

Things I Think About When We Say Grace

Characters:

Evie - A college student haunted by her mother's disappearance on Christmas Eve ten years ago.

Therapist - A school psychiatrist helping Evie work through her grief.

Scene one - Introductions

(The stage is set in a minimal way. Two armchairs, one for Evie and one for Therapist, are the only props. Therapist has been sitting in an armchair with her eyes closed, motionless, for as long as people have been entering the theater. Once the house lights go down Evie enters, and as soon as she does, Therapist opens her eyes and comes to life.)

Therapist: Hi Evie, have a seat.

Evie: Thank you. I'm sorry, there was water on the way in but I wasn't sure if I was supposed to take any so I didn't.

Therapist: That's no problem at all. I'm so glad you decided to meet with me.

Evie: I mean, I don't know if I would have done it on my own, but my family really wanted me to.

Therapist: Evie, I'm not interested in talking about what your family wants from you. This is your session. In your own words, why did you decide you needed to see a psychologist?

Evie: I don't know, I guess I'm having a hard time processing grief, but I don't really think anybody's understanding it right. Like, it's not that I'm unusually fixated on this, it's just that nobody is thinking about it enough and I don't understand why they're not. No one will tell me more because they think it'll traumatize me more, but from what I remember my mom disappeared when I was little. Like, actually disappeared in that no one knows what happened to her and that's why I'm here. It was kind of horrible actually, because it was Christmas eve when it happened and my family is like, really big on Christmas, or at least we were before this happened. I remember it was one of our big Christmas dinners too, where mom spent all day cooking, and I was so excited for the next morning because I went Christmas shopping with my mom that day. We bought everybody else's presents but not mine, because she said that mine was special and she'd already bought it. And then tomorrow morning she was gone and I never even opened my present. It's just that it's been so long, and I never knew why she disappeared, and even if I did once I can't remember now. It just doesn't make sense. We were a good family. We got along well. She had friends, and she had a good family. I don't know why she would have left.

Therapist: That sounds really hard, Evie. It sounds really hard to remember. It sounds like you're having memory problems. Do you remember anything else about the night when it happened? Can you try and reach back into those twelve year old memories and tell me?

Evie: I remember ... well, that's what I've been trying to do all this time, fix my memory problem. I don't remember a lot aside from what I told you, but I remember that every night before dinner we would say grace, as a family, and that my mom would lead us. And I remember that while we said grace I used to think about everything I was grateful for, and I remember the things I thought about when we said grace that night. I think about them a lot because they're really the only clear thing I remember from that night and they give me something to hold onto.

Therapist: That's good. I'm glad you have something from that night. I won't ask you to share what you thought about if you don't want to.

Evie: No, that's all right. I remember the things I thought about were lobsters, ice cream and shopping.

Therapist: Interesting. Can you tell me more?

Scene two - Lobster

(Evie and Therapist take a beat to move from the positions they had settled in and into a sitting actors neutral before starting as if to rewind the scene that just happened)

Evie: I can try. Well, I can tell you about why I was praying for lobsters first because it's kind of a funny story. I remember when I was little I really wanted to keep a lobster as a pet. Like, every time my mom took me shopping and we passed by a fish tank at a fish store I would start crying because of all of the lobsters in cages, swimming in dirty water with rubber bands on their claws because I knew they were about to get eaten, and I would always ask my mom if we could buy one and take it home and she would always say no Evie, lobsters aren't pets, and that made me so sad. And I remember that every holiday for a whole year I would write letters to the lobsters. I wrote them cards on my birthday, and easter, and thanksgiving and presidents day and each time I would hand them off to my mom and ask her to deliver them for me. And I remember that when I came down the stairs for breakfast on my ninth birthday there was this thing wrapped on the table and it was big and round and I was so sure it was a lobster tank, and my mom and dad were smiling, and my dad said to open it, and there was no lobster. My parents got me a fish, like the kind you see in fish stores, and I was trying to smile but all I could think about was the lobsters in their tanks and how they probably couldn't even see ten inches ahead of them in the muddy, gross water they lived in, how they probably never even saw me with my nose pressed

up against the glass, waving, and how they never got my lobster letters. And my mom and my dad knew I didn't like the present even before I started crying and there was a moment of silence where I saw my mom's face deflate and then...

Therapist: And then what, Evie, what do you remember?

Evie: I don't know. I can't remember anymore. Maybe I could a few minutes ago but I can't anymore. Maybe I can try to remember again?

Therapist: Try to remember, Evie, because you know it's something bad. Try to remember how long that silence was. Try to remember why you were crying, even though you were nine, even though it shouldn't matter because you cried over lost stickers when you were nine. Try to remember because you're thinking about it right now, and because it has to be important. It has to be. It has to be important enough for you to forget it. Try to remember Evie.

Evie: You remind me of someone right now. You sound like my dad when he wouldn't talk to me or mom and he was so silent that I wondered if it was still possible for him to speak, and felt bad for him just in case he forgot how. You sound like my mom after I opened the birthday present, like the manager to the fish store telling me I had to leave, you sound like you're picking me up off the ground kicking and screaming and like you're angry driving me to the doctors office, resentful about how you had to take a whole afternoon off work to deal with my temper tantrum on my birthday, when I was supposed to be cheerful. You remind me of someone else that I can't remember.

Therapist: That's not how you use the word resentful. You can say that your father was resentful of you, not that he was resentful about you.

Evie: Right, that's right, I'll remember that for next time.

Therapist: Good. Speaking of remembering, do you remember anything after you opened the present?

Evie: No, I'm sorry. I don't think anything important happened after that, at least not anymore. It's like a murky wall in my memory after that. I think I was praying for the lobsters because I always wanted one as a pet when I was little and my mom would never get me one. I think it might be a funny story my dad tells over dinner. Let's move on

Scene two - Ice cream

(Evie and Therapist take a beat to physically rewind their positions into an actors neutral, and Evie's face shifts from noticeably distressed to calm and expressionless.)

Therapist: I'm so sorry, I just lost my train of thought. Did you see it go by, out the window? I can't remember anymore.

Evie: Neither can I.

Therapist: Perfect. I hate feeling forgetful alone, but if we both do it together, it's like neither of us ever forgot anything at all. What were you saying?

Evie: I believe I was telling you about the things I think about when we say grace in my family, and I told you that on the night my mom left I thought about ice cream and shopping. You asked me to elaborate. I could start with telling you about ice cream if you'd like?

Therapist: Go ahead.

Evie: Well, I think I was thankful because there was going to be ice cream after dinner, and I loved ice cream when I was little, but more than that I was remembering this one time when me and my mom snuck out at night to get secret ice cream and it was so fun that maybe that was why I loved it so much. She woke me up while I was sleeping and we tiptoed outside, me in my pajamas, and it was fun to pretend to be quiet even though there was no reason I can think of that we would have to be sneaky.

Therapist: How did she wake you up Evie? Did she push back your hair and kiss your forehead and whisper loudly "wake up Evie we're going on an adventure?"

Evie: She did actually, now that you mention it.

Therapist: And then what? And then did she hold your small hand like it was very important even though you knew she could walk just fine without you and did she lead you down through the backyard and make a big show of going through the back gate instead of the front door to make less noise, and did she scoop you up so your pajama pants wouldn't get soaked from the midnight dew on the lawn?

Evie: She did, and I remember that she didn't need to worry about getting her ankles wet because she was wearing a fancy dress and high heels, right?

Therapist: That's right. She looked like a princess.

Evie: Why was she dressed like that?

Therapist: I don't know, ask her.

Evie: I can't.

Therapist: Oh that's right, I forgot.

Evie: I remember how it started raining really hard right as we were getting into the car, and the raindrops all blended together to make this shield around our car so everything outside the windows was blurry and I felt so safe eating Carvell in the car with my mom and I promised myself I would remember everything about that night forever, and I think I did.

Therapist: Evie, what flavor ice cream did you get?

Evie: I ... I, um, can't remember. I got chocolate, maybe, or mint chocolate chip, or grass with chocolate chips in it, or ants on a log, or ants riding on top of a train, or-

Therapist: Evie, calm down. It's okay if you don't remember what flavor ice cream you got. I'm going to ask you whether or not you remember several other things and you're going to have to stay calm.

Evie: Okay.

Therapist: This is for your own good.

Evie: Is it?

Therapist: Do you remember why you were sneaking out of your house, why that night, how far the dew would have soaked up your ankles if your mom had made you walk? Do you know why your mom got so angry when your fingers went numb trying to unlock the garden door, or if the employees at Carvell were getting paid overtime for working into the night or if they never worked overtime at all? Did you lock your lips and throw away the key or do you remember, somewhere, is the key under a fake rock at your dad's house or did your mom never give you a house key because she thought you would lose it? The house key was supposed to be a present for your twelfth birthday, wasn't it, a sign of freedom. Why did your dad never give you that key, even after your mom was gone? Did he not want you to have it? Or did you both know that a key is worthless if you choose to simply forget instead? Why can't you remember what flavor ice cream you got that night? Is there a reason, or is that just one of those memories that disappears with time?

Evie: I don't know. I think maybe I just forgot because it's been ten years and I had a lot of other things on my mind. Maybe forgetting what flavor ice cream I had that night isn't that big of a deal after all. Forgive me for saying this, but this all seems a little unprofessional. I feel like I'm supposed to be doing most of the talking, not you.

Therapist: Is that right? I suppose that's right. In that case, I'm very sorry, can we start over?

Evie: Of course. I'd like to pretend this never happened.

Scene five - Shopping

(Evie and Therapist take a beat to physically rewind their positions into an actors neutral, and Evie's face shifts from noticeably distressed to calm and expressionless.)

Evie: Sorry, what was I saying? I forgot for a second.

Therapist: That's all right Evie, you can take as many seconds as you need. But I believe you were going to tell me about the things you thought about when your family said grace the night your mother disappeared. I believe you said you thought about shopping?

Evie: That's right, now that you say it I believe it too. I think I was distracted while my family was saying grace because I was thinking about how my mom had taken me Christmas shopping earlier that day, and she'd gotten every present except mine, because mine was too special to get at the mall. I think I was excited to open it.

Therapist: That's interesting. Can you tell me more?

Evie: At least from how I remember daydreaming while we were saying grace, it was the best day. The mall had just opened a new food court and we got a small thing from every stand I thought looked good and when we had dumplings I'd never had them before so mom called me worldly and there was a carousel at the mall and mom let me ride it over and over. We got a present for every relative I'd ever heard of in my whole life, and a lot I hadn't, so many people and mine was the only one too special to come from the mall. I remember we got a tie for dad, with stars that glowed in the dark, and a disney princess lego set for my cousin, and a tv dinner for my uncle who was getting a divorce, and a tv for my aunt who was divorcing him, and an island for my grandma who wishes she was cultured and live peacocks for my grandpa to put on my grandma's island and a timeshare in Disney World for Jesus since my mom was always religious, and a new car for my mom since she didn't have one and -

Therapist: What is it? Those all sound like wonderful presents.

Evie: No, no they were but mine was the best because mine was special, and my mom wanted me to have it and I never opened it. How did I never open it?

Therapist: Maybe you forgot?

Evie: But I can't have forgotten it because I'm remembering it right now. I'm remembering it, so it has to have happened. Did it happen? You always seem to know what I'm remembering. Did I ever remember this before?

Therapist: I believe you were just talking about this a few minutes ago. You said there was a house key you were supposed to get as a present that you never got. Something about ants on a train.

Evie: No, that wasn't it. That was a different present. That was a birthday present, this is a Christmas present.

Therapist: Maybe the present is still there, in your dad's house? Maybe it sits under your bed, gathering dust, year after year, because everyone forgot about it but you. Evie, are you ever, even a little bit, scared to remember where you left it?

Evie: I'm sorry, did you say you remembered where my present was? I need to find it.

Therapist: Maybe the present is a fake rock in your dad's backyard. Maybe the present is a party dress, or an ice cream with no flavor, or a lobster. Maybe the present forces you forwards. Evie, if it was you, alone, in your airless room, staring at the present the morning after your mom left, would you have opened it? Did you open it? Evie, do you remember what's inside that wrapping paper?

Evie: I'm so sorry, but no. If I did I would tell you. Maybe I knew once, but I just can't remember.

Therapist: That's quite alright. Memory can be a tricky thing.

(A timer buzzes from offstage)

Therapist: Oh, it looks like that's all the time we have for today. Will you be scheduling another session with me Evie?

Evie: I think I'm okay, thank you. I'd rather not ever do this again.