

# A Life Unhappening:

*A spoken-word ballet, in one act, about the impact of Alzheimer's disease on three generations of one woman's family*

Written and Produced by Adam E. Stone  
Choreography and Stage Management by Chelsea Stone  
Lighting Design by Richard Cadena

*The Dancers* (in order of appearance):

Marletta:	Carrie Kesler
Thomas (Marletta's son):	Chance Marshaun Hill
Tru (Woman observed by Thomas):	Jeanine Holtgrave
Sara-Jo (Thomas' daughter & Marletta's granddaughter):	Hallie Chametzky

*The Voices* (in order of appearance):

Marletta:	Diane Glancy ( <a href="http://www.dianeglancy.com">www.dianeglancy.com</a> )
Thomas:	Adam E. Stone ( <a href="http://www.adamestone.com">www.adamestone.com</a> )
Sara-Jo:	Thirza Defoe ( <a href="http://www.thirzadefoe.com">www.thirzadefoe.com</a> )
The Caregiver:	Bret Correll

*The Dancer Understudies:*

Amanda Beckmann, Will Heisner, Diana Joylena Shepherd, Raynah G. Unes-Reid

ASL Interpreter: Lilith Reuter-Yuill

Audio design by Jon Clarkson and Adam E. Stone.

All audio recorded, produced, mixed and mastered by Jon Clarkson.

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Additional orchestrations of "As the Day Ends Fast" arranged and performed by Jon Clarkson. All rights reserved.

World Premiere Performance presented in collaboration with the St. Louis Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association on May 11, 2012 at the Touhill Performing Arts Center, St. Louis, MO.

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## Ballet Synopsis:

Unlike a traditional ballet, where the dance is choreographed to music, in this spoken-word ballet the dance is choreographed to a pre-recorded audio track, in which the nine-scene narrative unfolds. Music is used in the transitions between the scenes, and for the dance finale, but the majority of the ballet consists of dance choreographed to the monologues of the four main characters: Marletta, who suffers from Alzheimer's disease; Thomas, her son; Sara-Jo, Marletta's aspiring-ballerina granddaughter and Thomas' daughter; and a unnamed caregiver at the residential facility where Marletta lives.

Notable talent involved with the production includes Grammy Award-winning musician and actress Thirza Defoe, who performs the voice of Sara-Jo, and novelist, poet, essayist, playwright, and film maker Diane Glancy, who performs the voice of Marletta. Richard Cadena, author of four books on theater and stage lighting and technical editor of the magazines *Lighting&Sound America* and *Lighting&Sound International*, is the lighting designer for the production.

Scene 1

"I used to find my way by the trees"

*Narrated by Marletta*

*Dancer: Marletta*

Scene Length: 7 minutes, 49 seconds

I used to find my way by the trees.  
"How could you do that?" people would ask,  
and I would say, "How could you not? How could you not?"

When I was a girl, growing up in Mississippi in the 1930s,  
we knew our place.  
But I got over that. Later, I sure got over that.

Azz ... Alzzz ... Alzheimer's - something like that.  
I can't remember those things anymore,  
it's like they never happened, were never even here.

My mother knew I wanted to take dance lessons  
because I asked her almost every day - over and over;  
and she always said "I'll sign you up - Oh, Marletta - I'll sign you up!"

But ... she never did.

She named me that - "Marletta."  
Not because it meant anything to her, or to anybody else -  
because she liked the sound of it, the pretense of it.

There was a little girl about my age who lived down the road;  
a dark girl, poor like us,  
and we played together, and kissed each other when we got older.

Mother never liked her, thought she was beneath us,  
like there was room for anyone to fit beneath us!

Mother always sent her away.

The trees in this town ... what town are we in?  
The trees here are beautiful - every day I go walking,  
and ... smooth them ... with my eyes.

That's what keeps me alive.

But mother found out about the trees,  
and sent them away too,  
and we had to take the car and go to St. Louis,  
Alfred and I had to take the car and go clear up to St. Louis.

No ... Memphis ... or Milwaukee.

I'm trying to find the things I need to find  
to do the things I need to do ...  
that's what I was working on when you got here.

No, she never liked that girl.  
"Talon" - "Talon" was her name, I think,  
and I don't remember if I had my pills yet today -  
Did I have my pills today?

Oh, yes, Dr. Keffeler - he's a handsome one,  
I like him alright - but he never tells me anything I don't already know,  
he never has anything to say at all.

And are you ... do you live near here?  
Are you happy ... is your life ... going ...  
How you would want it to be?

Because they'll have dinner soon,  
if you want to stay, dear;  
and I think they have an extra room somewhere;  
this house ... it's a very big house, you know,  
and the people who are always doing things here -  
they're always doing the things they do. Here.

My first husband? Jerk.  
He didn't want to have children, and I wanted to have children,  
and thank ... God ... we didn't have any together.

I had one later ... a boy, it was.  
You? Oh yes ... oh yes ... I'm sorry, dear.  
How could I forget about you?

Is it far ... did you drive a long way to get here?  
They'll be bringing the pills and the trees soon,  
if you wanna stay.

Art? Yes, I did, I did.  
I started out drawing pictures,  
because I was pretty good at it -  
Mother couldn't find anything wrong with the pictures I drew.

Later, I did other things too -  
big, hanging things ... and shapes.

Oh, I don't know - I can't remember any of that now.  
It's like it wasn't even here.

Now, where are the dogs?  
This house is so big, and I miss  
putting my hand on them ... patting ...  
Patting their skin.

Mother never had dogs,  
wouldn't allow them after the preacher's wife shot herself,  
and she never liked that girl very much at all -  
she sent the girl away, she did -  
never liked her one bit.

But I liked her -  
better than either one of those men I married;  
but we knew our place, and if we forgot it, they'd remind us;  
back then we did - back then we did.

So Alfred and I, we would take the car up to St. Louis,  
and go to the nightclubs and dance and jazz.

And then we had that little baby - that little boy.

Oh, and he's a character, that boy is.  
He's around here somewhere, with the dogs -  
he chases them, you know, and I have to get after him -  
I have to say, "Alfred - leave them alone - leave those trees alone."

And then he goes away and they bring the dinner,  
and that should be soon, they should be bringing it soon,  
and are you sure you're not hungry, because they could bring an extra table,  
and there's a bed where you could stay.

Drawings? Yes, I started out with drawings.  
I was married to someone back then - God! I can't remember his name!  
Does that ever happen to you?  
Do you ever just forget things - Poof! They're gone?

Ahhz ... Aszz ... heimener's ... Azzheimer's, something like that.

We lived in a big house for awhile, Charles and I,  
he did something important for a bank ... no, a college ...

And whew ... wasn't he the man about town?  
Didn't everyone know that he was just about something special?

When I walk, and see the trees, they're special like that too,  
and that little boy - he'll just a grin at you and you'll want  
to squeeze his cheeks, and he'll run off laughing ... yes, he will!

And ... Mother? My mother? Oh no, Mother didn't laugh; she didn't laugh at all.  
I told her all my life, every day, that I wanted dance lessons,  
and she said, "Oh, Marletta - I'll sign you up."

But she never did.  
She never did.

Scene 2

"Who makes love to you?"

*Narrated by Thomas*

*Dancers: Thomas and Tru*

Scene Length: 3 minutes, 48 seconds



Who makes love to you, my girl?  
On a Tuesday evening  
at the corner of Grand and Olive  
in the shadows of the lights  
of disinterested passers by?

While the rest of us pretend this is real,  
fritter away with these distractions,  
indulge the illusion of physicality.

Because life is for the living, right?  
And youth is for the young?  
And that sweet brown skin fits so tightly to your bones -

as if it's daring some disease to haunt you,  
rob you,  
as if you could go on ... into eternity ... living such a life you live;  
laughing with a twisted grin,  
man after man,  
fix after fix,  
rolling with it,  
shaking it off,  
never a minute closer to death.

I see that secret in your eyes,  
and I want to own it -  
but it's only for rent;

and when we finished,  
you'd shake me off too,  
as if I never existed to you,  
never touched your sacred places,  
never knew that you were real.

We could dance that devil's dance together;  
or I could tie a thread around it,  
pop it blue,  
slide it in.

You would share that medicine with me,  
and if I didn't try to touch you ... there ...  
maybe those eyes would some day stay mine.

So ... tell me about your mother, my girl -  
tell me what you know of life.

My mother? Oh -  
she's a soul unwinding,  
a life unhappening before my eyes.

I'm ... grateful though -  
some things remain,  
some pieces of that jagged puzzle,  
that knife that cuts me as it heals me,  
that thread that ties me to myself.

As I watch things disappear,  
I sometimes wonder if I'm real;  
it's the only thing that connects us, you know -  
makes us who we see ourselves.

So ...  
Who makes love to you, my girl?  
Here, tonight, in this right-now?  
This real right-now?

Scene 3

"Grandma Marle used to watch me dance"

*Narrated by Sara-Jo*

*Dancer: Sara-Jo*

Scene Length: 4 minutes, 29 seconds

Grandma Marle used to watch me dance.  
Every year, every May - near Mother's Day.  
She'd always try to sit as close to the front as she could,  
and sometimes it would embarrass me -  
the way she would smile,  
the way she would beam, like a little kid with an ice cream cone,  
when she was like, 70-years-old or something.

Especially last year, when it was really bad,  
when she thought I was her mother,  
and she said, in front of everyone,

**"Well, Mother always was a beautiful dancer.  
Always got what she wanted, Mother did."**

Shaney Morgan laughed when she heard that,  
leaned to someone and whispered something;  
something mean and petty and small, I'm sure,  
and I just wanted to say,  
"Didn't anyone you know ever have a disease?  
Didn't anyone you know ever forget things?"

But ... I didn't.

And anyway, this year Grandma didn't come,  
and Dad, he acts all weird these days,  
and Mom says he's depressed, but won't admit it,  
and that Grandma won't ever be able to come again -  
it's just too much for her - it just wears her out and confuses her too much.

So I made up this special dance for her,  
but I'm not gonna tell Shaney Morgan, or anyone else - not even Miss Elaine,  
and it's her studio I go to.

I'm just gonna dance it,  
the one dance I get to choreograph this year.

Because I tried to go and visit her there,  
I really did,  
and I know I shouldn't have let it freak me out,  
because I really do believe in God,  
a strong and loving God,  
but people still get this disease,

even when they love God and believe in God,  
which I don't like,  
and I don't think it's fair,  
and she didn't even know who I was,  
like - not even at all,  
and she kept looking at me, like she was looking through a fog,  
and like she was embarrassed,  
like she knew she should know who I was, but just didn't,  
and Dad was all weird and distracted and I swear he was checking out the nurse lady,  
and then she called me ... "Talon" ...  
and hugged me, and looked like she was gonna cry,  
and I just had to go, I just had to get out of there....

Well ... at least I didn't cry until I got to the car;  
and Dad, all mad and wouldn't hardly talk to me,  
and then saying, "She has a disease ... it's not her fault"  
and me thinking, "Duh - I know that -  
but it's not my fault either,"  
and then him dropping me off at Mom's house with barely a hug,  
and Mom saying how he's depressed, and it's his Mom and all,  
and I understand that, I really do ...

So ... I'm not gonna say anything to anyone,  
not Shaney, or Laurie, or Mom or Miss Elaine -  
I'm just gonna dance it,  
out of nowhere -  
like it just came out of nothingness,  
and just went back there -  
and maybe ... they'll all figure it out.

Or maybe they won't.

But maybe she will -  
maybe, wherever she is, and whatever she's doing,  
and whoever she's talking to, and whatever crazy stuff she's talking about,  
she'll just get it, and just smile, just beam, like she used to when I was little ...  
when she was my Grandma:

Grandma Marle, silly with an ice cream cone.

Scene 4

"Visitors?"

*Narrated by Marletta*

*Dancer: Marletta*

Scene Length: 2 minutes, 7 seconds

Visitors? No one's come to see me in weeks, months maybe.  
Yesterday? You were here yesterday?  
Oh, come now, dear, you don't expect me to believe that?

Well, yes I am out-of-sorts - as a matter of fact, yes I am.  
I don't have money to pay for all this, I can't find my ...  
check thing, checkbox, check coat - yes, checkbook,  
can't find it anywhere, and someone has to pay for this place - they tell me  
every day here that soon I have to pay them for this.

You pay them? Don't you have a wife ... or a family ...  
or something? How can you afford to do all this?

Oh, my money? Well, if it's *my money*, where is my check-thingy?

I just - I just can't find anything anymore,  
and no, I don't want to sit by the trees outside;  
I don't want to be here anymore.  
I don't know where my glasses are,  
I don't know if I've had my pills yet,  
I haven't seen the dogs in months,  
and Mother will be here soon -  
and she won't pay them,  
she'll expect me to pay them,  
and won't that be just something -  
won't that?

I'm just so ... tired ... now.

I just want to go to sleep ... I just want to curl up and go to sleep ...  
and never wake up.

I'm almost finished here, I think.  
Almost done.

The dogs are so smooth, but I can't ever find them -  
I can't ever find anything;  
or, *think* of anything.

But it's been a good life, Alfred, dear -  
don't be sad for me, it's been a good life.

Scene 5

"She taught me about God, in her own way"

*Narrated by Thomas*

*Dancers: Thomas and Marletta*

Scene Length: 4 minutes



She taught me about God, in her own way.

She made this piece of art, when I was young,  
a little kid,  
about God and the universe,  
how God was in everything, was everywhere,  
and I remember the catch-line:  
"Grey-bearded Shaman, pretending to be trees."

When she was in the hospital,  
when this latest turn-for-the-worse started,  
but before she had to come here,  
I thought of that piece of art, because it was summer,  
a hot, stifling day,  
but then there was this breeze,  
out of nowhere, out of nothingness,  
and these tall, distant trees I could see from her window -  
fourth or fifth floor up, we were,  
and sure enough - long, hanging branches,  
with these frond-like things on them,  
dipping down, dipping back up,  
like bobble-head dolls in the back windows of cars,  
"silent shaman, pretending to be trees."

And she ... she was just looking at this little card  
that had somehow gotten onto her lunch tray:  
"Courtesy of Environmental Services," it said,  
and she was so fixated on it,  
so obsessed with it,  
like everything she needed to know was right there,  
a ticket, a passport,  
from this life to the next -  
reading it aloud,  
over and over,  
grinning all goofy,  
and me thinking What kind of God thinks this is funny?  
And if it's not supposed to be funny, then what the Hell is it supposed to be?

Hmmm ... but I guess that's grace, right?  
I guess that's humility?  
Her laughing at herself,  
laughing at how she'd forget things,  
just a year ago,

when she was still able to live in her own home,  
when she'd come pittering down the hallway,  
each time I came to visit,  
calendar in hand,  
notes she'd written to herself,  
and then crossed out,  
and then written again,  
slightly different syntax, slightly different form,  
asking again which doctor Dr. Keffeler was,  
and why would she be going to see him,  
and then scribbling another note on her calendar,  
and then coming back, three minutes later,  
deadpan serious,  
and us going through the whole thing again,  
as if,  
always - perpetually -  
for the first time.

Grace, right?  
Humility?

See ... I don't believe in enemies - I don't believe they're real.  
But if I did ... I wouldn't wish this disease on my worst one.

Everything good about me, I learned from her.  
Everything honest, and human, and real - her.

Scene 6

"Only on the midnights"

*Narrated by the Caregiver*

*Dancers: Marletta, Thomas, Tru, and Sara-Jo*

Scene Length: 4 minutes, 4 seconds

Mostly 'cause I grew up on a farm, you know,  
and spent least as much time with animals as with peoples,  
and studied them up,  
and made imaginary games,  
and imaginary worlds -  
Well, these ones here: I look at them kind of like my animals, you know?  
Kind of like I'm their shepherd or something.

But only on the midnights, that's all I'll work anymore:  
I like the quiet of it, the peacefulness;  
I used to get kind of agitated when I worked day jobs -  
noisy, busy places, lots of bigwigs, lots of rules:  
"hurry up and do this" or "hurry up and do that,"  
and I just couldn't what you call "function" doing that,  
I got most hateful and mean and agitated doing that.

But midnights - they're quiet and peaceful and solemn -  
and even when they do get mixed up and think it's day,  
and wander the halls,  
or pack all their stuff up like someone's coming to get 'em,  
it's usually only one of 'em at a time,  
and I can most always sit in a chair with 'em and talk a piece  
and get 'em settled back down.

That's what's special about me - that's my talent, you know.

Now Miss Marletta, she never packs her stuff up,  
or paces the halls, or calls for help - or really, anything at all.

Far as animals go, she's an independent sort - doesn't depend much on others,  
doesn't go in for the herd or the pack.

But see,  
I'll see that little lamp come on in her room,  
and she'll sit in her rocker by her bed, and stare out her window, stare into the night;

and I'll go and sit where she can only just see me out of the corner of her eye,  
and most always she'll start talking then -  
about her mother, and her husbands, and her artwork.

She's got a son here in the area - charts say he visits near every afternoon -  
but she never talks about him.  
Maybe 'cause he comes to visit, I don't know: maybe 'cause she's at peace with him.

Or maybe 'cause in the darkness she thinks I'm him - doesn't see any reason to talk about him to him.

Some people, they get kind of worked up about this disease,  
'bout how it makes people forget, and change, and turn all vegetable-like;  
and I guess if it was my relations going through it, maybe I'd feel that way too;  
but more than anything, I think it's interesting,  
I like hearing what kinds of things they're gonna say.

Like Miss Marletta - who's she gonna think she's married to,  
and what's she gonna think he does for a living, and what word  
is she gonna stick in there when she really means something totally different?

Kind of like putting together all the pieces of a puzzle, you know -  
some come to fit good, and others you figure out are just plain made up.

Like this "Talon" person - that one I can't figure, that one I don't have a handle on yet.

But I'll keep going - I'll keep listening.

Long as she's here, and I'm here,  
long as there ain't anyone else up and around and needing soothing back to bed.

Scene 7

"So lost you don't worry about getting lost"

*Narrated by Sara-Jo*

*Dancer: Sara-Jo*

Scene Length: 2 minutes, 48 seconds

When I was really little,  
like 5 or 6 years old,  
I used to worry all the time about getting lost,  
or ... you know ... stolen;

I mean, like *all* the time.

I never told Mom or Dad or anyone else,  
I just tried to hide it, tried to pretend it wasn't happening,  
I wasn't feeling it, but on the inside, it kinda made me worry, kinda freaked me out.

That's what I love about dancing -  
Even back then, at that age, I could get so wrapped up in it,  
so ... absorbed ... that I could forget about everything else,  
I could just *be* the steps I was dancing,  
like a clock or something,  
like a perfect pattern, a perfect plan ...  
a gift from God that couldn't be stolen.

I told her that once,  
maybe 3 or 4 years ago,  
and she really liked that,  
she really smiled big, and goofy, and said, "**So lost you don't worry about getting lost.**"

Mom said, even back then, the Alzheimer's had started,  
and that I shouldn't worry, or be mad, if Grandma Marle said things that didn't make sense.

But ... I don't know - it kind of made sense to me, you know?

That's the thing I'm always gonna remember the most about her,  
no matter how she changes and no matter what else happens -  
how she would smile so big, and how she would always *listen*,  
*really* listen,  
not like Laurie, or Shaney, or even Mom -  
because they listen, but it's more like they only do it to hear what *they* wanna hear;  
but Grandma Marle, she *hears*—I mean, she used to hear everything you said,  
like coming to you,  
instead of expecting you to come to her.

That's what I'll always remember the most ... that's the thing.

Scene 8

"Clocks, they only move in one direction"

*Narrated by Thomas*

*Dancers: Thomas and Tru*

Scene Length: 3 minutes, 4 seconds



It was this way with my Dad, too.

He had his first heart attack when I was 34,  
and I was the only family he had,  
so I left everyone and went there.

And he was really embarrassed,  
to be there,  
in a bed,  
with needles in him and a gown and no control over anything -  
that wasn't like him at all.

And the nurse ... she was young and tall with curly brown hair,  
and a tan, and a vibrancy,  
a "livingness" ... a smile.

'Cause youth is for the young, right?  
And life is for the living?

I ... I started running more then, doing more pushups.

See ... all my life, he was iron;  
all my life, mad as I might get at him,  
much as I might think I hated him - he was iron, the comfort of iron.

And she ... she was wisdom ... she was love.

I sometimes worry I'll lose that without her -  
that sensibleness, that compassion, that ability to just smile, just love, no matter what.

Flesh ... can't really give you that back:  
clocks, they only move in one direction,  
and you can push the other way as hard as you want,  
you can pedal like a madman on an imaginary bicycle;  
you can smile and stare until you *will* a reaction,  
and maybe you'll even get a positive one, or more -  
maybe you'll achieve that temporary victory,  
that conspiracy of physicality, that coming together against the apart;  
until the distractions fritter themselves away,  
and the only thing left ... is the only thing real.

Because ... I guess the main thing is to remember how to love - really love.  
I think that's what she would say, anyway - if she still could.

Scene 9

"Just the prettiest, shiniest girl you'd ever see"

*Narrated by Marletta*

*Dancers: Marletta, Thomas, Tru, and Sara-Jo*

Scene Length: 6 minutes, 30 seconds

Ah, Alfred used to ask me that too ... if I worried what it would be like.  
No ... I don't.

There may be a lot of things I forget, but I'm pretty clear on that one;  
you know, either there's something else, some new, wonderful experience,  
or there's not.

But you can't really do anything about it either way, so there's no point in getting upset,  
in worrying too much about it.

Talon?

I never knew a "Talon" - I've never heard that name at all.

When I was little?

Oh, goodness, that was a long time ago.  
But, I think I remember it pretty well -  
couldn't tell you what I had for breakfast this morning,  
but Mississippi? Yes, I remember that.

Everywhere you would go down there, there were trees - big, huge, giant trees,  
like the ones out there,  
in the morning time,  
when it's light.

Mother took me there every summer ... dropped me off with *someone* there -  
came back to get me when school started up.

Those pictures? By the light?

Yes, those are mine.

"A life well-lived?"

Well, yes, I think so.

Lots of things I don't remember, you know.

It's this Alza ... Alfredzheimer's -  
something like that.

But no, I don't think I've wanted for much,  
I think I've gotten just about everything I ever needed from this life.

Who? "Talon?"

Yes, oh yes - there was a Talon -  
just the prettiest, shiniest girl you'd ever see;  
we took dance together when we were little.

She was a very good dancer.  
Her mother was so proud of her -  
used to show her off to everyone,  
used to say, "Now, isn't she just something?"  
Used to say, "Now, come watch this one dance!"

Audio fades

Dance finale (all four dancers) to piano/vocal version of "As the Day Ends Fast" (Music and lyrics by Nealey Gail Compton; performed by Nealey Gail Compton):

*As the day ends fast and the night creeps past and I wait for nothing  
Because I've done the last*

*These sheltered lies hiding behind unaware eyes and their hearts beat quick  
Wanting that of their fiend fix*

*I see the truth that they are so blinded by and it's not worth the bliss  
To continue since you missed*

*And oh, but at times it seems so great and all I need is one more day  
All I need is one more day*

*And oh, but at times it seems so great and all I need is one more day*