

HALFWAY TO FLORIDA

Bronwen Bitetti

Characters:

REN: a bespectacled girl of ten.

LACY: her mother.

TRACE: Lacy's boyfriend.

Note: All sound must be produced live. It must be immediate, physical.

A window frame suspended ten feet above the stage. A ladder leads up to the opening. Lights up on REN in the window frame, leaning out. She is dropping items out the window, one by one, watching them float down: a white feather, a ribbon, a handkerchief, two blank sheets of paper—finally, a white slip. As she does so, she chirps a tune, as if trying to make them fly. Blackout.

Lights up on LACY in a white bathrobe, lying on her side on a white bed. Her face is turned toward the nightstand on which sits a tiny black-and-white television. It is tipped on its side, so the image is right-side-up in her view. REN comes into the doorway of the room, holding something behind her back.

REN

Mom. (*whispers*) Are you sleeping? (*beat*) Mom?

REN approaches the bed. She stands over LACY:

Mom. (*pinched*) Mom?!?

REN touches her shoulder.

(*louder*)
Mom!

REN

(*quickly, out of nowhere*)
It's in the drawer!

LACY

What is? Mom?

REN

(*realizing, from a fog*)
Oh. Hi, baby.

LACY

REN sits on the bed. Pulls a box tied with white ribbon from behind her back and sets it on the floor.

(*momentarily placated*)
Knock. Knock.

REN

Beat.

Knock. Knock. Lacy, you're ruining it... Mom?

Beat. She touches her shoulder.

Hm? Oh. What is it?

LACY

(*firmly*)
Knock-knock.

REN

No... knocking... please, honey.

LACY

Please? Why?

REN

(*fading out again*)
Sleepy...

LACY

Beat. REN watches LACY.

REN

Mom. Mom.

LACY

Ssshh. Sleep. You go back to sleep.

REN

Did you take your medicine today?

LACY looks at her. A realization. Then, strangely coherent:

LACY

Why aren't you in school?

REN

Did you eat today?

LACY

Answer me young lady.

REN

(ignoring her)

Mom. Did you eat?

LACY

I said—

REN

(sickening)

It's Saturday.

Beat.

LACY

Oh.

REN

What are you watching?

No response. REN reaches over and turns off the television. Again, LACY doesn't respond. A last resort:

REN

(quietly at first, unsure)

Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah *(committing, loudly)*, someone's in the kitchen, I KNOW-OH-OH-OH

REN nudges LACY, trying to get her to sing along.

Someone's in the kitchen—*(dropping it)* and it's Ren and Lacy. It's dinner time. C'mon.

REN reaches over and pushes LACY's legs to the edge of the bed and gingerly gathers her up, tipping her upright.

We'll eat together. OK?

REN slowly leads LACY to the kitchen. By the time they get to the table, LACY is shaking and unable to hold her neck up. REN notices, moves very quickly, with purpose and urgency.

REN

Mom. Do you want some orange juice? Or candy?

LACY

Orange—

REN getting the juice.

REN

Orange juice it is.

Holds the glass out toward LACY, she takes it shaking, gets it to her mouth and is barely able to finish it without spilling it.

REN

Do you want more? Are you OK?

LACY shakes her head no. Her shaking increases.

REN

OK.OK.

She quickly goes to the refrigerator and pulls out a pink cake box. She takes it to the table with a fork. Opens the box, revealing a decorated birthday cake. She hesitates, then plunges the fork into the cake. She brings the bite to LACY's mouth.

Happy—

*Realizes that LACY is shaking too much to bite off of the fork.
Throws the fork aside, gets up and grabs a spoon.*

Sorry. Sorry.

New bite on a spoon.

Happy Birthday.

*As she feeds her, she sings “Happy Birthday” like a lullaby and
LACY’s shaking decreases.*

Happy Birthday to you. Happy Birthday to you.
Happy Birthday Dear Lacy. Happy Birthday to you.

REN goes and hugs LACY.

I’ll save your pinches and spankings for next year.

Blackout.

Lights up REN standing in front of a chalkboard. Her hair is braided into pigtails— tied with white ribbon. She wears a starched dress and patent leather t-strap shoes. She is not comfortable in her skin, her clothes or in the room. Next to her, a bird-cage sits on top of a table. A paper-mache crow, wings out-stretched, takes up most of the space inside the cage. It looks grossly out of scale with the cage and how it came to be in the cage at all is dubious. REN clutches some papers in front of her from which she shakily reads, occasionally looking up from the pages.

REN

Migration is an ancient instinct, hundreds and hundreds of thousands of years old, in birds from sparrows to the Great Bald Eagle. They know when it is time to migrate when signs of winter start happening. One way they know it is time is when the leaves fall off of the trees, and you can see their nests. Also, when the air starts to get cold and freeze, and they don’t have as many grasses and bugs to eat, their instincts tell them to gather their families and fly south. Some birds must travel thousands of miles to reach their winter resting place. It is a hard trip and they have to plan ahead to make sure they have places to eat along the way. Just like when people go on vacations— if

you go by car, you stop along the way or bring snacks or, if you go by plane, the plane-ladies bring you food and things. Birds also must have food for their journey. But the one thing they can't plan for, like people do, is the weather. They can get caught in storms out on the ocean, where they don't have anywhere to land and die from being blown all around. All they can do is hope that they don't run into a storm like that. (*A change of topic*) Birds know each other by the sounds of their voices. They have very dis-ting-tive voices and I will demonstrate some of the different varieties. Starlings sound a little like they're gargling...

She demonstrates this one and all to follow— they are uncanny imitations.

The robin's call is a sure sign of spring (*she demonstrates*); the falcon's cry is almost as terrible as it looks (*she demonstrates the falcon's scream*); the warblers are very musical (*she demonstrates*); most people don't like the crow; they think it's scary — but it's one of the easiest...

She demonstrates and as she does so, she tries to speak the next few lines but all that comes out are crow caws. She looks puzzled at first, but then continues as if nothing is wrong. Blackout. Caws fade into:

Muffled flirtatious laughter of TRACE and LACY in darkness:

I can't. Get it on. LACY

Here. It's the clasp. TRACE

LACY giggles.

That was the hardest part to make. TRACE

You made it? LACY

Took me a week... TRACE

When did you do it? LACY

TRACE

After work all last week. I stayed late to use the tools.

LACY

(enthusiastically)

I love it. I can't believe you made it... but I still can't get it on. I think it's too small, my wrist is—

TRACE

I know that wrist. It'll fit perfect. There.

LACY

Thank you.

TRACE

Where'd you get this? You look—

LACY

The bracelet? *(teasing him, throwing it away)* Oh, this guy I knew once... he was a real bore.

TRACE

(not amused)

No. The slip.

LACY

Oh, this old thing? Ren gave it to me. Isn't that sweet? Must've saved her allowance.

TRACE

(sullen)

Yeah.

LACY

What's wrong?

TRACE

Forget it.

LACY

No. What just happened?

TRACE

Just leave it alone, Lacy.

LACY

If I did something I want to know what it is.

TRACE

Lacy—

LACY

Lacy— Lacy— just tell me what it is. Everything's fine, I'm gettin' presents and were kissin' and then all of a sudden it's like I'ma goddamn leper.

TRACE

Shut up, Lacy!

LACY

I'm just trying to communicate with you!

TRACE

Don't try things you don't understand!

LACY

You know what I don't understand? You. You and your breathing. How can you love me one second and treat me like the plague the next? What did I do? I'll fix it— don't go away like that—

TRACE

LACY! I SAID SHUT UP!

The sound of her running at him in barefeet, hitting his chest.

LACY

No! It's the truth! You're running! I'm only trying to—

TRACE

(overlapping)

Get off of me! Godamnit!

The sounds of a fight. TRACE hits LACY several times— we only hear the progression from a slap to dull thuds of his fists hitting her body. She struggles, cries out once and stifles the rest at his warning that REN will hear her. TRACE shoves her, the sound of her hitting the mattress, moving the bed and hitting the floor. At this point, crow caws are heard, building to screams, while:

TRACE

Christ! It's like a fucking aviary in here! *(Beat.)* Lacy.

Silence. She is holding her breath.

Lacy. I told you— (*failing*) I'm sorry.

TRACE exits slamming the door, shaking the house. Lights snap up on LACY, crumpled on the floor next to the bed in a new white slip. One arm is outstretched on which she wears a metal bracelet. Pink birthday candles are scattered around her. REN is crouched outside the door, hands over her ears, eyes shut tightly. After a few moments, LACY pulls herself into a sitting position. Half of her face is red, ready to turn colors. Red marks up and down her arms. She sits, dazed. After a moment, she picks up a birthday candle from the floor in front of her, slowly puts it in her mouth and chews. She does this several times. Blackout.

REN in front of the chalkboard.

REN

Most birds do their migration during the day, except for the brave Warbler family. They are a smaller spee-sees of bird and have to fly in the nighttime to keep from getting eaten by bigger birds. This works very well for them—except they have to be very careful of lights. Lights of all kinds: street lamps; head-lights; and especially light-house lights are very dangerous to them. In fact, in September of 1887 the light-house keeper at the Fire Island Light House found three hundred and fifty six Warblers dead outside of it, from only one night of flying. (*A change of topic*) You might wonder how humans know so much about the migration of birds or how the birds even stay on course every year. Well, human have made great progress studying the flight patterns of birds by attaching little metal bands around their ankles with the date and place they were caught. Then, we can study where they end up and how long it takes them to get there.

Blackout.

Lights up on REN and LACY in the bedroom. LACY, in a grey dress, sits on the bed. REN stands in front of her, dressed for school. LACY is brushing REN's hair, putting it into braided pigtails.

REN

Instincts. I told them about instincts.

LACY

What instincts, silly-girl?

REN

Migration. I told them about homing instincts and how they know when to fly south. I told them about the Warbler family and sparrows and thrushes and the kingfisher, too. *And* I told them about the little balls they have in their heads and how it tells them which way to go.

LACY

A what? A ball in their heads?

REN

Mmhm. It's like a compass.

LACY

That's nice... convenient. Havin' a compass in your head.

REN

I told them about how far they had to fly and how scary it was— but how nice it is when they finally get south—

LACY

Where in the south?

REN

Depends on which kind of bird.

LACY

Oh. Well, uh...where do the little ones go?

REN

(delightfully exasperated)
Which one?

LACY

You know— the little ones.

REN

The Warblers?

LACY

Yeah.

REN

They go to Flor-ee-da... some of them go to South America, too.

LACY continues doing REN's hair. Beat.

REN
Can we go to Flor-ee-da?

LACY
What?

REN
Can we go to Flor-ee-da?

LACY
What are you talkin' about?

REN
Let's go there.

LACY
Why?

REN
To get away...

Beat. LACY stares at her.

From him.

Beat. Finally:

LACY
I don't know what you're talking about Ren. You've got such strange thoughts sometimes. (*almost disapprovingly*) All those books that you read.

REN
Mmhm. I want to see the Warblers. They're not native here.

REN
Please?

LACY
Probably not, darlin'. How would we get there anyway?

REN
We could fly.

LACY

We can't afford to go on an airplane.

REN

(mumbles)

We could go. *(Beat)* The crow flies 2 miles and 260 feet in one minute. The sparrow flies at the rate of 2 miles 2844 feet in one minute. During migration, the sparrow will fly up to 3500 miles in a single day.

LACY

Ren—

REN

This is an ancient instinct, hundreds and hundreds of years old, in birds from sparrows to the Great Bald —

LACY

(calming her)

Ren! Ssshhh, honey.

LACY puts her arm around her.

REN

The Warblers fly at night.

LACY

You're a smart girl, aren't you baby?

REN nods.

LACY

I don't know where you get it. It's hard for you, hm?

REN nods.

Be careful, baby— don't you get too smart. People will be afraid to love you.

Lights up on REN in the window. It is night. This time she sends white paper airplanes flying out the window, into the night and the audience.

REN

Watch out for the street lamps and head-lights... and light-houses, if you get that far. You've got to make it out past the street lamps, at least. Then just glide on over the headlights. Fly right above 'em. Find the jet-stream. Go to the fields, sleep during the day in the grasses and the clover. Volplane.

Blackout.

Lights up on REN & TRACE sitting at the kitchen table. She is eating cereal. TRACE is putting his boots on. They do not speak. TRACE sits. Looks at REN. She stops eating, but plays with her cereal. He picks up a fork from the table and begins to pick his teeth. The fork flashes as he twists and turns it. After a few moments—REN looks up at him, catches him in the act, he freezes and slowly replaces the fork on the table. They sit looking at each other. TRACE finally reaches under his flannel shirt, into the breast pocket of his T-shirt—pulls out a long brown feather. He places it on the table. Beat.

TRACE

Found it for you. Hawk probably.

He exits. REN rises, revealing two phonebooks underneath her on the chair. She picks up the feather, puts it into a phone book, closes it. Blackout. Sounds of various birdsong in darkness.

Lights up on LACY in a pool of white light, lying on the floor. She does not move. Bird noises underneath.

REN'S VOICE

Mom? Mom. Mom, wake up. Are you asleep? O.K...

Beat.

Someone's in the kitchen with Dinah
Someone's in the kitchen I know-oh-oh-oh
Someone's in the kitchen with Di-nah
Strummin' on the old banjo and singin'
Fee-fi-fiddly-i-oh
Fee-fi-fiddly-i-oh-oh-oh-oh
Fee-fi-fiddly-i-oh
Strumming
on
the

old—

Mom!!!

Blackout.

Lights up on REN in the middle of an empty stage. She wears a white slip that is too big for her.

REN

When Chester Simmons came out of the Fire Island Lighthouse on September 17, 1887— the sun was shining bright. He took one step out the door and felt something small and fragile— like a house made of match-sticks— collapse under his big ol' foot. He looked down and saw the platform was covered with birds. He didn't know what kind. All he knew was there were hundreds. Hundreds of little bird bodies. He didn't know what to do. He had a habit of countin' things ever since he was a little boy, so that's what he did— he counted 'em all. Then, he felt sad for 'em... and thought he should give 'em a funeral or something. And since he had nothing else, no flowers or anything to throw after 'em— he got the salt shaker that he packed everyday in his lunch, especially for his hard-boiled egg— and he took each one, gently dropped it into the ocean and sprinkled a little salt after 'em. Hoping it didn't hurt too much when they hit the light.

Halfway through her monologue, a large crow flies from the rear of the stage, glides over her head, and above the audience. It flies in swinging circles while she speaks. Blackout.

End of play.