Co-Dependent
&
Undoing: Learning to Love Beyond American Gendered Conditioning

by

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“I’m so fucking grateful for my ex.”
Co-Dependent

CHARACTERS:
PAT: In college. Female. White.
BELLA: Henry’s older sister. Black.
REGGIE: Pat’s mom.
ANDREW: Henry’s dad. Black.

SCENE ONE

A campus package room. PAT and ADITI stand last in a long line holding their rain coats and dripping. ADITI stands ahead of PAT and turns back to address her.

ADITI:
She didn’t give you any more specifics?

PAT:
She just said a care package.

ADITI:
No chance there’s thirty bucks in cash inside is there?

PAT:
My guess is nonperishables and face masks. What do you need money for?

ADITI:
I told Nicky I would roll through at 6:00 with cash for an eighth. And I really don’t want to run to the ATM in this weather.

PAT:
He won’t take venmo?
ADITI:

He says he runs an analog business.

Pat scoffs.

PAT:

I’d love to see Nicky balancing a ledger.

ADITI:

He’s not balancing anything he’s getting it all at no cost. His aunt ships him the bud from California for free. Seriously his only expense is his sex life.

Pat is silent. Aditi looks.

ADITI:

Oh shit I forgot! (That Pat slept with Nicky.)

PAT (self deprecating):

Me too. For the most part.

ADITI:

God how drunk were you?

PAT (self deprecating):

I seem to have forgotten that too.

ADITI:

You’re a fucking idiot.

Aditi turns around. Pat internalizes that comment.
ADITI:
Jesus this line hasn’t moved at all. Are you sure this is from your mom? What if I stand here with you this whole time and it’s like, spam?

PAT:
She sent it last week and I got a notification that I would be receiving a package today. What else could it be?

ADITI:
What app was this notification from? Was it from the mail service or your horoscope? Maybe you’re receiving a spiritual package. Or a phallic package.

PAT:
It was an email. And it said mail service. Not male service.

ADITI:
Okay just checking. I can’t stand here with you forever.

PAT:
Yeah I know. The pick up, I got it.

*HENRY enters. His locks are dripping as he sheds his rain coat.*

HENRY:
Fuck that’s wet.

PAT (to herself):
That’s what he said.

*Aditi rolls her eyes and doesn’t respond.*
HENRY (*looking up*):

What was that?

*PAT turns red and spins around.*

PAT (*beet red*):

You said, “fuck that’s wet,” and I said–

HENRY:

“That’s what he said.” Yeah, I heard you.

*BEAT. SPARK.*

PAT:

Or at least I would hope that’s what he said.

*Henry, pleasantly surprised,*

HENRY:

Well, wouldn’t we all?

*Pat, pleasantly surprised,*

PAT:

You must not share many intimate moments with hetero boys.

HENRY:

Can’t say that I do.

PAT:

Lucky you.

*She turns back.*
HENRY:

Do you?

*PAT and ADITI both pivot to face him, in disbelief by his frank question.*

HENRY:

I mean—I uh—don’t feel compelled to answer that or—wow great first I drip on the hot girl’s feet and then my own foot ends up in my mouth. Not sure this package was worth the humiliation.

*Aditi rolls her eyes again and turns back to ignore him. Pat’s face has returned to red.*

PAT:

It could be.

*Henry smiles.*

HENRY:

Well it definitely would be if I got the hot girl’s name.

*Aditi gags, facing forward still. Pat’s tickled.*

PAT (*extending her hand to shake*):

Pat.

HENRY (*shaking her hand*):

Henry.

PAT (*gesturing*):

This is Aditi.

*Aditi turns halfway around to wave curtly.*
HENRY:
Nice to meet you guys. What are you waiting for?

PAT (reading into his question):
What do you mean?

*Henry gestures to the package line.*

PAT:
Oh my uh, my mom sent me a care package.

HENRY:
Wow that’s amazing. I think the last thing my dad sent me was condoms my freshman year.

PAT:
She’s the best. She sends me something like this at least once a semester. They normally have some kind of theme. Can’t say I’ve ever gotten condoms, though.

HENRY:
What, she’s saving the reproductive health theme for a wedding gift?

PAT:
Well I have gotten tampons but those are hardly as suggestive as condoms.

HENRY:
Mmm maybe not for most.

*Pat laughs nervously. Aditi gags harder.*

PAT:
Well what are you waiting for?
HENRY:

Maybe some verbal affirmation that I’m not creeping you out right now. *(Pat smiles)*

Oh, and speakers.

PAT:

Do you maybe need any help setting those speakers up after this?

HENRY *(smiling)*:

That’s pretty affirming. I would love some help. Would you be bailing on Aditi, though?

PAT *(to Aditi)*:

You were going to pick up anyway, right?

ADITI *(to Henry)*:

Do you have thirty bucks cash? I’ll venmo you right now.

HENRY:

Uhh *(checks his wallet)* yep. HenryVoss19.

*He holds out the cash. Aditi takes it immediately.*

ADITI:

Great. *(To Pat)* Don’t wake me if you come home.

*She pulls out her phone as she’s walking away.*

PAT:

She didn’t know it was going to rain. She’s not a fan of this weather.

HENRY:

What’s your stance?
PAT:

I clearly don’t mind being caught off guard.

HENRY:

Or getting wet.

*Pat blushes. Henry’s phone chimes. He checks it.*

HENRY:

Thirty dollars from Aditi Shah for “Pat’s Pussy”.

*Pat’s face goes white.*

PAT:

She wrote that?

HENRY:

It’s a cat emoji but I went for the alliteration.

PAT (*embarrassed*):

Nice.

HENRY:

That’s a non-binding contract. Just so you know.

PAT (*relieved yet still annoyed*):

Gee thanks.

HENRY:

We can write our own contract later. If you’d like.

PAT (*intrigued*):

Oh yeah?
HENRY:
Well, just to be safe. Start thinking of terms.

SCENE TWO

*Pat and Henry enter Henry’s room. Their hair and shoulders are still wet from the downpour outside.*

HENRY:
You know AJ? He organized the class streak last year?

PAT:
Oh yeah I remember that!

HENRY:
Were you there?

PAT:
Uh, no, haha, not my thing.

HENRY:
Makes sense. I would have remembered you.

*Pat feels PRESSURE.*

HENRY:
Anyway, AJ’s house is throwing a Halloween party at the end of the month and the theme is puns and I have absolutely no ideas.

PAT:
What! None?
HENRY:
I thought of wearing a sailor’s cap and carrying around a hoagie. Submarine.

PAT:
Haha okay but what happens when the drunkest person at the party steals your sandwich and then you’re just a sailor?

HENRY:
You don’t think I could guard a hoagie?

PAT:
That’s gotta be a you-call, man.

HENRY:
I need you to trust me if we’re ever in a sandwich security breach together. I want you to say you believe in me.

*Pat’s not so big on trusting people. She’s huge on believing in people, though.*

PAT:
I guess your new nickname is Bigfoot because I believe in you. (*Pat spots the guitar in the corner of the room and goes to it.*) Do you play guitar?

HENRY:
Wait can we circle back to the Bigfoot thing–

*Pat has picked up the guitar and plucked some strings.*

PAT:
Woof this is out of tune.
HENRY:

Do you play?

PAT:

I did in high school. How long have you been a guitarist?

HENRY:

Well, I don’t really end up actually playing it that much. I haven’t gotten around to tuning it in a while. It looks cool on display though, right?

PAT:

Wow guitar just for show? So you have like, money.

HENRY:

Ah, no. It used to belong to my mom.

PAT:

Okay… Did this—(she reaches for his desk to grab a black Supreme fanny pack)—$300 fanny pack belong to her too?

HENRY:

No, I got this from a yard sale off campus. You know, after some kid spent their parents’ money on it peak-hype. Are you into Supreme?

PAT:

Well, you know Supreme ripped off Barbara Kruger right?

HENRY:

Who’s that?
PAT:
A super popular artist from the 80s. Hasan Minhaj did a bit about it. The red text block and the white letters is like, her signature aesthetic. They lifted her design.

HENRY:
Man, she should sue them out the ass. They’re making legit billions off her font.

PAT:
It’s just so ironic because, like, Barbara Kruger’s work was always critiquing capitalism and consumerism. She rejected the whole concept of like, mass commodification because she saw seeking material gains as a way of isolating ourselves from others.

*Henry looks down at his fanny pack.*

HENRY:
I wear it when I’m around friends, though.

PAT (*kidding*):
Oh yeah you’re for sure fine then.

*Henry smiles slightly. Awkward silence.*

PAT:
So what’s your like, 

HENRY:
So how’s your semester go–what?

PAT:
No, never mind.

HENRY:
What were you going to ask?
PAT:

Um. Well I just figure that we’ve been somewhat forward with each other thus far, and it makes sense in my mind to continue that forthrightness. And so in the interest of for–(unable to think of a third synonym)–titude, I guess I’m interested in hearing your, like, best case scenario here?

HENRY:

Well, I’ll start by saying that I am having a very good time already.

PAT:

Yeah?

HENRY:

Absolutely. You could slam the door in my face right now and I would feel good about the outcome of tonight.

Pat laughs.

PAT (joking):

Okay so I should go then or?

HENRY:

Please don’t. Or do! If you’d like to leave,

PAT:

I’d like to stay.

HENRY:

That is good news.
PAT (decrescendo so that the last line is inaudible):

I’d also like maybe to– if it were on your mind or– if you had the thought on your own but maybe– you’d be interested in having sex–

HENRY (loudly):

What was that?

PAT (matching his volume):

Sex?

HENRY:

Oh! Well that’s a uh, that’s a yes for me on my end over here, you know if we get there.

PAT:

Yeah, we’ll see!

HENRY:

Is there anything you’d like to know from my neck of the woods about this sex we may or may not be having?

PAT (bad fake sexy):

Got any of those condoms from your dad left?

HENRY (bad fake sexy):

Nah I ran out of daddy’s condoms–

PAT:  HENRY:

What the fuck– You know, it felt wrong. It felt wrong!
HENRY:
Covered on rubbers, though. *(He gives a thumbs up. Pat returns the thumbs up.)* Any other queries?

_Pat likes Henry, so she’s scared to ask this question._

PAT:
Yeah-uhh well. Huh Hmm here let me think for a second well, what do you, I mean, what do you—like— what do you think that you want? Do you know what I mean?

HENRY:
Yeah, uh I think so. Well, I guess if I’m being forthright, I’d have to say I’m not totally sure what I want. Do you know? What you want?

PAT:
I think I want consistency.

HENRY:
Really? Okay.

PAT:
What, is that a surprise?

HENRY:
No not necessarily a surprise but maybe a little unfortunate.

PAT:
Oh really?

HENRY:
Yeah I mean sure. Or, I guess I just think now I might disappoint.
PAT: 

Interesting.

HENRY: 

Really?

PAT: 

Well I like a challenge sometimes.

HENRY: 

Ah hah. Hah hah (*nervous laugh*).

PAT: 

Sorry that was weird I’m just kidding you should definitely keep things at your comfort level.

HENRY: 

No yeah of course. It’s just that—the last person I was with felt like, really intent on changing me, so I think I’m kind of sensitive about that stuff.

PAT: 

What? How did she think she was going to change you?

HENRY: 

She just, I think she wanted me to like, feel more than I did.

PAT: 

Feel more… for her?
HENRY:

Well yeah. Now I get that it was about her. It was always about her. But she acted like I was a disappointment for not having more emotions. She was always just kinda pushing me. Whenever I shared anything real with her she would go in. “Why aren’t you sad about that? Why aren’t you angry at them? What’s wrong with you?” Whatever I was feeling… it wasn’t…

PAT:

Wasn’t enough.

*Henry is suddenly terrified.*

HENRY:

Yeah.

*Awkward moment*

PAT:

I’m sorry.

HENRY:

Don’t worry about it.

*Awkward moment.*

PAT *(matter of fact):*

You’re always enough.

*She shrugs. He smiles and gives a “psh nah” face.*
PAT:
It’s funny, I have the opposite problem. I’ve always been… too much… The word “needy” comes to mind. (Beat.) Did you think she was too much? Your ex?

Henry thinks.

HENRY:
No. What she wanted from me felt like too much. She didn’t. (Beat.) She just, never understood me.

PAT:
Did you ever understand her?

Henry’s never thought of that.

HENRY:
I don’t know.

Pat isn’t accusing, she’s listening.

PAT:
So, what do you want?

Henry starts to understand Pat’s question.

HENRY:
I think I want someone that’s nice to me. Someone that I can be nice to.

PAT:
Yeah. Retweet.

HENRY:
It feels pretty abstract though.
PAT:
What do you mean?

HENRY:
I mean, I guess I mean that I have a really nice, attractive, great person here with me, and when you asked me what I wanted I thought of some imaginary person like some body and face shape that’s a combination of a lot of childhood/early adolescent television crushes who would be able to unlock something in me. I guess who would know the answer to your question. They would be able to tell me what I wanted.

*Beat.*

PAT:
So that’s why you can’t tell me what you want? Because you’re waiting for someone else to tell you first?

HENRY:
… Yeah?

PAT:
… Cool.

*Henry’s relieved.*

HENRY:
Here’s a question: Have you ever dated a black person before?

PAT:
Yeah? Is that bad?
HENRY:
Have you dated *only* black people before?

PAT:
No? Is *that* bad?

HENRY:
Nah, I’d rather that not be your fetish.

PAT:
Don’t worry I don’t have any fetishes.

HENRY:
None?

PAT:
Nope.

HENRY:
Wow, boring. So you really do just want… “consistency”?

PAT:
In an ideal world, yes.

HENRY *(referencing the two of them)*:
Is this not an ideal world?

PAT:
Does it feel that way to you?

HENRY *(studying Pat)*:
I don’t know… Could be.
Pat smiles. She wants to kiss him so bad. Henry chooses to be upfront. He leans in.

HENRY:

Pat, I can’t– I don’t want an exclusive relationship. So if that’s the consistency you’re looking for, I don’t think that’s me. That said, I am very attracted to you. And I don’t see that changing any time soon.

Pat burns red. She keeps staring at his mouth.

PAT:

I think, I think I could be okay with a different kind of consistency. If that’s what you’re offering.

Henry smiles.

HENRY:

Here’s what I’m offering (he holds up his hand and counts each part of the deal on his fingers): friendship, sex–with me (Pat blushes), cuddling (Pat smiles and nods), sex with other people (Pat nods once)… is that enough? Do I need to sweeten the deal? What about food? I can offer you snacks. (All his fingers are up) Do you think that might work for you?

She hasn’t stopped staring at him all night. She’s not about to stop now. Smiling,

PAT:

Yeah. Yeah I think I can work with that.

HENRY:

Alright!
With his hand still up he gestures for a high five. Her palm meets his with tentative enthusiasm. They interlock fingers as their hands fall. Pat stares at their hands.

Henry stares at Pat.

PAT:

You know, we just made a sex contract and we haven’t even kissed yet. Do you maybe want to include a clause so you can immediately back out if you don’t like– Henry grabs Pat’s face with his free hand and kisses her. When he pulls away Pat’s eyes are still closed. IT’S A REALLY GOOD KISS YOU GUYS.

HENRY:

Nah, I’m good. You?

PAT (eyes still closed, quickly):

Yeah good me too I’m good too–

She kisses him. They’re kissing! They lean back on the bed! Blackout!

SCENE THREE

Pat and Aditi smoke Pat’s weed out of her bong in her room. Aditi lights the bowl. She inhales.

ADITI:

So I saw Henry this morning in Sherman.

She exhales and passes Pat the bong.

PAT:

Right he has Astronomy there on Wednesdays.
Pat smiles thinking about him. Aditi blows air through her lips like a horse. Pat notices. She's embarrassed.

PAT:

Sorry, that was gross.

ADITI:

No believe me I know exactly where my crush is on Wednesday mornings. 

(Laughing) We’re so pathetic.

The word pathetic hurts Pat. We can tell because she takes a few tries to light the lighter. She doesn’t let Aditi notice she hurt her. While Pat lights the bowl,

ADITI:

Have you guys talked since the last time you went over there?

Holding in the hit,

PAT:

Nope.

ADITI:

Are you okay with that?

Still holding her breath,

PAT:

Yup.

She exhales smoke. She passes the bong.
ADITI:

Wow that’s impressive. I’m happy for you. (She attempts to light the bowl) She’s dead.

She passes the bong back to Pat, who tries to torch the bowl, then empties it by knocking it repeatedly on her Power Puff Girls placemat that she uses as a weed tray. She immediately begins to grind more bud.

ADITI:

I’m really glad you’re not totally letting this control your life.

PAT:

Well I wouldn’t go as far as to say I feel in control. But I’m at least content. I mean, it’s not like I’m not used to this kind of interacting.

ADITI:

Right. (Beat) Wait what do you mean?

PAT:

I mean like that, we rarely—or like, whenever we hook up it takes around a couple days for either of us to reach out.

ADITI:

Oh right-right-right. But that seems normal, right? It is a Weekend Hookup.

PAT:

Is it though? Still? Like, first it was Thursdays, then it was after Bar Night on Wednesdays, and then one Monday we run into each other walking home from class and we’re talking, and I’m trying to make the amount of anxiety I have over the
ethnography I have to read sound sexy and mysterious and make me seem important
and not just like a fuck up, and I ended up following him all the way back to his
room. And he invited me in because, like, I was there? And I had been chewing gum
that someone gave me at the end of class and it was still a little minty so we made out
and then we fucked. On a Monday.

ADITI:

Oh! (Half joking.) Shut the fuck up then, Pat, you did get the Weekday Hookup.

PAT:

Well, but, like, did I? Because it kinda feels like I tricked him into having sex during
the week.

Aditi scoffs.

ADITI:

Henry’s nice but he’s not THAT nice. He’s not going to do anything he doesn’t want
to do. Including having sex during the week.

PAT:

I know he’s not going to do anything he doesn’t want to do. It’s not like he’s going to
start seeing me during business hours or asking me about my mom or anything. I’m
just thinking, maybe he didn’t realize it was a Monday, or didn’t realize he was
shifting into the next gear, potentially setting a precedent. The first thing he said to
me, even before we kissed, was how he isn’t looking for something serious. He told
me he couldn’t—that he didn’t want that. I don’t want to be inconsiderate about his
needs.
ADITI:
Who initiated the Weekday Hookup?

PAT:
He kissed me first but it was hard to tell; I was trying to be cute. I may have leaned in.

ADITI ("comforting" her):
Pat, you didn’t trick him into sex. You’re overthinking it. This is not some dramatic, star crossed lovers story. Don’t take this the wrong way but, Henry probably doesn’t consider this encounter important enough that it would change anything.

She takes it the way Aditi wanted her to take it.

PAT:
But still, it must have surprised him, or caught him off guard. He wasn’t planning on it happening! What if he didn’t want it to happen? You don’t have to overthink anything to know you don’t want something to happen. I just followed him back to his room and then, what, was he going to make me turn around and leave? What if he was fucking out of obligation?

ADITI:
Nobody fucks out of obligation.

PAT:
I do!

ADITI (She’s lost her patience):
No healthy person fucks out of obligation.

Pat doesn’t know how to respond to that. She takes a monster hit. Aditi laughs.
ADITI:

Woohoo! Self-medicating! Lord grant me the strength to numb the things I cannot change.

*Pat exhales with a straight face, passes Aditi the bowl, and stands up to get her phone.*

PAT:

If I were smoking to numb anything, wouldn’t you think I'd shut up by now?

ADITI:

You right. Why do you think you smoke then?

*Pat gets insecure.*

PAT:

Well, why do you?

ADITI:

Insomnia and Depression. Plus, I don’t know, I think I still get off on doing shit my parents don’t know about.

PAT:

Right.

*Pat takes a moment to really consider her habit.*

PAT:

I just think it feels really good. It’s like when I’m eating a whole sack of popcorn and I zone out and it feels so good. But with weed I’m not shitting out kernel bits for the next two days. It’s kinda how I justify faking orgasms too. Sure, I’m cheating myself
out of pleasure in the moment, but I won’t be later when I’m high as shit and deep throating a pan pizza.

ADITI:

Thank god we spend so much time together so we can bear witness to each other’s sloth and gluttony.

PAT:

Yeah but I eat the most when I’m alone. I love you, but I don’t want anyone witnessing me pleasuring myself with food.

ADITI:

All the more reason for us to spend time together: so you could actually try to stop binging for once.

PAT:

I don’t want to stop binging.

ADITI:

Why not?

PAT:

Well, because my weed tolerance is getting pretty high, and I need to feel good somehow. I’m not about to stop faking orgasms.

ADITI:

Not even for Henry?

PAT:

Especially not for Henry, I don’t want to make him feel bad!
ADITI:
What about making him make you come?

PAT:
I don’t want to make him do anything.

ADITI:
But you’re not even giving him a chance! How is that fair to him?

PAT:
Well now it’s too late isn’t it? He thinks whatever we do is doing the trick, so if I start springing new instructions onto him, he’s going to think that I was lying.

ADITI:
So you’re just going to continue lying to him–you know you’re refusing to be vulnerable. Men think it’s sexy when women are vulnerable.

PAT:
I think it’s a different kind of vulnerable that turns them on. More “her guard’s down” vulnerable and less “speak truth to power” vulnerable.

ADITI:
Don’t you think he has a right to know whether or not he’s making you come?

PAT:
If he’s brave enough to ask me, I’ll tell him.

*Aditi rolls her eyes.*
ADITI:

God Pat, you really need to stop expecting that people are going to just do things for you. Your pleasure is your responsibility. If you want it, you’re going to have to ask for it.

PAT:

But why does he not have to ask for it? Why is it just assumed that I’m going to make him come every time?

ADITI:

Because you want to keep hooking up with him. Who knows what he wants.

*Pat’s face is set on fire.*

PAT:

Right. Who knows?

*Aditi lights the bong and inhales deeply, milking the hit. Smoke builds up in the chamber until it’s opaque. Pat watches it trapped in the clear glass. It wants to be more without taking up more space. The curves of its gaseous instincts disappear until the solid white claustrophobia becomes uninterpretable. Aditi lifts the bowl out of the piece at her leisure. She clears the chamber with a sharp inhale. As she’s coughing.*

ADITI:

You know, for guys, whether or not they can make a girl come is a sensitive issue.
PAT:

I’m very well acquainted with his sensitivity. Let’s just say he doesn’t need to be more vulnerable to help him come. Plus, it’s hard for either of us to feel vulnerable when we’re not even making eye contact.

*Aditi laughs. She puts the bong away.*

ADITI:

Wait are you serious or was that a joke?

PAT:

Which part?

ADITI:

The no eye-contact part.

PAT:

No that wasn’t the joke part.

ADITI:

That’s the funny part though.

PAT:

It is?

ADITI:

Yes!

PAT:

Why?
ADITI:
You guys have been having sex for weeks and you won’t even look him in the eye?

PAT:
It feels like more of a mutual understanding to me. That’s just not part of our routine.

ADITI:
Ugh eye contact is so hot though. For friends with benefits you have very limited benefits.

Beat.

PAT:
I guess so… Henry has like, really sexy eyes.

*Pat smiles to herself. Aditi sees her smile but doesn’t respond. She pulls out the bong again and tries to light the dead bowl. Pat notices and becomes embarrassed.*

PAT:
The more I think about it, I think it’s for the best we aren’t, like, staring into each other’s eyes. That’s not who we are. It’s not what we’re supposed to be doing.

ADITI (holding in smoke):
Word.

*She exhales and blows smoke into Pat’s face.*
SCENE FOUR

8AM a Saturday morning in his dorm room. It’s grey today—drizzling on and off giving light showers to the un-showered.

PAT:

Hey, Henry? (Beat) Henry?

HENRY:

Huh?

PAT:

Are you sure it’s okay that I’m still here?

HENRY:

What!

PAT:

No, hear me out, I think you’re so sweet for making me feel like it’s okay to stay but I’m serious I really truly do not have a problem if you wanted me to leave like it’s okay, like–

HENRY:

Woah Pat, no hey that is not an option. (Playfully) You are not allowed to leave (he says with a chuckle)!

PAT (laughing weakly):

Haha okay, okay! I’ll stay!

HENRY:

Thank you.
He kisses her and looks away right after. She puts her head on his chest. Is her hair in his face? He closes his eyes. She considers being vulnerable.

PAT:

I’m kind of nervous about this week. I’m going to have so much homework.

HENRY:

Nah, you got this.

PAT (careful):

I just really need to make this professor like me.

Henry, with his eyes still closed, rolls his head over to hers.

HENRY:

Hey.

She rolls her head to his with her eyes open.

HENRY (eyes closed):

You don’t need to make anyone like you. It doesn’t even matter because they definitely already like you.

PAT:

How are you so sure?

HENRY (eyes closed):

Because you’re likable.

Pat smiles, staring at his shut eyelids. He opens his eyes and matches her smile. He closes his eyes and purses his lips. She kisses him with her eyes open. Then rests her head and shuts her eyes.
PAT:

I like you.

*Henry’s eyes open. He looks at Pat, who opens her eyes.*

HENRY:

Oh? That’s probably not good.

*Pat turns white.*

PAT:

It’s not?

HENRY:

I still don’t want a relationship.

PAT:

I know. I know, I wasn’t trying to suggest anything else.

HENRY:

Okay cool, but I mean–

*Pat sits up. Henry sits up also.*

HENRY:

–if this thing, like, doing what we’re doing is going to feel not good for you because of how you feel, that’s like the opposite of what I want.

PAT (*quietly)*:

What do you want?

*Henry, defensive.*
HENRY:

I don’t know what to tell you. I still don’t know.

PAT (confirming):

But you know what you don’t want.

HENRY:

I’m sorry. It’s just—kind of vulnerable I don’t want to be. I honestly really feel like it’s important for me to not be like, super accountable to, like, anyone. It doesn’t have to do with you. Honestly it’s just, not something I see myself being capable of handling.

PAT:

I know. No, I’m not going to make this about me it’s totally fine. I am happy with our situation. I mean like, that wasn’t me asking for anything else. I don’t necessarily want more.

_He looks at her, unsure._

PAT:

 Seriously, I like, don’t want you to feel bad about this. (Beat) I’m gonna go.

HENRY:

Really?

PAT:

Yeah for sure I should get moving.

_She gets out of bed and dresses._
HENRY:
You don't have to, you're definitely welcome to stay.

PAT:
No, no I'm going to go. No worries.

*She puts her bra in the pocket of her sweatshirt.*

PAT:
Bye, friend.

HENRY:
Hey yeah, bye man.

*She goes to kiss him. He kisses her quickly. She feels tears then she opens the door and walks through. She exits. She talks to herself as she walks home.*

PAT:

*She winces and stops walking.*

PAT:
FUCK.

*She’s twitching. She tries to funnel her nervous energy into crying. No tears are coming out. She resumes walking. Talking to herself, a bit manic.*

PAT:
Look, you are not allowed to screw this up. You’re a functioning human woman. You should be fully capable of having adult-type relationships. It is possible for you to get what you need out of this. It’s all there. He respects my boundaries—there are
definitely no boundaries being tested. I’m stupid attracted to him. I have someone to make out with, and from what I can tell neither of us is sleeping with anyone else so to be honest it’s practically like we’re exclusive. And it’s so consistent I mean this is my, my what, my fourth night there this week? If I can spend that much time with him and he wants to spend that much time with me, that means something.

She stops in her tracks. She starts to wince again. On the other side of the stage, Henry stirs, then wakes up. Pat’s next chunk of text is said over his action. He moves leisurely to his desk and his laptop. He futzes with his Spotify for a moment until he runs into an issue. He tries solving it on his own.

PAT:

No. Stop. This doesn’t mean anything. *(Slowing down each time she repeats)* You don’t mean anything to him, you don’t mean anything to him, you don’t. Mean. Anything. To. Him. He doesn’t care. This is just yet another thing that I cannot control so, naturally, I have stupid FUCKING feelings for him, but that doesn’t have to mean anything! He doesn’t have to reciprocate in order for me to get what I need from this. *(Beat)* I don’t even really *need* anything from this! The only thing I need in this world is chocolate, my bong, and my bed. *(She winces)* And to stop fucking thinking about him.

*Pat takes out her cell phone and calls her mom. When Reggie picks up, we hear a disembodied voice from offstage. Henry, exasperated with his computer, picks up the phone and dials his dad. Andrew’s voice comes from offstage as well.*
REGGIE:
Pat?

ANDREW:
Hello?

PAT:
Hey mom.

HENRY:
Hey dad, something’s up with my
Spotify account.

REGGIE:
Wow 8:30 this is early for you! Why are
you up?

HENRY:
Hello?

ANDREW:
Yes?

PAT:
I slept at my friend’s dorm but they
needed to sleep so I left.

REGGIE:
Ah. Did you eat yet?
PAT:

Nah.

HENRY:

I said something’s weird with my Spotify account I’m having trouble logging in.

REGGIE:

What are you gonna have for breakfast?

ANDREW:

Henry, I’m getting ready for work. What’s your question?

PAT:

Probably whatever leftovers I have in my fridge.

HENRY:

I guess uh, was there anything different about this month’s bill?

REGGIE:

Could you go to the dining hall and get oatmeal?

PAT:

Uh, I guess but I’m on like the opposite
side of campus right now.

ANDREW:

I didn’t pay a Spotify bill this month. I don’t use Spotify.

REGGIE:

Well I think it might be worth the trek. You could bring tupperware and stash some fruit away for later.

HENRY:

Yeah, I know you don’t. I do.

PAT:

Yeah that’s a good idea I definitely need to do that. How are you?

REGGIE:

I’m good, I have a deadline for editing these wedding shots that I keep pretending isn’t creeping up on me.

ANDREW:

Oh do you? How do you pay for it?

PAT:

Yikes.
REGGIE:
I know. I have a plan, though. I bought a bag of licorice and every time I finish a photo I get to eat a piece.

HENRY:
I don’t.

*Pat chuckles lightly.*

PAT:
Sounds effective.

ANDREW:
Sounds like you don’t use Spotify.

PAT:
Hey mom I’m actually back at my dorm so I’m gonna go.

REGGIE:
Okay hon! Are you gonna go to the dining hall?

HENRY:
I guess you’re right.

PAT:
I don’t know. I’ll probably just go over to Aditi’s. We have leftovers in the freezer
from last night. *(Half-joking)* Ben and Jerry’s for breakfast doesn’t sound unappealing.

*Reggie is silent.*

PAT:

Mom? Hello?

ANDREW:

Was that it?

REGGIE:

I really think some protein would be a better choice.

PAT:

Oh my god, mom I was joking.

HENRY:

Yep.

ANDREW:

Alright.

*Reggie doesn’t respond. She knows Pat wasn’t joking.*

REGGIE:

How’s Aditi doing?
HENRY:
Oh, Dad,

ANDREW:
Hmm?

PAT:
She’s fine. She’s just super tired and swamped with work. But that’s the hand you’re dealt when you’re a Government major with insomnia and depression.

HENRY:
I met this girl,

REGGIE:
… And how are you doing? How do you feel on those new meds?

ANDREW:
Yeah I’m sure you did. Now make sure I don’t have to, alright?

*Pat doesn’t like Reggie’s tone.*

PAT:
I feel fine.

*Henry doesn’t like Andrew’s tone.*
HENRY:

What does that mean?

PAT:

We’re both fine seriously we have each other. You know dealing with shit is always easier with a buddy.

ANDREW:

Look–

PAT:

We’re like diet buddies, but like, depression buddies.

REGGIE:

So she makes you feel better?

ANDREW:

–just don’t do anything stupid that drags me into your life.

Pat is pissed.

Henry is pissed.

PAT:

I don’t need anyone to make me feel better.
HENRY:

I wouldn’t need you to get involved no matter what.

REGGIE:

I know sweetie.

ANDREW:

Mhm.

PAT:

In fact, if anything, she needs *me* to make *her* feel better.

HENRY:

I mean, from the looks of it, you might need me more than I need you.

REGGIE:

Pat, you’re not responsible for her.

You’re responsible for you.

ANDREW:

Tell you what, son, when I need help logging into my Spotify account I’ll let you know.

PAT:

You’re right. I am. I’m taking care of
myself, don’t worry.

HENRY:

Yeah you do that. And as far as the bank account you can keep hitting up Bella for that one.

REGGIE:

I know, baby. I trust you.

Silence.

Silence.

REGGIE:

Pat?

HENRY:

Dad?

REGGIE:

Hello?

PAT:

Mom I gotta go.

ANDREW:

I gotta be getting to work now.

REGGIE:

Okay talk to you later–

HENRY:

Okay look dad I’m–
Pat hangs up the phone. Andrew hangs up the phone. Henry tosses his phone on his bed. He leaves the room for a run.

SCENE FIVE

Split stage, Pat’s room and Henry’s room. Pat is in bed and Henry’s room is empty.

Pat lays in bed, the front of her t-shirt is stained with chocolate. A small pipe sits on her chest. She is stoned and staring at her laptop with headphones in. She “laughs” at something she’s watching by blowing air through her nostrils, which blows the ash from the bowl onto her t-shirt, co-mingling with crumbs. Frustrated, she pauses what she’s watching and moves the bowl to her bedside table, then carefully tilts her upper body over the side of her bed to brush the debris from her chest. She then grabs the pint of Ben and Jerry’s that has been collecting condensation on the floor next to her bed, and a spoon from a drawer in her bedside table. She unwraps the pint, wiping the wetness on her duvet cover, pops the lid, and begins to eat. She proceeds to eat the entire pint of Ben and Jerry’s all during Henry’s own self-care ritual.

(During Pat’s following monologue):

On the other side of the stage, Henry enters, just finishing his run. He pulls out his earbuds, plugs his phone into his speaker, and puts on his music. He begins his cool down exercises. He’s stretching deeply. He holds the stretches longer than you would. It’s as if he’s nursing each muscle. The care with which he performs this ritual is dogmatic in a way. He’s putting effort into loving his body, into listening to it. When
he is finished stretching he takes a seat at his desk. From his bottom drawer he pulls out a Happy Lamp, which he plugs in and turns to a medium setting. Henry takes out one of several small moleskins he carries around in his back jeans pocket. This was the one Henry had been writing in the night before. He takes note,

6.5 miles. 3 stretches of incline. Total time, 72 minutes.

Henry turns to another page in this journal and notes,

3 cigarettes. 8 PBRs. 2 IPAs.

He shuts the notebook and immediately stores it away. He then opens his phone and swipes back and forth on Tinder for a while in front of his Happy Lamp. He swipes left faster and faster until he closes the app. He puts down his phone. He picks it back up, opens it, and with muscle memory, unlocks his private photos to look at a picture of his ex-girlfriend. Not a nude, just a picture of her smiling at him in his bed at home one morning when the light made her look super golden. He wondered how she fit that many curls into one Snapchat. He opens Facebook and starts to Facebook-stalk Pat. He smiles at a picture of her posing with a Disney Princess. He then begins to scroll obsessively through his own profile, and continues to analyze photos of himself—especially the thirst traps he posts—as Pat talks through bites of ice cream.

PAT (shoveling ice cream the entire time):

It’s like, we’re here for each other for convenience’s sake. I can think of very practical reasons why I’m sleeping with him: consistent male attention, a source of distraction, and the social currency I earn by constantly having intercourse. He’s—he can be good for my self-esteem.
I don’t really know why he’s doing this. *I am* an easy fuck. But he’s not like that, and plus, he could have any number of girls as an easy fuck. It’s just that I don’t ask for anything. He’s lazy in a different way than I am, but his anxiety is hungry for the same meaty slab of validation that mine is. And I’ll feed him— I want to feed him, but he’s not going to feed me because I’m not going to let him know that I’m hungry. If I do, then I’m not an easy fuck anymore—I’m a fuck he has to feed.

I do like him. His pace excites me—the banter feels satisfying, like there are “r”s rolling between my ears.

I don’t want to ask him for more than he’s able to give. I don’t want to remind him of what he might just not be capable of. I don’t want him to resent me because he knows what I want.

She takes her last bite, sets the pint down next to her bed, and grabs her bowl.

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**SCENE SIX**

*Pat and Henry sit on Henry’s bed. Henry hands Pat the joint. She inhales and coughs a bit (she’s still nervous with him). He hands her his water bottle.*

**PAT:**

Thanks. Sorry.

*She sips.*

**HENRY:**

No worries. Coughing’s good.
PAT:

Yeah that’s what I say.

*She passes it back and he hits it.*

PAT:

You’re really cool.

HENRY:

What! What do you mean?

PAT:

I’m just really impressed by you. I mean, what, you have these nice lil joints pre-rolled and your room always looks so nice and neat and you always smell so good. It just seems like you’re really good at taking care of yourself.

HENRY:

Huh. I’m okay at it.

PAT:

No, I mean it, you’re really hitting me with very capable vibes.

HENRY:

Haha thanks. But there are for sure some things life needs me to do that I’m pretty scared I’m not capable of dealing with.

*He passes her the joint, which has gone out. She lights it, takes a small hit and talks through it.*
PAT:

You would be so easily though, if you went for it enough. (Exhale) It’s a practice thing. If you can take care of yourself in one shitty situation you can do it in other shitty situations too. Fear: invalid.

*She hands him the joint and he hits it.* “Drew Barrymore” by SZA comes on through his bluetooth speaker. Pat leans her head back with her eyes closed and smiles.

PAT:

Mmm I love this song. SZA is very relatable content. Do you like *Ctrl*?

HENRY:

Uh yeah where I can get it?

PAT:

No, that's the name of this album.

HENRY:

Oh, uh, no this isn’t my playlist … What were we just talking about? (Beat. Henry passes the joint) Oh! You were calling my feelings invalid.

PAT:

No I wasn't! I was saying… that using fear as an excuse not to do something is invalid.

HENRY:

I don’t know if I agree with that. Fear is what helps us protect ourselves.
PAT:

Does it though? Bad shit still happens. Your house could flood and no amount of fear could protect you from that. All fear’s doing is keeping you from risks you probably should be taking.

HENRY:

What are you an investment banker– what kinds of risks do you think we’re meant to be making?

PAT:

All good things require risk! Should I get a dog? Should I apply for this job? Should I introduce myself to this person? Happiness is risky business, my friend.

*Pat lights the joint and hits it hard. She passes it back to Henry. He takes it from her and she shuts her eyes to bop to the song’s second verse. He watches her for a moment and then hits the joint. They’re silent as the second verse plays,*

"I get so lonely I forget what I'm worth,

We get so lonely we pretend that this works,

I'm so ashamed of myself think I need therapy,"

*Pat comes in absentmindedly singing,*

PAT:

“I’m sorry I’m not more attractive, I’m sorry I’m not more ladylike, I’m sorry I don't shave my legs at night. I’m sorry I’m not–”

HENRY:

Did you say you relate to this?
PAT:
To what?

HENRY:
This song?

PAT:
Oh, uh, yeah.

HENRY:
That’s weird. You shouldn’t.

PAT (feeling suddenly vulnerable):
Oh, sorry.

HENRY:
No, don’t apologize it’s just—(Henry pauses the music from his phone) you’re so positive. It’s like, you’re so positive you make me want to be positive. And that's some pretty negative shit to relate to.

PAT:
I guess, but I do feel that way, I can’t really help it. This song just, like, really validates stuff I’ve said to myself.

Beat. Henry considers this.

HENRY:
Did you know that saying something out loud convinces your subconscious that it's true?
PAT:
What, just like that?

HENRY:
Yeah, seriously. Legit uttering it is all it takes for your brain to believe it. That’s why I’m big on mantras. Visualizing a goal and verbalizing it so it’ll manifest. “I will run a seven minute mile. I will get to sleep before twelve every night.” It seems dumb but it helps. And I just think, if verbalizing good stuff yields good stuff, then I’m pretty sure verbalizing bad stuff is just going to make that stuff feel true. Fuck being ladylike and shaving your legs and feeling like you should be more attractive. You’re so hot and so great. You have nothing to apologize for.

*Pat is kinda stunned and feeling very validated.*

PAT:
Thanks…

HENRY:
I’m sorry, did I make you uncomfortable?

PAT:
No it’s just, that’s nicer than what I’m used to hearing.

HENRY:
That sucks.

PAT:
It’s really fine.
HENRY:

It doesn’t have to be fine.

*Pat likes what Henry is saying but is getting nervous being considered so closely.*

PAT:

I want to kiss you.

HENRY:

Uh, you should do that then.

*Pat kisses Henry. They start making out! They lean back on the bed, Pat starts to move things forward. Henry stops.*

HENRY:

So I wanted to float something past you.

PAT:

Uh, okay!

HENRY:

So since we’re now having sex, and we’re like, kinda experimenting with this whole set up, I was thinking that maybe we can experiment with some physical things. You know, try out stuff that we’ve both wanted to try but haven’t wanted to try in a relationship.

PAT (*unsure*):

Okay. Is there anything… specific?

HENRY:

I don’t know. What do you want to try?
PAT:

I have no idea.

HENRY:

Well what are you into?

*Pat takes a moment to register the question, and then a few moments trying to think of something to name.*

PAT:

I have no idea.

HENRY *(unsure):*

Okay… what are you *not* into?

PAT:

… I’m not into oral sex.

HENRY:

Really?

PAT:

Yeah. I mean. Under certain—more… monogamous circumstances yes, but under these circumstances, no.

HENRY:

Okay very cool. I take that as your final answer, but just as a follow up: do you not like giving or receiving?

PAT:

Both.
HENRY:

Huh. Why?

PAT (Scared. Honest, despite herself):

It’s just, there are very clear power dynamics there. And I already feel the power dynamics in relationships like, really hard. So it just feels like, a lot.

HENRY:

I guess so. I mean, I kind of see it as just another way we can make each other feel good.

PAT:

It doesn’t make me feel good. “It’s a kind of vulnerable I don’t want to be.”

HENRY:

Word. Let’s not do that then!

PAT:

… Is that okay?

HENRY:

Of course!

PAT:

Okay. Thank you.

HENRY:

You’re welcome?

PAT:

Yeah. (She’s relieved)
HENRY (Doesn’t know if he’s allowed to ask—but he wants to know):

Is that not always okay?

PAT:

Um. It’s not always a discussion. Or, it’s a short one. One question.

HENRY:

Plus your answer?

PAT:

(She thinks) Yeah I guess. But that part’s unspoken.

HENRY:

What do you mean?

PAT:

Well, it’s a rhetorical question. “Do you want to suck my dick?” I don’t need to say yes for both of us to know what happens next.

HENRY:

But, you obviously always have a say in that.

PAT:

Yeah it doesn’t feel so obvious in the moment. What feels obvious is that, the guy is very confident he’s going to get the answer he wants to hear.

HENRY:

Couldn’t you even like, fake some of that confidence? To ask for what you want?

PAT:

No one has even seemed remotely interested in what I want.
HENRY:
No one?

Pat feels like she’s said too much.

HENRY:
That’s not what sex should be like.

PAT:
Yeah I get that I’m doing it wrong.

HENRY:
No, it’s just, sex is about both people. Our sex is about both of us, right?

PAT (compensating a tiny bit too much):
Yes, of course, I know that our sex is for both of us!

Henry suspects Pat isn’t being honest.

HENRY:
It just doesn’t feel like it?

Pat is petrified.

HENRY:
Are you not coming?

Pat, feeling guilty and cornered makes a lame attempt,

PAT (quietly):
Not coming to what?

Henry gets it. He leans back and a way from Pat.
HENRY:

Fuck…

PAT:

I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I just didn’t want you to be disappointed or think that I don’t love having sex with you or that like, I need more or something like that–

HENRY (frustrated with himself):

No, Pat–stop it. You’re not–I’m the one that–I’m sorry. I’m sorry I’m not doing… enough.

PAT:

No, Henry, no you are so doing enough, I don’t need anything else, I don’t need more than what you’re giving me,

HENRY:

That’s clearly not true!

PAT (almost crying):

No, please I’m so content, I wish this weren’t happening I’m so sorry.

Henry covers his face with his hands. He takes deep breaths and then lets his hands go.

HENRY:

Okay. You’re going to tell me how to make you come.

Pat starts crying.

PAT:

Why do I need to do that?
Henry sees this was the wrong approach.

HENRY:

Oh my god, you don’t, fuck, shit, I’m sorry you don’t have to do anything. I just—I, I mean I want to give you something. I feel like, I need to give you something.

PAT:

Okay.

HENRY:

Do you want—a neck rub?

Pat shakes her head.

HENRY:

Do you want a little snack?

Pat does a small, sad nose-exhale-laugh and shakes her head. Henry really thinks.

HENRY:

Do you want to be alone?

Pat shakes her head. He’s relieved.

HENRY:

Do you want a hug?

Pat waits, and then nods. Henry hugs her. She shuts her eyes tight with her head against his chest. While in the hug,

HENRY:

I’ve decided we need a clause in this social contract that says you don’t have to, but that you can tell me anything. Amendment approved?
PAT:
I’m just, scared that, I’ll tell you something that I want, and then you won’t want it.

HENRY:
Hey. Happiness is risky business.

She does her nose-exhale-laugh again, this time with more feeling.

HENRY:
Do you want to watch something?

Pat nods.

PAT:
Yeah.

HENRY:
Do you want to watch Kangaroo Jack?

Pat’s smile takes over.

PAT:
Yes. Very much.

HENRY:
Okay!

He gets up, moves a chair next to the bed so it’s facing the pillow, then grabs his laptop and perches it on the chair. Once it’s opened, he climbs back in the bed and lies next to Pat, who has turned on her side to face the computer. Henry reaches over Pat to set the movie up with one hand. While he’s looking at the screen, Pat’s looking at his eyes. He catches her. She’s smiling. He smiles.
PAT (whispered):

Thank you.

HENRY (whispered):

You’re welcome.

Beat.

PAT (whispered):

I want to kiss you.

HENRY (whispered):

Thank goodness.

They kiss lightly and as they do they breathe together. Then they both face towards the laptop.

SCENE SEVEN

Henry paces outside Pat’s building. He’s wearing black skinny jeans and a Jack Daniels logo t-shirt. He has his phone in one hand and car keys in another. He’s about to get VULNERABLE! He swipes through his phone then holds it up to his ear. Pat appears on the other side of the stage mid-bong rip. Her phone rings. Still inhaling she looks at her phone, her eye widen and she begins hacking and wheezing, caught off guard. She steadies her breathing as Henry anxiously awaits on the other end. Right before he’s about to hang up, Pat answers.

PAT:

Hello?
HENRY:

Hello? Is Pat home?

PAT (in a mid-Atlantic accent):

Who is this? Operator?

HENRY:

Haha yeah. So, I have a question.

PAT:

Is this serious? What is too urgent to just text?

HENRY:

Glad you asked. It’s a Halloween emergency.

*Pat is speechless for a moment.*

HENRY:

Pat? You there?

PAT (very serious):

How can I help?

*Henry smiles real big.*

HENRY:

I was on my way to Goodwill for some well-priced inspiration and was wondering if you’d care to join. I still have zero ideas for a pun costume. I figure you’re good at wordplay so,

PAT:

You want to exploit my wit for your own gain.
HENRY:

As always.

Pat smiles.

HENRY:

So you wanna come down?

PAT:

What right now?

HENRY:

Well I’m outside your building so that would probably time out well, yes.

PAT:

Uhh– (she looks down at her sweatshirt with her signature breast plate chocolate stain)–yeah I’ll be down in like, five.

Henry smiles.

HENRY:

Thanks. You’re seriously saving my ass.

He hangs up smiling. Pat imMEDIATEly pulls off her t-shirt, throws a knit dress over her dirty leggings, fixes her messy bun, applies a generous amount of deodorant and Bath and Body Works Body Spray, then shoves her feet into her boots as the spray cloud is settling around her. She looks closely at her face in the mirror, her mouth gaping (think Mascara Face). She wipes sleep out of the corners of her eyes with her pinkies, then licks her middle fingers to aggressively rub away the black makeup that has stained her under eye bags. She stashes her bong in her closet, grabs a piece of
gum from her backpack, snatches her purse off her couch, checks the mirror one last time, does a deep breath and a “JUST TRY TO ENJOY THIS PAT” smile while looking herself in the eyes, then opens her door.

AT GOODWILL

Pat and Henry walk into the Goodwill. There are racks of clothes, a row of changing rooms, and several mannequins near the entrance, including one wearing a bright blue full-body snowsuit.

HENRY:

So it has to be a really solid pun because I always get shit for lame costumes. But I don’t want to like, force anything. It’s gotta just happen naturally.

PAT:

Great ideas don’t just happen! Sure you’re starting with an instinct but it requires effort to make anything actually work. And it’s like, all trial and error. So it’s definitely not an option to just not try anything.

HENRY:

Fine alright I don’t need the perfect pun right away, we don’t need to rush anything. But the whole thing about puns is that they’re like, changing one thing about an existing concept so that it becomes something new, so that it makes a connection that it hadn’t before. So I gotta like, pick an idea to start with and figure out how it will work for me from there.
PAT:
Okay, well that seems like the easy part. You can find one inspiring item and make connections to whatever it references.

HENRY:
Well how do I pick what to be inspired by?

PAT (dramatically):
YOU DON’T CHOOSE INSPIRATION. INSPIRATION CHOOSES YOU.

*Henry gives her a look.*

HENRY:
No it’s good. I gotta get on your level.

PAT:
I think the most important thing to remember here is to listen to your gut. If something catches your eye it’s probably for a reason. Follow your instinct and then we can figure out what to call it together.

HENRY:
Got it. (*Looking around*) So where do we start?

PAT:
Listen to your gut! What is calling to you?

HENRY (eyes closed):
Hmmm.
PAT:
Eyes open, Henry, this is a visual decision.

HENRY:
Well with my eyes open all I can see is that Hawaiian shirt!

*Pat takes off towards the shirt.*

HENRY:
Woah where are you going?

*He follows her. She picks up the shirt and holds it up to him, visualizing.*

HENRY:
This wasn’t actually an idea I just got distracted by its pattern.

PAT:
Give it a chance! This was your first instinct! What if you taped the Lay’s Potato Chip logo to the front? “Hawaiian Lays”?

HENRY:
Maybe we should avoid culturally specific costumes.

*Pat hangs up the shirt on the men’s shirts rack.*

PAT:
Duly noted.

HENRY:
What about…

*He grabs a red and black flannel from the rack and holds it up next to the Jack Daniels logo T-shirt he’s wearing.*
HENRY:

“Lumberjack Daniels”? 

PAT:

Booo.

HENRY:

Does that mean it’s a good pun?

PAT:

It means you can’t wear clothes you would wear on any random day and pass it off as a Halloween costume. WHERE IS YOUR SPOOKY SPIRIT?

HENRY:

My gut went to this shirt, I don’t know what to tell you.

Pat examines the shirt with her face twisted, deep in thought. Henry stares at her.

Then she lights up.

PAT:

What if you splattered paint all over it and went as “Lumber Jackson Pollack”?

HENRY (laughing):

Uh no.

PAT:

What! That is such a good one!

HENRY:

It’s a good pun but that would be way too much work.
PAT:

Oh please you wouldn’t need any skill you’d barely even be painting you’d just be flicking goop randomly onto a—(seamlessly, just occurring to her) oh my god, was Jackson Pollack a hack?

HENRY:

It’s going to look like I tried way too hard.

*Pat really takes this to heart.*

PAT:

Henry, people like people who put in effort. A lot. Hardly anyone does anything memorable by barely doing anything at all.

HENRY:

Yeah but you have to admit, the people that can pull that off look really cool when they do.

PAT (*not buying it)*:

They don’t look like they’re having that much fun, though. I don’t know, to me, it just looks like they’re too scared to try.

*Henry smiles.*

HENRY:

The REAL monster under the bed: putting yourself out there.

PAT:

I want to challenge you to do something truly spooky this Halloween. Look un-cool.

*Henry lets out a cute little stage scream. Pat laughs.*
PAT:

No, but, listen. Everything in here is a thread of someone’s history. Everything in this store has been worn by someone that decided to share a little part of themselves—to share a choice they made—with the people in their lives. That’s risk taking. That’s badass. That’s way better than cool. Plus, you’re going to a pun-themed Halloween party; if your friends really take themselves so seriously they picked the wrong theme.

HENRY (smiling):

Nah, I’m pretty sure AJ has been collecting campus newspapers for weeks. And he bought fox ears. He’s “Fox News”.

PAT:

Now THAT’s terrifying. There has to be some article of clothing in here that inspires you but that you had at one time—incorrectly—assumed that you weren’t brave enough to pull off.

Henry considers the idea partially for a moment until his eyes land on the snowsuit displayed by the door. Pat follows his gaze and gives him an excited nod.

HENRY:

No.

Blackout. Lights up on a row of dressing room doors. Pat and Henry are each in their own dressing room.

HENRY (from inside):

Pat?
PAT:

Yeah?

*Henry steps out of the dressing room in the full-body snowsuit. He looks amazing, but he’s unsure. Pat steps out in a camouflage shirt and a pair of super flair corduroys. Plus a fur hat. Henry starts to laugh at her.*

HENRY:

You know you really shouldn’t try on second hand hats–

PAT:

I shouldn’t do a lot of things Henry!

HENRY:

So what do you think?

*Pat’s smiling but she wants to let him get there for himself.*

PAT:

What do you think?

*Henry steps out and looks at himself in the full length mirror outside of the dressing rooms.*

HENRY:

I think I look sick.

PAT:

Fuck yes you do!

*She stands behind him and looks at him in the mirror over his shoulder.*
HENRY:

Okay but is there pun-potential?

*Pat looks around for a second, then grabs a circle hanger off the accessories rack that has a scarf tied around it. She yanks the scarf off, tosses it over her shoulder, and holds the circle hanger horizontally over his head.*

PAT:

Snow angel, baby.

HENRY:

Oh my god YES!

PAT:

I could make you a halo out of pipe cleaners. Neon ones so it’ll all go. I bet I could shape some sweet little wings out of them too.

*Henry turns away from the mirror to face Pat.*

HENRY:

I’d bet you could.

*Pat smiles, proud. She steps forward to examine her own look in the mirror and Henry stands beside her. They look at themselves. They look at each other. They look at themselves together.*

PAT:

We look super cool.

HENRY:

Oh damn! I failed then! Well, I do have a back up idea…”
He starts undoing his snowsuit to reveal he’s wearing the Hawaiian shirt underneath. Pat’s jaw drops. He grabs the scarf that’s over her shoulder and loops it around her to pull her a little closer.

HENRY:
Feel like getting laid?

PAT:
BOO!

Henry kisses her, then they stumble laughing back into Henry’s dressing room and shut the door behind them.

BACK AT HENRY’S ROOM

HENRY:
You were such a pro today. You’re clearly well acquainted with a thrift store.

PAT:
Thank you! Yeah I mean, I always wanted more attention and I guess fashion seemed like a solution. But my mom and I never had money for the mall or anything like that so thrifting became a go-to.

HENRY:
Sounds like my mom.

A significant pause.

HENRY:
She would take me to consignment shops with her, which was torture because they didn’t have anything for little boys. My move was to try on all the ladies derby hats
and see which one made my head look the smallest while my mom sold off gifts from my dad. Which… I can’t imagine felt great. For either of them.

PAT:

Is that where you were told not to try on second hand hats?

*Henry chuckles.*

HENRY:

Yeah I guess it is. It’s also where I learned that—well, that gifts from my dad come with conditions.

*Pat studies Henry, choosing carefully what to say so as to not scare him off.*

PAT:

What do you mean?

HENRY:

I mean, he was raised in a really specific way. In a really fucked up time. So he has this, understanding of what it’s like to be a black man in American. He was pretty sure everyone was always gonna– count that as a strike against me. And like, I always went to predominantly white schools, so he just made sure I knew that it was even more important for me to be a “real man” than it was for the white boys in my class.

PAT:

That… sucks.

HENRY:

Yeah. One time when I was like seven, my mom actually bought me one of those derby hats and I came home wearing it. My dad flipped a shit. It’s wild I can like, still
hear him yelling at her. You know, like “he’s already black, you can’t make him gay too!”

PAT:

Fuck… What would he think of you dating a white girl?

Henry laughs weakly.

HENRY:

Well, you know, he’ll never find out, so…

Henry stares off. Pat shrinks.

HENRY:

My mom would have liked you though.

Pat eases.

PAT:

Your mom sounds… shrewd.

Henry half smiles.

HENRY:

Yeah, shrewd enough to uh, get the hell out of our house.

Pat’s face falls. Henry doesn’t see. Henry’s vibe at this point is pulsating away from him and then back into him. Pat knows that if she jumps in at the wrong moment, like double dutch, she’ll stunt his energy and this admission will have made him somehow smaller, instead of letting him expand. She chooses her moment carefully.

PAT:

My favorite part of going thrifting is when I’m there by myself.
Henry looks at her.

HENRY:

Yeah?

PAT:

Yeah. When I go with my mom, she’ll nudge me towards what she likes, or more often away from what she thinks is tacky or “risky”. When I’m on my own I’m only listening to me. I’m only thinking about what would make me feel good to put on. It’s really cool learning to follow what I’m drawn to. I realized that I’m a lot nicer to myself about the choices that I make when I’m not pressured into thinking about what another person will think.

HENRY:

Did you have a hard time being nice to yourself?

PAT:

Yeah, I mean, I still do. But yes it felt–it felt like a really big relief. I was really into flower prints. These long skirts with like, jewel toned flowers–I haven’t ever seen anything like them on Instagram but they legit cost a dollar and they weren’t tight on my belly like skinny jeans were, and when I wore them I just felt like, like I had chosen to be nice to myself. I knew that I might be having the shittiest day, but no matter what happens, I can always choose to throw on a flower skirt. I can always make a decision that feels like, love.

Henry’s staring at her.
HENRY:

Huh.

*Pat feels watched. She doesn’t hate it.*

PAT:

I wrote a song about them.

HENRY:

About your skirts?

PAT:

It’s called *99 Cent Skirts*.

HENRY:

Well sure. Was this a normal thing for you? To write odes to articles of clothing?

PAT:

Uh, no. I was more commonly found writing odes to shitty boys. This song was my favorite one that I wrote though.

HENRY:

How does it go?

PAT:

Uhh–

HENRY:

Would you play it? You can use my guitar,

PAT:

Um.

81
HENRY:

Please?

*Pat blushes.*

PAT:

Okay but I haven’t held a guitar in like, two years. My callouses are gone. Feel—

She reaches out her fingertips to Henry. Her hand shakes the tiniest bit. He watches it for the briefest moment before touching her fingertips with his.

HENRY:

Those are some soft tips.

He grabs the guitar from the corner of his room.

PAT:

Is it in tune? Because I’m helpless without a–

HENRY:

I’ll tune it.

He opens a tuner app on his phone and plays an E. He tunes the guitar. He spends a little longer on the G string. Heh heh. Then he hands the guitar to Pat. She grabs it, wary to leave him hanging. She settles. He watches. She looks to him.

PAT:

You ready?

HENRY:

You bet.

She takes a deep breath and recalls,
PAT:

G         C
I have got no bridges to rebuild
G         C
I have got no slots to be filled
G         C
All I’ve got is what’s inside my mind
Em         D
Warfare an entirely different kind
G         C
I’m tired of threads just pulling out the lines
G         C
I’ve worked so hard to stitch them it’s a crime
G         C
I’m trying to stare straight into the blue
Em         D
But I’m still scraping up scraps of glue

F         C         G
Sunshine baked my brain to glass
F         C         G
99 cent skirts they saved my ass
F         C         G
Two-buck-books and stars to chill my bones
F         C         G
In flower prints I’m feeling less alone
In flower prints I’m feeling less alone
In flower prints I’m feeling less alone
In flower prints I’m feeling less alone

She lets the last chord ring out.

HENRY:

Wow.

PAT:

Don’t.
HENRY:

That was… special.

PAT:

You’re special.

Henry takes a second.

HENRY:

You’re so special. That’s a very perky song.

PAT:

Yeah I was, uh, pretty tired of writing these sad longing ballads that were like, mourning for all the things I thought I didn’t have. It just felt like I needed to write a love song for myself.

HENRY:

Well I can see why. A love song like that would do anyone good. You know, from the sound of it, you’re pretty good at taking care of yourself.

PAT:

From the sound of it…

HENRY:

You’re amazing, Pat. I–I’m–you–

A chill runs through Henry. Pat wants to fill the dead air.

PAT:

I have a confession.
HENRY:

Oh?

PAT (coy):

I am pretty sure that, there’s no way I haven’t caught feelings for you.

HENRY:

Oh. Are you–is that going to be a problem?

PAT:

Why?

HENRY:

Well because we’re–we’re not–

PAT:

Right.

HENRY:

Right?

PAT:

Yes, oh my god of course. No. We’re not… we’re not…this isn’t about like–this isn’t like, what I want–

HENRY:

It’s not?

PAT:

No, this is. You are, I mean what we’re doing is, it’s, I don’t not want it. I was saying that I don’t want anything else, anything like extra. Like, labels, or, commitments, or–
HENRY:

Consistency?

Pat looks to Henry, surprised.

PAT:

This is consistent.

HENRY:

But, I mean like, what, have things changed for you? Why now, why tell me you have feelings for me now?

PAT:

Because I do.

HENRY:

Wait, but, is this not enough for you anymore? Is this going to end up hurting you?

Pat is feeling everything slip through her grasp.

PAT:

No stop. Please, no. I’m fine. Trust me, I don’t need any special treatment, I don’t need you to compromise what you want for my sake.

HENRY:

Yeah but I don’t either. I want you to be in control of this thing, Pat.

Pat scoffs, genuinely amused.

HENRY:

What? I do. I don’t want some kind of power over you!
PAT:
You already have it! Saying you don’t want it now is just denying responsibility for it!

*Henry does NOT expect to be called out. He hadn’t considered his negligence until now.*

HENRY:
Fuck.

PAT:
No–

HENRY:
Why do you even spend time with me Pat?

PAT:
Please don’t–

HENRY:
No seriously what are you getting out of this?

PAT:
I’m getting to spend time with you!

HENRY:
Does that really feel worth it to you?

PAT:
Does it not feel that way to you?
HENRY:
I’m not the one who isn’t getting enough out of this.

PAT:
Neither am I! Henry, please stop doing this, I don’t want you thinking I’m unhappy with everything you’ve given me so far.

HENRY:
Like what?

PAT:
Like, confidence! And kisses! I don’t need anything else from you, Henry. Trust me.

SCENE EIGHT

Outside the coffee shop. Pat stands with Aditi as she smokes a cigarette.

PAT:
I always fucking do this.

ADITI:
Yeah but at least you’re aware. It’s just a matter of adjusting your expectations right?

PAT:
Lowering my standards.

ADITI:
We all have to do it. You have like, weirdly high expectations for how people are going to treat you. You don’t really make it easy for people. Maybe you just need to cut him some slack.
PAT:
You’re probably right. I mean, it’s not like he’s me. He’s not going to want to get any closer. That’s too much effort. He let me know he’s not into effort.

ADITI:
Yeah but who is? We know more than anyone what it’s like to not work hard at something that would inevitably be good for us. Just, back off. Let him come to you.

PAT:
Not sure I see that happening.

ADITI:
Well, when it doesn’t, ice cream pints on me.

PAT:
Thanks baby. Love you.

INSIDE THE COFFEE SHOP

_Bella and Henry sit at a table with empty iced coffee cups._

HENRY:
I’m really really sorry I dragged you into this, Bella. Did he say something to you?

BELLA:
Yeah. Several things. But listen, don’t worry about it. I’m not scared of him.

HENRY:
Good you shouldn’t be. You don’t need him.

BELLA:
Yes I do? And you do too.
HENRY:

Bella what the fuck?

BELLA:

Henry it’s not a bad thing. I need to write every day, you need to go on runs, Dad needs to keep his distance from us, and we need him to keep paying for shit. For now. So we need to know how to deal with him. And insinuating that we’ve been talking about his money behind his back is not going to go over well. Even if that’s the truth.

HENRY:

So we lie to him.

BELLA:

We maintain some privacy from him. Whatever we need to do to feel okay accepting his help and also his treatment.

HENRY:

Hmm. So that’s what you call bailing on the past three holidays? Privacy?

_Bella takes a moment to see him._

BELLA:

Yes. I love you Henry. But I have to love me too. Somebody has to.

HENRY:

Come on Bella you know I love you.

BELLA:

Of course I do. But I’m not your responsibility, I’m mine. And taking responsibility for myself means protecting myself from unhealthy shit.
HENRY:

And leaving me alone with dad for Christmas.

_Bella sees him again._

BELLA:

I’m going to try to make it next year. I really am. It’s just hard. Taking care of myself is a full time gig and something is always going to be a little bit out of balance. I don’t have a cute girlfriend like you did that showers me with confidence and takes my shit patiently and rubs my back when I want to quit. So I let some things fall through the cracks because I fucking need to.

_Henry sees Bella._

HENRY:

I don’t know how you do it. I want to be in control of my shit so bad, like you are.

BELLA:

I’m not in control of my shit, I’m in control of how I react to it. And you absolutely can be too, Henry. Trust me.

_Henry recalls when Pat said that last night._

HENRY:

Shit.

BELLA:

What’s up?
HENRY:
Well, there’s this situation that, uh, that I do not feel in control of. And so when it really hit me, I didn’t even try to control my reaction to it.

BELLA:
Mhm. Does it happen to have anything to do with those girls at the door? Because they’re not doing a great job controlling their reaction to you.

*Henry looks to the door and sees that Pat and Aditi have entered and Pat looks mortified. Even though this is supremely awkward, Henry is happy to see her. He smiles meekly and waves her over. Pat walks to him and Aditi follows.*

PAT:
Hey!

HENRY:
Hello!

*Awkward moment where they both want to apologize. Pat is reading his body language as, “he wishes I weren’t here.” Henry’s reading her body language as “she thinks I’m an asshole.”*

BELLA:
I’m Bella.

PAT:
Hi!

HENRY:
Pat, this is my sister. She’s visiting for a few days.
PAT:

Oh that’s awesome! So y’all are getting coffee?

They both look at their empty iced coffee cups.

BELLA:

We were.

PAT:

Haha right!

Awkward beat.

HENRY:

Speaking of which, I’m gonna run to the bathroom.

PAT:

Cool!

BELLA:

Is it?

Pat doesn’t notice Bella’s teasing. Aditi snorts.

PAT:

Oh my god I’m sorry this is Aditi.

BELLA:

Hey.

ADITI:

Sup. (To Pat) I’m going to order.
PAT:
 Uh okay cool I’ll catch up to you!

Aditi gives her a “what are you doing? We said you were going to back off” look. Pat keeps smiling awkwardly until Aditi heads off to the coffee line. Bella thinks Pat is cute.

BELLA:

You wanna sit?

PAT:

Uh, sure!

Pat sits down.

BELLA:

He’s a thousand percent pooping.

Pat’s tension is eased a little.

PAT:

His butt did look a little clenched.

Bella, pleasantly surprised,

BELLA:

You looking at my brother’s butt?

PAT (unsure):

Well, only because you were sitting when I walked in.

Bella laughs.
BELLA:

So I guess you and Henry are touchin’ tushies?

*Pat goes red.*

PAT:

Did he say something about me?

BELLA:

Nah. It just seems like you two would get along.

PAT:

Well, we do. Get along.

BELLA:

Maybe you get along a little too well for his taste.

*This concerns Pat.*

PAT:

Are you sure he didn’t say anything?

*Bella studies Pat.*

BELLA:

Look Pat, I know he might be making you feel a little powerless right now but, power is cumulative. It’s gained by taking risks. You can build your own power. You don’t need to wait for him.

*Henry walks back in. Pat and Bella see him and Bella winks at Pat.*

HENRY:

What’d I miss?
PAT:

Uh, your sister’s really cool.

HENRY:

Mmm, tell me something she doesn’t know.

*Bella sticks out her tongue at Henry. Pat looks to Bella, gearing up to take her big risk. Bella sees something in Pat’s eye and doesn’t know where she’s heading. Without warning, Pat leans in and kisses Henry on the mouth. Henry, caught off guard, doesn’t kiss back.*

PAT:

Love you.

*Bella’s jaw drops. Henry, still stunned laughs nervously.*

HENRY:

Wh- uh, s-see uh see you later.

*PAT IS MORTIFIED. SHE LOOKS TO BELLA AND IT REGISTERS THAT THIS IS NOT THE TIME OR PLACE FOR WHAT SHE WAS INSINUATING. SWEET PAT JUST FELT SO NERVOUS SHE NEEDED TO DO SOMETHING. BUT THIS WAS NOT IT!*

PAT:

BYE!

*Pat spins around on her heels and flees the premises. Henry looks at Bella.*

HENRY:

What the fuck did you do?
Bella, shocked, shrugs slowly.

BELLA:

Female empowerment?

SCENE NINE

Pat is in bed: a similar scene as her last “self-care” montage. She’s listening to “needy” by Ariana Grande without headphones in. She starts singing along,

PAT:

“I’m obsessive and I love too hard, good at overthinking with my heart, how you even think it got this far? And I can be needy, way too damn needy, I can be needy, tell me how good it feels to be needed,”

Aditi enters Pat’s room after knocking repeatedly to no response.

ADITI:

Why weren’t you responding to me?

PAT (shocked at Aditi’s lack of sensitivity):

Oh my god.

ADITI:

No don’t you fUCKING oh my god me Pat. You can’t just ditch me while we’re out and then not respond to any of my texts. Where the fuck did you go?
PAT:
I was here. I’ve been smoking in my room since I embarrassed the ever loving shit out of myself in the coffee shop and ran out. Didn’t you trip on a carton of Ben and Jerry’s when you walked in? Could it be any clearer that I’ve been crying all day?

ADITI:
No you can NOT make this about you right now Pat.

PAT:
What?

ADITI:
You decided to fuck off and leave me alone *in public* like an abandoned kid, and then you completely cut me off? You could have texted me, you know, you don’t have to show your face to send an SMS.

PAT:
Oh my god Aditi– I didn’t cut you off.

ADITI:
Did I do something wrong?

No you didn’t do anything wrong!

ADITI:
Well then why did you do that to me?

PAT:
This had nothing to do with you!

ADITI:
You have to admit you wanted me to come find you. That was so selfish of you, Pat, to not even consider what I felt like standing there. Alone.
PAT CAN’T TAKE IT ANYMORE.

PAT:

Well did you consider what I felt like when you venmo’d Henry $30 for “Pat’s Pussy”?

ADITI:

What the fuck are you talking about?

PAT:

When we first met Henry you ditched me in public and you totally embarrassed me in front of someone I was trying to make a good impression on!

ADITI:

Well who cares you clearly made a fucking impression on him!

PAT:

That’s not the point Aditi! It was mean!

ADITI:

It was obviously not my intention to be mean to you Pat.

PAT:

Well it felt mean! And the calling me an idiot, and the telling me I’m too much for people. I didn’t realize I didn’t like it at the time, but maybe that’s because I hadn’t figured out yet that you’re not supposed to be mean to me!

ADITI:

Jesus Christ, Pat, you’re so fucking sensitive. I’m not a mean person. I give tough love that’s just how I am– I’m trying to fucking help you! I swear I have never met a
more sensitive person in my entire life. I don’t know what you expect from people or what makes you think it’s reasonable, but you’re going to be sorely disappointed when you want the world handed to you with absolutely no pushback.

PAT:

I don’t expect no pushback. I just don’t expect unnecessary cruelty from the people who say they love me!

ADITI:

_Say_ they love you? That’s fucking low. You _know_ how much I care about you. I tell you I love you all the time.

PAT:

I know you do but— god Aditi do you even like me? Because I promise, it feels like you hate me. You don’t want to hear the good shit about Henry, you don’t want to hear the bad shit about my life even though you know venting makes me feel better—

ADITI:

I’m not here just to make you feel better!

PAT:

Okay! Then what are you here for?

ADITI:

I’m here because—well—I’m here because—because we fucking love each other Pat!

PAT:

Yeah I know. I thought this was how I was supposed to feel. I thought, “we’re so close we care about each other so much. It’s almost like we’re in love with each other
and when you’re in love not everything’s pretty. Not everything’s nice. Not everything feels like love.” But I was wrong. Everything should feel like love.

*Aditi rolls her eyes.*

**ADITI:**

Yeah good luck with that.

**PAT:**

No! I’m not going to let you convince me that I’m stupid for expecting love! It’s not that fucking hard to love someone, Aditi. Not if you actually want to love them.

*PAT LEAVES! Aditi kicks the Ben and Jerry’s pint.*

**SCENE TEN**

*Pat approaches Henry’s door. She knocks without hesitation. After a few moments of Pat’s forced resolve, he opens the door.*

**PAT:**

It’s not that hard!

*Henry, confused looks behind him.*

**HENRY:**

That’s what she said?

**PAT:**

No that’s what I’m saying! I’m telling you I don’t think what I want is that hard for you to give.
HENRY:
I’m confused Pat, you said you didn’t want anything else. You insisted that,

PAT:
I was lying! I thought telling you what I wanted would make me “a kind of vulnerable I didn’t want to be”. But it’s a pointless fear. Because you know what I want.

HENRY:
Well yeah now I know. Without you going full girlfriend in the coffeeshop I wouldn’t have had any way of guessing.

PAT:
That’s bullshit. You can feel it. You’ve been listening to me. And I’ve been listening to you. You’re waiting for some magic person to tell you what you want, well, here I am. You want to love me.

HENRY (intrigued):
I do?

PAT:
Big time. Exhibit A) you stayed up with me that whole night after we watched Kangaroo Jack. You were tired and you were going on a run the next morning but you didn’t go to sleep. You stayed up with me and listened to me talk about my mom’s old minivan with the DVD player that had Kangaroo Jack stuck in the disk drive, and then about all the times I threw up in that minivan, and about the time I cried hysterically when we sold it back to the dealership with Kangaroo Jack still
stuck inside. Because you like me Henry! And you could choose to love me, because it’s not that fucking hard.

HENRY:

Pat, I’ve talked to you about people who have asked me to change.

PAT:

Yeah but they asked you to do things you didn’t want to do. Feel things you hadn’t felt. You want to love me, Henry, and I want you to too.

HENRY:

Yeah I get it, Pat. You made it very clear in front of my sister what you expect of me. Shouldn’t my initial response have been an indication that I’m just not capable of doing it?

PAT:

No! Your initial response was your fear. It’s holding you back from what you want–from what we want. Going for it’s scary but, risks are good!

HENRY:

*Calculated* risks are good.

PAT:

This *is* calculated. I’ve done the calculations! You don’t have to worry about not being enough. If you choose to love me, every day, I know I’ll never need more than that.

HENRY:

So, you want me to love you and never stop loving you?
PAT:
Yes. Because if you love me every day, on the day you break up with me, I’ll feel confident that you’re doing it with good reason. That we’ve given all we can to each other and that we loved as well as we could and as completely as we could and now for reasons outside of our control, it’s time to move on.

HENRY:
What if I can’t love you as completely as you want me to?

PAT:
I believe you can. If you want to, you will. You love yourself so well, Henry. If you want to love me, you have everything you need. No matter what, you have everything you need.

*Henry is continuously drawn into Pat’s affirmations.*

HENRY:
I just don’t want to promise you something now that I won’t be able to give you down the line.

PAT:
Don’t think about that. If you’re willing and able to give it now, give it now. It feels so good, Henry. You asked me if this feels worth it and it does because loving you feels so fucking good.

HENRY:
For me too.

*They both smile, closer now.*
HENRY:

I want to. I’m afraid.

*She puts her forehead to his.*

PAT (whispering):

Do it anyway. Please.

*Henry takes a deep breath. He holds Pat’s face in his hands. He’s a man about to jump.*

HENRY:

I love you.

*They both feel a shocking surge of power.*

PAT:

I love you so much Henry. *(It feels like a sugar rush)*

HENRY:

I really love you Pat. *(His eyes are light like we’ve never seen them)*

PAT:

I love you.

HENRY:

I love–

*Pat kisses him! They’re kissing! They’re in love! They both took THE BIGGEST RISK! THEY’RE BOTH SO POWERFUL!*
SCENE ELEVEN

The next morning, in Henry’s bed. They’re both fast asleep tangled in each other.

Pat’s phone rings and it wakes her like an alarm. She starts up, confused for a minute, forgetting the momentous event from last night until she looks at Henry’s face.

His mouth is agape, he’s barely snoring. She finally looks to her phone and sees that her mom is calling her. She wakes Henry by nudging him indelicately.

PAT (whispering for some reason):

Henry!

He opens an eye

PAT:

It’s my mom!

He startles, pulling the covers over his bare chest,

HENRY:

Where?

Pat points to the phone.

PAT:

I can call her back.

HENRY:

You sure?

PAT:

Yeah.

She kisses him. The kiss sticks.
HENRY:

Is it just me, or was our sex especially wonderful last night?

*Pat smiles wide.*

PAT:

Definitely not just you.

HENRY:

Who knew love was an aphrodisiac?

PAT:

Most poets.

HENRY:

Every time I said I love you it felt like I was revealing a whole new body part.

PAT:

Hmm… vulnerability is sexy, baby.

*Henry smiles.*

HENRY:

You’re sexy, baby.

*Pat swells with the validation and the hormones. She kisses him. Her phone rings again. She takes a second to break away from Henry’s face.*

PAT:

I’m going to take it this time.

HENRY:

Seems like a good call.
PAT:
I’ll go outside.

HENRY:
Ok no worries! Wait–

*He reaches down the crevice next to his bed and fishes a pullover sweater out from the deep. He hands it to Pat. Pat smiles and throws it on. She starts to head outside but Henry grabs her wrist.*

HENRY:
Love you.

PAT:
LOVE YOU.

*Henry, content, falls right back to sleep. Pat bounces a bit and answers the phone as she heads out of Henry’s room.*

PAT:
Hey mom sorry, you woke me up.

REGGIE:
Oh I’m sorry sweetie. Late night?

PAT:
Uh, a little. Kind of–emotionally–a lot.

REGGIE:
Hmm. How’s Aditi?
PAT:

Why would you ask that?

REGGIE:

Oh well, she’s your emotions person. She’s kind of your everything person– I just assumed you two were together.

PAT:

Um, I don’t know how safe a bet that is anymore.

REGGIE:

What does that mean? Did something bad happen?

PAT:

No, I–I think something good happened. I think it was good. We kinda, had a conversation we really needed to have.

REGGIE:

And now there will be fewer conversations?

PAT:

Now there may be no more conversations.

REGGIE:

Wow. Are you okay?

PAT:

Yeah it was uh, it was my idea to– confront the issue.

REGGIE:

Oh, Pat I’m so proud of you. That kind of stuff is not easy to remove yourself from.
PAT:

Yeah. Wait what do you mean?

REGGIE:

Well, you two were so immeshed, addressing your codependence couldn’t have been comfortable.

*Pat is stopped in her tracks.*

PAT:

Our codependence?

REGGIE:

Well I don’t know if she owned up to anything on her part but it’s inspiring to know that you confronted your own codependent tendencies.

PAT:

Uh…

REGGIE:

It’s brave, I mean, I know it couldn’t have been easy but, choosing to create more space between the two of you can only be healthy for your own self-reliance. Thank goodness now you can just focus on *you*.

PAT:

I can?

REGGIE:

Oh of course honey! This is a blessing, honestly. Being beholden to another person is terrible for your own personal growth. It’s impossible to be the kind of selfish you
need to be in order to effectively self-care when you’re putting another person’s needs first.

PAT:

So I couldn’t take care of myself when I was friends with Aditi?

REGGIE:

Aditi seems like an all-in kind of friend and you have to be all-in on yourself! Making healthy choices, keeping yourself to a consistent schedule, maybe you can find time to get to the gym… I tend to think that that relationship was really enabling some of your worst habits.

PAT:

I don’t know what to tell you, mom. She’s like, my only friend that’s lasted. Committed people are pretty scarce in my life for some reason.

REGGIE:

Pat, you know I love you, but I get the sense you’re not the easiest person to maintain that kind of a relationship with. You expect a lot from… your person.

PAT:

What, like it’s a trend?

REGGIE:

I mean, when you stopped seeing that guy, Nicky, the one who didn’t wear shoes, you really leaned on Aditi. That’s when I remember getting phone calls and phone calls about the ways Aditi was challenging you, and you totally took it all to heart. You just, you get stuck on getting complete validation from one person, and if it’s not
there from them, then it’s not there at all. And you put all your energy towards getting that person to treat you exactly how you want that you have no energy to treat yourself the way you deserve!

PAT:

Mom, so many people only have one person. You had dad!

REGGIE:

Yes, but when I met your dad, and I knew that he was going to be my person, I realized I needed a back-up plan for if he wasn’t my person anymore—or, if he just needed to be his own person for a day. Honey, it’s why I haven’t crumbled since he’s been gone. I made a choice to learn how to be able to give myself everything.

PAT:

But what if I can’t learn how to do that? I already know how to give everything to someone else can’t I just keep doing that and hope that someday someone returns the favor?

REGGIE:

It’s just an exhausting thing to ask of someone. If neither of you are empowering yourselves, how will you have the energy to be everything for each other and also enough for you?

PAT:

Mom, I don’t know if I’m ever going to be enough for me. I just… really want to be someone else’s top priority.
REGGIE:

Honey, it’s just not fair to be that codependent.

PAT:

Okay, mom I gotta go.

REGGIE:

Pat, are you oka–

Pat hangs up.

Beat.

SCENE TWELVE

Continuing from the last scene:

Pat begins to walk.

PAT:

She has no idea what she’s talking about. Her and dad were totally codependent they had kids together that seems pretty code-fucking-pendent. God I can’t believe she called me exhausting. Just because I have the gaul to ask for someone’s support, I’m a chore to be with. And she says I have high standards for people?

It’s not even valid anyway because she clearly was just waiting for me to cut Aditi loose! I mean could she have stomped on the grave of our friendship any quicker?

“Codependent” could just be some random psyche term she pulled out of her ass. As if it’s unrealistic that Henry and I could actually make the choice to love each other!

This is going to work; I’m going to make this work; I’m going to be with–Aditi?
Pat, still walking, approaches Aditi, who is walking towards her on her way somewhere else.

PAT:

Hey.

ADITI:

Hi.

They give each other that awkward smile/frown/nod and keep walking. Aditi slows reluctantly.

ADITI:

Pat?

Pat turns around.

PAT:

Yeah?

ADITI:

I’m sorry things got fucked up with Henry. If you wanna talk about it or like–

PAT:

No thanks. You don’t have to do me anymore favors.

ADITI:

When we talk it isn’t a favor. I do this shit because I love you. It’s tough love okay? Living with immigrant parents you learn tough love– it’s because I want the best for you!
PAT:

Then why do you expect the worst from me? Can’t you just trust me that I’m capable of doing what’s best for myself?

ADITI:

I don’t know if I could!

PAT:

Wow.

ADITI:

It’s just, Pat, you act like without me you would fall apart.

PAT:

That’s not true!

ADITI:

So you’re saying you can be alone? With nobody?

PAT:

Of course!

ADITI:

Fine! I guess it’s a good thing you fucked stuff up with Henry.

PAT:

I didn’t fuck anything up, actually. I solved it.

ADITI:

So you’re not alone then?
PAT:

I don’t have to be alone I have someone that loves me.

*Aditi scoffs.*

PAT:

Shut up.

ADITI:

Wow! You made Henry say he loves you?

PAT:

I didn’t make him say anything! I inspired him!

ADITI:

Sounds like you manipulated him, Pat.

PAT:

I know the concept of loving someone is a complicated one for you, but I’m not letting you discredit my love.

*Pat starts to walk away.*

ADITI:

I just hope you don’t treat him the way you treated me.

PAT:

The way I treated you? I gave you literally everything I had.

ADITI:

Well then you must have been pretty drained because it didn’t feel like much. I guess you were a little preoccupied with your own shit.
PAT:
Like what shit?

ADITI:
Like hating yourself shit? Like not letting yourself orgasm or look someone you’re on top of in the eye?

PAT:
Don’t.

ADITI:
You know what Pat? You push people so hard to give you the love that you want. Why don’t you just give it to your fucking self?

Aditi exits. Pat stands stunned. She scoffs, trying to find something to say.

PAT:
She… I…

Pat looks shocked at herself. She attempts to shrug it off.

PAT (starting confidently but unable to complete the statement):
I love mysehh–
I love myshhhhh
I love my–

Pat gags.

PAT:
FUCK!

She exits.
SCENE THIRTEEN

Henry knocks on Pat’s door. It’s the first time he’s come this close to her room. Pat answers, having expected him.

HENRY:

Hey, uh, what’s going on?

PAT:

Nothing.

HENRY:

That’s not true. You never came back after your phone call. Did something bad happen? Is your mom okay?

PAT:

She’s fine. I’m fine. I just… don’t think I… can do this.

HENRY:

Do what?

PAT:

Do… us.

Henry is having trouble processing.

HENRY:

Why? Is it something your mom said?

PAT:

No. Well, kinda. I don’t know. But this–this isn’t her idea. It’s mine. I–I just–can’t.
HENRY

Pat, how is it possible that you got me to step all the way out here on a fucking limb because “all I need is within me,” and now all of a sudden you can’t?

PAT:

We’re different people. We started this thing in very different places.

HENRY:

Well we were just very much in the same place last night. What happened?

PAT:

Nothing happened. Really, nothing happened and I think that’s what’s wrong. Nothing has changed, I haven’t changed. I still want to only love you and for only you love me.

HENRY:

Okay! I can do exclusivity! Pat, you make me feel like I could do anything.

PAT:

No, Henry, I mean, I want you, and only you, to love me. I want you to love me so I don’t have to love myself. Take care of me so I don’t have to take care of—choose me so I don’t have to choose myself.

HENRY:

Why can’t we both choose you? When I choose you, it feels like I’m choosing myself. It’s like, I love myself for loving you.

PAT:

I love you for loving me too.
HENRY:
Then love you too!

PAT:
It’s not that simple, Henry, I can’t just love me because you want me to!

HENRY:
You spent a lot of breath convincing me that I can just love you because you want me to. That it’s not that hard.

PAT:
Yeah for you! It’s not that hard for you to love me.

HENRY:
What’s the difference?

PAT:
The difference is that I have a history with me! I have trust concerns. I have no idea how to believe in myself and I need to learn. I need to–practice or,

HENRY:
But we can still be together while you learn!

PAT:
I can’t learn with you as a crutch. I need to try loving myself on my own to actually feel any kind of confidence that I can survive alone.

HENRY:
But being with me while I believe in you can help you believe in yourself. You did that for me, Pat I want to help you!
PAT:

You already have! Before I met you, I would have never had the confidence to think about what’s best for me, and, what’s best for the people I’m with. I was too scared to consider how unfair it was to ask someone to support me and then refuse to support myself.

HENRY:

We can support each other.

PAT:

No, we can’t. I won’t have enough love to give you if I’m not giving any love to myself.

HENRY:

Don’t worry about not being enough for me. I’ll love you and you’ll love me and that will be enough.

PAT:

Right but then, who’s going to love me when we break up?

HENRY:

You don’t need to think about that now.

PAT:

Yes I do! Because if I don’t, then you don’t get to. You’d always feel guilty that I wouldn’t be able to handle you leaving, so you’d convince yourself that it’s not a possibility, and then you’d resent me for keeping you stuck in–
HENRY:

I won’t resent you.

PAT:

Well then I’ll resent me! For never giving myself any—any heartbreak insurance! I make it seem like I’m brave, like I’m not afraid to offer my heart to people, but the reality is I just didn’t want to admit that I was afraid of being heartbroken because I thought I didn’t deserve to protect myself from that.

HENRY:

… You do deserve that. You deserve everything, Pat. I wish I could give you everything.

_Pat is so grateful for Henry’s love. She leans in and pushes her forehead into his. He closes his eyes._

PAT:

I don’t. I wish I could.

_Henry leans out and looks into her eyes._

HENRY:

Can I kiss you?

_Pat nods and adds quietly._

PAT:

Yes please.

_They share a sad kiss. Henry, making a case for future kisses. Pat, trying to enjoy a last kiss._
HENRY (whispered):
I love you.

PAT (whispered):
I love you too. I’m just not ready to.

She hands him his sweater.

SCENE FOURTEEN

In Henry’s room, Henry lays face down in bed and Bella sits in the chair near him. We hear him letting out long guttural screams into his pillow.

BELLA:
Alright. That’s enough. I think you got it all out.

Beat. Henry lets out one more little scream. Then lifts his head from the pillow.

HENRY:
God. I can’t believe she fucking dipped. It’s like, clichéd at this point.

BELLA:
Don’t try to connect unrelated shit. This is for sure the best thing for both of you.

HENRY:
How?

BELLA:
Well for one thing, you don’t have to have the White Girl Conversation with dad.

HENRY:
I don’t have to have any conversations with dad.
BELLA (seeing he’s being dramatic):

Alright, well. You do. But, not this one.

HENRY:

It just doesn’t feel fair.

BELLA:

It’s not about fairness— you don’t owe each other anything. But, I guess she felt like, she had stuff she owed herself. Y’all are just in different places, and that’s okay. This stuff, it’s all about like, timing and fit.

HENRY:

Sorry I thought I was a good fit.

BELLA:

Hey, no. Henry, you should not feel sorry for that. I gotta say, I was impressed with how brave you were with that girl.

HENRY:

It just really felt like she believed in me.

BELLA:

I’m sure she did! She just needs to believe in herself now too.

HENRY:

I finally felt ready.

BELLA:

Look, doesn’t it say something that you were only convinced you were ready because… someone else was doing all the convincing for you?
HENRY:

What are you talking about?

BELLA:

Like, I don’t know. You let Pat do a lot of emotional labor for you. I mean, it sounds like she gassed you up a lot. And put in, like, a lot of effort telling you how strong you are. And, to be honest, if you weren’t doing the same for her, I get how she could feel, kinda tired of it. It makes sense that she, like, wants more for herself.

HENRY:

But I showed her how much more I was going to bring. She didn’t even give me a chance once I got on her level.

BELLA:

Alright, but, it took a lot of energy to even get you there. Maybe she wants to figure out how to love herself in a way that, you can’t.

HENRY:

Why can’t she figure that out while I love her how I can?

BELLA:

Because it sounds like she wants to do it right.

Beat.

HENRY:

No one’s ever made me feel the way she did.

BELLA:

Henry, you have to try making yourself feel that way.
HENRY:

Don’t be gross.

BELLA:

You don’t be gross! I did it! I figured out how to make myself feel strong and loved and safe on my own. It’s something Black women feel like we need to do. Because everyone expects us to do it for them, so we know no one is going to do it for us. You need to man up and protect your energy. Start by being nice to yourself—making yourself feel good.

HENRY:

How?

On the other side of the stage, Pat stands in front of her mirror. She has a pack of sticky notes in one hand and a marker in the other. She writes each statement she says aloud onto a sticky note and posts it somewhere around the mirror as she makes her declaration.

PAT:

Okay. Let’s give this a shot. You are—gorgeous.

Posts note.

BELLA:

What did Pat say? That made you feel so good?
PAT:
You take care of yourself the way that’s right for you.

*Posts note.*

HENRY:
She would tell me, that I’m really good at taking care of myself.

PAT:
You give a shit about important things.

*Posts note.*

BELLA:
Hmm. That so? What else?

HENRY:
She let me know that… trying is cool. That I’m allowed to be generous to myself.

PAT:
You’re generous to others.

*Posts note.*

HENRY:
That I’m enough right now.
PAT:

You’re enough. *(With some difficulty)* I’m enough. Always.

*Posts note.*

HENRY:

That it feels good to love me.

PAT:

It feels good to love me.

*Posts note.*

BELLA:

You deserve to hear that shit.

PAT:

I deserve the kind of love that I give.

*Posts note.*

BELLA:

But I think part of being an adult is, not needing to hear it from other people. It’s gotta be a conversation with yourself.

PAT:

And I deserve to give it to myself.

*Posts note.*
HENRY:

Why?

BELLA:

Because being the person who makes that conversation happen for someone else is exhausting.

PAT:

It feels good to love me.

HENRY:

And that’s happened to you?

PAT:

I deserve the kind of love that I give.

BELLA:

That has happened to me so much. It’s happening to me right now!

HENRY:

Alright! (Sarcasm) Sorry I feel like I need you right now.

PAT:

And I deserve to give it to myself.
BELLA:

Needing me is not the problem. The problem is not realizing that you need yourself, too.

PAT:

I deserve to give it to myself.

HENRY:

So… this is my job now?

PAT:

I am going to give it to myself—

HENRY:

…seems hard.

PAT:

—hard.

*Pat smiles at herself.*

PAT:

That’s what she said.

**END OF PLAY**
INTRODUCTION

As the title of my play suggests, Co-Dependent is an intimate examination of the ways Americans are conditioned to give and receive love with the ideals of self-reliant individualism and a logic of isolation, as opposed to an active love ethic. In writing this play I have used insight from bell hooks’ seminal 2001 book, All About Love: New Visions, to craft the intertwined experiences of two individuals, Pat and Henry–one woman and one man, that will hopefully stand as representative for some of the plights of participants in heterosexual/heteroromantic love. To understand the actions and intentions of these characters, I have followed bell hooks’ definition of love as an active verb: to love is to interact with someone we admire with “a combination of care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, and respect.”¹

Through the course of Pat and Henry’s relationship, as well as their interactions with friends and family, Co-Dependent seeks to illuminate the disparity in gendered conditioning surrounding love, self-love, and self-worth. For the purposes of this study into the negative effects of such binary conditioning, I will be referencing gender as it has been constructed in the United States to uphold patriarchal power structures: a Mars and Venus, sun and moon, masculine and feminine dichotomy. I hope to illuminate the danger of separate conditioning based on sexual difference through the roadblocks–both internal and interpersonal–this internalized binary poses to Pat and Henry on their paths to love.

A few of the tenants of modern love that have been previously instilled in Pat and Henry are the negative stigmas on vulnerability and intentional communication for both men and women; the insistence on staying in control of one’s feelings juxtaposed with the abdication of responsibility to make decisions with a love ethic; and the imposed fear of depending on anyone—particularly a romantic partner—for any aspect of emotional growth. All of these cultural conditionings are the given circumstances Pat and Henry are both loaded with when they first meet, therefore they dictate the parameters of the romantic contract they draw up: sex, cuddling, friendship, sex with other people, and food. These characters invest in the “friends with benefits” convention because it’s how they think they should be interacting, what they should want, based on the fears they’ve already been indoctrinated into dating with. However, the tension in this play promises both these characters personal growth because despite the fact that they each have been discouraged in different ways from wanting to love and be loved, their undeniable connection reminds them subconsciously that living with love is what they’ve both always wanted. Throughout the course of their relationship, they each perform varying amounts of emotional labor for themselves and each other. That labor proves necessary for them to grant either themselves or each other permission to risk vulnerability, lack of control, and codependence in order to give and receive love.
CHAPTER 1: DICHOTOMOUS OBSTACLES TO LOVING IN HETEROROMANCE

In his book, *When All You’ve Ever Wanted Isn’t Enough*, Harold Kushner admits, “I am afraid that [young people] will grow up looking for intimacy without risk, for pleasure without significant emotional investment. They will be so fearful of the pain of disappointment that they will forgo the possibilities of love and joy.”

While already having experienced heartbreak—and therefore becoming defensive to opening up once more—is one way young people have become cynical in the pursuit of love, even those who have never put themselves out there before are wary of the possibility of love because they have been told in so many ways that love is not meant for them.

Pat, having been socialized as a woman in the United States, has learned about love through books, movies, and television shows as a topic she is allowed to be concerned with and an outcome she should hope for, but not something she is inherently deserving of. hooks comments, “females, no matter our childhood traumas, are given cultural support for cultivating an interest in love.”

The concept of love is something that is held over women’s heads as the reward for following every rule the patriarchy has set out for them: be thin, be smooth, be quiet—be what men “want” and not what you want; defer to what the patriarchy has programmed men to think is attractive and pleasing, for that’s the only way a woman will be worth anything at all.

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3 Ibid., 153.
As hooks insists, “The wounded child inside many females is a girl who was taught from early childhood on that she must become something other than herself, deny her true feelings, in order to attract and please others.” These standards of femininity are employed by corporations and men in charge to instill a sense of lack in the minds of women and therefore keep them from realizing how powerful they truly are. Since love nurtures, empowers, and fosters growth, the patriarchy will do all it can to keep the carrot of love dangling in front of women while manifesting interpersonal obstacles that render ever actually “catching” love near impossible.

Henry, having been socialized as a man in the United States, experiences an entirely different set of challenges in the face of pursuing love, not the least of which involves being told from infancy onward that love is not a narrative he should be focused on. hooks speaks to how conditioning for American boys estranges them from concentrating on love despite their very real craving for it, yet instills in them shame for that desire: “Although so many boys are taught to behave as though love does not matter, in their hearts they yearn for it… To embrace patriarchy, they must actively surrender the longing to love.” A guiding principle of toxic masculinity is the unyielding assertion that “boys don’t cry.” Without a healthy outlet for their emotions, men are placed in a perpetual state of not having their needs met. hooks speaks to the origins of men’s perception that they have no right to let their feelings be heard by comparing their early conditioning to women’s: “The wounded child

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4 Ibid., 49.
5 Ibid., 39.
inside many males is a boy who, when he first spoke his truths, was silenced by paternal sadism, by a patriarchal world that did not want him to claim his true feelings.”

True, some men were lucky enough to be encouraged to share their feelings—to receive love through the form of supportive sustained listening. Their experience receiving love, however, does not teach them to give love and furthermore, in our country, hardly anything does—“schools for love do not exist.” Their lack of training only furthers the divide between how those who are socialized as men and those who are socialized as women recognize love: “Most men feel that they receive love and therefore know what it feels like to be loved; women often feel we are in a constant state of yearning, wanting love but not receiving it.”

Despite love being constantly mystified to Americans, whether it be through assuring women that their desire for love will not come to fruition or convincing men that their desire for love does not exist, in this play the genuine attraction and connection between Pat and Henry leads the two characters to risk contradicting their conditioning in order to experience love.

Pat and Henry are not unusually predisposed to give and receive love in ways that betray the typical conditioning of their genders. It is the promise of love itself present in their innate connection that empowers them both to want it. Furthermore, it is their mutual positive impressions of each other and the way they use their love

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6 Ibid., 49.
7 Ibid., xxviii.
8 Ibid., xx.
languages to affirm those impressions for one another that encourage Pat and Henry to see living with love as a possibility. As they permit each other to come closer and closer throughout the course of the play, they discover it necessary to reject the boundaries of attachment that they have been disciplined with. For one, their attraction to each other from their first meeting on incites a kind of blunt, unabashed flirting. The way they avoid obscuring their intentions is uncommon in a dating world that rewards mystery and therefore the presentation of a false self. Because they are immediately clear with each other, they are both able to get a reading of who the other person is and what their connection could be like. Anxiety-driven assumptions on either end that could have led to a premature conclusion of their interactions were staved off because, as hooks comments, "when we hear another person’s thoughts, beliefs, and feelings, it is more difficult to project on to them our perceptions of who they are." Immediately, their initial attraction leads them to behaving with a love ethic, because one of the most integral activations of loving another person is respecting them and their abilities, and being honest from the get go of their relationship reflects "respect for [one another’s] capacity to cope with reality."10

As Pat and Henry’s relationship progresses, the boundaries they were pressured into subscribing to begin to feel increasingly inadequate. Though neither are fully satisfied with the limitations they’ve set for themselves, Pat, having been conditioned as a woman, is feeling a stronger lack. In their emotional labor exchange,

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9 Ibid., 49.
10 Ibid., 46.
Pat and Henry’s predispositions feed into each other’s. Henry is used to receiving love— he has almost always had a girlfriend and his older sister looks after his heart closely. And though his family has a history of lovelessness and abandonment, Henry has taken advantage of the societal inequality within modern dating wherein one person (typically the person that aligns themselves with Venus rather than Mars) supplies necessary love and emotional labor for another. This has manifested poorly in Henry’s past relationships, and when he meets Pat, he bemoans how his last girlfriend wanted to “change him” because he “wasn’t emotional enough,” without realizing that a relationship where mutual love is present “thrives on difficulties. The foundation of such love is the assumption that we want to grow and expand, to become more fully ourselves.”

Henry is the kind of person who believes loving someone comes from “falling in love”—an activity entirely void of autonomy that the universe supposedly thrusts upon you. hooks rejects what she considers the dangerous notion of “falling in love” because of its implications that love is not a decision. In reality, it’s not “the universe” that is thrusting love upon you, it’s the romantic “leader” in the dynamic who has already decided to actively love—they have, as Erich Fromm wrote in *The Art of Loving*, already made “a decision, a judgement, a promise” to love. hooks argues that in love, the leader is usually the more feminine figure in the relationship. In heteroromantic couples the woman is most often leading and the man is most often

11 Ibid., 171.
12 Ibid., 181.
13 Ibid.
following—not inherently, or based on some kind of sexual difference, but as a direct
result of their genders’ conditionings. For example, toxic masculinity has convinced
men that they have little to no access to their emotions, so they are less able to clearly
identify their needs and articulate them in order to lead a conversation that results in
greater love. As hooks puts it, believing in the passive occurrence of falling in love
“seems to be especially useful for men who are socialized via patriarchal notions of
masculinity to be out of touch with what they feel… If you do not know what you
feel, then it is difficult to choose love; it is better to fall. Then you do not have to take
responsibility for your actions.”14

Pat, on the other hand, is used to giving love—in friendships, in relationships,
with her mother: who, for all we know, is Pat’s only close family member. Beyond the
gendered permission Pat is granted to acknowledge her desire for love, she was taught
to give love by learning from the example her mother set. Unlike the love men
receive from their mothers—which teaches them to receive love rather than give it—Pat
internalizes her mother’s love ethic as an integral part of her gender construction and
assumed gender role. Pat incorporates a selfless habit of loving behavior as she
models her womanhood after her mother—a generous person whose words of
affirmation plant seeds of self-love within Pat that are then tamped down too tightly
upon by friends and significant others taking Pat’s learned generosity for granted.
Pat’s continued engagement with a love ethic is coincidentally the social role she
feels she should inhabit as well as the product of her effort to send the love she

14 Ibid.
wishes to receive out into the world. Either way, Pat continually offering her spirit and service to people who do not match her level of emotional effort has become her naturalized way of interacting with those she admires. Pat’s internal monologue affirms that she is the person who always “loves more.”

This instinct of Pat’s is a typical way women are led to envision themselves in heteroromantic relationships. Because their conditioning has empowered them to be in touch with their emotions, they have an easier time being able to verbally express their needs. Men, in response to feeling inadequate as a result of their partner’s expression of dissatisfaction, shift blame back onto women and stigmatize their honest, respectful, and loving confessions as a sign that they are “needy.” Of all the buzzwords I have thrown out to my peers that were socialized as girls growing up, “needy” has elicited the most visceral responses. The negative stigma on a person’s ability to express their needs has conditioned generations of women and people with “feminine” energy to feel guilty in their attempts to experience love. bell hooks notes that though “choosing to be honest is the first step in the process of love… when women communicate from a place of pain it is often characterized as ‘nagging.’”

The fact that something as integral to healthy relationships as informing your partner of what behavior makes you feel safe and loved is interpreted as cause for an apology is indicative of the patriarchy’s power to shame people for their emotional intelligence and keep them in a perpetual state of lack.

15 Ibid., 157.
CHAPTER 2: INTERRUPTING OUR “CHATTERBOXES”

Being continually withholding from someone is a manipulative power play, and to guilt someone who is brave enough to risk going against that power dynamic into thinking they’re somehow asking for too much is even more manipulative. At that point, the person in power is contributing to the fabrication of the “needy” person’s growing anxiety. In her self-help sensation *Feel The Fear... And Do It Anyway: Dynamic Techniques for Turning Fear, Indecision, and Anger into Power, Action, and Love*, Susan Jeffers defines the narrative our anxieties each produce as our “Chatterbox”: “This is the little voice inside, the voice that tries to drive you crazy—and often succeeds! … It’s the voice that heralds doom, lack, and losing. We’re so used to its presence we often don’t even notice it is talking to us.”16 Refusing to hear and/or provide what it is that someone you are close with needs only feeds their Chatterbox and steals that person’s power. It is the exact opposite of providing positive affirmations for someone, the application and beneficial effects of which are illustrated in *Co-Dependent*. Positive affirmations are particularly effective for combatting our Chatterboxes and interrupting each of our internal monologues.

One of the clearest manifestations of internal monologues are song lyrics. Successful lyrics utilize language that resonates with an artist’s demographic because listeners recognize rhetoric they use in their own internal monologues in what the artist is singing. Therefore, if a song is especially popular, it’s an indication that the concepts it invokes are especially common—and most likely systemically enforced—

feelings. The second track off of Ariana Grande’s most recent, history-making album, *Thank U, Next*, is a haunting ballad titled, “needy”. The piece’s lyrics convey Grande’s heartbroken apology to her significant others for being “way too damn needy.”\(^{17}\) *Thank U, Next* as a whole is one of the most groundbreakingly honest testimonials of self-care to ever be disseminated on a platform the scale of Grande’s. Lyrics such as “there ain’t nothing wrong with saying I need me time,”\(^{18}\) “I can’t fake another smile,”\(^{19}\) and “wanted you to grow, but, boy, you wasn’t budding,”\(^{20}\)–the last of which predicated Grande’s revolutionary and transformative mantra, “thank u, next,”\(^{21}\)–provide content to replace our Chatterboxes\(^{22}\) with a more positively affirming internal voice. Grande’s lyrics provide a script for our unconscious narratives to become, as Jeffers puts it, “a loving internal friend.”\(^{23}\)

In the context of the rest of the album, “needy” reads as subversive: Grande is verbalizing her negative internal monologue in order to destigmatize being “needy” and critique the learned behavior of apologizing for communicating one’s needs and then apologizing for the apology because that itself conveys vulnerability: “I’m sorry if I say sorry way too much.”\(^{24}\) The song’s lyrics are useful in demonstrating the

\(^{17}\) Ariana Grande, “needy,” *thank u, next*, (Republic Records, 2019).

\(^{18}\) Ibid.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., “fake smile,” *thank u, next*, (Republic Records, 2019).

\(^{20}\) Ibid., “in my head,” *thank u, next*, (Republic Records, 2019).

\(^{21}\) Ibid., “thank u, next,” *thank u, next*, (Republic Records, 2019).

\(^{22}\) Jeffers, *Feel the Fear... and Do It Anyway*, 48.

\(^{23}\) Ibid., 58.

mental-turned-verbal articulations of women’s prescribed insecurities, particularly the enforced habit of apologizing for not conforming to societal expectations that keep us easily consumed and controlled.

In Co-Dependent, Pat listens to “needy” when she is alone, self indulging in her depression and feeding her Chatterbox negative affirmations. Because Pat is not self aware enough at this point to read Grande’s lyrics as subversive and empowering, she internalizes the rhetoric as a contribution to her own internal monologue. The words, “I’m obsessive and I love too hard/ Good at overthinking with my heart/ How you even think it got this far?” become true for Pat simply because she sings along to them out loud. Jeffers argues in Feel The Fear... And Do It Anyway that the words we say out loud are the sentiments our subconscious takes hold of, whether or not we actually consider them true: “it doesn’t matter if we believe the words or not. The mere uttering of them makes our inner self believe them.” This is one reason why our Chatterboxes are so loud; we’re strengthening them by singing along to self-deprecating music. Leftuntended to, a negative internal monologue will grow like a weed. There are, after all, so many sites in the media that are meant to instill a positive feedback loop of negative thoughts in all of us in order to keep us in a perpetual state of lack that we will then feel pressured to compensate for by

25 Jeffers, Feel the Fear... and Do It Anyway, 48.


27 Jeffers, Feel the Fear... and Do It Anyway, 65.

28 Ibid., 48.
purchasing items that make us “feel better” about insecurities that were prescribed to us anyway.

To fight back, we need to manually override negative thoughts with the power of positive affirmations. Sometimes, intervention from the people that love us is just the motivation we need to snap out of it. Another song featuring apologies that Pat admits to relating to and then sings along with in *Co-Dependent* is SZA’s “Drew Barrymore”\(^{29}\). This anthem for girls who are—in the words of Ariana Grande’s “needy”—“sorry that [they] think [they’re] not enough,”\(^{30}\) is the fourth track on SZA’s album *Ctrl*. *Ctrl* is an unprecedented achievement in songwriting because SZA’s open-hearted revelation of the insecurities imposed on her as a young black woman boils her superobjective down to a recognizable goal for listeners of any demographic: to feel in control. To an enlightened person, the self-deprecating lyrics in “Drew Barrymore” are subversive and seek to destigmatize the guilt women—specifically black women—have internalized for not achieving patriarchal beauty and behavioral standards.

While spending the night with Henry, Pat absent-mindedly sings along to SZA’s lyrics, “I’m sorry I’m not more attractive/ I’m sorry I’m not more ladylike/ I’m sorry I don’t shave my legs at night.”\(^{31}\) These sentiments have already invaded Pat’s subconscious, and her singing along to them only further convinces her inner self of the applicability of the lyrics to her own self-perception. Henry hears Pat singing


along to this part and, having already been told that she relates to the song, takes issue with what Pat is saying about herself. Through his own mindfulness practice—a particular manifestation of his own self-care—he has learned the dangerous effects of verbalizing negative thoughts and finds it necessary to intervene. In a significant act of love, Henry interrupts Pat’s singing and negates the validity of such detrimental affirmations. In doing so, Henry interrupts Pat’s running internal narrative both literally and figuratively. Henry provides positive affirmations to Pat to replace her string of apologies as well as permission to drown out her Chatterbox herself by vocalizing those positive affirmations.

This act of love on Henry’s part is representative of the act of love I extend to *Co-Dependent*’s audience. My goal is to provide permission for people to interrupt their own internal monologues as well as the destructive narratives their loved ones perpetuate for themselves. Since women are socialized to listen to their feelings more acutely, granting them permission to critique their inner monologue may appear more urgently necessary. However, the goal of my play is to critique both sides of the imposed gender binary’s conditioning regarding self-love, and that includes examining the harmful manifestations of toxic masculinity’s holistically enforced logic of isolation.

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32 Jeffers, *Feel the Fear... and Do It Anyway*, 48.
CHAPTER 3: TOXIC MASCULINITY’S CAPITALISTIC LOGIC OF ISOLATION

bell hooks points to capitalist consumerism as a foundational component of a national “logic of alienation and estrangement” because with increasingly violent material competition, “the basic interdependency of life is ignored so that separateness and individual gain can be deified.” American exceptionalism dating back to 19th Century Transcendentalism enforces self-reliance and values defiant individualism over any kind of generous love ethic. It is under this kind of conditioning that a fear of depending on others and being a figure others can depend upon develops. Because rugged individualism is such a desirable trait within toxic masculinity, cultural sites that reinforce the significance of capital gain become sites that affirm some men’s conceptions of their own masculinity.

Since wealth projection was first employed as a means of reifying gender, people have sought empowerment through owning objects whose assigned monetary values endowed them with social clout. A brand whose logo-emblazoned products construct current conceptions of masculinity is Supreme. In an episode of his Netflix series Patriot Act with Hasan Minhaj, Hasan Minhaj examined Supreme’s exploitation of hype culture—specifically the name-recognition and resale value facets of material accumulation. A way Minhaj critiques Supreme is by identifying the irony behind the inspiration for their now famous insignia. Supreme’s classic italicized

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33 hooks, All About Love: New Visions, 73.

white block lettering inscribed in a red rectangle directly lifts the signature aesthetic of post-conceptual contemporary artist Barbara Kruger\textsuperscript{35}. In \textit{All About Love: New Visions}, bell hooks references one of Kruger’s most recognizable pieces, \textit{Untitled (I shop therefore I am)}, 1987\textsuperscript{36}, when condemning the national shift away from moral consideration and towards consumer consideration. hooks writes, “Artist Barbara Kruger created a work proclamation ‘I shop therefore I am’ to show the way consumerism has taken over mass consciousness, making people think they are what they possess.”\textsuperscript{37}

The work in question presents a black and white photograph of a hand reaching towards the viewer, and Kruger’s typical red box with white lettering boasting “I shop therefore I am” is superimposed over the hand\textsuperscript{38} so it looks as if the absent and therefore implied subject, to whom the hand belongs, is presenting an object to speak on its behalf. This piece invokes the concept of allowing material belongings to take place of genuine identity formation, which when done successfully, involves engaging with and potentially depending upon other people. Kruger’s work repeatedly stages “investigations into the seemingly innocuous and yet potentially insidious ways in which ideological messages infiltrate daily life by means of the mass media” by employing “strategies of appropriation and replication of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[35] Ibid.
\item[37] hooks, \textit{All About Love: New Visions}, 72
\item[38] “Barbara Kruger. I Shop Therefore I Am. 1990 | MoMA,” The Museum of Modern Art.
\end{footnotes}
imagery from mass culture.” To reference Kruger’s intervention in modes of representation, *Co-Dependent* appropriates images of mass culture to isolate the function they serve in social construction. Specifically, one scene of the play invokes the image of a Supreme product: a fanny pack displaying the brand’s Kruger-style logo.

Pat notices that Henry owns the Supreme fanny pack during one of their first interactions, and teases him for being unaware of the brand’s contradicting aesthetic reference and social function. Pat informs him that “Barbara Kruger’s work was a critique of capitalism and consumerism. She rejected the whole concept of like, mass commodification because she saw seeking material gains as a way of isolating ourselves.” Though Pat recognizes that Henry’s investment in Supreme is a sign of his own self-imposed, societally encouraged isolation—a flaw she attributes to the unethical nature of capitalism—it is unclear if she is yet able to make the connection that this particular form of estrangement is symptomatic of toxic masculinity’s reinforcement of emotional estrangement. Either way, she notes a potentially detrimental line of logic in Henry’s inner monologue—in which owning a Supreme object benefits his gendered social status—and seeks to intervene.

Pat’s intervention tactic, however, is different than Henry’s. The disparity lies again, not in some inherent sexual difference but within their gendered conditioning. Pat questions what she interprets as Henry’s self-estrangement by critiquing the formation of a cultural object he owns that reinforces a logic of isolation. She

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39 Ibid.
critiques the brand practices of a product he has invested in, as opposed to the way
Henry’s behavior manifests the logic of isolation, because while Henry feels
certain enough to voice a concern he has regarding Pat’s behavior, Pat does not feel
empowered to do so as a result of her gendered fear of being written off as
“nagging.”

The significance of Pat’s intervention is that it’s meant to encourage Henry to
distance himself from subscribing to capitalist ideals. Prioritizing upward mobility in
capitalism undermines the development of a love ethic because, as Erich Fromm
posits, “‘the principle underlying capitalistic society and the principle of love are
incompatible.’” Though valuing material gain and engaging in the pursuit of love
are counterproductive, for many they have become interchangeable. Those cynical of
the promise of love consider the constancy of commodity accumulation a surrogate or
consolation for love. bell hooks describes the phenomenon, “We may not have love
but we can always shop.” Pat and Henry have both experienced lovelessness at
varying degrees throughout their lives, and a commonality between them is their
utilization of consumption to stand in love’s place. Since they both equate material
acquisition as a payoff for human connection, having their first shared outing in a
Goodwill makes that interaction more meaningful because shopping puts them in a
mindset of feeling emotionally fulfilled.

40 hooks, All About Love: New Visions, 157
41 Ibid., 72.
42 Ibid.
CHAPTER 4: THEATRICAL RETROSPECTIVES ON TRADITIONAL AMERICAN ROMANCE

This play is a semi-autobiographical piece in that much of the plot and characters are inspired by true events. The reason I felt compelled to write such a revealing and intimate play is that during the corresponding intimate moments in my life, I considered myself completely alone. Many in my support system ended up being figures in my life that isolated me, and so while I didn’t feel like I could talk about the fears I was having in my supposed solitude, I definitely spent a substantial amount of time thinking about them. I have felt, as Ariana Grande has said, “good at overthinking with my heart.”\textsuperscript{43} Looking back on the lessons I’ve learned, I wonder if I would have figured anything out sooner with some guidance–some representation; if there were stories on the stages and screens that I watched depicting relationships and conventions for dating in positive, productive terms instead of reductive and commodified narratives that left me without a sense of what is healthy and barely a sense of what I was worth. Had I known how impactful it would be to observe the behavior that made me feel powerless strategically mimicked and discredited, I would have sought out more cultural sites that were willing to speak up on the sense of lovelessness that plagues so many of us. What would have been possibly even more influential are models of healthy, loving, and self-loving behavior in relationships that could have offered alternatives to the kind of treatment I had normalized.

\textsuperscript{43} Ariana Grande, “needy,” \textit{thank u, next}, (Republic Records, 2019).
Of course these enlightened texts have existed in the world, however it was not until I explored the current American theater canon and works from womxn playwrights that have been written in recent history that I found the honesty I was craving from the stories I consumed. Two plays that provide impactful representation of heteronormative relationship standards at different points in American history are Sarah Treem’s 2014 play, *When We Were Young And Unafraid*, and Sarah Ruhl’s 2009 play, *In The Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)*. *When We Were Young And Unafraid* illuminates inherently violent power dynamics in early 1970s American dating norms and *In The Next Room*, which centers on a husband and wife’s dynamic in the late 19th century, is a hopeful model for discovering self-love as well as the courage to communicate desire in a relationship.

*When We Were Young And Unafraid* by Sarah Treem takes place in the early 1970s at an inn-turned covert shelter for victims of domestic abuse. The play was first produced in 2014, and its title refers to a time within many Americans’ living memory before inventions like the internet and social media introduced a level of awareness buttressed by educational interconnectivity. People were for the most part kept in the dark regarding (and therefore at the mercy of) the potentially violent consequences of enforced gender roles. A turning point for Women’s Liberation—just before *Roe v Wade* and the Violence Against Women Act were passed—the time period of this play

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45 Sarah Ruhl, *In the Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)*, (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2010).

was a transformative moment in American history when consciousness-raising efforts resulted in coinciding heightened awareness and heightened fear. In *All About Love: New Visions*, bell hooks proposes that releasing one’s self from the confines of cultural conditioning is a requisite step on the path to love. hooks uses a quote from Sharon Salzberg to define such “liberation” as “an understanding of the truth so powerful that there is no turning back from it.”

According to the implied causality of Treem’s title, once we are no longer “young,” innocent, and uninformed, we cannot remain “unafraid.” This function evokes the activist sentiment, if you’re not afraid you’re not paying attention.

In today’s world, where we mature into a state of terror faster than ever, dating and domestic violence is no longer normalized to the extent it was in the 1970s. At that point in the United States, most people failed to make the connection between culturally engrained, gendered power dynamics and rates of domestic violence. In *When We Were Young And Unafraid*, Mary Anne–the domestic abuse survivor currently staying at the inn–is the embodiment of being “young and unafraid” within the context of violence against women. Mary Anne’s naiveté lies not in an unawareness of the harm men are capable of inflicting, but rather in her unconscious complicity in the loaded dating conventions that made the domestic violence so likely.

While staying at the inn, Mary Anne provides Penny, the innkeeper’s teenage daughter, lessons on how to influence a man into pursuing her. Mary Anne uses words

such as “surrendered” and “tactical position”\textsuperscript{48} to articulate the power plays dating employs. In the following passage, Penny questions Mary Anne’s choice of language, and in response Mary Anne illustrates the disconnect in her consciousness between the implied violent stakes of heteroromantic courtship and the enacted violence of domestic abuse:

“PENNY: Why do you talk about dating like it’s warfare?  
MARY ANNE: Because it \textit{is} Penny. Men only approach a situation one way. What do I have to kill? Who do I have to conquer?  
PENNY: That is so depressing.  
MARY ANNE: (Confused) Why is it depressing?  
PENNY: I don’t want to fight a war! I just want to spend time with Tommy.  
MARY ANNE: Well, luckily the war doesn’t last very long and the point is to lose it anyway. You just need to keep it up long enough to make sure he’s only fighting on one front. After that, all you have to do is surrender.”\textsuperscript{49}

This play provides a helpful framework of how to critique dating conventions by considering the intimate implications of gender politics. It is not until after Mary Anne is assaulted by the play’s purported “nice guy” that she perceives the pervasiveness of the disrespect for women (and therefore lovelessness) present in American romance.

One way Pat vies for respect is by demanding love. The play that inspired my decision to grant Pat the opportunity to verbalize her desire to be loved by a partner whose love proves inadequate was Sarah Ruhl’s \textit{In The Next Room (or The Vibrator}

\textsuperscript{48} Treem, \textit{When We Were Young and Unafraid}, (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2015), 30.

\textsuperscript{49} Treem, \textit{When We Were Young and Unafraid}, (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 2015), 30.
*Play*. *In The Next Room* is a work of theatrically adapted history based on the story of the doctor who invented the vibrator in the late 19th Century to treat female hysteria and his wife whom he won’t use his invention on.\(^5\) In addition to her all too common lack of sexual fulfillment, Catherine, the doctor’s wife, has a newborn she is unable to produce milk for. Catherine’s dissatisfaction with her inability to form an intimate physical connection with her daughter only makes the effects of her husband’s neglect more unbearable. It doesn’t help that while Catherine waits in the parlor, in the next room her husband uses his tool on patients to provide them with what she suspects could be the physical relief she’s looking for. Throughout the play, in blatant disregard for social and professional decorum, Catherine vies for her husband’s attention in front of his patients and, in response to his obstinence, attempts to initiate an affair with a male patient of his. Rather than hide her infidelity, Catherine uses the threat of adultery as a tactic to draw some urgently needed attention out of her husband.

Having been raised with 19th Century American ideals of sexuality and marriage, Catherine’s husband cannot fathom what has compelled his wife to break behavioral norms because he has not experienced any precedent for open communication and therefore has as few strategies at his disposal to listen to his wife’s desires as she has to convey them. In the following scene, their struggle against the inadequacy of their cultural vocabulary for love gives way for Ruhl’s masterful application of poetic language—in order for them to both defy their conditioning and

\(^5\) Ruhl, *In the Next Room or the vibrator play*, (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2010).
connect on a more knowledgable, meaningful level, they must conjure their own imagery to articulate what it is they both need.

“MRS. GIVINGS: Give up your operating theater, darling.  
DR. GIVINGS: And do what instead?  
MRS. GIVINGS: Love me. Love me for your job.  
DR. GIVINGS: All day long?  
MRS. GIVINGS: All day long. I have heard that some women do not need the vibrating instrument to give them paroxysms, that relations with their husbands have much the same effect. Love me for your job.  
DR. GIVINGS: I would like to love you.  
MRS. GIVINGS: Would you?  
DR. GIVINGS: Yes. I have not known how.  
MRS. GIVINGS: You said to me when my hand was on another man’s cheek that there were all types and shades of love—But what is it then, this very particular way in which you love me? What color? What temperature? And please do not say: you are my wife, I am your husband.  
DR. GIVINGS: I do not have the words.  
MRS. GIVINGS: Please try.  
DR. GIVINGS: That is why they have poets—to classify all the degrees of love. It is for scientists to classify the maladies arising from the want of it.  
MRS. GIVINGS: Try.  
DR. GIVINGS: Do not make fun of me. Do you promise?  
MRS. GIVINGS: I promise.  
DR. GIVINGS: (Kissing tenderly each place as he names it—all on the face) I bless thee: temporomandibular joint. I bless thee: buccal artery and nerve. I bless thee: depressor anguli oris. I bless thee: zygomatic arch. I bless thee: temporalis fascia. I bless thee, Catherine.  
Mrs. Givings cries, it is so intimate.”

Just as in Co-Dependent, it is the love and care both characters truly harbor for each other that motivates them to find a solution to their discontent by looking outside of the discourses prescribed to the relationship standards they hold themselves to.

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51 Ibid., 139-141.
Originally produced in 2009, Ruhl’s play critiques the gendered terms for giving and receiving love at a specific point in American history—and subsequently, the traces of those terms that remain in present day relationship expectations—by providing her female protagonist with the ahistorical confidence to reject the hand she’s been dealt in love and demand consideration for her emotional and physical needs. The outstanding risk Catherine takes in the form of a request to her partner to love her as an active verb is mirrored in *Co-Dependent* when Pat makes the same request to Henry.

Though both *When We Were Young And Unafraid* and *In The Next Room (or The Vibrator Play)* were written in this century, their stories provide snapshots of the cultural conditioning regarding love and dating at distinct moments in American history. Female characters in these plays either conform to or subvert social codes that are representative of the sexism present in their respective time periods. Their actions illustrate the obstacles Americans faced on the path to love in those time periods, just as I hope Pat and Henry’s actions will illustrate the obstacles Americans face on the path to love today. I intend for my play to provide representation for one challenge posed by modern American conditioning: that is, the struggle in learning to give and receive love.
CHAPTER 5: QUEER EYE – SELF-HELP AND SUBVERTING CONDITIONING IN PRESENT DAY

I want to provide a model for how to love–ourselves and one another–that can act as a counterpoint to the onslaught of lovelessness represented in American media. My objective is to undo some of the conditioning that normalizes a scarcity mentality and fear of rejection by representing alternative behavior. Hopefully, from my play audiences will take with them a greater understanding of how overriding fear and loving courageously and generously can foster significant growth for loved ones and one’s self.

For guidance on how to craft a fictional model of that subversive behavior, I look to a nonfiction manifestation of the power of radical love: Queer Eye. Netflix’s reboot of the early 2000s Bravo reality television show, Queer Eye for the Straight Guy,\(^\text{52}\) is in my opinion an incredibly successful example of how receiving and learning a love ethic engenders significant personal growth.

The show is successful for so many reasons, one of which being that their creators and leadership team had excellent intentions and furthermore a sense of intentionality that speaks to the care with which they bear the responsibility of rebooting this classic program. In 2018 the show’s creators and the new Fab Five put out a book called Queer Eye: Love Yourself, Love Your Life—a title that promises instruction on implementing a pervasive daily love ethic. The book is glossy, yet accessible self-help with a back cover that reads, “FIRST THINGS FIRST: YOU’RE

ALREADY FANTASTIC, HONEY” and demystifies the “makeover” component of the show by rebranding the process: “IT’S NOT A MAKEOVER; IT’S A MAKE-BETTER.”

In their introduction, the executive producers of Queer Eye (David Collins, Michael Williams, and Rob Eric) articulated their sense of personal stake in the show and how they hold their show accountable to love and unite people rather than exploit them. They argue, “in order to bring people together, you have to share your personal experience” and that in order for the executors of their show, the Fab Five, to be successful, they would have to “share their victories and their vulnerabilities.” In doing so, they “blast into people’s lives like tornadoes and build up their confidence through kindness, care, and humor.”

Further along in their introduction, Queer Eye’s executive producers attest to what they consider to be their biggest payoff as well as the show’s ultimate goal when they describe the confidence that participants on their show develop as a result of their “make-better”, “You see how that newfound confidence can completely change someone’s life. For us, the payoff is that transformation and how it inspires a person to grow, take a chance or face an emotional challenge.” One reason I see the work Queer Eye is doing as connected to my work is that we share the narrative of

54 Ibid., 80.
55 Ibid., 12.
56 Ibid., 13.
57 Ibid., 13.
transformed/transforming individuals offering love as a catalyst for increased self-worth and the opportunity to take risks for one’s self.

The *Queer Eye* reboot’s basic premise is that five fabulous gay men drive a truck through southern red states, connecting with people who need help feeling motivated to be their best selves. The cast includes Tan France, the style expert, Antoni Porowski, the food and wine guy, Jonathan Van Ness, the groomer, Bobby Berk, the interior designer, and Karamo Brown, the culture expert—although it’s clear to anyone watching the show that Karamo’s real value comes from his ability as a trained social worker and psychotherapist to provide emotional labor for each of the show’s participants. He’s the one that makes them (and all of us viewers) cry.

Each of the show’s stars are uniquely qualified in their own way to provide not only a generous and at times intimate service for people who need support, but also well rounded, well informed advice for the betterment of each of their “heroes”\(^\text{58}\)—what they call their participants. For advice to be good enough for a misinformed person to internalize it and be motivated by it, it has to come from a reputable source. Therefore it was crucial that each of the Fab Five were able to garner the trust of their show’s participants and prove their expertise’s validity using their cumulative ethos.

Each episode, the Fab Five demonstrates more of their ethos to their audience, and so by the end of each season, the audience has no inclination to doubt the abilities or intentions of the show’s leading men. However, within the context of each

\(^{58}\text{Ibid., 12.}\)
individual episode, Tan, Antoni, Jonathan, Bobby, and Karamo are charged with the task of establishing their ethos in a matter of days for the participant in order to ensure the effect of significant, lasting growth.

The boys establish ethos in three ways—by being forthcoming with their mastery of each of the three Aristotelian categories of ethos: phronesis (useful skills/wisdom), arete (virtue, goodwill), and eunoia (goodwill towards one’s audience.) Once they introduce themselves to the hero they’re helping that episode, the men waste no time demonstrating their phronesis—their keen ability respective to their categories—in an inclusive and accessible fashion that meets their hero where they are. Their ideas are imbued with arete, as they each perpetuate their authentic and generous presences by listening carefully and being able to empower and inspire without being judgmental. The Fab Five present their eunoia when they’re with their participants by being transparent about their genuine desire to help them in the way that works for them as opposed to exploiting the vulnerable position “make-better” recipients put themselves in when they volunteer for the show.

It is my intention to model that level of transparency and goodwill when engaging with other people and my play—either to the generous actors who have been developing the roles with me, or to an audience. I strive to reenact my lessons learned clearly and truthfully enough to project phronesis within this subject, articulate my love ethic by treating my characters with consideration and respect in order to


establish arete, and convey eunoia by demonstrating my commitment to offering my audiences a perspective on and permission to love. Earning ethos in the eyes of my collaborators and audience is imperative for having any kind of lasting impact on their frame of reference.

By scrolling through any of the Instagram accounts of alumni heroes from the reboot’s first three seasons, it’s clear to see that the transformative confidence the show’s creators hailed as their goal is working wonders. Admittedly, gaining thousands of social media followers after being on reality television is also a pretty reliable way to gain confidence, but more than just their popularity, the content they post indicates the foundational ways their perspectives have been altered. The long-term effects of *Queer Eye*’s “make-betters”\(^{61}\) are attributed to, in addition to the Fab Five’s demonstrated credibility, the genuine shift in perspective they are able to provoke within their heroes. Unlike classic makeover shows like TLC’s *What Not To Wear*\(^{62}\)—whose formats rely on a balance of humiliating and reprimanding their recipients then demonstrating a new lofty ideal for them to strive towards without demonstrating any confidence in their recipients’ abilities to maintain this new ideal on their own—the *Queer Eye* reboot is not under any pretense that leading with negativity is productive.

The medium the Fab Five communicate through is positive affirmation. While they tailor their exact approach each episode to the needs of the individual they’re

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\(^{61}\) Ibid.  
helping, their guiding principle is the same: instill within this person that not only are they already capable of living the life they want, but also that they deserve to be generous enough to themselves to try.

The Fab Five being composed of solely queer millennials means that their internalization of what a person of any given circumstances should do is incompatible with what many of the show’s participants have been conditioned to believe. For example, in one episode from the third season, a hero named Jess reveals that she hasn’t spoken to her family in five years because her homophobic parents kicked her out when she was a teenager for being gay.63 Other reality shows may have seen this fractured family as an opportunity for a dramatic reunion. Regardless of whether or not contacting the family is what’s best for this person, traditional Western ideals for the prioritization of a nuclear family unity dictate that they should reconnect with their family. However, the Fab Five as queer millennials have a different position on family. They subscribe to the queer ideology that we can choose and create our families based on who has earned our trust. Rather than suggest that Jess, who had felt resigned that family was not something she “was going to have,”64 put herself in the potentially unsafe situation of allowing toxic people back into her life, the Fab Five—in particular Bobby, Karamo, and Antoni—teach her new ways to fortify her connection with her chosen family.

64 Ibid.
The noticeable difference between attempting to reconnect incompatible people and focusing instead on the community Jess has now is that the Fab Five is not asking Jess to do anything she fundamentally does not want to do. The same is true for how they empower all of their heroes. A part of making meaningful change in a person’s confidence is meeting them wherever they are on their own self-love journey, and that means only proposing solutions that feel accessible and truly enjoyable for that individual.

A hurdle that the Fab Five clears on the show is the learned shame that every single one of their heroes harbors about prioritizing their own pleasure or their desire to be loved/love themselves. Here most clearly *Queer Eye* confronts American conditioning for how we give and receive love. In a soundbite from Season Three, Antoni intuits why their method is so successful in not only giving their hero permission to acknowledge the fact that they’re deserving of love, but also convincing their hero to internalize that fact to the extent that they’re galvanized to be more generous to themselves: “by giving them a little bit of care, by giving them love, and attention, and some affection, it makes people feel worthy.”

This generous love, the kind bell hooks describes in *All About Love: New Visions*, is revolutionary, as evidenced by the impact the Fab Five has made through normalizing and imparting that lesson.

In a particularly touching moment during Season Three Karamo Brown insists that one of their heroes—a camp administrator named Joey whom the Fab Five has

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helped to organize a camp-wide celebration of his “make-better” – describes that he deserves his special night:

“KARAMO: Tonight is your night and you deserve it. Can you just say with me that you deserve tonight?
JOEY: Um… I feel… like I deserve to be appreciated–
KARAMO: Just say, ‘I deserve tonight.’ Come on.
JOEY: I deserve tonight.
KARAMO: I’m proud of you.
JOEY: Thank you.”

Like Henry in Co-Dependent, Karamo does not waver on the significance of verbalizing positive affirmations for one’s self. He devotes part of his chapter in Queer Eye: Love Yourself, Love Your Life to introducing the idea of mantras and their benefits: Karamo defines a mantra as a concept originated in Sanskrit that can be interpreted as “a sacred saying with mystical power” and a “life mindset that cuts through self-doubt or distraction.” In addition to generating one’s own mantra or positive affirmations, Karamo emphasizes the impact that accepting compliments and positive affirmations from others has on our psyche and self-perception. He writes, “We tend to deflect compliments, and that’s because we don’t believe we deserve them. That’s a self-esteem issue. Allow someone’s compliment to interrupt those negative thoughts in your mind and change your inner dialogue.”

As is previously noted, in Co-Dependent Pat and Henry offer compliments and affirmations to one

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69 Ibid., 157.
another in order to interrupt each other’s internal monologues; whether or not either character accepts the affirmation is indicative of where they are in their self-love journey at that point in the play. These interactions also contribute notably to their intimate, romantic connection, a phenomenon that Karamo rationalizes by positing, “compliments and orgasms have a lot in common.” He shares that “Swiss research has shown that receiving a compliment triggers the same response in your brain as a terrific toss between the sheets.”\(^{70}\) If this is true, within the confines of Pat and Henry’s arrangement—including the temporarily unaddressed imbalance of their orgasms—the act of complimenting one another is loaded with more intimate implications than sex itself, which is why Pat and Henry both feel more vulnerable offering each other positive affirmation than they do having intercourse.

Bobby Berk, the show’s interior designer, shares helpful insight in his chapter of *Queer Eye: Love Yourself, Love Your Life* in terms of risk taking and allowing fear to propel you to greater heights. He writes, “fear can motivate you if you channel it right.”\(^{71}\) While Bobby does take risks on *Queer Eye* by embarking on ambitious renovations and redecorating for each hero’s home, the most helpful examples of him taking chances on himself despite fear are in the stories he shares about his personal and professional evolution. From leaving home after being outed to homophobic parents at fifteen; to deciding to move from Springfield, Missouri to Denver, loading up a U-Haul, and driving through the mountains all in twenty-four hours; to heading

\(^{70}\) Ibid.

\(^{71}\) Ibid., 36.
to New York City a few years later with $100 in his pocket; to taking on $600,000 in
debt—which he paid back in full within a year—in order to open his own store in
SoHo,72 Bobby is the embodiment of “Feel the Fear… And Do it Anyway!” In fact,
“Do It Anyway” is a section title in his chapter.73

Bobby admits how important he felt it was to share his “victories and
vulnerabilities,”74 despite the shame he felt about his unconventional path to success,
claiming “now I think my true story needs to be told. Who knows? If I had taken a
more linear path…I might not be where I am now.”75 Bobby’s story not only
destigmatizes a non-traditional approach to career development, it also normalizes
taking risks based on the faith one has in one’s self. When describing his process of
taking out such a substantial loan, Bobby shared, “My friends who worked on Wall
Street thought I had lost it. ‘You’re insane, Bobby. Why on earth would you do that?’
Um, it’s called taking a leap of faith, people”.76 In a direct address, Bobby demystifies
a seemingly inaccessible sense of intuition and offers permission to readers to move
past their fear: “Trust your gut in your home, at your job, and in your relationships.
I’m so glad I took chances, even though I was afraid.”77

References:
72 Ibid., 36-37.
73 Ibid., 41.
74 Ibid., 12.
75 Ibid., 37.
76 Ibid.
77 Ibid., 41.
Susan Jeffers emphasizes the transformative impact of believing in one’s own capabilities in *Feel The Fear... And Do It Anyway* when she writes, “all you have to do to diminish your fear is to develop more trust in your ability to handle whatever comes your way!” She proposes “I’ll handle it!” as a viable mantra for those feeling paralyzed by fear. In *Co-Dependent*, neither Pat nor Henry spend a majority of the play feeling confident that they will be able to “handle whatever comes [their] way.” Specifically, neither of them believe they will be able to support themselves emotionally or be “enough” either for themselves or someone else. Ultimately, the challenge they are both tasked with is finding the courage to stop relying on crutches and security blankets for emotional labor, and instead wager that they already possess the strength to “handle” what they had previously doubted they could. This plot line serves as *Co-Dependent’s* attempt to normalize making the brave choice to believe in yourself.

Though *Co-Dependent* ends before we can observe the benefits Pat and Henry reap from choosing to have faith in themselves, Bobby Berk and participants on *Queer Eye*’s experiences serve as evidence of the rewards such risks can yield. The Fab Five’s approach, to introduce tools and resources for heroes looking to improve their confidence, only produces lasting change if they will continue to take risks for themselves once the cameras stop rolling. Fortunately for *Queer Eye*, a constant among every participant of theirs is a sense of bravery, which is why the show has

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78 Jeffers, *Feel the Fear... and Do It Anyway*, 8.
79 Ibid., 10.
80 Ibid., 8.
deemed them “heroes.” In an interview on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, Bobby defends their heroes’ bravery by arguing, “it takes a hero to be able to get up there and put yourself on display for the world and allow yourself to be open enough that we can come in and help you.” Jonathan continued, “to share yourself and be vulnerable is really heroic.”

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82 The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, “Rapid Fire Questions For The ‘Queer Eye’ Guys,” (Online video clip, YouTube, 2 April 2019), Web.

83 Ibid.
CHAPTER 6: KNOWING THE ABUNDANCE OF A COURAGEOUS SELF-LOVE PRACTICE

Though every member of the Fab Five has been transparent and open on the show, Jonathan Van Ness—especially in *Queer Eye: Love Yourself, Love Your Life*—presents as the member that currently has the most intimate relationship with his self-love/self-care journey. Perhaps because he’s the youngest of the five he happens to have begun that journey most recently. However, it’s possible that Jonathan’s demeanor and the fact that he has “always demanded to live out loud” allow him to be so forthcoming about his “process” of loving himself in public forums and media.

In the last scene of *Co-Dependent*, Pat begins her own self-love process. In an ideal world, right after the play ends Pat would watch Jonathan on Netflix, follow him on Instagram, and model her newfound personal care practice after his. Jonathan’s chapter in *Queer Eye: Love Yourself, Love Your Life* would be especially helpful for Pat as she embarks on her self-love journey in terms of dispelling the shame she feels for prioritizing her pleasure, specifically when it comes to her binge eating. Jonathan discusses his emotional relationship to food unambiguously: “One night, I ordered $29 worth of Taco Bell… Do I still self-soothe with food? Always.” His candor when discussing a kind of behavior that is common, though rarely represented with

85 Ibid., 21.
86 Ibid., 24.
compassion is one way Jonathan chooses positivity, rather than listen to “negative self-talk.” He points to the manual override of his Chatterbox as part of his active self-love ethic, “I struggle with body issues and then struggle with the fact that I’m still struggling with them. Enough already! You get caught up in negative self-talk and you start to spiral. Then it’s not about practicing self-care. You need to give yourself a double dose of self-love.” Jonathan’s bravery is evident when he voices his very human craving for comfort because, as he has proclaimed, “to share yourself and be vulnerable is really heroic.”

His heroism manifests in how he inspires others to protect themselves from shame, which stands as a barrier to self-love. bell hooks posits, “As long as we feel shame, we can never believe ourselves worthy of love… we need to speak our shame and our pain courageously in order to recover.” It is not only Jonathan’s transparency regarding his self-love practice that gives his audience permission to disregard shame, but also the amount of fun he exhibits while he practices. His *joie de vivre* even while doing personal maintenance on his physical and mental health makes that kind of work attractive and therefore accessible.

Though Jonathan has been cultivating his own sense of self-worth for some time, the work he attests to doing is the self-loving tactic Pat begins her journey with

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87 Jeffers, *Feel the Fear... and Do It Anyway*, 48.


89 The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, “Rapid Fire Questions For The 'Queer Eye' Guys,” (Online video clip, YouTube, 2 April 2019), Web.

in the play’s final scene. Pat’s first step towards self-love is to deliver positive affirmations aloud to herself while scribing her assertions onto sticky notes and adorning the frame of her mirror with them. In his chapter of Queer Eye: Love Yourself, Love Your Life Jonathan admits, “Being who I am is a constant process, and every day I still work on that relationship with myself. I have definitely done affirmations in the mirror, telling myself ‘I am enough.’” Verbalizing that she is enough is just one of the affirmations Pat offers herself in her mirror. She also declares that she deserves the kind of love she gives and that she is worthy, not needy. Watching the Fab Five convince others that they are also worthy of love on Queer Eye would validate Pat’s new, more intentional internal monologue.

The exercise Pat does–sticking Post-It notes displaying positive affirmations to her mirror–is a combination of techniques presented by Susan Jeffers in Feel The Fear... And Do It Anyway and Karamo Brown on Queer Eye. Jeffers suggests writing quotes or affirmations on sticky notes and posting them “all over the place–on your mirrors, your desk, the refrigerator door, in our car, your diary, and so on.” to remind yourself of the kind of inner monologue you’d like to manifest. Jonathan suggests making similar mental notes throughout the day as well when he writes, “The important thing to remember is that you are special and you are beautiful.

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92 Jeffers, Feel the Fear... and Do It Anyway, 68.
Remind yourself of that every morning and at night—and when you’re stuck at a traffic light or waiting in line. You get the point.”

Another lesson Pat’s final action on stage is inspired by is an activity Karamo did with one hero, Robert, during *Queer Eye*’s third season. Robert, a nurse at a psychiatric ward, father, and fiancé, tries to use his gregarious charm and self-deprecating sense of humor to deflect from his insecurities. In order to encourage Robert’s growth, Karamo points out that Robert himself is the only person perpetuating any of the harmful ideas he has about himself. Later in the week Karamo brings Robert to a dance studio with a floor to ceiling mirror. Karamo knows that negative self-talk is “absolutely disenabling” in terms of developing the confidence necessary to be generous with one’s self, so he confronts Robert with an audio recording from their first meeting, in which all the sound bites of Robert insulting himself are supercut together into a concentrated string of self-deprecation.

The edit highlighted to Robert how his seemingly innocuous jokes cumulated to a warped sense of self-worth. Karamo promises that “the only way to change this is to acknowledge it,” then asks Robert to stand in front of the mirror and say aloud what he sees. Once he has said them aloud, Karamo hands Robert a marker to write his observations on the mirror. Robert populates the mirror with words such as, “good

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guy,” “father,” “success,” “funny,” “worthy,” “handsome,” and “loved.” Once his list is complete, he writes across the top of the mirror, “I am all of these things and more.” When they step back to admire all the qualities that Robert already possesses, Karamo hammers home for Robert that these affirmations forge a commitment to himself, “This is the vow you’re making to yourself. This is the vow that you want to make to your family and to your future wife. That this is the man you’re gonna be for them and this is the man you’re gonna be for yourself.”

While Pat doesn’t have a social worker looking over her shoulder encouraging her affirmations, she is confronted by the people close to her about her own self-esteem issues. Eventually, Pat takes initiative to make the “vow” to herself that Robert makes—to choose to see the extent of her value, and spend energy reminding herself that it’s there. bell hooks proposes that “the wounded heart learns self-love by first overcoming self-esteem”—self-love is the key to activating a complete and sustainable love ethic, so using positive affirmations to tackle low self-esteem can be an important step towards living with love.

Self-love is, as Jonathan Van Ness argues, “a process.” According to hooks, the first step towards a more loving relationship with ourselves is “actively introducing into our lives constructive life-affirming thought patterns and

97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.
behavior.” The generosity we learn to volunteer to others is comprised of the same gifts we can give ourselves: “When we see love as a combination of trust, commitment, care, respect, knowledge, and responsibility, we can work on developing these qualities or, if they are already a part of who we are, we can learn to extend them to ourselves.” Sometimes, as in the case with the heroes on *Queer Eye*, receiving those gifts from another person can be inspiring for one’s own self-love practice because in addition to providing the validation that increases our senses of self-worth, when people model behavior that makes us feel loved we learn how to do that work on our own. As Jonathan writes, “Letting someone else take care of you… can be life changing…imagine if you could re-create that joyous feeling every day for yourself.”

The care and validation Henry provides for Pat throughout their relationship empowers her for the first time to consider self-love within her reach. Her confidence is raised, therefore her impression of what she deserves changes. Also, his kindness operates as a counterpoint to the harsher treatment Pat receives from Aditi. The positive affirmations he offers her—“Fuck being ladylike and shaving your legs and feeling like you should be more attractive. You’re so hot and so great. You have nothing to apologize for”—generate material for her new, self-loving internal narration. Though she ultimately makes the decision to cultivate self-love, for a

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102 Ibid., 54.
majority of the play Pat’s attempts to love and be loved by others are thwarted by her reticence to love herself because, as hooks affirms, “Self-love is the foundation of our loving practice. Without it our other efforts to love fail.”

Towards the end of the play, Pat must ask herself a crucial question: in the words of RuPaul Charles, “If you can’t love yourself, how in the hell you gonna love somebody else?” Jonathan makes the case for loving yourself before being able to love somebody else with the following analogy: “Think about what they tell you on the airplane during that safety speech, you know when the flight attendant says to put your oxygen mask on before helping anyone else. In other words, you can’t do for others until you do for yourself.” There are several reasons that loving others is almost impossible without loving ourselves. For one, if you are not generous with yourself in terms of affirmation, appreciation, and love, you will always be looking for that labor from others. In that case, your relationships rely on the generosity and accessibility of the other person. For Pat, until the play’s resolution, her ideal relationship involves receiving all the love she needs from someone else.

However, when we love, “we risk being acted upon by forces outside of our control,” and so whether or not another person will always be available to support Pat emotionally is subject to uncertainty. Jeffers suggests that setting up the

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parameters of a relationship such that you exclusively need someone else to tend to your needs keeps us trapped in fear–she asks, “What can be more frightening than depending on someone else for one’s survival?” Acting out of fear, we are constantly focusing on what we can get from the other person as opposed to what we might be able to give to each other.

This fear is so paralyzing, Jeffers argues, that when we trap ourselves in it, “We can’t give. We can’t love. We become, consciously or unconsciously, manipulative, because our survival is involved.” Jeffers explains that Pat’s inability to perceive her own calculating behavior is conventional among adults, contending, “it usually never occurs to us that we aren’t behaving like adults, or that we aren’t giving. We have unwittingly deceived ourselves… We have been taught the illusion of giving, but not the actuality of giving.” Pat experiences a shift in her perspective regarding what she expects from others once she realizes that her refusal to be generous with herself prevented her from being as generous as she thought she was with Aditi and Henry.

Though she considers herself a giving person and indeed the person who “loves more” in her relationships, Pat’s sense of selflessness is based on what Jeffers refers to as “a hidden barter system,” because she “gives” only to “get” in return. From her skewed point of view, in her relationships she’s giving all her love to

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108 Jeffers, Feel the Fear... and Do It Anyway, 162.

109 Ibid.

110 Ibid., 161-163.

111 Ibid., 160.
another person—and not herself—hoping that they will reciprocate. With Henry, Pat is displacing the love she should be giving herself onto him, with the intention of encouraging him to perform emotional labor for her that she is afraid to try for herself. In an anecdote about a past relationship, bell hooks reflects on a time when she wanted the kind of love from her partner that she was unwilling to provide for herself, wondering, “It is silly, isn’t it, that I would dream of someone else offering to me the acceptance and affirmation I was withholding from myself?”112 For the majority of the play, Pat assumes that “silly” desire is reasonable. To those who operate with the same presumption as Pat, hooks offers the counsel, “Do not expect to receive the love from someone else you do not give to yourself.”113

Pat’s fixation on being “someone else’s top priority” is incompatible with the reality of “necessarily conditional” interpersonal love. As a survival tactic, we all make decisions based on whatever serves our own best interest, and so when exchanging love with someone else it is, as hooks argues, “always necessarily conditional.”114 Because “we cannot exercise control over the behavior of someone else and we cannot predict or utterly control our responses to their actions,”115 anticipating being able to prioritize another person unconditionally is to act without foresight.

113 Ibid., 68.
114 Ibid., 67.
115 Ibid.
There is, however, one type of relationship we can confidently decide to
prioritize no matter what: our relationships with ourselves. hooks notes, “We can give
ourselves the unconditional love that is the grounding for sustained acceptance and
affirmation. When we give this precious gift to ourselves, we are able to reach out to
others from a place of fulfillment and not from a place of lack.”116 Prior to the lessons
she learns during *Co-Dependent*, Pat was unwilling to love herself unconditionally,
and was constantly searching for someone else to do it for her. For these reasons, she
was continually reminded of her perceived lack.

There were, of course, other reminders impressed upon Pat regarding her
insufficiency because within American capitalism, “keeping people in a constant state
of lack, in perpetual desire, strengthens the marketplace economy.”117 Pat must
combat her conditioning to be able to reject how the scarcity mentality that capitalism
has narrated informs her that she’s not worthy of pleasure or deserving of self-love.
Believing that she doesn’t deserve to love herself positions self-love as a limited
commodity. In reality love is an action with intention and not a noun to project
imagined restrictions on. Jeffers disavows the scarcity mentality by attributing its
perpetuation to fear, citing, “People who fear genuinely can’t give. They are imbued
with a deep-seated sense of scarcity in the world, as if there wasn’t enough to go
around.”118 The law of scarcity makes us feel threatened and insecure, so by affirming
the plentitude of living with self-love, we challenge its influence.

116 Ibid.
117 Ibid., 47.
118 Jeffers, *Feel the Fear... and Do It Anyway*. 162.
Jonathan references his own internal dialogue with respect to this ideology when he writes, “When I hear [my internal] competitive voice, I’m like, ‘I totally understand why you would feel like that but I need you to calm down, girl. There’s totally enough success for everyone.’ I’m really into the law of abundance versus the law of scarcity. So deep right?” On *Queer Eye*, the Fab Five absolutely follows the law of abundance in their “make-betters,” as their guidance is geared towards appreciating and therefore dedicating love to the blessings the heroes are already endowed with. Their advice echoes Jeffers’ in *Feel The Fear... And Do It Anyway*: “There is so much you are not seeing that is already there. There is no need to feel scarcity, when there is such abundance.” Orienting our goals from a position of plenty encourages a sense of security and furthermore the confidence to take risks, such as being vulnerable with another person. Jeffers argues, “when you are aware of the fact that ‘you have,’ you can give,” not just to others, but also primarily to yourself.

The plot twist in *Co-Dependent* is that after spending all this energy motivating Henry’s growth and persuading him to be vulnerable and loving, in the end, Pat is the one who calls an end to their relationship. After learning the information she does about the kind of relationships she’s been manifesting, Pat can

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120 Ibid, 80.
121 Jeffers, *Feel the Fear... and Do It Anyway*, 174.
122 Ibid., 175.
no longer ignore the fact that she has been trying to give from a place of lack. Pat understands that, as Karamo said, “the only way to change this is to acknowledge it,” and by acknowledging it, she must also face the decision to juggle her own crucial, nascent self-love practice with loving Henry, or invest all of her energy into herself.

Eventually, after cultivating the skill of loving herself, Pat will hopefully reach a point at which “self-esteem is learned and there is a balance between autonomy and dependency.” After all, as the play communicates, taking the risk of establishing a healthy dependency on another person can be extremely rewarding. No one is completely isolated, and remaining grateful and open to those we lean on and ask for help from is integral to being able to preserve one’s independence. The distinction between healthy dependence and dependence that comes from a place of fear is one’s level of autonomy in deciding how much of someone to be dependent on and under what conditions. Jeffers quotes Rollo May’s *Man’s Search for Himself* to address a misconception within our conditioning for giving and receiving love: “‘Love is generally confused with dependence; but in point of fact, you can love only in proportion to your capacity for independence.’” To overcome her fear of codependence, it is critical that Pat develops confidence in her ability to be independent.

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125 Jeffers, *Feel the Fear... and Do It Anyway*, 173.
She can say she wants to learn self-esteem and autonomy and how to love herself, but “‘the desire to love is not itself love. Love is as love does”’\textsuperscript{126} and in order to effectively learn to love herself on her own, it might be necessary that she decides to be alone. In \textit{Feel the Fear...And Do It Anyway}, Jeffers admits to electing for solitude when she was at a similar crossroads: “I learned that in order to get rid of the fear of lack, I had to do the \textit{opposite} of what I had been doing up until that time… I had to start releasing, letting go, giving it away.”\textsuperscript{127} Pat’s decision not to be with Henry, especially after distancing herself from Aditi, is a complete about-face from the superobjective Pat had been pursuing until her pivotal conversations with Reggie and Aditi, but making a drastic change can often be necessary for radical healing. Jeffers reasons, “often when we undergo a process of self-recovery, for a time we may find ourselves more alone… genuine love is a personal revolution.”\textsuperscript{128}

Releasing attachments is valuable in several ways for Pat in training herself to be self-loving. Maintaining potentially tainted bonds could keep Pat stuck in the habit of seeking affirmation mainly from those relationships. Furthermore, learning to tend only to one’s self while receiving validation from another person could be compared to learning to ride a bike with training wheels on. Pat acknowledges the benefit of establishing faith in herself without the crutch of another person’s love, confirming hooks’ statement that “knowing how to be solitary is central to the art of loving…

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\textsuperscript{126} hooks, \textit{All About Love: New Visions}, 172. Quoting M. Scott Peck’s \textit{The Road Less Traveled}.

\textsuperscript{127} Jeffers, \textit{Feel the Fear... and Do It Anyway}, 164.

\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 187.
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When we can be alone, we can be with others without using them as a means of escape.”\(^\text{129}\) To be proactive about her individual wellness, Pat must learn to be her own safety net and internalize the belief that no matter what comes her way, she’ll be able to catch herself.

Thus far in her existence, not having another person’s support as her emotional insurance policy has been Pat’s greatest fear, so challenging herself to subvert that instinct requires an enormous amount of bravery. Though, as hooks insists, such bravery is essential to any part of living with love: “To live our lives based on the principles of a love ethic…we have to be courageous. Learning how to face our fears is one way we embrace love. Our fear may not go away, but it will not stand in the way.”\(^\text{130}\) In other words, to be empowered in love we have no choice but to feel our fear, and choose to love anyway.

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\(^{130}\) Ibid., 101.
CONCLUSION

Based on the staggering representation of rampant lovelessness in our world, the fact that anyone chooses to love is miraculous. Every single gesture that activates “dimensions of love—‘care, commitment, trust, responsibility, respect, and knowledge’”\textsuperscript{131} is a rebellion against greed and an exertion of power that we have been manipulated into believing is weakness. We’ve been brainwashed to think that love doesn’t sell—that it somehow isn’t relevant or attractive within a culture of consumerism. This couldn’t be further from the truth. Living with a love ethic, we are wealthy, we are generous, we are whole, we aren’t paralyzed by fear, we are free. The capitalistic, patriarchal powers that are too often gatekeepers for forms of representation are terrified by the strength we find in love and our inherent and unwavering desire for it, so they condition us to believe we don’t deserve it or that it doesn’t exist. Yet, as bell hooks has observed, “despite overwhelming pressure to conform to the culture of lovelessness, we still seek to know love.”\textsuperscript{132}

In writing this play, I have been inspired by valiant individuals and undaunted communities that devote their resources to undoing our debilitating conditioning. bell hooks, \textit{All About Love: New Visions} is absolutely transformative in part because the accessibility of its language and reasoning mirrors the availability of societal lessons in lovelessness. It is an instructional text that meets its audience where they are to enable a meaningful, intimate connection to the material; similarly to how the

\textsuperscript{131} Ibid., 94.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 77.
exercises and insight Susan Jeffers provides in *Feel the Fear...And Do It Anyway* allows her audience to invest personally in following the book’s direction. Netflix’s *Queer Eye* is a cultural sensation because of its groundbreaking commitment to representing genuinely loving interactions and how they can incite growth. The permission-granting function within each of these works is what I strive to achieve for *Co-Dependent*’s audience. While the play is a work of fiction and not within the self-help genre of *All About Love: New Visions, Feel The Fear...And Do It Anyway*, or even *Queer Eye*, I intend for it to be an affective, uplifting piece. *Co-Dependent* strives to create the kind of media representation bell hooks references when she imagines, “Were we all seeing more images of loving human interaction, it would undoubtedly have a positive impact on our lives.”133 *Co-Dependent* is my effort to build a model for how to love ourselves and others that serves as an alternative to American conditioning.

133 Ibid., 96.
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