

**HELVETICA**  
**By**  
**Katie Coleman**

# HELVETICA

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HELVETICA

*for Caitlin.  
Always.*

# HELVETICA

*Helvetica* was first produced as part of the Hollins-Mill Mountain Theatre Winter Festival of New Works in January of 2015. The production featured the following cast and creative team.

## **Cast**

**Myron.** Kevin McAlexander

**Past Helvetica.** Emma Sala

**Present Helvetica.** Bonny Branch

**Future Helvetica.** Kathy Clay

**Mother/Patient/Illustrator/Animal Shelter Employee.** Amanda Mansfield

**Father/Doctor/ Agent.** Michael Mansfield

**Husband.** Jared M. Anderson

## **Crew**

**Director.** Katie Mack

**Stage Manager.** Meredith Dayna Cope-Levy

**Hollins Technical Director.** John Forsman

**Mill Mountain Technical Director.** Karen Gierchak

**Lighting Designer.** Ann Courtney

**Assistant Stage Manager.** Caroline Cromwell

**Light Board Operator.** Aileen Buckland

**Scenic Carpenters.** John Corrwll, Cole Tankersley, Katie Ward

**Box Office Manager.** Anna Goodwin

**Producers.** Todd Ristau, Ernie Zulia

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## **Cast of Characters**

**Past Helvetica** —Child. A young adult actress playing a precocious child. Very bright and energetic.

**Present Helvetica** —Adult. Anywhere from twenty-five to forty-five. Agitated, full of ennui.

**Future Helvetica** —Senior. Sixties to seventies, but fit, still a spark of youth.

**Myron** —A stuffed bear. He's played by an adult. No bear costumes, please.

**Mother** —30s-40s. She's tired. Troubled.

**Father** —30s-40s. Masculine. Works with his hands.

**Husband** —20s-40s. He's successful, and looks it.

**Patient** —20s-30s Female. Optimist.

**Doctor** —Any age. Any gender. Professional, with kind eyes.

**Illustrator** —Female, around the same age as Present Helvetica. She's fun. Enjoys life.

**Animal Shelter Employee** —20s-30s. Any gender. Still enjoys their job.

**Agent** —Any age. Any gender. Helvetica's biggest fan.

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## A PLAY ABOUT STORIES

### SCENE ONE

*Lights up on MYRON, a stuffed bear. He's played by a middle aged man, somebody's beloved uncle. He's alone on an empty stage. He smiles and maybe waves to the audience.*

**MYRON.** This is a story about my best friend. (*PAST HELVETICA enters. She's a young adult actress playing a precocious eight-year old. She stands, frozen in time.*) This is Helvetica Burke. She is eight years old. This is the day her mother died. (*Sound effect: Sharp, short. PRESENT HELVETICA enters. She's somewhere between thirty and forty. She freezes.*)

Here she is today. The day her husband leaves her for a religious cult. (*Sound effect: Longer, pained. Not a punchline. FUTURE HELVETICA enters. Sixties to seventies, but fit, still a spark of youth. She freezes.*) And this is the day she will die. (*Sound effect: An unknown sound.*) These are not the biggest events in her life. They are resonant, they are important, but they aren't everything. The biggest event in her life was on a quiet Sunday at home, when, after fixing that creaking sound that the screen door kept making, she decided she wasn't going to feel sorry for herself anymore, and she didn't. Like all people, Helvetica had her crises. When her husband left her, in the middle of her life, she thought it was his absence that sent her into a spiral of doubt, but it had really started long before then. But these moments, and all the ones in between, the 25,000 some-odd days that humans have, are what make up Helvetica, and she is our story. (*All three Helveticas exit. Lights shift and we're in the past, Helvetica's childhood home. The set is dressed in full view of the audience. Sound effect: The Sound of the Past. Helvetica's MOTHER is alone onstage.*) Helvetica was born on the edge of a Large Midwestern City, filled with space and time. Her parents were the ordinary sort of parents, as seen from the eyes of a child, with a masculine, outdoor-type father and the retiring, somewhat less visible wife. When she was born, they weren't quite sure what to do.

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**MOTHER.** Child... --Is it strange to still call her "child?"

**FATHER.** We'll think of a name eventually.

**MOTHER.** Darling.

**FATHER.** Sweetie.

**BOTH.** Child.

**FATHER.** I know that the world seems hard out there from the padded bottom of your crib...

**MOTHER.** Surrounded by bars...

**FATHER.** ...But we want you to know that your mother and I are here for you,

**MOTHER.** Will always be here for you.

**FATHER.** Well, not always.

**MOTHER.** Almost always.

**FATHER.** For the foreseeable future, at least, we will be here for you, and help you, and guide you through the many strange turns a life may take.

**MOTHER.** You will have your first step soon, your first word, your first idea.

**FATHER.** Your first doubt, your first tantrum, your first apology.

**MOTHER.** It's a strange and terrible place out there. There are countries that want to kill us.

**FATHER.** Other religions that would burn us to the ground.

**MOTHER.** I had a nightmare when I was pregnant that a man cut you out of my belly with an electric knife.

**FATHER.** Honey.

**MOTHER.** You know, like the ones you use at Thanksgiving? And he pulled you out of me, but it was too soon for you to be born yet, so you were just lying there on the floor while the man, not really more than a child, really, he just held on to his Thanksgiving knife and cried, and I stared at your cold little body on the carpet and then I woke up.

**FATHER.** Dreams are meaningless.

**MOTHER.** I was so relieved when you were born, because when I saw you, you looked nothing like the dead child from my dream. That was a relief.

**FATHER.** You had hair.

**MOTHER.** Such a lovely head of black hair.

**FATHER.** I wanted to pace in the waiting room like Ricky Ricardo and hand out cigars. But apparently they don't do that anymore.



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**MOTHER.** Your father was right there by my side, feeding me ice chips and holding my hand.

**FATHER.** I was happy to do it.

**MOTHER.** When you were in my belly we called you little sprout, 'cause that's what you looked like on the sonogram.

**FATHER.** A little bean that had just sprouted.

**MOTHER.** She's four days old, honey, surely we'll think of a name soon.

**FATHER.** Until then, good night, little sprout.

**MOTHER.** Little bean.

**FATHER.** Little girl. *(The lights go out on them. Lights shift to find Myron and Mother. There could be a projection or some illustration of the story.)*

**MYRON.** Helvetica's mother grew up on a farm, so she loved animals. She could relate to them in a way that she never quite could with humans. She liked people well enough, she had a few friends, but the pressure to talk, to keep up a conversation, was something that she always felt anxious about, in the presence of other humans. When she was alone with animals, her dog Bastion, for example, she loved the simple act of being silent with him. She also enjoyed brushing her family's dairy cows, playing with cats, geese, goats, and all of the other critters and crawlies that reside in the farmland of the Middle West. When she met Helvetica's father, they were both volunteering at the local animal shelter. *(Father enters.)*

**MYRON.** She was a junior--Art History--he was a year out of college--Literature--living with his parents, and trying to get a job. Times were tough all over. She graduated, and while her grades weren't quite enough for Veterinary School, she did know one thing.

**MOTHER.** I want to do something with animals.

**MYRON.** And while Zoology and Marine Biology were maybe outside her reach, there was the job at the animal shelter.

**FATHER.** I've found a job.

**MOTHER.** No more substitute teaching?

**FATHER.** It's the Parks Service.

**MOTHER.** A Government job?

**FATHER.** Federal Benefits, good wages...

**MOTHER.** A Park Ranger? You love the outdoors.

**FATHER.** Sort of.

**MOTHER.** Well?

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**FATHER.** I watch for Forest Fires.

**MOTHER.** Someone does that?

**FATHER.** It's me.

**MOTHER.** You're that someone.

**FATHER.** Now I am.

**MOTHER.** So, what, you sit and look through binoculars?

**FATHER.** Sometimes. I sit in a Ranger station, high above the trees, and watch the horizon for impending forest fires.

**MOTHER.** Only you can prevent them.

**FATHER.** Exactly.

**MOTHER.** Well, sounds like you'll have plenty of time.

**FATHER.** I can work on my book!

**MYRON.** But as time wore on, as time must, Helvetica's parents found their vocations...less than they had hoped. He found he had plenty of time to write, but nothing to write about. He sat staring at the horizon, a beautiful one to be sure, and the thoughts in his head, always bursting to get out when he was younger, seemed to drift away over the tops of the trees.

**MOTHER.** You know I saw something the other day.

**FATHER.** Something great?

**MOTHER.** Yes.

**FATHER.** I saw a fox taking a bath.

**MOTHER.** It was a word. In the font selector.

**FATHER.** The what?

**MOTHER.** The fonts. It was a name.

**FATHER.** For our little sprout?

**MOTHER.** Helvetica.

**FATHER.** What does it mean?

**MOTHER.** I have no idea.

**FATHER.** I love it. Helvetica.

**MOTHER.** Helvetica.

**MYRON.** Helvetica's mother was good at her job. She enjoyed it immensely, and it showed, so she was promoted. Around the time Helvetica was beginning to gestate inside her, she accepted a promotion. It was now her job to personally euthanize the animals to whom she had grown so attached. She always knew it was happening. Too many animals, not enough people. And although she herself thought it might

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should be the other way around, there was no changing the fact that the animals had to be killed, and someone had to do it. Older ones, mostly. The cute puppies and kittens would usually get snatched up, sometimes by the workers themselves. Helvetica's mother had a small menagerie herself at one time. It happened on Friday mornings. So while most people looked forward to the weekend, Helvetica's mother knew that Friday only brought death in the form of a small room and a crank of a dial. Gas was more efficient than needles. As the months--and years--went on, she found that she had trouble looking her own animals in the eye. The silent comfort she once felt with Meg or with Pip, Annabeth and Edmund, Huck and Scout, eroded over time. She slowly gave the animals away, to good homes, of course. And she cried when each one was driven away, but they were tears of relief, for deep in her heart, she knew they knew. They could smell the death on her like they could smell fear. And although she still loved animals, she couldn't keep them at home any longer. Her grief had drowned the joy she had once found in the company of living things. So, as a compromise to herself, when Helvetica was one year old, she gave her a stuffed bear, a beautiful, handmade piece, with onyx eyes and soft, downy fur. Because his singular expression didn't remind her of any of her favorite protagonists, she decided on Myron. We were friends at first sight.

## SCENE TWO

*Past Helvetica is alone onstage. Dancing, or playing on pieces of furniture. Myron enters, and watches her for a time before speaking.*

**MYRON.** Like all children with no siblings, Helvetica relied on her imagination more than most. She fought dragons and rescued handsome princes from evil wizards, she crash-landed her spaceship on a hostile, alien planet, she even solved the mystery of Who Killed Barbie? Spoiler: It was Skipper. But her favorite game of all was Travel. More than anything, Helvetica loved to construct a sailboat out of household furniture, and sail around the living room, her trusty First Mate, yours truly, at her side. (*Helvetica begins building the sailboat out of furniture.*)

**PAST HELVETICA.** Put your back into it, Myron!

**MYRON.** Aye, Captain!

**PAST HELVETICA.** We have to get this cargo loaded before Cap'n Kloves figures out it's missing!

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**MYRON.** Ah, the Dread Pirate Cap'n Kloves! Scourge of the Seven Seas, hated from Tripoli to Singapore!

**PAST HELVETICA.** He hasn't seen the last of Captain Helvetica! We may have to sneak away this time, but one day--

**MYRON.** We shall return to Black Island and have our revenge!

**PAST HELVETICA.** For now we will be satisfied by the liberation of these treasures.

**MYRON.** And you're sure none of these could go...missing?

**PAST HELVETICA.** Myron, I've told you! These treasures belong to the people of Hong City.

**MYRON.** But there's so much here. Surely they won't miss a little gold. Don't we deserve to be rewarded?

**PAST HELVETICA.** All the reward I need is seeing the delight in the people's eyes when I return what's been stolen.

**MYRON.** Sigh. And the look on Cap'n Kloves face when he realizes we stole it out from under him.

**PAST HELVETICA.** That too.

**MYRON.** Still, we could use a new coat of paint, maybe a cannon or something.

**PAST HELVETICA.** Posh. The *Condor* is a fine ship. Fastest clipper in the Philippines. *(Myron looks through a spyglass.)*

**MYRON.** Avast! The pirate's gang approaches!

**PAST HELVETICA.** Retreat!

**MYRON.** If only we had a cannon!

**PAST HELVETICA.** Speed is as fine a weapon as any!

**MYRON.** They draw closer!

**PAST HELVETICA.** Then shove off, ya dog! Let the winds guide us home!

**MYRON.** Aye, Captain! *(They sail away.)*

## SCENE THREE

*Sound effect: The Sound of the Present. Present Helvetica is sitting at a table at a restaurant, perusing a menu. Myron enters.*

**MYRON.** By the time she was in her late twenties, Helvetica had accumulated a variety of ex boyfriends, and one, she was somewhat proud to note, on again, off

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again girlfriend. She didn't like to affix labels to herself, but looking back years later, she thought of the relationship fondly. But on this night, five years after graduating college--that relationship was over, and she found herself on a blind date. A set-up courtesy of friends from work. (*HUSBAND enters, looking around, and spots Helvetica. He's masculine, successful, and looks it. A touch insecure, though. Probably some bullshit with his parents.*) He didn't look like she expected. He was handsome, but in a unique way. He was also a little scattered. He looked like he wasn't in control of the situation. Helvetica found this appealing.

**HUSBAND.** Helvetica?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** That's me! So you're him.

**HUSBAND.** I am indeed him.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Hi. (*He sits down.*)

**HUSBAND.** It's nice to meet you.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Nice to meet you. The boys have told me a lot about you.

**HUSBAND.** Really? They seemed awfully tight-lipped about you.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I cultivate an air of mystery.

**HUSBAND.** That can be very appealing.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I've found that to be true.

**HUSBAND.** Does that make me a detective?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** It makes me Agatha Christie and you some guy on a train with a book.

**MYRON.** The easy, flirtatious banter was second nature to Helvetica. While she found *His Girl Friday* charmingly outdated from a feminist perspective, there was no denying the dialogue. Her sparring partner, having not had the pleasure of experiencing Ms. Russel's superb delivery, felt like he was missing something. This feeling would persist for as long as he knew her. At first, he found it exciting.

**HUSBAND.** So did you uh--find the place okay? I mean, with the weather and all it's--

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Oh, no I live close to here, I come here all the time.

**HUSBAND.** Oh yeah? My office is just down the street.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** We could have passed each other a thousand times.

**HUSBAND.** Never even noticed.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** So they said you're in finance.

**HUSBAND.** Yep.

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**PRESENT HELVETICA.** What does that mean?

**HUSBAND.** You don't really wanna know, do you?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Oh god, I really don't.

**HUSBAND.** What do you do? I mean, I'm guessing temping isn't your--

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I come up with stories.

**HUSBAND.** Stories?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Short answer: I'm a writer.

**HUSBAND.** Long answer?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** You don't want to hear about it.

**HUSBAND.** I really do.

**MYRON.** What Helvetica thought was:

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Well...I think it would probably have been better to never be born at all. The world is nothing but suffering followed by death, and the only alleviation humanity has come up with is stories. Fantasies to make us believe that there's something worthwhile to this bankrupt existence.

**MYRON.** What she actually said was:

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I try to make the world a little happier.

**HUSBAND.** You want a drink?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Yes. (*Lights shift.*)

**MYRON.** It was a below average date, in her estimation. Her usual, cynical honesty had put him off, as it did to many others. They ate, they drank, but conversation seemed forced, she was asking him questions, searching for mutual interests. They both liked "comedies" and "music" and "spending time with friends." Generic, non-threatening answers to engender the least possible amount of disagreement or controversy. But then, something happened.

**HUSBAND.** This isn't working, is it?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I don't think so, no.

**HUSBAND.** Okay, then how about this? The chances of us seeing each other again right now are pretty low, right?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Low.

**HUSBAND.** Like single digits.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Agreed.

**HUSBAND.** So why don't we ditch the bullshit for a minute, huh? You have opinions?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Doesn't everyone?

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**HUSBAND.** Unpopular ones?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Almost exclusively.

**HUSBAND.** Alright, then. We trade unpopular opinions. Cut straight through the fat and really get into what we're like. What makes us individuals.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Sounds fun.

**MYRON.** It sounded like a lot more than just fun. It was straight out of a movie. Billy Crystal and/or Tom Hanks, but definitely Meg Ryan. Sentiment and Cynicism fought it out for a quick three rounds inside Helvetica's brain. Sentiment won on points.

**HUSBAND.** Okay, I'll go first. I love the Microsoft Office Paper clip guy.

*(Helvetica laughs. A real, honest laugh that melts the tension from her shoulders, and when she looks up at her future husband, she sees him in a new light.)*

Your turn.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I really like airports.

**HUSBAND.** Really.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I've always found them relaxing. They're so clean and organized. Plus, I love the schedule. I get there early, I've got two hours to kill, all alone, I can totally read a good chunk of my book before I board.

**HUSBAND.** What kind of books do you like?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** No, no, we can talk about that later! Be more offensive!

**HUSBAND.** Um...I don't like Bob Dylan!

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** What?

**HUSBAND.** He can't sing!

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** He doesn't have to sing!

**HUSBAND.** Then he shouldn't! *(This is extremely good natured, they're both laughing.)*

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I don't believe in God.

**HUSBAND.** I'm Jewish, but I'm Anti-Zionist.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I'm not really interested in the news. I just can't take it.

**HUSBAND.** It's hard to take sometimes. I like Ben Affleck.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I like country music.

**HUSBAND.** I like Death Metal.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Netflix sucks.

**HUSBAND.** I'm not really big on movies.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I think I prefer tv.

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**HUSBAND.** I can't fucking stand to look at myself in the mirror. (*The laughter stops.*)

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Who can?

**HUSBAND.** I think I used to be able to, but something...

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I think everyone feels that way sometimes.

**HUSBAND.** No, really. Sometimes, I just think that there's...there's no point to anything, you know? I mean, what am I doing this for? Why am I making this money? To pay for nicer things, and then even nicer things, and what? So I can have a child, and hope that one day that child will have even nicer things? Is that we're doing? Progressively sliding up the economic scale? For what? To raise privileged monsters who hate us and then die of a drug overdose at twenty four?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I don't know. (*He reaches out his hand.*)

**MYRON.** And Helvetica made a decision.

## SCENE FOUR

*Sound Effect: The Sound of the Future. Future Helvetica and another PATIENT, much younger, are waiting in a doctor's waiting room. An Oncologist's office. Future Helvetica is holding a book in her hands, but she's not reading. Her eyes wander. The Patient is staring at her.*

**PATIENT.** Hi.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Hello.

**PATIENT.** I'm sorry.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** What's wrong?

**PATIENT.** It's nothing, I just--

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Yes?

**PATIENT.** I don't mean to bother you.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Oh?

**PATIENT.** You're Helvetica Burke, aren't you?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Um, yes, yes I am.

**PATIENT.** I'm such a big fan of your books.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Thank you. That's ah--nice to hear.

**PATIENT.** My mother read *Darkly Drear* to me when I was a kid, and I--



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**FUTURE HELVETICA.** How nice.

**PATIENT.** I'm sorry, this isn't the right....

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Oh no, I...It's always nice to talk with fans.

**PATIENT.** I'm sorry, I just--Are you here? Like here-here?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** I'm not sure yet.

**PATIENT.** Oh. I uh, I have breast cancer.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Oh. I'm sorry.

**PATIENT.** They cut my tits off.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Shit.

**PATIENT.** Yeah. And then I think I'm fine for a year and...

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Oh.

**PATIENT.** My scan comes back and they want to do another biopsy. Just To Be Sure, they said. To Be Safe.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** I'm...

**PATIENT.** And today I--I find out if it's in my liver.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Is there someone--

**PATIENT.** My mom's across the country. She wants me to move home.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** I—I started getting these headaches, so. They cut open my head and cut it out, they just want to make sure it's uh...

**PATIENT.** Little things are persistent, aren't they?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Tenacious.

**PATIENT.** Good word.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Shaved my head. For the surgery, you know? So I feel like a fraud, people think I've had chemo, but...I got off easy on the cancer lottery. So far.

**PATIENT.** I'm sure it's fine. They catch it early?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Yeah.

**PATIENT.** They do that shit all the time.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** You too. C'mon, lots of people come back from what you— (*Silence for a moment.*)

**PATIENT.** Anyway, I didn't want to unload on you, I'm sure you've got your own stuff going on and--

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** No, it's okay. It's good to talk.

**PATIENT.** Yeah, I just. I really liked your books. Even the Ballerina one.

(*Helvetica laughs.*)

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**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Yeah, I took a lot of flak for that one.

**PATIENT.** There's nothing wrong with telling kids the truth.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Thanks.

**PATIENT.** You scared?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Sure.

**PATIENT.** I'm scared.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** That's okay.

**PATIENT.** Can you uh--you think you could a— (*Future Helvetica moves to sit closer to the Patient. After a moment, she reaches out slowly, and takes the Patient's hand.*)

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** When I was a little girl my mother told me something. She said that the hands were the window to the soul. Everyone says it's the eyes, I know, but...someone's hands really tell you what they're like. Our hands are how we interact with the world, and with others. Rough or smooth, hard or gentle, our hands, and the way we touch, are the closest we can be to someone, and they're our most valuable possession. So when we hold hands, it's a cooperation. Each hand must carry some of the weight of the other. We're carrying each other. (*Before anything else can be said, the DOCTOR enters.*)

**DOCTOR.** Good afternoon, Ms. Burke.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Doctor.

**DOCTOR.** If you'll follow me, please. (*The Patient lets go of Helvetica's hand and smiles. Helvetica follows the Doctor to another part of the stage. Maybe the Doctor's desk is a piece of the sailboat from earlier.*) Thanks for coming in.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Is it like last time?

**DOCTOR.** The MRI showed a small mass in your cerebellum.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Oh.

**DOCTOR.** We've been able to grade the tumor, Ms. Burke, and as far as these things go, you understand, things are looking good--

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Good.

**DOCTOR.** It's really very minor. What we call a Grade I Astrocytoma.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Another one.

**DOCTOR.** Right.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** But it's cancer.

**DOCTOR.** Yes, but, if you're going to have brain cancer, well, that's the kind you want. (*Helvetica sighs.*)

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**FUTURE HELVETICA.** So what do we do?

**DOCTOR.** The fact that it's there at all can present some difficulties. I would schedule a surgery immediately.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Again.

**DOCTOR.** It's actually a fairly simple procedure. Easier than last time. Much smaller incision. They do it everyday.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Okay.

**DOCTOR.** Let's take a look at the schedule, shall we? How about the 19th?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** So soon.

**DOCTOR.** We need to get to it as quickly as possible. Is there someone who can pick you up?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** I'll figure something out.

**DOCTOR.** Okay, we'll see you then.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Sounds good.

**DOCTOR.** You're gonna be fine. *(They exit. Myron enters.)*

**MYRON.** At Helvetica's funeral, there was a reading from her book, *Petunia's Brain*. *Petunia's Brain* was like any other brain, in terms of neurons and vessels and cells. But the thoughts that it thought were unlike the thoughts thought by *Sleeping Beauties* and *Snow Whites* and *Belles*. For *Petunia*, though named for a flower, was unlike any plant you might find in the ground. She was smart, she was rough, and just full of the stuff that made her different from those all around. But the teachers in school and the kids on the block didn't like someone special like that, So they hit her with sticks and they played their mean tricks, and the teachers sat her down for a chat. You need to try harder, the teachers explained, to be just like the others in school. And though *Petunia* tried hard, (well maybe not all that hard), she ended up breaking their rule. Cause what could she do? You can't be someone else when your brain thinks things different than they. So she danced her own dance and she wore funny pants and didn't care what those fuckers would say. I may have changed it a bit.

## HELVETICA

### SCENE FIVE

*Sound effect: Sound of the Past. Past Helvetica and her Father are fishing off of a dock. Myron is with them.*

**MYRON.** Vacation.

**PAST HELVETICA.** This is boring.

**FATHER.** It's not boring, it's peaceful.

**PAST HELVETICA.** That's just a word adults use to mean boring.

**FATHER.** Sometimes. But look at that view.

**MYRON.** Reminds me of my natural habitat. I long to return there, and survive on nuts and berries and the slower woodland creatures.

**PAST HELVETICA.** It's pretty.

**FATHER.** Just pretty?

**PAST HELVETICA.** I like the way you can see the trees reflected in the water.

**FATHER.** There you go. What else?

**PAST HELVETICA.** We could be missing something on TV.

**FATHER.** I sure hope so.

**MYRON.** *Night Murder* is on!

**PAST HELVETICA.** You think mom's back yet?

**FATHER.** It's at least an hour into town.

**PAST HELVETICA.** So we're just gonna sit here.

**FATHER.** We're gonna catch a fish.

**PAST HELVETICA.** Ugh.

**FATHER.** And then we're gonna eat it.

**PAST HELVETICA.** Can't you do it?

**FATHER.** I'm building our relationship, Helvetica. One day, you'll look back on this and smile. We're making lasting memories.

**PAST HELVETICA.** You think I'll forget how bored I was?

**FATHER.** I hope I'll forget how rude you were.

**PAST HELVETICA.** Can I at least get a book?

**FATHER.** Nope. *(She sighs dramatically.)*

**PAST HELVETICA.** Can you tell me a story, then?

**FATHER.** Now that might be something I can do.

**PAST HELVETICA.** Cool.

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**FATHER.** You have to keep an eye on your line, though.

**PAST HELVETICA.** Deal, deal. Story.

**MYRON.** Tell a story about a courageous bear, long domesticated, suddenly on his own in the wild.

**FATHER.** Here's a story about a fish.

**MYRON.** It's like he's not listening to me.

**FATHER.** Once upon a time there was a little girl who didn't appreciate the nice things her father did for her.

**PAST HELVETICA.** Daaad!

**FATHER.** Alright, alright. Once upon a time there was a fisherman.

**PAST HELVETICA.** Fisherwoman.

**FATHER.** Excuse me, a fisherwoman. And the fisherwoman had to provide for her family, but it was a very poor season, and they were very hungry. So one morning she was out at the stream, and she cast her line, and after a great long time--

**PAST HELVETICA.** As long as this?

**FATHER.** The fisherwoman was very patient, and she knew how to enjoy nature, and she thought deep thoughts and figured out many things while she was waiting for that line to move. But eventually it moved, and she hauled up into the air, a very small fish. A disappointing haul to be sure. And the fish said "Please, noble fisherwoman, please! I am such a small fish, I can't provide for your family! But if you wait for a season, I will eat and grow larger, and then catch me again, sell me for a large profit!" And the fisherwoman narrowed her eyes. "I would be very simple indeed if I were to give up certain gain for uncertain profit."

**PAST HELVETICA.** ...Is that it?

**FATHER.** That's it.

**PAST HELVETICA.** That's stupid.

**MYRON.** I bet I could catch a fish.

**FATHER.** How is it stupid?

**PAST HELVETICA.** It just is.

**FATHER.** It's about how what you have is better than some uncertain thing you may have in the future.

**PAST HELVETICA.** I get it, dad, I'm just saying. Okay, okay. My turn.

**FATHER.** Go ahead.

**PAST HELVETICA.** The fisherwoman narrowed her eyes. "A talking fish!" she shouted, and struck a deal with the little fish on the spot. "I will never let harm

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come to you, little fish,” she said. “If you will agree to jump into this bowl here, and tour the country, and go on television, and make us both rich.” “Hmm,” said the fish. “The stream is pretty boring.” “We’ll see the world together,” said the wonderfully bright and beautiful fisherwoman. “50/50” The little fish countered, “60/40.” They agreed, and her family had plenty to eat, and the little fish was very happy, and in my story no one had to die or anything. The End. (*Father laughs.*)

**FATHER.** Alright, your story is better.

**PAST HELVETICA.** I know. (*Helvetica has discovered something.*)

## SCENE SIX

*Sound effect: Sound of the Present. Present Helvetica is at a book store, with her Husband. Myron appears.*

**MYRON.** She published her first children’s book at thirty-one, shortly after getting married. It’s called Sailing Around the Living Room, and it was very well received. I’ll bet you can guess what it’s about. A courageous bear, long since--

**HUSBAND.** That was fun!

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** You think so? You think they liked it?

**HUSBAND.** Yeah, it’s a funny story, right?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Something like that.

**HUSBAND.** I’ve got to run.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I thought we were getting dinner?

**HUSBAND.** Client meeting, got pushed back from yesterday.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Oh, uh. Okay.

**HUSBAND.** Sorry, babe. Gotta make money.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** This is making money.

**HUSBAND.** It sure is. (*He kisses her goodbye, and leaves.*)

**MYRON.** We can go to dinner.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I guess we’ll have to.

**MYRON.** I’ll stay in your purse.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Italian?

**MYRON.** I don’t eat.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I know.

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**MYRON.** I'll keep you company, though. (*A female Book Store Employee, Helvetica's future ILLUSTRATOR, walks by.*)

**ILLUSTRATOR.** Ms. Burke?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Helvetica.

**ILLUSTRATOR.** Great reading.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Oh, thanks.

**ILLUSTRATOR.** It's so...wistful. In a good way, though, right?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** It is?

**ILLUSTRATOR.** I thought so. You know, the girl having these imaginary adventures, but there's that sense that one day it'll be over. Cause she starts school the next day, right? And that's such a symbol of change, about crushing the imagination and the creative impulse out of us?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Haha. Yeah, that's sort of what I was going for.

**ILLUSTRATOR.** But the kids don't get it.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Not right now, at least.

**ILLUSTRATOR.** I know! Like, these kids are gonna grow up loving this story, and then come back to it when they have kids of their own, and get this totally different level to it later, you know?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** You really think so?

**ILLUSTRATOR.** Oh, definitely.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Hey, are you off work?

**ILLUSTRATOR.** Oh yeah, I just stuck around for the reading.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** My husband just had to run off to-- You wanna grab something to eat?

**ILLUSTRATOR.** Uh, sure! Yeah, that'd be fun.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** You can stop telling me how great I am, I promise.

**ILLUSTRATOR.** Deal.

**MYRON.** They became great friends, eventually she became her, um, *second-best* friend, and the illustrator of all the rest of her books. They were close, and discussed much in their lives, but the secret that she never revealed was that Helvetica didn't really think her story was all that wistful at all. Because she never had that spark snuffed out of her at school, or by her parents, or anyone else. She and her faithful, courageous, handsome stuffed bear were constant companions, well into adulthood. Until one day, after everything fell apart, he was placed in the

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attic. I was placed in the attic. Helvetica's work suffered after that. Her public appearances became less frequent, her output stopped altogether.

### SCENE SEVEN

*Sound effect: Sound of the Future. Animal Shelter. Future Helvetica is looking at dogs, which can be portrayed in a number of ways, probably just mimed. Real dogs wouldn't really be worth it.*

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Well, Hello there! Hey fuzzyface. Are you ready to get out of here? I'll bet you are. I can't imagine having to stay cooped up in here. (*An ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER joins her.*)

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Neither can I.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** It must be so hard to work here.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Sometimes. Sometimes it's worth it, though.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** This one's a sweetheart.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Oh, absolutely. Found him living in a dumpster behind a restaurant.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Probably eating well, at least.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Poisoned, actually.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** ...oh.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Happens a lot. Dogs aren't really made to eat fast food.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Well, neither are humans.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Haha. Yeah, I guess not.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Seems okay now, though.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Do you have kids?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Nope. Just me.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** I think he'd be a great choice. Huskies aren't great with kids, but are usually very loyal. They just have to know you're the boss.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Shouldn't be too hard.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** What kind of dogs have you had in the past?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** None, actually. Not that I remember anyway. But my mother had dogs and...I've been thinking about her lately.



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**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Oh, really? Well, there might be some other ones that might be a little easier for beginners...

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** I think I like him. He looks, well, not like a Myron...like a Joharis.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** You a *Darkly Drear* fan?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** You could say that.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Oh my god. You're... (*She smiles.*)

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** I'm surprised you recognized me.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** I'm reading it to my son. He loves you.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Oh, children don't know books by their authors, just the stories. He loves *Darkly*. He's probably not even aware I exist yet.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Maybe not.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Sometimes I wish it were still that simple.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Everybody has a job, right?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** What?

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Well, I mean, we all think that certain people, wow, those actors, they've got it made. They get paid for playing around in front of a camera. But if you know any of those people, it's a lot of work, right? And the press, and they have to be away from their families. And you think, wouldn't it be nice to be a famous author, and just make up stories all day?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** And there ends up being so much more than that.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Yeah, you have to go on tour, and promotions and--

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Always be thinking of something new.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** And if it's not the same as *Darkly Drear*--

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** You get crucified.

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Yeah.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Or isn't it wonderful to be able to work with animals all day, and take care of them and find them good homes?

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Yeah.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** But there's more to it than that, isn't there?

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Yeah.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** What do I need to sign?

**ANIMAL SHELTER WORKER.** Come with me.

HELVETICA

SCENE EIGHT

*Sound effect: Sound of the Present. Present Helvetica and her Husband are at home. Myron enters.*

**MYRON.** People always asked Helvetica why she never had kids.

**HUSBAND.** So he left. Not like I can blame him.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** You don't think she had a right?

**HUSBAND.** A right to what? It was his kid, too.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** No, I agree. But ultimately it was her decision.

**HUSBAND.** Yeah but without telling him?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** It's complicated.

**HUSBAND.** I don't think it's all that complicated.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** What if it wasn't his?

**HUSBAND.** Well then, all the more reason--

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** What would we do?

**HUSBAND.** Oh, I get a say?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Let's imagine, for a moment, that you do.

**HUSBAND.** I don't know.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** We have money.

**HUSBAND.** But we have lives.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Some would say that a baby is the most important thing you can do with your life.

**HUSBAND.** What do you think?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Well, we always said we wanted kids someday.

**HUSBAND.** Someday is now?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I'm not saying that.

**HUSBAND.** You're very carefully not saying anything at all.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** It would be hard for me to write if I had to take care of a baby.

**HUSBAND.** I don't imagine you'd get much done for a couple of years.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Unless you quit your job.*(He laughs.)* Is that funny?

**HUSBAND.** Um, no...

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** It just didn't occur to you?

**HUSBAND.** No.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Why should I quit my job?

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**HUSBAND.** Because.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Careful. Cause I'm a woman? Cause I work at home?

**HUSBAND.** Cause you work at--

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I get paid pretty well for what I do at home.

**HUSBAND.** I know that, just...

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** More than you.

**HUSBAND.** Oh christ, Helvetica.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Oh, sorry. You like to forget that right?

**HUSBAND.** So you're deciding?

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I haven't decided anything.

**HUSBAND.** I'm sorry I laughed.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** No, it's fine. It's good to know how you really feel. It's not like you're feeding the hungry or anything.

**HUSBAND.** I like to think--

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** But you're wrong. You work for a bank. A collection of banks, actually. A conglomeration of banks, an abomination of banks, I don't know the collective noun for banks.

**HUSBAND.** Helv—

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** And we all know what banks do, don't we? Banks take. I'm working in my office, I'm giving. Every profession is either giving or taking. I'm making up stories, I'm putting something into people's minds, but you, you're taking. Banks take people's houses and their cars, and their family owned restaurants and the libraries and the museums and the theaters and the schools. And one day there won't be anything left but the banks. And then what will they take? Cause there won't be anything left. And as much as I give, the banks can always take more.

**HUSBAND.** Very poetic. You should put that in a story. *Comrade Mouse and the Soul of the Proletariat.*

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Fuck you.

**HUSBAND.** No, fuck you. You trade in fairy tales and tell yourself it's art. You're too selfish to have a kid and you want to blame it on me.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** You're right.

**HUSBAND.** What?

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### SCENE NINE

*Myron and Present Helvetica are telling a story.*

**MYRON.** It was a day like any other. The day she put me into the attic. It wasn't so bad at first. There had been times, of course, when I was on display in the guest bedroom. Sometimes months would pass without her noticing me, but it was always...temporary. The attic felt permanent, it felt...personal. Sometime after the divorce. It was sudden, but somehow I saw it coming for a long time.

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** I'm sorry, Myron. *(She puts him in the attic. This can be done in any number of ways.)*

**MYRON.** I don't wanna go away. Don't listen to him, you need something. You do. You're not who he thinks you are. No. Stop. Listen to me! Talk to me, Helvetica. Talk to me. Please. You do, you need me. Please. Please. Please. I know you can hear me. *(Present Helvetica can hear him, but she ignores him. Maybe she even tells herself she can't hear him any longer.)* Don't do this. I don't like it up here. Please let me out, I'm scared. I'm...I'm all alone. *(Myron exits. Present Helvetica sits down to write. As Present Helvetica narrates, two DANCERS, who may or may not be Past Helvetica and Husband, act out the story through dance.)*

**PRESENT HELVETICA.** Once upon a time, there was a Ballerina. And she was perfect. She was beautiful, and eternally young, and she danced all day and never got tired. Yes, she was perfect in all the ways you can be perfect. Except the most important way. She wasn't real. Instead of blood and bones and flesh and fingernails, she was made of wood and some clockwork parts, and when a small crank was turned, she danced to a number of different songs. She lived in a music box in the Toymaker's window, and little girls and boys loved to watch her dance, and their laughter made her happy. But one day she was sold to a rich man who worked in the heart of the Palace. An advisor to the Queen, they said. And when the advisor's wife opened the gift, she clapped her hands and laughed, and the Ballerina danced and danced. As the years passed, the advisor's wife would open her box every once in a while, and get a faraway look in her eye as the Ballerina danced, really giving it her all, her springs and gears straining for all they were worth, but then she would close the box again, sometimes for months at a time. When you're built to do one thing, any time not spent doing it is torture. And one day the advisor's wife died. There was a great funeral, and the day after the service, the

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advisor spent hours watching the Ballerina dance, over and over, watching her wear down, then turning the crank with tears in his eyes. It confused the Ballerina. Her dance was supposed to make people happy, not sad. So, she changed. She didn't think she could do it, go against her own clockwork like that, but she pulled and she strained, and she managed a *grand jeteé* in a totally new place. The advisor almost dropped the box in surprise. Could this little dancer really have changed her dance? Or was grief driving him mad? Late that night, he dreamed a familiar dream. He was dancing in a great ballroom, but for the first time, instead of dancing with his wife, it was the Ballerina. They danced through the old clockwork steps, and then the new *grand jeteé*, and then they were on their own, making it up as they went, and the Ballerina laughed. She had never danced with a partner before. So it went for some time. The advisor resigned his position, staying in his chambers most days, to watch the ballerina dance, and then meet her in a dream, where they would dance through the night. It was a year before he could admit to himself that he had fallen in love with her. He never said anything, not even in the dream dance. They let the dance talk for them; to ruin it with words would be something close to sacrilege. So he just watched her dance more and more. Hundreds of times a day, and all through the night. The Ballerina was in heaven. And then, the advisor realized that people would pay money to watch her dance. A music box ballerina should not be able to do a *changement*, but somehow, she could. The peasants would clap their hands and gasp and lay down their coins for the advisor, who began to demand more and more from the little ballerina. She didn't mind. All she ever wanted to do was dance, but strangely, after a number of years, just as the first strands of grey began to appear in the advisor's beard, she began to grow tired. The advisor had become very rich, but her schedule never wavered. She'd dance and dance, until her movements slowed, and the advisor would call an end to the day's entertainment, taking her home to rest. And while he begged her and pleaded to keep working, keep dancing, for just a few more days, a few more hours, a few more minutes, I need this, please, I need you to dance for me! Dance! Just a bit longer, and then we'll rest, I promise, then you'll only dance for me. And like a fool, like a little wooden-headed girl, she believed him. And she danced. And she stopped seeing him in her dreams, for now he only dreamed of himself. And then one day came, as these days always will. She missed a step once, jerking forward in her track like skipping forward in time, and the advisor gave a shout, and snapped the music box closed. He rushed into town, trying to find the old Toymaker's shop,

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finding it empty and dark, with a sign in the window that said “foreclosed.” He was afraid of opening the music box himself, terrified of doing something irreparable. The Queen’s great machinist took a look at the gears and the sprockets, and apologized. “It looks like she was loved,” said the machinist, and the advisor just nodded. He took the Ballerina back to his room and watched her dance again and again, her steps faltering more and more, until the music and her body stopped short, stuck in place forever. The little Ballerina couldn’t move, as much as she tried. The advisor put her back on the dresser, where she had spent so many years, locked away inside her box, but this time he didn’t close the lid. She could still see him, everyday, going about his business, waking and sleeping, but all the joy was gone. Without the dance, she became another piece of furniture, and sometimes he didn’t even remember that they had shared anything at all. But the Ballerina did. And when she dreamed, she was still dancing.

## SCENE TEN

*Sound effect: Sound of the Future. Future Helvetica is at lunch with her AGENT.*

**AGENT.** I know it’s been a tough couple of years.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Decades?

**AGENT.** Okay.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** You’re gonna ask me to write another *Darkly Drear*.

**AGENT.** Not necessarily.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** The story’s over. She’s grown up, what, you want me to write about her old age? *Darkly Depressed?*

**AGENT.** Please, no.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** I was joking. No one wants another Ballerina.

**AGENT.** Actually it did well overseas.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** I heard.

**AGENT.** People are more pessimistic there.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** What, are you hurting for commissions or something?

**AGENT.** Why’s it gotta be about that?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** It’s been ten years.

**AGENT.** And that’s too long without a book. You haven’t worked on anything?

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**FUTURE HELVETICA.** I had something, but...too close.

**AGENT.** Too close?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Too close to home. I don't think I want it published.

**AGENT.** What's it about?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** A girl and her father.

**AGENT.** Oh.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Right.

**AGENT.** Well, you be the judge of that. What about something new?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** You don't have any other authors?

**AGENT.** Not like you.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Oh, are you my biggest fan?

**AGENT.** If I wasn't your biggest fan, you'd be in trouble.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Okay.

**AGENT.** Kids forget, Helvetica. The Darkly kids are all grown up, just like her. I'm not saying that's it, I'm not saying they're not classics. Kids will read them for the next century, at least. But...

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** What?

**AGENT.** I think we deserve more.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Awfully demanding today, aren't you?

**AGENT.** I'm just saying...

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** I'm old.

**AGENT.** I want to read another Helvetica Burke book.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Before I die.

**AGENT.** It's always about death with you.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** I'll think it over.

**AGENT.** It's not as bad as you think.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** What's not?

**AGENT.** Everything.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Sometimes I just think I'm out of reasons.

**AGENT.** Reasons to write?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Excuses. Stories about better places, magic and romance?

**AGENT.** Have you thought about writing for adults?

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Ha. I have no interest in that.

**AGENT.** I think the cynicism would kill me.

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**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Probably.

**AGENT.** Just think it over.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** Maybe something will come to me.

**AGENT.** Call me. And get a dog or something. You'd be surprised.

**FUTURE HELVETICA.** I've always been afraid of dogs.

**AGENT.** A little old to still be afraid of things, aren't you?

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