Role of Ambiguity in the Emotional Effectiveness of *Erlkönig*

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Acknowledgements

When I started college I had no idea where I was going. Somehow, I ended up enrolled in a Basic Music Theory class, taught by Dr. Larry Van Oyen. This course included my first encounter with Schubert’s *Erlkönig*. I didn’t hear it again in any form until the summer before my sophomore year, when Bryan Taylor, my friend, mentor, and former Resident Assistant, performed Goethe’s “Der Erlkönig” in its original German at the RA Training talent show. I didn’t recognize the poem at all, but I remember Bryan’s performance. The winter of my sophomore year, I took another class with Dr. Van Oyen, this time an Honors Seminar called “Math, Music, and Art.” It was during this seminar that *Erlkönig* left its lasting impression on me. The lyrics, Goethe’s poem, drew my full attention. I began to think of the story within the context of my newly declared major, Psychology. Through many extensive, enthusiastic conversations with Abby Bucey, by far the most important person I met in my time at North Central College, it was concluded that *Erlkönig* was the perfect piece of source material to inspire an extensive interdisciplinary project.

Unfortunately, Abby’s changes in academic Major and career goals led to her abandoning the project. However, her support and encouragement were ever-present. The project continued to develop under the invaluable guidance of my advisor, Dr. Mary Jean Lynch, and my Honors 300 professor, Dr. Mara Berkland. Without the constant reassurance and patience of Dr. Lynch, the psychological portion of this project would have been a lost cause. When my senior year schedule became, shall we say, cumbersome, Dr. Lynch helped me find a research assistant. This truly excellent young woman, Emily Kendall, executed the majority of my data collection while I was participating in an Acting Internship at Chicago Shakespeare Theatre on Navy Pier.

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Role of Ambiguity in the Emotional Effectiveness of *Erlkönig*

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Abstract

Contemporary cultural fear of mental illness can be seen as comparable to the fear of the supernatural in earlier times. This study examined how changing fear-inducers changes affective state. Participants read an English translation of Goethe’s “Der Erlkönig” while listening to its musical adaptation by Schubert. They read the story from one of three perspectives: literal, in which the Elf King was actually present (Supernatural); metaphorical, in which the Elf King was the result of the son’s schizophrenic hallucinations (Mental Illness); or unspecified, in which any and all interpretations of the story were valid (Ambiguity). Participants then completed a questionnaire rating their fear reactions. It was found that participants in the Mental Illness condition experienced the most fear toward the son, presumably because schizophrenia stigmatized that character, creating an emotional barrier between character and reader. Additionally, participants in the Ambiguity group showed the greater degree of empathy toward the son.
Role of Ambiguity in the Emotional Effectiveness of *Erlkönig*

Reviving old stories for modern audiences has become a very common practice in the performing arts industry. Many times, if a tale is not reproduced verbatim, essential elements and themes are preserved while settings, dialogue, and characters are reconstructed to accommodate the present-day zeitgeist. The process through which artists determine which elements to preserve and which to alter has commonly been one of artistic judgment, if not trial-and-error based on responses from audiences or critics.

Goethe’s 1782 folk-lore inspired poem, “Der Erlkönig”, tells the tale of a father and his child riding through the forest on horseback. The child begins to call out to his father because he believes a mystical Elf King, which is invisible to the father, is speaking to him from the shadows. At one point in the poem, it is insinuated that the Elf King grasps the child and causes him physical pain and injury. The tale ends when the father rides out of the woods, looks down, and finds his son dead in his arms.

The poem does not attempt to answer what actually occurred in the forest, nor does it try to realistically explain how the child died. Many believe this ambiguity is the most disturbing and intriguing aspect of the story. Goethe, when discussing how his poem should be set to music, is quoted as saying, “The thing to do is to place the auditor in the mood that the poem suggests; letting the imagination then create its own figures…without his knowing anything of the how of the process” (Gibbs, 1995, 119). Goethe advocated an open interpretation of the events in his poem, and essentially condemned any artistic liberty, primarily on the part of a musical composer, that attempted to lend any additional specificity to the piece (Gibbs, 1995).

When Franz Schubert composed and published a musical setting of Goethe’s “Der Erlkönig” in 1815, the consensus from critics was that his music was brilliant. However, those critics also concluded that Schubert’s musical setting did Goethe’s poem an injustice (Gibbs,
1995). Schubert’s Lied, titled *Erlkönig*, begins with driving triplets on the piano, a hectic rhythm that persists throughout the majority of the piece. From the first notes of Schubert’s song, the audience can feel the haste with which the father and son are riding, which the critics saw as violation of Goethe’s wishes for ambiguity. Other components, such as the obvious fear in the child’s voice, the seductive and sensual manner in which the Elf King spoke to the boy, and overall “tone painting” use in Schubert’s music, raised similar criticisms. Schubert’s interpretation was accused of “too boldly impress[ing] itself on the listener’s imagination” (Gibbs, 1995, 122) through unnecessary specificity, leading to a misreading of Goethe’s lyrics.

While hearing Schubert’s piece, some listeners perceive that the son is sick, that the pair is riding through or away from a ferocious storm, or that they are being chased (Gibbs, 1995). All of these, while valid interpretations, are not what Goethe wanted audiences to conclude from the start of the narrative (Gibbs, 1995). If the audience came to those conclusions, or any conclusions, Goethe wanted them to do so in their own time and by their own imaginative mechanisms, not as a result of the decisions or creative liberties taken by the composer (Gibbs, 1995). Essentially, it was concluded that Schubert had missed the point of Goethe’s poem, and that his take on “Der Erlkönig” was wrong.

Gibbs (1995) cites a list of the stylistic and literary contrasts between Goethe’s poem and Schubert’s song: “…one might construct a contrast between the ‘Goethean’ and ‘Schubertian’ conceptions of the poem; *Goethean*: Uncanny, Progressive, Narrative, Phantasmagorical, Imaginative, Mysterious, Episodic; *Schubertian*: Human, Dramatic, Pictorial, Material, Realistic, Atmospheric, Unified” (124). If preserving Goethe’s concept of the poem was essential to maintaining its effectiveness at evoking fear and confusion, one could conclude that the “Uncanny…Phantasmagorical, Imaginative, Mysterious…” elements needed to remain
unchanged. After all, for a large portion of earlier history, the Elf King legend and stories like it were terrifying because most people believed in the supernatural; they did not doubt that these uncanny, mysterious phantoms could actually cause them harm (Lange, 1999). In other words, letting listeners perceive the events in “Der Erlkönig” as being supernatural was essential for evoking fear in those listeners because that was the type of fear-inducer they knew.

Schubert’s tendency in his songs was to “[use] worldly phenomena as metaphors for states of mind” (Gibbs, 1995, 123). With *Erlkönig*, Gibbs (1995) asserts that Schubert “captures the dominant psychological state of the literary text” (123), leading readers to “conclude, as many have, that the child [in *Erlkönig*] is hallucinating (118). This reading, in a way, is the opposite of the “Goethean…Uncanny…Phantasmagorical” reading. Based on the reactions of his critics, Schubert’s concept of the poem may have been ahead of its time with its “Human…Material, Realistic…” insinuations.

Despite the criticisms, Schubert’s *Erlkönig* remained the most popular, praised, and widely performed setting of “Der Erlkönig” ever written (Schroder, 2002). The song has, in some ways, surpassed the poem in its reputation for evoking fear (Gibbs, 1995). It has also continued to be the subject of debate in terms of how it should be interpreted (Schroder, 2002). Schubert’s setting leaves plenty to the imagination, poetically and musically (Thomson, 1983). Not everyone hears Schubert and concludes that the child is hallucinating; some listeners hold to the idea that the Elf King is a supernatural being, physically present in the events of the song (Gibbs, 1995). Perhaps Goethe’s demands for maximum ambiguity were unnecessary, as the emotional effectiveness and thought provocation of the poem have not been lessened by the musical setting.
It is more or less beyond debate that Goethe’s poem deeply affects those exposed to it. From a cultural perspective, the piece has become virtually ubiquitous in the Western art tradition and is almost unanimously considered a poetic masterpiece (Gibbs, 1995). Schubert’s musical setting is one of dozens that have been composed in attempts to do “Der Erlkönig” justice (Gibbs, 1995). In fact, there are so many settings of “Der Erlkönig” that it spawned its own musical tradition (Gibbs, 1995). The countless pieces of artistic homage, musical or otherwise, paid to “Der Erlkönig” are evidence of Goethe’s pervasive creative influence.

Scholars also assert that the potency of “Der Erlkönig” goes beyond its literary value, stemming from the natural human response to the poem’s content. In a 2010 article by Spitzer, Schubert’s Erlkönig is dissected and analyzed on both a musical and literary level. Specific moments were identified in both Schubert’s music and Goethe’s lyrics which utilize some of the most basic fear stimuli. Spitzer (2010) points to how Erlkönig evokes the Flight aspect of Fight-or-Flight through the driving piano triplets as well as Goethe’s lyrics, how the piece utilizes descending patterns of emotions to induce fear rather than suggest hope. It is also acknowledged that the switch from lyricism to recitative toward the end of Schubert’s composition simulates a freezing of time, similar to what is experienced in extreme fear situations (Spitzer, 2010). This analysis suggests that the mere content of “Der Erlkönig,” regardless of setting or interpretation, is enough to have an effect on an audience.

The apparent generalizability of the emotional events depicted in “Der Erlkönig” even led psychoanalyst James Herzog to coin the phrase “Erlkönig Syndrome” when referring to how some childhood fears develop due to parental modeling or a lack of parental guidance (Spitzer, 2010). A study by Murris, Merckelbach, and Collaris in 1997 strongly supports the idea that childhood fears can originate from parental modelling (87% of their sample). The same study
identified frequently reported childhood fears. On their list of Top 10 fears, were being kidnapped, predators, the dark, frightening dreams, thunderstorms, ghosts, and spooky things. All of the above mentioned fears feature prominently in Goethe’s poem, Schubert’s song, or both.

Goethe’s contemporaries believed that his “poem [could] not be improved on” (Gibbs, 1995, 122) While this belief may arguably be true, the effectiveness of Goethe’s “Der Erlkönig” was not negatively impacted by Schubert’s interpretation and musical setting. Why might this be the case, if the ambiguity of the piece, the literary element that Goethe himself argued to preserve, was decreased by the Schubert’s music? It is possible, as stated above, that Schubert’s specifications left enough ambiguity intact to preserve the essence of Goethe’s poetic intent. What would happen to the piece’s effectiveness if even more specificity was added, leaving less and less to the imagination? It may also be that the content of “Der Erlkönig” is simply too intrinsically fear-inducing to be decreased by additional specificity. Would different fear-inducers affect audience members differently?

Even without explicitly stating it, Schubert’s music led audiences to interpret the boy’s experience with the Elf King as a hallucination (Gibbs, 1995). Though Schubert’s setting was less ambiguous than Goethe’s poem, it did partially follow Goethe’s instruction by letting audiences reach their own final conclusion. If Goethe’s instructions were ignored entirely, and it was explicitly stated that the boy was hallucinating, how would this affect the piece’s impact on the audience? To further push the bounds of ambiguity, one could even state that the boy is schizophrenic. Schizophrenia would certainly be a different fear-inducer, and one of comparable intensity to that of a murderous Elf King (Muris et al., 1997; DeLisi, 2011). On the other hand, if the ambiguity were to be eliminated by explicitly stating that the Elf King was actually present,
implying that the child is psychologically unimpaired, how would the story’s emotional impact be affected?

One might also ask what it means for a piece to be “emotionally effective.” In the case of both “Der Erlkönig” and Erlkönig, part of the effectiveness is the piece’s ability to evoke fear. In addition, as these pieces involve identified characters, effectiveness can also be measured in audience empathy and emotional investment in the characters (Johnson, 2012; Wilson & Cantor, 1985). Perhaps in earlier generations, it was simply assumed that audiences would empathize with the fearful, helpless child or his equally helpless, mourning father. Would this empathy be affected, altered, or decreased if it was explicitly stated that the child was not being pursued and attacked, but was hallucinating? If it was stated further that the child had schizophrenia, a highly stigmatized mental illness, would the audience be emotionally invested or empathetic at all? Or, perhaps, would the changing contemporary attitude toward mental illness evoke even more empathy in a modern audience than the idea of a malevolent elf?

Teherani, Hauer, and O’Sullivan (2008) assert that empathy can be assessed and measured via simulations. Based on the assumption that the Schubert’s Erlkönig is highly emotionally effective, it is not implausible to think of an audience as being in a kind of emotional simulation (Johnson, 2012; Wilson & Cantor, 1985; Spitzer, 2010). The audience’s empathy toward the characters in Schubert’s piece could then be measured and analyzed. If levels of ambiguity are altered and the audience is consequently more emotionally invested, those differences will be measureable. In other words, it can be preemptively established that the child is schizophrenic or that the Elf King is real, and any variation in the song’s effectiveness on the audience can be subsequently measured.
The question for the present study is whether the common interpretation of Schubert’s *Erlkönig*, that the child is hallucinating, should be made explicit. Ambiguity has been widely regarded, though not empirically supported, as one of the foremost functional elements in both “Der Erlkönig” and *Erlkönig*. By explicitly stating that the child is (1) mentally ill or (2) experiencing a supernatural event, and measuring the effects these assumptions have on the piece’s effectiveness, this study is evaluating both the role of ambiguity and significance of specific fear-inducers on the emotional effectiveness of *Erlkönig*.

The hypothesis of this study is that further decreasing ambiguity will result in a decrease in emotional effectiveness and audience investment. Though the specificity added by Schubert did not negatively impact the effectiveness of the piece, it was hypothesized that additional specificity will put too great of a limit on the audience’s imagination to induce comparable measures of fear.

Furthermore, it was predicted that explicitly stating mental illness as the cause of the Elf King’s appearance will evoke negative stigma of the child and decrease the audience’s empathy toward that character. Labeling the child as schizophrenic could produce an emotional barrier between the audience and the child, despite the generalizability of the fear he is experiencing.

The purpose of this study was to use its findings to inform the writing of a new version of the Elf King legend as a modernized staged play.

**Method**

**Participants**

A total of 65 participants were used in this study. All of the participants were college students enrolled in introductory Psychology courses at North Central College who took part in this study in order to satisfy a course requirement. All participants were 18 years of age or older.
Materials

Three prompts were used. The first prompt asserted that all interpretations of the song were valid. The second prompt asserted that the Son was schizophrenic (Mental Illness). The third prompt asserted that the Elf King was real and physically present. Attached to the back of each prompt were the lyrics (Goethe’s poem) in script format, with the names of the characters listed next to their verse or line of text. A recording of Schubert’s *Erlkönig* via a YouTube video, accompanied by English subtitles, was shown. A questionnaire was designed containing 29 5-point Likert scale questions and six free response questions regarding audience experience while listening to the song.

All three prompts, both the German and English lyrics, the lyrics by character, and the questionnaire are provided in Appendices A, B, C, and D, respectively.

Procedure

Groups of 1-10 participants took part in each session. Participants were randomly assigned their respective prompts to read and instructed not to turn to the next page until told otherwise. When all participants finished reading, they were shown the YouTube video. The video, lasting just over 4 min, was watched in full with no pauses or breaks. Upon completion of the video, participants were allowed to turn to the page with the lyrics in script format. After the lyrics had been read, participants were allowed to keep the lyrics while they completed the questionnaire. After the questionnaires were completed and handed in, participants were debriefed and free to leave. Typical sessions for this study lasted approximately 20 min.

Results

Responses from the 29 Likert scale questions were analyzed using a One-Way ANOVA. Two items yielded significant effects of the prompts. A Tukey HSD was run to determine which specific groups were significantly different from each other.
“I thought the Son was scary.” The Mental Illness group \((M = 2.23, SD = 0.92)\) agreed significantly more than the Ambiguity \((M = 1.46, SD = 0.51)\) and Supernatural \((M = 1.62, SD = 0.81)\) groups, \((F(2,62) = 6.21, p = .003)\).

“When the Son was scared, I was scared.” The Ambiguity group \((M = 3.46, SD = 1.22)\) agreed significantly more than the Mental Illness group \((M = 2.64, SD = 0.95)\), \((F(2,62) = 3.27, p = .045)\).

Two manipulation checks also yielded significant results:

“I believe the Elf King was really there with the child.” The Mental Illness \((M = 2.05, SD = 0.95)\) group disagreed significantly more than the Ambiguity \((M = 3.27, SD = 0.83)\) and Supernatural \((M = 3.00, SD = 1.18)\) groups, \((F(2,62) = 9.21, p < .0001)\).

“I believe the child was reacting to nothing (or Neutral stimuli, i.e. shadows, wind, fog, etc.)” The responses of the Ambiguity \((M = 3.455, SD = 1.101)\), Mental Illness \((M = 2.682, SD = 1.086)\), and Supernatural \((M = 2.714, SD = 1.056)\) groups were significantly different, \((F(2,62) = 3.57, p = .034)\).

**Discussion**

The results support the hypothesis that decreasing ambiguity decreases emotional effectiveness and audience investment. First, these results could indicate that ambiguity is, indeed, an essential literary element of the story in terms of maintaining audience investment via emotional attachment to individual characters. The audience’s engaged imagination and the amount of uncertainty they were experiencing from the Ambiguous prompt could have made the audience more susceptible to the fear-inducers. The uncertainty they felt may have resembled the uncertainty they perceived from the Son’s lyrics, which then could have fostered empathy for the Son. Explicitly naming a reason for the Elf King’s appearance decreases this same area of
Audience investment. This decrease could be a result of the audience’s imagination being less engaged, as Goethe might argue. Second, it may be because the reason explicitly stated was that the Son was schizophrenic and hallucinating. This statement very well might have stigmatized the character, making it more difficult for the audience to empathize with him.

Participants in the Mental Illness group also showed significantly more fear toward the Son than the Ambiguity or Supernatural groups. This further supports the prediction that explicitly stating schizophrenia as the reason for the Elf King’s presence negatively stigmatized the child. Explicitly naming the fear-inducer lessens the degree to which listeners empathize with the character of the Son, especially when the fear-inducer is potentially stigmatizing, such as Schizophrenia.

The manipulation checks showed that the initial perspective from which the participant heard the song did influence at least the simplest levels of interpreting the story. Participants asked to assume that boy was schizophrenic were less likely to believe the Elf King was actually present. There was also a significant difference between groups in terms of whether they believed the boy was reacting to neutral stimuli, which indicates that the prompts successfully influenced participants’ interpretation of certain details in the story.

In future studies, the experiment might be redesigned to only include Goethe’s poem, rather than Schubert’s music and the accompanying lyrics. This new design would, to a degree, remove any initial creative liberties on Schubert’s part and return the poem to its original levels of ambiguity. Significant differences may exist between reactions to Schubert’s music and lyrics and reactions to only Goethe’s words. A comparative study between the two stimuli could yield a better understanding of precisely how the musical setting affects the interpretation and effectiveness of the poem.
The present study contained only three conditions: Ambiguity, Mental Illness, and Supernatural. The Mental Illness group, through the use of the schizophrenia label, showed significant stigmatization of the Son. However, this labeling was an extreme case of disambiguation. It may be more useful, for the purposes of precisely measuring effective levels of ambiguity, to add more conditions on a spectrum of both specificity and severity. This spectrum could range from an ambiguity group, to an illness group, to a hallucination group, to a mental illness group, to a schizophrenia group, each with its own respective prompt. Or, as there are many causes for hallucinations, a prompt could be written to assert that the boy is suffering from a physiological malady, such as a fever or tumor. Additionally, a physiological explanation may actually increase audience investment and emotional effectiveness through sympathy rather than empathy.

Utilizing the Present Results

The goal of the present study was to gather data to inform the writing of a modernized version of “Der Erlköning” and to include subjects such as mental illness. I presented this plan to the North Central Theatre faculty and was lucky enough to be accepted in to the 2013-2014 Student Directed Series. “Erlköning,” an original theatrical work I have written and am currently directing, will run from May 22nd to May 24th, 2014.

Based on the results of the experiment, I only had to adhere to two simple guidelines when writing the script: Do not explicitly name Schizophrenia, or any other stigmatizing mental illness, as the reason the boy sees the Elf King; and preserve and utilize as much ambiguity as possible. Beyond these two specifications, I relied only upon my own judgment, research, and feedback from peers and professors to devise the plot and content of the script.
While writing the play, I drew as much material and thematic information as I could from Goethe’s poem. I am also planning to integrate arrangements of Schubert’s music into the play whenever appropriate. Because my study involved Schubert’s setting rather than Goethe’s poem alone, it would seem inconsistent to apply Schubert-based results to a Goethe-only modernization. I cannot deny that Schubert’s music has irreversibly changed my reading of Goethe’s poem.

I truly agree with Goethe’s contemporaries when they referred to “Der Erlkönig” as a masterpiece of poetry (Gibbs, 1995). Throughout the script, I inserted either quoted or paraphrased lines from “Der Erlkönig” and used Goethe’s phrases to title my scenes. The three major characters, father and son and Elf King, were all included. However, through the process of modernization and expansion, many characters were added. For some of these new voices, I was able to draw from other relevant pieces of source material, some of which undoubtedly informed Goethe’s own writing (Schroder, 2002).

“Der Erlkönig” was not an original concept. The imagery of a mystical being kidnapping or killing children is thousands of years old, dating back as far as Babylonian and old Hebrew mythology (Schroder, 2002). In the lore surrounding the creation story, Lilith, Adam’s first wife before Eve, was cast out of Eden and rejected by both Adam and God for disobedience. Lilith later became an evil demon that abducted and killed human children (Schroder, 2002). Keeping with this Hebrew tradition, I named the son Ben and the father Dave. “Ben” is a Jewish patronymic prefix; it translates to “son of,” which I thought very fitting. Dave, a form of David, draws from the story of King David, the father of the Jewish monarchy. I also added a mother character, named Lilith. Initially, naming this character was a novel reference to the Hebrew
Ambiguity in *Erlkönig*

myth. However, as the plot developed, the folklore surrounding Lilith began to influence the character’s role and language more and more.

“Erlkönig” does not directly translate to “Elf King” in German. A direct translation of the literal term is “Alder” or “Oak” king. Based on this mistranslation, scholars have determined that Goethe’s poem drew from an earlier work by Johann Gottfried Herder, in which Herder mistranslated the Danish folktale of the “Elf King’s Daughter” to “Erlkönigs Tochter” rather than the literal and appropriate “Elfenkönigs Tochter” (Kostka & Graybill, 2004; Schroder, 2002). From this mistake, we know that the figure of the Elf King’s Daughter, who in the folktale murders a man who would not succumb to her seduction as he rode through the woods to his wedding, played a prominent role in Goethe’s inspiration. To acknowledge this important source, as well as the reference Goethe makes to the Daughter in his poem, I included and featured a character referred to as “Girl” who is meant to fulfill the malevolent, seductive archetype.

Not all of the additional characters had an academic or historical source. Some characters, like the Conductor, Therapist, and Medic, were written for stylistic and/or logistical purposes. I also wrote in a character named Phil, later changed to Paige for casting reasons, whose initial purpose was to further the plot. However, Paige quickly became a comic relief character.

I took many liberties in modernizing the Erlkönig legend when writing my script. One such liberty was writing a bedtime story that very loosely follows Goethe’s plot, but does so in a way that I thought fitting for a child to hear. This embellished story, among other events, served as the foundation of Ben’s encounter with the Elf King later in the play.
Schubert’s musical incarnation of the piece prominently features the horse by using the constant, steady, driving triplet rhythm on the piano, the musical element for which he was most chastised by critics supporting Goethe’s assertion of ambiguity. It is a virtually undisputed assumption among musical scholars that the triplet rhythm represents hoof beats (Kostka & Graybill, 2004). For reasons too numerous to list, I could not include a horse in my play, nor did I want to. However, due to the perpetual motion in both Goethe’s and Schubert’s interpretations, I felt the need to include a comparable mechanism for travel. I therefore set a large portion of my play on a train. The train provides a similar driving rhythm, a comparable “vehicular” mechanism to keep the events of the story in motion. Setting the play on a train also provides many more interesting staging opportunities than other vehicles, such as a car.

With regards to the results of my experiment, I strictly avoided naming any specific mental illness to explain Ben’s interactions with the Elf King. However, it is shown and frequently mentioned that Ben takes medication for some sort of behavioral abnormality, though his symptoms have generally been mild. It is also stated that he has trouble making and keeping friends and that his father has taken him to visit special boarding schools. It is left open to interpretation whether Ben’s affliction is purely psychological, physiological, or otherwise; however, it is insinuated and later explicitly stated that Ben has claimed to see and hear things that are not there.

The above description may sound closer to disambiguation than the results might have dictated. However, ample amounts of detail were included with the intent of complicating and confounding any sense of certainty the audience may experience early in the play. For example, it is made clear that Ben’s experiences have been strictly auditory and visual in the past and that
Ben and Dave have established tactile stimulation as a means of discerning between real stimuli and delusions. This theory is tested when Ben begins to feel things he is sure are imaginary.

Until the rehearsal process began for Erlkönig, I was not confident in my utilization of ambiguity. But as the cast and I began table work, it became obvious that no one in the room read the play with the same interpretation. While this response may seem natural and expected, it is still curious to me that my cast was split virtually 50/50 between those who thought the Elf King was real and those who thought Ben was hallucinating. Even within these two groups, no one could agree on exactly how the play was meant to be interpreted. I regarded that moment as a small but poignant victory in the broader scope of this project.

The script of Erlkönig, as it stands at this point in its editing, can be found in Appendix E.
References


http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmvjYBo-IRY


Appendix A

Pre-Test Prompt: Ambiguity

The following song tells the story of a father and his son riding through the woods at night.

Please listen to the following song and read the lyrics carefully, then answer the questions below.
Like most works of art, this piece is open to interpretation and can be read from many different perspectives. All interpretations are valid and useful for this study; we only ask that you respond honestly based on how you experience the song as a whole.

Pre-Test Prompt: Mental Illness

The following song tells the story of a son describing his vivid Schizophrenic hallucinations to his father. Though it is not explicitly stated in the story, the description of the boy’s experiences unmistakably matches the criteria needed to diagnose the boy with Schizophrenia. With this assumption in mind, please listen and read the lyrics carefully, experiencing the song as a whole, then answer the following questions.

Pre-Test Prompts: Supernatural

The following song tells the story of a father and his son having a supernatural experience while riding in the woods. A traditional reading of this story holds that all of characters are real and actually present. In other words, though the description may sound like a vision, delusion, or hallucination of some kind, it is a traditional assumption that the supernatural event is actually occurring. With this assumption in mind, please listen and read the lyrics carefully, experiencing the song as a whole, then answer the following questions.
Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind;
Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,
Er faßt ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm.

"Mein Sohn, was birgst du so bang dein Gesicht?" –
"Siehst, Vater, du den Erlkönig nicht?
Den Erlenkönig mit Kron und Schweif?" –
"Mein Sohn, es ist ein Nebelstreif."

"Du liebes Kind, komm, geh mit mir!
Gar schöne Spiele spiel' ich mit dir;
Manch' bunte Blumen sind an dem Strand,
Meine Mutter hat manch gülden Gewand." –

"Mein Vater, mein Vater, und hörest du nicht,
Was Erlenkönig mir leise verspricht?" –
"Sei ruhig, bleibe ruhig, mein Kind;
In dürren Blättern säuselt der Wind." –

"Willst, feiner Knabe, du mit mir gehn?
Meine Töchter sollen dich warten schön;
Meine Töchter führen den nächtlichen Reihn,
Und wiegen und tanzen und singen dich ein." –

"Mein Vater, mein Vater, und siehst du nicht dort
Erlkönigs Töchter am düstern Ort?" –
"Mein Sohn, mein Sohn, ich seh es genau:
Es scheinen die alten Weiden so grau. –"

"Ich liebe dich, mich reizt deine schöne Gestalt;
Und bist du nicht willig, so brauch ich Gewalt." –
"Mein Vater, mein Vater, jetzt faßt er mich an!
Erlkönig hat mir ein Leids getan!" –

Dem Vater grauset's, er reitet geschwind,
Er hält in Armen das ächzende Kind,
Erreicht den Hof mit Müh' und Not;
In seinen Armen das Kind war tot.

Who rides, so late, through night and wind?
It is the father with his child.
He has the boy well in his arm
He holds him safely, he keeps him warm.

"My son, why do you hide your face so anxiously?"
"Father, do you not see the Elfking?
The Elfking with crown and tail?"
"My son, it's a wisp of fog."

"You dear child, come, go with me!
Very lovely games I'll play with you;
Some colourful flowers are on the beach,
My mother has some golden robes."

"My father, my father, and don't you hear
What the Elfking quietly promises me?"
"Be calm, stay calm, my child;
The wind is rustling through withered leaves."

"Do you want to come with me, pretty boy?
My daughters shall wait on you finely;
My daughters will lead the nightly dance,
And rock and dance and sing you to sleep."

"My father, my father, and don't you see there
The Elfking's daughters in the gloomy place?"
"My son, my son, I see it clearly:
There shimmer the old willows so grey."

"I love you, your beautiful form entices me;
And if you're not willing, then I will use force."
"My father, my father, he's grabbing me now!
The Elfking has done me harm!"

It horrifies the father; he swiftly rides on,
He holds the moaning child in his arms,
Reaches the farm with trouble and hardship;
In his arms, the child was dead.
Appendix C

Erlköning: Lines by Character

Narrator: Who rides so late through night and wind? It is the father with his child; he has the boy in his arms. He holds him securely. He keeps him warm.

Father: My son, why do you hide your face so fearfully?

Son: Father, don’t you see the Erlköning? The Erlköning with crown and train?

Father: My son, it is a streak of mist.

Erlköning: you dear child, come, go with me! Very lovely games I’ll play with you. Many colorful flowers are on the shore. My mother has many a golden garment.

Son: My father, my father, and hear you not what Erlköning to me softly promises?

Father: Be quiet, stay quiet, my child. It is the wind rustling the dry leaves.

Erlköning: Fine boy, do you want to go with me? My daughters shall look after you well; My daughters lead the nightly round dance, and cradle and dance and sing you to sleep.

Son: My father, my father, see you not there Erlköning’s daughters in that gloomy place?

Father: My son, my son, I see it exactly. The old willows have a grey appearance.

Erlköning: I love you, your beautiful form entices me. And if you are not willing, I will use force.

Son: My father, my father, now he is seizing me! Erlköning has injured me!

Narrator: The father shudders, he rides swiftly. He holds the groaning child in his arms. He reaches the courtyard with effort and distress. In his arms, the child is dead.
Appendix D

Questionnaire:

1. Please write a brief summary of and reaction to the song you just heard.

______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________
______________________________________________________________________________

For each of the following statements, please circle the number that most closely represents your agreement with each statement.

1-Strongly Disagree  2-Disagree  3-Neither  4-Agree  5-Strongly Agree

2. I thought the Elf King was scary.
   1  2  3  4  5

3. I thought the Son was scary.
   1  2  3  4  5

4. I thought the Father was scary.
   1  2  3  4  5

5. At times, I thought the Son was scared.
   1  2  3  4  5

6. At times, I thought the Father was scared.
   1  2  3  4  5

7. At times, I thought the Elf King was scared
   1  2  3  4  5

8. When the Son was scared, I was scared.
   1  2  3  4  5

9. When the Father was scared, I was scared.
   1  2  3  4  5

10. When the Elf King was scared, I was scared.
    1  2  3  4  5

11. I was surprised when the Son died.
    1  2  3  4  5

12. When the Son died, I was scared.
    1  2  3  4  5

13. When the Son died, I was confused.
    1  2  3  4  5
14. I believe the Elf King was really there with the child.

15. I believe the Son was reacting to nothing (or Neutral Stimuli, i.e. shadows, wind, mist, etc.)

16. I believe the Son had a reason to be afraid of the neutral stimuli (shadows, wind, mist, etc.)

17. I’ve been afraid of similar neutral stimuli in my life (shadows/dark, wind, mist, etc.)

18. While listening, I was afraid of the Elf King.

19. I believe the Son’s fears were reasonable.

20. I believe the Son’s complaints to his father were reasonable.

21. I believe the Son really thought he saw the Elf King.

22. I believe the Father’s fears were reasonable.

23. I believe the Father’s reactions to his Son’s complaints were reasonable.

24. While listening, I felt scared for the Father (empathetically).

25. While listening, I was expecting something bad to happen.

26. While listening, I was expecting everything to be all right.

27. While listening, I expected the Son to die.

28. I believe in the paranormal (spirits, ghosts, mythical creatures, etc.)

29. As a whole, I thought this song was scary.

30. I believe other people would think this song was scary.
SHORT ANSWER: Please answer the following questions briefly and honestly, using the space provided.

31. What could have made this song scarier? A different medium (film, animation, sound effects, multiple voices)?
                                                                                                           
                                                                                                           
32. Please briefly specify and explain your past or present fears regarding neutral stimuli (shadows/dark, wind, mist, etc.).
                                                                                                           
                                                                                                           
33. Please briefly explain why you thought the Son’s fears and complaints were reasonable or not reasonable.
                                                                                                           
                                                                                                           
34. Please briefly explain why you thought the Father’s reactions to his Son were reasonable or not reasonable.
                                                                                                           
                                                                                                           
35. Please briefly describe Schizophrenia as you understand it, the state how you learned about it. (Class, family history, personal history, afflicted friends, scholarly study, etc.)
                                                                                                           
                                                                                                           
                                                                                                           
Appendix E

ERLKÖNIG

By Cullen J. Rogers
I – The Elf King’s Lullaby

(LILITH carries in a young BEN, gets him ready for bed. She hums his Lullaby.)

My baby, don’t you cry now,
You’re safe while you’re with me.
I will rock you and dance
And sing you to sleep.
I will rock you and dance you
And sing you off to sleep.

BEN: Mama, I’m not sleepy yet.

LILITH: (Chuckles, but breathing heavily.) If you’re so awake, why did you have me carry you up the stairs?

BEN: ‘Cuz I like hugs.

LILITH: Mama likes hugs too, Benny, but stairs are hard on her heart. Let’s get you your meds before we tuck you in.

BEN: I don’t wanna take them. They stick in my throat and taste gross.

LILITH: You have to take them, Benjamin, they keep you safe. Just like Mama’s medicine keeps her safe. We’ll do them together, okay? One…Two…THREE. (Take their medicine, both grimace) See, all done. Now you can sleep all night, worry free, and you don’t have to take them for almost a whole day.

BEN: They’re still gonna be gross tomorrow.

LILITH: They’re only going to be grosser if you don’t get some sleep. Being tired and grumpy won’t help.

BEN: Why can’t I stay up with you and dad?

LILITH: You want to stay up all night watching old, boring westerns?

BEN: I don't think they're boring! Dad likes them!

LILITH: I wish I shared your enthusiasm, sweetheart.

BEN: What's enthusiasm?

LILITH: (Laughs) EnTHUSiasm. It means excitement. If you have enthusiasm for old movies, you're excited to watch them.

BEN: So...so you're not excited to go watch the movie?

LILITH: I'm always excited to spend time with your daddy. It's just this particular old movie is one that I've seen about a million times.

BEN: Whoa, really?!

LILITH: No, not really a million. But it very well might be close to a hundred. Enough to make me just a little tired of it.

BEN: Well... If you're tired... What if you go to bed and I stay up and watch with dad instead? Because I have enthumisasim!

LILITH: (Laughs again) Yes you do. But you, my little man, need your rest.
BEN: But I wanna watch the movie! I wanna see the story!
LILITH: How about we watch it first thing in the morning, instead of cartoons?
BEN: You're gonna make me wait AND miss cartoons?
LILITH: OKAY, okay, how about we compromise: if you take my word for it that your daddy's movie is boring... I'll tell you a different story. A much better story.
BEN: Like what?
LILITH: Like... Well, how about one of grandma's stories? From the old country, something she told me when it was my bedtime.
BEN: That sounds even older and boringer than dad's movie.
LILITH: Maybe that wasn't the best way to sell it... How about I tell you a kind of story we've never let you hear before?
BEN: Like WHAT?
LILITH: What if I told you...a scary story?
BEN: I didn’t know grandma had scary stories.
LILITH: Well that’s because we’ve never told you any, goof ball.
BEN: Well tell me now, I wanna hear it.
LILITH: Okay! Okay just give me a second to remember all of it. I’ll probably have to clean it up a bit –

DAVE: (Off stage) Hey Lil, the popcorn’s ready!
LILITH: I’ll be right there!

DAVE: And the DVD menu’s been looping for a while.
LILITH: Just a few more minutes.

DAVE: Like a while…
LILITH: Honey, I’m putting Ben to bed, give me a minute.

DAVE: Goodnight Ben, love you buddy!

BEN: Love you too, Dad!

DAVE: I’m pressing play!

LILITH: Go ahead!

DAVE: I’ll eat all the popcorn!

LILITH: I’ll kick you’re a – uh, butt!

DAVE: Language!

LILITH: Bite me!
DAVE: Aw, you’re no fun…

BEN: (Giggling) You sure I can’t stay up?

LILITH: Now I am. You ready for your story?

BEN: Now I’m not.

LILITH: Well settle in, ‘cuz here it goes: A long time ago, in a faraway kingdom, there lived a happy little family in the village by the side of a castle. There was a big, strong father; a sweet, young mother; and their little son, whom they loved very much. They lived safely and happily each day, knowing that no matter what happened, the good King and all of his knights would be there to defend the village from anything that tried to harm them…So long as they stayed close to the castle, and as far away from the Forest as possible.

BEN: Why?? What’s wrong with the –

LILITH: Hold your horses, I’m getting there: This wasn’t just any forest, and the villagers knew it. They’d been to other woods. Tamer places that flourished and bloomed with sweet smelling flowers and soft grasses. The trees in those woods were friendly and strong. You could climb any tree all the way to the top until you could feel the sun beaming down on your face. The earthy floors of those woods were soft and warm. So comfy you could take a nap right there between the trees. But the Forest around the castle…this was the Cold Oak Forest. There was no sweet smelling anything, only the damp, heavy stench of rotting, fallen logs. Whatever trees still stood there could not be climbed. Every branch that wasn’t covered in long, sharp thorns was brittle and sickly.

BEN: That’s gross.

LILITH: Yes it is, sweetheart, now… Deep in the heart of the Cold Oak Forest, if you could make it in that far, you’d find out why these woods were so…gross. This Forest was the home of another king, a king who hated the good King in the castle. This king in the Forest had no happy villagers, no brave knights, and no family.

BEN: What was he king of, then?

LILITH: He was king of the Forest. Master of the trees, of the winds and the shadows. King of everything that made the Cold Oak Forest such a sad, lonely, dangerous place.

BEN: What made him king of all that?

LILITH: Magic. He wasn’t just any man who walked into the Forest and said, “I’m King of this place.” He wasn’t a man at all. He was the Elf King. (BEN laughs a little. LILITH gives him a look.) And with his dark magic he kept the Cold Oak Forest alive, even though it had died long ago. He lived there all alone, hating the good King and waiting for just the right opportunity to strike out against the happy village.

BEN: So the Elf King, he’s why the villagers need the good King and the knights?

LILITH: Yes. And –
BEN: Well what are they going to do about it? He’s magic.

LILITH: Well he’s only magic when he’s in the Forest. If he were ever to leave that place, his powers would stop working. If he tried to attack the castle or even the village he could be fought off like any other person.

BEN: Why would he leave, then? Just to hurt the good King?

LILITH: Yes, and no. Elves, just like humans, want companionship. They want someone to talk to and live with and play with. Well, the Elf King didn’t have anyone like that, which is why the good King made him so sad. The Elf King hated that he didn’t have any knights or villagers, but he especially hated that he didn’t have a beautiful little daughter, like the good King had. Even with all of his power, the Elf King still felt like he was the king of nothing.

BEN: What did he do?

LILITH: One night, when even the moon was dark, and the good King, his knights and his villagers, and the beautiful princess were all asleep, the Elf King left the safety of the Cold Oak Forest. Immediately, his magic left him, but he was still clever and quick and dangerous. He hid in the shadows and made it through the entire village without being seen. He slipped right past the big iron gates of the castle, and once he was inside, he could easily scale the stones of the castle walls and get up to any window of the palace. Can you guess whose window he climbed to first?

BEN: N…no?

LILITH: The Princess’s. He crept into her room, silently, and stole her away while the rest of the castle slept. He took her back to his Forest kingdom and hid her in the woods. Once he had her under the cold shadow of those dying trees, his magic returned to him, and he cast upon the princess a horrible spell.

BEN: What spell?

LILITH: Loneliness. Cold, deep loneliness. Such complete loneliness that the princess would never want to be alone. So she would never leave the Elf King’s side.

BEN: If she was lonely, why wouldn’t she try to go back to the good King, back to the castle?

LILITH: Loneliness is an ugly thing, and the princess’s beautiful face soon became dull, wrinkled, and grey. If she made it back to the castle, the good King wouldn’t have recognized her. And anyway, the good King was so sad when the princess was taken, he shut the gates to the castle and would let no one in.

BEN: What did the village do?

LILITH: For a little while, they mourned with the good King. But soon, the people grew angry.

BEN: Why?
LILITH: Because the princess wasn’t the last one to be taken to the Cold Oak Forest. Two young girls were taken from the village the next night. The night after that, two boys. They were terrified. They pleaded for their King’s protection, but he refused to open the castle gates.

BEN: So nothing happened?

LILITH: Well something happened. Would I be telling you the story if that was the end?

BEN: I dunno.

LILITH: One night, something came to the little family’s cottage and tried to take their son.

BEN: The Elf King.

LILITH: No sweetheart. The princess. The Elf King’s spell was driving her mad with loneliness, so she was kidnapping the children and bringing them back to the Forest with her. But, before the princess could grab the boy, his mother rushed to his bed side and fought to protect him. The mother fought so hard for her son, the princess gave up and dragged the mother away instead.

BEN: She took the Mom?

LILITH: Yes, and as the princess dragged her, the mother screamed and screamed and woke the entire village. The father heard the screams and moved as fast as he could. He was too afraid to leave his son in the cottage alone, so he grabbed the boy and saddled his swiftest horse. Together, they raced after the mother’s screams. Toward the Cold Oak Forest.

Behind every bush and tree, the boy saw things moving. Animals. Monsters. And children. Wild, stolen children. They wore rags that had once been clothes, and they spoke to the boy through the wind. The boy told his father what he saw and heard, but the father told him to keep quiet. A strong gust of wind blew, and the child heard a different voice, deep and powerful. It called to him, and promised to make him a prince in the Forest kingdom! The boy tried to tell his father, but the man said, “My son, it’s just rustling leaves.”

Up on a tree branch, the boy could see a figure wearing a robe of leaves and a crown of bark. The boy cried out to his father, but again was told to hush. The boy shivered and wept as the figure reached down from the branch and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck. The child screamed, and their horse reared up on its hind legs. Terrified, the father spun around and raced out of the dead trees. On and on he rode, as fast as he could. Finally, he reached the edge of the Forest. His son had stopped crying and seemed calm. The father looked down…at his son, only to find… Ben? Ben.

BEN: Whaaat?

LILITH: You’re sleeping through the best part of the story!

BEN: It’s so loooong, I’m sleepy now.

LILITH: You were going to stay up and watch a three hour western.

BEN: Can I still do that?
LILITH: Benjamin.

BEN: Fiiiine. Mama, can you finish the story tomorrow night?

LILITH: I don’t know, how much did you miss?

BEN: I remember the princess kidnapped a bunch of kids and the mom and took them some place.

LILITH: That’s the last you remember?

BEN: Yeah.

LILITH: Alright, fine, tomorrow then. How do you like your first scary story so far?

BEN: It’s not very scary, it sounds fun! I’d wanna go live with my friends in a magic forest!

LILITH: You would, huh?

BEN: If I had friends.

LILITH: Benny. You’re going to meet some new kids tomorrow at the mall. They’d love to be your friends. You guys won’t be in the forest, but I know you’ll have fun anyway.

BEN: I forgot about that.

LILITH: You should be excited. All the other kids can’t wait.

BEN: All the other kids know each other. And like each other. I don’t know anyone and no one likes me.

LILITH: Now that’s not true. I love you. With all my heart. So does your dad. Right, Dave?

(Dave snores off stage.)

LILITH: With all his heart. Just give the other kids a chance. I know they’ll love you, too.

BEN: Fine…

LILITH: Good night, Benjamin. Dream sweet.

BEN: Dream sweet, mama. I love you, too.

(Lights fade down.)
II – Who Rides So Late

(Erlkönig plays. The flickering silhouette of a galloping horse and rider is projected, resembling an old film. BEN, now a teenager, sleeps in his seat on the train, then wakes up startled.)

LILITH: What’s wrong?

BEN: Nothing. Nothing, I’m fine.

LILITH: Was it the dreams?

BEN: Yeah. I think so.

LILITH: Which ones?

BEN: Grandma’s story.

LILITH: Oh… The good one or the bad one?

BEN: I don’t really remember now. I think the bad one.

LILITH: I’m sorry, sweetheart… What time is it? When did you last take your meds?

BEN: I’m not sure. Let me check. (BEN goes to check his phone.)

LILITH: Don’t bother, I’ve got it. (Checks her watch.) Hours ago, Benjamin, good lord! (BEN rolls his eyes and scoffs, getting out his medication.) You’ve got to be more careful.

BEN: I have been.

LILITH: Not careful enough, clearly. Are you warm enough?

BEN: Yeah, I’m fine. Thank you.

LILITH: Come on, you’re shivering. Ask your dad to share the blanket.

BEN: No really, I’m fine. It’s the dreams, not the cold. Let him keep it.

LILITH: Are you expecting me to sleep through your teeth chattering? Besides, I’m cold, too. We should all share it, it’ll be warmer.

BEN: Fine. (Pulls at the blanket, struggles to get it out from under his father).


BEN: I’m sorry!

DAVE: What’s the matter?

BEN: I’m just trying share some blankets. I’m cold, and Mom.
DAVE: What about Mom?
BEN: It’s freezing in here, Dad.
DAVE: You said, “Mom.”
BEN: Well, yeah, she’s probably just as cold as I am. Damn, it’s like tomb in here –
DAVE: Benjamin, watch your mouth.
LILITH: David, lighten up on him. |We’re in public.|
DAVE: |We’re in public. | That’s incredibly disrespectful.
BEN: Whatever.
LILITH: Ben –
DAVE: Stop. Please, Ben. I want to get some rest before we transfer. You should, too.
BEN: Fine…Dad, how much longer?
DAVE: We’ve been over this.
LILITH: We transfer trains tomorrow morning.
BEN: Right. Okay, I remember now. Sorry.
DAVE: That’s fine bud just please, try to get some rest.
BEN: I will.
DAVE: If you really need something and you can’t find a conductor, let me know. (Puts earphones in.)
BEN: Dream sweet, dad. (DAVE doesn’t respond.) Love you, too.
LILITH: Honey, do you have any extra headphones? (No response.)
BEN: Don’t bother. He shut us out already.
LILITH: That was faster than usual.
BEN: Faster every time.
LILITH: Your dad’s right, Benny, it’s a long trip. We should get some sleep.
BEN: Lucky me, back to my dreams. (BEN pulls his phone out.)
LILITH: Ben put that away, it’s too bright.
BEN: I’ll turn down the brightness.
BEN: Mom, I never get to talk to anyone. Can’t I just tell my friend goodnight?

LILITH: Quickly. Then it gets turned off and put in your bag until we transfer. Got it?

BEN: Fine. (Types on phone, presses send. Sneaks a glance to see if his mom is watching, and keeps typing. His phones buzzes, his face lights up, and he goes on typing.)

LILITH: Benny, I said one message and then away. Did you hear what –?

BEN: I will.

LILITH: Benjamin. (He looks up, sees her scowl, presses send and hits the power button.) Thank you. Dream sweet.

BEN: Night.

(BEN tries to get settled. Lights fade down slightly. He’s restless. He climbs over his seat, trying not to wake his parents, and tries to settle into another seat. The car hits a rough switch and jolts him. He pulls out his phone and props himself up against the window and watches the streaking lights out the window. Lightning flashes a few times. We see the horse again. BEN hurries to the opposite window to try to catch another glimpse. The sound of the wind grows louder and whistles, and we hear a voice. The train jolts, BEN shouts and falls back into the seat behind him.)

DAVE: Ben? Ben what’s wrong? What are you doing?

BEN: I wasn’t…I didn’t mean to. I don’t –

DAVE: Whoa, whoa, whoa Ben, what’s going on? What are you doing down there?

LILITH: Dave what is it? Ben, oh God –

BEN: Did you…Dad did you hear? Didn’t you hear?

DAVE: Yeah buddy, I heard the thunder. It woke me up.

LILITH: Get him back to his seat. I’ll get his prescription.

BEN: NO not that, the other –

DAVE: It’s okay, it’s just a little thunderstorm –

BEN: NOT THAT. The – the other –

DAVE: The other what? Ben –

BEN: The voice!

LILITH: Oh my God…

DAVE: (Looks around, knows the other passengers can hear.) Ben, come here bud, come on.

BEN: No –
LILITH: Please, sweetheart. Just get up. Dave, let me through. *(Pills in hand.)*

BEN: Don’t.

LILITH: Would you let me through?

DAVE: Benjamin you need to come out from there.

BEN: I don’t want to.

LILITH: Let me help!

BEN: Just BACK OFF!

DAVE: *Ben. (Takes a deep breath. LILITH throws the pills down on the seat, grabs her pillow, and walks out of the car.)* Deep breaths bud, just focus on breathing deep. Alright? What do we say about the voices?

BEN: Dad, *no,* this one wasn’t –

DAVE: *(staying calm)* Ben, focus on me. Focus on my voice. We know the difference between the real sounds and the voices.

BEN: But it wasn’t just the voices, Dad, there were other sounds and I saw something –

DAVE: *Benjamin…(deep breath)* Take my hand. Grab the seat. You can feel that, too. What do we do when we see things?

BEN: Find an anchor.

DAVE: Find an anchor. What do you got?


DAVE: Good. What do you see?

BEN: You. Window. The window. Dad, out the window, I saw –

DAVE: It’s solid fog outside, bud. Whatever you saw, it was probably just –

BEN: I know.

DAVE: Okay. Now what about sound?


DAVE: Good, now… Music?

BEN: Mhm.

DAVE: What music, Ben?

BEN: *(points up, as if to a speaker)* There’s like, piano m…I uh…never mind.
DAVE: The piano. Okay bud. It’s okay. It’s always the piano. *(DAVE pulls him close and tries to hum LILITH’s Lullaby, getting it not quite right.)*

BEN: That wasn’t it. It was louder this time.

DAVE: You remember it?

BEN: I can’t. I still can’t tell you what it sounds like. I just think …I know it was louder than before.

DAVE: Does it still hurt?

BEN: Not like it used to.

DAVE: That’s good, then, right? *(BEN doesn’t respond.)* Come on. Let’s get you back to your seat. Do you need a hand?

BEN: I’m okay. *(Train shifts, BEN loses his balance.)* That wasn’t even fair.

DAVE: Have you taken your meds tonight? *(BEN shakes his head.)* Alright. We’ll be home before you know it. I don’t want you getting stressed out for nothing, okay?

BEN: For nothing.

DAVE: Get some sleep, buddy.

*(They both settle in. BEN tries to control his breathing. The winds build up slowly, then begin to rock the train car.)*

BEN: Dad?

DAVE: Just the wind. *(BEN hums a tentative version of LILITH’s Lullaby. Lights fade, BEN never closes his eyes.)*
III – Very Lovely Games

(Lights back up, DAVE is rooting through his bag for money.)

DAVE: They’re closing down the food car in 20 minutes, let’s get moving.

BEN: Can I stay here?

DAVE: We should stick together, Ben, come on.

BEN: Please, Dad? I’ll stay here with our stuff. You won’t have to waste time packing up.

DAVE: Ben?

BEN: I won’t move.

DAVE: Promise? (BEN nods, pinky promise, whatever.) Okay. What do you want for breakfast?

BEN: Nothing, I’m fine.

DAVE: It’s going to be a long day.

BEN: I’m not hungry.

DAVE: You’re gonna want something in your stomach after you take your pill. (BEN looks up, DAVE signals him to go ahead. He takes the pill.) Hypothetically, if I were to grab an extra box of cereal or a certain kind of juice, what kinds would you recommend?

BEN: Grape juice and Frosted Flakes.

DAVE: Hold tight here, I’ll be back in a few.

(DAVE exits out the front of the car while LILITH enters from the back. Sits next to BEN without speaking.)

BEN: Morning, mom. (Nothing.) How did you sleep?

LILITH: Fine.

BEN: Did anyone bug you about switching cars?

LILITH: No.

BEN: Why did you leave?

LILITH: Because I wanted to.

BEN: Oh. (Beat.) Why did you want to?

LILITH: Because otherwise I would have made an even bigger scene than the one that –
BEN: Why would you have –?

LILITH: “Why, why, why?” How old are you Benjamin? When you’re not screaming or swearing in public, you’re asking never-ending questions like a toddler.

BEN: I’m sorry. I don’t really know what happened last night.

LILITH: You forgot to take your meds. Again. That’s what happened. And when I tried to help you, your father blocked me out like he always does.

BEN: I’m sorry. (Waits for her to say something else. Nothing. Gives up, takes out his phone.)

LILITH: Why is that out?

BEN: I have four texts. I just want to say “Hi” real quick.

LILITH: What did I say last night?

BEN: It was too dark and the screen was too bright and –

LILITH: I said it goes in your bag until we transfer.

BEN: We transfer soon, I didn’t think it would be a big deal just to –

LILITH: Was I in any way unclear in what I asked you to do?

BEN: No, but I –

LILITH: So why is the phone still out?

BEN: Because I’m not doing anything wrong!

LILITH: Do not raise your voice to me.

BEN: Why is it such a big deal if I’m talking to people?

LILITH: This is a family trip, you have no business –

BEN: You spent the night in another car because you and Dad –

LILITH: I did that because he –

BEN: Some family trip. I could have done this alone. I’m too old to be chaperoned like this.

LILITH: Clearly that is not the case! (BEN caught off guard. Beat.) Last night. Perfect example. Until you can prove to us you can control this, we’re not going anywhere. You don’t have anyone but us.

BEN: That’s not true!

LILITH: Okay.

BEN: I have friends at school, close ones! That’s who I’ve been talking to. That’s all I’m doing.
LILITH: If you’re so close, why have I never met them?

BEN: I’ve tried to bring them over –

LILITH: The last thing we need is you falling in with a bunch of delinquent –

BEN: They're good people.

LILITH: How am I supposed to trust you on that?

BEN: Mom!

LILITH: Great friends you only know through your phone. God knows what you’ve been talking about if you have to hide it like this.

BEN: I’m not hiding anything!

LILITH: Then what are you talking about?

BEN: What people talk about! How our days are going, how we’re feeling, what classes we hate, who we’re dating, where we want –

LILITH: What?

BEN: They, who *they* are dating.

LILITH: Benjamin.

BEN: I’m not dating anyone, I know your rule!

LILITH: Give me your phone –

BEN: Why? Mom, I promise –

LILITH: You expect me to trust you right now?

BEN: Yes! No – I don’t expect it, I’m asking you to trust –

LILITH: I want that in your bag in the next five seconds or I’m shutting off your service. I don’t want to see it again for the rest of this trip except in an absolute emergency.

BEN: I don’t understand what’s so –

LILITH: If I have to say it one more time, the damn thing is going out the window.

BEN: Fine. *(Lifts up his bag.)* Can you hold this for a second? It’s getting close to time. *(BEN puts the bag on LILITH’s lap, reaches in to get his pills, takes one, puts them back in the bag, then takes off running out the back of the train car, leaving LILITH stuck beneath the bag.)*

LILITH: BENJAMIN!!! *(Takes off after him.)*
DAVE: (Reentering from the front of the car with snacks. Scans the car for BEN, can’t find him.) Ben? Benjamin! (Checks under the seat. Goes to a passenger, PAIGE, with headphones on, sitting behind them) Excuse me. Excuse me, please, did you see where my son went?

PAIGE: Your son? I’m sorry, I –

DAVE: It would have been in the last few minutes at most.

PAIGE: I’ve been reading, I wasn’t really paying attention –

DAVE: He’s about this tall and has brown hair, he would have been sitting right here.

PAIGE: Last time I saw him was when you got up. I’m sorry, I’m really not sure –

DAVE: Please! I just need to know a direction – He could have gone into the bathroom that way and I missed him or he’s anywhere down that way. I just – He can’t be alone for this long, not if I don’t know where he is, not if he’s wandering, he’s –

PASSENGER: Excuse me. You mean the young man from right there?

DAVE: Yes, did you see where he went? Please.

PASSENGER: He took off that way just before you came in, but he was running. If you hurry –

DAVE: Thank you! (DAVE takes off. Two PASSENGERS exchange looks. PAIGE removes her headphones.)

PAIGE: Watch my stuff?

PASSENGER: I’m sorry?

PAIGE: I know what he looks like. I could help.

PASSENGER: That kid was crazy. Just let his dad handle it.

PAIGE: Please.

PASSENGER: Uh…sure, whatever.

(PAIGE runs after DAVE.)
IV – Crown and Tale

LILITH: Is there anything else you need before bed?

BEN: No thank you. Can I have a hug?

LILITH: Of course sweetheart.

BEN: I love you, Mama.

LILITH: I love you, too.

BEN: With all your heart?

LILITH: What?

BEN: With all your heart. You always used to say that, but you haven’t for a while.

LILITH: Benny, I love you more than anyone or anything in the world.

BEN: With all your heart?

LILITH: With all my heart, yes. Sweetheart, what’s wrong?

BEN: (Tearing up.) Did I do something bad?

LILITH: Oh honey, no. Why would you think that?

BEN: Ever since the mall it feels like you’ve been mad at me, like you don’t love me –

LILITH: Benny, I could never stop loving you. Mama hasn’t been mad at you. I’ve been mad at myself.

BEN: Did you do something wrong?

LILITH: It feels like I did. Yes, I did.

BEN: Did you say you’re sorry?

LILITH: Over and over.

BEN: Did the other person say it’s okay?

LILITH: Well let’s see: Benjamin, do you forgive me?

BEN: Yes. What for?

LILITH: For almost losing you.

BEN: I was gonna come back. We were just gonna play for a while –

LILITH: Benny did you…have you told daddy about the mall?
BEN: You said you wanted to do it, so I didn’t –

LILITH: I do, and I’m going to.

BEN: When do I get to go back to the mall?

LILITH: Let’s not talk about it sweetheart. Mama’s not feeling well.

BEN: Is it your heart?

LILITH: A little. Mostly just worrying.

BEN: I forgived you, though. Everything’s okay now.

LILITH: I know you did. That makes it a lot better.

BEN: But still not okay?

LILITH: Almost okay.

BEN: Well I hope everything gets all the way better.

LILITH: Thank you Benny, me too. Now, uh…Dream sweet.

BEN: Mom?

LILITH: What?

BEN: You never finished the story.

LILITH: Mama can’t do that right now.

BEN: I was gonna ask him to tell it when I saw him at the mall, but I couldn’t find him after –

LILITH: You need your sleep, Benjamin.

BEN: I just wanna hear the end.

LILITH: Fine. Fine, alright. Do you remember where we left off?

BEN: The Elf King took the princess and she took the Mother.

LILITH: Right. Okay… Well the Elf King – He hated the happy kingdom so he snuck in and kidnapped the princess and killed the good King. Then later –

BEN: Killed him? I thought he just made him real sad?

LILITH: That’s…that’s right, he um – Benny, this story isn’t really as nice as I made it sound.

BEN: Can I hear the real one?

LILITH: Don’t you wanna just finish what I’ve been telling you?

BEN: I want the real one.
LILITH: Okay. The Elf King did kill the good King. And he made it look like he killed the princess.

BEN: How did he do that?

LILITH: When guards rushed into her room, they saw blood on the walls and gave up hope of saving her.

BEN: I don’t get it.

LILITH: The days went on and the children began to disappear, and trails of bloody footprints could be seen leading all the way back to the Cold Forest.

BEN: Why was there blood? Were the kids hurt?

LILITH: The night that the princess came for the boy, his mother fought and fought and got dragged away, leaving the same trail of blood. The father was forced to follow the footprints as he raced to save his wife, all the while shielding his son’s eyes from the gruesome sight.

BEN: I don’t like this.

LILITH: In the forest, the son tugged on his father’s sleeves, “My father, the Elf King. Don’t you see?” But there was no one there. The man wouldn’t let himself be afraid. He only wanted his wife back. He hushed the boy, again and again, until… “Father, don’t you see, there! The Elf King’s Daughter, in that gloomy place.”

BEN: He had a Daughter?

LILITH: She promised the boy so many wonderful things. The child told it all to his father, and the man began to shake. “My son, these old trees cast the trickiest shadows, the wind fools your ears.” But with all the man’s wisdom he could not explain away what the Forest showed them next, as his wife’s mangled body dropped lifelessly from the trees.

BEN: Mom?

LILITH: His horse reared and galloped out of the Forest. Through his own sobs, the man could hear his son, still speaking to something he could not see. The horse burst into the clearing, and only then did the father dare to look down at his son. The child no longer spoke. He didn’t move. He didn’t breath. He sat there on the saddle. Dead. As cold as ice.

BEN: How?

LILITH: The boy chose to go with the Elf King. He chose the Forest over his life and his family because his Mother was not strong enough to keep him out of the trees.

BEN: But she fought off the –

LILITH: And she lost. The Elf King got him. She didn’t do her job. Couldn’t. She failed. It killed her son, and it killed her.

BEN: How was the first story supposed to end?
LILITH: Goodnight Ben.

BEN: No! Mom! Did they live in the first one, did the father save them?

LILITH: No.

BEN: Mom? Isn’t there another ending.

LILITH: There could be.

BEN: Can I hear that one?

LILITH: Benjamin, listen to me. I need you to promise me to never wander off again. People are always going to be there to try to take you away from me. Please promise me you’ll always stay. Promise you’ll never choose them over us, it’s not worth it. Promise me, Ben.

BEN: I promise! Mom –

LILITH: I’ll never let it happen again. I’ll never, ever let it happen again.

(LILITH hugs BEN desperately. BEN starts singing LIL’s Lullaby, she joins him eventually.)
V – Why Do You Hide Your Face?

(LILITH runs through the front door of a different car, scans the passengers, makes her way down the aisle, then exits through the back door. BEN pops up from a pile of coats/blankets.)

RIDER: It. Is. Alive. (Cackles. BEN looks at him sideways, says nothing.) That’s not your seat. What brings you to this end of the train? (BEN pulls out his phone.) Listen, kid, I’m just making conversation. You look kind of familiar is all. Do I know…? (BEN hands the blanket to the passenger in front of him.) You don’t need to cold shoulder me, kid.

BEN: I don’t mean to be rude.

PASSENGER: You’re fine, no worries.

RIDER: Hey, speak for yourself. This shit stings.

BEN: Jesus.

RIDER: Now maybe I’m guessing, but you seem to be hiding from someone. Level with me. Was that your…mom? Seems a little young, but it’s worth a guess.

BEN: Please stop.

RIDER: Look, friend, I know better than most how rough troubles at home can be. If it’s bad enough that you’re hiding from her…My mother and I, we had this huge falling out when I was younger. Thought we’d never speak again. But I got older, she got older. You learn to forgive as you grow, you heal. In the meantime, if you need someone to talk it out with –

BEN: I’m fine, I don’t need –

RIDER: Mhmm. Right. Listen, don’t – don’t take this the wrong way, I know it’ll come off as… I’m headed home right now. My house is on a lake. It’s warm, bright, relaxing. The grasses along the banks have these flowers that just smell –

BEN: Not interested.

RIDER: You look like you need to blow off some steam. All I’m saying. You’d be welcome to stay as long as you like. My mother – she lives with us now, she’s old – she will make you a meal you will never forget –

(BEN back under the blankets as DAVE runs through the car. DAVE exits.)

RIDER: Your father, I assume? Based on your reaction. My old man –

BEN: Goodbye.

RIDER: Kid!

(BEN steps into the aisle and starts to head back to his car. At that moment, GIRL stands and catches BEN’s eye. He freezes. She smiles. He smiles nervously back. BEN takes an unsteady step toward her, and PAIGE plows clumsily through the door.)
PAIGE: You’re okay!

BEN: Excuse me?

PAIGE: Your dad’s worried sick – did you see him?

BEN: Should I know you?

PAIGE: Ah, uh, no. I guess not. I’m helping your dad find you.

BEN: Great. (Walks back past his seat and sits back down.)

PAIGE: So, you…you’re fine, so… I’m sorry, I’m really not trying to make you uncomfortable, but would you come with me so your dad knows you’re okay?

RIDER: Good luck, lady.

BEN: I’m fine where I am.

PAIGE: Right. Okay. Would it be alright if I waited here until –?

BEN: I not in the mood to be monitored.

PAIGE: That’s not what I intended at all. I just, it would make me feel better, for your dad. (BEN shifts over a seat.) Thank you. I’m Paige. (Offers her hand.)

BEN: (Hesitant, BEN takes her hand. Immediately, BEN relaxes a bit.) Ben.

PAIGE: Nice to meet you, Ben. (Beat…beat, beat, beat.) So, I uh…that’s…So, forcing conversation. What brings you and your dad on the train?

BEN: Cheaper than flying.

PAIGE: Was it?

BEN: I don’t know. Just the least stressful way to get home.

PAIGE: Home from where?

BEN: School visits.

PAIGE: College?

BEN: No, it’s…I might be transferring to a, uh…well it’s pretty much a boarding school.

PAIGE: Ah, okay cool, cool. Is it some place I would have heard of?

BEN: It’s sort of a specialty school. So, probably not.

PAIGE: I won’t push. (Beat.)

BEN: How about you?
PAIGE: Visiting my brother on the Cape. Trains provide better photo ops than flying. (*Holds up camera.*)

BEN: You’re a photographer?

PAIGE: Amateur. Very, very amateur. But I needed a hobby, so…

BEN: What do you do for a living?

PAIGE: Very little.

BEN: Lucky.

PAIGE: You could put it that way. You could also say I’m coasting on the last of my dad’s inheritance. Small perks of being an orphan.

BEN: I’m sorry, I didn’t mean –

PAIGE: It’s fine, really. Baby of the family, eight older siblings. I barely remember my dad. He lived a good life though, so…

BEN: And your mom…?

PAIGE: Fairly recently, actually.

BEN: Oh. Sorry, I –

PAIGE: No, I don’t mean it’s, like, unpleasant to think about her, but it’s still not…pleasant, you know?

BEN: I know.

PAIGE: What about your mom? She didn’t want to come along, visit boarding schools?

BEN: Oh, she’s around here somewhere. Lucky me.

PAIGE: Not on good terms with her, huh? Sorry, that’s –

BEN: No, it’s okay. She’s not always around. She’ll be gone for a while, come back, then go away again. I wish she would pick one, but. Whatever, she hates feeling left out, so I let her come along.

PAIGE: Sounds complicated.

BEN: You have no idea.

PAIGE: I won’t push.

BEN: I don’t mind. It’s easier than talking about this with my dad.

PAIGE: Is he on her side or your side?
BEN: Mine, I guess? No, neither. He's always rationalizing, trying to get me to keep a level head. But when my mom talks, he doesn’t hear her, which pisses her off, and then I never hear the end of it.

PAIGE: She vents to you, or –

BEN: Not really. I don’t know, she either ends up coddling me or being super strict, whatever she thinks will make her seem like the better parent at the moment.

PAIGE: Is that what happened this time?

BEN: Mhmm. She wouldn’t stop yelling about me texting.

PAIGE: You go over your limit a lot?

BEN: I never get the chance to! She hates when I talk to people. She’s so used to me not having friends, she doesn’t trust the ones I have now.

PAIGE: Why not?

BEN: Hell if I know. She doesn’t trust me with anything. She thinks I’m pushing her away.

PAIGE: Or running from her?

BEN: Sometimes.

PAIGE: Down a train?

BEN: Trust me, the distance helps. It’s not like I don’t love her. Things are just different now.

PAIGE: Have you talked to her about this?

BEN: Tried to. It’s just hard when you can’t get the shouting to stop.

PAIGE: I’m sorry.

BEN: Don’t be.

PAIGE: *(Taking a chance.)* Look so, I left all my stuff back in the other car, I wouldn’t mind checking on it. If you’d like to, you can walk with me. No rush, though, seriously. Unless someone steals my dirty socks, I left nothing of value.

*(GIRL re-enters from the back and walks the length of the car, out the front.)*

BEN: Might as well head back.

PAIGE: Cool. It’ll be okay Ben.

BEN: Hope so.

*(They go toward the front door. BEN turns back for a second, catches the RIDER’s eye. Exit.)*
VI – My Son, I See It Clearly

(PAIGE and BEN enter their car from the back. PAIGE checks her bags and notices BEN looking from end to end of the car.)

PAIGE: They’ll be back.

BEN: I know. I’m just looking for –

PAIGE: Did your mom head that way? (Points to front of the train.)

BEN: No. I thought I saw someone I knew. She looked familiar.

PAIGE: Right. Let me get a conductor and have them call the other cars for your parents. I’ll let you know if I see anyone interesting. (Exits front.)

(BEN gets settled. He pulls out his cell phone, starts typing. Music begins to play. Quiet piano of Shubert’s Erlkönig, mixed with LILITH’s Lullaby. BEN hears it. Looks around. No one else in the car seems to hear it. GIRL enters from the front of the car.)

BEN: Hello.

(GIRL doesn’t answer. Walks past him and sits a few rows back. DAVE enters, running in from the back of the car, PAIGE enters from the front.)

DAVE: Ben!

BEN: Dad –

PAIGE: That was fast. (BEN looks to PAIGE. When he looks back, the GIRL is gone.)

DAVE: How did I miss you?

BEN: I was –

DAVE: Are you okay?

PAIGE: Everything’s fine. I found him a few cars back.

DAVE: Back that way? Oh god, Ben. Were you in a friggin closet? I ran all the way to –

BEN: Dad, I’m sorry. (Hushed.) I needed some time alone. A quiet place.

DAVE: Right. Okay. Is it over?

BEN: I think so.

DAVE: And you okay?

BEN: Yes. (Over the next dialogue, BEN takes another pill.)

DAVE: Thank you.
PAIGE: No problem, really.

DAVE: *(Holds out his hand.)* Dave.

PAIGE: Paige. Glad I could help.

DAVE: I apologize if I scared you, I shouldn’t have yelled, I was… I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this.

PAIGE: It’s nothing.

DAVE: If there’s anything I can do –

PAIGE: Point me toward the bathroom?

DAVE: I can do that. That way, I think. Two or three cars.

PAIGE: Thanks. Nice to meet you, Ben.

BEN: You, too.

PAIGE: If I see her, I’ll make sure she knows where to find you guys.

*(PAIGE exits out the end of the car. DAVE sits next to BEN.)*

DAVE: Her?

BEN: A girl, someone from school.

DAVE: You scared the crap out of me Ben.

BEN: I didn’t mean to.

DAVE: I know, bud. I know. Was it the same as last night?

BEN: Not even a little.

DAVE: Worse?

BEN: No. Just different.

DAVE: These have been happening more often, Ben.

BEN: They haven’t been as bad though, just more.

DAVE: You have been taking your medication?

BEN: Yes, I’ve been taking the fucking –

DAVE: Benjamin.

BEN: I’ve been taking them. I promise.

DAVE: On schedule?
BEN: Yes.
DAVE: And only when you’re scheduled?
BEN: Almost always. I’ve been careful.
DAVE: Okay. Please know I trust you with this. I’m just worried.
BEN: You trust me. You still want to send me off to Special Ed Camp, but –
DAVE: That is not what the school was, and you know it.
BEN: I’m not even remotely as bad as those kids.
DAVE: They weren’t that bad –
BEN: Are you KIDDING me?!
DAVE: They weren’t even the ones you were going to be with. You’d be –
BEN: With the less fucked up ones.
DAVE: People your own age, who know what you’re going through –
BEN: How would they know –?
DAVE: Who can relate to what you’re experiencing. You wouldn’t have to hide it or miss classes. You can keep going to school without the distraction of –
BEN: Switching schools won’t make them go away.
DAVE: But you’ll be with people who know and can treat you on campus whenever you need it.
BEN: I don’t need all that. They’re getting better. Taking me away from my friends will only –
DAVE: Your friends will understand. The school won’t keep you from talking to them, and you’ll have every holiday to –
BEN: To convince them I’m not a nut case.
DAVE: Ben, if they’re really good friends, they’d never think –
BEN: Well they’re all I have right now.
DAVE: Hey. You got me, man. You always have me, you know that.
BEN: I know, Dad. But I can’t get by with just you and Mom anymore. I need people my age.
DAVE: Ben?
BEN: I’m sorry! Friends are important –
DAVE: Benjamin.
BEN: What?
DAVE: You said Mom.
BEN: I –
DAVE: You said you can’t get by with me and Mom.
BEN: You know what I meant.
DAVE: Ben.
BEN: It just slipped.
DAVE: I need you to be completely honest with me.
BEN: Dad –
DAVE: Please. You promised. *(BEN looks away, then nods.)* Where is she right now?
BEN: Not here.
DAVE: When was the last time you saw her?
BEN: In the other car. I ran, and she came running after me. I haven’t seen her since.
DAVE: Is she talking to you?
BEN: Not right now.
DAVE: At all today?
BEN: When I saw her.
DAVE: Otherwise?
BEN: I don’t hear from her unless she shows up.
DAVE: But when she’s here…?
BEN: Yeah.
DAVE: What was she saying?
BEN: I remember her yelling. Telling me to do things.
DAVE: To do what things?
BEN: Stop texting people.
DAVE: …And?
BEN: Actually that was the worst of it, this time.
DAVE: How long has this been –?
BEN: When we visited the school. The yelling didn’t really start until last night, though.
DAVE: Before or after you fell?
BEN: Before. And during, but at you.
DAVE: Really?
BEN: For not listening to her. *(They both laugh a little. PAIGE reenters and smiles at them.)*
DAVE: At least that’s normal.
BEN: Kind of…
DAVE: We don’t have to talk about it anymore.
BEN: No, I…I have it under control, Dad. Really, I promise.
DAVE: Ben…If that changes –
BEN: I’ll tell you. Right away.
DAVE: Thank you. That means a lot to me, Ben. I – *(Brakes screech as the train slows down.)*
Shit! I forgot to ask about luggage. I need to, um… *(Catches PAIGE’s eye, they both nod. PAIGE puts her head phones back on.)* I’ll be right back. Just, wait for me here?
BEN: Okay.
DAVE: Promise?
BEN: Promise.
DAVE: Love you, Ben.
BEN: I love you too, Dad. *(DAVE exits.)*

*(BEN packs up his backpack. He whistles a short section of LILITH’s Lullaby, then stops himself. The RIDER enters from the back with his bags, whistling the Lullaby where BEN left off. He makes eye contact quickly before exiting. LILITH steps into the car. She packs her belongings. BEN won’t make eye contact.)*

LILITH: You have nothing to say to me? *(BEN says nothing.)* I run down an entire train. My own son hiding from me. You try to tell me how grown up you are and you hide – you wonder why we don’t trust you. *(No reaction.)* Make us waste hours looking for you. How long has it been since you took your meds, probably –
BEN: It hasn’t been that long. Less than an hour.
LILITH: I think I know how to tell time, Benjamin. This is our stop, get your things together. Can I trust you with that, or are you going to run off again? (*BEN doesn’t move.*) Ben, I’m getting tired of this… Just do as I say.

BEN: Stop.

LILITH: Are you even listening to me?

BEN: No.

LILITH: No?

BEN: I can’t listen to you.

LILITH: Benjamin.

BEN: You shouldn’t be here.

LILITH: Excuse me?

BEN: You’re not here anymore.

(*LILITH stares at her son, then exits the train without using the doors. PAIGE looks up.)*

PAIGE: You say something?

BEN: Not really. (*DAVE enters the front of the car.*)

DAVE: Ready, bud?

BEN: Sure.

(*All exit. BLACKOUT.*)
VII – What He Quietly Promises

(In a therapist’s office.)

THERAPIST: What’s keeping you from talking about it?

LILITH: It’s hard. Saying it out loud… It makes me afraid. I panic. I sweat. My heart starts –

THERAPIST: Lilith, you’re safe. Ben’s in school, if he wasn’t you’d have gotten a call by now.

LILITH: I know…

THERAPIST: You’ve been dwelling on this for months. What’s keeping you from just forgiving yourself?

LILITH: Forgiving myself seems too easy.

THERAPIST: What do you mean?

LILITH: I hate that I could have been so careless. If it had been someone else with my child, or even someone else’s child, I don’t know if I could forgive them. So what right do I have to forgive myself? There have been nights when I just sit in bed and tell myself: I did that. That happened because of what I did…what I didn’t do.

THERAPIST: What are you trying to accomplish with that?

LILITH: To…I don’t know, to make myself accept it? Get myself ready to tell Dave.

THERAPIST: How often do you do this?

LILITH: At least…twice a week? Usually more.

THERAPIST: And has that been helping?

LILITH: Not by much, but a little. Yes.

THERAPIST: Lilith, if it’s alright with you, I’d like to move into a new exercise, sort of similar to what we’ve done before. We wrote everything out on paper, everything that happened at the mall –

LILITH: Right.

THERAPIST: What I’d like to try today is the same kind of activity, only verbal. How does that sound?

LILITH: I’m not sure I –

THERAPIST: All that’s going to happen is you are going to imagine Dave is sitting in the chair (LILITH starts to breathe heavily) and at your own pace, as you feel comfortable, you’re going to tell him what happened.

LILITH: I think I need more time before I can –
THERAPIST: We can go as slow as you need to. I think you’re ready.

LILITH: If I start to have an attack –

THERAPIST: We’ll stop. You have my word. But I don’t think that’s going to happen.

LILITH: Is it normal to be this nervous?

THERAPIST: It’s very normal. But the point of the exercise is to fight through it.

LILITH: Great.

THERAPIST: Whenever you’re ready.

LILITH: (Breathing.) Dave…Honey…Remember my mom’s old fairytales? A few months ago I started telling them to Ben as bedtime stories. One of them was the Elf King. Remember? He really liked that one.

THERAPIST: You’re doing great, Lilith.

LILITH: The next day, he had that play date at the mall. Audrey and Becky’s kids. Well, at the mall, we were…We were all settling down in the food court, by the carousel, and we’d gotten the kids set up with their lunches. Can we take a break or something?

THERAPIST: You’re right on track, Lilith. I’d like you to try a bit longer.

LILITH: I got everyone settled down and eating. Becky and Audrey were on their way back with their food…They were so close, so I went to grab something for myself. (Closes her eyes, breathes.)

THERAPIST: Go on. (Lights down on THERAPIST, spot on LILITH.)

LILITH: I was gone maybe five minutes. I got back to the table and Audrey…Her eyes went from me to the kids. Then back to me. I couldn’t see Ben. He’d been so well-behaved all day. Now he was gone. We searched everywhere, the security guards called for him over the speaker. He could have been anywhere in the building by then.

DAVE: (In dark.) How did you get him back?

LILITH: Security told me to pick a spot that Ben knew. They had me stand next to the carousel and wait. They wouldn’t let me help, just stand there and wait. I felt like I was about to scream when I felt a little tug on my leg. He was just standing there, smiling, with an ice cream cone. He looked so happy. I knocked the ice cream out of his hand – fuck if I know who gave it to him. He started to cry and I just broke.

DAVE: Was that all?

LILITH: I got Ben in the car and just drove. He kept asking me, “Mama, what’s wrong? What’s wrong?” All I could do was ask where he got the ice cream. He told me he got it from the Elf King. He kept talking about all the other kids that wanted him to come with and this one pretty girl that held his hand. Someone tried to take him. Someone tried to take Ben!
DAVE: It’s all right. Lil, it’s all right. We got him back.
LILITH: They would have taken him and never brought him back –
DAVE: We won’t let it happen again. Lilith please, just breathe. It won’t happen again.
LILITH: How are you not flipping out? Are you listening to me?!
DAVE: Yes, Lil, I am. You need to relax now. Come on, sit here. We got him back.
LILITH: I can’t breathe.
DAVE: Lil?
LILITH: I can’t breathe. I can’t –
DAVE: Lil – Damn it – Hun, look at me. (Sees her eyes.) Where are your meds?
LILITH: I can’t –
DAVE: Come on hun, take this. Lilith, take it. There you go. God okay, phone…
LILITH: I’m sor – I didn’t stop…
DAVE: Please, just hang in there – I need an ambulance at 1582 North –
BEN: (Offstage) Mama?
(Schubert begins to play. BLACKOUT.)
VIII – My Father, Don’t You See

(Lights up on the next train. BEN and DAVE enter from the front of the car, carrying their bags and led by CONDUCTOR. PAIGE looks up.)

PAIGE: Look at that.
DAVE: Hi again.
BEN: Hi.
DAVE: Have a good lay over?
PAIGE: Few hours of nothing. Got some decent pictures of the area, though. You guys?
DAVE: Grabbed some food and a nap.
PAIGE: Sounds nice.
BEN: (Stretching his back.) Not in a train station.
PAIGE: Hopefully the seats are an improvement.
(They awkwardly scoot past each other and get to their seats, PAIGE a row or two up.)
PAIGE: (to BEN) No mom?
BEN: She’s not coming back. It’s over.
PAIGE: Oh –
DAVE: Have a good one, PAIGE.
PAIGE: Same, both of you.
DAVE: (to BEN) These have never felt so comfortable.
BEN: Give it a half hour. (Grunts) I just wanna sleep, we’re moving too fast.
DAVE: Yeah, well…We might be back sooner than we thought.
BEN: Good.
DAVE: (Checks his watch.) How long’s it been?
BEN: Sometime this morning. On the other train.
DAVE: None in between? (Beat.) Ben?
BEN: I don’t think so, no.
DAVE: It should be about time then.
BEN: Dad –
DAVE: You don’t wanna wait too long.

(BEN gets the bottle out. There’s only a few left. He takes one.)

DAVE: When’s your next refill?

BEN: Soon. (Train slows, making its first stop.)

DAVE: We’ll find a pharmacy when we get to the hotel.

BEN: We don’t have to.

DAVE: Just to be careful, Benny. You went through those faster this time. Should we ask about upping your dose?

BEN: No, that’s not –

DAVE: I’ll make an appointment for Monday after school.

BEN: Dad.

DAVE: A checkup, Ben, that’s all.

BEN: Can we talk about something else, please? I don’t want to think about it anymore.

DAVE: Sorry. I’m just – I’m trying to stay on top of this.

BEN: (Seeing something toward the front of the car.) That’s her.

DAVE: Ben?

BEN: The girl.

DAVE: What –?

BEN: The girl from the last train, I thought I recognized her from somewhere. Maybe school.

DAVE: What girl?

BEN: She was right there – (Pointing.)

DAVE: Don’t point, man, you’ll creep her out. Just – tell me where she’s at.

BEN: Second window from the front, on the left.

DAVE: She’s cute. (Smiles at his son. Train starts moving again.) Benny’s got a crush.

BEN: Dad.

DAVE: You gonna talk to her?

BEN: Dad! You’re worried about being creepy, and you want me to talk to her?

DAVE: I think it would be an adventure.
BEN: I wouldn’t know what to say to someone like that, even if I could get out there.
DAVE: I’ll move, just ask nicely –
BEN: I’m not exactly dressed for hiking.
DAVE: What?
BEN: It’s all rocks and trees outside – Are we in the mountains already?
DAVE: Why would –
BEN: How fast do you think we’ve been going?
DAVE: Why does outside matter, Ben?
BEN: You’re the one who wants me to get out and talk to her.
DAVE: I meant walk over and say, “Hi,” to her. (Points.)
BEN: Not her.
DAVE: Then who?
BEN: The blonde girl from the last train, outside the second window from the front on the left, like I told you –
DAVE: Grab my hand.
BEN: What? I’m not –
DAVE: And the seat. Find an anchor.
BEN: I’m not!
DAVE: You’re seeing people floating outside the train!
BEN: It’s – I worded it weird! She got off at that last stop. She was standing on the platform. (DAVE looks him over.) I’m not. I’m sure of it, Dad.
DAVE: Ben…
BEN: You don’t believe me… Great. You told me you trust me, and now…
DAVE: I do. It’s just…(BEN turns away.) You’re right. I’m sorry, I misunderstood.
BEN: Me, too.
(GIRL walks down the train aisle and exits front. BEN sees her go, and follows.)
DAVE: Where are you going?
BEN: Bathroom.
DAVE: It’s that way?
BEN: I don’t know. I was just gonna walk until I found one. I need to stretch.
DAVE: Sure. Just hurry back.
BEN: Yup. (Exits. PAIGE sees him go and looks back to DAVE, who signals that it’s okay.)
(The brakes screech and the train slows.)
CONDUCTOR: Ladies and Gentlemen, can I have your attention, please. We will be experiencing an unplanned delay due to an approaching train on our track. We should be moving again within the hour. We apologize for the inconvenience and thank you for your patience.
PAIGE: (Removing her headphones.) An hour?
DAVE: Looks like it. Will it make you late for something?
PAIGE: I’m just visiting family. I can show up whenever.
DAVE: It would’ve been nice to get back early.
PAIGE: What’s the rush? Got a hot date?
DAVE: (Laughs self-consciously.) Not for a long time.
PAIGE: I’m sorry. That was in bad taste.
DAVE: Not at all, it’s –
PAIGE: I have horrible timing.
DAVE: In terms of what?
PAIGE: Ben told me a few minutes ago, I guess it just slipped my mind.
DAVE: Told you what?
PAIGE: That your wife took off between trains. She’s not coming back with you guys.
DAVE: My wife…
PAIGE: Girlfriend? I don’t mean to assume. Ben’s mom.
DAVE: Lilith. What exactly did Ben tell you about his mom?
PAIGE: She’s not always around. They’ve been butting heads lately, but she really wanted to come with you guys, so –
DAVE: He didn’t mention she passed, did he?
PAIGE: Passed…?
DAVE: No longer with us. Gone. *(PAIGE still struggling.*) She died.

PAIGE: What – When??

DAVE: Between trains.

PAIGE: WHAT?

DAVE: Ten years ago. Come on –

PAIGE: You scared the shit outta me.

DAVE: I’m sorry. Lil had a great sense of humor. She wouldn’t have wanted me to be all “doom and gloom” about it, not after all this time.

PAIGE: I don’t understand. Ben –

DAVE: Ben. He likes to keep her close. A little too close. Not a little, way too close. Sometimes he talks about her as if she’s still here. He’s had a hard time letting her go.

PAIGE: I can’t blame him.

DAVE: Well no, but it’s not just… Something’s always been a little off.

PAIGE: Oh.

DAVE: We had him checked out multiple times. No one can figure it out. “Symptoms too mild for conclusive –” whatever.

PAIGE: No one knows how to help?

DAVE: We’ve had him on a few prescriptions, just to cover what we know, but… It’s tricky. I just have to make sure he takes them every time, on time, and only on time.

PAIGE: If he forgets?

DAVE: Sometimes nothing. Sometimes he hears things. And I guess, sometimes, Lil comes back. I’m sorry, I don’t – you’re a stranger, this isn’t your problem.

PAIGE: No, no, I um… My mother passed a year ago. I can’t remember the sound of her voice anymore, after a year. I’d give anything, just for one more day. Ben, it can’t be easy for him, but… I don’t know, in a way, I almost envy him.

DAVE: Don’t.

*(An alarm begins to blare and lights flash.)*

DAVE: Jesus.

PAIGE: What the hell is that?

*(A group of train employees runs in from the back of the car, answering radio calls.)*
CONDUCTOR: We’ll shut this off as soon as we can, folks.

PASSENGER: What’s going on??

CONDUCTOR: Some kid popped an emergency window and climbed out.

PASSENGER: Will that affect our delay?

CONDUCTOR: Depends how quick we get him back inside. (Exits.)

PAIGE: It’s kind of a drop from these windows, isn’t it?

DAVE: (Looking out.) Ben.

PAIGE: What?

DAVE: IT’S BEN.

(DAVE grabs his backpack and sprints out. PAIGE looks out the window and follows after him.)
IX – The Nightly Dance in the Gloomy Place

(GIRL walking in the woods, exits. BEN enters, looking for her. Following shadows, hearing the Lullaby. He takes a pill and the song stops. The shadows stand still and then disappear. GIRL appears.)

BEN: Hi. (The GIRL acknowledges him, but doesn’t respond.) Where are you going?

GIRL: Wherever we want. Or just keep following.

BEN: I haven’t been following you. I mean just now, I was, but on the train – it was just coincidence.

GIRL: No it wasn’t.

BEN: My dad planned this trip. I didn’t decide which trains –

GIRL: You remember me.

BEN: I don’t know about remember. I thought, maybe, you looked familiar…

GIRL: I do. So do you.

BEN: Where from?

GIRL: You’ll remember.

BEN: I don’t think I can.

GIRL: Try harder.

BEN: What? (GIRL smiles and walks away.) Why did you get off the train?

GIRL: This was my stop.

BEN: There’s nothing here.

GIRL: You’re not looking hard enough. (Shadows begin to move again.)

BEN: We should get back to the train.

GIRL: No. There’s nothing there for us. We got off for a reason.

BEN: My dad will kill me if he finds out I left.

GIRL: They know by now. No one is coming after you.

BEN: It hasn’t been that long. But if I don’t get back soon –

GIRL: How long do you think we’ve been walking? (BEN doesn’t respond.) No one is coming. Listen around you.

BEN: My dad wouldn’t let them leave without me.
GIRL: Why not? Why not be rid of you?
BEN: He’s my dad!
GIRL: You’ve been nothing but a burden to him –
BEN: Excuse me?
GIRL: – for years. He could easily –
BEN: You don’t even know us!
GIRL: We both know that’s not true.
BEN: Who are you?
GIRL: You’ll remember once we’re further in.
BEN: What does that even mean?
GIRL: Look, I’m one of very few who know what you’ve been through.
BEN: How could you possibly –
GIRL: Look at me.
BEN: I don’t have time for this. The train –
GIRL: Look at me, Ben.
BEN: (Beat.) How do you know my name?
GIRL: Do I need to get you an ice cream cone to make it click? (BEN recognizes her.) Let it come back.
BEN: I don’t believe this.
GIRL: But you should.
BEN: No, I WON’T.
GIRL: You did before, and you almost came with us.
BEN: No, I did not, because you’re not even –
GIRL: Why not stay with us this time, like you wanted to when you were little?
BEN: Because I’m not little anymore! I’m too old to be doing this!
GIRL: Are you too old to be happy?
BEN: Happy. I just want to live. I haven’t lived a day in my life, not since you two showed up and tried to take…until you took away everything I had.
GIRL: You never had anything for us to take. If you lost something, we’re sorry. But we only meant to give you –


GIRL: A way out.

BEN: Of what?

GIRL: Loneliness. (BEN listens.) All of us were stuck in it, once. You, especially. That’s how we knew to find you. It’s why we were trying to help.

BEN: Trying to help? Where have you been the last few years?

GIRL: Waiting our turn.

BEN: This doesn’t make sense. (Gets out his cellphone.)

GIRL: Ben, when has anything ever made sense for you?

BEN: Get away from me.

GIRL: You came after me. If you didn’t want me to be here, you could have let me go.

BEN: None of you ever just “go.”

GIRL: Because you know we care.

BEN: I have people who care! I have a family, and friends, and –

GIRL: Tell me about your friends, Ben. (He stutters a response.) If you’re so close, read me a text from them. Anything, just one. (BEN drops the phone to the ground and starts walking away. GIRL follows.) They sound supportive: friends who don’t talk and aren’t ever there. A father who thinks you’re crazy. A mother who treats you like an infant. Just obey: don’t talk, don’t think, don’t grow. Does it sound like she cares?

BEN: My mom –

GIRL: That’s not what you need. Not if you want to really live. Ben. Stay here. (Shadows shift.) We’d never abandon someone who has suffered like we have. We are a real family. We will respect you, like an equal, not talk down to you like a child. There is real love here. Love like a family should have, like friends should have, like true companions. Companions that you’ve never been allowed to have. Don’t you want to explore that kind of freedom?

BEN: I do, but –

GIRL: With us you can. Stay with us, and that freedom can never be taken away from you. My father doesn’t lie.

BEN: Your father?

GIRL: I want to share that freedom with you, Ben. I want it with all my heart.
BEN: What?
DAVE: (offstage) Ben!!! Where are you?! Benjamin!!!
BEN: Dad?
GIRL: He is not welcome here.
(GIRL exits into the shadows. BEN tries to follow but staggers.)
BEN: Wait!
(DAVE enters.)
DAVE: Ben!!!
BEN: Dad, you need to get out of here.
DAVE: Are you okay?
BEN: Dad.
DAVE: Are you hurt?
BEN: Please, Dad, just go back.
DAVE: We’re both going back. Right now.
BEN: Let go of me.
DAVE: What the hell were you thinking?! (Music begins to play.)
BEN: Do you hear that?
DAVE: You jumped out of a train! What the hell would make you do that, man? I don’t care, I don’t even care. I got you back, you’re safe.
ELFKING: (Unseen) For now.
BEN: Dad –
DAVE: What?
BEN: Did you hear that?
DAVE: Yes, it’s the wind, Ben. God, you gave me your word! And the fine, the goddamn fine we’re going to have to pay. This could have been criminal!
ELFKING: Come. Go with me.
BEN: I need to go with – (BEN steps clumsily and falls into DAVE.)
DAVE: Jesus, Ben…Ben, buddy, look at me. Okay, come here. Easy. Where are your pills?
BEN: Don’t have them.
DAVE: That’s fine, we’ll get them on the train, just…Have some water.
BEN: I need to go.
DAVE: We’ll get you outta here, bud.
BEN: No, Dad –
DAVE: On three. One, two, three. *(Drags BEN upright.)*
BEN: I’m going with her.
DAVE: You’re going with me.
BEN: I need to find them.
DAVE: We need to find Paige, and we need to find the train. And those are both this way. Ben?
BEN: …Can I have the water back?
DAVE: Yeah. Hold on, okay?
*(DAVE drags BEN off. Shadows shift.)*
X – Golden Robes, Unwilling Force

(PAIGE sitting propped up against a tree, taking pictures of the forest around her.)

DAVE: (Distant) PAIGE! PAIGE!

PAIGE: Over here.


PAIGE: What do you want me to say?

DAVE: Anything, I can’t see you. I need your voice.

PAIGE: Alright… How was your day?

DAVE: I’m pretty sure you know how || my day was!

PAIGE: Mine could have been better. A few bumps and bruises, but hey, it was an adventure.

DAVE: Are you being serious right now?

PAIGE: No. I’m talking. You told me to keep talking, so I’m a keep talking.

DAVE: (Entering, almost carrying BEN.) That you?

PAIGE: No.

DAVE: What are you doing down there?

PAIGE: Thought I’d have a nice sit, snap a few pics. I might have sprained my ankle.

DAVE: Are you all right, can you put weight on it?

PAIGE: A little, if I’m careful. I just needed a rest.

DAVE: But you can walk?

PAIGE: Slowly. I’ll probably need a hand. Is he okay?

DAVE: He’s dizzy. We need to get him back to the train.

PAIGE: (Hoisting herself up. Hangs onto the tree.) Alrighty. Which way?

DAVE: It’s…uh… Which way did you come from?

PAIGE: I want to say that way, but I kept getting turned around.

DAVE: Don’t worry about it. I’m almost certain we need to head… If Ben and I just came from that way and I went left when you and I split… Shit, I don’t recognize any of this. Help me look for moss, we’ll figure out where North is.

PAIGE: If we found North, what direction would the train be?
DAVE: I don’t know! …We’re gonna run out of time.

PAIGE: Not if you run.

DAVE: How are we gonna run with your ankle and Ben about to pass out?

PAIGE: We arn’t. Leave Ben with me. I’ll watch him. You go.

DAVE: I can’t leave him, he’s –

PAIGE: He’s safe. I’ll keep him calm, keep giving him water, and you can find the train.

DAVE: (DAVE lays BEN down by the tree.) Are you sure?

PAIGE: I’m sure. Dave…(Holds out pill bottle.)

DAVE: What’s this?

PAIGE: Ben’s name is on it. I found it on the ground, empty.

DAVE: He spilled them, probably fumbling with it.

PAIGE: There were none on the ground.

DAVE: Then…no, then we have to stick together. If he starts –

PAIGE: We’ll only slow you down. Please, go find the train, bring someone back with you to help us. It’ll be the quickest way back.

DAVE: If Ben, while I’m gone, if he gets sick –

PAIGE: I’ll take care of him. I went to medical school, okay? Go.

DAVE: Thank you. (Exits.)

PAIGE: Hurry!

BEN: (Groggy) You went to medical school?

PAIGE: For a few weeks, yeah.

BEN: What kind of doctor did you want to be?

PAIGE: Anesthesiologist. Or dental hygienist, I couldn’t decide.

BEN: You need medical school to be a dental hygienist?

PAIGE: Nope. Took me a few weeks to figure that out. Now I take pictures and ride trains.

BEN: At least you’re happy.

PAIGE: I’ve got no major complaints. I don’t know about happy.

BEN: But you’re free.
PAIGE: I mean…free country, right? Everyone’s –

BEN: No. Not everyone. Whatever’s going wrong for you, you’re free to change it. You can find your own way to be happy.

PAIGE: It’s not that easy.

BEN: No, but it’s simple. And open. Everything about my life is locked down in this routine. If I don’t follow the pattern, every day … It’s like living in this shitty, never-ending, death-trap maze that I’ve had to navigate over and over. I can’t trust anything. Not my senses, not my feelings, not my thoughts. Not my family. So I stay put.

PAIGE: You don’t trust your dad?

BEN: If I had his trust, maybe… He doesn’t even trust me to go to a regular school without ruining everything. He thinks if I’m contained, it’s all manageable. He doesn’t understand how it grows. I’m afraid if I don’t break out, at some point it’s going to break me.

PAIGE: You won’t break, Ben. You’re a strong kid.

BEN: Bullshit. We just met. How would you know?

PAIGE: Jesus, I’m not patronizing you. What you’re describing sucks. (Music begins.) Your life sucks, is that what you wanna hear?

BEN: (Seeing shadows. ELFKING enters, all in shadow.) You don’t know the half of it.

PAIGE: No, I don’t. But I do know everyone has shit, Ben. Everyone knows pain. Look, from what I can tell, what you’ve been through has been awful, and I’m sorry. But I will not insult you by feeling sorry for you. You can fight and grow and overcome, we all can.

ELFKING: [You’ll have to fight.]

PAIGE: [You’ll have to fight] harder and longer to keep your head above water, but fighting is better than giving up. You just have to choose to do it, yuh know?

ELFKING: Not giving up. You’re looking for a way out.

BEN: If I could find a way out, I –

PAIGE: Looking at your life and your routine as this maze is a choice. And it’s making what’s outside look tempting. Ben, whatever routine your Dad’s trying to hold you to, you have to trust that it’s for the best. He’s trying to understand. Help him. Choose to fight through together. It’s what your Mom would have wanted.

ELFKING: How would she know?

BEN: How did you know?

PAIGE: Your dad told me. Losing your mom… That, I can relate to.

ELFKING: She never knew her.
BEN: You didn’t know her.
PAIGE: No, but I know that pain. I understand how hard it is to come to peace with it.
ELFKING: Aw. Let’s help her come to peace.
BEN: What’s keeping you from finding peace?
PAIGE: I don’t wanna talk about it.
GIRL: Of course not.
BEN: Please.
PAIGE: I wasn’t with her when she died. I missed my flight, and I didn’t make it back in time. I know it was an accident. But I was scared, too. The idea of seeing her like that… Now I’ll never see her again.
ELFKING: Help her come to peace.
BEN: I wish I could help.
GIRL: You can. (GIRL places a rock next to BEN.)
BEN: I can’t.
PAIGE: You have. Look, I’m sorry for –
BEN: No. (To PAIGE.) I needed to hear it.
PAIGE: Thank you for listening.
ELFKING: Listen now.
PAIGE: The routine will get easier, Ben.
GIRL: Hear that?
ELFKING: Listen to what she wants for you.
PAIGE: Your dad wants the best for you. It will help block out the rest.
ELFKING: Block out your chance of freedom.
PAIGE: You’ll find your own way to be happy.
ELFKING: You’ve found it, here. She wants to bar you from it.
GIRL: You’ll have to take it.
BEN: Not like this. (Kicks rock away.)
PAIGE: What do you mean?
ELFKING: Choose your own way, then. It’s your right.

BEN: I just… I need something else. Maybe help. Maybe a hobby. You have your camera. Does that help you?

PAIGE: It was her hobby before mine. It helps me remember.

ELFKING: Choose.

GIRL: Take it, Ben.

BEN: Can I see it?

PAIGE: Sure.

GIRL: You’ll have to take it.

ELFKING: Or she’ll take you back.

BEN: Could I take a few?

PAIGE: Of course, my pleasure.

GIRL: She’ll deny you every chance of pleasure.

ELFKING: Every chance you have left.

BEN: How many are left? I don’t want to waste.

PAIGE: It’s digital. Feel free. (BEN snaps a photo. FLASH.)

GIRL: Free. (FLASH.)

ELFKING: Free. (FLASH. BEN checks the screen.)

ELFKING & GIRL: Come with me.

(BLACKOUT. Smash… Lights come up LOW. ELFKING laughs. Lights slowly up, PAIGE is sprawled and unconscious. The camera sits broken on the ground. Shadows fall silent.)

ELFKING: Atta boy. I knew you were a fighter. And your technique. Beautiful. Enticing. Abrupt. I liked it. (Steps into the light. It is RIDER.) How ‘bout now, kid. Do you recognize me? (Cackles.) You look worn out. Or wasted, I can’t really tell. Why so sleepy, Benny? The girl, she was a nice touch, huh?

My daughter led you into
My Kingdom in the trees.
And she’ll rock you and dance you
And sing you to sleep.
Or did she sing you, then dance you,
Then ROCK you off to sleep.
Come on, you can tell me. Was she the one who wore you out? My little princess, all grown up, just for you! You gotta be age appropriate if you want to be persuasive. Don’t seem so uncomfortable kiddo, this is a happy reunion. Come on over, darlin’! (*GIRL approaches, BEN doesn’t relax.*)

BEN: Back off.

ELFKING: No, no, now that won’t do. We need to make the boy feel at home.

BEN: Stop it. Just stop. Oh, God, what did I do?

ELFKING: You made a choice. Your own choice, for once. Feels good, doesn’t it? You’re feeling better. Thinking clearer. Breathe that clean, open air, Benny! You chose freedom. Soak that freedom in.

BEN: She was going to help me, she was trying –

ELFKING: Trying to help? Oh, my pretty little boy, all she was trying to do was turn that maze in your noggin into a voluntary prison. But you thought on your feet, removed the obstacle.

GIRL: This is your chance, Ben. Stay with us. Start over. You fought your way out, now you can live however you want.

BEN: This is not what I want! Hurting people, leaving my dad.

ELFKING: Where is he, Ben? Where is your dad? You’re worried about leaving the guy who left you to die in the woods with this free-loader? He left you here while he ran for safety, for an escape route, back to the train.

GIRL: I told you, Ben. There’s nothing for us back there.

ELFKING: Sounds to me like he wanted you to stay with us. You’d be happy, if he gives a damn about that, and he’d be free to live without being held back by his nut bag son.

BEN: Stop it!

ELFKING: Those aren’t my words, if you remember correctly. I – we – would never call you that. We understand. You’re not made for that world, Ben. You don’t belong there, with those people, but that does not make you dysfunctional. Just out of place. Not anymore. You are where you belong, and we care enough about you to recognize that. We’ve cared enough to stick around after all these years, to persist in our attempt to rescue you from that train wreck of a world, if you’ll excuse the phrase. That ice cream cone, that silly little sweet, was a promise, a commitment. We never left. And we have no intention of leaving you behind. How many people in your life can say that? Sleeping beauty here, with all her talk, you’ll never see her after this. She’s a stranger, she’ll go home, forget you. Your dad, if by some act of God he decides to come back and collect you, plans to ship you off to Crazy Camp so you’ll stop being his problem. That is never the kind of father I’d be to you. As for your mother… Well, she doesn’t exactly have perfect attendance, but –

BEN: SHUT UP! This is all a trick! My mom is gone! Because of what you did, she is gone!
ELFKING: What we did?

GIRL: She’s not gone, Ben.

BEN: Stop lying! All that’s left of my mom is her memory, a fucked up shadow, just like you and him and all of this. I just need to breathe and hold on and and and wait. This’ll clear up like it always does. You’ll be gone, she’ll be gone, and –

(ELFKING signals GIRL, she walks up to BEN and kisses him.)

ELFKING: How’s that for finding an anchor?

GIRL: Trust us. We won’t lie to you. You can feel us.

BEN: I can.

ELFKING: Look at me, Benjamin. This is not a trick. What we are offering you…It’s more real than anything you’ll be leaving behind. (Holds out his hand. BEN shakes it.)

BEN: This can’t…This has to be some kind of a game.

ELFKING: Then it’s a very lovely game, don’t you think? Benjamin, my invitation has never expired. I am promising you a kingdom. I’m promising you the freedom, the opportunity, and the right to rule that kingdom for yourself. The way you want to live. The way you want to love. The way you want to reign. Sovereignty over your own life, and the joys, the unparalleled joys of power.

BEN: Why me?

ELFKING: Because you will be choosing it. Not many of my children have had the wisdom to come willingly. Even she fought – my first recruit – before embracing me as her true father. Only because she didn’t know any better. You fought, like all the rest, kicking, screaming…smashing. But you, Ben, you fought to be with us, not to get back to that world. Your reward for breaking out of that goddamn maze of a life will be everything you’ve ever wanted! Embrace my Kingdom! Embrace the beauty of its chaos, the vitality of the wilderness, and you’ll find love and happiness, both new and old!

(From the company of shadows, LILITH appears.)

ELFKING: All you have to do is choose to be mine, and they will be yours.

BEN: All I wanted…

GIRL: It’s where we belong.

BEN: I want it. (Grabs LILITH’s hand.)

GIRL: Just trust us.

BEN: With all my heart. (Hugs LILITH. Something’s wrong.)

ELFKING: Good boy. Now. Come with me.
BEN: No.
GIRL: Ben.
BEN: No.
ELFKING: Benjamin, it’s too late.
BEN: I can’t do this.
LILITH: Sweetheart.
BEN: No! I’m not doing this anymore! I’m going back.
ELFKING: You’re going with me.
GIRL: There’s nothing to go back to, please –
(BEN starts to laugh.)
BEN: This is stupid.
ELFKING: Hold him. (GIRL grabs BEN’s arms.)
BEN: This is all so fucking pathetic. Go away.
(GIRL releases him.)
BEN: GO AWAY!
(All shadows scatter, leaving only BEN, GIRL, LILITH, and ELFKING.)
BEN: None of you are here. You aren’t here anymore. You never were. Go.
ELFKING: I knew you were a fighter.
LILITH: Sweetheart, please listen to him.
BEN: She was a nice touch. They both were.
GIRL: You don’t know what you’re giving up. You said you want to live.
BEN: I do.
ELFKING: Then why do you spit my offer back in my face?
BEN: It’s not worth it.
LILITH: We’d be together again. Benny, come back to Mama. We’ll make a new family here.
ELFKING: If you don’t choose us, you’ll never see her again.
BEN: I don’t see her now.
LILITH: How can you say that, Benny? Look at me. Look at Mama.
BEN: No. My mom made me promise not to choose this. You’re not fooling me.
GIRL: What do we have to do to convince you? Ben, I’m willing to do whatever it takes –
BEN: Don’t bother.
GIRL: Ben –
ELFKING: No. He’s right. Let me. (Approaches BEN. Shadows creep back.)
BEN: Do your worst. (Starts to pick up PAIGE.)
ELFKING: As you wish, child. (Takes BEN by the throat.) I gave you the chance to escape. I recognized your potential, your strength of will, your determination to find happiness. I saw your loneliness and sought to give you a home. We dedicated years to you, hoping that one day you’d compensate us for our time. You were given a sure thing, yet you are insolent enough to question my intent. (laughs.) Kiddo. You have no idea how bad you’ve fucked up.
BEN: Mom!
LILITH: You have to make the choice, sweetheart.
GIRL: Trust us, and all of it will stop.
ELFKING: Just say the word, Ben, and we’ll put all of this behind us. I can be very forgiving.
BEN: Please –
ELFKING: Oh my beautiful child, I insist! And if you’re not willing, then I will use force!
DAVE: (Offstage) BEN! PAIGE!
(GIRL, LILITH, and Shadows scatter.)
ELFKING: Do not waste any more of my time. (Drops BEN, exits.)
(BLACKOUT. Lights slowly up, BEN on the ground, gasping. CONDUCTOR enters.)
CONDUCTOR: They’re over here! Hurry!
BEN: Who are you?!
BEN: Don’t touch me!
DAVE: We need to get you back. There’s a paramedic on the train, she’ll help us make it stop.
BEN: Nothing is going to stop now! He’s coming back, he’s coming for me!
DAVE: Ben, please. Trust me. Just come here!

BEN: Stop telling me to trust you! Nothing’s real!

DAVE: I am real! Take my hand, find an anchor!

BEN: The anchors don’t work anymore! They grabbed me. They hurt me. They made me hurt Paige!

CONDUCTOR: You did this?

DAVE: Ben!

BEN: I didn’t mean to! They made me! I’m sorry, Dad, please, she needs help, please help her.

DAVE: We can’t help her here. We need the medic, and she’s back on the train.

BEN: Then take her! Go, now! (CONDUCTOR starts to go.)

DAVE: No! We’re not leaving without you.

BEN: Dad, you have to take her!

DAVE: We will, if you come with us. If you don’t, she could die. You have to, Ben.

BEN: He’ll find me.

DAVE: No one is going to find you on the train.

BEN: They did before.

DAVE: They won’t this time! …We’ll be moving too fast for them to catch us. Right?

CONDUCTOR: Sure. Unless they can run a hundred miles an hour.

DAVE: Ben, we’re almost out of time. We have to hurry, otherwise –

BEN: I know. (Takes DAVE’s hand.)

DAVE: Good, that’s good, Ben. Alright, come on.

BEN: I need help.

DAVE: That’s fine, bud, I got you. I got you, come on.

BEN: Dad, I’m scared.

DAVE: We all are, Ben. I’d be worried if you weren’t.

(All exit.)
XI – Rock You, Dance You, Sing You to Sleep

CONDUCTOR: Make some room, people. Come on, clear a path!

PASSENGERS:

What’s going on?

Is it the kid who got out?

How much longer until we’re moving?

Is he okay?

I demand a refund, this is ridiculous.

CONDUCTOR: We’ll be up and moving in a few minutes at most. Any complaints you have can be filed online or at the next station.

PASSENGERS:

You can count on it.

Can we at least get some snacks? My blood sugar –

I hope his father –

I’ll be filing a law suit, if I have to.

You are not keeping my money.

CONDUCTOR: Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please. We are evacuating this car for a medical emergency. Please collect your belongings and exit through the front of the car. (Passengers complain. CONDUCTOR glances at his colleagues.) Failure to comply is punishable by law! Let’s get these people out of here. You, make sure the medic knows where to find us.

COND. 2: She’s already with the kids and the dad.

CONDUCTOR: Good, let them know this car is cleared and blocked off for them.

COND. 2: Will do. (Exits as other CONDUCTORS push the people out. Reenters with MEDIC, BEN, and DAVE, who’s carrying an unconscious PAIGE.)

MEDIC: Lay her down gently. Be very careful with her head.

DAVE: Okay.

MEDIC: Keep the compress on the wound, not too much pressure.

DAVE: Got it. (Train starts moving. BEN grabs a seat.) Benny, how’re you doing over there?
BEN: I need to lie down.

DAVE: Go for it, bud, try to relax.

CONDUCTOR: (Reentering with water bottles.) They’re settling down. We’ll be hearing about this for months.

COND. 2: Can’t wait.

CONDUCTOR: I want a few more eyes in there in case they get loud again.

COND. 2: Yes, sir. (Exits.)

CONDUCTOR: Drink this, kid.

BEN: What is it?

CONDUCTOR: Water.

DAVE: Drink it, Ben. You’ll feel better.

MEDIC: Does he still need me?

DAVE: He looks like it’s over. Ben –

MEDIC: Just keep holding that, I’ll be right back. (Shifts over to BEN.) Hi. Ben? My name is Julie, I’m a paramedic. I’m here to help you.

BEN: Right.

MEDIC: Can you tell me how you’re feeling? (She feels BEN’s forehead and wrist, he flinches.)

BEN: Just tired.

MEDIC: This won’t take long, and then you can sleep if you want. But first I’d like to see your eyes, if you could just look into the light.

BEN: It hurts.

MEDIC: That’s fine. That’s all I needed. Is there anything else I can help you with? Are you feeling funny in any way? Or hungry?

BEN: No, my stomach’s upset. I’m cold, though.

MEDIC: We can get you a few blankets. (Gets CONDUCTOR’s attention.)

CONDUCTOR: Sure. (Exits.)

BEN: Thank you.

MEDIC: I’ll be right over here if you need me for anything.

BEN: Okay.
MEDIC: (To DAVE.) His pulse is weak. He’s a little warm, and his pupils are slightly dilated. I’ll keep an eye on him, but there’s not much more I need to do other than keep him hydrated.

DAVE: Thank you.

MEDIC: Alright, let’s get a look at that. (Looks at PAIGE’s head.) Bleeding’s stopped. I don’t like that swelling though.

DAVE: How bad?

MEDIC: Not life threatening. (Checking PAIGE’s pupils.) She’ll have one hell of a headache, though. When she wakes up, we need to keep her awake. I’d be amazed if she’s not concussed. Help me get her shoe off. I want to look at that ankle.

PAIGE: (Groaning.) Ow.

MEDIC: Sorry, sorry. I’ll go slower.

PAIGE: No, not that. I mean yes, that, but my head.

DAVE: Paige, I’m so sorry. Ben –

PAIGE: No, don’t. How is he?

DAVE: Resting. He seems fine for now.

PAIGE: He hit me?

DAVE: With your camera, yeah.

(One of the CONDUCTORS speaks over the intercom. BEN looks out the window, lights flash by and wind rocks the car. BEN gets comfortable and passes out.)

INTERCOM: Attention passengers: If you’re hoping to leave the train at the Rochester station, please make your way to one of front five cars. Doors will only be opening in cars 309, 310, 311, 312, and 313. I repeat, you must move to cars 309 through 313 if you need to exit at Rochester.

PAIGE: How’s my camera?

DAVE: I haven’t checked. I’ve been busy.

PAIGE: You brought it back though, right?

DAVE: I think the Conductor did. I’ll flag him down.

PAIGE: There are a lot of memories on that thing.

DAVE: He’s got it. But I’m just giving you a heads-up, Ben…well, feel that, he swung hard. It might be broken.

PAIGE: Just as long as I can get the files off… (CONDUCTOR enters with a stack of blankets.) Excuse me – ow, ow ow ow.
MEDIC: Easy.

DAVE: Sit, I’ll get it. *(To CONDUCTOR.)* She wants her camera. Are those for my son?

CONDUCTOR: He said he was cold.

DAVE: I’ll take them. Thank you.

CONDUCTOR: Here. Something’s rattling around in there, but it looks fine.

PAIGE: Thank God! I’m mean, thank you. Thank you so much, I appreciate it — And the lens is fucked. Ow.

DAVE: Benny, I have your blankets. How many do you want?

CONDUCTOR: *(To MEDIC)* I’m sorry to do this, there are some passengers who need to pass through this car. I’ll make sure they go quickly.

PAIGE: It turned on!

MEDIC: Thank you. *(CONDUCTOR exits.)*

DAVE: Are you sure he needs blankets? He’s sweating.

MEDIC: He asked for them. Does he still want them?

DAVE: I don’t know. He’s asleep.

PAIGE: Looks like everything is still here! What are these?

MEDIC: Give him one, blankets can’t hurt. *(DAVE lays the blankets over BEN.)* Tell me if there’s any pain when I —

PAIGE: OW. YES.

MEDIC: This might be a break. You’re going to need a splint. I’ll see what I can find. *(Exit.)* *(BEN moans in his sleep.)*

DAVE: You alright, bud? *(Feels his for head.)* Well no more fever, but you’re clammy. *(Adds another blanket.)*

CONDUCTOR: We’re addressing a medical situation in this car, so please move as quickly and as carefully as you can. *(Ushers a line of passengers through the car.)*

PAIGE: Dave. Dave come look at these. *(DAVE moves to PAIGE’s side of the aisle.)*

CONDUCTOR: *(Train jostles.)* Hold on, just passing over a switch.

*(Passengers are jostled again and RIDER shifts out of the passenger queue and into the seats in front of BEN.)*

DAVE: What am I looking at?
PAIGE: Ben took these, while you were gone. Before he...yeah.

DAVE: It’s just trees. (*Last passenger exits.*)

PAIGE: Well in that one, yeah. But look here.

(*BEN wakes up, sees RIDER.*)

DAVE: More trees. And fog, and some leaves.

PAIGE: Maybe, but...

RIDER: I’m not asking anymore.

PAIGE: Okay fine, but this one. (*BEN stands.*) What’s that then?

DAVE: Ben? (*BEN collapses.*) BEN?!

PAIGE: What’s going on?!

DAVE: No, no, no, BEN! Goddamn it!

PAIGE: HELP!

DAVE: He’s not breathing!

PAIGE: SOMEBODY HELP!!!

DAVE: He’s so cold…

PAIGE: PLEASE!!!

DAVE: Ben…

(*DAVE cradles BEN. RIDER, GIRL, and LILITH appear. BEN joins them. Lullaby. BLACKOUT.*)

End of Play
Ambiguity in *Erlkönig*
Ambiguity in *Erlkönig*

**ERLKÖNIG**

*Written and Directed By: Cullen Rogers*

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