

'THE FOREST'

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"I always thought the best measure of a man's life was the impact his death has on those who have to keep on living."

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(All stage directions are intended to be whimsies.)

SCENE 1

(A single light comes up on a bed. KATE, mid-30s, readies her daughter for bed. SAMMI, 12, is on the side closest to a nightstand with a light and clock radio. She holds a stuffed teddy bear. Beyond that, this is an as-yet indeterminate location. The rest of the set is in darkness.)

SAMMI: Mommy?

KATE: Yes, dear?

SAMMI: Where's my daddy?

KATE: He's in hell, dear. Now go to sleep.

SAMMI: Don't say that!

KATE: Turn the radio on.

SAMMI: No ... Why?

KATE: It's 8 o'clock. I need to know the weather for tomorrow.

SAMMI: Will you read me a bedtime story?

KATE: In a minute. First, the radio.

(SAMMI turns on the radio. The announcer talks under KATE and SAMMI.)

SAMMI: I'd rather hear music.

KATE: It's been a long day, Sammi. Do what I tell you!

RADIO VOICE 1: Welcome to the 50,000-watt blowtorch: KOA Radio 850, home to the Denver Broncos, Colorado Rockies and CU Buffs.

(KATE takes notice when she hears about the dead man.)

RADIO VOICE 2: The news time is straight up 8 o'clock. I'm April Reigns. Our top story: Police responding to a call to the Super 8 hotel on East Colfax Avenue this afternoon discovered the body of John Gartland, who of course has been in the news constantly these past few months.

KATE: *(Softly)*. Good riddance.

SAMMI: Good riddance!

KATE: Shhh. Play with your bear. *(She does.)*

(KATE pauses as the newscaster goes into her next story, and she is shaken by what she hears. This news is a shock to her.)

KATE *(Softly)*: No. Not Kennedy.

SAMMI: Not who, mommy?

KATE *(to herself)*: "In the mystery of the fog and gentle rain last night, a rare and exquisite flower fell."

(A single flower, let's say an orchid, drifts down onto the bed. SAMMI is disinterested.)

RADIO VOICE 2: After a short career in the NFL, McCarty founded a magic-based national suicide prevention network called The Maze. Sources tell KOA that Boulder police have ruled out foul play, and they don't believe the death was accidental. Lambert was just 32.

KATE: Turn it off.

(SAMMI does.)

SAMMI: Mommy?

KATE: (still stunned): What, baby?

SAMMI: Why wasn't I a good enough reason for daddy to stay?

(A double whammy. KATE is in no way prepared for this.)

RADIO VOICE 2: Gartland, as you know, has been awaiting trial on charges that he molested his three daughters. According to KOA's Jim Dooley, Gartland rented a hotel room, wrapped his head in plastic and suffocated himself. Police also found an empty bottle of scotch next to his bed.

RADIO VOICE 2 *(continues)*: This on the same day that thousands of mourners packed Mackey Auditorium on the University of Colorado campus in Boulder to pay final respects to Kennedy Lambert.

RADIO VOICE 2: The former CU football star-turned-minister's body was discovered on Tuesday in a frozen ravine at the base of the Flatiron Mountains in Boulder ...

KATE: Oh, good God.

SAMMI: Please, Mommy?

KATE: Sweetheart, we talked about this. ... Your daddy was ... sick.

SAMMI: You mean sick like ... cancer?

KATE: No, honey, sick like ... like ... your friend ... Tina. Remember when she fell on the playground and broke her arm?

SAMMI: She had to wear a cast for two months.

KATE: Well, bones aren't the only things that can break in a person. Your heart can break. Your hope. ... Just like bones. But there's no cast for a broken heart.

SAMMI: I miss Daddy.

KATE: Honey, you were 2. You can't possibly remember....

SAMMI: But I do!

KATE: What?

SAMMI: He was tall and had straight blonde hair like mine. Only his was a little darker.

KATE (*surprised*): That's right.

SAMMI: He had a droopy face, like Eeyore. It was like he was always laughing and crying at the same time.

KATE: I think he was more like Winnie the Pooh. "If you live to be a hundred, I want to live to be a hundred minus one day so I never have to live without you."

SAMMI: Bethany, at school? She said my daddy left because he didn't love me enough to stay.

KATE: What?

SAMMI: She said my daddy is burning in a lake of fire. She said I'll join him there when I die because I'm going to hell, too.

KATE: Well, that Bethany is a little bitch monster.

SAMMI: Sometimes she's so mean to me I just want to kill myself.

KATE: Don't you say that, Sammi. Don't you ever say that!

SAMMI: It's just an expression, Mommy.

KATE: It's not. Promise me –

SAMMI: But is she right, Mommy?

KATE: Of course not. Remember what I always say about people who are mean?

SAMMI: "People are mean because they are unhappy."

KATE: That's right. ... Or they are just little bitch monsters like Bethany Foster.

SAMMI: But I am unhappy, too, mother.

KATE: Yes, dear, I know you are. Sometimes.

SAMMI: Does that make me a meanie?

KATE: No, Sammi. You're not mean. You're relentless. Now go to sleep.

SAMMI: Tell me a bedtime story.

KATE: It's late. I'm exhausted.

SAMMI: Tell me a story!

KATE: Look around. There are no books where we are.

SAMMI: Then make one up!

KATE: About what?

SAMMI: About ... my daddy!

(Another orchid falls onto the bed.

KATE: You know what? I will. ... It's time.

(KATE climbs into bed with SAMMI.)

KATE: This story takes place in a meadow just outside a ... a forest.

(Lights come up to reveal the bed is not in a literal bedroom at all but rather, oddly enough, right in the middle of a pristine, quiet meadow on the edge of a forest. The grass mixed with wildflowers is a foot high. The forest itself is not yet visible to the audience.)

SAMMI: Where is this forest?

KATE: Oh, hell, Sammi, I don't know ...

SAMMI: Just make it up!

KATE: OK, it's in ... Japan. ... You ARE relentless!

SAMMI: And what's the name of this forest?

KATE: It doesn't matter.

SAMMI: Oh, but it does, mother. Everything must have a name — or how will we know who we are?

KATE: Oh, all right then ... It's called the ... the ... *Perdido* Forest.

SAMMI: That's an odd name for a forest.

KATE: Well, it was the first thing that came to mind.

SAMMI: I mean that doesn't even *sound* Japanese.

KATE: Goddammit!!

SAMMI: What does that even mean, "pear-deed — "?

KATE: It means "The Lo—" *(stops herself)*. No, honey ... *Perdido* means a bright, happy place where animals of every kind gather and play happily together as best friends.

SAMMI *(cynically)*: They never fight?

KATE: No. Not in the *Perdido* Forest.

SAMMI: Well some of them had to eat each other, mother. I mean, that's the natural order of things.

KATE: Well, this is my story, and in my story, the animals never ate each other. ... Jesus, Mary and Joseph!

SAMMI: Did they ever sleep?

KATE: They did. That is, until the day the sun ... stopped.

SAMMI: The sun stopped?

KATE: Right where it was in the sky. Like the hands of a clock stopping in its ticking tracks. From then on, it was forever daytime outside the Perdido Forest.

SAMMI: Why did the sun stop?

KATE: Because ... a heart broke.

SAMMI: Whose?

KATE: (*Whispering.*) Mine.

SAMMI: What did you say?

KATE: The sun, dear.

SAMMI: The sun has a heart?

KATE: Of course. Something happened that made the sun very sad, and it just stopped.

SAMMI: What happened?

KATE: There was just one rule in the meadow: The animals were never, ever allowed to wander into the Perdido Forest.

SAMMI: Why?

KATE: Because the forest is a dark and scary place.

SAMMI: And someone did?

KATE: Yes ... someone did.

SAMMI: Who are these animals?

KATE: Well, first there was a bird named ...

SAMMI: Oh, can we call her Twitter??? Please?

KATE: You spend too much time online.

SAMMI: Please?

KATE Fine. Her name was Twitter. *(An actor flies onto the stage in a bird costume, complete with the Twitter brand logo comically spread across its front.)* And there was a bunny rabbit named ...

SAMMI: Bunnacula! *(An actor hops out to play the bunny. It looks as much like the fictional vampire bunny character as you can get away with.)*

KATE: Who is Bunnacula?

SAMMI: The vampire rabbit!

KATE: Where did you ever -?

SAMMI: You read me that story, mother!

KATE: I did? Fine, Bunnacula, whatever. You pick the next animal.

SAMMI: A barracuda!

KATE: A barracuda named ...?

SAMMI: Uda! *(An actor slithers out to play the barracuda. It is a fish with legs, with a wholesome look that can also appear menacing with its large, sharp teeth.)*

KATE: Uda the Barracuda - that's clever. Now, there was one last animal ...

SAMMI: A deer! *(An actor wearing antlers eagerly gallops out to play the deer.)*

KATE: No, not a deer.

SAMMI: Yes!

KATE: No. Not a deer. And this is not up for debate. *(To the deer):* Not a deer! *(The actor who plays the deer exits glumly.)*

SAMMI: Well, what kind of animal was it?

KATE: He was most definitely... a bear.

SAMMI: What's his name?

KATE: The bear was called... Scott. *(The actor who plays SCOTT comes out as the bear.)*

We can't see his face. He is fully covered in a huge, cartoonish bear costume.)

SAMMI: That's an odd name for a bear.

KATE: No, it's the perfect name for the perfect ... teddy bear.

SAMMI: Like mine?

KATE: Like yours.

SAMMI: What did he look like?

KATE *(softly)*: He was tall and had straight blonde hair ...

SAMMI: The bear??

KATE *(snapping to)*: A hat. He liked to wear a goofy hat and a fat necktie *(SCOTT pulls out a hat and a fat necktie to complete his outfit.)* And every once in a while, he smoked a pipe. *(SCOTT pulls out a pipe).* Filthy habit. *(SCOTT looks hurt.)* Well, it is!

SAMMI: Yuk!

(Scott thoughtfully tosses the pipe away.)

SAMMI: He sounds like a silly bear.

KATE: When Scott was young, he was always laughing and telling jokes. But you know what I tell you about kids who are always trying to make you laugh?

SAMMI: Sometimes, deep down, they are sad.

KATE: Oh, but Scott loved to scare his friends. His favorite game was hide and seek ...

SAMMI: I love hide and seek!

KATE: Well one day, when it was time to hide, as Twitter counted to 10 -

SAMMI: Wait, I want to be in this story. Can I, mommy? Can I please?

KATE: Well I am making it up just for you, so ... why not?

(SAMMI jumps out of the bed and joins the animals in the meadow.)

SAMMI: I want to be a giraffe!

KATE: That's going to make it hard for you to hide. ... Why don't you be a little girl?

SAMMI: Oh, yes! I'll bet the animals have never seen a little girl before!

KATE: No, they have not! You were the wildest animal they had ever seen.

(The animals gather around SAMMI curiously. Except SCOTT, who keeps his distance.)

SAMMI: Hello, Bunnacula! Hello, Twitter! Hello, Uda!

TWITTER: Well, this is awkward.

UDA *(whispering to BUNNICULA)*: Psst. Where the hell did SHE come from?

BUNNICULA *(shrugs)*: Never seen her before in my life!

SAMMI: I'm a little girl!

(Together):

TWITTER: A little what?

BUNNICULA: A little weird.

UDA: Whatever.

SAMMI: My name is Sammi!

TWITTER: Congratulations.

BUNNICULA: Sam who?

UDA: Don't wear it out.

SAMMI: Hello, Scott.

SCOTT: How do you know my name? *(He turns away.)*

SAMMI: Mommy told me.

(SCOTT, cornered, simply growls at her. We hear the sound of an actual, ferocious bear. Sammi backs off.)

TWITTER: OK, let's play! 10-9-8-7-6-5-4-3-2-1

(As Twitter counts down, KATE continues the story.)

KATE: As the other animals hid, Scott ignored the rules and ran a few steps into the forest, just to see if his friends would come looking for him.

SAMMI *(Popping her head out of hiding)*: Did they, mother?

TWITTER *(Looks up and doesn't even have to move)*: Uh, Bunnacula? I'm not blind.

You're sitting on a stump. Uda, you're far too fat of a fish to hide behind that skinny tree. And, little girl, I mean jeez ... make it hard, why don't you?

UDA: Do you think he ran into the forest?

BUNNICULA: No, he knows the rules.

UDA: Yes. That's why he does it!

(SAMMI returns to the bed and addresses her mother thoughtfully.)

SAMMI: Um ... mother?

KATE: What is it, dear?

SAMMI: Everyone knows Bunnacula doesn't talk.

KATE: The vampire bunny doesn't talk?

SAMMI: No. So that awful cat doesn't get her. Duh.

BUNNICULA: Well, that sucks.

SAMMI: I mean, you should know that.

KATE: Well, it's a magical forest, dear. Here, the bunny talks.

BUNNICULA: Yay!

KATE: Bunnacula? Continue.

UDA: So ... what are we going to do?

BUNNICULA: I'm too afraid to go into the forest.

SAMMI: I know! Twitter, why don't you fly over and look down?

TWITTER: I can do that.

KATE: And so Twitter flew over the trees and called out from above:

TWITTER: Oh, I see you, Scott, you bad bear. You come out of that forest this minute!

KATE: And Scott came out, laughing heartily.

BUNNICULA: You scared us, Scott!

SCOTT: Sometimes it feels good to be scared, Bunny. It reminds you that you are alive.

UDA: My turn! 10-9-8 (*He only gets to 8 before being interrupted.*)

SAMMI: Oh, that naughty bear!

UDA: What?

SAMMI: Scott ran into the forest again! I saw him!

TWITTER: I'm on it.

KATE: Twitter again took flight. But this time, he couldn't see Scott. The deeper he flew over the forest, the darker it got. Twitter couldn't see the ground. Just as he was about to give up, he heard Scott calling out from below.

SCOTT: Hey, Twitter!!!

TWITTER: Scott? Is that you?

SCOTT: Giving up so easily?

TWITTER: Oh, I see you now! Uda! Bunnacula! I found him! ... Now Scott, you come out of there this instant!

KATE: Scott came out of the forest, but he wasn't laughing this time. He had more of a naughty look on his face. Like he was enjoying all this attention a little too much.

SAMMI: That's not very nice.

KATE: Sammi. Be kind. Remember?

SAMMI: He was sad?

KATE: Yes. Now help the other animals to understand.

UDA: You can really be such a jerk, Scott.

SCOTT: Oh, you shouldn't have come looking for me, you big baby.

BUNNICULA: So Scott, you didn't want to be found?

SCOTT: No!

TWITTER: Then why did you call out to me?

SCOTT: I didn't!

TWITTER: Did so, you big fibber!

SAMMI: You guys, don't fight! We're all friends.

(Together.)

TWITTER: Oh, yeah.

BUNNICULA: Well, if that's what the book says.

UDA: I've known her for, like, 30 seconds.

BUNNICULA: So Scott ... what's it like in the forest???

SCOTT: Well, it's no place for a little girl like her, I can tell you that!

UDA: Scott, you foolish bear. The forest is no place for any of us. The bogeyman lives in there. Everyone knows that!

SCOTT: I'm not scared of the bogeyman.

TWITTER: Well, Scott. You broke the rules. You are disqualified.

SCOTT: Oh Twit, don't flap your wings off.

TWITTER: It's Twitter! ... And this isn't funny, Scott!

UDA: Not at all.

BUNNICULA: Totally uncool.

SCOTT (*Thoughtful*): I'm sorry, guys. I didn't mean to frighten you. ... I promise I will never go into that forest again.

ALL THREE: Promise?

SCOTT: Scout's honor!

SAMMI: I say we give Scott one more chance.

SCOTT: I'm really sorry, guys.

BUNNICULA: OK ... We forgive you.

SAMMI: My turn! Go and hide everyone! 10-9-8-7-6-5 ...

(As SAMMI counts, the animals hide, but SCOTT runs straight into the forest again, only deeper. This time, Twitter sees him and interrupts SAMMI.)

TWITTER: Hey! Scott ran into the forest again.

(The other animals converge.)

SAMMI *(To her mother)*: No, mother. Not this time. You can change it. Have Scott come out of there right now.

KATE: I'm sorry, sweetie. I can't do that.

SAMMI: But you can! This is your story!

KATE: No, dear. It's the bear's story.

BUNNICULA: Why he ... he lied right to our faces!

UDA: I say, forget about Scott. He deserves whatever happens to him.

SAMMI: Don't say that, Uda!

UDA: I'm serious. Who keeps running into danger, when we all we have to do to stay safe is just ... follow the rules?

BUNNICULA: The rules are meant to protect us!

TWITTER: Some animals just aren't made to play it safe, Uda. Scott is a bear, after all. And he's our friend. I'm going to look for him. *(She flies over the forest again).*

UDA: Well, I'm not going. He put all of us in danger when he ran in there. Do you think he gave *that* one second of thought?

BUNNICULA: He's our friend, Uda. No man left behind. I'm going in. *(The bunny bounces into the forest).*

UDA: Bunnica, no! You'll be eaten alive in there! *(UDA follows BUNNICULA in).*

(Cries of "SCOTT, SCOTT" can be heard from inside the forest.)

TWITTER: "It's so dark."

UDA: "Ouch, that hurts."

BUNNICULA: "I want my Mommy!"

(SAMMI returns to her mother at the bed.)

SAMMI: Mommy, please tell me the animals found Scott. And even though he was a big fat jerk about it, they forgave him because he was safe, and that's what friends do...

KATE (*Compassionately*): For years they searched, honey. Lifetimes. But this time, honey ... no. They never found him.

SAMMI: And so the sun stopped.

KATE: And so the sun stopped.

SAMMI: Well, that's a terrible story, mother.

KATE: It is, isn't it?

SAMMI: I mean really maybe the worst I've ever heard. You call that a bedtime story?

KATE: Well, you put me on the spot.

SAMMI: How am I supposed to go to sleep knowing Scott is still lost?

KATE: It takes time, honey. You learn.

SAMMI: Well, this story clearly needs a better ending. A happy ending.

(SAMMI runs back into the meadow. She is heading straight into the Perdido Forest.)

KATE (*frantic*): Sammi, oh no no no. ... Where are you going?

SAMMI (*frantic*): He's lost, mother. And I am going to find him!

KATE: Sammi, NO!!

SAMMI: Maybe he's waiting for me to find him.

KATE: Oh, dear God no!



(SAMMI runs into the forest. The lights shift to reveal the landscape of the forest for the first time. There is a small entrance made up of three distinct paths, surrounded by an impenetrable cluster of trees and unscalable stone. Anyone who enters must choose a path. SAMMI stops for a moment, then picks the trail on the left.)

SAMMI: Scott!!

KATE: What have I done?

(KATE arrives at the forest and takes the path on the right without hesitation. In the middle trail, we can see a forced perspective projection showing a tiny bear running, and it is getting smaller, indicating he's already much farther down his path. The path SCOTT took long ago. The three are now going in all different directions. The tiny bear stops and turns to us. We hear a loud, ferocious growl and ...

BLACKOUT