

TO FLY UNHINGED

By Anne-Julia Price



STAGE MODEL: The two images above should give an idea of my stage model, although the perspective on my sketch is a bit off. The stage is stark, black. Throughout the play, the only objects are a table and two chairs, along with small elements on the table depending on the scene. These include a notebook, pen and clock radio in the first scene; a computer and a stack of papers/folders in the second scene; and a wine bottle, two glasses and an urn in Scene 3. The light is centered on the table, chairs and characters, creating a vignette on the stage, but fades on the chair where the lawyer and mother sit when the daughter speaks her longer monologues. I thought about using a screen, but was unsure how the character would interact with the elements on the table with the screen in front of them. I wanted the stage to have as few distractions as possible so that the audience can focus more on the characters and dialogue. It should feel somewhat eerie and intense to convey the heaviness of the play. I want the audience members to walk out feeling it in the pit of their stomach.

CHARACTERS:

DAUGHTER MOTHER

LAWYER WAITER

SCENE 1

A stark room. A table and two chairs sit center stage. On the table are a notebook, pen, clock radio ... and the DAUGHTER in fetal position. 3am.

DAUGHTER

(Daughter twists, turns. Sits up straight, rigid. Picks up clock)

3am?!

(Puts down clock. Moans, writhes, rubs face. Turns toward and speaks to audience)

It is pointless. I may never sleep again.

(Beat)

But how can I can complain about not sleeping when she will never wake again?

(Beat)

DAUGHTER (cont)

Never know the frustration of insomnia. Never look at an alarm clock. Never be woken up by one. Never have responsibilities. Never write. Never cook. Never drink. Never smile. Never hug. Never ... anything.

(Beat)

So much to do.

(Beat. Stares into space/the audience. Startled back to moment)

A list. I'll make a list.

(Hops off desk, sits in chair and looks around desk. Opens notebook to a fresh page. Looks back at audience)

Mom liked lists. You would find them everywhere. Grocery lists. To-do lists. Lists of books she wanted to read. She *loved* her books. They were everywhere. By her rocking chair. By the sofa. On the sofa. In the bathroom. By her bed. On her bed. Sometimes I'd want to cuddle up next to her in bed and hug her, but I would have to push all the books away first.

(Beat)

I would gladly push all the books away right now.

(Beat. Startled back to moment)

The list.

(Takes notebook. Stares at it. Starts writing)

Wake up.

Make coffee.

Pick out dress ... Black.

Email people.

Find Nana better doctors.

(Beat. Speaks to audience)

Nana is sick with pneumonia. They keep giving her antibiotics, but they just make her sicker. She is weak. I'm scared.

(Beat. Begins writing again)

Find a therapist, for me. Acupuncturist. Someone. Help.

(Beat. Looks to audience)

Help?

(Beat. Starts writing again)

Pick up boxes.

Pack Mom's apartment.

Drop off things at battered women's shelter.

Clean apartment. Or not.

Cancel Mom's laptop.

(Beat. To audience)

Mom just ordered a new laptop. She is ... she *was* preparing for retirement. She wanted to write again and stop working in doctor's offices with people she didn't like. I was encouraging her to look for remote jobs as a medical writer. She would be so goo ... she *would* have been really good at that.

(Beat. Starts writing again)

Make list of bills.

Pay bills.

Find her will.

(Beat. Speaks to audience)

DAUGHTER (cont.)

Mom made a will years ago. She showed it to me to make sure I knew it existed. But I don't know why she made a will so early. Life is short. Life is short, she would say. It's almost like she knew something was going to happen.

(Beat)

I wish I wouldn't have been such a selfish brat. I wish I would have spent more time with her. I wish I would have shown her how much I loved her. Appreciated her. I wish I wouldn't have been so defensive. Been a better daughter and friend. Been kinder. Told her how precious she was to me.

(Beat)

I miss her.

(Beat. Starts writing again)

Find a lawyer.

Get succession.

Find someone to officiate at the service.

Make a video of pictures and her favorite music and quotes to show at the service.

Make programs.

Pick out urn.

Close her bank accounts and cancel her credit cards.

Pay bills. Her bills. My bills. Hospital bills.

Google how to sell a car.

Sell her car.

Eat.

Cry.

Grieve.

Work.

Call your mother.

You can't, she's dead.

She is dead.

My mother is dead.

(Beat)

Sleep.

Sleep.

Sleep.

If I sleep, when I wake up, can it all just have been a bad dream?

(DAUGHTER puts pen and notebook down. Crawls back onto desk and curls up into fetal position)

SCENE 2

A table with two chairs sits center stage. On the table, a computer and a stack of folders/papers. On the chairs, DAUGHTER and LAWYER.

LAWYER

Thank you for coming. Man ... so sorry for your loss. What a trip, right?! Crazy. I was telling my wife about you last night. And I'm tellin' ya, I wouldn't wish that shit on anyone. You're doin' alright though, right?

(Beat)

Right. We've got a little paperwork to get through, don't we? I'll just need your Jane Hancock on a few of these. Let's see now, where did I put those?

(He filters through papers and looks through files on computer)

DAUGHTER

(To audience)

A dusty striped pillowcase-draped window. Sees nothing. From inside. Or out. A door. Remains open. Always. A thump. A scream. A shot. See it. It's what you don't. Saw it, down. A cast iron skillet? A hammer? A fist? But first, knock, it down. Him. Darkness. Silence. Love, still breathing. Who shut the door first? He forgets. Who leaves last? "In fact, everyone who has left his homes brothers, sisters, father, mother, children or fields because of my name will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life." Matthew 19:29. "But victims don't get nuthin'," he said. Just keep it open, and let the light back in. Who needs a dusty pillowcase?

(Beat)

It has been 10 days, 22 hours and 20 minutes since Mom died. Since my uncle brutally beat and shot her.

I saw everything. I was there. He shot at me too. But missed.

Mom is gone. She is gone, but she's coming back, right?

Nana is back in the hospital, getting better. Six doctors have been assigned to her. It was not the pneumonia killing her, it was the antibiotics the first doctor prescribed to her, again, and again, which gave her C-Diff. The incompetence is astounding.

My uncle is in jail. He is family, but ... I hate him.

I am afraid to hear my phone ring.

Afraid of all the change.

Afraid of sleeping alone. Afraid of sleeping at all.

Afraid to make decisions. The wrong ones.

Afraid my uncle will find a way to escape, that he will get out and kill us too.

My skin is crawling.

I am sad.

I am tired.

Really tired.

LAWYER

Right. Found it! I need you to list all of your mother's assets ... here. So what was it like to get shot at?

(Beat)

LAWYER (cont.)

I got shot at once. Like slow motion, right? Bullets flying all around like crazy. Feels like you're not even there. Not really. But you are. I was. You were. Your poor mama was. Damn.

DAUGHTER

Last night ... Dreams. Wolves. Ghosts. A long trip. Somewhere far away. Farther still. I don't know where. She'd call. And then ... nothing. I pick up the phone. Call her. But ... nothing. Another world, a new her, peace, I assume. I leave. After it all. All the while keeping her in mind. Then ... silence. I worried, felt uneasy, uncomfortable. What if something was wrong? Still ... no word. I called her number. And then ... nothing. Piercing. My heart. Slamming my head. Against a brick wall. No! Silence. Silence. Silence. Then ... "I'm ok. I just wanted you to know that I'm alright." My heart beat again. Then I woke up ... and cried.

(Beat)

It has been almost one year since Mom's death.

I am living in Seattle now.

The D.A. called.

The trial is in two months.

I am scared.

I don't want to see him. My uncle.

I want to throw up.

Nana visits him.

I have to buy a plane ticket.

Go to Nana's in Louisiana.

She is still there. She prefers it that way.

She's better now.

(Beat)

I went back to Louisiana for the trial.

I arranged everything, took off work, bought my ticket, everything. Went there for the trial.

The trial didn't happen.

It was postponed.

Again.

And again.

And again.

LAWYER

Alrighty then. Just sign here. And here. And here. And initial here.

(Beat)

I shot a pig once. Well, I didn't have to. But I wanted to. For a boucherie. It was alright. Nah, I take that back. Shot him in the head, right between the eyes, at first he didn't take. Thrashed around like a chicken with its head cut off. But you know, worse, cause he was a hog. Damn near bust a hole through the pen. Bastard. Oh, but you know, they pray over it first, the Cajuns. To save its soul and all. Sure was good eatin'. Nice and musky. Yes ma'am, fear sure is delicious.

DAUGHTER

(To audience)

And the moon rose, and the delusions danced in the den, to piano out-of-tunes, around spittoons and roach-nest infested kitty kibble and rat-nibbled boxes of girly and MAD magazines and super hero comics, coughing up dust, mite-y memories, worldly encyclopedic words and packed cedar robes of old clothes and film reels, tripping on and over fabric scraps and braided rugs and my lemon twist. Remember those? Falling into broken deep freezers and in love with those cackling night hags glued to my childhood chest. But enough about them. What about that retro knotty pine paneling?

(Beat)

It has been five years since Mom's death.

They say it's for real this time. The trial.

But I'm in Paris. My beloved city. Paris. My lifeline. My breathing space.

"Well, can't you just come for the trial and go back?" asks the Assistant D.A.

Seriously? No, I can't fucking go back for the trial and then come back to Paris. I'm not made of money. And my cousin's coming to visit me here. It's her first time in the city. No. I can't.

"If you don't come, he could go free and you would be responsible. Do you want that?" Are you fucking kidding me? How dare she! And she is supposed to be the victim's *advocate*. What a fucking joke! Don't threaten me. Don't you dare threaten me.

(Beat)

The trial is not next week. They changed it again, to May. In two months. But this is it. Really. The judge said. I'm not the one who postponed it five, six, seven times? I'm not the one who got to continue on with life like nothing ever happened. I'm the one who finally took a goddamn trip to Paris so I could fucking breathe! And NOW you have the trial?! Fuck you. Fuck. You.

LAWYER

Okaaay, looks like everything is good to go. Thank you for your business. But look here,

(Inappropriately takes hand. DAUGHTER recoils)

Everything happens for a reason. You just have to make the best out of a bad situation. Time really does heal all wounds. Let go and let God, as they say. In fact, you should probably get out, see people. Get some color to your skin. Have a drink. Hell, have a few. It'll do you good. Me, I would join you, but ... I'm going huntin'. Nothin' like killin' deer to lift your spirits.

(Smiles big)

That will be five-thousand dollars.

DAUGHTER

Safety. Tranquility. *Justice*? Put your arm around me. Gonna be ok. Outside, within, feel the breeze. Smell the hope. Taste the biscuits. Swing low, sweet chariot. Handmade by PawPaw and Grandpaw, and tobacco stains. And laughter. Lots and lots of laughter. And some tears. And she turns back into a little girl. Swinging to the sound of hope. And of what used to be. It was there. But now, it's here. Hiding inside.

(Beat)

We did not have a trial. He plead no contest. He didn't want us to have to take the stand.

That was kind of him.

(Beat)

DAUGHTER (cont.)

His lawyer shook my hand. I didn't know who he was. He acted like he was my friend. My *victim's advocate* didn't tell me. She didn't pull me away. I guess this sort of thing happens every day for some people.

(Beat)

He is sent to the Louisiana State Penitentiary. Angola. There are stories. A TV show about it. I am scared. For him. I want him in prison, but ...

(Beat)

They say I need to forgive. Focus on the love. Find peace. How do you find peace in such a noisy world? Noisy mind. The silence inside, so much louder than chatter out. Out there. No sense. I keep trying. I read books on philosophy and psychology and conflict resolution and Buddhism and all of it. I understand, but still. No sense. One night she came to me in a dream. It took a while, but she finally came. She was afraid for my wellbeing, my sanity. She wanted to stay a while to make sure I was ok. I think she is here now. I know she is. I want her to be at peace, but I don't want her to go. I don't ever want her to leave me. Ever.

(Beat)

I've scattered her ashes in places she loved. Paris. Barcelona. Bruges. Seattle, by the ducks at Golden Gardens. New York, by Strawberry Fields. In the water, in front of St. Louis Cathedral. In Tennessee, where she was born. But not Greece. Not yet. She always wanted to go to Greece, but never got to. I want to take her there. She would like that, I think. Yeah. Maybe she will like it so much that she'll stay?

(Beat)

And no, everything does not happen for a fucking reason.

SCENE 3

An outdoor terrace on a cliff overlooking the Aegean Sea. A café table with two chairs.

(WAITER enters, walks to center stage and speaks to audience)

WAITER

I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. A zillion million times. I love you.

(WAITER leaves stage and MOTHER and DAUGHTER enter.)

MOTHER

You're running ... Too fast ... Uphill.

(Out of breath, finally reaches the top)

The universe is keeping its eye on you, young lady. You'll speed up time.

DAUGHTER

Should I slink backwards downhill? Would that bring us back to normal?

MOTHER

Sweetheart, normal is not something to aspire to.

DAUGHTER

Then how do we know when we've arrived?

(MOTHER makes her way up to the terrace. Stops, then notices the view overlooking front of stage towards audience)

MOTHER

We have arrived.

(Beat)

(MOTHER turns to audience)

My dear, sweet baby brother. He was always Mama's favorite. Always got what he wanted. Even the height, the blond hair with soft curls and the bright blue eyes. There was always something a little off, because of that Mama and Daddy coddled him. He never saw what Mama and I had to go through before he arrived. Daddy's rage and alcoholism. The abuse. I thought at least that would put Mama on my side. But no, I always had to fight for everything. Never got anything handed to me. But still, he was my sweet little, baby brother. And I loved him. I know he loved me too.

(Beat)

MOTHER (cont.)

I don't know what happened. He was jealous. Helpless. Not in his right mind. "Oh, he won't hurt y'all," she said. We knew something was coming, even before he threatened to kill us. But we never expected all this to happen. We were more worried about what would happen to *him* if Mama died. Would he be able to live on his own? Would he be able to keep a job? Would he stay in the house, it eventually falling down around him? Would he let his friends stay? Get into drugs? We didn't realize then that he was already taking drugs, selling them, sleeping with hookers in the back seat of Mama's car. Boys will be ... boys?

(Beat)

Well, we don't have to worry about *him* anymore.

(Beat)

(MOTHER looks out over audience to Aegean)

MOTHER

The view. Would you look at that view?

DAUGHTER

Wretched paradise.

(DAUGHTER sits down at the table)

MOTHER

Magic. Heaven. If only I had wings ...

(Spreads arms out like wings)

Fly and fly and ...

DAUGHTER

Stay awhile?

(MOTHER sits down on the other chair at the table, behind transparent screen)

MOTHER

Not for long.

(WAITER enters, sets a bottle of wine and two glasses on the table and walks offstage)

DAUGHTER

What's on the other side?

MOTHER

We have reached the end.

DAUGHTER

Don't go.

MOTHER

I can't stay.

(MOTHER and DAUGHTER pick up their glass)

MOTHER and DAUGHTER

To Greece.

MOTHER

To you. To me. To family. To flying.

(Beat)

(MOTHER looks out, in thought, toward the Aegean)

To this one crazy and unpredictable life. To never forgetting beauty. And love ... despite everything.

(MOTHER turns toward DAUGHTER)

MOTHER and DAUGHTER (in unison)

To love.

(MOTHER and DAUGHTER clink glasses and drink)

MOTHER

Just because none of us can get along in this family it doesn't mean we love each other any less.

(Beat)

We are all just quasi-strange in our own way.

(DAUGHTER turns toward audience)

DAUGHTER

Strange. He was always my Uncle Johnny. We would have taco-eating contests, write funny letters to each other, draw cartoons, lift weights, build forts. When I was 13, he got the holy spirit, like Pawpaw. I saw the change in his eyes. He would start talking nonsense. Too much sometimes that you would just have to walk away from him in the middle of his monologue. He kind of calmed down from that after a while and was funny again, but still not quite right. I never really wanted him to come visit me when I was living in other places, but I did hope he'd get to travel, see a different way of living, not hide out in that back room of the house. Strange. After everything happened, that room ended up detaching itself from the house. I go from hating him and wanting him to die a horrible and painfully slow death to feeling sorry for him and wondering if we had taken him out more often would he have become this monster. If Mom would still be here. If we would still be a family.

(DAUGHTER turns toward MOTHER)

DAUGHTER (cont.)

Where would a different path have led us?

MOTHER

It doesn't matter. This moment. This. And Greece. And us.

(MOTHER and DAUGHTER pick up their glasses)

DAUGHTER and MOTHER

To us!

MOTHER

Greece, we are finally here. You could have brought me sooner, you little rat.

(Beat)

This is it. Moving forward, onward.

(Beat)

I'm sorry. So much pain back there. Loss. The violence. If only I'd known.

DAUGHTER

If I.

(Beat)

The meeting. The rage. The jealousy. The argument. The cop. His fists. The gun. The gun. The gun. No one listened. *No one* listened. Cops. Neighbors. Doctors. No one! Why is it that nothing can be done until after it is too late?!

(A tray slams to the ground in the background. Both MOTHER and DAUGHTER let out a loud SCREAM)

(Beat)

MOTHER and DAUGHTER

The screams.

(Beat)

MOTHER

Time.

DAUGHTER

It can't be erased?

MOTHER

Not erased. But easier. We made it here, didn't we? A step forward.

DAUGHTER

Yes, but ... I miss you.

MOTHER

I am right here, my sweet baby. I will always be right here.

DAUGHTER

I know, but

MOTHER

I love you. I will always love you. And I know you love me too. I always knew that, even when we argued. And I'm thankful to you for bringing me *here*. It's perfect. And it is never too late. Don't think it's ever too late. Everything will be ok. Eventually.

(Beat)

Sweetheart, it is time.

DAUGHTER

Already?

MOTHER

It's time.

DAUGHTER

Life is too short.

MOTHER

It's time.

DAUGHTER

(DAUGHTER turns to waiter)

Excuse me, what is the time?

(WAITER with tray approaches the table and picks up the bottle and glasses, stops just before and turns toward audience)

WAITER

They say it is all in the timing. Maybe if they would have paid more attention to me, accepted me. Laughed at my jokes. Not walked away from me when I was talking. Maybe if they would have taken Mom to the hospital in the city instead of the small town. Maybe if they would have stopped her from coming back to the house. They knew it wasn't good. They were afraid of me. I didn't mean it. I love them. But I didn't know what to do. Maybe if the police would have come sooner. Maybe if the cop had taken the time to speak with me that day instead of leaving to escort someone to a football game. Maybe if they would have moved away and let Mom and me fend for ourselves. Maybe if they just would have left us alone. Mom would still be here. My sweet sister would still be here. My niece wouldn't hate me. But none of that happened. This is what happened. I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. What could I do? It's just very bad timing.

(WAITER walks offstage)

(MOTHER and DAUGHTER look at each other. DAUGHTER rises from table. MOTHER hands her an urn. DAUGHTER walks to edge of cliff/stage, says a silent prayer, opens the urn, and allows ashes to fly out. MOTHER, behind the screen, fades out of sight. DAUGHTER places urn on table and walks center stage to face audience)

DAUGHTER

I should have brought her to Greece sooner. We should have traveled more together. I shouldn't have been such a selfish brat. We should have spent more time together. I should have told her how much I loved her more often. I should have told her how much I appreciated her. I shouldn't have been so defensive. I should have been a better daughter. I should have been a better friend. I should have been kinder. I should have told her how precious she was to me. I should have hugged her more often. I shouldn't have moved away without her. We should have laughed more often. We should have argued less often. I should have told her she was beautiful more often. I should have complimented her singing more often. I should have complimented her dancing more often. I should have complimented her writing more often. I should have done more dishes. I should have made her favorite meals. I should have introduced her to more of my friends. We should have gone out dancing. We should have drunk more wine. We should have smoked pot together. We should have gone to London. We should have gone to Spain. We should have moved to Paris. We should have had more time. More time. More time.

(Beat)

I shouldn't have asked her to go with me that day. I should have made her leave the house. I should have made the cop stay. I should have made the cop talk to him. We never should have gone to the house. If only we'd known. If only we'd known. If only we'd known.

(Lights fade)

THE END