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# THE CLOSEST DISTANCE

by TERRY DUGAN

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MYLA, a woman with dementia  
ALIENA, drug-addicted daughter of MYLA  
JACOB, friend of ALIENA  
HILLA, older sister of MYLA

**SCENE:** MYLA's home, where one often finds here sitting at a dining table next to a small kitchen. Characters also go through front and bedroom doors.

## SCENE 1

MYLA's home. It's compact, with a small kitchen, a dining room and living room all in the same open-space room. There's a front door and a door that leads to the bedroom. There is also a window. MYLA, wearing a house dress, is sitting at the table. ALIENA is talking on the phone. You can hear a faint, constant cry from a baby.

**ALIENA:** I said you can't come! Leave us alone! *(Ends call)* Hilla's never going to tear us apart. She wants to lock you up with crazies, forget about you. I'll never lock you up with crazies because I care. *(No response from MYLA.)* Are you ready? Let's practice signing your name.

**MYLA:** My name?

**ALIENA:** Practice signing your name. *(MYLA doesn't move)* Hold on. *(Walks away from the table)* Where's that check? Where's the God damn check? *(Finds it by the phone)* Oh. Oh, here it is. Here it is. Oh are you ready!

**MYLA:** Ready. *(ALIENA grabs her hand.)*

**ALIENA:** Myla. E-t-e-r- ...the R's are hard to make... n-e. There you go. You did so good, such a good mommy for helping her girl.

**MYLA:** Do you know my girl?

**ALIENA:** I'm your daughter, sweetie.

**MYLA:** You? No! *(Picks up a picture)* My daughter wears a hat. See, she wears a hat.

**ALIENA:** That's you in that picture, mommy. I'm your daughter.

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by Terry Dugan  
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<http://www.royaltyfreeplays.com>

Contact Info: [terrydugan@gmail.com](mailto:terrydugan@gmail.com)

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**MYLA:** No. My daughter went away a long time ago.

**ALIENA:** She was a bad girl. *(MYLA slaps ALIENA and is shaken by it.)*

**MYLA:** She was a good girl. Don't you talk about her like that. We rode horses and cleaned chickens and fed pigs, and we played dress-up and we wore hats. Why won't she come back?

**ALIENA:** What's your daughter's name?

**MYLA:** ...It's... Kitten. No. Princess.

**ALIENA:** Was it Aliena?

**MYLA:** *(Laughs)* What kind of name is that? It was Kitten. I'm sure of it. I should know my own child. What is that noise? Is that my baby? Is that my baby girl?

**ALIENA:** It's not your baby. It's my baby.

**MYLA:** Why is she crying?

**ALIENA:** Because she doesn't want to sleep.

**MYLA:** I think it's my baby.

**ALIENA:** No, don't go in there. *(ALIENA Grabs her. The two have a violent, screaming confrontation.)*

**MYLA:** No! My baby! My baby!

**ALIENA:** No, no, listen, listen...there's no baby...It's just, one of the animals.

**MYLA:** ...Oh, they're always crying for something. Always food. Or the sun. They cry so much, I hate it. Maybe we give it some food. I'll get my boots and hat.

**ALIENA:** No, we already fed it, sweetie.

**MYLA:** It will stop crying.

**ALIENA:** It will stop crying, and everything will be fine.

**MYLA:** Why do I hear crying?

**ALIENA:** Because that's all there is! All the world is crying. *(Pause)* Tears are the one thing they can't take away from you. You don't want

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them, but they're all yours. *(No response.)* They're an ending and a new beginning, every drop a resolution. When your eyes are washed of sadness, you can see clear. You're supposed to, anyway. I've had too many endings, and my new beginnings, don't feel so new. *(The phone rings.)*

**MYLA:** I'm sorry. Who...you said you were someone?

**ALIENA:** It's me, Aliena.

**MYLA:** You look, I...Did I know you when you were younger?

**ALIENA:** Yes!

**MYLA:** I think I... *(ALIENA grunts, picks up the phone receiver and slams it down on the phone.)* I saw you in prison. You were, you were...No! You're not going to hurt me!

**ALIENA:** I don't hurt anyone.

**MYLA:** Don't hurt me!

**ALIENA:** I would never-

**MYLA:** Stay away! Stay away!

**ALIENA:** Calm, calm, shhhh...Look at me. Look at me. Do I look like a bad girl? I would never hurt you. I stopped, I stopped going to prison. They said I'm all better. Don't I look all better? Do I look like a bad girl?

**MYLA:** You don't look like a bad girl.

**ALIENA:** What do I look like?

**MYLA:** I don't know.

**ALIENA:** We were best friends, a long time ago. And then I...I'm back! I'm back, you see, and things are going to be like they always were. Like the good-old days. You liked the good days. You'll remember them. *(No response)* I know we have memories together.

**MYLA:** I think I hear something. Do you hear something?

**ALIENA:** Do you hear me? We have memories together. Just concentrate, try to remember, something. Not prison, not the stealing. When you look at me, can't you think of something nice in that head of yours? Something you could never forget? *(No response)* You forgave me for what I did to you, didn't you? You can forgive your daughter, can't you?

**MYLA:** My daughter? Yes, I have a daughter. I'll show you a picture of her.

**ALIENA:** No, I've seen the picture.

**MYLA:** Look how pretty she is.

**ALIENA:** I don't want to see the picture! I want to see a picture of me!

**MYLA:** This is my daughter. Look how pretty she is.

**ALIENA:** In that hat.

**MYLA:** Oh what a nice hat. I don't think they make hats like that anymore.

**ALIENA:** You don't think they make straw hats? Of course they make them.

**MYLA:** I've never seen one. Just on my daughter, in this picture. (The telephone rings twice and stops.) Why is there always noise? (The telephone rings again. ALIENA answers it.)

**ALIENA:** What has taken you so long? I'm dying over here. Just get- Do you understand how much I need this right now! (*Hangs up.*) Can you believe how selfish some people are?... I'm going to leave you for a while, momma. I won't be gone very long, I promise, and Jacob will take good care of you. You like it when Jacob comes over, don't you? (*No response*) Don't look at me like that. Don't...don't you judge me. Always, always looking down your nose at me, just like Hilla. I'm not perfect, OK? I never, I never said I was perfect. I used to be good, didn't I? Why do you only remember the bad? Why can't you tell me how I used to be good! (*No response*) I need it, OK? I need it. I need it because I don't know what it felt like to be a good girl, and until that time comes, I'd rather feel nothing. You can't act all superior to me, not when you're not helping me. (*No response*) Don't you have anything to say?

**MYLA:** I...I don't know where I am. Can you tell me where I am?

**ALIENA:** You're at your home.

**MYLA:** This is where I live?

**ALIENA:** This is your place. These are your things. This- (*Grabbing the picture*) This girl is your daughter. Why would you have her picture here if this wasn't your house?

**MYLA:** And I know you. You take care of me, don't you?

**ALIENA:** Yeah. I take care of you.

**MYLA:** This is such a pretty place.

**ALIENA:** Of course, it's pretty. Everything's pretty. It's all pretty when you don't have a single care in the world. To be you for one minute so I can see the world for everything it's not. Everything's pretty when you don't know how it all works. Memories are life's way of cheating you out of seeing everything that's good in the world. (*No response.*) Memories convince you that things were always better and they're all wrong now. They make you build up a tolerance for life until one day you realize things don't get any better – they get worse. But it's not true, is it? It's not true. You see that it's not true. You see things are just as good as they ever were – or better. Nothing's really changed. Nothing ever changes! The apple I ate today is just as good, if not better, than every apple I've ever eaten. But why can't I taste it? What's it like to relive every single experience of life? (*No response.*) I can tell you what it's like to feel nothing. It's like being a puffy, white cloud that never rains, drifting around the world, watching life all around you.

**MYLA:** What's that noise?

**ALIENA:** It's nothing.

**MYLA:** I hear something, coming from that room.

**ALIENA:** No that's, that's just the animals outside.

**MYLA:** Outside?

**ALIENA:** Outside. The chickens and horses and pigs, they're outside.

**MYLA:** Oh.

**ALIENA:** You know outside, don't you. The world, the air, the animals. I'll bet you don't know outside.

**MYLA:** Of course I know outside.

**ALIENA:** After dad died and I ran away, what did you do? (*No response*) You didn't do anything, did you? Sold the house and then locked yourself in this place. You live in a museum exhibit. It's a good thing I came back to take care of you. A real good thing. One day, we're going to go outside. We'll go outside, and we'll go for walks. And we'll get you a new TV. You'd like a new TV to watch your shows, wouldn't you? But a big, nice TV because that's how they make them now. And you can see the TV from anywhere you're sitting. You could, you could sit at the table and play cards or sit in your favorite chair and knit. You knit, don't

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you? You knitted a scarf for me one time. And when I was playing in the snow, it got caught in the evergreen trees, and I was so twisted around, I said I couldn't breathe. And you came out, you ran outside with your scissors and you cut right through that scarf. It felt like you saved my life. You remember that? *(No response.)* How can't you remember that? You spent so much time making the perfect scarf for me, and in a second, you slashed right through it. How can you not remember that! *(Pause, then a knock at the door. ALIENA begrudgingly leaves her mother's side to undo the chain lock and answer the door, where JACOB enters.)* Took you long enough.

**JACOB:** Deal with it.

**ALIENA:** I'm dying in here. I even had the last of my coke, and you say, "Deal with it?"

**JACOB:** When am I getting my money?

**ALIENA:** When I go cash her check, you'll have it.

**JACOB:** Why's that rat always crying every time I walk in here?

**ALIENA:** Must not like you. *(JACOB goes to the room with the child.)* You remember Jacob, don't you? You see him all the time. He comes, like, almost every day. He won't bother you. You can just sit in your chair over there and watch TV. *(The crying stops.)* And I'll come back, and maybe we'll, maybe we'll go outside and take a walk. Would you like to take a walk? *(No response.)* Jacob! What are you doing!

**JACOB:** *(From the other room)* Chill out. *(JACOB re-enters. ALIENA motions to ask what's happening.)* When's the last time you changed that kid's diaper?

**ALIENA:** When's the last time you were over?

**JACOB:** That kid's been sitting in his own crap for two days?

**ALIENA:** I guess you earned your money today, didn't you?

**JACOB:** I want paid today. Today!

**ALIENA:** How 'bout I just pick up something for you at the park?

**JACOB:** Why don't you pick me up something from the park AND pay me?

**ALIENA:** *(ALIENA makes a noise to dismiss JACOB's request.)* Don't answer the phone. Bye momma. *(ALIENA makes a noise and exits. JACOB locks the door sits down at the opposite end of the table. After a short pause, he*

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*speaks.)*

**JACOB:** Well hello there. Remember me? Jacob? My name is Jacob. *(No response)* How are you today? *(No response)* You look like you're tired. Are you tired? *(MYLA shakes her head no.)* So you don't want to take a nap today? OK. *(JACOB walks over to MYLA, stands behind her and starts feeling her breasts. She tries to resist. JACOB covers her mouth with his hand and forces her forward on the table. With his other hand, JACOB starts unbuttoning/ taking off his pants as MYLA squirms and makes noises. Blackout.)*

SCENE 2

*Later that day. ALIENA sits on the floor. MYLA sits at the table. A faint cry of a baby's can be heard. ALIENA is more than a little high. The phone rings many times, but no one answers it. ALIENA acknowledges it by saying, "Go away!" but it doesn't faze MYLA. ALIENA gets up and pulls the phone out of the wall, screaming at the phone.*

**ALIENA:** Stop calling! Stop it! Leave us alone!

**MYLA:** I keep hearing something. What keeps making that sound?

**ALIENA:** It's the rooster. It just won't shut up.

**MYLA:** But it's not even time to crow.

**ALIENA:** Well, there's something wrong with it, isn't there? It's sick. It's making me sick. The rooster is making me sick, your sister is making me sick, everything is making me sick, just leave me alone! *(ALIENA briefly cries. MYLA begins to detach.)*

Hilla wants to put you in a mental home, drop you off with the crazy people. But you're not crazy. You're fine. You just need time, to remember. Those memories are there. I see them in your eyes, looking for a way out... *(ALIENA grabs a large knife from the kitchen.)* No one's going to take my mother away. Maybe I'll just kill Hilla if she tries to take you away from me. I'll kill her if she doesn't stop calling, if she ever tries to touch you ... "She's my sister." ... I'm her daughter. I'm her DAUGHTER. She's mine, you old witch ... You don't mind if I cut Aunt Hilla's throat, do you? *(No response)* No? Good. She wants to take you away from me. She wants to take my mommy away from me ... I hate to think about what would happen to you if I wasn't here to protect you. I'm a, I'm an angel of mercy. I'm an angel of mercy here to save you.

**MYLA:** An angel with wings.

**ALIENA:** To save you.

**MYLA:** To save me.

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**ALIENA:** (*Puts knife on the table*) You and I are the same, you know? There's something eating away at us. We're victims of the world. Nature is using some defense mechanism against us. Ground and water, air: they never die. I think they want us to die. They want me to die.

**MYLA:** I don't want you to die.

**ALIENA:** The world thinks it would be better if I would. We're just another bug in the world, waiting to be squashed. We think we're so big. We think we're so in control. Compared to nature, everything living in it is different degrees of small. I used to think you knew how to make me feel like the smallest person in the world. I didn't find out until later that I was the smallest. (*Pause*) I bought something for us. (*ALIENA goes into the bedroom, the cries increase. ALIENA yells "Shut up! Shut up!" and comes out with a straw hat for MYLA. She shuts the door and the cries return to being muffled.*) I found your hat!

**MYLA:** My daughter's hat.

**ALIENA:** Try it on.

**MYLA:** NO! No, I don't want to.

**ALIENA:** But I bought it for-

**MYLA:** No! No! No!

**ALIENA:** OK. OK. (*ALIENA puts the hat on the table.*) Do you remember... do you remember that time when we were in the grocery store, and I put oranges inside my shirt to make it look like I had boobs? I said, "Look mommy, I'm just like you." And you rolled your eyes, and I lifted up my arms so proud and the oranges dropped onto the floor? You laughed and said, "Great, we've got to pay for those now." Remember that? (*MYLA shakes her head no.*) Do you remember the night I let that pregnant cat into the house because it was crying outside the window, and then the next day, before you even knew I let the cat in, we had about 6 kittens waiting for us in the closet? (*MYLA shakes her head no.*) You said I had a good heart. (*No response.*) Remember when dad was away the day grandma died, and I stayed up all night with you – you crying into my hair and me squeezing you so tight because letting go meant you falling to the floor? (*No response.*) Of course not. I was good. I can be good. Just remember it. Something. Anything! (*No response. ALIENA gives up. She grabs the hat and puts it on. HILLA appears in the window, looking in.*)

**MYLA:** I remember you. I remember. You're that hard-working girl, aren't you? Always doing everybody's chores.

**ALIENA:** What else, what else?

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**MYLA:** I remember you were younger and you went to a dance.

**ALIENA:** Yes!

**MYLA:** And, and, oh, you were so pretty.

**ALIENA:** Pretty. I was pretty.

**MYLA:** The most gorgeous girl at the ball. Everybody wanted to dance with you, but you, you found the best-looking man – a prince – who danced with you all night. You were so beautiful. Oh, but at midnight, everything changed back to the way it was. Oh it all changed back.

**ALIENA:** (*Realizing it was the Cinderella story, she puts her hat on the table.*) I'm going to lie down for a while. (*She exits into the bedroom, slams the door and yells "Shut up!" twice to the baby.*)

**MYLA:** So pretty. (*Starts dancing with herself and singing "la-la-la." HILLA is at the door, and she opens it as far as the chain will allow. HILLA peeks in.*)

**HILLA:** Myla. Myla. (*MYLA stops dancing, turns and looks at her. Through motions and gentle persuasions, HILLA talks MYLA through undoing the chain.*) Baby sister. Myla, let me in.

**MYLA:** Hello.

**HILLA:** Oh sweetie. (*The door is now open. HILLA goes to embrace MYLA, who backs away.*) Myla, we need to hurry. You're in danger. Aliena is going to hurt you. You're going to hurt yourself.

**MYLA:** Do you hear that noise?

**HILLA:** We have to get away from the noise.

**MYLA:** (*Grabs her picture.*) Have you seen my daughter?

**HILLA:** Yes. She's with me. Come with me if you want to see her.

**MYLA:** At the farm?

**HILLA:** Shhh. Quiet, quiet. Yes, Myla. At the farm.

**MYLA:** We ride horses and feed pigs and clean chickens-

**HILLA:** Hurry. Myla, come on. Let's go see her.

**MYLA:** I'll bring her hat. (*As MYLA grabs the hat from the table, ALIENA opens the bedroom door. The cries are louder as the door stays open.*)

**ALIENA:** Mommy, I'm- No!

**HILLA:** Leave us alone, Aliena. She's coming with me.

**ALIENA:** I warned you, Hilla. I told you to leave us alone!

**HILLA:** You don't know what you're doing, Aliena. *(Screaming, ALIENA attacks HILLA. MYLA hides in the corner by the front door and puts on the hat. She covers her ears. ALIENA and HILLA fight their way toward the front of the stage, though for HILLA it's more of a struggle than a fight. When the action moves to the front, MYLA walks over to the table, picks up the knife and goes into the bedroom – as nonchalantly as possible.)*

**ALIENA:** She is my mother!

**HILLA:** She's dying.

**ALIENA:** You're not getting in the way this time!

**HILLA:** She doesn't know us. She doesn't know you!

**ALIENA:** She knows me! She remembers me! We're one big, happy family.

**HILLA:** Why can't you let her die in peace? Do something for her for once in your life! Have mercy on her! *(The cries stop. ALIENA puts her hands around HILLA's neck.)*

**ALIENA:** I am an angel of mercy. She said so herself. I am an angel of mercy here to save her. You're an old, dying woman. How are you going to save her? *(HILLA is gasping for air.)* She will remember me! She will remember loving me! *(MYLA enters from the bedroom, holding the baby's head in one hand and the body in another. ALIENA loosens her grip on HILLA. After a pause:)*

**MYLA:** I did it momma! That rooster won't bother us no more. *(Blackout. ALIENA screams. Blackout.)*