

The You Play

by
Rafaella Marcus

Accessible Text Version
19/09/20

'Tis time; descend; be stone no more
The Winter's Tale, Shakespeare

Note: This is a play written for each individual audience member to become part of. Your body supplies the final piece of the puzzle.

This text has been adapted for d/Deaf and hard of hearing audiences, and anyone for whom it might be preferable to read rather than listen. As such, this text differs a little from the audio version.

Instructions to the reader are given in *[italic square brackets]*.

Where text is unassigned, consider that to be a narrator, a Jiminy Cricket. She's also like the caption boxes in a comic book; taking you places, telling you things, guiding your travel in the story. All other voices are denoted in script/dialogue form.

(what's past is) Prologue

The first thing is a choice. Here it is.

You can do this at any time. But why don't you wait until the hour reaches sixteen minutes past?

That way you'll know there's a chance that someone, somewhere, is doing it at the same time as you.

Of course, it only works if everyone does it.

I'll give you a moment to decide. You can stop reading, walk away, come back as the quarter hour draws close. Or just plough on right now (you groovy individual, you).

Give yourself five seconds to decide.

5. 4. 3. 2. 1. Ok.

Welcome.

In this performance, you're going to be asked to do or imagine things.

Take this moment to prepare yourself. You'll need a glass of water. And even if you didn't need a glass of water, it's a nice thing to have, isn't it? Something free, that's good for you. Get a glass of water and put it somewhere close by where you won't worry about knocking it over - somewhere that catches the light, if you like.

You'll be asked to play music, if that is something that is available to you and that you enjoy. You'll be asked to move, if that's available to you. Place yourself somewhere where that's possible. You can sit or stand or kneel or crouch, you can lean against something or not lean, it's all up to you, and what you need.

You'll need somewhere to begin. You can move to another room during the story if you want to, so long as you can take this text with you. You can go anywhere, if you want to. But for now just somewhere private will do. Low light, a bit dim. A bedroom, a wardrobe, a study. Pretend you are the only person in the world. Marooned.

There is nothing as dangerous as shipwreck in these minutes, though you might sometimes feel nervous. That's ok. The main character of this story is You. You better act like it.

Let's try now, shall we? Look outdoors, out of a window, out of your front door. Somewhere something is moving, within the scope of your vision. It could be a bird. It could be a person. It could be cars, or pushchairs, or wheelchairs, or scooters. It could be your own lashes as you blink. Find that movement. Concentrate on only that. Follow it, for as long as it lasts.

Now copy it. The best mimic you can, with your body and your space. I'll give you 16 seconds. Go.

[16 seconds pass]

Nice.

Ok. I think we're ready to begin.

....

nor night nor day no rest

So.

The first thing is, you wake.

You squeeze your eyes tight shut and open them again, and there's very little difference.

You realise it's still dark, which is strange considering the time of year, but you can deal with the dark. *[Make the room brighter. Open a blind or turn the light on. Go.]*

You try very hard not to think.

You tumble out of bed (and you stumble to the kitchen)
and you stretch your reluctant body. *[Do it now, feel the pull of your limbs. That's good. That's your body working.]*

Every day you shower - or actually some days, quite a lot of days, you need a protective second skin, so you don't shower, you just splash your face with water. *[Get your glass of water and dip your fingers in it. Now flick it on your face.]* It makes you think of rain. Remember rain? Remember getting drenched in the rain because you were going to be out all day and you were fooled by a blue sky? You were dashing from A to B to C and you got caught at B and a Half?

[Go on, flick that water. Experiment, have some fun! Smear a big wet handprint on the side of your face - rub a squeaky finger on your teeth - leave a secret glisten drying somewhere on your body.]

They used to smile at you in the rain, That Person. They *loved* the rain, like a dead wife in a film.

I'm sorry. Just like there's a You in this story, there's also a Them.

You wonder what they're doing right now, are they still curled up in bed, a soft imprint that bears the shape of them, the weight of them, are they arching their delicious limbs -
stop. *[Hold your breath for three seconds and don't think about anything.]*

[Exhale.]

You put your clothes on next, skin still slightly damp - and you're thinking of rain again, you're remembering what it was like to cram into a room or a train or a class full of people wet from the rain - when *was* the last time you were in a room with so many bodies, all steaming and mingling greenhouse clouds of sweat and breath and vapour?

You should dry yourself off properly before you get dressed. That's how you get a fungal infection.

[Drag your wet finger under your clothes somewhere. Trickle some water down your neck.]

You should start. You should start this day, which is *not yet* just like all the other days. This day could go anywhere, be anything, if only you could work out the right thing to do. Somewhere, you

know, there is a magical combination of actions or deeds or words, and all you need to do is find them, and you will be whole again, whole and proper and *good* and -

You are going to make a change, do something assertive.

That's an instruction! Do something decisive, stamp your foot or slam a door or drink your entire glass of water in one go! Let this day know you exist! Go!

Hm. Bit motivational video, that.

The truth is that you don't really know if any of your days *can* be different, you've made your bed so well. *[Make your bed, if you haven't already.]*

it's just one foot in front of the other in front of the other in front of the other in front of the other in front -

[Pinch yourself.]

You inhale the smell of your first coffee as you make it, you push your nose right into the instant, the ground, the beans, you get right in there and sniff *[imagine it, or go and do it if you have coffee and you really want to]* but

it smells of kids working for two dollars a day on the surface of a dying planet. Tea would be no better, the sound of the kettle a long wail of bloodshed, colonialism, and twee Union Jack souvenir mugs. You pick up a piece of fruit but there's a fishing line of murder and exploitation from the other side of the world to your hand.

You go to pour milk into your coffee and a curdled clot slumps wetly into the mug. *[Spit in your hand and smell it.]* Gone off, but you only bought it a few days ago, didn't you? You could have sworn - but for you to know for sure, you'd need to know the last time you went out and you don't -

You piece of shit. You - *[wipe your hand].*

The milk is a bad sign, you've done something wrong again and you search wildly for a way to atone. *[Go and get a bag of rice and don't come back until you've counted every single grain in the bag.]*

[Joking obviously.]

You piece of shit, you piece of shit, you -

Ok. Ok. Just - just breathe. Breathing can't be moral, can it? Can't be good or bad. It's just - breath. Literally nothing. wind. air.

You breath slowly in and out for 16 seconds. Go.

[16 seconds pass]

And

And

Yes. The day hasn't started yet. It could go anywhere, be anything.

[You touch your own face.] It is the touch of someone you loved long ago.

...

I love you but don't touch me right now

So.

[There are voices, far off. The sound of the universe.]

So there's this king -

[Voices, again, louder than before. Interference.]

There's this king, who lives far away and long ago - in that story country where it's *all* kings, you know? The whole land is just castles with kings in them and sometimes a clever lad to marry the princess. Just kings and lads, as far as the eye can -

Woman 2: What do you mean 'oh'?

Oh.

Woman 1: I just mean - I don't know, it's weird.

How strange.

Woman 2: I thought you'd want something like this.

There's something going on outside.

Woman 1: Why would I *want* this?

In the park, next to where you live, two women, one tall, one short, are having a fight. They *were* holding hands but now they look separate and tense. Oh well, the king'll have to wait. This is much juicier.

[The interference clarifies into a city park. Two women arguing.]

Woman 2: well god then I don't/ under

Woman 1: it's fine just drop it, forget it, forget I ever /said

Woman 2: I don't understand why you're being weird about it, honestly I thought it was a *nice* thing

Woman 1: yeah no, it *is*, it's just you you you could have given me more notice, we are literally on our walk right now and you tell me they're joining us

Woman 2: ok, is that all, is that all it is, the short notice?

Woman 1: well well yeah no I mean there's more

Woman 2: because I didn't mean to upset you, I just thought it was a lovely thing that /two of our friends

Woman 1: it is a lovely thing! I'm really happy for them -

Woman 2: that two people we love are a couple now - ok right because you don't seem happy

Woman 1: I AM OBVIOUSLY HAPPY FOR THEM.

[beat]

Woman 2: can you shush because people are

Woman 1: *sorry*

Woman 2: people are staring

Woman 1: they're not staring

Woman 2: those men are staring

Woman 1: well they're always here, staring and saying stuff, the fuckers

Woman 2: shh they'll hear you

Woman 1: I don't fucking care if they do, in fact next time they say something vile to us, I'm going to go over there and -

Woman 2: please don't.

Woman 1: ok. ok, sorry, look, I'm being quiet. I'm being good.

[They walk on in silence for a bit.]

Woman 1: it's just because what happens when they break up?

Woman 2: maybe they won't break up.

[beat]

Woman 1: yeah. yeah. I guess. Maybe.

Woman 2: give them a chance, they've only been together 5 minutes.

Woman 1: *[sigh]* yeah. ok. It's just. I don't know, I just don't see it between them, I feel like it's - bad vibes.

Woman 2: oh come on

Woman 1: well

Woman 2: bad vibes! you can't say 'bad vibes', we *love* them, they're our *friends* - and they'll be heading round that corner in a minute so/ tell your face

Woman 1: I just don't like that now they -

[beat]

Woman 2: that now they?

Woman 1: it doesn't matter

Woman 2: *that now they?*

Woman 1:

Woman 1:

Woman 1:

Woman 1: that now they love each other more than they love us.

[pause]

Woman 2: more than they love you, you mean? you know, just because you've fucked both of them-

Woman 1: that's *not fair*.

Woman 2: no. sorry. that - that wasn't fair of me.

[beat]

Woman 1: you see? I said nothing good could come of it.

...

The Spider

[*The park goes away.*]

I think that's enough of that.

You get a lot of that kind of thing - your window faces the park and from time to time other lives bleed in unexpectedly. You sit below the window and listen - or perhaps you peep out, hiding yourself, you read their lips, their body language, you take them all in - the couples, the joggers, the families, the groups of kids playing music off their phones.

It gives you a terrible ache sometimes, but you have no-one to blame but yourself. Because -

I'm sorry. This is the horrible bit.

This is what you did.

Sixteen weeks ago that feel like sixteen years - before the not showering and the not going out and the coffee that tastes like guilt - you loved someone.

Picture them now. You know who they are. Even if you've never met them, you know who they are. They are the person you have always loved. Let their face come into your mind.

Yes. There they are.

There was something indecent about how much you loved them. You embarrassed yourself.

[There is something near you now, an object. Something very mundane, something inexpensive, something you don't pay much mind to, something you can pick up and carry around, something that's sort of always just there.]

[Pick it up now. Congratulations. You are holding the last thing they left behind them when they went away.]

[As you pick it up, it occurs to you that without realising it, you have been keeping this object close. Moving it from room to room with you, weaving it into the fabric of your life. They probably didn't even realise they left it behind.]

[Just hold it, don't look at it. Just feel it, you don't need to look. Just remember.]

You were in love.

At first you loved them like you were driving home a long way at night and every single light was green, like you were the Great fucking Gatsby

When they smiled you felt your chest hurt as it expanded, like heart disease, or the Grinch at the end.

[Hit yourself in the chest with the object.]

And they loved you too, though there's no accounting for taste.

[You can look at the object now.]

And every day you woke up to this miracle of being loved.

[Hold the object very tight. The way it feels in your hands is the way that being loved felt.]

And every day you wondered when it was going to end.

[Put it down. You're going to hurt it.]

You don't know how the ends begins, it's so - it's like when a doctor shows you a scan of a brain and says 'Do you see that shadow?' but you don't. And they say 'That shadow like a thumb print?' and then you can see it and yes, it's exactly like a thumb print, like a dirty thumb print

in fact, it's more like a dirty thumb print on a white wall somewhere you've never noticed

before but now

now you've seen it, you can't unsee it.

It begins like that.

You were at a party maybe, or a friend was over visiting the two of you, or it was the pub or the park or the waiting room of a doctor's office even, it doesn't matter - the point is, you saw it.

You saw *touch* happen between them and someone who was not you, and your head filled with the exchange of heat between bodies, the brush of fine hairs, *touch*, awful and unlawful.

[stroke your fingers along the back of your hand until you shiver]

After that you were obsessed, you studied every movement of their hands, of the arm creeping along the small of the back, you counted the milliseconds in their hug, their smile, their squeeze *[pluck out a hair from somewhere on your body]* -

touch, like punctuation.

It actually felt a bit like relief in a way: thank god, it's here, the worst is here. You knew they were always leaving you.

After that, there were spiders in your brain.

[Make the object so you can't see it. Put it behind the sofa, drop it in a bin, bury it under piles of coats, sit on it, go.]

They could not understand why your smiles did not reach your eyes, and you could not understand why touching them was like touching chicken skin,

You could not understand why the thunder in your brain was SO LOUD *[CLAP YOUR HANDS OVER YOUR EARS, WRAP YOUR ARMS AROUND YOUR HEAD]*, AND ALL THAT STATIC

JUST

DROWNED
THE
LOVE
OUT

[STOP BREATHING]

You had to tell them of course. You had to tell them that you knew, what else were you going to do, nothing else would have been fair *[stare at something without blinking for as long as you can]* you haven't slept for seven nights. seven nights bloodless and staring as the spiders crawl over your eyes, you'll never sleep again.

You had to tell them, so you told them.

[Imagine slicing into something. Imagine going into the kitchen and getting an apple or a carrot or

a potato or an onion. Something that crunches. Getting the biggest fucking knife you can find and just slicing that fucker in two. Pushing all the way down down down and CRUNCH.]

God that would feel good.

That would feel so good.

That would feel....righteous.

Fucking vegetable.

[You would leave the two halves of the apple or carrot or potato or onion or whatever it was cooling on the kitchen counter, going brown and dry and hard, and just a bit less nice than they were before.]

Good.

Of course they were upset when you told them what you knew, of course they told you it wasn't true but something about their crying actually quieted the brain-spiders, made you even more sure.

[Make it dark. Turn off all the lights. Close the curtains. Read this by the light of your phone. Breathe.]

They turned the light off behind them as they went, as though they were leaving an empty house and not a room with you in it. As they were leaving they said: 'I never wished to see you sorry. Now I trust I shall.'

[Sit and breathe. Breathe in the dark.]

It takes exactly one message for you to realise the mistake you have made. A missive from a mutual friend pinging loudly into your sweaty head and hands: **what the fuck have you done?**

[Fling open a curtain, flick the switch and stare into the nearest light source, just a for a second, just long enough to feel it white out your brain and your eyes, burn out your nerves and your heart]

You knew as soon as you heard the door slam. As soon as they picked up their suitcase - as soon as they vanished out of sight as silent as a wingbeat - you knew
you were wrong.

And what you are standing in now is the wreckage of thousands of tiny pieces of your own life.

[Stand up, if you can. Stand with your hands away from your body, palms out.]

and now what you miss is the thousand tiny moments of

picking lint off their shoulder

popping a spot on their back

putting fingers in hair

grabbing a foot as it comes into your orbit as you sit on the floor and they're on the couch

going 'here' as you pull them towards you and lick your finger to get the toothpaste stain out

[Put your finger on your wrist bone and move the flesh around in circles]

holding back their sweaty hair as they heave over the toilet bowl, rubbing their back, why did you rub their back, what was the scientific basis for rubbing their back, but you always did and

so did they, to you
and you can still feel it sometimes
vertebra by vertebra
bone by bone

[You can stop now.]

I'm sorry.

You've been alone here a long time now. The dreams you have before you open your eyes each morning are such terrible dreams, and every day is the same.

The first thing is, you wake.

...

Yellow Raincoat

Once again, the park, the playground - a mother, father, a child around two years old. The family are young. Whenever one of the parents holds the child, they bounce slightly, rocking him.

Dad: ayayayayayaya

Child: *(mimicking)* ayayayayayaya

Dad: clever!

Mum: he likes dancing

Dad: do you like dancing? you like dancing? yeah! Disco Man!

Mum: don't move his arms like that, let him walk on his own

Dad: he's fine, aren't you Disco Man?

Mum: disco honestly

Dad: *(singing)* night fever, night fever

Mum: you gonna teach him to moonwalk next?

Dad: now there's an idea

Mum: by the time he's 16 you'll have embarrassed him to death

Dad: nah

Mum: he'll think you're very ancient

Dad: noo

Mum: very uncool

Dad: why are you saying this

Mum: he'll show all his friends pictures of you and they'll laugh at what you're wearing

Dad: never! My style is timeless.

[They watch the child play.]

Mum: you can't moonwalk anyway

Dad: I can

Mum: go on then

Dad: I can, it's like -

[clothes rustling]

Dad: it's hard on this ground, let me get up on the thing

[climbing]

Dad: haha there, see

[a thump]

Mum/Dad: oh my god!/christ!

[the child crying]

Dad: what just

Mum: he was copying you and he just/ fell off that

Dad: oh no don't copy silly daddy

Mum: hey hey, hey it's ok

Dad: oh oh there darling there

Mum: distract him

Dad: *(loud)* You're ok! You're ok! look at silly daddy!

Mum: ah look at silly daddy dancing! look at daddy dancing! Yeah?

[the crying stops. beat. is replaced by a laugh.]

Mum/Dad: yeah! / that's better / good boy

[the child burbles]

Mum: he's fine. I'm going to put him down for a bit, let him run around

[she does so]

Dad: I wish I could do that

Mum: do what

Dad: when he's crying and you just make a noise or a face or something and then he stops crying and stares at you. It's like he just...forgets. He forgets to be hurt.

Mum: when *you* make a face

Dad: what do you mean

Mum: well he never stops crying when I do it

Dad: yes he does

Mum: no. he doesn't copy me.

...

Time Passes

When I say go, you're going to hold your breath for 16 seconds. Take a deep breath. Ok. Go.

[16 seconds pass]

And breathe. Now imagine each one of those seconds was a year. That's how long it feels like since the day they left.

There's this king - remember the king? - there's this king who marries a girl whose brothers are turned into swans. And she asks what she can do to turn them back - and nobody knows why she has to do this, *she* didn't turn them into swans, but maybe she's just

like that -

and the remedy, the swan-brothers tell her, is that she has to go into graveyards at midnight and gather nettles and briars, and use the nettles and briars to weave shirts for them all, and when she's finished she has to throw the shirts over her brothers' heads - and that sounds like the hardest bit, to be honest, because they're *swans*, have you ever tried to dress a swan in formalwear -

she has to throw the shirts over their heads and they'll turn back into men.

And also she can't speak a single word during the time it takes her to do this. It takes her years. She loses her children, she loses her sanity, she almost loses her life.

You think you know how she feels.

...

flower babe

Wow, ok. This is grim.

Let's have a party.

Not with guests, obviously, because that would require things to be normal and for you to be able to talk to people and have them in your home, BUT

for the first time in a long time, you open the window.

You look at the park and - wow, it's busy on a weekend. You're gripped with panic at the sight of so many bodies, so many bodies so close to touching, and the thought of *touch* still makes you feel sick with fear

It's hot and bright and

[Go to the window if you haven't already, touch the glass and feel its coolness]

You look out of the window and you see the most incredible 16 year-old.

OH NOT LIKE THAT.

Fucks sake.

Incredible like - you want to *be* them. They're so cool, so self-assured - they're in a big group, they're the centre of the big group, and there's something about them that sort of shimmers like a heat haze. They're lying down on the grass.

Do you remember what it was like to be 16? Sorry, that's such an old person thing to say, maybe you *are* 16, or you were 16 recently, or maybe you feel like you never stopped being 16, even though when you count it was years ago.

in any case, you should have a pretty accurate sense of what it was like.

[Lie down on something. Get comfy. Lounge. Breathe into all your limbs, which are loose and perfect because you're 16. Go.]

One of their mates or you don't know, maybe more than mates, is doing something to their hair. Daisies. They're picking daisies and putting them in their hair.

[Get up. Get a mirror, and something to decorate yourself with. Pens, lipstick, confetti, coloured paper, glitter, sequins, anything bright, anything that will dress you for the feast. A silly hat, a pair of neon lycra leggings, face paint, finger paint, food colouring.

Get everything you need.]

The kids outside are dancing now, they're playing something from their phone and it pours into the heat, drumbeats and the taste of salt, and if you'd like to, you put a song on too, a song to dance to

[put a song on]

- and I know it's hard to pick a song, you'll want to find something perfect, so don't

think about it too long. Just instinctively. Whatever you pick will be perfect. The person you love always told you that, you can hear them say it: 'You always pick the right thing.'

[Got it? Ok. Press play. And as the music swells, take your bright, festive things and make yourself beautiful. Your holiday self, the guest of honour at the festival. Ink and glitter yourself, put coloured things in your hair. Adorn yourself with whatever comes to hand. You have 60 seconds. Go.]

[60 seconds pass]

Yes! Look at you! A little miracle. That's worth a selfie at least.

[Now - and this is very important - dance until you're out of breath.

Go!]

...

why are you in pain

A burst of music that fades. The park, again. One boy, one girl, late teens/early twenties. It's a summer evening, the park is full of bodies, relaxed, laughing, gathering in groups.

boy: ok, so the Fisher King is - it's sort of complicated but basically he's this king who's got a wound that won't heal.

girl: this is a story right?

boy: yeah

girl: not like, Prince Phillip

boy: no this is like, far away and long ago

girl: got it

boy: uh so it's a wound in - well it usually says his thigh but wikipedia says that probably that means his dick, like the wound is that he's impotent.

girl: is this like a Jordan Peterson thing, because it feels like /a

boy: no! well I don't think so. anyway, just - let me - uh so this wounded king, all he does is go out on this boat and fish

girl: Fisher King, checks out

boy: because there are no animals to hunt or crops to - what do you do with crops -

girl: pluck? I don't know

boy: gather. basically because he's wounded, so is the land. Like the kingdom is this...reflection of his wound.

girl: a reflection of his dick not working

boy: yeah, it's like this idea that if the king is sick, the land is sick

girl: the *land's* dick doesn't work

boy: yeah. kind of. - and so look the fisher king, all he has to do to be healed is a knight has to ask him the right question

girl: what do you mean the right question, like 'hello king, why doesn't your dick work?'

boy: oh sorry do you know this story?

girl: what

boy: it's just -

girl: no

[beat]

boy: So there's this guy, this knight, Percival

girl: Percival

boy: Percival, and he turns up to visit and during dinner he sees all this wild shit in the castle, like there's a parade in the middle of dinner and loads of spooky maidens wearing white and a girl with I think, like, the Holy Grail

girl: obviously

boy: and the king is obviously really sick, like he looks rough, but Percival's been told it's rude to ask questions, so he doesn't ask. About any of it. Like not about the parade or the Grail or the wound, he just says nothing - and because he doesn't ask when he was supposed to, he has to go away and do quests for years

girl: why?

boy: it's just how it goes, it's like a law - not like a legal law, like a

girl: no I get it. like - physics. like gravity

boy: right. like.... story physics. [beat] So during all the time Percival's away doing quests, the fisher king is getting sicker and sicker and so is the land, until they're almost dead, but they can't die. And finally after years of questing, Percival ends up back at the castle, and this time he's older and more tired and more beat up, and he has - like a lower bullshit tolerance, and *finally* he asks 'what is the deal with your wound?'

[beat]

boy: and that's it.

girl: that's it? that's the end of the story

boy: yeah, that was the question.

girl: what? I'm confused

boy: 'what's going on?' is the question, like 'why are you...?'

girl: 'why are you in pain?'

[beat]

boy: and when he asks it, the king is healed. and the land is healed.

girl: seems to me like maybe the king could have just said like 'I'm having shit one. Could do with talking about it.'

boy: yeah. maybe. I think that's hard for...for kings though.

girl: is it?

boy: yeah.

girl: ok. I'll bear that in mind.

...

incident in the park with george

[Find your pulse. That's all you need to do.

You can find it in your wrist or your neck, it's your choice. For your wrist, hold out one hand, with your palm facing up. Then press the first two fingers of your other hand on the inside of your wrist, at the base of your thumb. Or, press your first two fingers to the side of your neck, just under your jaw, beside your windpipe.

Press your skin lightly until you can feel your pulse like a tiny kick in your fingertips, a tiny kick that says for another second that you are still here – if you can't find it, try pressing a little harder or move your fingers around. Keep trying until you find it.

And once you have it, hold onto it.]

You go to the window a lot these days.

It's almost comforting to see all these lives ticking on - the couples, the joggers, the families, the groups of kids playing music off their phones. You start to recognise the same people again and again, like neighbours in a sitcom.

A huge man with a tiny dog; a family that seems to acquire and shed children with the phases of the moon; a group of young men on the grass surrounded by empty tinnies; two women, one tall, one short, who walk hand in hand most days until suddenly, one day, there is only the short woman, walking furiously alone.

From your seat by the window you can see her shoes scuffing against the path, kick kick kick kick.
And in your veins, tick tick tick tick.

You only turn away from the window for a second

[something HAPPENS in the park, a SCREAM of shock and fear, a ripple of violence]

and you run

you've worn nothing but your own feet for months and they hurt as you cram them into the nearest shoes, you hobble down the stairs - did stairs always hurt your knees like that? - but you're running, you're limping and running towards the park, towards the scream and you round the corner and

the short woman you saw from the window is on the floor. it's been so long since you saw someone else up close and she doesn't quite look real - she's curling up, she's shielding her head. there's something bright and red dribbling from her hairline -

Woman 1: can you just FUCK OFF

you think she's talking to you at first but then you realise she's shouting at the men. they look younger from down here. some of them are holding cans in their hands, they're looking at you to see what you'll do

you take a step forward and you put yourself between her and them.

There's a second where a dozen possible things could happen.

- but then one of them laughs and shrugs and they turn away, sniggering, yelling one last thing as they go - and they're gone.

there are cans and other things on the floor around the woman -

Woman 1: *(shakily)* fucking hell

she's getting up slowly, and you feel useless, you don't know how close you should get so you just say 'are you - alright?'

[sign it or say it out loud now. "are you alright?" go.]

your body feels like someone else's

you help her to a bench and sit next to her and you ask again, "are you alright?"

[say or sign it again - go]

Woman 1: yeah, I'll be - fuck, she always told me not to say anything to them. Probably shouldn't even have come this way but -

You say: do you know them?

[ask - go]

Woman 1: no, no, not *know* them. They've yelled stuff before and I always wanted to - fucking yell back, tell them what shits they are, I don't know. Maybe that's why I came this way in the first place, I was so angry and - they caught me by surprise with the throwing stuff, they've never done that before. I don't know, I know I shouldn't have said anything I just -

(she cries)

Woman 1: I wouldn't have done it if she were here, so it's her fucking fault anyway, her fucking fault for leaving

you put your hand on her hand

and she clings to it like she's drowning

[move your fingers from your neck or wrist and hold them tightly with your other hand]

Woman 1: thank you

[Ask her the question. Ask her why she's in pain. Go.]

...

kings

there is a king who feared his own good fortune.
there is a king who could not keep good things around him.
there is a king who lost his wife, his child, his friends.
there is a king who did not sleep for sixteen years.

there is a king who lives in a tower -
there is a king who got lost in a forest -
there is a king who banned -
there is a king who murdered -
there is a king who -
there is a king -

oh but honestly who cares about kings?

none of these stories are about kings anyway.

...

oh she's warm (epilogue)

(infinitely gentle)

Things change a little after the incident. You don't exactly keep in touch with the short woman but

sometimes you see her walking in the park and sometimes you go down and you walk along with her. From a safe distance, of course. The men have not come back yet but you think she's grateful to have you there, and the thought that you could be useful to someone is - startling.

A lot of the time you don't know what to say. You got used to silence, while you were sewing your shirts.

At the end of the swan brothers story the girl hasn't quite finished her task. The final shirt lacks an arm, and so the youngest brother is left with one human arm and one swan's wing, bearing forever the mark of a sister who could not quite do everything, but did enough.

You flex your hands as you walk.

You reckon you have a choice, over what you do now. Over how you make amends for what you did.

perhaps you leave Them alone, reasoning you've caused them enough harm for one lifetime, knowing they owe you nothing. This would be a good ending. Tough but mature. Full of growth. It might be what's right.

or perhaps you send Them one beautiful, thoughtful message. You tell them that you know you've hurt them too deeply, you have no wish to pick over the bones of what you did, but you wish them well - no, more than well. You wish them every happiness. That would be a good ending too.

or perhaps you ask Them for an audience, and perhaps graciously they say Yes, they've been worried about you. You hold out to them the last thing they left behind - *[get it now, get it from where you hid it]* - and they smile and say "I thought I'd lost that" and from there talking is simple

or perhaps one day, you simply open the door to the street, and there they are

as if by magic

and they hold out a hand to you

it seems unlikely, but there's always a chance.

You always thought that, in the end, that must be what heaven is. In the long, brutal wait for whatever comes next, that's what you hope for:

That those who were lost come back.

That everyone loves you, and everyone is proud.

That you did no lasting harm, and no-one blames you for a thing.

That someday, someone will say to you that everything's alright, and it will be true.

They could be down there now, right this minute. You could go and join them. They're waiting for you.

Go to your front door. Go and meet them.

You've done so well.

Go.