



Out of Tune

By 10th Grader Alise Mackey

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Principal Characters:

VALERIE, A 42 year old Black woman.

ROSE, Valerie's daughter. She is 16 years old.

JOE, Valerie's brother, 37 years old

MEREDITH, Joe's wife, is white

JAMES, Valerie's late husband

Supporting Characters:

MS. SIMMONS, Valerie's neighbor

BENNETT, One of Rose's friends. He is 16 years old

BETH, Ethan Myers' wife and Bennett's mother

ETHAN MYERS, A perpetrator of domestic abuse who is running for city council

PAUL ANDERSON, An interviewer for an influential news outlet.

/ indicates overlapping dialogue.



Act 1, Scene 1

JOE is cleaning up plates as the last guests file out of the home. Everyone hugs and offers encouraging remarks to VALERIE as they leave. Everyone is dressed in funeral attire.

MS. SIMMONS

Oh, Valerie! It's just so awful!

ROSE

We're aware.

MS. SIMMONS

I'm so sorry you all have to go through this. It's outrageous! I hope that racist cop goes to prison for the rest of his life! Racist!

VALERIE

Actually, he's um... he's just suspended.

MS. SIMMONS

What?! How can they do this?! What happened to justice? I'll be praying for you. All of you. You know, the Garner family, the Martin family-

Valerie places her hand on Ms. Simmons' back and guides her toward the door.

VALERIE

Thank you for coming, Ms. Simmons. Have a good night.

Valerie ushers Ms. Simmons out of the door as the neighbor says her last remarks.

MS. SIMMONS

You too. James was an absolute delight. Such a shame. I'll make you a casserole!

Valerie closes the door.

ROSE

Everyone goes back to cleaning, but Rose is doing so furiously.
God, that Ms. Simmons. What a selfish bitch.

VALERIE

Rose!

ROSE

You know it's true.

Joe chuckles. Everything in between quotes is said in a mocking, stereotypical old lady voice.

“What happened to justice?!” Are you kidding me? “I’ll be praying for all of you?” Who does she think she is?



VALERIE

We're all grieving-

ROSE

Yes, *we're* grieving. We are. She's looking for *us* to comfort her for having the same skin as Dad's killer. "James was an absolute delight?" She thought he was here to cut her grass when we moved in. She never even came into our house until today! What a typical fake white ally.

VALERIE

Give her a break. She's never experienced this before.

JOE

Yes, she has, Valerie. She's seen the news. The difference between her and us is that she has the luxury of turning the T.V. off.

ROSE

"I'll bake you a casserole." Sure, your soggy, inherently white broccoli casserole will make everything better. Thanks so much, police brutality is solved!

VALERIE

Rose, that's enough! It's not easy for someone to have to question their surroundings like she has to now.

ROSE

It must be nice to be new to that.
Everyone cleans in tense silence.

VALERIE

How was the protest?

JOE

Protest?

MEREDITH

Yeah, I thought you knew about it. I organized a protest at the station. The reason that we aren't getting a trial is because of the police conduct review process.

JOE

What's the process?



MEREDITH

The police deal with misconduct internally, which is to say that they hardly deal with it at all. It makes it really hard for prosecutors like me and Val to do our jobs.

ROSE

Mom, what are you going to do about work?

JOE

Rose-

VALERIE

No, Joe, it's okay. I have to think about this now.

ROSE

You can't work with the police department anymore. It's just wrong.

VALERIE

I know, I know. It's just that entering the job market after ten years is so overwhelming.

MEREDITH

Well...local elections are coming up.

VALERIE

And?

MEREDITH

And? Even before all this happened, you were a promising candidate. You have a degree from a top ten university, and a diploma in political science at that. You're a shoo-in. Even more now.

VALERIE

What do you mean, even more now?

MEREDITH

People want to see a city councilor who will change things. They want someone on the council who has the same struggles/ as them

VALERIE

/So you want me to exploit my husband's death for a campaign?

ROSE

It's a good idea.



VALERIE

It's a good idea to use your dad's death as a campaign booster? Are you kidding me?

MEREDITH

You know James would want you to do this.

VALERIE

Don't even say his name concerning this. It's not right.

MEREDITH

Neither is letting all of this pass without a fight! I can organize all the protests I want, but what we need is someone in power. This town needs you.

VALERIE

No.

MEREDITH

This isn't just about you anymore, Valerie.

VALERIE

I was wrong. I don't think I'm ready to talk about this. It's not right, jumping right back in after, you know...

MEREDITH

At least think about it.

VALERIE

I can't think about anything right now. I just have to get this place cleaned up, and I- I don't want to think about anything right now, okay?

MEREDITH

You're right. I'm sorry. I think it's time for us to go, actually. It's getting really late.

JOE

We're only a call away, okay Rose? Val?

ROSE

Thanks, Joe.

VALERIE

Thank you. Love you, little bro.

Joe and Meredith hug Valerie and Rose before they leave.



ROSE

It's been a really long day.

VALERIE

Yeah. It's been a long week.

ROSE

When we were at the protest, I saw this really funny poster. And I reached for my phone, and I just thought: Dad would love this. And I texted it to him, knowing he'd respond right away like normal. And he didn't. Because he was taken from us by some trigger-happy bastard. He doesn't deserve a family. He doesn't deserve to be back on the police force, charged with protecting the community. He deserves to rot in hell. *(Pause)* Mom, aren't you angry?

VALERIE

Of course I'm angry-

ROSE

It doesn't seem like it. Because you're willing to stand back here and clean up this mess!

VALERIE

I don't know what to do, Rose! Okay? There isn't a handbook for this! I don't have the energy to keep fighting. I'm tired. I just want a moment of peace in all of this. Is it so bad to want that?

ROSE

I'm sorry.

VALERIE

Hey, come over here.

Valerie and Rose go over to the piano and sit down on the bench.

Remember, when he had time on the weekends, how your dad would play this piano in the morning?

ROSE

And you would always sing along-

VALERIE

(Pause) He's gone, baby. We can't bring him back with posters and chants. I'm sorry that I can't fix it. I wish I could fix it.

ROSE

Me too.



VALERIE

Why don't you go on to bed? Tomorrow's going to be a long day.

ROSE

Okay. I'll try to get some sleep. I love you.

VALERIE

Love you too, baby. Goodnight.

Rose exits. Valerie walks over to the piano, smiling softly as she sees the pictures of James on the piano top. Valerie freezes as the lighting turns blue and James walks on stage, a little ways away from Valerie. Valerie becomes life like again as James speaks.

JAMES

Tired of the party?

VALERIE

I've never really been a fan of socializing.

JAMES

My solution is to hide behind the piano the entire night. Problem solved. At a party, but no socializing.

VALERIE

Not all of us have that luxury.

Beat.

You know what's crazy?

JAMES

What?

VALERIE

I've done all these great things, graduated at the top of my class, and never even learned how to play a scale.

JAMES

Pretty crazy.

VALERIE

My little brother, Joe, right in that room, got all the piano lessons. He never really practiced. I always thought it was a waste.

JAMES

That's a shame. It seems like you would be one to practice everyday.



VALERIE

I was too busy with mock trial and speech and debate.

JAMES

Was it worth it?

VALERIE

You know, seeing where I am at this moment, and hearing the notes you can wring out of that thing, it really doesn't seem like it.

JAMES

It's never too late.

VALERIE

Really? I always thought it was like learning a language.

JAMES

It's never too late to at least try.

VALERIE

Maybe when I retire. I'll never have time for it now.

JAMES

Thirty minutes, once a week. In the beginning, just five minutes a day is enough.

VALERIE

Five minutes, huh?

JAMES

First lesson is free, if that helps.

James gives Valerie his card. Valerie chuckles.

VALERIE

Oh, I get it now.

JAMES

What?

VALERIE

This entire time, you just talked to me for my money.



JAMES

No-

VALERIE

Wow, even the piano player wants something from me!

JAMES

My name is James.

VALERIE

Okay then, James. It was nice while it lasted, but now that I know, the magic is gone.

JAMES

The magic? What?

VALERIE

I should've known. You know what? Let's do it. Right now.

JAMES

What's happening now?

VALERIE

I would like my free lesson, please.

JAMES

I'm being paid to play at this party-

VALERIE

It's okay, no one is paying attention anyways.

JAMES

Wow, thanks.

Valerie sits on the piano bench.

VALERIE

Let's do this.

James joins Valerie on the piano bench.

JAMES

Well, okay. We'll start with the C scale, then.

VALERIE

C scale. Nice.



JAMES

So, you put your right thumb right on this key, the one before the two black keys. Yeah. That's C.

VALERIE

Okay. (Puts left hand on paint instead of right).

JAMES

That's your left hand.

VALERIE

Oh, oops.

JAMES

Okay, so you play C with your thumb, D with your second finger, and E with your middle finger.

Valerie complies.

Then cross your thumb over to F, and play the rest until the next C.

Valerie plays the notes.

VALERIE

I did it. C scale.

JAMES

With one hand and one octave, but congratulations.

VALERIE

I'm so sorry to take you away from your hiding out.

JAMES

Oh, don't worry about it. It was a pleasant surprise.

VALERIE

Well, thank you for the lesson.

JAMES

It's only been two minutes.

VALERIE

I know. I should probably go back to the party. It feels a little childish to be hiding out here.

Gotta get back in there and put my best fake smile on.



JAMES

Wow. Okay.

VALERIE

It was nice to meet you, James.

JAMES

It was nice to meet you, too...

/

VALERIE

Valerie.

JAMES

See you later, Valerie.

James walks offstage as the lighting turns white again. Valerie sits back down at the piano and presses a few keys tentatively. Valerie sits on the bench and begins to play a favorite song of hers. It begins fine, but thirty seconds in, a couple of keys don't sound. She tries again, confused, and again, more frustrated.

VALERIE

What the hell?

One last time, and Valerie realizes that something is wrong with the piano, and not the hands playing it.

I'll fix it, (Grabs the picture of James) tomorrow (and brings it to her chest).



Act 1, Scene 2

VALERIE is in the living room. She is under a piano with a flashlight in hand, trying to see something. There are various tools scattered beside her feet that barely poke out under the piano. After a few moments, ROSE comes in and joins VALERIE.

VALERIE

Valerie continues to work on the piano.
Rose! You're home late...

ROSE

Yeah, sorry. I called you, but you didn't pick up. I was out with some friends.

VALERIE

What friends? Doing what?

ROSE

Oh, I just found some drug dealers and we smoked a joint.

VALERIE

What?!

ROSE

Chill, Mom. I had to tutor Bennett, remember? I told him I'd help him with his Ebonics.

VALERIE

What?

ROSE

It's for English. A white boy trying to read Fences aloud is hilarious at best, upsetting and offensive at worst.

VALERIE

Do you have a recording?

ROSE

I already texted it to you.

VALERIE

(chuckling) Just make sure you let me know next time? I really don't like not knowing where you are, especially now. And I thought I told you to make him come over here.

ROSE

Yeah, I know. Mr. Myers wasn't home or anything, so it was okay.



VALERIE

Is there a smaller screwdriver out there?

ROSE

Don't you think we should just hire a piano tuner? That thing's been broken since before Dad died.

VALERIE

Do you know how expensive a piano tuner is?

ROSE

I figure you've already spent plenty of money on those "how to" manuals anyways.

VALERIE

So why add to the bill with one of those piano tuners? They're done in an hour, but always have to fiddle around with it for an extra two. They're just friendly pickpockets if you ask me.

Valerie speaks as she struggles to get up from under the piano.

Let me give you some advice: never pay for someone to do something you can do by yourself. Chances are, it'll never be done just the way you want it.

Valerie goes over to the piano keys and plays a chord. It sounds disgustingly out of tune.

ROSE

I'm guessing that's how you want the piano to sound then?

VALERIE

Very funny, Rose. These things take time, and that's something I have plenty of lately.

ROSE

You haven't come across any jobs yet?

As Valerie replies, Joe walks on stage in business casual clothes with a briefcase and hugs Rose.

JOE

Hey, kiddo.

VALERIE

Thanks for asking, baby, but the job market's pretty tough right now. That wasn't gonna change since you asked me yesterday.

Valerie hugs and greets Joe.

JOE

We know, but one can hope. How's the piano sounding?



ROSE

It makes sound now, I guess that's an improvement.

VALERIE

Hush!

JOE

Val, it'll take more money to repair that thing than what it's actually worth. It looks pretty, that's enough.

VALERIE

Nope! I keep telling you guys, it'll take time. Didn't I teach you that patience is a virtue?

ROSE

Uh-uh/

JOE

/Nope.

VALERIE

I can't deal with you both at the same time. Rose, go start your homework.

ROSE

Agh, homework.

VALERIE

You should've thought about that before you decided to scurry off to Bennett's house.

JOE

Bennett's house again? Hmm.

ROSE

Just a friend.

JOE

Sure. But you know, if you ever need someone to beat this kid up...

ROSE

Thanks, Joe. You're a grown man who shouldn't be beating up teenagers, but thanks.

JOE

Anytime, kiddo.



VALERIE

Enough! Go do your homework, Rose.

ROSE

Yeah, yeah, okay!

Rose exits the stage, and Valerie busies herself around the kitchen.

VALERIE

Are you hungry?

JOE

No, no, I'm good. I don't want you to go out of your way-

VALERIE

No, it's not a problem. We've got all this food in the fridge from Ms. Simmons.

JOE

In that case, definitely no.

VALERIE

Are you sure I can't get you anything? I can even make something. I haven't touched a pan in a week, but I still remember how-

JOE

I don't doubt your cooking skills, Val. I came by to see how you're doing, not to ransack your kitchen.

VALERIE

Right. You know, everything's okay.

JOE

Come on, Val.

VALERIE

No, it's not. How am I supposed to do this?

JOE

Do what?

VALERIE

Anything! How am I supposed to watch my daughter question why this had to happen to us? And not have an answer for it?



JOE

Val-

VALERIE

You remember how Mom would always tell us that we have to do twice as much to get half as far?

JOE

Oh, boy. Can't forget.

VALERIE

I have, Joe. I've done four times as much, more than that. I did everything right. So why is Rose fatherless like the others? What was all of this for? And I keep thinking, what was he like as it was happening? Did he feel any peace when he was- was bleeding out?/ Did he

JOE

/We don't get those answers.

VALERIE

How am I supposed to stop this from happening to Rose? To you?

JOE

You can't stop it. Not from where you are right now.

VALERIE

What do you mean?

JOE

We didn't get justice. We didn't get even get a trial.

VALERIE

I know!

JOE

Remember what Meredith said the other day?

VALERIE

Yes, but a campaign? Have you seen me for the past week? I can't even fix this stupid piano. How am I supposed to pull off a campaign for six months?

JOE

Please, you're Val.



VALERIE

What?

JOE

Since when have you been the first one to throw in the towel? Ever?

VALERIE

Well...

JOE

What happened last year when Rose's math teacher accused her of cheating on her test?

VALERIE

I went down there/

JOE

You *marched* down there and demanded to know what all the stupidity was for. You have always been this family's protector, Valerie. James' face is already in the news, plastered on newspapers. It's up to you to change how his story is told, to protect what little of him we have left.

Rose enters.

ROSE

You're still here? It's almost 8.

JOE

Oh, crap. I gotta go, Meredith's got me on a curfew.

ROSE

What'll happen if you break it? You can't get grounded.

JOE

Oh, I wish. White people love to have discussions instead of actual punishment. Sometimes I wish she'd just make me sleep on the couch.

VALERIE

You better get going, then!

JOE

Promise me you'll think about it, Valerie.

VALERIE

I will. Leave already!



Joe leaves.
Finished your homework?

ROSE

Not even close. Do you want to finish up my bio lab for me? And by finish, I mean start and finish.

VALERIE

It's tempting, but no thanks.

ROSE

It was worth a shot. What did Joe want you to think about?

VALERIE

How do you feel about this whole campaign thing?

ROSE

I really think you should do it. I mean, I've even thought about it logically. First, you can't go back to your old job because you worked pretty closely with the police department.

VALERIE

Right.

ROSE

You already have the credentials to run. And you have a crazy family to help you do it.

VALERIE

Also, right.

ROSE

If you're worried about me not wanting you to do this, then don't be. The thing about Dad was that he was this huge optimist.

VALERIE

Oh, I know.

ROSE

He's like those Good Morning America reporters that show the happy fluff pieces, you know? He had this ability to convince me that everything would be okay, somehow.

VALERIE

Like nothing could go wrong.



ROSE

Yeah. I think that if you decide to run, you can give all of us some of that assurance. That maybe this city will somehow be okay.

VALERIE

You're just like him, Rose.

ROSE

You think so?

VALERIE

It's true. Just like him. You've grown up to be so passionate. Hey, you need community service for school, right?

ROSE

Yeah.

VALERIE

How about you play the piano for church? I'm sure they need someone now that you father isn't here.

ROSE

I don't know, Mom.

VALERIE

You should. It would've made him happy. I'll call the church and get it set up.

ROSE

Did I ever have a choice?

VALERIE

You know the answer to that.

Rose sighs. Rose grabs the T.V. remote and turns it on. Stage left lights up with Ethan Myers and Paul Anderson.

PAUL ANDERSON

Glad to have you back on the show./ This is Paul Anderson with Ethan Myers, here to talk about recent events in Spalding.

VALERIE

Do you mind if we turn off the news?



ETHAN MYERS

It's truly an honor./ Iowa was not as exciting as here.

ROSE

/Can we just watch a few minutes?

PAUL ANDERSON

Speaking of exciting-

ETHAN MYERS

Ah, yes. The hot button issue of "police brutality."

VALERIE

Oh, no.

PAUL ANDERSON

What do you think?

ETHAN MYERS

These days, people don't let our officers do their job. Have you heard the news, Paul?

PAUL ANDERSON

I pretty much am the news around here, so yes.

ETHAN MYERS

That man was dangerous. He did not comply with the police; he was suspicious! Our citizens are upset with the brave people who put their lives on the line protecting this city, yet they haven't been in the streets protesting about the many reforms we need to make.

ROSE

/Suspicious?!

PAUL ANDERSON

What reforms do we need to make?

ETHAN MYERS

Let me tell you, unemployment is a big issue right now. Houses are being foreclosed, and our finances are not being prioritized as they should be.

PAUL ANDERSON

How should they be prioritized?



ETHAN MYERS

Let me tell you, it should be above this police brutality nonsense.

PAUL ANDERSON

Taking a strong stance there. And I heard you might be revealing some big news today, Myers.

ETHAN MYERS

Yes, I am. City of Spalding, our city was once one of great renown. Our economy was thriving, our schools had funding, and our morale was high. Today, we are used to the new Spalding: defeated, underfunded, and incomplete. Our projects are started, but not finished. Let us regain our pride. As your future City Councillor I'll help to restore our city. Vote Myers.

ROSE

Vote Myers, my ass.

Rose turns off the T.V., which means that stage left goes black.

VALERIE

Watch your language, Rose.

Valerie pulls out her phone and dials Meredith.

VALERIE

Meredith? I'm in. We're doing this.



Act 1, Scene 3

MEREDITH, ROSE, BENNETT, and VALERIE are sitting in the living room. A whiteboard easel is set up in the living room, and on it says 3 months till E-Day. There's a huge phonebook on the table. The living room only takes up half of the stage in this scene. The other half, concealed by lighting, has ETHAN MYERS and a POLICE OFFICER.

MEREDITH

Val, I made a script for you- basically just say you are running for city council, your qualifications, and what you stand for. Rose, I made one for you, too. Brag about how awesome your mom is, it's important. Also, call your friends about volunteering.

ROSE

No one calls anymore, Meredith.

MEREDITH

Fine, then text! I made up a list of businesses in the city, and the list of residents in the phonebook right there.

ROSE

What are you in charge of right now?

MEREDITH

The best job of all- digging up dirt.

VALERIE

Dirt? No, I don't want it to be like that.

MEREDITH

Come on, Val-

VALERIE

No, I'm serious! If we're doing this for James, it has to be done right. And I'm sure Bennett isn't comfortable volunteering for us if we're taking down his dad.

Bennett shrugs.

BENNETT

He's my dad but he's an ass.

VALERIE

What is wrong with the youth today? Sailor mouths, all of you. I'm not compromising. Politics don't have to be dirty.



MEREDITH

This isn't Rose's fifth grade presidential race, Valerie. We have to get our hands dirty if we're going to win, especially against the chief of police.

VALERIE

Sure, we'll get our hands dirty. By reviving the community garden, or by finger painting with kindergartners. I'm not going to attack this person just to win. This will be civil.

MEREDITH

You're in for a rude awakening- but fine. We'll do it your way.

VALERIE

Great. And are you sure you have time for this? With your domestic abuse crisis training and everything-

MEREDITH

If I had a problem, I wouldn't have accepted. We're doing this.

VALERIE

Okay, I'll just get started then.

As people work, Rose and Bennett talk quietly.

BENNETT

So, first week back at school.

ROSE

No need to remind me. I swear, I could teach Mr. Adams' US history class for him.

BENNETT

Literally anyone could.

ROSE

I really just wish I didn't come back to the one day slavery unit. He could've thought about how he could improve the lesson considering what happened. He probably doesn't even know anything other than the stupid American Pageant textbook.

BENNETT

Well, think about it this way- three more months and then we can burn it.

Rose and Bennett laugh.

MEREDITH

Bad news. Ethan Myers already has an ad.



ROSE

Let us see!

Lights up on stage left. Ethan Myers is begins speaking.

ETHAN MYERS

Our men in blue are heroes. Every single day, they put their lives/ on the line for-

ROSE

/That's enough.

Meredith taps a button on her phone and the lights on stage left go off.

MEREDITH

Still want to leave Myers alone?

VALERIE

It's way too easy for people to assume I'm acting out of anger, Meredith. Trust me, a Black woman running a smear campaign just won't work. He has his tactics. We'll have ours.

MEREDITH

Fine. We'll see how long this lasts.



Act 1, Scene 4

ROSE sits is lying down, sleepy as her mother walks in. The easel says 1 MONTH TILL E-DAY.

VALERIE

How was your day?

ROSE

It was just one of those days.

VALERIE

Why? What happened?

ROSE

I don't know. Just a lot of schoolwork to do.

VALERIE

Did you practice for church yet?

ROSE

Not yet. But I did stuff like two hundred envelopes.

VALERIE

Come on, Rose. It's almost Sunday. You've got a big responsibility to fill.

ROSE

You don't have to remind me. I'm just having some trouble focusing.

VALERIE

You know what your father used to do when he couldn't focus?

ROSE

What?

VALERIE

He'd practice.

ROSE

God, Mom! I'll do it, I just have a lot of work to do!

VALERIE

You'd better watch your tone.



ROSE

I just don't think you realize how much pressure you've been putting on me.

VALERIE

What pressure?

ROSE

I'm not going to be some living memorial for Dad. I can't live up to that.

VALERIE

I'm not asking you to live up to that-

Valerie's cell phone rings.

One second.

Valerie answers the phone.

Hello?... Oh, thank you so much! It's really appreciated... I'll see you then!

Valerie hangs up.

I'm not asking you to live up to your father.

ROSE

Oh, really? Taking his place at church? Being optimistic like him?

VALERIE

I just thought it would be nice to honor him that way, that's all-

ROSE

It feels like you want me to become him, not honor him.

Valerie's cell phone rings again.

Go ahead, answer it. I'll wait.

Valerie answers it. Rose sits on the piano bench, impatiently fidgeting.

VALERIE

Hello, this is Valerie... Is there any way we can speed up the process?... Okay, thank you.

Goodnight.

Valerie hangs up.

Sorry, where were we?

ROSE

Oh, don't be sorry! I should have made an appointment!

VALERIE

What is wrong with you today?



ROSE

I don't know, maybe it's the fact that I can't have a conversation with my mom without Candidate Henderson interrupting!

VALERIE

Rose, that is not fair! You were the first one to jump on the idea of a campaign.

ROSE

You are an adult, you were the one who made the decision!

VALERIE

You knew how much work this would be!/Can't you see that I'm doing this for you?/What do you want from me?

ROSE

/I just feel like I should be able to talk to my mother!/Is it too much to ask for a parent?
Beat.

VALERIE

A parent?

ROSE

I already lost one. I really can't lose two.

Rose exits. Valerie, for the first time in this scene, sits down and stills. She closes her eyes as the lights fade to blue. Valerie opens her eyes to James walking on stage toward her.

VALERIE

C'mon, James. You know it's bad luck to sleep in the same bed before the wedding. Plus, I have some late night revisions to do. Unless....

JAMES

No!

VALERIE

Please? Just read me one line?

JAMES

You know what? Fine!

VALERIE

Yes!



JAMES

But that means I'm sleeping here tonight.

VALERIE

Fine!

JAMES

Okay. Here goes.

VALERIE

You don't need your paper? You bastard.

James moves closer and holds Valerie's hands gently.

JAMES

I, James...have not finished writing my vows.

VALERIE

What?

JAMES

I'm just going to improvise.

Valerie lets go of James hands in frustration.

VALERIE

Why do I even bother?

JAMES

I have the important parts memorized.

James takes Valerie's cynical hand.

I vow to tell you corny jokes forever. To take care of you and our eight future children.

VALERIE

Is it too late to cancel the wedding?

JAMES

(Smiling, slowly continuing) Yes. To always hope in us. To protect you always. Are you crying?

VALERIE

No, I just got a little something in my- yes, I'm crying!

JAMES

To-



VALERIE

-I vow to listen to your corny jokes without too much judgement. To be by your side during your darkest hours. To grow old with you and not be repulsed by you like my parents. To see our *one* child grow old as well-

Valerie's cell phone rings loudly. The lighting rapidly goes back to white, present light as James exits the stage. The other side of the stage has a spotlight on Meredith, who is talking to Valerie on the phone.

Hello?!

MEREDITH

Sorry this is so late, Val. I just wanted to check in with you.

VALERIE

Okay, tell me what's happening.

MEREDITH

The latest poll has us five points behind Ethan Myers. We need maybe one big push, something to get us in the lead.

VALERIE

Did you have something in mind?

MEREDITH

I know you're not going to like this, but... we've done all of the right things. We've done the photo-ops, the canvassing, the events- but we need something more. We need an attack.

VALERIE

Meredith.

MEREDITH

Before you say no again, think about your motivations. Think about who you're running for.
Just as Meredith says this, a huge, startling bang comes from offstage.

VALERIE

Rose! You okay?! Do you need me? I'm coming Rose!

(From offstage)

ROSE

Mom, chill! I just dropped my textbook!

(Mutters)

I swear, bio is actually going to kill me.



MEREDITH

Everything okay?

VALERIE

Rose just dropped her textbook and I thought it was something much, much worse. I can't keep feeling this way. I can't- I'm going crazy. I have to win this, Meredith. I need to feel safe again, I need my family to feel permanent. We have to win.

MEREDITH

So?

VALERIE

So, do you have a plan?

MEREDITH

You know I do.



Act 1, Scene 5

The stage is split. Stage left is PAUL ANDERSON and ETHAN MYERS, but the lighting does not expose them. Stage right is ROSE and BENNETT in the living room doing homework, and MEREDITH is off to the side with earplugs in her ears, focused on campaign work. The easel says 15 DAYS TILL E-DAY. There is only light on stage right.

ROSE

Does it ever stop getting weird, seeing your dad on T.V.?

BENNETT

It's never really weird, it's more like infuriating. And it makes me feel pretty shitty.

ROSE

So I guess we feel the same way, then.

BENNETT

Sometimes it's funny, though. He's so short that when he stands next to Paul Anderson, the cameramen have to adjust so that they're in the same shot.

(Someone knocks on the door. Rose says her next line as she rises to answer it.)

ROSE

I guess that helps.

BETH

Hi, Rose. I need to come in.

Rose steps aside as Beth barges into her house.

I was told that Meredith is here.

ROSE

Is something wrong?

Valerie comes onstage to check out what the noise is about.

VALERIE

Hi, Beth! How are you doing?

BETH

I think you might know.

Beth sees the remote for the T.V. and grabs it. She turns on the TV, and stage left lights up with Paul Anderson and Ethan Myers.



PAUL ANDERSON

It's your favorite and only real newscaster,/ Paul Anderson, here with breaking news. We received an anonymous tip about city council candidate Ethan Myers. This man allegedly perpetuated an abusive relationship with his wife for fifteen years./ Juicy, juicy.

ROSE

/Oh my God. An abusive relationship?

BETH

It's been running all day.

PAUL ANDERSON

Graphic images were sent of Elizabeth Myers in an email.

The images are shown to the audience by Paul.

We reached out to Ethan himself, so stay tuned for this exclusive interview.

BETH

Did you even think about this, Meredith? What if he thinks it's me?

ETHAN MYERS

Thanks for having me, Paul.

PAUL ANDERSON

Let's get right down to business. What do you say to these accusations?

ETHAN MYERS

Well, accusations they are. Pictures can be doctored, lies can be written. All I'm going to say is that I am the same candidate I've always been- forward thinking and dedicated. My rivals, however, are so bitter that they can only attack me. My voters know the truth.

PAUL ANDERSON

That's good enough for me!

ETHAN MYERS

Vote Myers.

Disgusted, Beth turns the T.V. off. Stage left blacks out.

BETH

(To Meredith) How could you?

VALERIE

Beth... it wasn't just Meredith who did this.



ROSE

Mom, what do you mean?

BETH

(To Meredith) No. No, I trusted you. Y-you said that you'd gone through this! That you knew how I felt!

MEREDITH

I did go through this, Beth. Which is why I had to do it. You know you weren't going to advocate for yourself-

BETH

Advocate? Who am I supposed to run to, the police? You do not get to criticize me-

VALERIE

Why can't we criticize you, Beth? Why don't I get to hate your husband because of who he's taken from me? I've done everything right up until now. I've played nice while running against someone who condones murder, and I'm five points behind. I'm always five points behind. Your husband, your silence, is responsible for the hell that my family has to live in. The only way I can attempt to make sense of it all is to win. Because if I can't... If I can't, what do I tell my daughter? That abusers always win? That mothers can't protect their children?

BETH

I have protected him. Those pictures show me protecting him. Don't think that because my husband is alive, we're not living in our own hell. You'd do your daughter a service to tell her that there are monsters she can't be protected from. There are bad guys who win. The earlier she knows, the more time she has to get used to it.

BENNETT

(To Beth) This was my protest. Being here, working against him, this was my protest.

BETH

You should know better-

BENNETT

Mom, haven't you dreamed of a moment like this? One where the entire world knows who he is? Haven't you ever thought about what it would be like if we fought back, and for once, we won?

BETH

Bennett, come on. It's time to go.

BENNETT

Go where?



BETH

Home.

Bennett and Beth exit.

ROSE

I just- I don't understand how you could be okay with doing this.

VALERIE

Rose-

ROSE

You can't use me to justify this, Mom. This was all you. I can't imagine what Bennett must be feeling right now. God, I just can't believe that you would even do something like this. You've changed, Mom. You really have.

Rose exits.



Act 1, Scene 6

Stage left: The living room is populated with VALERIE'S sponsors talking to each other, gathered together to watch the poll count. Everyone on the cast is there as a supporter. Stage right, PAUL ANDERSON and ETHAN MYERS on the news.

PAUL ANDERSON

Breaking news with the town favorite./Just in time for this news, our newest city council member joins me to make his first speech/ while elected into office!

VALERIE

/Newest city council member.

ETHAN MYERS

City of Spalding,/a new era is beginning. One where our citizens are protected from danger. One where detrimental voices to our society are silenced. You placed your trust in me, and I will deliver. Over the next four years, I see a city where no doors are locked. Jobs are created. Street corners are empty. Thank you for doing your duty to make a greater Spalding.

VALERIE

/Rose, turn it off!/
Rose searches for the remote, but comes up empty.

ROSE

/I can't find the remote!

Shocked, everyone listens to Ethan Myers in complete silence.

PAUL ANDERSON

Back to the news. This just in, an African-American man was shot by a police officer this evening and remains in critical conditioning after jaywalking. Already off to a safer city, if you ask me. Which, of course, you did. Have a good night, people. Tonight you should be able to sleep easily.

Valerie's supporters are shocked. There's a blackout onstage, and when the lights are up it's blue lighting with just James and Valerie.

VALERIE

I just can't believe it. I even did my best to pick the most effective jury- I just don't know what went/ wrong!

JAMES

/You win some, you lose some. You knew it would be like this, Valerie.



VALERIE

It's one thing knowing, and another experiencing, James. I *let* this happen.

JAMES

Come on-

VALERIE

No. I've tried my best. It's so easy to feel like a cog in the system. I've tried, you know? I've tried to make this right, somehow.

The lighting changes to bright white again as James walks off. Val's supporters crowd in front of her. Meredith walks up to Valerie with her concession speech. Valerie begins.

In my time as a lawyer, I've learned this: you win some, you lose some. You put your tears, your sweat, your time, your everything into a case, and still, you lose. You know, 7 months ago, my husband was alive and well. 7 months ago, my daughter had a father. We've lost a lot. But with loss comes an obligation to fight.

Pause. Valerie chuckles cynically.

An obligation to fight.

Valerie folds the paper.

But for tonight, think about someone you love. Tell them you love them. Thank whoever you pray to, thank them that you still have the ability to hear that person say they love you back. There isn't a day that goes by that I wish I could hear those words from my husband. And to Ethan Myers... congratulations. Clearly, there are bad guys who win.



Act 1, Scene 7

VALERIE is getting up from under the piano as ROSE enters with a backpack on her back. Rose sets down her bag and hugs her mom.

ROSE

Hey, Mom.

VALERIE

Hey, baby. How was school?

ROSE

The usual. How's the piano?

VALERIE

It's good.

ROSE

What?

VALERIE

It works.

ROSE

You actually fixed it?

VALERIE

I actually fixed it. Well, mostly.

ROSE

What do you mean, mostly?

VALERIE

This piano will never sound like it did when your father played it. But it still plays.

ROSE

I guess that has to be enough.

Valerie puts her arm around Rose's shoulders.

VALERIE

I guess so.

The End.