

"SHORT TRIP HOME"

INT. DINING ROOM - EVENING

Mother is setting the dining table for dinner. DARLA enters with a grocery bag.

DARLA (O.S.)  
Mama, I got some sweet potatoes.

MOTHER  
I told you I don't need anything.

Mother starts putting the food on the table.

DARLA  
You shoulda let me help.

Darla looks around and surveys the table and goes into the kitchen. None of the glasses or plates match; there are paper napkins; the whole thing is crowned by a paper honeycombed turkey decoration as the centerpiece.

MOTHER  
No need.

INT. KITCHEN

Darla puts the bag on the counter. She opens her purse and takes out a small flask. She takes a quick swig and deftly replaces the flask.

MOTHER (O.S.)  
Your Aunt Gert called. Said Ilona, got a divorce. Did I tell you that Ruthie told me Carl's wife left him. Met some guy on the internet and ran off. Ain't that awful.

Darla goes to the Dining Room.

INT. DINING ROOM

Darla goes to the table and begins to pick at the food in the bowls.

DARLA  
Did I tell you I went to the doctor the other day.

MOTHER  
No. Don't pick.

Darla sneaks one final snippet of food.

MOTHER  
(Continuing)  
Jewel told me she was going to have to have a hysterectomy. That poor thing.

CHARLIE enters from the other room.

DARLA  
Charlie.

Charlie slides past them both to the kitchen and retrieves a Dr. Pepper from the refrigerator.

DARLA  
(Continuing)  
Well, I kept feeling this pain.

Charlie re-enters with his soda. He belches after he takes a huge drink.

MOTHER  
Charlie, do you need anything?

CHARLIE  
No, mamma. I'm fine.

He exits to the living room.

EXT. FRONT PORCH

Joe stands on the porch; his suitcase next to him. He stands with his head bowed as if to summon some inner strength he doesn't know he possesses. He raises his head. A motion catches his eye. At first it appears that a small lone bird helps itself at a birdfeeder. He realizes that its a fake bird that has been affixed to the bird house. He puts his hand on the knob and slowly turns it and pushes the door open.

INT. LIVING ROOM

Joe enters the living room with his suitcase.

Joe looks at Charlie laying on the couch drinking a Dr. Pepper. Charlie divides his attention between reading Nietzsche's *Human All Too Human* and watching TV.

JOE  
(continuing)  
Charlie.

He moves more into Charlie's view.

CHARLIE  
I'm watching the game, ass wipe.  
Charlie doesn't acknowledge Joe's presence.

JOE  
(Continuing.)  
Nice talking to you.

Joe goes to the kitchen.

JOE  
I'm here. I made it.

INT. DINING ROOM

MOTHER  
There he is. You're just in time.  
I thought you were going to miss  
it. This is wonderful. We're all  
here together. Supper's on.

DARLA  
Hey, bud.

JOE  
Sis.

MOTHER  
Charlie! Supper! Go sit down.  
It's all ready to go.

JOE  
I need to freshen up a bit first.  
Still feel like I have airplane all  
over me.

Joe goes to the bathroom. Charlie comes from the other room.

## INT. BATHROOM

Joe turns on the water and leans against the door closing his eyes. Joe takes out his cell phone. He gets no signal and can't make the call. Frustrated he puts it away.

DARLA (O.S.)  
Mom. Where's the turkey?

MOTHER (O.S.)  
I thought since it was just us,  
chicken would do.

DARLA (O.S.)  
Well, that says Thanksgiving.

JOE  
Get it together so you can get this  
over with and get back home.

He takes a bottle of Zoloft from his pocket and tosses one back before turning the water off. He opens the door and exits.

## INT. DINING ROOM

Joe joins the others at the dinner table. The family eats in silence for a moment.

MOTHER  
Your Aunt Gert said that her  
daughter, Ilona, got a divorce.

DARLA  
Mamma, I heard this already.

MOTHER  
That family has been through so  
much.

Darla gets up and goes into the kitchen. She returns with a orange juice jar of chilled water. She pours a glass.

MOTHER  
(Continuing.)  
You know, my cousin, George, had  
that....that mental illness. After  
he lost his job, he never found  
another job.

DARLA  
(To Joe.)  
When were you last here?

JOE  
Dad's funeral. Year and a half.  
(To Mother)  
Mom, I got a promotion.

Mother gets up and goes into the kitchen.

MOTHER  
Really? You remember Adele? She  
lost her job when the plant closed  
last year.

DARLA  
(To Joe.)  
Congrats.

Mother returns with a pitcher of iced tea.

MOTHER  
I talked to Rose yesterday. Her  
bursitis is worse. She and Aunt  
Molly are going to Christus Gardens  
in Gatlinburg. I've decided to  
sell the house. Did you know that  
Patty had her baby?

Joe drops his fork startled.

DARLA  
What?

JOE  
What brought this on?

MOTHER  
She was pregnant.

DARLA  
No, the house. Why are you selling  
the house?

MOTHER  
Too big for me.

JOE  
But mom, we grew up here. Our  
memories are here.

MOTHER  
You'll still have those memories.

DARLA  
(Uneasy)  
Where will you go?

MOTHER  
Don't worry, I'm not coming to live  
with you.

They eat in silence for a moment. Darla stops and looks  
around the room.

CHARLIE  
How much do we get when you sell?

They all look at Charlie who continues to shovel the food  
into his mouth.

INT. KITCHEN - EVENING

Darla and Joe are doing the dishes. Darla dries the dishes  
and puts them away. Joe stands washing them.

JOE  
Selling the house.

DARLA  
Do we have to talk about it?

JOE  
This family never talks about  
anything.

DARLA  
What's that mean? We talk.

JOE  
"Your Aunt Shirley found out that  
her boy Ed was a serial killer and  
your cousin Ruthie is a  
pterodactyl."

(Beat)  
When was the last time we talked?

DARLA  
You have my number too.

Joe smiles slyly at Darla. They wash in silence for a  
moment.

JOE

I'm just saying that it seems like after daddy died, we all just flew off in all directions.

DARLA

I was graduating high school when you were born. We were never close.

On the wall, a singing bird clock begins to chirp. Joe and Darla turn and just look at it.

JOE

You aren't upset by mom's announcement?

Darla shrugs.

JOE

(Continuing.)

Me either. Why is that?

Charlie enters scratching his ass. Darla and Joe fall silent. Charlie gets a Dr. Pepper from the refrigerator.

CHARLIE

Ladies.

Charlie exits. Joe flicks some soap suds after Charlie.

INT. DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Joe sits at the table in the dark. A glass of milk and a partially eaten piece of cake are on the table in front of him. Charlie is asleep on the couch with the TV still going. Mother enters. She turns on the light causing Joe to squint.

MOTHER

Why are you sitting here in the dark?

JOE

Felt like it. What are you doing up?

MOTHER

Need some Alka-Seltzer.

She goes into the kitchen and returns with a fizzing glass of water.

JOE  
Mom, what's wrong with this family?

MOTHER (O.S.)  
What kind of question is that?

JOE  
It feels like we're just related in name only. I'm not sure we care about each other. I'm wondering if I fabricated memories of a family that never existed here.

She stands in the doorway sipping her Alka-Seltzer.

MOTHER  
I care about you. I love you.  
Love all my children.

JOE  
Then come visit me.

MOTHER  
That big city scares me.

JOE  
Call me.

MOTHER  
I'd only get your machine.

JOE  
You let a few beeps on my machine keep you from saying "hi," from saying you were thinking about me.

MOTHER  
Don't work yourself up over nothing.

JOE  
If a baby animal doesn't bond with it's family, it dies. Even if it gets food.

(Beat)  
Do you know why I don't come home, er, come to see you more often?

MOTHER  
You work a lot.

JOE  
Yeah. That's it.

They are there together in silence. Joe eats his cake.  
Mother sips her water.

JOE  
(Continuing)  
Mom. Do you feel like you know me?

A chirping sound is heard.

MOTHER  
Did you see my new bird clock? It  
won't chirp when the lights are  
off. So it won't keep you awake.  
(She finishes her water  
and puts the glass in the  
kitchen.)  
Well, I'm going back to bed. You  
want the light on or off?

JOE  
Off.  
(Beat.)  
Mom, where's the family album?

MOTHER  
(Nervous.)  
I don't know. Living room maybe.  
I don't know. Why?

JOE  
I just need to see something.

MOTHER  
Don't stay up too late.

She turns off the light and exits. He looks after her for a moment. As he picks up his fork and starts to put a bite of cake in his mouth, Joe sees the paper turkey centerpiece staring at him. He stops, puts the fork down and pushes the cake away.

JOE  
Damn flightless bird.

He takes the bird and swats it like a volleyball it into the darkened kitchen.

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY

Charlie is sprawled on the couch, watching a football game on TV, reading Sartre's *Being And Nothingness*.

He moves only to push the remote and change the channel. Joe enters. He bends over the coffee table looking for something.

CHARLIE

Move.

JOE

Do you practice being an ass or is it just a gift?

CHARLIE

Move, faggot. I'm not going to tell you again.

JOE

That's nice.

(He bends back over to resume his search)

As soon as I find the family album, I'll be gone.

CHARLIE

(Getting angry)

I said get out of my way....NOW!

JOE

Have you always hated me? Or was there something specific that I did?

Charlie flicks a wad of paper at Joe.

CHARLIE

Don't make me pop you.

Joe leaves.

CHARLIE

(To himself. Smiling.)

I've always hated you.

INT. DINING ROOM

Darla is having a snack. Joe enters.

JOE

I refuse to believe that Charlie and I are from the same gene pool.

DARLA

When I was young, I thought he was left by gypsies.

Mother enters.

MOTHER  
You still eating.

JOE  
Mom, I couldn't find the family album.

MOTHER  
Why does it mean so much to you?

JOE  
I just want...need to see if we were ever a family.

She retrieves plates from the kitchen and starts setting the table.

MOTHER  
Well, there was a small fire in the garage last summer. It burned in the fire. I'm going to have me some of that pie.

She exits to the kitchen.

JOE  
A fire.

Mother enters carrying a couple bowls of leftovers. She puts them on the table.

MOTHER  
Nothing big. Just some rags. But it got the album, your and Darla's baby books, your grandmother's trunk.

JOE  
My baby book is gone?  
Mother exits again.

DARLA  
(Overlapping)  
You don't have my baby book anymore?

She enters carrying a couple more bowls which she puts on the table.

MOTHER

It really wasn't that bad. Might as well go ahead and have supper.

JOE

Mother, do you realize when you say something like that....it makes me feel less than....

MOTHER

Less than what?

JOE

Just less than. Like you don't care.

MOTHER

Nonsense.

JOE

Don't dismiss my feelings. What is wrong with this family? Why can't we....

MOTHER

What?

JOE

Talk. Communicate.

There is a silence among them. Darla stops eating. She reaches for her purse and starts to exit when Joe speaks.

JOE

(Continuing)

Mom. There are things...Don't you want to know me? Know what's going on in my life?

MOTHER

I know you. I gave birth to you. Nursed you when you were sick.

JOE

Yes. Yes, of course. But mother, what do you tell our relatives about us?

MOTHER

What?

JOE

You talk...we talk about everyone else. We're all guilty.

(He takes a deep breath.)

I'd like to tell you about my life. There's a man I love, a man I've been in a relationship with for several years.

Mother starts to leave but then stops. She turns around as if she doesn't quite know which way to go.

JOE

(Continuing)

I thought so. We can never talk about something like this. Something important to us. All we do...I do is keep each other at arms length...I suppose distance let's us pretend we're a family.

He turns away.

JOE

(Continuing.)

I'm closer to my lover's family than this one.

Silence fills the room. Charlie enters with a book and goes to the kitchen.

DARLA

(To Mother.)

I'm forty-three. I have no husband and no prospects. I saw the doctor last week. Now, having a child....well. My life is fairly empty. So I drink.

(She pulls out her flask and takes a swig)

A lot. Hard liquor. Guess I get that from daddy.

Mother starts to speak but Charlie starts to pass back through. He sees Darla drinking.

CHARLIE

What's going on? Supper ready?

DARLA

We're having a drink and a chat. Is there something you've hidden from us?

CHARLIE

What? I don't have any secrets. Besides, Jean Racine said, "There are no secrets that time does not reveal." Until then, have a Dr. Pepper and wait.

JOE

Nothing ever bothers you. Nothing bothers any of us. Where did we get that?

DARLA

Daddy.

CHARLIE

Hey! Watch it! Daddy was a saint.

DARLA

To you.

CHARLIE

You guys are freaks. What's the point of talking? My life ain't Oprah or Springer.

JOE

It's what families do. It's how they survive. Otherwise, they're no better than this half-eaten chicken.

Pause.

MOTHER

You kids are so bitter and angry. You can be happy if you want to be. You just have to make up your mind to be happy. My life has been tragedies and sorrows. But I decided to be happy.

JOE

Did you? Are you?

She exits in a huff to the kitchen. Charlie sits down at the table. Joe struggles to regain his composure.

JOE

I shouldn't have said anything.

DARLA

You can pick your friends and you  
can pick your nose, but...

JOE

You can't pick your family.

Mother enters with one final bowl.

MOTHER

Supper. Let's eat.

Charlie eats like he hasn't eaten a meal in a long time. He opens his book, Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*, and reads while he shovels food into his mouth.

Mother enters with the paper turkey centerpiece which she puts on the table. She sits and starts to eat. Mother picks at her food with her head down.

Darla looks at Joe and smiles at him meekly. She sits and begins to eat. Darla slowly chews on her food staring off in the distance. She drinks from her flask and sets it down on the table.

They eat in silence. The void between them is punctuated by the occasional tink of silverware hitting a plate.

Joe stares at them for a moment before going to the kitchen. He returns with a plate and sits down. He stares at the paper turkey centerpiece on the table which stares implacably back at him.

The bird clock chirps.

FADE OUT.

THE END.