

An excerpt from:

WHEN

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Synopsis: *Just as memories fade, so does this production. Alternating between a disappearing memory and the mostly-present, “When” explores the way that Vera’s relationships with her spouse and daughter must flex as she begins to lose her memory. In the present, her daughter Maurie is home to visit after a long absence. Vera and her husband, Charlie, try to re-connect with Maurie and her partner.*

The production should begin bursting with tiny details—jewelry on costumes, a well-dressed set, complicated lighting and sound. By the end, it should be utterly minimal. This change should be slow and steady through each transition. For example: The set begins well-dressed, with pictures, knick-knacks, art works, statues all around all rooms. During each transition, a few pieces are removed until the last scene is the barest set, without even a blanket remaining over the back of the couch.

Set: No set transitions needed. A kitchen area to one side with a table, appliances. A bedroom area with a large bed. A living room area with comfortable couches and chairs, a coffee table. This room is closest to the door from “outside.” The kitchen and bedroom should feel deeply within the home, though it is a small house.

Transitions: Intended to interrupt the flow, the scenes should not easily move from one to the next, but feel pieced-together, like they start and end in the wrong spot.

Cast:

| | |
|---------|---|
| VERA | Late 40’s, female, mature, graceful |
| CHARLIE | Late 40’s, male, his age shows |
| MAURIE | Early 20’s, female, gawky and rough around the edges, and soft-spoken |
| EMMA | Early 20’s, female, mature for her age, down-to-earth |

SCENE ONE

The first (and fullest) instance of the repeating memory.

VERA lounges on a comfortable red chaise couch, playing with balls of multicolored yarn. She is not knitting but might be braiding or finger-knitting or knotting the yarn. She is a woman of respectable age. She wears a long robe or nightgown. She is fidgety, can't maintain eye contact, or look at one place for any length of time.

CHARLIE enters. He matches VERA in age and wears simple neutral colors. He hangs his coat by the door he enters from and joins VERA on a chair across from her.

VERA
You're looking very red today.

CHARLIE
What shade of red?

VERA
Oh, a darling one.

CHARLIE
Is it the color of the couch?

VERA
No, no, you know the couch is colored like an old potato.

CHARLIE
Of course.

VERA
Don't sound so cross, I've told you this a thousand seventeen times.

CHARLIE
If not more.

VERA
Definitely not more.

CHARLIE
Am I red like your lips?

VERA
No, no, my lips are colored like kisses.

CHARLIE
Kisses like this?

(CHARLIE kisses her, she grins at him.)

VERA
I'm not sure, kiss me again and I'll tell you.

(He kisses her again.)

CHARLIE
Well?

VERA
My lips aren't red like those kisses.

CHARLIE
What color were they?

VERA
Burnt orange.

CHARLIE
Mmm.

VERA
Orange that's been left simmering over heat for too long and has just begun to tinge.

CHARLIE
Like an orange marshmallow.

VERA
Like an orange marshmallow.

CHARLIE
So I am not red like this couch, or your lips.

VERA
No, you're a darling red.

CHARLIE
Like the carpet in the other room?

VERA
The carpet is colored like pop rocks in my mouth.

CHARLIE
Mmm. I guess so.

VERA
You know that too. Is your memory going?

CHARLIE
No, I just like to hear you say them.

VERA
You're a darling red.

CHARLIE
A darling red.

VERA
Like the sun hitting brown sea glass and casting a shadow.

CHARLIE
That's a lovely color.

VERA
Or clay right on the edge of the stream.

CHARLIE
The kind you just want to dig your hands into.

VERA
Or the color of the sweater you wore on our second date.

CHARLIE
I don't remember that sweater.

VERA
I do.

CHARLIE
What do you remember about it?

VERA
You smelled green.

CHARLIE
Green?

VERA
Haven't I told you this before?

CHARLIE
Tell me again, love.

VERA
Green, like the color of the dew on the grass first thing in the morning.

CHARLIE
I love that time of day.

VERA
Or the color of the turtle I had in third grade.

CHARLIE
Named Sarcoline?

VERA
The turtle named Sarcoline.

CHARLIE
No wonder you liked me.

VERA
I liked you for you, not your colors.

CHARLIE
Do you like my colors too?

VERA
Of course. They make you even more beautiful.

CHARLIE
I love you for you too.

VERA
That makes me feel purple.

CHARLIE
What shade?

VERA
A strong, steady purple.

CHARLIE
Say more.

VERA
The way that waking up next to you feels purple.

CHARLIE
I love that feeling.

VERA
The way that driving with you in my car feels purple.

CHARLIE
Mmm, partners in crime.

VERA
The way that falling in love with you makes the purple feel darker and stronger and warmer.

CHARLIE
Falling in love with you feels like my whole body is getting warmer.

VERA
Exactly!

CHARLIE
Like my whole heart is making room for you. I feel so full.

VERA
The purple is like that.

CHARLIE
I get it.

VERA
You do?

CHARLIE
Of course. It feels safe and strong and warm, and maybe that looks like purple to you.

VERA
Exactly like purple.

CHARLIE
Then I get it.

VERA
I'm glad. It's such a lovely color.

CHARLIE

It's a really wonderful feeling too.

(They share a momentary comfortable silence.)

VERA

I wish you could see my colors too.

CHARLIE

I don't need them.

VERA

But they're so beautiful.

CHARLIE

I think you're beautiful anyways.

VERA

You're just saying that.

CHARLIE

I think you say and do the most beautiful things, and that makes you just right.

VERA

You don't know what you're missing.

CHARLIE

I don't need them. You make me feel warm, I make you feel purple, we work it out.

VERA

You don't *always* make me feel purple.

CHARLIE

You don't always make me feel warm.

VERA

I still love you.

CHARLIE

Good. I'd be worried if you didn't.

VERA

Don't be worried. Be happy.

CHARLIE

You make me feel happy too.

VERA
That makes me feel yellow.

CHARLIE
Yellow?

VERA
Yellow.

SCENE TWO

Vera tidies in the living room, straightening pictures, folding and re-folding the blanket draped over the back of the couch, etc. Charlie is in the kitchen, kneeling in front of the stove with a bucket of grimy water and an old rag. They speak loud enough so the other can always hear them, even from different rooms.

VERA
Oh my goodness.

CHARLIE
What is it now, dear?

VERA
I can't remember where I placed my—

(She finds her glass.)

VERA
Nevermind, love.

CHARLIE
Lost your cup again?

VERA
I need to put a tracker on it.

CHARLIE
Or just keep it in your hand.

VERA
I can hardly keep it in hand when I'm running around cleaning.

CHARLIE
You know Maurie doesn't care if it's clean.

VERA
Yes, but *I* care.

CHARLIE
This is why I am in here, cleaning the inside of the stove.

VERA
It has to be ready!

CHARLIE
I know, my dearest.

VERA
Talk me through everything.

CHARLIE
Maura's room.

VERA
More specific. My list is... *(she waves a hand at her head: it's gone)*

CHARLIE
The bed is made, you did that yesterday.

VERA
That's true. She's got the warm flannel sheets.

CHARLIE
You dusted, vacuumed, and cleaned the mirror this morning.

VERA
I'll go light a candle.

CHARLIE
You don't need to do that.

VERA
It's not about need.

(VERA dashes offstage. CHARLIE exits the kitchen, enters the living room, and picks up VERA's forgotten cup. He returns to the kitchen, rinses the cup, and refills it with lemonade. VERA enters the kitchen.)

VERA
A match!

CHARLIE
A match?

VERA
A match!

CHARLIE
Oh, a match.

(He opens a drawer and hands her the box of matches. VERA begins to dash off, he touches her arm to bring pause.)

VERA
Yes?

CHARLIE
I love you.

VERA
Thank you.

CHARLIE
You didn't tell me my color this morning.

VERA
I didn't?

CHARLIE
No. You told me about the dream you had last night—the Venus Fly Traps with snake tongues—and jumped out of bed before I could ask.

VERA
Let's see.

(A pause. VERA considers CHARLIE.)

VERA
Blue.

CHARLIE
Blue?

VERA
Just... Blue.

CHARLIE
Which shade?

VERA
Not one perceptible to humans.

CHARLIE
You perceive it.

VERA
Only barely. Why am I holding matches? Oh! The candle in Maurie's room.

(She begins to leave, pauses--)

VERA
I love you.

(She kisses Charlie's cheek and dashes to an offstage bedroom. CHARLIE returns to the kitchen and returns to cleaning the oven.)

VERA
She hasn't come up with any new allergies, right?

CHARLIE
Nope.

VERA
What about the friend she's bringing?

CHARLIE
All clear.

VERA
How's the oven coming?

CHARLIE
With a lot of very charred grit and elbow grease.

(The doorbell rings.)

VERA
Oh no! Or—yes! But... I'll get it!

(Charlie stands, closes the oven and washes up while VERA opens the door. The lights dim on the kitchen while VERA welcomes MAURIE and EMMA.)

VERA
You're home!

MAURIE
I'm home, Ma. Hi.

(VERA and MAURIE hug. EMMA enters, sets a suitcase and another bag down.)

EMMA
Hi, Vera! How are you doing?

VERA
Oh, I'm doing quite green, Emma, it's so lovely to see you.

MAURIE
We nearly got into a car accident on our way here.

VERA
No!

EMMA
It was my fault, I can admit to that.

VERA
Come in, tell me all about it. Charlie!

CHARLIE
Just washing up!

VERA
Come in, come in. Do you want something to drink? I have Arizona iced tea for you, Maurie.

MAURIE
I'll just have some water, thank you.

VERA
What's the matter?

(She rushes over, presses a hand to MAURIE's forehead)

MAURIE
Ma, I'm just trying to avoid sugar, don't be weird.

VERA
Sugar? But it's in everything. Is this because of some internet thing?

MAURIE

No, I just started paying attention to how much I was taking in and thought I might just avoid sugary drinks and sweets, extra sugar that I don't need.

VERA

I suppose that makes sense. Water then. For you, Emma?

EMMA

Oh, I'll have water too—but because I prefer it, not because I am avoiding anything.

VERA

I'll return with Charlie too, I hope.

(As soon as VERA exits, MAURIE lies her head on EMMA's shoulder.)

MAURIE

Thank you for driving.

EMMA

Of course, darling.

MAURIE

It's all so heavy.

EMMA

I'm glad we could make it out. Your mom is happy to see you.

MAURIE

I know. Thank you for driving.

EMMA

I love you.

MAURIE

Maybe I need more coffee.

EMMA

Love, you had three cups this morning.

MAURIE

Or sugar.

EMMA

What do you think?

MAURIE

I don't care.

EMMA

I know.

(They sit in silence. Lights in the kitchen on VERA and CHARLIE)

VERA

She's here!

CHARLIE

How does she look? How is Emma?

VERA

She looks happy. You know? With that little glow to her smile.

CHARLIE

I'm glad she's home. It's been so long.

VERA

But she's home, and she brought her partner, and it will be good.

CHARLIE

It will be good.

VERA

Come and say hello?

CHARLIE

Of course. I thought you would want this all tidied up before they saw the mess.

VERA

Thank you.

(She kisses CHARLIE on the cheek.)

VERA

Oh! The water. They wanted water. Did I ask if they wanted ice?

CHARLIE

Maurie doesn't like ice, remember?

VERA

You're completely right. No ice.

CHARLIE

I'll go and say hello.

VERA
Thank you, dear.

SCENE THREE

VERA is knitting with needles, a different color yarn than the last time. CHARLIE enters, hangs his coat by the door and joins VERA in a chair across from the couch.

VERA
Was it a good day at work today?

CHARLIE
How could you tell?

VERA
You're looking very red today.

CHARLIE
What shade of red?

VERA
You're a darling red.

CHARLIE
A darling red?

VERA
Yes. Like the sun hitting brown sea glass and casting a shadow.

CHARLIE
That's a lovely color.

VERA
Or clay right on the edge of the stream.

CHARLIE
The kind you dig your hands into.

(They share a momentary comfortable silence.)

VERA
You don't know what you're missing because you can't see them. The colors are so beautiful.

CHARLIE
I don't need them.

VERA
You're just saying that.

CHARLIE
I don't. You make me feel warm, I make you feel purple, we work it out.

VERA
You don't *always* make me feel purple.

CHARLIE
You don't always make me feel warm.

VERA
I still love you.

CHARLIE
Good. I'd be worried if you didn't.

VERA
Don't be worried, be purple. Falling in love with you makes me feel purple.

CHARLIE
It feels like my whole body is getting warmer.

VERA
Exactly!

CHARLIE
It feels safe and strong and warm, and maybe that looks like purple to you.

VERA
Exactly like purple.

CHARLIE
Then I get it.

VERA
It's such a lovely color. You're such a lovely love.

CHARLIE
I'm glad.

(He leans over and kisses her.)

SCENE FOUR

(EMMA and MAURIE are wrapped up in blankets in the living room. MAURIE rests with her head on Emma's lap. Emma absentmindedly plays with her hair.

VERA and CHARLIE are in the kitchen. Vera reads a book, Charlie cooks.

Light begins on EMMA and MAURIE.)

EMMA
That's what I thought.

MAURIE
Right?

EMMA
It's definitely new.

MAURIE
Mhm.

EMMA
Unless I'm completely losing it. Which I might be, the way I think.

MAURIE
You work too much.

EMMA
The table is still new.

MAURIE
Mhm.

EMMA
Is it too late to complement her on it?

(Maurie shrugs.)

EMMA
I ought to have noticed it sooner.

MAURIE
Mm.

EMMA
I'm glad we could come out here.

MAURIE

Me too.

EMMA

It's nice to take a break, and get to spend it with you and your family.

MAURIE

I'm glad for the break too.

EMMA

Makes me stop working and just... be for a moment. Do you want to take a walk?

(Maurie rolls to look straight up at EMMA, and gives her a Look.)

EMMA

We can stay here.

MAURIE

I'm so warm.

EMMA

Me too. Little space heater.

MAURIE

Yes, suck up all my warmth.

(She snuggles closer.)

MAURIE

I'll keep you warm and keep you wanting to stay here.

EMMA

That's all the convincing I need.

MAURIE

Cozy.

EMMA

Quite.

(Lights up on Vera and Charlie.)

VERA

And he just yelled at you, right in front of everyone?

CHARLIE

It was absolutely horrible.

VERA

I can't believe it.

CHARLIE

It broke my heart.

VERA

I think that is utterly unprofessional.

CHARLIE

That's what I said!

VERA

Did you talk to him about it?

CHARLIE

Well, I've thought about it.

VERA

Thought about it isn't did it.

CHARLIE

I don't want to make waves.

VERA

Make waves, my love.

CHARLIE

I really love this job.

VERA

You don't deserve to be chewed out for a silly mistake.

CHARLIE

And I'm still so new.

VERA

Not for a silly mistake, and not in front of all of your coworkers.

CHARLIE

I don't know.

VERA

I triple-doggy-dare-you to walk into his office on Monday and tell him you think he was unprofessional. It's an engineering firm for gods' sake, he probably just needs a bit of prodding.

CHARLIE

Well, a triple dog dare, I don't know, that's pretty serious.

VERA

I'm serious! Come on, try it for me. Hey, Boss... what's his name again?

CHARLIE

Richard.

VERA

Hey, Dick, you were a dick, let's talk about it.

CHARLIE

Oh my god.

VERA

Dicky, you yelled at me in front of all of our coworkers because I forgot to copy you on an email. What the fuck?

CHARLIE

This... Not helpful.

VERA

Dear Sir Richard – what's his last name?

CHARLIE

I am not telling you his last name.

VERA

Dear Sir Richard LastName. I am writing to you to request a meeting to discuss a small matter of communication occurring last Thursday afternoon. Is there a time you would be available to meet with little ole me?

CHARLIE

I'll talk to him, okay?

VERA

Yes!!

CHARLIE

Just... a bit more politely than your ideas probably.

VERA

If you must.

CHARLIE

I must.

VERA

I'm proud of you.

CHARLIE

I know.

VERA

You've worked so hard to be where you are.

CHARLIE

I'm really happy with his company. You know? Of course you know. I'm happy because it's right, because it's not... it's not Calivander's, it's just... better and I'm more respected—

VERA

You're doing work you're proud of. That's a very yellow feeling, my love.

CHARLIE

Exactly! Or which shade of yellow are you thinking?

VERA

Close your eyes.

CHARLIE

Closed.

VERA

Breathe in, and imagine those biscuits we used to make—

CHARLIE

First day of school biscuits.

VERA

First day of school biscuits! With the butter all melted over them, fluffy inside and crispy on the top.

CHARLIE

I can smell them.

VERA

That's the color.

CHARLIE
That's not a color.

VERA
Do you understand anyway?

CHARLIE
Beautifully.

VERA
Then it's still an effective form of communication.

(She kisses Charlie on the cheek.)

CHARLIE
What are you reading?

VERA
Oh, a book.

CHARLIE
I see that.

VERA
I don't really know what it's about.

CHARLIE
How far into are you?

(Vera shows the half-read book.)

CHARLIE
Is it that hard to follow?

VERA
I don't know.

(Charlie sits down at the table beside her.)

CHARLIE
What's going on?

VERA
The words just aren't sticking today.

CHARLIE

Okay?

VERA

I read and I read and I can't remember what it said a moment ago.

CHARLIE

Is it the book?

(She offers a hand to look at the book.)

CHARLIE

I've never heard a John Green book being hard to get through.

VERA

It's not even the writing. It's not hard to read, it's just hard to think about.

CHARLIE

Has this happened with other books?

VERA

I don't know, a few. Can we talk about something else? When are you going to start breakfast?

CHARLIE

I'll start it now.

(Vera puts the book upside down on the table and shoves it so it slides to the other side.)

VERA

I want to help.

CHARLIE

Here, hold the bowl.

(VERA holds the bowl as Charlie cracks an egg into it.)

VERA

French toast?

CHARLIE

It's Maurie's favorite!

(Lights back on Maurie & Emma.)

MAURIE

I love their love, you know?

EMMA
I know. It's absolutely beautiful.

MAURIE
Makes me smile.

EMMA
They just work so beautifully together. There's so much joy between them, I imagine even when they don't get along they're still happy together.

MAURIE
I want that.

EMMA
Me too.

MAURIE
You make me feel warm.

EMMA
Really?

MAURIE
You don't know that?

EMMA
I mean, I do. It's nice to hear, I suppose. You make me feel safe.

MAURIE
I love you too.

EMMA
It's not the same thing.

MAURIE
Hmm?

EMMA
Loving you and feeling safe.

MAURIE
What do you mean?

(MAURIE slowly, achingly sits up, disturbing the mountain of blankets. She burrows back underneath them, sitting cross-legged on the couch.)

EMMA

I love you. And I feel safe with you, and I feel warm. And I just like you. They're all different.

MAURIE

Okay, say more.

EMMA

It's like... Liking you is not one step down from loving you, like after I like you, then I love you. It's more like I like you as a person, and I love you as a person. They're different. I chose to love you, I didn't choose to like you. You could be an asshole, and I might choose to love you, but I might not like your jerkface guts.

MAURIE

That makes sense.

EMMA

In the same way that you make me feel safe and warm are different from I love you. Those aren't choices, they're more like liking you. They take time to build up and trust and work. They're a symptom of loving you, and they're part of why I chose to love you, but they're not a choice. I feel warm and safe around you because I trust you, and I trust you because we communicate and work together to build our trust in each other.

MAURIE

You're sweet.

EMMA

So I love you, I like you, I feel safe and warm with you. And I trust you, that one counts here too.

MAURIE

Mmm.

(She lays back on Emma's lap.)

MAURIE

I feel safe and warm with you too.

EMMA

I'm glad. Be kind of weird if you didn't.

END SCENE.