

(Name of Project)

by
(Name of First Writer)

(Based on, If Any)

Revisions by
(Names of Subsequent Writers,
in Order of Work Performed)

Current Revisions by
(Current Writer, date)

Name (of company, if applicable)
Address
Phone Number

RESPECT HAS SEVEN LETTERS

SETTING: AN ISLAND SOMEWHERE. THE SOUND OF WAVES.
SIX SIGNS IN DIFFERENT HANDWRITING READ: NO MAN IS AN
IS LAND

JOEL plays island music DR.
ANTHONY plays bongos.

JOEL

In the islands we have a saying: "It matters not how
many fish there are in the sea if you have no bait on
your hook."

(JOEL walks back to his
instruments, plays a chord
or two then pauses.)

Actually, I made that up. Pretty good, right?

WENDY enters reading The Old Man
and the Sea.

WENDY

(reads)

He was an old man who fished alone --

(looks up)

I know that story--tossed from place to place, doing
the best you can all by yourself.

(reads)

Alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream -- skiff, what's
a skiff?

(looks up)

Must be some kind of boat. You don't go fishing in a
plane.

ODESSA enters.

ODESSA

I go fishing any way I can. Any time I can. Any
where I can. Ooh, I love to fish. I'd fish from a
plane if I could.

WENDY

(reads)

And he had gone 84 days now without taking a fish.

ODESSA

(looks at WENDY)

Ooh, that's too bad!

(looks front)

But, yeah, you know I can fish. It's so relaxing when you're fishing, you just, it just takes everything away. I love to fish. Bass, crappie, I fish it all. Except, ooh, I don't like to catch those catfish. They're good to eat but I don't like to catch 'em. When they get on your pole, ooh, I can't stand that noise.

ODESSA imitates sound of catfish on a pole.

WENDY

(reads)

In the first forty days a boy had been with him. But after forty days without a fish the boy's parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally salado --

(looks up)

oh, great, now we have Spanish words to deal with, too--

ENRIQUE enters.

ENRIQUE

(to audience)

That I can help with.

ENRIQUE whispers to JOEL and walks away.

JOEL

-- which is the worst form of unlucky --

WENDY

(reads)

--which is the worst form of unlucky --

(looks at JOEL)

How'd you know that?

(JOEL grins and shrugs)

The worst form of unlucky. Yeah, we'll see. I bet I could give him a run for unlucky.

(reads)

And the boy had gone, at their orders, in another boat which caught three good fish in a week.

(looks up)

Figures.

JIMMY enters.

JIMMY

Plenty times you ain't gone catch nothing. But sometimes you gone catch a lot. Never know. Might be you catch something really big. It's just the chase. Or maybe just being in that atmosphere.

ODESSA

(nods)

Just being there. Relaxing. I can fish for hours and hours, let it all go.

JIMMY

Yeah, relax. Unwind. I fish any chance I get. I have been known to fish six days in a week.

(growing more intense)

I like fishing on a boat, manipulating fish to bite; using different bait to catch a fish. We got a tournament -- who can catch the most bass in a year -- I caught 300 and some. Won that tournament. We have tournaments see who catch the most bass, who catch the biggest bass, who catch the most over five pound. One year I won all three.

(pauses, breathes)

Man's gotta have a way to relax.

JOEL

In the islands we have a saying, "Give a man a fish, feed him for a day; teach a man to fish, make him a liar for life."

(pause)

Actually, I made that up. Good, right?

WENDY

(reads)

It made the boy sad to see the old man come in each day with his skiff empty and he always went down to help him carry the gaff --

(looks up)

Gaff? Skiff, gaff, this guy likes little words with lots of f's. Me, I like H's. Now that's a pretty-looking letter. It can show up in any part of a word and do something different every time. It can even be silent. That's a hard-working letter. Like me.

Though nobody'd accuse me of being silent. Gaff--I have no idea.

(reads)

And the sail that was furled around the mast.

(looks around)

Furled? Furled?

ENRIQUE

(shrugs)

It's not Spanish, I can tell you that.

SUSAN enters.

SUSAN

(to WENDY)

It sounds sort of like curled?

(front)

Used to, I never looked anything up. I thought I could just intuit, just feel the meaning of a word.

Antebellum -- bell, auntie, it obviously had to do with old ladies and hoop skirts. Of course, I always thought asylum was alyssum, which has a very different feeling to it. As my parents pointed out, a dictionary can be useful. But not as much fun.

(to WENDY)

Furled sounds like curled but faster. A fast curl. Does that work?

WENDY

Works for me. Thanks.

(to audience)

The old man has the boy to help him. I have her. She's my tutor. We've been together so long we might as well be married. If you count common law, we probably are.

(reads)

The sail was patched with flour sacks and, furled -- there he goes again -- it looked like the flag of permanent defeat.

(shakes finger at audience)

That's not good. Don't you ever give up.

LAVERNE and ALLISON enter.

LAVERNE

(reads)

Row, row, row your boat, gently down the stream . . .

ALLISON

If you could row your boat anywhere, where would you go?

LAVERNE

(Considers)

Miami.

COPELAND enters.

COPELAND

I never give up trying to learn. One of the time I go back to school, I was so anxious to learn I go right up at the front of the classroom, and the teacher let me know I have to let the bright kids them come up to the front. I go back to school all right, way in the back.

JOEL

I know that's right. My mama she did send me to school. Every morning she say, "Joel, get up and go to school." But the teachers there they put stuff on the board and if you're not a bright person that understands, back of the class. See, they are hoping you won't come back.

MARY enters.

MARY

But you did come back. Eventually.

JOEL

When my 15 minutes of fame was up. Got no choice, then; time for some learning.

JIMMY

I learned plenty in school, just not how to read.

JOEL

Oh, yeah. I learned music and the music learned the parties and the parties learned the girls and the girls sure enough learned me. It never bother me in the islands, not being educated. I was having too much fun.

ANTHONY enters.

ANTHONY

Fun? We worked. Before school, after school, only place I got any rest was in school. On a farm, wasn't no playin'; it was just Get this wood in.

Work the garden. Feed the pigs -- those stinkin' smelly pigs. Basically, at school I just didn't want to do anything. School meant I got a chance to play. Some of the teachers was pretty mean, though. Made you eat soap.

(grins)

I was kind of like a terrible little boy. Got no direction. See my daddy, he was paralyzed. He was paralyzed in his left leg and his right arm. You always did want a dad that played ball or such but he was too old to play ball. And the cane didn't help.

WENDY

(reads)

Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated.

(looks up)

There you go--undefeated.

COPELAND

She keep trying and trying but my mom, she did have a lot of us, like about ten, so when my grandmother send me to live with my mom, there were already nine children in the house.

JOEL

There was ten of you? Us, too. I was the baby.

ODESSA

You had ten kids? Ooh. There wasn't but nine of us. I was somewhere round about the middle, I think, maybe fifth.

MARY

We had two.

SUSAN

I was an only child. An only child, living a small-town life in a 100-year-old house two blocks from town.

COPELAND

I was an only child when I live with my grandmother. Them other nine live with my mom. My mom try and send us to school, but maybe once a week. Sometime for the whole month we don't go to school. We have to wear uniforms, like blue shirt and khaki pant, and I not have them, so I never really go to school that much. But when I am 13, my dad say he going to start supporting us, but every week when we go to his house to get money for school, he always say he don't have any. Because he did get a lot of kids also, too, like all around the places.

WENDY

My dad? I just call him my sperm donor.

SUSAN

My father was a printer: business forms, wedding invitations, funeral programs, whatever anybody in town needed. I grew up listening to the rhythm of the printing presses. I did my homework there; I practiced clarinet there. I brought my first boyfriend there.

WENDY

(to SUSAN)

Ooh, "born to be wild."

(front)

More like "born to be well-read." Growing up underneath a printing press; you know, if life were just, that would be just . . . so unfair. I, on the other hand grew up in Humble, Texas. That's either a metaphor or just plain ironic.

(to SUSAN)

What do you think?

SUSAN

I think that's up to you.

WENDY

Yep. Born in Humble, Texas, in a trouse. Bet you never heard that before. A trouse is what I call a trailer that's been built-on so much it's kind of turned into a house. The nearest grocery store was about 45 miles away. Sometimes we'd ride the tractor to get groceries. It'd take about two hours.

COPELAND

It not take the teachers two hours to get groceries. They get it all done during class. They give you work to do and go run errands. Come back at the end, see what you done, and that's it.

WENDY

That was about it--work, school, work. My grandparents pretty much raised me: get up early, feed the pigs and chickens, go to school, come home, help Grandpa get ready for nighttime. Cut wood for the fireplace, haul it in. Like I said, work, school, work.

ODESSA

Oh, yeah, we had pigs, chickens, potatoes, tobacco. And a little bit of cotton.

JOEL

Cotton, yeah, that meant Christmas in the islands. The people take a tree--and it is dry, dry branches--and they wrap cotton around all the branches, cover the whole tree like it is snow and hang little jingly Christmas decorations on the tree. Never like here with a green tree because we never have any green Christmas trees.

When we are dreaming of a white Christmas, we are dreaming of a dead tree with cotton on it.

ODESSA

Ooh, I'm so sorry. Now, our house, it was made out of wood but not branches. And we didn't have lights, we had lamps. When we washed, we had to catch rain, didn't have running water, we had to catch rain water.

WENDY

We washed in this little bitty sink out by the toilet. It wasn't clear water so you couldn't use it to cook with or drink.

ODESSA

Now, we had a well to draw our drinking water, and we heat our water on the stove to take baths. We had a tub here and a tub there and a washboard. And we had the iron that you heat on the stove, and it was - whoo--it was a lot of work! We had a woodstove to cook with and our outside toilet was away from the house.

COPELAND

Why we all have outside toilets? Maybe there is something about outside toilets that make learning to read hard.

JOEL

In outside toilets maybe the reading material is not for reading.

COPELAND

My grandmother and we lived in a house it was so old it has big gaps in the boards, so we say you can stay inside and outside that house at the same time. We have to walk about two miles for water. We carry it in a bucket on our head.

Maybe that bucket weigh too much, maybe that is what is wrong with my head, why I struggle so hard.

WENDY

(to COPELAND)

Don't go on like that. You keep your head up.

(to front)

I say that to myself all the time: Keep your head up. I need to. My mom and dad was 14 and 17 when they had me, their little Texas rose. Huh. Know where my dad grew up? In Carrboro, North Carolina. Really. I think maybe my grandad helped start Fitch Lumber. And here I am, down the street from where he was born, by way of Texas and my literacy tutor. Now, that's strange. But my grandparents was better than any parents I can think of. Still are. They were the best things in the world to me. Not that my grandma wasn't capable of wearing out your hind end when you needed it. When I was 7 I stole a cigarette. My grandfather rolled his own tobacco. Rolled his own weed, too; it grew wild where we were. Helped his back pain. It just made me sick. The tobacco, not the weed. Good thing it was the tobacco I stole and smoked. Didn't matter to my grandma; she paddled me good.

ANTHONY plays bongos.

SUSAN

I loved the rhythm, the cadence of the printing presses. I'm still a sucker for a good drum beat. I just loved the sound of words being made.

WENDY

Trouse. There's a word being made. By yours truly.

JOEL

Words have a rhythm inside them. Some words you can sing. That's how I learned them. Mississippi.

(demonstrates)

I learned to spell early in life by singing.

MARY

Oh, really?

JOEL

(turns to MARY)

I forgot you were here.

(front, shrugs)

In the islands we have a saying, "Don't tell fish stories where the people know the fish." I learned to sing, anyway. When I was 5 years old this man name Mr. Jack moved into my village and he played guitar. It was the first time I heard something like this, cause we lived on a hillside--mountain, rivers, and all that stuff--and I keep hearing this pling, pling, pling, and I decided to follow the sound. And it was this old man. I ask if he can teach me how to play and he didn't hesitate; he say, "Yes, son" and put his big ol' guitar in my hand.

WENDY

(reads)

The old man had taught the boy to fish and the boy loved him. The old man and the boy sat on the Terrace and many of the fishermen made fun of the old man.

COPELAND

In the islands, people jeer at you, laugh up to you, if they find out you go back to school.

JOEL

They be like, "You know you too dumb to be going to school. Can't teach you nothin'.

COPELAND

The teachers, too. If you not real bright, they not real interested.

SUSAN

I just love working one-on-one with learners, adults to children. Because you do see from a very early age where they begin to get lost. And within a few years they are completely at sea. Because our educational system rewards only a narrow range of skills and misses the vast possibilities.

(passionate)

Every learner is capable of beautiful, creative, and artistic work.

COPELAND

(to SUSAN)

You never make it as a teacher in the islands.

SUSAN

Students don't always get to know how special and talented they are, because what we value as knowledge is so limited. But at every point along the way there is a chance to offer help, hope, commitment.

ODESSA

Special and talented? Uhn-uh. I'd've remembered if a teacher ever called me that. Our school was like, I guess, a log cabin. We didn't have glass windows, they were just made out of wood and you open them. We had maybe about ten kids, mixed ages.

WENDY

Us, too. There were maybe 20 kids--elementary to high school--all in one building.

ODESSA

The teachers, they didn't take time, because if you weren't up there, you was down here. I finally dropped out. Because my mom, she had nine children. She was, well, she was just a housemom; she never worked.

MARY

I think nine children counts as work.

ODESSA

Well, yeah, and she needed help, so I dropped out to help her. And help my brother. He was real smart. He was smarter than I particularly was. And he had all good grades and he want to go to school, so my mom let him. I wanted him to just go, go, go, so he could maybe teach me, you know. But that didn't happen. The last year at school Uncle Sam called and he went to the army. And I thought, well that's that. I'll never, I always be . . . back here, not up forward.

JOEL

Back of the class.

ODESSA

So I got married, you know. I thought that would be a way out, but it wasn't. I had a first child. That made it worse. I said, I can't go to school now; I have to look out for my child. Then I had another child and I said, no way out now.

WENDY

(pondering)

No way out.

(shakes her head)

Actually, my life was pretty way out. Not just way out in the country, either. When I was a child I lived with my grandparents. Then my parents broke in my grandparents' home and took me. It was a big mess, which as you might figure, didn't work out, and I ended up living in a shelter with my mom for 2 years. After all that, and a whole lot more we will not be going into here, I had to drop out of school when my mom got sick. Well, I didn't actually drop out, more like I was dropped out.

JIMMY

I dropped out when I was 16. I couldn't get out fast enough.

COPELAND

I never really drop out because I keep going back. I think the teachers, them wish I would drop out!

WENDY

With me, they did more than wish. I had to leave school to take care of my sisters. The school said they'd give me a home tutor so maybe I could get my mom out of the hospital and come back to school next year. Said if I needed any extra help they'd be there for me. Well, the tutor came. Twice. Maybe it was me, maybe it was how we lived -- I mean I was working, taking care of two kids, you know, doing a mother's job at 15, and trying to go to school with this tutor. She came twice and then I never seen her again - she never called, never sent a letter, nothing. I never heard from the school either. Not a word.

JIMMY

I heard from school, all right. Every year. I had special reading classes all the way through. It didn't matter. I was on the varsity football team, the wrestling team, I paid attention in class and could join in the discussions fine. That's why the teachers kept passing me. They'd make sure I was signed up for a reading class and then pass me. But I needed one-on-one and I didn't get it. Maybe a home tutor would've worked for me.

ANTHONY

What home? We were getting in the car to go to a wedding one day when my brother saw smoke. We tried to put out the fire, but the house went up, whoosh! With us watching. We lost everything.

Just like that.

(snaps fingers)

Like the Bible says, in the twinkling of an eye. My mom and I went to stay in town. Mama raised me to a couple more years, then she died. So, I had to quit school and get a job. Figured I could stand up and work for myself and supply my own needs. So, who was taking care of me at 15? Me, myself, and I.

JOEL

Best person to do it. When I grow into this 14-year-old not-wanting-to-listen-to-parents kind of person, and Mama say, or sister say, "I want you to do this," I say,

(looks around)

"I don't want to do that." And they say, "Fine, no food for you." And I say, "Okay, I'm gone." Cause there's fruits in the hills, put a hammock on a tree, and you are set. Everything you want is in the hills: bananas, mangoes, and no teachers. At 13 if you don't pass your common entrance exam at school, you're outta there. Time to get a wife and kids and supper on the table. Just like that.

JOEL and ENRIQUE snap their fingers on "that."

ENRIQUE

Just like that. My dad lose his job and he cannot afford to pay for college for all three kids. Both my sisters are in college, too, in Mexico. So I was like the only male in the family and I have a cousin here and he told me, oh you want to come to the US, a year, two years, make some money to send back to your parents. That was the plan.

ANTHONY

Make money? Sounds like a plan to me. My dad had left me a 62 Buick Special.

Had to make money to put gas in that thing--whole lotta money cause it took a whole lotta gas! Sounds hard being out there on your own at 15 but I had a car. I had an apartment. I mean that's living luxury to me. But luxury at 15 isn't luxury ten years later. Laying cable, driving dump trucks, construction, what not. I went back to night school a few times here and there but it didn't work out. I always quit going, said, "Oh, well, I gotta work, gotta survive, gotta have the things of the world." But you know, someday just something happen inside of you, a kind of emptiness you want to fill. Wanting that education. Wanting that GED or high school diploma. Wanting that piece of paper.

SUSAN

The paper, the Sunday paper is what made me want to read. The comic strips. I couldn't get enough of the colored pictures. I wanted to understand what was going on. I would study them and study them trying to figure it out.

SUSAN reads over WENDY'S shoulder.

WENDY

This guy's all about the paper, too, but it's on account of the baseball.

(reads)

"I have yesterday's paper and I will read the baseball," the old man said. "The Yankees cannot lose. Think of the great DiMaggio."

SUSAN

"But I fear the Indians of Cleveland," said the boy. "I fear both the Indians of Cleveland and the Tigers of Detroit."

WENDY

"Be careful," said the old man, "or you will fear even the White Sox of Chicago."

SUSAN

"You study the paper and tell me when I come back,"
said the boy.

JOEL

Study. Not a happy word. You can tell a lot about
words by the way they sound. Study.

(shudders)

Bad, very bad. I would get my schoolwork but there
was no help at home, there was no mama help, no
brother help, no sister help, my brothers married and
my sisters gone.

ODESSA

No, no help, cause my parents was busy with the farm
and they was sort of like me cause like my father
didn't know how to read or write and my mom, she knew
a little reading, but not much.

ANTHONY

Not much. If I came home with something I didn't
understand, nobody else understood it neither, so
what you do? Can't ask them; they don't know. Cause
my daddy didn't graduate, my brother didn't graduate,
my mama didn't graduate.

JOEL

So I say, "Mama, I got homework" and she say, "You
know how to do it?" And I say, "Yeah." And she goes
away. And I put the books down and, whoosh, outta
there. No problem.

COPELAND

It is all a problem to me. I even get to hate books
because I don't know what it is in it, you know?
Whenever time my friends use to talk about things in
the newspaper or something interesting in a book I
used to always feel dumb, so I go far from them and
listen.

ANTHONY

Go out on the balcony and try not to listen. My first wife was a nurse. She used to take me to their parties. Sitting there with doctors, lawyers, whoever, and they throw something at you -- I couldn't communicate with them. I didn't even have a high school education. Made me feel miserable. I just go out on the balcony and stay there till time my wife say, "You ready?" And I say, "Yeah, baby, I'm ready."

WENDY

This is a great book.

(slowly)

The Old Man and the Sea. Did you notice that every word in that title has three letters. Know why that's significant?

(pause)

Me neither.

(reads)

"I think of Dick Sisler and those great drives in the old ball park," said the old man. "He used to come to the Terrace. I wanted to take him fishing but I was too timid to ask. Then I asked you to ask him and you were too timid."

SUSAN

"I know," said the boy. "It was a great mistake. He might have gone with us. Then we would have had that for all our lives."

COPELAND

There was a teacher try to stick with me but I am too timid. I actually go to school barefooted for about two weeks. And then my teacher, she bought me a pair of shoes and I go to school for about six months straight. But the shoes finally get messed up so after that I didn't go back.

WENDY

Maybe it was a mistake not calling the school and raising a ruckus about the tutor. I was so disappointed, I didn't think about going back to school for years. People'd say, Did you graduate and I'd say, Yeah, I graduated. I didn't want to tell them the truth. Cause I felt like if that woman would've stuck in with me I'd've graduated.

COPELAND

My teacher, she came to my house a lot of times to get me in school, but I used to hide from her because I was, like, barefooted and don't have any proper clothes to wear, and I was so shy.

ODESSA

Nobody from the school was knocking on my door, I wish they was, I wish they did, but no. Maybe if they had, things'd been different.

JOEL

In the islands we have a saying, "If the sea were hotter, we could catch boiled shrimp."

(pause)

Okay, I made that up. "If," "would've," "should've," "could've"--I erase those words from my vocabulary. Them and "trying." There's no trying, there just doing and not doing. You gotta make up your mind and just do it. I think Nike ought to put me in an ad: holding a book, sweat pouring down, trying to read.

WENDY

(reads)

"I may not be as strong as I think," the old man said. "But I know many tricks and I have resolution."

JIMMY

You figure out all kind of tricks. You got to. It's like . . . I don't know what it's like. Not reading is like living in a foreign country all the time.

It's like there's a language everyone else knows, and you don't have the key to it.

ENRIQUE

Tell me about it.

ANTHONY

It's kind of eats at you, even if you try to act like it don't. Just knowing you could maybe have that key.

JIMMY

Books might as well have been blank for me. Nothing there.

ANTHONY

You know, I paint houses and looking at a book was like looking at a painted wall. Just all one big single thing, maybe a word here and there but mostly just paint.

COPELAND

It is like looking at the ocean: the letters make like waves, line after line on the page like waves on the ocean.

JIMMY

You just figure out how to cope. You gotta be smart. In a restaurant, you pretend to look at the menu while you listen, then order what someone else did. At the grocery store, you either have to look at the pictures, or remember where something is, or ask someone. With your mail, you got to remember the designs on the envelopes so you can tell what's important. Save that, throw the rest away. But you still gotta find someone else to read that important stuff to you. Even as a kid, you can't read the notes people pass you in class. You have to pretend to read it, fish around for clues, and if all that fails, get a good friend to tell you what it says.

But the place you get caught and can't get away is reading out loud. That's when you ask to go to the bathroom and never come back!

COPELAND

Reading out loud, that is the worst.

JOEL

That is the one time it bother me a little not being educated. I was involved in this rock and roll band and every week we would have like these little meetings and they would pass all these papers around to read. I would sit there by myself while they talked and try to cipher all these words, so when my turn come up at least I know I can read two three sentences. That was the one time I think I need to read more, to do things more with books. Cause before that, there was no book at all. Just a guitar. And parties.

COPELAND

If you do not have book sense, you must use common sense. When I leave school, I work at this hardware store. Sometimes my boss give me a list of items to bring from the stockroom. I take the list, look at box on shelf, look at list, sometimes there is a picture, I match the letters and the picture. Then it start to bother me; I start to feel bad about myself. But every customer that come to the hardware, in 7 years, they not know I can't read.

ODESSA

You figure it out.

ENRIQUE

Sometimes you can't. When I first come here I was driving and had an accident. I was really scared, cause that was the first time I was in a accident.

But I was really terrible in English, so the police officer kept trying to speak to me in Spanish but he doesn't know Spanish. And so they are bringing a lot of cops in, and they are like "Does anyone know Spanish? Know anyone who knows anyone who knows Spanish?" And the cop keeps asking me what happened and I try to tell him, and they are all laughing. Because he is going, "Oh I'm sorry I can't help you; I don't know Spanish. The only thing I know is Taco Bell." And then they all start saying, "Taco?" "Taquito?" "Burrito?" And I am like, "Hey, burrito is an American thing." But I could not speak even one line of English.

WENDY

(to ENRIQUE)

You're lucky they knew Taco Bell.

(reads)

He kept his lines straighter than anyone else did. I keep them with precision, he thought. Only I have no luck anymore. But who knows? Maybe today. Every day is a new day.

(pause)

There you go.

(reads)

It is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready.

ODESSA

Ooh, that is true. I was so ready. As my kids got older I said, "I need to do something for my self." I have a son, he's eleven. And I used to couldn't help him, like when he came to me with a problem with reading, or punctuation marks, or spelling. And that really hurt me. So I got this job at the university. And I worked, worked, worked till this opportunity for a class come along and then I grabbed for it.

WENDY

I didn't mean to grab for it. I thought the whole thing was a joke. I worked at the Dog House and this girl I worked with, well--turned out she wasn't just a girl, turned out we were third cousins, but--

SUSAN

There's an old joke about when two Southerners meet, they aren't satisfied till they find how they're related. And it's true. Because we all are, aren't we? Connected. Hooked together in ways we don't even understand.

WENDY

Exactly. So, this third cousin, she was taking these parenting classes and they said she had to go back to school. And I was like, what do you mean, school? And she told me about the Literacy Council. For some reason, the idea of school sounded kind of nice. She had the number right there so I called and left a message. I was like, "My name's Wendy; I'm just calling about some information. I'll call you back." And this girl said, "You didn't give them your phone number." And I'm like, I'm not giving no stranger my home number."

SUSAN

Certainly not a stranger with The Literacy Council!

WENDY

(to SUSAN)

Well, I didn't know.

(front)

So this girl says, "Well give 'em the number here, at the Dog House." And I was like, "Why? They ain't gone do nothing to me." And she says, "They might have a tracer on their phone." Here I hadn't done nothing bad, and she had me all scared.

MARY

We have that effect on people. The FBI, the CIA, the Literacy Council.

WENDY

So I called back. And left the phone number at the Dog House. Later that afternoon, they called and I was just real up front. I said, "Are you a joke?" Because of how that home teacher had gotten me all hopeful and then dropped me. But I could tell from this woman's voice that she was serious as day and night. We set up an appointment. I really didn't plan to go, but something got me up that morning and told me it was for real.

ODESSA

"Really?" That's what my son said when I told him I was going back to school. He say, "Oh, we gonna be in school together." Now when he asks me about schoolwork, I can look at it and say, "Oh no, that's wrong."

(grins)

That's exciting. It's still hard, but I do pretty good.

JIMMY

Reading and writing is still one of the hardest things. But you ain't got to be a speed reader, you know. When you ever see a race where everyone crossed the finish line at the same time? It's okay if it's hard and you got to take it slow.

WENDY

(reads)

He felt something hard and unbelievably heavy. It was the weight of the fish and he let the line slip down, down, down. What a fish, he said. He has the hook in his mouth and he is moving off with it.

(looks up)
That fish is pulling the boat!

SUSAN
Skiff.

WENDY
(to SUSAN)
Whatever.

(front)
That ain't natural.

COPELAND
When I open a book it is like it just take off
without me.

ENRIQUE
Yeah, in this country I have to start at the bottom.
I cannot read or write or even speak the language. My
first job was as a dishwasher. And, you know, I came
from college, and I was feeling really terrible,
like, what am I doing here? In the Cracker Barrel.

WENDY
You calling North Carolina the Cracker barrel? Come
to Texas sometime.

ODESSA
Now, they not all Crackers here. Some is. But some
are okay.

ENRIQUE
The Cracker Barrel. It is a restaurant where I wash
dishes.

JOEL
Oh, yeah, you scraping the bottom of the barrel
there.

JOEL plays piano riff.

ENRIQUE

But now I'm in a different place that I am a supervisor, supervising even people that, like, speak English and speak very well English. So I am pretty proud of myself.

COPELAND

Before I come here, they keep trying to make me supervisor at the resort. Three years in a row I win the award for best worker of the year. Sometimes if my boss is taking a day or two out, he leaves me to supervise. But because I cannot read I just cannot do it. Because of the paperwork. The personnel manager press me why I don't want the supervisor position since I am best fitted to do it. I have to explain to her that I cannot read and write. I feel the vibes to learn but I just cannot do it.

WENDY

That is known as a "stalemate."

(gestures toward SUSAN)

She also gives me vocabulary words.

(reads)

I can do nothing with this fish and he can do nothing with me, the old man thought.

(looks up)

Most folks just call it a catch-22.

(reads)

Once, he stood up and looked at the stars and checked his course. We must be going eastward, he thought.

(pause)

Well, at least he ain't lost.

SUSAN

To get completely lost, to dive into a book, to be so captured by a book that you don't hear what's going on outside, don't notice that you're hungry--I don't get lost that way any more.

ODESSA

I get lost just looking at the covers. I go by the books in a store and I'm like --

(ODESSA turns, stopped in her tracks by some books)

My daughter say MOM! And I say, I'm coming. I'll pick up anything just to read it. I like to curl up on the couch and read novels. Scary novels. Real scary novels. And when I read 'em, then the least little thing I hear is, like --

(JOEL whispers "boo" in her ear. ODESSA shrieks.)

I just love it.

COPELAND

I can get lost in a book but I don't think the way you mean. I pick up a book and it make no sense. So I am lost, all right.

JIMMY

Getting lost is always in the back of your mind. You can't go anywhere unless you already know how to get home. Can't be depending on street signs. It's hard to expand your horizons when you doing it all from memory.

JOEL

You better remember, cause you come out of the subway--
(throws his hands up)
It's hard if you cannot read the signs.

MARY

It's hard even if you can.

JOEL

Then you end up seeing the world without meaning to. Because if you're doing it all from hearing, Newark sounds a lot like New York and Petersburg sounds a lot like Pittsburgh. You can end up somewhere you really did not want to go.

(shakes head)

Newark.

ENRIQUE

I can tell you a funny story about getting lost. My grandmother, she could not read and write. She grew up on a farm. As a kid, she didn't care because everyone was like that. But when she moved to the city, it changed. She had to take the bus in Mexico City, and she get lost all the time because the sign up front of the bus telling where it is going--she cannot read it. We would get worried about her. One time she left for the supermarket and was gone for 5 hours. We called and called until finally we find her in another supermarket really far away. We never know where she will turn up.

ODESSA

I'm not sure that's funny.

WENDY

It's just like this book. The fish is so big it's pulling him out to sea. No telling where he'll end up.

JOEL

My fish was the music. That is what pulled me out of the islands. It wasn't like I sat there saying, Maybe next week I'll go to America or something, it just happened. Wasn't no plan. I didn't get no preparation for life. Well, it was told to me in subtle ways by my mama, like, "Boy, if you don't get an education, you gonna be stuck with a shovel and a fork."

MARY

Do you know the word subtle? Cause that what you said ain't it.

JOEL

It subtle enough that I don't listen. So I am 15, finished with school and doing construction. One day I am trying to learn how to build houses and singing. I am always singing. In the islands we have a saying, "Singing don't row the boat. But it sure make the trip shorter."

COPELAND

I never hear that one.

JOEL

(shrugs)

And this guy hears me singing and says, "Hey, you want to go to America?" I just stick the shovel in the ground and say, "There'll be no more of this." Next week, I am on a cruise ship in New York. Literally. Suddenly you're drinking, wearing clean clothes, your whole life change. Like that.

(snaps fingers)

I was loving it. Greece, Israel, Africa, Cuba, we went everywhere.

WENDY

Most of my traveling was more like: shelter, grandparents' house, school. "Traveling" is like a, a-

SUSAN

Euphemism?

WENDY

What she said. She likes fancy words. Tries to get me to use them. But "traveling" may not be completely accurate cause the kind of traveling I did from school, some folks call "running away." I may have shown my tail a time or two, but we'll just call it travel.

SUSAN

I didn't travel anywhere significant till I was in college. My world was small and I so much wanted a bigger world. I wanted to be introduced to different foods, languages, cultures. That was some of what I got from books.

MARY

When I was 6, I was sent away to boarding school. One of my presents was a book I still have. The story of Benji, a little dog.

ENRIQUE

Going away was really scary. Moving to a new place, a new language and everything. But now I like it; I like it to meet different people. I don't really want to stay in one place now. In Mexico, I was trying to be a doctor. So maybe I could work in a hospital in Mexico and then maybe move to South America. I want to go to Chile, Argentina - it's like, now there is something pulling me other places.

WENDY

(reads)

He could feel the steady hard pull of the line and his left hand was cramped. It drew up tight on the heavy cord and he looked at it in disgust. What kind of hand is that?

ODESSA

Ooh, that is just what I feel like saying sometimes when I am trying to type in this new computer class. "What kind of hands are you?" Especially when the teacher says it is time for a typing test. That is just so nerve-wracking.

JOEL

Test. Bad word. Tsssst. Like a snake. I don't like writing no test.

COPELAND

I used to feel bad a lot of times because the only writing I could do and not even a hundred percent properly is sign my name.

ODESSA

I don't like to write cause I have difficult spelling. And when they say let's write, I say, "Oh my goodness." I have to think. I can't concentrate with all that scribble scrabble going on.

(moves forward)

Now, just between you and me, there's things I want to put on paper. But it's like I'm not smart enough. You see other people that does it and you think, "Ooh, they're so smart-- I can't be that smart." But the truth is, I'd like to write a children book, something for kids. But I can't write like that.

JIMMY

I can write enough to get my thoughts down. However, spelling correctly interrupts those thoughts. When I focus on spelling I can't think what I'm trying to say.

JOEL

I can spell fine for myself. It's just if "Somebody Else"

(nods toward Mary)

has to read it, then we're in trouble.

MARY

It's the only time I felt like I was in over my head as a tutor. Joel and I were working on reading and things were going well and then the literacy counselor asks, "So, what are you doing about writing?" And I said, "What do you mean writing?"

JOEL

It would help if English made any sense. Now, math -- when I left school in the islands, I was at long division. Long division came and my brain stop thinking. That's when I quit. But now I'm doing fractions, decimals, algebra. Math has a route you follow along, but English? Spreads itself around all over the place. Like swamp water.

MARY

And despite the fact that I'm a good reader and I'm a very good writer and I like to explain things to people, it's a real challenge to break it down. And make it understandable. And make that understanding last.

JOEL

In the islands we have a saying, "English is like a woman, you can't understand her and she don't last."

(pause)

That, my friends, is a simile.

(pause)

Okay, yeah, I made it up.

WENDY

I love to write. I have whole notebooks of poems and stuff I used to write as a kid. My aunt was kind of my encouragement because she used to write poems, so when I was a little kid I kind of picked it up from her. I haven't wrote anything since she passed because it was kind of a hurtful time. She was 32. Her heart just quit. Well, her heart just quit, but it was on account of her being poisoned, which we will not be going into right now. A lot of what I wrote may not have made sense to other folks, but it made all the sense in the world to me. Writing takes me to my own world.

(reads)

He lay against the worn wood of the bow.

The first stars were out. He knew soon they would all be out and he would have all his distant fiends.

SUSAN

A star, a boy, and a puppy. The books I loved first and most all had animals in them. The puppy and boy had lost each other and the star brought them together. It was a beautiful book, well-loved and worn.

MARY

The Littlest Angel. That was my favorite. He was always getting in trouble because he was bored and missed earth terribly. When the call goes out in heaven for gifts for the Christ child about to be born, he gives an old wooden box with his most treasured earthly possessions: a robin's egg, a white stone, his dog's collar. And because the box is given with such love, it begins to shine, brighter and brighter, until it becomes the Star of Bethlehem.

WENDY

Don't it just figure that the two of them would have books about stars? They were born under a lucky star and have the books to prove it.

(reads)

"The fish is my friend too," he said aloud. "I have never seen or heard of such a fish. But I must kill him . . . I am glad we do not have to try to kill the stars . . ." We were born lucky, he thought.

(looks up)

Now, that's just beautiful.

COPELAND

I do not think I am born lucky, because I try and go back to school like 5 times and it not work. When I am at the hardware store I go to night school for about two months.

But then a hurricane come and blow off the roof and that is the end of that school. I am not kidding you.

JOEL

Man, that is --

(looks at ENRIQUE)

What is that?

ENRIQUE

Salao.

JOEL

Yeah. In the islands we have a saying, "Even a blind man will catch a fish if he keeps a-castin'." But in your case, maybe not.

WENDY

(to JOEL)

Is that a real saying? Just curious.

JOEL shrugs, grins.

SUSAN

And she is. Always. Enthusiastic, optimistic, honest, and curious.

WENDY

That's enough of that. The book I loved was Curious George. He was so happy, he always had a smile on his face.

(pause)

Okay, I know he was a cartoon and didn't have no choice about smiling. But it was just an inspiration to me. I wanted to be that happy. I would check that book in and out of the school library all the time. The librarian thought it was hysterical cause it's all I wanted to read. You could only keep the books three days so I would check it in and then check it right back out.

SUSAN

I loved going to the library.

MARY

My mother took me to the children's section, and we picked out a book.

SUSAN

It was in an old house and when you walked in there was a glass display on either side --

MARY

There was a limit on how many books you could check out, so I got my own library card.

SUSAN

And in the display were all these china First Lady dolls dressed in their inauguration gowns --

MARY

I think my mother was interested in me having my own card so she could put as many books as she wanted on hers.

SUSAN

They were dressed in satin and pearls and lace and silk. I loved going there to read . . .

COPELAND

I only go to a library here to get photocopies. There is always kids studying and sometime I am like, what the hell they are doing? How can they sit and study all night? It is better for them to sleep. Because what they are studying about? They can read already.

JOEL

Library? Never been. I did went after my daughter was born so I had to take her for her library card. But I'd drop her off and disappear. There's never such a thing in Trinidad. It was a word we knew of, library, but there was no actual thing.

COPELAND

When I try to read, the least noise I hear, it just get on top of my head; my brain start to shake like Jello. I have to stop, you know, walk away, drink some water, maybe do some exercises. I lift some weights and go run, run, run and then when I get tired, I go and sit. Then my brain come back together and I take up the book again. The librarians, them don't like this much.

ALLISON

In the summers, the library was my second home. I was so young when I got my library card I don't even remember it.

LAVERNE

I was 21 -- I just got my card this year. I always liked the movie The Little Mermaid, and now I can finally read the book.

ALLISON

What is it about the Little Mermaid that you like so much?

LAVERNE

She's pretty, she has long hair, and she can swim. I'm pretty and I have long hair but I can't swim.

WENDY

One year for my birthday, my grandmother bought me my very own Curious George book. I still have it to this day. I felt so lucky.

(reads)

"I'd like to buy some luck if there's any place they sell it," said the old man aloud.

COPELAND

I am not lucky with school. When I first come to this country I try again in California.

But the school is thousands of Mexicans in it. Even the teachers, they all speak Spanish.

JOEL

You come to America to learn English and end up in a school where they speak Spanish. Man . . .

JOEL gestures at ENRIQUE.

ENRIQUE AND JOEL

Salao.

WENDY

"I must not think nonsense," the old man thought. Luck is a thing that comes in many forms and who can recognize her?

(looks up)

Who can recognize her? Me! My luck --

(pause, turns to SUSAN)

is that woman right there. I was skeptical as can be about having a tutor, but when I walked in the room there was just an immediate connection. I don't know if it was her smile, her voice, her "I know we're going to work great together." She just lifted me up. Now she's my best friend. She's not just my teacher. When I have things bothering me, I'll hold them in till I can't hold it no more and then I spill it out on her. That how much that woman has my heart.

SUSAN

We have each other's heart.

WENDY

She made me believe not just that it was possible to get my GED but that it was only a matter of time till I did it.

ANTHONY

It's all a matter of time, and my tutor keeps her eye on that thing. I'm pretty outgoing;

I like to conversate with folks who are willing. But Kelly's favorite thing to say is, "Anthony, we have work to do." She's hard, but she means well.

(grins)

No, I have a great tutor. She just want me to get it. And Jerry, my other tutor, he's great, too. I painted his house. Hadn't painted Kelly's house yet.

(to audience)

I'll paint yours if you want. But I wouldn't take nothing for my tutors. Kelly gives me praise. She just gives me praise.

JOEL

Yeah, the perfect person I have this time to be my tutor is right here. She's taking me along the right tracks. She's keeping me straight.

MARY

(smiles)

She's trying.

ODESSA

It's better than when I was coming up. Learning. My tutor, I just love her. She coached me about a lot of things I didn't know. We work on writing paragraphs, which I couldn't do. Writing about things, like if I go out fishing. I am just so lucky to have her.

JIMMY

Sometimes good luck starts out looking like bad. I was supposed to fill out work sheets for the Parks and Rec Department, turn in paperwork to let them know what I'd done. But I wasn't turning in the paperwork and they didn't understand because I was a good worker. I kept making excuses--"I left it at home." "I don't have it today but I will tomorrow." "It got lost." The situation played out till my supervisor was going to have to do some kind of disciplinary action.

So I decided to tell him I wasn't able to fill them out. I figured he'd push it under the rug and that would be the end of it. But he took me over to the Skills Center that same day. And that? That changed my whole life.

WENDY

(reads)

Do you believe the great DiMaggio would stay with a fish as long as I will stay with this one? He, who does all things perfectly even with the pain of the bone spur in his heel?

(pause)

What is a bone spur, he thought. We do not have them.

COPELAND

Maybe it is a bone spur I have in my head.

WENDY

(reads)

Fish, he said softly, I'll stay with you until I am dead.

COPELAND

Every day I know that I'm getting older and older and I still cannot do what I would like to do. It is so sad. It is like I cannot learn to read but I cannot give up trying.

WENDY

(reads)

He'll stay with me too, I suppose, the old man thought. Fish, I love and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends.

COPELAND

I don't think no one in the world struggle like me. Sometimes I go to bed at night and two, three o'clock I cannot sleep it is like I am just praying, praying to God to help me. I just forcing myself to learn.

Sometime when I wake in the morning I just feel so tired, just ready to sleep. Like I am fighting something during the night, something that is trying to stop me from learning.

WENDY

The old man dropped the line and put his foot on it and lifted the harpoon as high as he could --

COPELAND

So, I'm telling you I push myself, I force myself to learn. I just cannot try any harder.

WENDY

And drove it down with all his strength. He felt the iron go in and he leaned on it and then pushed all his weight behind it. I have killed this fish, which is my brother.

COPELAND

And then something big happen. There is a seminar I have to attend for my landscaping work. I think someone is just going to sit and lecture to you, show you pictures. I was so bad lucky, because when I get there, the only seat is in the front row. And I was like --

(makes face)

Because ever since school I always sit in the back. And now I have to sit in front. And the man who is lecturing, he is right here with me. I was like, "Jesus." We have a folder and on the projector is everything that he's teaching you about. Then he say we are going to take turns reading. Out loud. My heart just jump like it is crazy. I mean, I don't know what he is going to say I must read. So I am like, "Jesus." Then my mind flash on this class immediately.

And it is like somebody said, "Come on Copeland, you can do it." I'm telling you suddenly is like my brain just start to expand-- like somebody stick a tube in my forehead and start to blow and blow some air in my brain and it start to get big. And he just come up and say, "Copeland, you first." First. I'm telling you, I don't know if it is a duppy in my head or what, but it's like I see the first and the last of the words and I know everything. And the projector keep switching, and it's time to read again, and I did it every time! I done it like about 20 times. I'm telling you, I feel so proud of myself. And he starts just call out, "Anyone want to read?" And I volunteer. I just do it!

JIMMY and COPELAND slap hands.

JIMMY

And that's what changed my whole life. If my supervisor had let me off the hook, I probably never would have learned. Reading was the greatest challenge I ever took on. I was sure I couldn't do it. But I began recognizing different words. I made myself read labels. Instead of taking shortcuts or looking at the pictures or asking someone. Because when you can read you feel like you can be a part of society. You feel like you deserve some respect.

ODESSA

Mostly, you just respect yourself more.

LAVERNE

Respect has seven letters. R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

JOEL

Re-spect. When I finally learn that words break down into syllables--that's when it's getting to be fun. Like when you come to a comma, you can feel the breath. Time to relax. Finish the thought--period. The end.

I don't have that sight reading yet, the way some people can just pick up something and whoosh. I have to settle down and read it slowly, but then I get it.

JIMMY

And I started getting it. I was doing so good I just wanted to scream and shout, do something to let other people know how my life is changed. I thought there might be some others with this need so we called a meeting for all the folks in the department. I told them my experiences. I told them everything I used to do to hide the fact that I couldn't read. I said struggling with reading was nothing to be ashamed of and asked did anybody else have that problem. Because there was help.

(pause)

We had 15 employees come forward that day.

ODESSA

That is so good! When I get my phone call, I was so excited I couldn't talk. See, we had to write a essay on why did we want to go to the Skills Class. And I want to get in that class so bad, because I want to learn computer. And when the teacher called me on the phone, she said, "Odessa, guess what -- you was one we picked. You're going to class, cause your essay stood out." I was so excited I couldn't even talk. She said, "Ooh, you are going to be one of our best students." And I was like --

(whisper)

"No, it can't be me. She got the wrong person, it can't be me." I was so excited; I couldn't believe it. That was my greatest moment. I always thought I couldn't be up above, I couldn't be--I was just low. And now, "Wow, I'm top of the class." I never dreamed that I could do the things that I do now.

ANTHONY

I had dreamed of writing a sermon, but then when it came time I wasn't so sure. I went to my tutor and said, "Kelly, Kelly, Kelly, you gotta help me. I have my initial sermon and I don't know what to do I don't even know where to start." But we did it. I preached about how love never change, how we all need to come together and love one another. It's praying time now. It went on and on and on. Trust me.

WENDY

(reads)

I have all the prayers I promised if I caught the fish, the old man thought. But I am too tired to say them now . . . I wish I could see the glow from the lights.

ENRIQUE

You know, I used to be able to see only like two miles around me but now it's like I can see like really far away.

WENDY

(reads)

I wish too many things, the old man thought. But that is the thing I wish for now.

ENRIQUE

I want to be an RN, then a doctor and work in poor places. I don't really care too much about money; I just want to make some people happy. It is like my life is spreading out before me, like I was skydiving and my parachute has opened and I can see a world of possibilities.

ODESSA

It makes me want to learn more and more. Because I like my job, I love my job, but I want something better. I've been doing housekeeping all my life. I clean dormitories. I love the kids;

it makes my day when the kids come by and talk with me, and I'm gone miss that. A lot. But I think I'm ready to move on. It's time for me to get a little higher.

WENDY

I always wanted to be a lawyer; I was always told I had the mouth on me for it. I still think about it sometimes, but I just think that I have a little too much mouth and a little too much attitude for a courtroom. But I love flowers and baking, so now I think when my ship comes in--sorry, when my skiff comes in, I want to have my own business. But my first goal is that GED. Cause I'm taking my test in June! And that is a beautiful thing. My GED is like a dolphin, breaking through water in the sunset. Like it's making a rainbow when it jumps. Making a wish.

JOEL

My GED is a big ol' cruise ship out on the ocean. Gonna take me where I want to go. In style. And where I want to go is the college music program. So I can then finally, at the end of my old and golden years, sit back and teach all the young ones that's around me. Pass on what was passed to me by somebody else. So maybe 20, 30 years from now, another guy can be talking about me like I'm talking about Mr. Jack.

JIMMY

It's all about the one-on-one.

MARY

Passing on what we've been given.

SUSAN

Being completely committed to that relationship.

ODESSA

It's wonderful when you think about it, that there is someone out there just for you.

JOEL

Match dot com for reading.

WENDY

In Texas we have a saying, "No matter how big the sea, sometimes two ships meet."

JOEL

Really?

WENDY

Are you kidding? Ships? In Texas?

COPELAND

I just want to get my kids here. So maybe they not have to struggle like I do.

WENDY

Yeah.

(reads)

A man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated.

(looks around)

Don't you ever give up.

ODESSA

I might give out but I won't give up.

WENDY

(from memory)

I am glad we do not have to try and kill the stars.

(looks over the audience,
nods)

I reckon we were born lucky.

(hugs book to her chest)

It's the love of my life. My husband says, "I thought that was me." And I say, "Nope. Sorry." This is it.

(pats book over her heart)

This book, this reading, these words, all this-- that's the love of my life.

Lights down.