich. Especially like this because I saw what it did to you. I saw how helpless you became and all I could do was watch. I had to watch you stop eating, not be able to sleep from the pain, throw up pints of blood every night and have everything stripped away from you. You were in so much pain and there was nothing I could do to stop it. And now I'm going to have to go through it alone. I don't want to be alone. But then I can see you. I need you! I love you. I love you so much. You hear me? I love you.

I love you.

I love you, I lov -

LYDIA and CHARLES rush in. RICHARD disappears. BILLY is screaming and LYDIA runs to hold him. CHARLES makes his way over. Him and LYDIA exchange a look and he places a hand on BILLY's shoulder, rubs it gently.

LYDIA: Billy! Billy. I'm here, baby! I got you. It's ok. *(She hushes him)*

BILLY: Get away from me!!

He rushes away from them to the other side of the room.

LYDIA: Billy!! What's wrong? Just talk to me, please!

BILLY: Mom, stay there! Please don't come near me.

CHARLES: Billy! Stop this. You're scaring your mother. Have you taken anything? If you have, tell me now.

BILLY wretches over the waste bin in his room. CHARLES crouches by him, rubbing his back.

CHARLES: Talk to us, son. *(He turns BILLY to face him)* We're here. You're ok. What can we do?

BILLY: A phone. I-I need a phone.

CHARLES and LYDIA exchange a look. CHARLES nods and LYDIA leaves the room.

CHARLES: Ok. We'll get you a phone. Can you stand?

BILLY stands with CHARLES's help. CHARLES sits him on the bed. LYDIA comes back with the phone. She gives it to BILLY. He dials a number. CORA appears, away from the action.

CORA: Hello?

BILLY: Cora.

CORA: Billy?

BILLY breaks down.

CORA: Billy, where are you? Are you at home? Are you alone?

BILLY can't answer her.

CORA: Stay put. I'm coming to get you. Just get back to New York, ok?

She hangs up.

LYDIA: Who was that?

CHARLES: Lydia...

LYDIA: No, I want to know who that was. Who can our Billy, our *son*, talk to more than us. Billy, I don't mean to sound so bad but why can't you talk to us? We're family. I'm your mom. You can tell me anything.

BILLY: Oh, mom.

All three hug close together. LYDIA and CHARLES face into the huddle, BILLY faces away from them, face turned to the side and out.

EPILOGUE

RICHARD, CORA and CHORUS enter and form a line in front blocking the scene from the audience. RICHARD and the CHORUS look weak and frail. CORA is dressed in black.

CORA: I met Billy back in 73. We were both at college in Maine. Over the thirteen years that I knew him, he became one of my closest friends and, once he met Richard, my brother.

The screen comes to life. It reads “In 1981, the first cases of HIV were found in urbanised areas such as California, Los Angeles and New York. All cases we found in homosexual men. This is where the misconception that it was a ‘gay disease’ began. The screen goes black.

CORA: At first, he was quiet and kind, kept to himself mostly. But when he opened up, he was loud and vibrant and colourful. I saw him at his most happiest once he met Richard. He

The screen reads “The disease was officially named AIDS (Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome) however was also nicknamed GRID (Gay-Related Immune Disease) as well as ‘Gay Cancer’ and ‘Gay Plague’.” The screen goes black.

CORA: People can think what they want about them. All I care about is that I’ve now watched two people I loved go through hell while feeling forgotten by their families and friends.

The screen reads “The virus could also spread through blood transfusions and drug use. This resulted in a mass screening of all blood bank supplies across the country.” The screen goes black.

CORA: Billy was and still is a huge part of my life and the lives of my kids. Uncle Billy will be missed as much as Uncle Rich.

The screen reads “The American Government were slow to react to the impending crisis. The Reagan Administration told epidemiologists to ‘Look Pretty and Do as Little as Possible’.” The screen goes black.

CORA: In these times, We can’t forget that we’re all human. We are all equal. We cannot allow ourselves to forget our fellow men, even if it’s easier to pretend their suffering means nothing to us.

The screen reads “As of 2017, it is estimated that 77.3 million people have become infected with HIV since the epidemics beginnings. Around 35.4 million people have died from HIV since the first case.”

BILLY joins the line, next to RICHARD. They join hands. LYDIA and CHARLES enter and approach CORA.

CORA: Hello? Can I help you?

LYDIA: Um. Yes. Are you Cora?

CORA: I am.

LYDIA: Oh. Good. We're-uh. We're Billy's parents.

CORA: Oh Oh! I see! It's lovely to meet you. I wish the...the circumstances were better.

CHARLES: Did you organise this? For our Billy?

CORA: I did.

CHARLES: I see. *(Pause)* It's lovely. It didn't cost you too much now, did it?

CORA: Moneys not an issue. Billy was family.

LYDIA: That's real sweet. We're very grateful he had someone like you. This is very generous.

CORA: It's no trouble really. *(Pause)* It's a shame he didn't get to see you guys before...

CHARLES: We wanted to, honestly. But...

LYDIA: His situation, you'll understand...It was...difficult for us to process.

CORA: I'm afraid I don't understand.

LYDIA: I'm sorry?

CORA: I don't understand how you're processing of his condition would affect whether you saw him or not.

CHARLES: Well, young lady, if you weren't aware-

CORA: Oh, I was very well aware. I looked after him in the last few months and let me tell you, seeing someone you care about like that haunts you. I've been through that twice now. And you couldn't even bring yourself to visit? What I don't think you understand is that no matter what, he was still your son. His condition could never change that.

Silence falls over the trio. All look too embarrassed to speak next.

CORA: I'm sorry. Please forgive me. These last few months haven't been easy.

CHARLES: They've not been easy for us either. It was a shock when he told us, you know? To realise such a thing about your son and the not find out he's not going to be round much longer. That he came back to say goodbye. It was hard. But what I can say is that we *did* and *still do* love our son. We wouldn't be here otherwise.

CORA: I can appreciate that.

LYDIA: So, Richard was your brother?

CORA: Yes.

LYDIA: I see. Was he good to him? To Billy?

CORA: Yes. They were very good to each other.

CHARLES: How long were they together?

CORA: Five years. Lived together for two.

CHARLES: Richard. He had a good job?

CORA: Yes.

CHARLES smiles at this.

CORA: They were both great uncles too. To my two girls. Billy would always read to them whenever they visited.

LYDIA: Sounds like Billy.

CORA: Would you like to meet them?

LYDIA: Oh. Please.

CORA: Of course. They'd love to hear more about their Uncle Billy.

Blackout. The screen reads "Of the approximate 36.9 million people currently living with HIV around the world, 25% don't know they have it." The screen goes black. Blackout.

End.

