

ABSENTIA

by
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CHARACTER NAME	BRIEF DESCRIPTION	AGE	GENDER
Neo Baines/Esther	Grows up during storms. Black.	20	Female
Diana Baines	Neo's adoptive mother. Black.	Late 50s/Early 60s	Female
Tanya Dandridge	Neo's biological mother.	Late 30s	Female
Tyler Williams	Neo's best friend. Black.	20	Male
Clayton Harris	Black. Appears as if he's Neo's father.	40s	Male

TIME

Now and eight years earlier.

SETTING

The suburbs, a bus stop, and the woods out in the hills of Clermont, Florida.

NOTE

The actor playing Clayton also performs The Rabbit.

PART I

Lights up on a stage adorned in funeral flower arrangements and balloons. In the center stands a podium. Instrumental gospel music plays softly. Tyler, nervous, is sitting in the audience waiting for the service to start.

Tanya and Diana stand at the church's entrance, arm in arm. Diana looks out at the stage and congregation and is daunted by their sight.

TANYA

You think you'll still go to Alaska?

DIANA

Huh?

TANYA

I'm trying to distract you. Are you still going to Alaska?

DIANA

I kinda have to, don't I?

TANYA

I'm sure you could get your money back.

DIANA

No, I mean I have to go for- It's a shame that you can't come with me...

TANYA

I might run into you in Juneau too. I'll be there in August, same as you. Oh I heard it's lovely there. I'm sure the weather will be nice and-

DIANA

You hear us? Carrying on about trips and the weather. Never in a million years... Just a month ago we were screaming and crying.

TANYA

Well, no point in doing it now.

DIANA

I've made a mistake, haven't I?

TANYA

What?

DIANA

You can't distract me, Tanya... I've made a mistake. Look at everyone. They're judging me. Your side of the family has always judged me.

TANYA

They're your family too, and they feel sorry for you.

DIANA

But the service? It's too much, isn't it? The service, the church. I've barely even gone to church the last-

TANYA

Reverend Jones was happy to have it here.

DIANA

But it's too much. Don't act like you don't think so. You've had plenty to say before.

TANYA

I have my thoughts.

DIANA

What are you going to say when you get up there?

TANYA

I'll say some words of encouragement, and um, I'll pray and-

DIANA

You mean to tell me you don't have remarks prepared?

TANYA

I didn't want to bother you with it, Aunt Di. It's just one more thing-

DIANA

What are you gonna say, dammit?

Tanya takes a step away from her.

DIANA

Where are you going?

TANYA

I don't want get struck down by lightning. We're in a church, remember?

Diana looks around.

DIANA

I thought the storm was gonna keep folks at home... I don't know half these people.

TANYA

Oh, come on, Diana. They're probably folks who went to school with her. Or from your marathons and fundraisers. Which by the way, are we still training for that marathon coming up? I just got new Nikes and I want to break them in-

DIANA

It's not working, Tanya.

TANYA

I think there are people here who want to grieve with you. And there are folks who wanna get it over with and stuff their faces afterwards.

DIANA

Don't say that like it's bad thing. Don't you go to these things for the food?

TANYA

Oh trust me. I love me a good Louisiana crunch cake and Chek Soda just like everyone else, but that's not why I'm here.

DIANA

Why are you here?

TANYA

Because regardless of what I think of this, we're family.

DIANA

Neoma loved you so much-

TANYA

No, I mean you and me. We're family, whether we like it or not.

DIANA

If only she could see us.

TANYA

She'd be happy.

Shall we?

Tanya offers her arm again. Diana, though hesitant, takes it, and they proceed down the aisle of the church. They stop again.

DIANA

Was I a bad mother?

Tanya walks away without answering and takes the podium.

TANYA

Welcome... Thank you for joining us this afternoon. My name is Tanya Dandridge. I am the niece of the late Xavier Baines, who was the husband of Diana Baines and Neoma's father. I am here to lead us in a moment of reflection for the life of Neoma Baines. A beloved friend, cousin, daughter. An amazing child...

The last time I saw some of you was when we had to bury somebody. Think back. I'm sure it was somebody old. Auntie Harriet was seventy-five, Cousin Bootsy was eighty-nine. As much as they hurt, we expect those phone calls. But when the person we gather for is young, we ask ourselves "why?" more than we normally do. Maybe more than we ought.

I've known Neoma since forever and because of the incredible kindness shown by my Uncle X and his wife, I was able to witness an amazing life for twelve years. And what I wouldn't do for one hundred more. Some of you may call this a funeral. But Neoma was a Baines, and no matter how many times we've met to mourn the loss of a Baines, I've never been to a funeral. In the tradition of our fore-bearers, this should be a home-going service and if I may, a celebration of life. And not to say that it isn't, but if we can be honest, it's hard to celebrate. Not because Neoma didn't live a full life but because we expected her to have more life to live.

And as easy as it is to be down, I think on the times when we were happy together. Like when we'd play Slide and her hands would pop like fish grease trying to beat me at a game I taught her. I remember the soft coarseness of her hair twisted in pigtails and covered in Pink Lotion and Blue Magic. I remember her father telling her a corny joke and both of their laughs being louder than any sonic boom above Cape Canaveral. All of that is worth celebrating. So as tough as this may be, Church, can we agree that, despite our collective mourning, we celebrate a life? That no matter who you are, we send our sweet Neoma home not only her Heavenly Father but her earthly father Xavier, whose arms will hold and protect her until we all join them again? Can I get an amen?

She waits for a response.

TANYA

Amen... See, I'm nobody's preacher. The actual eulogy will be done by Reverend Jones after a few remembrances. But I do know how to pray. And if you're not the praying type, that's fine. Take a moment to yourself to think on Neoma and the thousands of girls like her lost to time. Think on her laugh, her smile.

Bow your heads.

They bow their heads. The lights fade.

Lights up on Esther's bedroom. It's a well-decorated room, something a teenage girl in a sitcom or in a magazine would have. A picture of her, Carla, and Clayton hangs on the wall.

Esther hears something bump. She picks up a flashlight and shines it around the room. Whatever is moving in the dark does not reveal itself. She pulls out a shoebox with holes in it.

She holds it gently but in her heart, she guards it with her life.

Esther exits her room and into the living room, which is just as nicely decorated. The front door is heavily locked. She looks around for a key, bumping into things in the dark.

Suddenly, the lights cut on and Clayton appears near the door.

CLAYTON

Do you know what time it is?

ESTHER

I couldn't sleep.

CLAYTON

And you thought going outside would help?

ESTHER

I was coming right back.

CLAYTON

Where were you going without a key?

No response.

CLAYTON

I cannot believe you, Esther. What did I tell you about leaving-

ESTHER

I said, "I was coming right back."

CLAYTON

I know you're getting older, but I can only let you have so much freedom.

ESTHER

But-

CLAYTON

But nothing, Esther. I don't want anybody to take you away from me. Are you trying to run away?

ESTHER

Of course not.

CLAYTON

Maybe I've given you too much freedom. You know, after your mother died, I thought giving you some freedom would be helpful. I mean, you've got your own room now.

ESTHER

I want my old room back.

CLAYTON

Excuse me?

ESTHER

Nothing, I -

He stops and looks at her box.

CLAYTON

What do you have in that box?

ESTHER

Nothing.

CLAYTON

Well, nothing is doing a whole lot of jumping. Lemme see.

Esther shows him the contents of the box.

CLAYTON

Esther!

ESTHER

I was gonna take him back.

CLAYTON

What for? I said you could keep him.

ESTHER

I know, I know.

CLAYTON

It's a little thing. We took it from its mama.

ESTHER

I was gonna look for her. She's probably not too far.

CLAYTON

It's too late.

ESTHER

But what if he gets sick and needs to see a vet?

CLAYTON

Oh, he won't get sick. He'll be fine. Besides, you haven't had more than a cold in 8 years.

ESTHER

His mama can take better care of him. We can set him free tomorrow. Together.

CLAYTON

Listen to me, child. When you take an animal like that from his home and you've touched him, his mama can smell you on him.

ESTHER

Then what happens?

CLAYTON

Well, she'll abandon him. Or worse.

Esther's eyes widen.

CLAYTON

You're his mama now, especially with the storm coming. Maybe it'll teach you some responsibility. You gotta start taking care of things from now on with your Mama gone. Now let's go back to bed. Put your friend away. Wait. What's his name again?

ESTHER

He don't have one. I gotta get to know him better.

CLAYTON

Me and your mama had a name for you as soon as you arrived. We slaved over it for months.

Esther begins to exit to her room.

She exits. Lights shift.

At the funeral. Tyler is on stage at the podium. He's twenty, but is boyish.

TYLER

Good afternoon. I'm Tyler Williams. Neoma and I are best friends. I moved here in the middle of fourth grade. Neo was the only person who talked to me on the first day, but the first thing she told me was that my hairline was uneven. And maybe that was rude, but I told my mom it was uneven when she was cutting my hair and I was glad to run home and tell her that someone else thought the same.

Neo was so open. Honest. She didn't hide any emotion. And if I was trying to hide how I felt about something, she'd feel it for me. If I was picked last at kickball, she'd riot. If the teacher didn't see me raise my hand to answer a question, she'd raise hers and say "Tyler's got it" and then she'd ask why I wasn't seen in the first place. You couldn't hide with her if you tried. And why would I want to? I was proud to be her friend. We did everything together. We even planned to go to school together, and with the fall coming, I just feel...

With her gone, I just feel like I'm floating...

TYLER

It wasn't my intention to say that when I came up here. I just wanted to give a memory but the thing I learned from that story is that Neoma wore everything on her sleeve and she'd want me to do the same... I had so much hope for so long and I still do but here I am her at funeral and I'm floating.

TYLER

And somehow, I still have hope. That may be the wrong thing to say, but I don't know if I've ever said anything right, so here we go.

I keep thinking that she'll knock on my door or that she'll walk in right now down the aisle. She's not actually gone. Maybe I'm pushing the limits of faith but the reason I'm not completely torn up right now is because she's not gone. Not really. She's still around somewhere, even if she's not here.

He looks out into the audience and sees Diana.

Ms. Diana, I don't want to cause you anymore pain. I just wanted to thank you for allowing me into your daughter's life and into yours. I can't imagine what you're going through and what you're feeling but I know I'm feeling something with you. Neoma loved you. And I do too but I still have hope... I'm sorry.

Tyler scurries off to his seat. Lights shift.

Esther is awake again in her room. The storm is picking up outside. She picks up her flashlight. Clayton begins to stir in his room.

ESTHER

Is that you, bunny bunny?

Esther gets up and grabs the box. She takes the rabbit out and begins to pet him.

ESTHER

I bet you want your mama. I want mine. I don't know when I saw her last. It seems like forever ago. Maybe it was. I don't know if I'm 12, 20, or 200.

Did your mama have a name for you? Maybe it was Peter. Nah, too obvious. Harvey. Too old. Donnie. No, and that's not even the name of the rabbit in that movie... Maybe I will call you Robyn.

I knew you way before I found you... My mom would read me a story and it would put me right to sleep. You think that'll help, sweet rabbit?

Esther looks around her room. Under her bed, she finds her tattered Robyn the Rabbit book. She opens it.

ESTHER

“This book is dedicated to Neoma Baines.”

That name hangs in the air. She begins to read.

ESTHER

In the woods lived Robyn the Rabbit
Who as a boy grew a bad habit
His mother tasked him to mop the floors
But never did he do any chores

"But Ma!" he shouted, "I'd like to play
'Round the lake in the sun all day.

"Sure, you can" his ma said to him
But first fill that bucket to the brim!"

The boy, so upset he couldn't leave,
Began to huff, puff, simmer, and heave!

As his ma cleaned, the boy had a thought
He'd leave home, hushed, before he got caught
Robyn the Rabbit slipped out the house
And went through the woods mum as a mouse

But soon the young rabbit lost his way
Long from the house he went off to play
Down the hill and skipped to the valley
It was so dark. Where was his family?

Robyn the Rabbit so far from home
Down by the lake, forever to roam.

She sees that the rabbit is asleep.

ESTHER

Works every time. Sometimes, I say it to myself when I get lonely and I drift off to my
mama. I wonder if there's something beyond these woods if she thinks of me. If she says
my name to herself like a poem.

Esther continues to cuddle the rabbit. Clayton appears in
the doorway.

CLAYTON

Up again, I see?

ESTHER

Robyn couldn't sleep.

CLAYTON

Just Robyn, huh? This is the second night in a row, Esther.

He picks up the box and sits on her bed. She studies him.

ESTHER

What are you all dressed up for?

CLAYTON

I'm headed to the store.

ESTHER

All dressed up like that? This early?

CLAYTON

So many questions. I take it you don't like it.

ESTHER

You normally don't get dressed up. Not for Walmart at least.

CLAYTON

Um, well, if you need to know, I think I may have met someone. Well, not really. I want to. I've seen her in the store a couple of times, a few smiles here and there, and I thought, well, maybe I could talk to her and... I think it's time you had a new mother.

ESTHER

No.

CLAYTON

I can see how bringing someone else here would be a tough transition. I miss Carla too, okay? She was everything to me for so long.

ESTHER

No I don't want anyone. Don't bring anyone else in here... It's not fair.

CLAYTON

You think we can make this work, just you and me?

ESTHER

...Yes.

CLAYTON

But you have to promise you won't leave me.

ESTHER

I won't.

CLAYTON

And you'll have to listen to me, okay? Anything I say.

ESTHER

Anything.

CLAYTON

I want you to want to be here. We can do this together.

ESTHER

Alright.

CLAYTON

And maybe we can bring in someone younger and -

ESTHER

No. No. I don't want anyone else here. Aren't I enough?

CLAYTON

That's up to you. Now, I want you to get some sleep, okay? Let me take him for the night so you can get some rest... You gotta make breakfast in the morning.

ESTHER

I do?

CLAYTON

Yes, if you want to be here.

He grabs the box.

CLAYTON

Now, sleep, love.

Clayton exits and Esther lies down.

Lights shift.

Back at the funeral. No one is at the podium. It's Diana's turn to speak but she struggles to get up. Tanya sees this and walks over to her.

TANYA

Are you okay?

No response.

TANYA

Come with me.

Tanya helps Diana up and pulls her off to the side so they can speak privately.

TANYA

We talked about this. You did what you thought was best.

DIANA

Tyler doesn't agree with it.

TANYA

Look, he's just upset.

They look at the audience.

TANYA

Everyone is waiting on something from you.

DIANA

I couldn't do it anymore, Tanya.

TANYA

We know. That's why we're all here.

DIANA

I'm a bad mother.

TANYA

Do you want me to say something?

No response.

TANYA

Do you want-

DIANA

You've already done too much.

TANYA

What?

DIANA

I mean, you've already done enough. You paid for basically everything.

TANYA

I was happy to. You've been through enough. I can handle this. The question is can you?

Diana shakes her head "no."

DIANA

No, ignore that. I got it... But come up with me?

Diana and Tanya walk up to the stage. Tanya stands behind her.

DIANA

I'm Diana Baines, the wife of the late Xavier Baines and Neoma Baines' mother...

She looks out on to the crowd.

DIANA

When Xavier passed, I was so moved by the love poured out to me not only as a wife, but as a human being struggling to keep my head up. His loss was sudden, and if it was hard on me, I knew it was hard on my Neoma. She was so young and I would have never asked her to be brave or tough, especially when I couldn't be. But she could see I was hurting and she was my solace. That first night without X, we sat in the kitchen crying, trying to figure how we were gonna get through the night. But after awhile she said, "It'll be okay, Mama. It'll be alright." I never questioned how she could be so certain. Like Xavier, she was confident, assuring. I knew if I had Neoma, I still had Xavier. Everything was gonna be alright.

And what a pair Neoma and Xavier were together. They had those mischievous Baines' eyes, the ones that could get them in and out of trouble with a wink. I could never be mad at either of them for too long. And when she was real little and she'd have a nightmare or saw a monster in her closet, she'd come into our room and she'd snuggle up to him as if he was the only one who could keep the monsters away.

As Neoma's mother, you'd think I could give you some insight into her life that you didn't already know. But because Neoma was Neoma, I know that with any interaction she had, she made you feel special and singular, and I was no different. Like the first time I held her in my arms. All mothers have a story about holding their babies for the first time but the way Neoma laid in mine, the way she pressed against my chest, it was truly as if she had been there a thousands times. Like she was waiting to get back there. Sure she and X were close, but she was my baby too. She knew that.

Diana grows more aware of the audience.

TANYA

Take your time, Diana.

DIANA

I may not be a mother in the traditional sense. I didn't carry her for nine months. But I was a mother in my own way and that was the way I knew best. And we mothers, we try to keep our girls safe. We tell them they can't leave the house. We tell them to not dance like this, don't move your hips like that. Keep the door open when you got company over, if you got company over. Don't talk too loud, don't love too hard.

We mothers, we mean well, but I pushed her away from me... I'm sorry.

I feel like I've failed all of you... I have to be honest now.

Lights shift.

Esther gets up for the day. She looks around for the box. It's missing. She comes into the kitchen to find Clayton.

CLAYTON

I'm waiting on my breakfast, Esther.

ESTHER

Huh?

CLAYTON

You slept in. You were supposed to cook for me, remember?

ESTHER

I'm sorry.

CLAYTON

Carla was never sorry. Carla was a good mother. Well, she was until-

ESTHER

Where's Robyn?

CLAYTON

You tell me. I thought you were gonna get rid of him.

ESTHER

I gave him a name so he's mine.

Esther takes a good look at Clayton. She sees he's well dressed.

ESTHER

You're still dressed up?

CLAYTON

I'm going into town.

ESTHER

You said you weren't going to-

CLAYTON

You didn't get up like you said. You're irresponsible... Maybe I'll run into that nice young lady. Or maybe at the bus stop, someone waiting to get home...

ESTHER

I told you I don't need a new mom. I'm fine. Just you and me.

CLAYTON

You're being selfish.

ESTHER

Don't do this.

CLAYTON

Don't do what-

ESTHER

Don't bring someone else here. I know what you're doing.

Where's the rabbit?

CLAYTON

You know where he is.

ESTHER

Where is he?

No answer.

ESTHER

(raising her voice)

Where's Robyn?! He needs me.

Clayton jumps up and slaps her. She covers her mouth to hold in her scream.

CLAYTON

If you yell again, I'll put you in the dirt right next to Carla. You hear me?

She nods.

CLAYTON

I do not work everyday providing for you to yell at me in my house.

Check your closet.

Esther rushes to the closet and finds Robyn's box.

A bit of blood has seeped through the box. She covers her mouth to keep herself from screaming. She returns to Clayton.

ESTHER

Why did you do it?

CLAYTON

What are you talking about? You did this.

ESTHER

No, I couldn't have.

CLAYTON

Last night. I heard you. The stomping. And there was screaming.

ESTHER

No, you did- You did this.

CLAYTON

It's okay.

ESTHER

You said, you said if his mother found him, she wouldn't want him so-

CLAYTON

Right.

ESTHER

You're putting things in my head. I didn't do this.

CLAYTON

Of course you did. It's okay. I understand why.

CLAYTON

You were doing it a favor, child. You didn't want it to suffer. You don't want to see it now, but you did the best thing for him. They don't know how to fend for themselves, they're so young. Helpless. Even if they find home, their mamas don't want them. I told you that. They can smell you on them. Someone else has had them. A threat. It's better off dead.

I'm not mad at you, Esther. I would have done the same thing...

He moves toward her to hug her. Esther stays in the embrace.

ESTHER

I understand.

CLAYTON

Good.

ESTHER

Sit. Let me make you breakfast.

Clayton sits down as Esther goes through the pantry.

Lightning flashes.

Diana goes back to the podium.

ESTHER

Are you still going into town?

CLAYTON

Do you want me to?

ESTHER

Maybe I could come with you. We can do this together, remember?

DIANA

I have to be honest now... Like many of you, I had remarks prepared, the Hallmark version of grief to try and spare anyone of any more pain. But I no longer have any poetry or platitudes to share. All I can say is this: Eight. That's how many years Neoma's been gone. Eight years I've searched. For eight years, I've clutched my phone until my hands blister. For years I've stayed in her room thinking she snuggled up next to me so I could keep her safe from any monster that haunts her.

Tyler's not the first person to talk to me about hope.

After all these years I should have hope. Hope is an ugly feeling. It eats at you until it's all you have left of yourself. Hope is even wanting to have a body to lay to rest because at least I'd know she wouldn't be suffering.. Eight years of this. And that may not seem like a long time. Maybe I should wait forever. But I lost Xavier and Neoma at the same time.

Esther puts her arms around Clayton as Diana speaks.

CLAYTON

I knew you'd do this one day. I knew you'd want me.

DIANA

So it's hard for me to have hope that she'll come home. Because I know I want her, but will she want me?

CLAYTON

I can take care of you. This can be our home, Esther.

Diana stops.

DIANA

She's a strong girl. I know she wanted to live.

Esther leans into Clayton as if to kiss him, but she grabs his head and slams it against the table. He tries to fight her off but she grabs ahold of him and slams him again.

CLAYTON

Esther!

NEO

That's not my name.

She keeps slamming.

DIANA

My Neoma wanted to live.

She slams him again until he's unconscious. When she's had enough, Esther steps back and looks at the damage she's done. She grabs a key from his pocket, unlocks the door, and runs.

Once she's out in the woods and realizes she's free, she screams her own name: Neoma. It's loud and primal.

Diana, overwhelmed, storms off. Tanya and Tyler go after her. Once she's at the back of the church, her phone rings. She answers it. Horror takes over her face.

DIANA

No... No...

TANYA

What's wrong?

TYLER

Ms. Diana?

DIANA

It's... Neoma...

Lights down.

A hospital room. Diana walks in and sees her child. They both pause for a moment. Neo is hopeful. Diana is horrified.

NEO

Mama? Mom.

Diana approaches her.

NEO

Mom. It's me. It's me, Neoma. It's me.

Diana shakes her head.

NEO

No, it is. It's me. I'm Neo.

DIANA

My baby. No, but my baby... You were supposed to be- I thought you were.

Diana goes to touch her but she can't.

NEO

No, please. Mama.

Diana tries to touch Neo again and then pulls away and storms out of the room as Tanya approaches.

TANYA

Diana, where are you-

Diana is gone. Tanya stops and looks at Neo. Neo is hurt.

PART II

Diana's house. Diana and Tanya whisper in the kitchen. Neo stands in her room. She touches the walls.

DIANA

Eight years, Tanya. I thought my baby was dead.

TANYA

Have you told her?

DIANA

Between me and the police, she put two and two together... How could I do this?

TANYA

You had your reasons.

A beat.

DIANA

That's a funny way of saying "I told you so."

TANYA

I didn't know if she was dead or alive just as much as you didn't. I just don't know if I could have buried her.

DIANA

I thought I could give Neoma some peace if I let her go. Or maybe, I could have some peace. Why is peace the absence of everything?

NEO

Mom! Mom!

Diana and Tanya both go to her room.

NEO

Where's my- My room?

DIANA

This is it, Neoma. Don't you remember?

NEO

Where's my stuff?

DIANA

Well, it's just right in- I haven't had time to- I've been with you the last few days and-

NEO

It should be here. Like, my orca poster- where's the picture of us and Dad-

TANYA

We can put it up soon.

NEO

No, it should be up here now. Where's my room?

DIANA

It's all in here.

NEO

Why'd you take it down in the first place? Where am I?

DIANA

You're here, baby. You're home.

NEO

No. Where's my room? I want my room. I want my bed and, and my clothes, and where are my books and stuffed animals? Where's Mr. Stuff-Stuff?

TANYA

Who?

DIANA

It's her stuffed orca. Xavier got it for her. *(To Neo)* It's just in a box over here. If you'll give me some time, I can set it back up.

NEO

Why are things in boxes?! Why am I in boxes? I was coming back. Didn't you know I was coming back?

A silence.

NEO

Mom...

No response.

Mom!

NEO

I didn't. I didn't know if-

DIANA

I can put your room back together.

NEO

No, I can do it.

Neo opens the closet door. She pulls out a box and opens it. She tries to remember where things go and she can't.

That went over-

DIANA

Please, let me do it.

NEO

She goes back to the closet. A shadow of a small rabbit appears. She freezes.

Hey, kid. You okay?

TANYA

Neo, baby, let me help you.

DIANA

Diana goes to pull things out of the closet.

No, stop. Leave it.

NEO

But you just said-

DIANA

Aunt Di, really?

TANYA

Please.

NEO

Neo exits the room and sits on the couch. She wraps herself in a blanket. Time passes.

DIANA

Neo, let me put your room together. It'll be more comfortable that way.

NEO

No, I can do it.

DIANA

Are you sure?

No response. Time passes.

TANYA

Hey Neoma. I just wanted to check on you. How are you feeling? Are you okay?

NEO

No.

TANYA

Can I get you anything? Water?

No response. Time passes.

DIANA

You've been here two weeks now. At least let me wash the blanket. It smells.

NEO

No.

DIANA

Your old one is in your room. It's in the closet.

No response. Time passes.

TANYA

Reverend Jones asked about you. He was hoping to come over and pray with you.

NEO

No.

TANYA

Can I pray with you?

No response. Time passes.

DIANA

When was the last time you ate?

NEO

I don't know. Yesterday maybe.

DIANA

Eat for me. Please? Maybe some soup?

NEO

I'm tired of soup.

DIANA

Then what do you like? I can pick something up. Maybe you can ride with me.

NEO

I'll have soup. Vegetable. Meat makes me sick, especially Spam.

DIANA

I've never fed you Spam.

NEO

Of course you didn't but that's all I ate when-

DIANA

Okay, okay. Coming right up.

No response. Time passes.

TANYA

It's been two months, Neo. People want to see you. Do you think you might be up to it? If not, no pressure. I just want to make sure you're moving along.

DIANA

Uncle Bill asked about you. Aunt Maggie, all of your cousins.

NEO

So?

TANYA

And Tyler asked about you.

NEO

He has?

TANYA

Tyler works down at the Winn-Dixie during the summer. He rang me up the other day. He's been trying to come see you but-

NEO

Why didn't anyone tell me?

DIANA

I didn't know if you were ready-

NEO

Of course I wanna see Tyler. He's my best friend. Or was, I don't know.

TANYA

He's so happy you're back. He cried a little at the register.

NEO

Tyler was always a crybaby.

TANYA

I think she's back, Auntie.

DIANA

Let's not rush it.

TANYA

We were thinking about having a small get together. Just some family and some friends if you want.

NEO

People want to see me?

DIANA

They missed you, Neo. Everyone did.

NEO

Small, right?

TANYA

As big or small are you want it to be.

NEO

Small, please.

TANYA

Really?

NEO

Yeah.

DIANA

I'll start making a grocery list.

Lights shift.

Neo's party at Diana's place. Neo stands center while Tyler, Diana, and Tanya stand around her. Party music and other guests can be heard. It is not a small party.

TYLER, DIANA, TANYA

WELCOME HOME, NEOMA!!

Neo smiles sheepishly.

DIANA

We're so glad to have you back, baby.

NEO

It's good to be back, Mom. I missed you.

TYLER

I missed you.

NEO

Oh my God, Tyler? Is that-

TYLER

You don't recognize me?

NEO

It's been eight years, Tyler.

TYLER

Right. My bad. You look the same.

TANYA

I'm not working on Robyn anymore. I'm working on something different.

NEO

Oh.

TANYA

Well, actually, it's done. I'm about to do a book tour.

TYLER

Anyway, we all missed you.

NEO

Who's "all?"

TYLER

Me, Devendra, Laura Jean, Yaritza, Ben.

NEO

I haven't heard those names in forever.

TYLER

They're still around. Well, Devendra is here for the summer. He goes to UCF too.

NEO

What are you studying?

TYLER

Marine Bio. I get to talk about sea turtles all the time.

NEO

Wow, that's amazing.

TYLER

But hey, I gotta tell you something-

DIANA

Excuse one second, Tyler. Let me get you something to eat. Aunt Maggie made ribs.

NEO

I don't eat meat, remember?

DIANA

Right, right. Let me get you some turkey.

NEO

That's still meat.

DIANA

Yeah, but it's not *meat* meat.

NEO

It had a face. Flesh and blood. Just like me. I'm good.

TANYA

I'm reading at all these elementary schools and libraries. Jacksonville, Pittsburgh, Houston-

NEO

Any in Alaska?

TANYA

Actually I do.

TYLER

L.J. planned to be here but she just had a baby.

NEO

Baby?

TYLER

Yeah, big old baby. Butterball turkey looking thing.

DIANA

Okay so no turkey. Maybe a salad.

NEO

I had fries, Mom. I'm good. Really.

TANYA

I leave at the end of the summer.

NEO

But I just got back.

TYLER

I know you just got back but maybe you can come out some time? I can come pick you up.

NEO

You drive now. Of course.

TYLER

I got my brother's old ride. That teal Malibu.

NEO

Ew.

TYLER

Anyway, they wanna throw you a real party.

NEO

Like a bonfire?

TYLER

Yeah, at L.J.'s place.

NEO

Let me think on it. I'm not much for leaving these days.

TYLER

Then I'll come to you.

DIANA

It's your party and I know you think I'm picking on you-

NEO

Then stop-

DIANA

But it's been two months. I just wanna take care of you, baby.

TYLER, DIANA, TANYA

We all missed you.

Tyler, Diana, and Tanya all speak at the same time,
overwhelming Neo.

TYLER

It probably feels like the world has changed so much but everyone is just the same. Devendra still goofy as hell. He's at UCF and he said he'd drive into town to see you. And Yaritza is a nail tech. Her mom runs her own salon now downtown near Jenkins Auditorium. Maybe we can stop by one day. They all missed you. I did too. We were so hype when we got the news-

TANYA

God, look at you. I can't believe it. You're here. I thought about you everyday. I had to. There was a time when I tried to distract myself from thinking about you but honestly, that was harder. You came from me. I know I had no control over the situation, but I'm a few glasses of Chardonnay in and I need you to know that I would have handled this differently-

DIANA

It's the mother in me. I'm sorry, I can't help it. I've been feeding you since you were a tiny thing. When you were gone, I would sometimes make your favorite foods.

DIANA

You used to love my meatloaf. I made it once as an experiment and I thought it was okay but you loved it! Maybe because you could slather it with ketchup. I see you still like ketchup. I saw it on your fries earlier. You want some fries, baby. I just wanna take care of you-

Diana goes to hug Neo. Neo shoves her off.

NEO

STOP IT! DON'T TOUCH ME.

The music cuts out and everyone gets quiet. Neo looks at all the party guests. Diana is embarrassed.

NEO

You do not get to touch me anymore. No one does. You had your chance.

Neo runs to her room.

TANYA

What did you do?

DIANA

Nothing, I just went to hug-

Tanya runs after Neo.

DIANA

I need to, um, go to the kitchen...

TYLER

I'll help you.

Lights shift to Neo's room. She takes in the emptiness of her room. She slumps to the floor. Tanya enters.

TANYA

Can I turn on the light?

NEO

I wish you wouldn't.

Tanya turns on the light anyway. She looks around.

TANYA

What the-

NEO

What?

TANYA

It's still empty. But I would have thought you would have fixed it up by now.

Beat.

NEO

You know, a few days ago, I found the program for my memorial service in the drawers with Chinese takeout menus. Who's idea was that?

TANYA

To put them in the dresser-

NEO

To give me a funeral? It's one thing to close the case, to not look anymore. But to actually end things? To "ashes to ashes, dust to dust" me?

TANYA

She said it would bring her some closure.

NEO

I got no closure from dad's service.

TANYA

Well, I look at it this way, kid: She was wrong and I'm happy for it.

NEO

Did you ever think I was-

TANYA

I didn't know what to think anymore. Not until she told me she was going to the police. I begged. I told her you were my baby too, and I couldn't ever abandon you like that. But if she didn't want you, I did. I couldn't abandon you.

Look I was a dumb kid back in the day, time passes and you know what? I was thinking maybe if you were mine, truly mine, we wouldn't be in this situation...

They sit in that for a beat.

TANYA

Listen, if you ever wanna stay with me, let me know. I mean, I only got a couch but if you just need some space, I got a little space for you. Okay, kid?

Tanya goes to kiss Neo on the forehead but stops herself.
She gets up.

TANYA

C'mon. Let's go back to the party.

Music starts up again.

NEO

You hear that? They don't need me... I'll be fine.

Turn off the lights, please.

Tanya turns off the lights and exits. Neo gets up and moves to the closet. Suddenly, the party music turns into eerie children's music. Then, in a voice over, Clayton's voice can be heard continuing the story of Robyn the Rabbit.

CLAYTON (VOICE OVER)

At the lake, Robyn met her reflection
They smil'd gently, no apprehension
Robyn jumped in and caused a great splash
"This is much fun, I hope it will last"

NEO

Who's there?

CLAYTON (VOICE OVER)

Soon, daylight came and Robyn was tired
But "Hello down, there!" a big voice fired

Robyn the Rabbit so far from home
"A new friend," he thought, all cloaked in foam

NEO

No, stop it. Don't-

CLAYTON (VOICE OVER)

"Robyn the Rabbit, that is my name,
Splishing and splashing, that is my game."

“Robyn, dear girl, my name is Rolf
I am, though big, just a wee, weak wolf.
Would you like to join me where I stay,
Where we can frolic and eat and play?”

“Play you say?” inquired the rabbit
“Yes of course, I make it a habit.”

A shadow of a rabbit appears on the closet door. Neo is frightened by it and searches for the light switch. When she finds it, the rabbit, music, and Clayton's voice disappear and are replaced with light and the party music. Neo catches her breath and returns to the party. Lights shift.

The following morning. Neo and Diana are eating breakfast at the kitchen table.

NEO

I missed coffee. Or maybe I missed creamer more. Hazelnut creamer.

DIANA

I used to not let you drink coffee. Did they- did he- let you drink coffee?

NEO

No, but Tanya did. Tanya let me when I would go stay with her when I was little.

DIANA

Right...

They sip their coffee and eat quietly. Then-

DIANA

I'm sorry about the party.

NEO

It's whatever.

DIANA

No, it's not. I shouldn't have pushed you. I thought you were ready. Everyone was just so excited to see you.

NEO

I'm not used to that many people all at once. Hovering. At the party, some people were like exactly the same... Am I the same?

DIANA

Sure. You're my baby.

Diana tries to reach across the table for Neo's hand. Neo flinches.

DIANA

No, I'm sorry. I know better.

Quiet.

DIANA

I saw you talking to Tyler about school. Have you thought about school or anything?

NEO

Nope. That was the one good thing about being held captive. No homework.

Neo snickers to herself. Diana is not amused.

NEO

Sorry. Bad joke.

DIANA

Very.

NEO

Bad joke but a good sign, right? A sign that I'm adjusting. That's what my therapist thinks. Or did she say I was deflecting?

They awkwardly nibble again.

NEO

No, I haven't thought about school. Don't I have to finish like 7th grade or whatever?

DIANA

I'm sure there are ways around that. Due to the circumstances-

NEO

Please don't talk like that.

DIANA

Talk like what?

NEO

Tip toeing around what happened. "Due to the circumstances." You sound like Channel 9.

DIANA

Which by the way, CNN emailed me. They were wondering if we'd like to sit down with-

NEO

Nope. I'm done with interviews. The paper was enough. I'm not trying to be the poster child for missing kids or whatever.

DIANA

Formerly missing kids. And they were just interested because it's not everyday that girls come home. Especially Black girls. I know all of the statistics and-

NEO

Did you go on TV a lot?

DIANA

No. Just once. I was already grieving and I don't do that well. Remember when your father passed? Anyway, I was grieving and the thought of having to do it publicly? My work is behind the scenes. Maybe they should have approached Tanya.

NEO

Grieving. People only grieve when someone dies.

DIANA

No, not really. People grieve when they lose something. Someone.

NEO

You really thought I was dead? You went to the police. You went to the courthouse. You-

DIANA

Not at first I didn't...

NEO

But after seven years, times up, am I right?

DIANA

Eight years and it's not like that.

NEO

Then what it's like?

DIANA

You're upset. We're both upset, I'm not gonna argue with you.

A silence.

DIANA

I have something I wanna show you.

She opens her phone and pulls up an email.

DIANA

Two tickets to Alaska.

NEO

To do what?

DIANA

To see the whales. I mean there's more stuff to do there but there are whales! You loved the whales. I always wanted to take you to SeaWorld. It was up the street but you refused. "They're evil," you said. You were like eight.

NEO

They still are.

DIANA

So you'll come? It's in August. Tanya can't go with me anymore because of work so I was gonna go alone but once they found you I-

NEO

Nobody found me. I escaped.

DIANA

You know what I mean-

NEO

No, I don't. You stopped looking for me. I fought him off, I ran down the hill and into Walmart. I found the police. Not the other way around. Okay?

DIANA

Okay. Anyway, I-

NEO

And since when do you like Tanya?

DIANA

I like Tanya just fine.

NEO

It's a shame y'all's daughter had to be abducted for y'all to get along.

DIANA

My daughter. My daughter was, was-

NEO

You can't even say it.

DIANA

So I don't like Tanya. If it wasn't for you, she would just be Xavier's sister's child to me. She's childish, and the little fame she's got has gone to her head. But I love Tanya because you are here and I wouldn't have you if I didn't have her. So I thought she and I could go on a trip in your honor. But then things changed, and I don't know, I've been thinking the last few days and maybe we should go.

NEO

You thought I was dead. Why?

DIANA

It had been so long. I came home to no one for eight years. I knew Xavier wasn't coming home, but you? Every time the phone rang, every time someone knocked, my heart thought it was you. I didn't know anymore.

NEO

I can't get Reverend Jones' voice out of my head. Last Sunday, he preached about Lazarus. And it took me a second to remember that story and when I did I thought, "Did anyone weep for me?"

DIANA

I wept for you all the time, Neoma. But a part of me wondered if you wanted to be found. Neo, you were only 25 minutes away. Did you know?

NEO

Of course I wanted to be found! I was twelve.

DIANA

You ran away from me. Do you remember that?

NEO

I wanna stay with Tanya. She offered.

DIANA

Offered? She offered?

NEO

I just need some space. Please.

DIANA

Neoma Baines, space? We had space for eight years. How much more space could you want from me?

NEO

I don't have any, Mama. I thought I was coming home. Why is my room empty?

DIANA

It doesn't have to be. I told I could do it.

Neo gets up to leave.

DIANA

Where are you going now?

NEO

I'm just gonna go sit in the car. Keys, please?

No response.

NEO

Keys?

DIANA

(handing over her keys)

Fine. It's not like you haven't left me before.

A beat.

NEO

You know... Clay- He had a T.V. and he'd flip between news channels. I always hoped I'd catch your voice looking for me.

NEO

When I saw you at the hospital, before I realized how messed up I was, all I wanted you to do was touch me, and you couldn't. One more disappointment and I'll- I have to go.

Neo exits, leaving Diana all alone. Lights shift.

We see Neo on Tanya's couch trying to fall asleep. In the dark, loud, cartoonish hopping sounds pulse through the house.

Over the hopping, we hear the story of Robyn the Rabbit. Diana, in a soft, motherly voice, reads the story. Eerie children's music plays underneath.

DIANA (VOICE OVER)

Ree the Rabbit was Robyn's sweet mom
She cared for all things, always stayed calm
But she awoke and began to fret,
"Where is my girl? To home she should get!

NEO

Mama?

The hopping grows louder.

DIANA (VOICE OVER)

Down the way, Robyn did think of her
As the wolf brightened upon sight of her fur

DIANA (VOICE OVER)

His teeth gleaned as he thirsted for flesh
Blood in Rolf's eyes, Robyn began to thresh

Robyn the Rabbit, so far from home
Why did she leave her ma all alone

NEO

Hello! Mom?

A large shadow of The Rabbit, now standing on two feet,
begins to loom over Neo.

NEO

Robyn?

The Rabbit doesn't speak but he continues to move
toward her.

NEO

Stop. Please.

Robyn continues.

NEO

Help! Help.

TANYA

Neoma. Are you okay?

The music and the voiceover disappear. Tanya appears in front of Neo as she catches her breath.

TANYA

You were having a bad dream. I'm here now. You okay?

NEO

I saw him. Why won't he go away?

TANYA

You didn't do anything wrong, Neoma. He can't touch you anymore. He's gone. Locked away.

NEO

Wait it wasn't. Never mind. Did I wake you up?

TANYA

No... I usually write late at night out here, and I figured you were asleep so-

Neo looks around and sees Tanya's laptop is on a table.

NEO

You're working, I'm sorry.

TANYA

Neoma...

She grabs Neo's hand. She flinches again.

NEO

I'm sorry. I'm not ready for that. Not from anyone.

TANYA

Okay, but look at me. It's okay. You're safe right now. He's not going to hurt you. He's locked up far away. I'm not going to hurt you. Stay here as long as you need to...

NEO

Thanks.

TANYA

When was the last time you talked to Diana?

Quiet.

TANYA

You gotta talk to her sometime. She's your-

Neo shoots her a look.

TANYA

She raised you, Neoma.

NEO

She raised me and she let me go. Why'd you let her?

TANYA

No, no. I fought her. Hard. You saw how we used to argue? Way worse than that. "She'll come home. You gotta have hope." I was with her when she did it, when she went to the police and to the court. She cried like a baby the whole time. Cried more than I seen anybody cry. But I said something. I couldn't just sit by and let you go again, and I'm not gonna let you go now.

NEO

So I can stay here?

TANYA

I just said you-

NEO

I mean, for forever.

TANYA

You wanna live on a couch for forever?

NEO

I was on the couch before.

TANYA

I don't know. And besides, I'm going on the book tour soon.

NEO

I know, you told me at the party.

TANYA

I saw Tyler at the grocery store today. He wants to know if you wanna hang out. I told him he can come over whenever you want.

NEO

I'll text him in the morning...

A beat.

TANYA

I was thinking...Would you wanna go on tour with me? If you're feeling up to it.

NEO

Me?

TANYA

I don't see anyone else in here. And it doesn't have to be for the whole time, but since Alaska is a stop I thought-

NEO

Well, yes. We were supposed before I was-

TANYA

Right. I know it doesn't change anything but I wanted to make up for it. Let me check in with Diana.

NEO

Why?

TANYA

Why not?

NEO

She had me in boxes. My toys, my books, my life. Everything stashed away, out of sight. And for years, that was the one thing I didn't think changed. My room.

You wouldn't have done that. You would have waited for me. Remember, you said that.

A beat.

TANYA

It's in August. I can talk to my people. We can go see the dolphins.

NEO

Orcas. I like orcas.

TANYA

Right. Let's go to bed for now, alright?

NEO

I don't wanna go back to sleep. I can't sleep.

Quiet

TANYA

If I stay here and watch you, you think you can sleep?

Neo nods. Tanya turns off the lights and sits with Neo.
Time passes.

TANYA

Neo, you sleep?

Quiet. Tanya takes that as her cue to leave and she goes
back to her computer. Restless, Neo pops back up.

Lights shift.

A few days later. Tyler and Neo sitting in Tanya's living room.

NEO

So I find the main key in his pocket. He had a ton of locks and shit on the door. And I
grab it and run for the door. And I go down the hill, running.

NEO

I hadn't run that fast since, since we had to do cross country or whatever in sixth grade.
It's almost like I teleported into the Walmart, I moved so fast, and, and -

TYLER

Go on.

NEO

I'm trying but- I'm not boring you?

TYLER

No... What about the rabbit?

NEO

What about it?

TYLER
What happened to it?

NEO
It's dead. It died.

TYLER
He killed the rabbit?

NEO
Don't we have a party to go to?

TYLER
It's not going anywhere... Now, finish your story.

NEO
Do I have to?

TYLER
No... But you were in the middle of it so-

NEO
Anyway, I'm in Wal Mart. And then I found a cop and I just kept saying my name. "Neo Baines, Neo Baines."

TYLER
Did he recognize you? What'd you'd look like?

An awkward silence. She tries to respond but can't.

TYLER
My fault./You don't have to answer that.

NEO
I know everybody wants a horror story.

TYLER
The crew. They keep asking me if I know anything.

NEO
And you don't. Got it?

TYLER
No, I don't. But I'm just curious because-

NEO
I'm here, isn't that enough?

TYLER
Of course it is. It's more than enough.

NEO
Good.

TYLER
I knew you'd come back, you know?

NEO
How?

TYLER
I just did. It was a feeling...

Quiet. She just stares at him.

NEO
I thought you'd go away for school.

TYLER
UCF isn't close.

NEO
It's like 40 minutes from here. Hop, skip, and a jump.

TYLER
Tell that to my gas tank.

NEO
You got an old ass car. It was old when Korey got it.

TYLER
It's better than nothing.

She studies his face.

TYLER
What are you staring at?

NEO
You look like a baby.

TYLER

Huh?

NEO

I know, but I mean you look exactly the same. But like, you got a mustache. It's not much but you got one. And you got like a deep voice. But it sounds like the voice you made when you were like trying to sound like your dad. And all that and you still look like a baby. Yeah, like you're trying to look older. Be older.

TYLER

Well, I am older. Older than when you saw me last at least.

NEO

I know. It's just weird. Do I seem older?

TYLER

You know we're the same age, right?

NEO

I feel like I'm like 12 and 200 all at the same time.

TYLER

You still talk the same, you know? Using "like" every other word.

NEO

My bad.

TYLER

No, don't apologize.

NEO

You used to hate it.

TYLER

And now I don't.

NEO

But you hated it. Like. No wait. *(She clearly starts her sentence over and tries very hard to not use the word "like")* You, Tyler, really hated it every time I did it. You would stop me if I was talking to correct me and use that Dad voice. I remember I would get really mad because I just wanted to get through a sentence without being interrupted because my mom used to do that. I would get like so fucking angry.

She's used the word "like."

NEO

No. I wouldn't "like" get angry. I would get fucking angry.

TYLER

I missed it.

NEO

Don't lie.

TYLER

I missed you. Is that a crime?

He feels himself start to cry and tries to hide it from Neo.
She ignores it knowing that's the most comfort she can offer him.

TYLER

We all missed you. Ben, Devendra, Laura Jean, Yaritza. All of us.

NEO

Jeez, Laura Jean. Good old L.J. with her Butterball Baby.

TYLER

I should have never told you that.

NEO

And she's married now? How?

TYLER

She's known Shane since freshman year. It was a nice wedding.

NEO

Nice nice or Clermont nice?

TYLER

Oh Clermont nice for sure. She had it at Jenkins Auditorium, there was Natty Light in champagne flutes.

NEO

She would. She used to pick on you and I'd have to tell her to back off. I don't even remember for what-

TYLER

Because my mom got my shoes at Payless.

NEO

Yeah, at Payless versus what? Walmart. We all had shoes from one or the other.

TYLER

No, no. Hers were from Target... You shoved her into the wall after Social Studies. I had never seen you do anything like that before.

NEO

Well, she should have left you alone. I can't believe you're friends with her now. I used to hate her.

TYLER

She used to hate you too but-

NEO

She doesn't anymore? Me getting abducted made you bitches soft.

TYLER

Alright, you have to play nice at the party.

NEO

And y'all are married? Who does that?

TYLER

Ease up, I'm not married.

NEO

How come? Are you waiting for your betrothed to have enough alpacas for her dowry? Hey, is that alpaca farm still here-

TYLER

Of course it's still here. But alpacas aren't enough anymore, you gotta grow oranges too...

NEO

It don't matter. Look, I'm just glad that out of everyone in this goofy ass town, you're the one who stayed behind.

TYLER

Right...

NEO

We're gonna get out of here though. Maybe I can get my GED or whatever, and I can go to school next fall or something. And and and, maybe I can go visit you this fall.

TYLER

I would love that but...

NEO

But what?

TYLER

Hey, I brought something for you. Does Tanya still keep a C.D. player?

NEO

Yeah, it's right over there... Keep it down. Tanya's working.

Tyler pulls out a C.D. and puts it into the player. He skips through it. "Never Gonna Give You Up" by The Black Keys starts playing. Tyler hums a little of it to himself.

TYLER

You remember this song?

NEO

I introduced you to this song.

TYLER

No, you didn't.

NEO

Yes. Yes, I absolutely did.

TYLER

My brother had the C.D. Matter of fact, it was still in his car when he gave it to me.

NEO

I've known this song my whole life. My parents love this song.

TYLER

Ms. Diana likes The Black Keys?

NEO

No, no. It's a cover.

TYLER

It's a cover?

NEO

Yup. And I told you that. When I introduced you to the song.

She sings a bit of the song, he joins in.

NEO

Wait. Didn't you leave that C.D. at my house? The last time I saw you?

TYLER

Right... Korey was looking for it sometime after you... He went by your house and asked Ms. Diana about it. Your mom gave it to him and then started crying. My mom was so pissed at him.

A beat.

NEO

Anyway, I'm gonna come visit you. Do you ever go to college parties?

TYLER

Do I look like I go to college parties?

A beat.

NEO

Honestly, I can't imagine you at a real party. Oh, man, we used to talk about going to parties all the-

TYLER

Neo. Neoma.

NEO

What?

TYLER

I'm not gonna be here this fall.

NEO

Oh. Okay. Um. What are you... Studying abroad or something?

TYLER

Or something. I'm transferring.

NEO

Where? Eckerd, Tampa? I remember those were on our list. Those are really good schools.

TYLER

Yeah, yeah, definitely.

NEO

So which one? Eckerd or Tampa?

TYLER

Duke.

NEO

Well, that's not Eckerd or Tampa.

TYLER

No... But if you remember-

NEO

Stop asking me if I remember things. Of course, I remember.

TYLER

It was on our list.

NEO

The top of our list. You must've turned out to be real smart.

TYLER

Yeah... I mean, no. Well, it took me a couple of tries. And I gotta do an extra year. You know, not everything transfers over.

NEO

You're smart, Tyler. It's fine.

TYLER

You are too. I'm sure if you weren't-

NEO

But I was, so-

TYLER

But you're here... And you can get in. If I could do it, shit-

NEO

I'm not going this fall, am I?

TYLER

No, but you could. Someday.

NEO

I didn't get to finish the seventh grade. Remember? Remember?

TYLER

Neoma-

NEO

Ugh, don't do that. Don't call me by my whole name. You never call me by-

TYLER

Neo. Neo...

NEO

I'm happy for you, Tyler. I'm glad one of us got it.

TYLER

We were supposed to do it together.

Awkward pause.

TYLER

Hey look, we should get ready to go...

NEO

What if I didn't want to go?

TYLER

You gotta go. Everyone's waiting on you.

NEO

I don't care about everyone. Can't we just sit around listening to music? Can't something be the way it used to be?

TYLER

Maybe another time.

NEO

Maybe.

Tyler gets up and starts the song over again. They start singing the song to themselves.

TYLER

I missed you, Neo.

NEO

I missed you too.

Neo closes her eyes and is transported back in time. The song continues to play.

PART III

Eight years earlier. Diana and Neo sit on a couch. Neo's head is in her mother's lap, and Diana runs her fingers over her hair. "Never Give You Up" by Jerry Butler plays. Diana sings along to the chorus.

DIANA

"Never gonna give you up, no matter how you treat me. Never gonna give you up, so don't you think of leaving..."

Me and your daddy used to sing this song all the time. "Never gonna give you up..."

She hums to herself.

NEO

I've heard that a million times.

DIANA

Neoma, Neoma, Neoma. My little Neoma. I love you...

NEO

I'm not little. I'm twelve. I'm almost thirteen.

DIANA

You'll always be little to me. I love you.

NEO

You already said that.

DIANA

I could say it a million times and it wouldn't be enough. I love you.

NEO

I love you too.

DIANA

You shouldn't have to do this. Little girls shouldn't have to mourn so soon.

Beat.

NEO

Can Tyler come over afterwards?

DIANA

Why?

NEO

Because he's my friend-

DIANA

Just friends?

NEO

Ew. Yes. And I'm his only friend. If he doesn't come over here, where will he go?

DIANA

Right, right. Poor Tyler, a lost puppy.

NEO

Speaking of puppies-

DIANA

Here we go. I done already told you about-

NEO

No, no. I wanted to say that I no longer want a dog.

DIANA

Good.

NEO

They are docile creatures. I would like a rabbit.

DIANA

God, no.

NEO

They're very smart, Mama. And well-behaved if you train them. And clever. They can learn all kinds of tricks-

DIANA

Maybe.

NEO

You say that every time. I'm starting to think you mean no.

DIANA

Aw, my baby is growing up.

Diana kisses her on the forehead.

NEO

Mama, please?

DIANA

A rabbit? I don't even know where you got that idea.

NEO

I saw one in the backyard and-

DIANA

You didn't touch it, did you?

NEO

No.

DIANA

Good. Now go put on your shoes...

NEO

Dad said we would talk about it seriously.

DIANA

I know, baby. And we will. Honest... I know you're upset. But not today, Neoma.

The doorbell rings. Diana turns off the music and goes to answer the door.

DIANA

If this is another casserole, I swear-

It's Tanya.

DIANA

I wish it were a casserole.

Hi, Auntie Diana.

TANYA

Tanya!!

NEO

Neo!

TANYA

They hug.

I thought you were meeting us at the funeral home.

DIANA

Well if it's okay with you, I thought I'd ride with you and Miss Neo.

TANYA

You can.

NEO

She can?

DIANA

Please?

NEO

Fine. I'm gonna go put on my shoes.

DIANA

She exits to her room.

How you holding up, kid?

TANYA

I'm okay.

NEO

You don't have to be tough with me. I'm hurt. Uncle X was my favorite uncle. Let me ask again. How you holding up?

TANYA

It's not fair.

NEO

Tanya hugs the child.

TANYA

I know... It's gonna be okay. He loved you and he lived a good life. I couldn't have raised you better. And your real dad damn sure couldn't so-

Let me look at you. How are you almost a teenager? Slow down, slow down.

NEO

I can't help it.

TANYA

And looking more like me everyday. Except those eyes. That's Uncle X all day. Now, this hair. You got that from me. How long it take for Diana to comb through this?

NEO

Centuries.

TANYA

I bet. We gotta get you outta these pigtails. She could at least put you in a puff... I won't mess with it now, but next time you hang out with me, I'll hook you up.

NEO

When's that?

TANYA

Oh, I don't know... I'm leaving in July.

NEO

Again?

TANYA

Yes, again. The kids love Robyn. I'm heading west this time. Cali, Arizona, Washington, and Alaska.

NEO

Can I go?

TANYA

I don't know about that, kid.

NEO

Why not? I'm not doing anything this summer.

TANYA

Diana didn't put you in day camp?

NEO

Day camp is for little kids. I'm home this summer. There's nothing to do here.
Everything's so boring.

TANYA

Right, right. Let me see what I can do. I'd love the company.

NEO

Promise?

TANYA

I promise I'll check with Diana.

Diana enters.

DIANA

Check what?

TANYA

I'll tell you in the car. Let's go.

Diana and Neo collect their things and they all exit to the car. Lights shift.

After the funeral. Diana and Tanya are in the kitchen washing and drying dishes. Neo and Tyler are in her room. She's reading from a book. Tyler is obviously bored.

NEO

Rolf's eyeballs grew wide thinking of meat
Robyn then hopped to his floppy feet
And dashed to the door, reached for the knob
But Rolf's mouth still drip dropped like a slob

"I thought we were friends," the wild wolf sobbed
"This is your home too, don't leave me robbed.
Please stay awhile, I'll show you no wrath
Here, look, I even drew you a bath."

Robyn the Rabbit wanted to rove
Until he saw his bath was on the stove
Rolf grabbed the boy by his big old ears
And held him over the pot he feared

“Please don’t cook me, I’m just a child
With a ma, pa, and heart so wild”
Let me be free so I can grow up
For now I am as big as that cup
And I had dreams before I was snatched
I had plans for myself not yet hatched

TYLER

Robyn is dumb.

NEO

No he isn't!

TYLER

He didn't know not to go with that big ass wolf with them big ass teeth?

NEO

That's not the point of the story. The point is-

TYLER

The point is I'm bored. Don't you know any other stories?

NEO

Yeah.

TYLER

Then why keep reading this one?

NEO

Because my bio-mom wrote it. And my mom-mom reads it to me.

TYLER

Still? Neo. That's a book is for kids.

NEO

I got other books. I got books on sea turtles and whales. Did you know that orcas travel in the same pods their whole lives? A whale could be like 30 and be like "Yeah that's my mama over there."

TYLER

You told me that a bajillion trillion times.

NEO

That's like, not a number.

TYLER

Why do you use "like" every other word?

NEO

No, I don't.

TYLER

Yes, you do.

NEO

Shut up. You better stop.

TYLER

Or what?

NEO

Or else. You have to be nice to people with dead parents.

TYLER

You only have one dead parent.

Neo is hurt by this. She starts to cry but hides her face with her stuffed orca. Ignoring her tears is the most comfort Tyler can offer.

Tanya and Diana in the kitchen.

TANYA

So you're gonna ignore me the whole time or-

No response.

TANYA

I don't have to be here, you know?

DIANA

I didn't ask you to stay.

TANYA

So you do know how to speak?

DIANA

I'm just upset, Tanya

TANYA

I can imagine-

DIANA

No you can't.

TANYA

But I wish you would just talk to me instead of slamming dishes... Now, I know you loved Uncle X very much. You and Neoma must be hurting something awful right now.

DIANA

That's not it and you know it.

TANYA

That's not it? We just left your husband's funeral and that's not it?

Diana clams up again.

Back to the kids as Diana and Tanya wash and dry dishes.

NEO

You better be nice to me. You'll miss me when I'm gone.

TYLER

Huh?

NEO

I'm gonna go on a trip.

TYLER

To Disney? I go to Disney all the time.

NEO

You go to Disney all the time because your mama works there. Nah, I'm gonna go on a real trip with Tanya, my bio-mom.

TYLER

Bio-mom sounds so goofy.

NEO

Why?

TYLER

Like it sounds like a super hero. The Adventures of Bio-Mom!!

NEO

She is a super hero. She's way cooler than my mom-mom. She writes books. She wrote this book for me. Robyn the Rabbit. See?

She opens the book to the dedication page.

NEO

Neoma Baines. That's me.

TYLER

So?

NEO

She promised to take me on her trip. Can I tell you something?

TYLER

What?

NEO

She's gonna go to Alaska! You know what that means?

TYLER

You need a big jacket.

NEO

It means I'll get to see the orcas!!

TYLER

Can't you just drive to the beach and see them?

NEO

Don't you know anything? They don't get close enough to our coast.

TYLER

Whatever. You know what's cooler? Sea turtles.

NEO

Psh. No.

TYLER

Yes! Didn't you see *Finding Nemo*? They surf.

NEO

That's a movie for *children*. Anyway-

TYLER

I'm gonna see them hatch one day. My dad said one day when he has off, he's gonna drive me and my mom to Cocoa Beach so we can see them hatch. And then I'm gonna go to a big school like Duke and study them all the time.

NEO

We're gonna go there. And when we do, they'll tell you orcas are the superior animal.

A beat.

NEO

Turtles kinda surf, I guess.

TYLER

And orcas are cool. They look like Oreos... Look at what I got.

Tyler goes into his pocket and pulls out a Black Keys C.D.

NEO

Where'd you get that?

TYLER

I stole it.

NEO

From Korey?

TYLER

Yup yup. You still got a C.D. player, don't ya?

NEO

Yes!

Neo snatches the C.D. and pops it into the player. They start dancing.

Back to the kitchen. Diana looks over at the door.

DIANA

Neoma Baines.

Neoma pauses the music. Diana walks over to her door and opens it.

DIANA

Neoma Baines. How many times have I told you not to keep this door closed when- Keep the door open.

NEO

It's just Tyler.

TYLER

Yeah, it's just me, Ms. Diana.

DIANA

Keep the door open. Please. And don't dance like that.

NEO

How'd you know I was-

Diana goes back to the dishes before she lets her daughter finish.

TYLER

Yo, maybe Ms. Diana does has super powers.

NEO

Shut up and dance.

Tyler turns the music back on and the kids dance.

Diana turns to Tanya and keeps her tone down.

DIANA

I just wish you wouldn't make her any promises.

TANYA

What promises?

DIANA

Alaska, Tanya? Really?

TANYA

What? I didn't promise her that.

DIANA

That not what I heard.

TANYA

She's twelve, Diana. I promised I'd talk to you.

DIANA

You shouldn't be promising her anything. This is like raising two children sometimes.

TANYA

You're not gonna let her go?

DIANA

You do know that I don't have to, right? Right?!!

This last question gets Tyler and Neo's attention.

TYLER

They're yelling.

NEO

They do that sometimes.

Neo turns up the volume on their music and they continue to play.

TANYA

I know you don't. Shit.

DIANA

Good.

TANYA

Raising her or not, Diana, I'm her family. Uncle X and I were blood.

DIANA

Listen, Tanya, I appreciate you being here and looking out for her. I really do. I gotta keep her focused for the school year. She's already scheduled to see a counselor and I don't wanna disrupt that.

TANYA

But maybe some time away from here would do her some good. And she can see that there's more to life than here.

DIANA

What's wrong with Clermont? There's not much to it.

TANYA

That's the problem.

DIANA

I just don't want her to get hurt

TANYA

Who's gonna hurt her?

DIANA

I'm glad she has someone younger to look up to, okay? There's something new everyday and I can't keep up. And she loves you. But I want to make perfectly clear who the mom is in the situation. And you don't live a normal life.

TANYA

My life is just fine.

DIANA

I didn't say it wasn't. I'm just saying you work odd hours. You're in and out of town. And when you're not traveling, you're what? Cooped up in your apartment scribbling?

TANYA

Scribbling?

DIANA

Writing. Sorry.

TANYA

No, fuck you, Diana. What? What you do is so much better? Taking calls and setting up meetings for other people. Well guess what? I'm actually in meetings. I'm actually doing business.

NEO

Hey, you want some juice?

TYLER

Is it safe?

NEO

Just ignore them.

They pause their music and get up to head to the kitchen.

DIANA

And the only reason you can do that is because of me! Xavier and I wanted her! We took her off your hands because you were no more than 18. I'm old enough to be your mama. So fuck you for trying to belittle what I do for a living because it pays for the child that you couldn't take care of so she can have a normal life and you should be fucking thanking me every goddamn day that somebody loved her and that that somebody is me! So no! I know what's best for my daughter and I will not let her go running around the country with you... I was trying to be nice letting you be in her life but fuck that!

TANYA

What about what she wants?

DIANA

Fuck what she wants, she's twelve, goddammit. Twelve. I know what's best. I do. Not her, not you. She's not going anywhere with you. Fuck...

Diana takes a breath and looks around the room. She sees Neo and Tyler looking at her. Neo's heard the whole thing.

DIANA

Neoma... Tyler... I... Y'all want some juice?

TYLER

I should... Um... My mom said I have to go home immediately.

NEO

Huh? You don't even have a phone.

TANYA

You don't have to leave.

DIANA

This is not your house, Tanya.

TYLER

No, I gotta. My little cousin Alex has a basketball game. YMCA. Serious stuff.

NEO

But-

TYLER

Sorry, Neo. Just... If I wanted to hear grown folks yell at each other, I'd stay at my own house.

Tyler scurries out the door.

TANYA

I should go too.

NEO

No.

DIANA

Thank you.

Tanya starts grabbing her things.

TANYA

(going up to Neo)

Neoma. Kid. One day I'll take you all over the world. Just you and me.

Tanya hugs the girl.

TANYA

I'm sorry you had to hear that. She means well. I think.

Tanya exits.

DIANA

Neoma, I'm sorry you-

NEO

Why can't I go?

DIANA

Because I need you here with me.

NEO

You don't let me do anything.

DIANA

That's not true and you know it.

NEO

You're always telling me what to do. What to wear. How to walk. I can't keep my door closed.

DIANA

I just want you to be safe.

NEO

You don't think I'll be safe with Tanya? She's my mom.

The word "mom" hangs in the air.

DIANA

I'm your mom, Neoma.

NEO

I know but- She promised.

DIANA

I'm not arguing with a child.

NEO

Why do you hate me?

DIANA

You think I hate you? Please. You want me to hate you because that's easier than accepting you can't have your way all the time.

NEO

When do I get to have my way? I can't wear my hair like the other girls. You still make me wear little kid clothes. And you ask me if Tyler's ever tried to be weird with me and he's my best friend. Why would he do that?

DIANA

Because boys do stuff sometimes. Bad stuff. You don't understand but-

NEO

No, I know what you mean.

DIANA

(genuinely concerned)

You do?

NEO

Not like that. But Tyler wouldn't.

DIANA

Yes, even the Tylers of the world. Please, I would know-

NEO

I'm not you!

DIANA

And you should thank God for that. Now please. I don't want to discuss this anymore.

NEO

But I wanna go.

DIANA

Dammit, Neo. Then go!

NEO

Mom-

DIANA

Go! Your father is gone, what's another loss?

NEO

Mom, I didn't mean it. I'm sorry.

DIANA

I'm just gonna go to my room. I need to lie down.

Diana walks to her room. Neo's left all alone. She goes to her room. Time passes. She stuffs some clothes in her backpack and grabs her Robyn book. She leaves out of her window and leaves it open. Lights shift.

Neo sits alone at a bus stop. It is raining. She has her backpack and a copy of Robyn the Rabbit in her hand. She calls Tanya but the call keeps going to voicemail.

As it rains harder, Clayton sits near her but not too close. He's unassuming. Nice. Dad-like.

CLAYTON

I don't think it'll ever stop raining.

Silence.

CLAYTON

I don't know the last time we had a clear day.

Silence.

CLAYTON

Your mama didn't teach you any manners?

NEO

My mama taught me not to speak to strangers.

CLAYTON

Right of course. I teach my daughter the same thing... Is your mama here?

Silence.

CLAYTON

My wife and kid are in the car. I was hoping the rain would die down before I went back to the car.

NEO

I'm just waiting for my real mom to pick me up.

CLAYTON

Gotcha... Do you travel much by yourself?

Silence.

CLAYTON

I work for the bus station downtown, you know? In the ticketing booth... I see girls by themselves all the time. I couldn't imagine letting my daughter travel alone. There's too much going on.

NEO

I'll see my mom soon.

Silence. The rain pours a little harder. Clayton notices her book.

CLAYTON

You like to read.

NEO

Are you asking me or-

CLAYTON

Making an observation. I see your book.

NEO

Oh yeah... Um, yeah, I like to read.

CLAYTON

My daughter loves those books. Don't you think you're a little too old for them?

NEO

No.

CLAYTON

What are you? Fifteen?

NEO

Twelve... But I'll be 13 in four months.

CLAYTON

I'm sorry. I thought you were older. You're a very serious person.

NEO

Thank you.

CLAYTON

Very serious. Which is why the book doesn't make sense.

NEO

I know the author. Personally.

CLAYTON

I don't believe you.

Neo opens up her book and points to the dedication page.

NEO

That's me.

CLAYTON

Is that so? Hm. Neoma Baines. What a lovely name. Well, it's nice to meet you, Neoma. My name is Clayton. Clayton Harris.

He puts out a hand. She shakes it.

NEO

Nice to meet you, Mr. Harris.

CLAYTON

No, no. Clayton. Please.

NEO

Nice to meet you, Clayton.

CLAYTON

There you go... "Robyn the Rabbit, so far from home. Down by the lake, forever to roam."

NEO

You do know it!

He flashes a big smile.

CLAYTON

I told you I did. You didn't believe me?

NEO

Well, no.

CLAYTON

My wife, Carla, she used to work at a bookstore. In fact, that's where we met... Anyway, we have all kinds of books and I read this one to my daughter all the time. Those books are hot right now. It's good that kids are into reading.

NEO

I love to read. I love to read about orcas and sea turtles.

CLAYTON

We just got back from the beach. No sea turtles yet. And no orcas.

NEO

Orcas don't come-

CLAYTON

Close enough to the east coast to see them... I heard that on T.V. once.

NEO

Right. I wanna go see them one day. Maybe see them in Alaska. I've never been to Alaska. I haven't been up north, and I figure, what's the opposite of Florida?

CLAYTON AND NEO

Alaska!

NEO

Alaska.

CLAYTON

Alaska is far away though. You know you can see them at SeaWorld, right?

NEO

I hate SeaWorld. They're bad people. The orcas should be in the ocean. And you know, orcas stay in the same pods for life. And they split them up.

CLAYTON

I feel bad for that trainer though? You remember that?

NEO

Yeah, everybody got upset with that whale who killed that lady, and I feel sorry for her, but that whale shouldn't have been kept like that. What did they think was gonna happen?

CLAYTON

Well, they sure do put the killer in killer whale, don't they?

NEO

That's a misnomer. And I figured that anyone, anything, is able to kill or fight for their life when you bring it out of them.

Beat.

CLAYTON

Are you sure you're 12?

NEO

Almost thirteen.

The rain continues to pour.

CLAYTON

When does your mom get here?

NEO

She lives in Montverde.

CLAYTON

Oh my, that is so far from here. The rain has let up a little bit, but I don't wanna drive in it... And I'd hate to leave you here. Your bag is getting wet. Must be a leak in the awning...

She looks up at the covering and then looks at her bag.
It's clearly wet.

NEO

I'll be fine.

CLAYTON

My car is right over there. You don't want your book to get wet either. It's very personal to you... Just until the rain dies down? You can talk to my daughter.

NEO

Just until the rain dies down. I don't wanna miss her.

CLAYTON

You won't. I promise.

He gets up and offers her a hand. She takes it. Neo looks back for a second and then goes off with him.

PART IV

A bonfire. Something like "Wolf Like Me" by T.V. On The Radio is playing. Neo and Tyler dance around the fire with beers in their hands.

NEO

I haven't heard this song in so long.

TYLER

You used to love this song.

NEO

I still do.

They dance harder as the music builds, the lights grow more intense. A loud hopping sound begins to drown out the music. Neo ignores it at first, but it keeps coming. Then, over the music, the story continues in a voiceover by Neo:

NEOMA (VOICE OVER)

Look at Neoma dance in the moonlight
with a heart so wild and a smile so bright
She must think she's finally free
Now that she's with her friends and family

NEO

Tyler, can I get another one?

TYLER

Yeah, check the trunk.

Neo gets another drink and continues to jam out.

NEOMA (VOICE OVER)

Times like these she seems to be well
dancing in the backyard as the music swells
but if she stops moving, she starts thinking
And the more she thinks, the more she keeps drinking

The shadows from her mind creep from the dark
as the bonfire continues to flicker and spark
The shadows scream, wanting to break out
Some nights they rage, growing from whispers to shouts

NEO

Tyler, do you hear that?

TYLER

You okay, Neo?

NEOMA (VOICE OVER)

Neoma can dance until the nights turn to days
And she can go to therapy or even to church to pray

She can dance all she wants, it won't reverse the abuse
The beatings she took in a windowless room
The shadows keep coming from her bruised brain
Because just like Robyn, they only want to play

Suddenly, the music stops and the hopping gets its
loudest. From the fire, The Rabbit appears. It is bloody
and mangy but has that perpetual smile Easter bunnies
have. It is missing an eye. It towers over Neo and stares
her down.

Neo stops in her tracks. The Rabbit says nothing, does
nothing. Just looks at her.

Tyler keeps dancing.

NEO

We have to go.

TYLER
(still dancing)

What? We just go here!

NEO

No, we have to. I don't feel safe.

TYLER

No one's gonna hurt you out here.

NEO

Help!

Tyler sees that Neo is serious but isn't moving. He doesn't see what she's sees, but he knows it's dangerous.

He grabs her and she pushes him off.

NEO

Don't touch me!/ Why doesn't everyone need to fucking touch me!

TYLER

I'm sorry. What's going on?

NEO

I wanna go home!!

The Rabbit stands over her. She finally runs away and Tyler follows. Lights shift.

Neo and Tyler in Tanya's living room.

TYLER

So you're not gonna tell me what you saw?

NEO

There's nothing to tell.

TYLER

(Not changing his volume)

Don't lie to me, Neo. Why didn't you tell me this sooner? I asked you what happened. I asked you if you were okay.

NEO

You don't get it.

TYLER

I'm your best friend. I wanna try.

NEO

It's not that simple.

TYLER

I waited eight years for you to come back. It's that simple for me.

NEO

You weren't there.

TYLER

But I'm here. I've always been here. I knew you'd be back.

NEO

No one was expecting me. Everyone thought I was a pile of bones in the woods.

TYLER

I literally did not think that. I knew you would come back. I just knew it.

NEO

How?

TYLER

I just did. I hoped you would.

NEO

Hope? How dare you have fucking hope?

TYLER

I was twelve, Neo, what else was I supposed to have? And besides, I was right.

NEO

Oh fuck you for being right. I hate you for being right. If you knew I was alive, did you think about what he was doing to me?

TYLER

No.

NEO

No? What did you think was happening, Tyler? Did you think I was hanging out with my new friends and applying to college?

TYLER

No. I don't know, I don't know.

NEO

But you're thinking about it now. And whatever it is, it's ten times worse. Because not only did it happen, it's still happening every night.

I can feel Clayton's hands on me right now, I can feel his sweat on my chest, and his weight on top of me. I see my book on the other side of the room.

And it only happened a few times. My therapist doesn't believe me, but I promise you it did and a few times was enough. Carla was the other lady he had in the cabin. At first I thought they were in on it together but she was just as stuck as I was. The last time he did it, she fought him off of me. "Take me instead," she said. "She's so young." He beat her good that night but he didn't do it again. The rest of the time I just saw what he did to her. I even saw when she tried to escape and when he stomped her out. Threw her out back in a hole... I knew I was in real trouble then but he told me he wouldn't force me to do anything again because I'd "want him sooner or later." The day I escaped, we were in the kitchen and he thought I wanted him. He was stupid. Vulnerable. All I could see was that stupid rabbit he'd let me keep. The only good thing that happened and he took it from me.

I was starting to think I'd never have anything again. There I had something...

It's hard to explain, Tyler. It's hard to explain something as it's happening.

TYLER

I'm so sorry...

NEO

You should be sorry for having hope. I wish you had thought I was dead. I wished I was dead all the time.

TYLER

You don't mean that.

NEO

Yes, I do. Because at least you would have shown me some mercy...

TYLER

But you're alive. And I want to help. Please.

NEO

You're leaving me.

TYLER

I'm not leaving you.

NEO

Going to North Carolina isn't leaving me? Just be honest, you didn't think I'd actually come back, did you?

TYLER

I did. Really did. Ask your mom.

NEO

Keep her out of this.

TYLER

No. Ask her. I stood up at your funeral told her and everyone there that you were out there. And when we were in high school? Every once and while I'd hear whispers about you, people saying you were dead. I spoke up and said that's not true. I've gotten into a million arguments online with people who swore you were gone. And I wasn't going to apply to Duke again but I did it just for you because I knew you'd say I was being a chicken if I didn't. All of that just for you.

NEO

Poor little Tyler.

TYLER

Not to play trauma Olympics but you are not the only person fucked up over this... I want to be a good friend. Let me be a good friend.

NEO

It's not gonna change anything.

TYLER

I shouldn't have abandoned you.

NEO

What are you talking about?

TYLER

I shouldn't have left you that day. I should have stayed with you and I should have kept you from going. Or I could have gone with you.

NEO

Now that's stupid. Don't be stupid.

TYLER

I know it is but that's all I've been thinking the last eight years. And now that you're here, I hate that you can see things I don't. What can I do? Please?

A moment. She thinks on this.

NEO

I want you to pretend this didn't happen. What I saw tonight didn't happen. You tell no one. You hear me?

He nods his head.

TYLER

I wish I wasn't going to school now. I wish I could stay with you and listen to the same stupid songs and stories a millions times over.

NEO

You have to go to school, Tyler. You have to.

TYLER

Are you happy for me?

A beat.

NEO

I know I'm supposed to say yes.

TYLER

Am I asking for too much?

NEO

I'll get over myself... Everybody is so ahead of me, Tyler. When I was at L.J.'s tonight, I felt like the kid sister tagging along. People have jobs. They're going places I wanted to go. And I have what? What am I doing?

TYLER

None of us would have anything if it hadn't been for you.

NEO

I don't want to be anyone's inspiration. I don't want anyone to do things in my memory. I'm here. I want to do those things.

TYLER

And you will. I know you will.

NEO

How do you know?

TYLER

How dare I have hope, right?

They sit in silence. Tanya comes out from her room.

TYLER

Are you gonna tell your mom about the rabbit?

TANYA

What rabbit?

TYLER

Tanya, I-

TANYA

Tyler, it's late. Don't you think you should go home?

NEO

He was just saying goodbye.

TYLER

Yeah, I was just saying goodbye.

TANYA

That's fine. Neo still needs to do some packing so...

TYLER

(to Neo)

I can't believe you're still going.

TANYA

Goodnight, Tyler.

Tyler gets up to leave. There should be a hug here between Neo and Tyler but neither one of them can do it.

NEO

I'll be back before you leave for Duke.

TYLER

You better be.

Tyler exits.

TANYA

Y'all woke me up.

NEO

I'm sorry.

TANYA

Maybe I'm just not used to having people here... Anyway, you should get some rest. Big day tomorrow.

NEO

You know I'm not much for sleep these days.

TANYA

Are you excited?

NEO

Sure. It's the one thing I've wanted that I'm gonna get. Me and you. I always wanted to get to know you better.

TANYA

It's funny when people say that. I don't think I've tried to hide anything. I'm in everything I write somehow. You know me better than you think you do. Even if it's just from a book about a stupid rabbit.

NEO

I don't think Robyn is stupid.

TANYA

Don't get me wrong. I just mean I was everywhere but home when I was a teenager. Girl, I was out there. Wild as hell. Whew, if only you knew-

Neo shoots her a look.

TANYA

I won't get into the details but I will say the evidence of that is in staring me straight in the eye right now. Anyway, if I was Robyn, my mama was Ree.

Because when I got pregnant with you, most people would have thought she would have turned me away. But she just held me closer...

When I was writing the first Robyn book, I remembered this thing that I had heard growing that if you touch baby animals like Robyn that their mamas don't want them anymore. You've heard this?

NEO

I've heard that too.

TANYA

Like they can smell when their babies have been messed with or whatever... It's a myth. Mama bunnies don't do that. If anything they're just very protective. Most moms are like that. My mom was at least. And your mom is too, even with me. God, if it wasn't for your mother and father, I don't know where I'd be. I know your mother and I don't always get along but... She saved my life.

NEO

I hate when you say that. I hate when you call her my mom.

TANYA

She's your mom, Neo. She raised you. Your real dad didn't have anything to do with either of us and I didn't have claim over you anymore. Your hers.

NEO

You can be my mom too.

TANYA

No I can't... Dammit, Neo, I can't even pick up a phone. I can't even pick up a phone for a twelve-year-old kid.

NEO

What are you talking about?

TANYA

The calls? From the bus stop? I was gonna go on about how you weren't my responsibility. You were hers. And you are but- I was trying to do a nice thing for a kid, and she lost her shit on me. So when you called me, I was like fuck it. You're not my damn kid. Not the way you're her kid.

NEO

But I was a kid. I was a child.

TANYA

I wish you had called her. Why didn't you call her?

NEO

So it's my fault now?

TANYA

I'm not as good with words as folks think I am. This is my shitty way of saying sorry...

NEO

It's a little too late for that, Tanya.

TANYA

I know that. But I'm trying to do right by you now. We're family.

NEO

I need to go home. Now.

TANYA

But what about our trip?

NEO

I can't leave her again.

TANYA

I was wrong, selfish even but I didn't know what was gonna happen.

NEO

We're past that.

TANYA

I made a promise to you all those years ago.

NEO

Shit, I don't even know if she wants me now. But I just want to go home. Please?

TANYA

Of course she wants you. She loves you... I may not be your mom but I love you, Neo. I love you too.

NEO

Are we family, Tanya?

TANYA

Flesh and blood.

NEO

No I mean are we family? Do you want to do right by me?

TANYA

Yes.

NEO

Then take me home. Take me home to Diana Baines. Can you do that one thing me? Just that one? Please. No bullshit. No money. Just a drive across town.

TANYA

I can do that.

Tanya grabs her keys and they head for the door. Lights shift.

Neo enter's Diana's home in the dark. She walks towards her room. Neo cuts on the lights to see Diana sitting on the floor.

DIANA

Do you know what time it is?

No response.

DIANA

I thought you'd be headed to Alaska now to see the whales.

NEO

I could say the same to you.

DIANA

I cancelled the trip. I didn't have anybody to go with. I was gonna go alone in the first place but I'm tired of doing things by myself...

Do you need me to fix up the couch? I washed the blankets.

NEO

I can't sleep.

DIANA

We got something in common. I can't sleep either. I can never really sleep. Moms don't sleep. But I'm sure you knew that.

NEO

No I've never heard that.

DIANA

Oh, okay. Well, moms don't sleep well. But it's not even a mom of a missing kid thing. All moms go through it. First we can't sleep because we can't stop looking at you when you get here. You're amazing and helpless.

DIANA

Then you scream your heads off and don't let us sleep. Next thing we know, you're teens and there's so much trouble out there... Even if you hadn't been taken, something was bound to happen. You party a little too hard, you get a fender bender. All you really had was Tyler and that stressed me out enough. The way y'all would argue, whew, baby.

DIANA

Never saw friends break up and make up within minutes the way y'all did.

I would take any of that any day over what I got. I'd rest a little easier than I do now. At least I'd have a sense of where you were.

NEO

I'm back now.

DIANA

Are you back, Neoma?

NEO

I'm here, ain't I? Still don't have a room though.

DIANA

Last time I checked, this was your room.

Neo goes to open her closet door. There are no clothes hanging, but on the floor, there are a ton of boxes. The Rabbit steps out of the close and tours over her. Neoma freezes.

DIANA

Neoma. You okay, baby?

NEO

I'm fine.

DIANA

You don't have to pretend.

NEO

I see him all the time...

DIANA

That man can't hurt you...

NEO

Not him... Or not just him... Mama, I used to pretend that I lived in a big old house with a comfy bed instead of a cot and a sleeping bag in a room made of curtains. I even imagined Clayton differently. Way different than what you saw in court. I saw him as this dad and Carla was my mom.

NEO

And we had a big old house and we had a portrait of the wall and I had my own pink room and a ton of stuffed animals. After Carla died, things started to change...

One day, he left the front door unlocked and I got out right and I saw a rabbit. A tiny thing. I wanted to take care of him...

And Clayton actually let me keep him. But I thought about his mother and I wanted to take him back but Clayton made me keep him. "His mother won't want him anymore. You've touched him. Everybody knows that, you stupid bitch." And one night, I put Robyn in a box, and I stomped it. Just like he did Carla.

The Rabbit and Diana are taken aback by this.

NEO

And I kept stomping on him. I stomped on Robyn until my white sneakers were red... After I did it, I tried to imagine it away just like I did everything else. But I couldn't. So I had to get out before Clayton got into my head anymore than he already was. Before I could hurt anyone else he might bring home.

I wanted to be dead for so long but there was a moment when Robyn was in my arms that I wanted you to hold me. I thought about his mama and how he might want to be in her arms, and I hoped that if he found her, she'd take him back... And when I broke out and was running down the hill, I thought "surely humans don't do that to their own. They always take them back." And when I got back here, you proved me wrong. You didn't even wait for me to come back to know if you wanted me. To know if I had changed.

DIANA

There was never a question in my mind about whether I would take you back, even when I went to the police. I pushed you away knowing I wanted you. If you want to be home, Neoma, you're home, baby.

NEO

Then why do I still see him? Why do I see red-brown fur and red-white sneakers and I hear that stupid fucking story in my head everywhere I go? "Robyn the Rabbit, so far from home..."

DIANA

Do you see him now?

NEO

Don't you?

Diana looks around the room.

DIANA

This is your room. You come and go as you please, but this is your room if you want it. No one can take that from you, not even me.

NEO

But do you see it, Mom?

DIANA

I don't see anything we can't take care of together, Neoma.

Diana pulls out a few boxes, posters, and photos from the closet. The Rabbit and Neoma watch her.

Neo starts going through the boxes and posters...

NEO

I don't remember where they went.

DIANA

That poster went on that wall... We can hang it in the morning.

NEO

I wanna hang it now.

DIANA

I'll get the thumbtacks later... Your shirts went in that corner. The dresser is in the garage.

Neo puts the box of clothes in the corner.

NEO

What else?

DIANA

Those are your stuffed animals. I remember them being all over the floor, but if they had a place, they were between that corner and on your bed, especially Mr. Stuff-Stuff.

Neo digs through the box of stuffed animals. They fall everywhere until she finds Mr. Stuff-Stuff. She hugs him.

NEO

How do you remember where everything went?

DIANA

I used to lie down in here. I had your room committed to memory. I could put it back together a million times. Everything was here but you.

Neo picks up a family portrait of her, Diana, and Xavier.

DIANA

Do you remember where that went?

Neo finds a nail on the wall and hangs the photo.

DIANA

Good.

NEO

I'm sorry.

DIANA

Don't apologize to me. I'm just glad you're home.

Neo gets up and hugs her mom. Diana is shocked by this but hugs her back.

The Rabbit leaves. Once Neo realizes The Rabbit is gone, she goes into the closet and pulls out her old bedding. She lays it out and lies down on it. She motions her mother to join her.

DIANA

You sure?

NEO

Yes. Tell me a story.

DIANA

Okay... Well, um, let's see. So the end of Robyn the Rabbit is my favorite. Ree, his mama, finds him and beats up the wolf and they run out of Rolf's house and back to their cabin. And it goes...

NEO

I've heard that story a thousand times. Tell me another.

DIANA

Okay... Let's see. Hm... So a long time ago, when I was younger and anxious, I saw you. In my dreams. Soft and sweet and round... And you were mine. Even if we didn't have the same flesh and blood, I was gonna give you a name, so you were mine. I knew your name and I recited it to myself like a poem. Neoma, Neoma, Neoma...

And when Tanya gave you to me, and I held you in my arms and I even opened my shirt and laid you on my chest so you could feel that heart of mine beat for you.

Diana holds her daughter and plays with her hair.

DIANA

And you snuggled right in like you'd been there a thousand times and oh, Neo, if you could have seen my dreams, you would know that you had. And I sat there holding you against me until we were breathing together like we were the same, flesh and blood didn't mean anything anymore. And when you can breathe with someone and you can breathe easy? That's family. That's love.

Oh baby, I didn't think I was gonna ever let you go. I don't know why I did. But you're here, baby. You came back to me. To my arms. I'm yours and you're mine.

Diana looks over at her daughter. Neo has fallen fast asleep.

Diana kisses her on her forehead and tries to fall asleep too.

Soon, they breathe deeply and together.

END OF PLAY