

THE SECRET OF LIFE

BY

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So from the mould
Scarlet and Gold
Many a Bulb will rise--
Hidden away, cunningly,
From sagacious eyes.

So from Cocoon
Many a Worm
Leap so Highland gay,
Peasants like me,
Peasants like Thee
Gaze perplexedly!

Emily Dickinson

1. IRENE

The lights come up on Irene, working behind the counter of a gourmet deli. At first glance she is calmly attractive, with an air of average existence about her. However, the delicately wrought bands of silver around her wrist and the deeply etched lines beneath her eyes tell us she has a depth of experience far beyond the average.

As she wipes her hands and turns to face her new customer, she is struck with a momentary blast of sudden recognition; standing across the counter from her is her best friend from Before Tenth Grade. The happy shock sends Irene off on a non-stop express train of kaliedscopic needs. Throughout the monologue, she addressess the audience as if the whole room were her long-lost friend. She makes a sandwich , but , by the end, only gets so far as cutting open the roll.

IRENE (Reunion)

Wiping her hands clean, repeating an order to a customer without looking at him.

Uh huh Uh huh Uh huh Uh huh got it got it let me see now ham, cheese,
salami, tomato, lettuce, pickle, onion on rye excellant did you want some nice
Grey Pou--

Suddenly recognizing the customer (the Audience) from out of her own past.

Oh my God Oh my God Oh my God Oh my God I cannot believe it this I cannot believe I mean can you believe this I mean this is insane, I mean, my God, how are you, I mean I just can't believe it's you because I was thinking about you all morning and I was actually trying to remember something else but you just kept popping up and what, the last time we talked was what, tenth grade correct me if I'm wrong here Driver's Ed, right, so oh my God what did you say, oh wait, that's right, wait a minute ham, cheese, salami, tomato, lettuce, pickle, onion on rye but listen, I just got these Kaiser fresh, so how's I do you a little favor just for old times sake and you like Kaiser, right, I remember, my God, I mean you could have gone across to the Korean, but you didn't because they call that like Karma, I mean I don't know what the Koreans call it but somebody calls it karma, I mean I knew who it was immediately I mean its in your spine that's where it is, that's who you are, my God look at me I can't stop talking you got me so excited I thought I'd never see you again I mean I've been waiting so long I was on the verge of giving up hope you know, I mean what the last time was what, that film in Driver's Ed about cars that crash and burn, and then I was out of there for good but I never forgot about you and I always looked for you no matter how scared I was that maybe my life was floating past me like little pieces of bad wood going down-river over the falls to the bottom of the pit right, I mean I was doing 130 with my eyes shut cruising all over the place making tons of money because believe me one thing leads to another and I had this fabulous blood-red Spider and this fabulous life in this fabulous apartment on fabulous Fifth Avenue playing Party Girl of the Fabulous Planet vibrating at fabulously high speeds going faster and faster and Europe and Tibet and Hong Kong where dog is a delicacy and burning up Page Six and smiling and vibrating and smiling and do you remember eighth grade biology with Mr. Spagnola and soaking the cloth in ether and the live

frog and pinning it to the piece of wood and dissecting it for a good grade and the poor little frog was still alive but couldn't move because of the pins and couldn't scream because of the ether but could still feel the scalpel and just had to stay there pinned into the wood unable to do anything but wait to die from the pain?

She puts the knife in the roll.

That was me. I was that frog.

Black out.

2. CARLA

In the darkness, we hear Madonna's RESPECT YOURSELF as dynamic cross-lighting hits CARLA, standing center . She is strong, imposing, a Maid of Iron. We are watching the introduction to her Infommercial.

As the lights come up on her, she bounces into her pitch on a swell of music. Her smile is huge. She wears tights and a cut off T-shirt with a boldly drawn butterfly logo. She bounds back and forth on the stage, as well as into the audience, working them with the seasoned craft of an aggressively happy call-and-response preacher.

CARLA

Hi. I'm Carla, and I wasn't always like this. Pretty impressive, I know. But once I was just like you.

Two years ago, I weighed in at 286 pounds and I was content to sit at home eating candy and watching the soaps and turning the mattress. I was going to Hell in a handcart. And I was miserable. *(big smiles)* BUT NO MORE.

It's not impossible if you have the desire, ladies. Desire and love are all you really need to get started with my new at-home weight training video cassette program, SHIT OR GET OFF THE POT--

--desire and love and your very own "Shit or Get Off the Pot" at-home weight training Total Care Package, including my patented one-size fits all video work-out Trainer; a 12-step, 8 part series of Shit or Get Off the Pot inspirational audio cassettes; an individualized 7-day Shoot-from-the-hip Pocket Planner; and my personalized line of nutrient supplements stoked with iron, potassium, calcium, and a whole slew of A, B-complex, C, D, E and lesser known vitamins.

Question, ladies: Do you know how to spell the word Diet D-I-E. t. D-I-E. Now, call me paranoid but there seems to be a negative kindasorta implication stuck right smack-dab in the middle of our national obsession.

It is time to end the madness, ladies, it is time stop being done unto by the world around you, it is time to stand up and DO FOR YOU. That's right.

DO FOR YOU.

Diets are not designed for love, ladies, they are designed for punishment. You are bad so you must deny yourself, you must deprive yourself until you hit that bing! magic pound and then you can relax and be yourself and you're right one piece of pizza can't hurt because look how good you are look how much weight you lost, you have conquered your metabolism, you are finally a good little girl ok what the hell one more slice before he comes back from the bathroom he'll never notice because look how skinny you are look how pretty just one more slice quick hurryalready *hurry* with the extra cheese and onions and pepperoni and oh my God the anchovies and all of a sudden the water starts leaking back into the boat and you don't know why but here you are going under again and you start bailing out the bilge but the bilge is you and they were right you are bad you are not worthy you are *fat* where is that goddamn pizza!

DO FOR YOU.

Believe me, ladies, when you start loving yourself *and* the work-out, you will see the lines on your stomach go from flab to fab; you will see your back cut a gorgeous V in a Frederick's bikini, you will see your pecs and arms and delts show the brilliance of strength, stability and self-control--in plain goddamn English ladies, you will feel better, look better, sleep better, eat better, smell better, and even taste better, I kid you not.

You will look in that mirror and you will say Oh My God, Who Is That Gorgeous Creature. You won't be able to look away. I know I can't. And why should I? Why should *You*? You deserve that mirror, ladies--in fact, go on out and buy a full wall-to-wall, that's what I say. It is time to start a whirlwind romance with that mirror ladies. If you don't, no one else will.

I know it is hard. I know it hurts. I have chewed my cud in the Pastures of Pain ladies, I am no stranger to the scars you are trying to hide inside your size 23 house-dress.

You are the only one holding the key to your freedom.

You are the one holding a gun in your mouths aiming it at your cellulitic hearts shooting bullets of self-abuse right into your left ventricle. I have been down that sad psychopathological path myself, ladies, and verily I say unto you now SHIT OR GET OFF THE POT. It's really that simple. SHIT OR GET OFF THE POT.

Do I know whereof I speak? Yes I do know whereof I speak because I too was not happy --How the hell could I be happy watching daytime TV day in day out killing time until my next bowel movement--Question, ladies: has anybody else here ever noticed the commercials that make up clearly one third of the time spent watching soap operas?

We don't have the right color hair. We don't have the right size breasts. We don't have young enough skin. We bloat. We smell. We bleed. We are not worthy. We are bad.

How many times a day are you the victim of thirty second phallogentric attacks like these ladies, how many more times can you let Daddy or Hubby or CooCoo treat you like a Penthouse Pet or a Playboy Bunny or a plain old disinfected pre-lubricated hole for his joy and amusement and how long before your passive self-abuse sling-shots you into the typical holding

pattern of over eating or bulimia or anorexia just to give you the slimmest feeling of control over *anything* and that only thing becomes your body and you rule it with an iron will and you force fingers and feathers and rubber tubes down your throat looking for the last scraps of semi-digested food that may have escaped your inverted peristaltic explosions--

Show of hands ladies--how many of you have ever experienced self-induced vomiting because you didn't want to get fat? I know how much it hurts. I know how embarrassing it is. I also know that about 1 out of 4 women have done it so I know I am not the only one in this room.

How much longer will you punish yourselves inside the solitary confinement of your over-inflated, de-sexualized bodies for the simple crime of being a woman? I know that's what you are doing because I have been there, ladies, I too have hated my vagina because that's all I had become--I let them tell me what I was until I couldn't take being what they wanted and transformed myself into something they couldn't stand and so I ate and I ate and I ate and I ate and I ate until I became a walking Lady Slabthing and did I mention he left me and the two kids and did I mention that was the first time ever in my life that I felt I knew who I was and I hated myself because of what I let them turn me into--

It took a few years but I finally ate myself into solitude--I was finally alone. I was at rock bottom. Days turned into months turned into years of eating and crying and believing what they had been telling me from the moment I was born, that I was second class, that I was not good, that I was *bad*, so I ate to be bad to live up to what they wanted and now they were gone and the silence thundered with every step I took.

But then one day out of the blue as I plodded into the kitchen for another half loaf of Superchunky Peter Pan, I stood there looking at the reflection of my monstrosity warped in the shiny side of the toaster, flesh rolling over me like an ocean of pain, bones breaking under the strain of a life I no longer wanted to live, and I saw this odd little butterfly barette stuck in my hair like some artifact from a previous civilization and suddenly I remembered that I had once upon a time been a little girl with a little body and a little mouth and a little hole and I remembered what it felt like before Daddy and Hubby and CooCoo jumped in and took control of my little body and my little mouth and my little hole--

--and I heard the silence in my kitchen and the silence in my bedroom and the silence in my heart and I heard myself start to laugh and laugh and cry and laugh and cry and laugh because I was back at a brand new beginning and there was no more Daddy and no more Hubby and no more CooCoo and it was safe for me to come out from deep down inside 286 pounds of anger and shame and I felt this shifting of ancient stones inside and I reached down and pulled this little girl up out of the blackness of her little hiding spot and I said to myself Carla it is time to come out of the darkness. It is time to come out of the cocoon
It is time to come into the world--
It is time to wake up and breathe--
It is time to stand up and love--
It is time to SHIT OR GET OFF THE POT--(*she starts the audience chanting*) SHIT OR GET OFF THE POT, SHIT OR GET OFF THE POT,

SHIT OR GET OFF THE POT, SHIT OR GET OFF THE POT--(she works the front of the audience, pressing their hands like a savior)--SHIT OR GET OFF THE POT, SHIT OR GET OFF THE POT

A burst of RESPECT YOURSELF plays as Carla weeps in ecstasy to the music.

Ladies, get ready to be born again, you are going to love yourselves, you are going to be happy, you are going to DO FOR YOU. And all with my money back guarantee! So Come on with Carla and SHIT OR GET OFF THE POT!!

The music swells as Carla ends with one final full frontal flex and a smile. Black out.

3. IRENE

During this sequence, she barely makes one cut into the roll.

IRENE (Hiding)

Forget the salami, I'm using capicola for you I mean only the best because here you are and here I am and let me tell you I thought I'd never live to see the day which is maybe a good omen because maybe now I'll remember this thing I forgot which is something I now know is inside but just can't seem to remember because I think it's hiding in its dark little cocoon somewhere waiting to be reborn again I mean it's almost there but not quite which is actually ok because I'm thrilled to still be around to at least try and remember because I came this close I mean I'm amazed I mean I was blind and numb and Fabulous with a capital F at the top of every guest list of every club and every hole where people go when they can't sleep because they are just too Fabulous to sleep and I was vibrating so fast I was breaking land and sea records for cars that crash and burn and of course pretty soon not being able to deny my human origins I started to vibrate faster than my poor little molecules could keep up with, I mean you did know I was on it even back in high school right, which is why I left and by this time I was shooting 250 dollars a day, smiling faster and faster and loving it because I was blind and numb and vibrating like a bug on a pin down Fifth Avenue and one thing leads to another which is something you have to learn and pretty soon I was pretty much a latex smile melting down a skull inside a fur coat wearing nothing but the holes in my arm and having a great time because no one suspected because I was so smart because I was vibrating so fast I became invisible and I was selling it as well because I have a head for business and one night I had to collect on this poor man who owed me this huge fabulous wad of money while my friends held him down because I was holding his five month old daughter upside down by the foot outside a window up 56 stories ready to let her drop and that was the night after I got my money that something snapped and I vibrated back to my fabulous apartment on Fifth Avenue and locked the door so no one else could maybe slip and hurt themselves on the trail of blood dripping down inside my fur coat.

She makes a slice in the roll.

I vibrated behind my locked door for about a year. I never went back out. I was waiting.

Black out.

4. ROBERT
(Intimacy)

The Duet from Delibe's LAKME plays.

The lights rise on ROBERT, a non-descript face in the crowd. Robert works for the MTA, dispensing tokens for the subway. He is a fragile man living under glass, taking his comfort where he can.

He sits in front of his window in his apartment, drinking a cup of blackberry tea. The light in his apartment is low. He puts down the tea, drops some Visine in behind his coke bottle glasses.

Next to the chair is an end-table covered with artist's supplies--pencils, pads of paper, paint-brushes; an easle with the current canvas sits near the table.

As the music plays, he gently reaches to the end-table beside him, and places a pair of binoculars to his eyes. He calmly scans the lives of his neighbors.

Suddenly, he sits up in great surprise, pulls the binoculars down, and darts away from the window. He leans against the wall next to the window; tries to calm his breathing.

With great stealth, he leans back around the corner of the window, peaks with his binoculars, and again pulls back from the view.

His back against the wall and still breathing hard, Robert makes a decision; he girds himself and slowly stands in front of the window in full view of the Woman watching him two blocks away.

He raises the binoculars to his eyes and keeps breathing, slowly enjoying the sudden thrill of his new relationship. Through-out the piece, Robert follows the directions of the Woman, with the awkward, tentative fragility of a virgin.

ROBERT

He gives a timid little wave and a nervous smile.

This is new. This is fun. This works.
This is like TV.

Oh my God.

Most people close their blinds at night, they like to hide away from the rest of the world. But I guess not you. You're a very sharing person.
I can tell.

God, she's pretty. You're such a pretty Woman. Why me?

He does a slight double-take, follows her lead, and slowly unbuttons his shirt.

I don't mind keeping my distance.

I've tried to win friends.
I've tried to influence people. I don't have it in me anymore.
But this is nice, this I like, this doesn't hurt.

Oh God.

Safe sex is smart sex. Isn't it? I guess I'm a genius.

Oh my God what am I doing?
Are you blushing?

I am.

It's ok to blush. You're safe. You can take chances. You can't fall. You've got a safety net.

We can open up. Under glass. Can't we.

We all have needs.
This works for me, this is wonderful.

God help me.

I have a history of falling, I have a history of being wrong. I am so tired of being wrong. I'll never have a relationship anyway. This is fine. This is interesting. I'm doing something like something I would watch on TV.

He follows her request, he hesitates a second and then takes off his shirt

Oh my God what am I doing, look at me, I'm taking a chance.

Funny how much people can sweat in those little briefs.
It's because they're black.
It makes you look like butter.
Like covered in butter.
Look. Look at me. Look.

Nodding his head "yes", he traces his fingers lightly over his nipples.

I'm buttering you.
I'm buttering your toes.
I'm buttering your ankles.
I'm buttering your calves.
I'm buttering the back of your calves.
I'm buttering the back of your knees.
I'm buttering the insides of your thighs.
I'm using lots and lots of butter.
Look.

Again following her lead, he unbuckles his belt. He fights to control his breathing.

Oh God, what am I doing? This is my life? This is not my life, this is TV,
I'm behind glass like on TV. I'm safe.

He unbuttons the top button of his pants.

That's why I love TV. No one gets hurt on TV, I've always loved TV even when they said it was bad for my eyes which was every night, lying on the floor, watching TV.

His caressing steadily mounts, arousing his new-found partner more and more even as he himself is more and more aroused. Caught up in the mutual seduction, he unconsciously opens up.

I used to fight with them, I'm not asleep, I'm resting my eyes.
But they were right, I was asleep. In front of the TV. He had to carry me upstairs to bed. Every night. Up to my room.

I used to walk in my sleep. My eyes were shut. Who could find the toilet.
I used to pee in the hallway.
In the corner.
On my sister once.

I got strapped into bed.

There was a closet. For robes. Next to my bed

I started dreaming.
Dreaming of Christ.
He was angry. And bleeding. He had long fingers.
I started dreaming Christ was hanging in my closet, hanging by a hook, reaching for me.
He hated me. He wanted to kill me. His fingers were so long. His hands were like Daddy's. He kept saying my name. He kept reaching.

These dreams woke me up. I couldn't move. I was frozen. In the dark. My groin was stiff. I could see his fingers. They were covered with blood.

I tried. I did. To make it all better. I thought pleasant thoughts.
I thought Mary Poppins.
Floating down from the sky. Like the Virgin Mary. With her big umbrella.
Her talking, parrot-head umbrella.

But every night, the parrot attacked her. It bit her hand until it was shredded.
Covered in blood.
Every night she fell. She fell from the sky. Screaming from the sky.

Every night I dreamed this. For two years. Strapped in.

Slowly his hand creeps down his belly towards the open button at the top of his pants.

I started peeing on the mattress.
Did you? Did you ever?
It's like floating. I wore diapers. They were plastic.
They were green.
I never took gym. The diapers.
I was tense--ashamed--couldn't breathe--didn't feel well.
I sat on the bleachers

They forgot me.
I just watched.
I just watched.

His hand lowers into his pants, and at his slightest touch, he climaxes on his feet. With a deep shudder:

I just--

Oh my God--

His knees almost buckling, he removes himself from the window, leans against the wall, amazed at what has just happened and is about to happen.

Oh my God what's happening this is new this is crazy this is something I didn't think, I can open up you won't make a face you won't walk away you won't not understand right maybe right:
I'm suffocating under glass, like a specimen, like a dead thing. I hate it.

At night when you're watching, do you sometimes fight this need to jump through the window? Are you that lonely and only two blocks away?

He looks again through the binoculars, she is still there. He gestures for her to wait one second, picks up a magic marker from the end-table, and writes quickly on the back of a piece of white paper.

Maybe. I don't know. Maybe. I don't know
It's been so long. I don't know.
I can't spend another year hiding under glass.

Maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe maybe--

*He holds up his message: **Robert.** In a whisper:*

Robert.

He gently places the sign on the floor.

Maybe you'll get it.
Maybe I won't fall.
Maybe this time I'll float through the sky and land gently on my feet on the other side of the glass.

With equal fear and hope, he looks through the binoculars for her response. He takes the binoculars away from his eyes, stunned. His smile is fragile as he takes in a breath and says:

Naomi.

The music rises as he gives another tiny wave; the lights fade to black.

5. IRENE

The lights come back up on Irene holding the roll like Urick's skull.

IRENE*(Exposing)*

But I guess it was fun and all, I mean if you like peeling your flesh back and pulling your bones out of your body with your own teeth, you know that kind of fun, like the tick of the clock pounding in your heart when every pump of blood in your veins is so polluted it could be your last and you just don't know anything anymore because all you do is live for the ether because when you vibrate you don't have to think and it's the private thoughts behind the latex smile running off your mouth that you want to avoid, I mean which is why I guess now it's so hard to remember the things I want to remember because I shot myself up into something that didn't have private thoughts anymore, I mean inside that furcoat behind that locked door I was turning into I guess your basic crustacean, I mean it's not very pretty, it's not like TV, I mean I had this hard shell of scabs from shooting on my arms and on my legs and in my neck and in my fingers and under my nails and in my breasts and on my thighs and even inside where no man has shot before, and I was vibrating around the Great Wall of Empty Chinese Food Take-Out Containers stacked like a maze around the apartment, I mean thank God for Delivery, right, and in those very tiny moments when I had to stop vibrating and wait for more ether to arrive from the Home Shoppers Network, when I'd press my head against the glass, against the window watching the rest of the world, there was this little part of me left still unscabbed, like I think my right pinky toe, that just didn't know why I was still alive and prayed for it all to stop, all the vibrating and all the shooting and all the Chow Fun and all the crusting over and all the pain from all the fingers reaching in the dark that plucked the life out of little three-year old girls behind locked doors and all the life slipping passed me and all the years clogging in my throat like a huge bubble cutting off my air and bloating my tongue while I dangled stuck on a pin about to burst.

I mean don't you hate that?

Black out.

6. CHERRY BOMB

In the darkness, we hear Madonna's JUSTIFY MY LOVE. A lurid red light hits CHERRY BOMB, a fabulous Lap Dancer. The music moves with liquid expression in her hips and breasts, her arms are serpentine and caress the caressable parts, her face a seductive expression of rapture. As she dances she seems lost in ecstasy but in reality she is far away, memorizing a monologue for an audition. In this piece we hear her inner voice as she goes into the audience and the red light, titillating men in the dark.

CHERRY BOMB

The raven is--the raven himself is hoarse--the raven himself is hoarse that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan under my battlements--*(repeats this line)*--Come you spirits--*(stuck)*--Come you spirits--come you spirits into--

Fuck. I'm never going to learn this. I should have called in sick. Maybe I should do Juliet. Maybe not. *(straddling a man)* Christ, this one smells like stale vomit. How lovely. Bet you have lots and lots of girlfriends. Chopped up in your refrigerator. In your dreams asshole.*(she gets off him)* Did I feed the cat before I left? God, I feel awful. Have to pick up some

Vitamin C. And toothpaste. And roach powder. What else. (*straddling another man*) Toilet paper. Christ I'm sweating like a pig.

Come you spirits into--I'll never fucking get it. Story of my life. Fuck that. Maybe I should just blow it off. It is only Stratford. Nothing much. I mean what's the big deal, am I even good enough--fuck, everyone I know is on Seinfeld or Rosanne or Frazier or winning Tony awards or giving interviews in Rolling Stone or fucking Robert Deniro because they know something I don't but hey I can't compare myself to my friends, right, I'm on my own path I'm on my own road I'm on my own karma--fuck, I'm going to shake my tits the rest of my life--Two degrees and a G-string go a long way-- (*straddles another man*) This pencil dick can't stop grinning. Hello pencil dick, that's what you are. But lots of women like that. No. They do. Really. Ugh. (*she gets off him*) I need to call Mom, it's her birthday. Do I want pizza tonight? Maybe Mexican. Maybe a Barium Enema. (*straddles another man*) Not in the middle of my period. So fucking bloated. I feel like a volcano. There's lava dripping down my thigh. I must smell like death. Good.

Come you spirits--come you spirits who--God I hate Shakespeare. Waitamminute, I love Shakespeare. I hate this job, that's it. I'm starting to forget. What am I? I'm an actress, I'm a pelvis, I'm an actress, I'm a pelvis. I can't do this anymore. I'm grinding myself into somebody else. I wonder if that was just a pimple this morning. Maybe it's a venereal wart. Maybe it's leprosy. Maybe I'll be dead tomorrow. Maybe not. Maybe I'll nail the audition. Maybe they'll love me. Maybe they'll give me the part. Maybe they'll bring it to Broadway. Maybe I'll go to Hollywood. Maybe I'll be a Star. Maybe I'll nail this goddamn speech and quit this fucking job no matter what because I'm losing my fucking mind--

As her inner voice screams, her dancing takes on a sinuous quality. Very simply, with all the fear and frustration and ambition pounding in her heart, she nails the monologue.

The raven himself is coarse that croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan under my battlements. Come you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, and fill me from the crown to the toe topful of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood, stop up the access and passage to remorse, that no compunctious visitings of nature shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between th'effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts and take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers, whatever on your sightless substances you wait on nature's mischief! Come thick night and pall thee in the dunkest smoke of hell, that my keen knife see not the wound it makes, nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark to cry, "Hold, Hold!"

Her hands are about to remove her top, baring her breasts.

Actress. Pelvis. Actress. Pelvis.

A happy light bulb goes off inside her. She decides.

Actress.

She smiles, and instead of removing her clothes, she walks off the stage as the lights fade quickly to black.

7. IRENE

The lights rise on Irene, who continues.

IRENE

(Action)

I mean my father always used to say , "you can't regret nothing" which is I guess what got him through his life I mean we all have our secrets and when I remember mine I promise I'll fax it to you but you know so many times I used to wonder what it would have been like to have stayed by you on your side of the road instead of taking the scenic route I mean my friends are all burnt out now or not really my friends anymore or dead and it just might have been fun to go the other way which is I guess kind of what I was thinking that night at the end of the year behind the locked door when I just couldn't take the unbearable un-namable agony of being born anymore, I mean for a whole year I kept seeing that little baby girl looking upside down at me holding her by the foot and it finally became clear to me how much I had in common with her because it was all my fault and I deserved what I got behind the locked doors and that was all I was going to get in my life over and over and over and over and I was never going to get out from behind them and why resist the awful gravity tugging at my arm pulling me behind the final locked door of a casket because I must have done something to deserve it and I looked at who I'd ground myself into and couldn't remember who I'd once been and realized I had to stand up for myself and put a stop to it once and for all because I was losing my fucking mind, so I locked myself behind the bathroom door and lit my old Jesus Voodoo Votive Candle from the Korean bodega and turned the lights out and dropped my coat off in a puddle on the floor scab-naked in front of the mirror like a stripper in a bad dream and filled my favorite needle with a teeny-tiny ocean of air and ripped off a patch of rotting flesh from the express line on my wrist and waited for the clock to strike exactly three because even at my worst I'm like that with time.

I was finally going to take my stab at life.

Lights down on Irene.

8. BESS

A light comes up on Bess, sitting alone in a white hospital smock, rocking slowly back and forth. She sucks in a breath and sings an old grammar school song like a mantra to keep her attention away from her thoughts.

BESS

50 nifty United States from 13 original colonies
 50 nifty stars in the flag that billow so beautifully in the breeze.
 Each individual state contributes a quality that is great.
 Each individual state deserves a bow.
 Let's salute them now--

She pushes out a gale of bad air..

I am in control here.
 I am in control. I am in the driver's seat. I am allowed to choose.
 A woman's body is her own. I am in control and I can do what I like because
 a woman's body is her own and I can do what I like--

It's not your fault. What can you do. Don't whip yourself. Sit back you're
 in control, simple procedure, three minutes, over, think about the kids about
 what you've got, a piece of cake sit back enjoy the ride Over in three minutes
 piece of cake in three minutes don't worry I am in control I can do whatever I
 motherfucking--

She sucks in a breath and sings--

50 nifty United States from 13 original colonies.
 Shout 'em scout 'em tell all about 'em
 One by one til you give a day to every state that's in the USA--In the USA--

What am I doing. Where is my goddamned life already. It's down the toilet
 already, just like she said it would be. Thanks Mom. Thanks for all the great
 advice, thanks for teaching me everything I need to know about what I need
 to do to have what I need to have, thanks Mom.

You said it's your life right Mom, it's your life you want to be a pig be a pig
 just remember to flush the toilet, right Mom. Secret of Life right Mom--

Thanks for the advice, Mom. I guess I'm a pig I guess I let you down--

I'm glad you're gone I only married you to get out of that house because I
 couldn't stand all the dirt and the piles of laundry and the fighting and the
 noise and the gin bottles and the slamming doors and the broken fingers and
 the vomit on the rug drying to a crust in the sun and that's the only reason I
 married you, to get out of that madhouse.
 Because I wanted my own madhouse thank you. I know how to keep a
 madhouse. I know how to keep it clean and running I know how to get up at
 five o'clock and keep it running and put you through goddamn computer
 school by cleaning bank offices and business cubicles and I know how to
 support you and nourish you and give you three baby mouths to feed and I
 know how to clean their rooms and I know how to clean their noses that
 keep running while you work overtime and nights late until you don't wake
 me up anymore because you don't even come home because you find within
 yourself this deep rooted need to pull anchor and sail off on board some
 brand new goddamn cruise ship from Japan with three Ph.d's in microchip
 technology and skinny hips and beautiful black hair and only one tiny
 mouth to fill and so you fill it and you walk around naked in her living room
 and she eats sushi off your big hairy monkey stomach and I'm left behind
 in the madhouse to keep it clean and keep it running and keep the mouths
 filled so they won't scream for Daddy like their Mommy does with the doors
 shut and the pillow over her face because here I am alone in the madhouse
 with no husband and no future and no past except three mouths to feed and
 piles of laundry to fold and a future of unpaid bills and a gin and tonic full
 of wondering how am I supposed to pay the future of unpaid bills with a
 past I gave up to support your life in the world of computer games and who
 am I anyway because now you're gone and I'm alone and not who I was

because I'm alone and so lonely and it's all my fault, I know I did something wrong and the last thing I need now is another mouth to keep filled with--

Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Hawaii, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts

She lets out a big breath. During this section, she is hit by a sudden burst of physical pain.

It's not my fault. It's not my fault your father ran away from his madhouse to live in sin with some Woman who only has one mouth to fill. It's not my fault and It's not your fault and I'm not going to let you grow up thinking you had anything to do with why your mother cries all the time and I won't make you suffer all your life because your father has destroyed my life and left me in the madhouse with a broom and shovel and another mouth to fuck I will not hurt you fuck I will not let you grow up in this world because all you get is fuck I will not let you inherit the pain your father fuck I will not let you fuck I do not want you fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck--

She is at the highest crest of pain. Sings--

Michigan, Minnesota, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Vermont, Virginia, Washington--

I wonder if they can wrap it up to go. I wonder if they can wrap it in a bow and ship it over to him so he can kiss it good morning.

Oh my God At least I still have a sense of humor fuck I hate it fuck this is my body fuck not yours fuck I am in control fuck I am in control fuck I am fuck fuck fuck fuck--

She struggles to sing:

West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming, North South East West
In our cool considered opinion, New York is the best of the 50 nifty United States from the original colonies--Shout 'em scout 'em
tell all about 'em one by one til you give a day to every state that's in the U-S-A-2-3 HEY!

The last word comes out as a convulsive gasp/scream.

Black out.

9. IRENE

Lghts up on Irene; she continues.

IRENE
(*Vision*)

So now I'm waiting and waiting and like I said one thing leads to another and finally the clock hits three and I am in control, I'm finally in the driver's

seat ready to flush away all the mistakes of my life with the needle of air sitting on my pulse when what do you think happens but the mirror cracks wide open and behind it is not the medicine chest one might expect behind a mirror in a bathroom but this wild river going 900 miles an hour and so I figure ok it's my last few moments of life I'm having a vision I'm entitled so I go with it and there's all these huge pieces of wood bobbing downstream and I hear this little kind of yelping noise and I look closer at the logs and who do you think I see nailed into one of the tree trunks cruising by but who, that's right, Mr. Spagnolo's frog, and the river is so loud because all the wood is racing towards the waterfall at the end of the river which is by this time just a few feet away and all the wood is going over the falls into this kind of fog and I look down at the froggie stuck on the wood and suddenly the roar of sound drops away and he looks me in the eye and in a tiny frog voice he says " Help" just as his piece of wood is starting to go over and so I jump in the river like in Phys Ed and I reach out and pull a pin out of one hand and then I pull a pin out of his other hand and then I pull a pin out of one foot and I'm about to pull the last pin out of his other foot but he's going over with the log so I grab onto a rock with one arm and with my other arm I reach out as far as I can and he whips out his sticky-like tongue and wraps it around my wrist, hanging onto me for his dear little froggy life with this huge piece of dead wood pulling him down and me with it but I'm not letting go this time I'm hanging on and all of a sudden his foot rips off his body and the wood disappears down into the bottom of the pit at the end of the waterfall and I drag him to shore and give the little fella mouth to mouth which him being amphibian and all was pretty unnecessary but by this time I was getting into it and the frog looked so happy to be finally once and for all free of the pins holding him down even though now he only had one foot that he hopped over to me, kissed me on the cheek, and jumped back into the river, swimming upstream like he was Esther Williams.

But you know, before the frog kissed me on the cheek, he whispered something in my ear. He gave me a special gift for saving him.

He gave me the Secret of Life.

The lights fade down on Irene.

10. STERLING

Madonna's cover of FEVER plays in the red shadows of BJ's, a jerk off parlor in the Bronx. STERLING, a slim 35 year-old man, chain-smokes against a wall while those around him fulfill their desires in the shadows.

STERLING

I'm giving him five more minutes more and that's it, fuck it, I got no time for this shit. I got a time clock to punctuate here for God's sake.

I mean they say a man is ruled by what you call his dictates and I believe there is very much truth unto this theory . And therein hello lies the danger of tempus fugit we are all what you call subject to. I mean like yanking's a ball and all but as a permanent way of life-style, forget it thank you. Tick tock tick tock hello you're dead and buried before you know what hit you and then where are you, six feet under with a hard on and a mouthful of dirt. I got no time for this shit is what I say.

I mean let us be real for but one second of Personal Disclosure here: first two months of 1-900-FUCK ME, my phone bill was pushing 500 a month thank you, I mean they scag you because of certain inalienable proclivities and then pow sister's paying through the nose for party line intimacies. Hasta la vista to that shit right--

I been trying to instill a little self-imposed discipline here. I mean like last week I whatyoucall masturbated with myself for the first time in like forever acausa I had too, I mean I was very much hello horny, if you know whereof I dot dot dot. I mean so I says to myself Sterling darl, scratch the man-itch babe, go for it, right, so's I pop my well worn Vidievid into the doohingy, I don't waste like a second, I hits the fast forward to the spurty part, I mean he's not even on his back yet still standing whatyoucall upright, I go pound pound pound ugh ugh ugh cross the eyes bite the lip, twenty seconds at the topmost, I flick it off, grab the Kleenex, mop and shine the cummy from by tummy, toss it on the floor and bang, lights out. I mean fuck it, I'm tired, I got no time for this shit right, forget it.

I mean I says Sterling dollface, wake up and smell the Sanka honey, it's what, it's decaffeinated hello. I mean it's like mine fields and bear traps I'm walking around here I mean what happens when my naturally perfect looks start the old God Forbid Fall from Grace, I mean it's not like there's too many out theres interested in digging below skin deep I mean I know whereof I speak from personal His-story baby, I mean I cannot deny it's been fun but that's only because I been blessed, I mean thank God I maintained my girlish figure and wasp-like waist or otherwise you wind up like these losers with the lines on the face hanging deeper and deeper waiting for some other loser to give it up and suck on it cause he knows aint nobody else gonna let him so he goes for Ivan the Trollable at four in the morning and splits back home alone to his motherfucking tabster hello meow thank you.

Like it's time for some major motherfucking home-improvements here, I mean I am like 35 years old already give or take a little bit of what you will, I mean where's my fucking life for God's sakes, like I think I'm finally way too over this shit anymores if you know what I'm sayin here. I am not the same open-ended motherfucker I was but 12 tiny months ago because I don't know what it *is* like, but I'm tellin you I got The Change going on even as we speak deep down somewhere insida the murky murky depths.

Sister.

He fans himself, checks his forehead, checks his cheeks, checks his watch.

I thank God I am what you call significantly blessed. I got the ass of a 12 year old. That's right--look see--(*shows butt*)--it stopped growing when it was 12. Act of God like, thank you Jesus. It has insured my dance card gets a proper work out hello. Wanna touch it right, of course right but you can't cause I'm saving it for like I said Mr. Right if he ever gets his motherfucking sphincter down here hello, he gets five minutes more and then I'm the fuck out of here. I don't got time for this shit.

He is, by the by, very cut. Thank God, I got no time for that foreskin bullshit, I mean forget it right, I mean like you really can't see it when it's up inside you swathed in yards and yards and yards of like lemon-scented latex and want-not but it's that 20 seconds before you kick his ass back out on the street you gotta worry about hello. Who needs that shit.

I was circumcised three times myself and I still got some left. Of this I am none too proud. I think my mother did it the first time because she hates me. I will survive, so fuck her dry, right--

Mr. Motherfucking Late Train Mystery Date, now he's a Jew, so you know what you're getting, thank you. I met him last night on this very selfsame spot hello, I was getting my dick sucked and I look over and I see him and I says hey you're cute and all come on over here and suck my dick which of course he did. He is very polite. And so I had the first guy suck his dick so's we could indulge in the old what you call courtship dialogue and so I says Honey you cute, you're a Jew right, which was a lucky guess on my part on accounta his dick was in the process itself and he says Yes and then he says hey You got the ass of a 12 year old and I says tell me something new, Motzaballs--very hardboiled on my part, yet still somehow alluring, as is my wont. And I says Moishe sister, how old you are, and he says Darling I'm very old, I'm 24.

He gives the audience a knowing look.

I says Honey that ain't old, but it's old enough, and he says How old am I, and I says old enough to write the book and he says How old am I and I says It don't matter cause I am very well maintained and he says How old am I and I says Girlfriend give it up, ok--I been around the block. Twice. And I'm looking for a parking spot.

And then he says Am I over 20.

I couldn't hear nothing after that cause on accounta the wedding bells making so much noise.

And I'm thinking Oh For God's sakes already it's happening right here in front of my body parts, The Change is going down all kinda alchemical like insida me transmuting pig shit into gold, I mean I am effecting my own motherfucking life and all like a lotus in the motherfucking mudpit or something. I am very serious upon this matter here.

So I says to myself, Sterling honey, go out on the limb.
 And so I says You like Joan Crawford and he says Yes.
 And so I says You like long walks on the beach and he says Oh Yes.
 And so then I go for broke and I says You like Sweet and Sour Porkrolls of ethnic persuasions and he says Yes Yes Yes and I says Motherfucker! and he says Excellent and I says What say we have dinner like real people for God's sake and see whats what and he says 8 o'clock tomorrow night's fine with me and I says I'll meet you right here on this very much selfsame cocksucking hello spot, 8 o'clock sharp don't be late motherfucker.
 And he says Ok. And I says Ok. And then we both come for like half a minute. Very simultaneously combustible to my joy and wonder.

Five more minutes. And he's paying. We're gonna have a nice dinner like real people with the lights on and we're gonna talk over candles and all and get to know each other because I think I just found the rest of my life.

And then I'm gonna fuck his brains out cause he's a nice guy and he deserves it. As does myself. We're gonna go for broke, plumb the depths for real, I can just feel it. I can't go on like this no mores. I'm getting hot flashes. I'm nauseous. I got The Change.

(Looks at watch) Five more minutes.

I got no time for this shit.

He takes out a breath spray, freshens his breath. Suddenly, he sees the off-stage arrival of his Mystery Date. He looks to the audience in stunned surprise and says:

Oh my God.

Well for God's sakes--

He turns back and smiles to his friend, pointing to his watch as the music swells and the lights go down.

Black out.

11. IRENE

The lights come up on Irene.

IRENE

(Expression)

So. Anyway. I woke up three months later in rehab and that was about two years ago but the trouble is it must have been a really good secret because I'll be damned if I can remember what it was but it really is ok because at least I know there *is* one deep down inside the murky depths waiting like a little lotus in the mud with all the time in the world waiting for me to change and grow a new skin and to live and to try and remember what it was the little froggie in the mirror told me and that's the great thing about life because nothing is a constant I mean nothing is stuck in one position it's all like a roll of film because each frame is individual but leads into the next frame and is kind of connected to it but is immediately in the past and the whole thing adds up to the final frame and see what I mean, here you are out of the blue and it makes me feel so happy to see you again and to make this sandwich for you after all this time but actually wait one second I've just been yabbering on and on and on about needles and pins and frogs oh my! so let me focus here on this roll before I forget all about your sandwich. I mean you've got to take things one step at a time that's all there is to it.

One step at a time.

The lights start to fade on Irene as she focuses on the job at hand. Just as she is about to slice through the roll, the lights bounce up and she suddenly remembers what the frog said.

Art School! Oh my God I remember now the frog whispered in my ear he said Art School, he told me Irene honey enroll your ass in art school as soon as you are able because it all comes down to *expression*, he said even if it takes your whole life you have to let it out before it explodes out or burns you up or eats you alive, whatever it is keeping you pinned down on a piece of dead wood or hiding inside a ravaged body --

Calra walks out, smiling, stands upstage.

--or trapped behind a locked window --

Robert walks out, smiling, stands upstage.

--or grinding your heart instead of listening to it --

Cherry Bomb walks out, smiling, stands upstage.

--or sacrificing a life instead of living it --

Bess walks out, smiling, stands upstage.

--or wasting your days with an unquenchable habit --

Sterling walks out, smiling, stands upstage.

--or cutting your blood with an ocean of junk because somehow somewhere life got really hard and knocked you down and you settled for what you got and what you got became who you are and who you are fed on pain and pain feeds on silence and the only way out is death. Or *expression*. Death or standing up and saying "This is not all I am, who am I?" And trying to find out. And *that's* the secret of life. Well, it's *my* secret, anyway.

God, I feel so silly--Art School. Duh. Now how did I, no, if I try to remember how I remembered what I forgot I'll forget so forget it because I remembered, I'm raised from the dead because I remembered, look at me I'm shaking like a leaf and in the good way too. I remembered.

You know what, I close up here in about three minutes I mean if you have a second we could maybe go and sit for a few hours over a glass of wine because I missed you so much and I can't wait to hear what *you've* been up to since tenth grade. Oh, I'm so happy. It's on me.

God I love you. It feels like my birthday. It is my birthday.

The lights start to go down as Irene opens the roll. Suddenly, we hear the "Joy Joy Joy" section of Beethoven's Ninth thunder out as powerful light bursts forth from the bread, bathing Irene and her smile in a State of Grace.

The End