

The Red Balloon
A play by
Matthew Gutschick

Personages

Mara, *an aging woman with increasing memory problems. A former poet.*

Lilly, *Mara's daughter. In her early forties.*

Sid, *Mara's husband. Also, he is dead.*

Nick, *Mara's husband. In his early forties.*

Underpass Prophet, *played by the actor playing Sid.*

Sully, *Around Mara's age. Played by the actor playing Sid.*

Decker, *A longtime boardwalk busker. Also played by the actor playing Sid.*

Topper, *an energetic and well-intentioned dog. Played by the actor playing Lilly.*

Place

A cookie-cutter suburban home, an underpass, a bucolic little park, a boardwalk, heaven.

Time

The present.

Lights up on Mara's room, which is in disarray. Clothes are strewn everywhere, furniture overturned. Lilly stands in the middle of this mess, apparently trying to remember something when Lilly enters with a load of laundry.

LILLY

Oh...my...Mom. Mom?

MARA

Oh, hi Lilly.

LILLY

What did you...Mom this is bad...this is really...bad.

MARA

What honey?

LILLY

Look at this...

MARA

Oh that...I know. Isn't it terrible?

(Mara starts picking through one of the piles.)

LILLY

What did you...Mom, this is our room...I mean-you can't do this in my house.

MARA

I know we're in your house Mara. I'm not blind. Just stupid sometimes.

LILLY

Stop.

(She does.)

LILLY

What happened?

MARA

Where?

LILLY

Here.

(Mara does a visual scan of the room.)

MARA

You tell me.

LILLY

What's wrong?

MARA
Nothing's wrong, Lilly. Go back downstairs.

LILLY
Were you looking for something?

MARA
That's none of your-

LILLY
What do you need Mom?

MARA
I didn't do all this.

LILLY
Yes you did.

MARA
I don't know who did all this...who made this mess. I've no idea.

LILLY
You did Mom.

MARA
Well that's not very good detective work. I'm your only suspect.

LILLY
I don't care. Are you looking for something?

MARA
Hold on a minute-

LILLY
This can't keep happening.

MARA
Stop accusing me-

LILLY
It just can't.

MARA
Maybe you did this-

LILLY
No!

MARA
I'm sorry. Can I help you find anything?

MARA

Okay. *If* I did this it was because I had to find my...

LILLY

Yes.

MARA

Had to find my...

LILLY

Your purse? Your key? What? Your purse is right here. Your wallet is in it. You have your nightgown on. Were you looking for clothes or-

MARA

Shoe! I was looking for my little blue shoe.

LILLY

Your shoe. Okay. That we can look for in all...this.

(They search for awhile. Not finding a thing.

Mara starts laughing.)

MARA

What are we...Lilly we're making quite a mess here.

LILLY

We have to find your shoe. Help me look Mom. I want to find it so we can put the room back together.

MARA

My shoe...is that what we...Lilly I know where my shoe is.

LILLY

You do.

MARA

I keep them in the closet.

(A beat.)

LILLY

I'm choosing to be happy about this. I'm so glad you found your shoe.

MARA

(Still laughing.)

We made quite a mess in here. You and I.

Lilly cracks up.

LILLY

You and I. We did Mom. We did.

(Mara gives Lilly a hug. Lilly is taken aback by her mother's smell.)

LILLY
Mom, did you shower today?

MARA
Of course.

LILLY
Maybe we better do it again.

MARA
No! I am not going to take another shower Lilly. That's wasteful.

LILLY
Maybe you didn't get all the...maybe the soap didn't work...wasn't fragrant enough.

MARA
Fragrant? Lilly, I am a lady. I know how to wash myself.

LILLY
Just-

MARA
That thing is so complicated anyways. That...the...I don't know how I manage...

LILLY
I don't either...
(Mara and Lilly stare at each other for a moment.)

LILLY
I will go with you Mom. Let's get you cleaned up and ready to go.

MARA
(Excited.)
Ohh. Where are we going?

LILLY
We're going...shopping.

MARA
I don't need anything...but who can't use a new blouse every once in awhile?

LILLY
Right. We'll go clothes shopping.

MARA
Good.

LILLY
And maybe afterward we can go have another look at Deer Run.

MARA

Deer Run.

LILLY

That nice facility...those nice apartments you...

MARA

Why would I need to look at an apartment?

LILLY

You want to look nice for the clothes store. Let's get you a shower.

MARA

I told you Lilly. I already showered today.

LILLY

Okay. How about I brush your hair then?

MARA

Fine. But you have to find the brush in this pile you made.

LILLY

I made?

MARA

Did I make it?

LILLY

No. We both did apparently.

MARA

We.

LILLY

That's more like it.

MARA

I don't know how you put up with me Lilly.

LILLY

Sometimes I don't either Mom.

I'm just kidding.

MARA

Sometimes I wonder.

LILLY

Here it is.

(Lilly begins brushing her mother's matted hair.)

MARA

I don't thank you enough.

LILLY

Oh. Mom.

MARA

No really Lilly...that feels good...what was I saying?

LILLY

About living here.

MARA

I can't remember what I was...this is so maddening sometimes. It's like I'm losing my mind.

LILLY

Just relax.

MARA

I just...words leave me Lilly. Sometimes. I can remember things from when I was a little girl with such detail but when it comes to...I don't know what's happening. It's hard to sleep. I know that much. Maybe if I could sleep more at night I wouldn't forget so many words. But it's this fantastic little light show when I sleep.

LILLY

A light show?

MARA

Yeah. I get these pictures of the day. The one I just lived or the one I think I just lived, but then there are these... that bumpy dirt road leading up to our lake house in Michigan, you and the girls...these pictures and they sort of...disappear maybe...dissolve. They dissolve into colors. These bright, sort of bouncy...colors all mixing together and separating. Like they are having a conversation at a party or...dancing. And I can't...they start to make shapes to tell a story and it doesn't make any sense to me...they don't ever come back together. They just slowly...run away. From each other. It never makes sense to me.

LILLY

And you can't sleep.

MARA

Ouch.

LILLY

Sorry.

MARA

It's okay.

LILLY

You can't sleep?

MARA

No. Not one wink. Maybe if your father would come home already

LILLY

Mom-

MARA

...I keep waiting for Sid to come home. He's really starting to worry me. At first I was just mad at him for leaving but now...I'm really starting to worry.

LILLY

You don't get tired of this do you?

MARA

This is just so selfish of him.

LILLY

Mom-

MARA

To up and leave like this and not even call. Where did he go again Lilly? I can never remember.

LILLY

Mara.

MARA

When he comes back, I am going to slap him so hard his cousin will fall down.

LILLY

You don't remember a damn thing.

MARA

What honey?

LILLY

Mom. Dad is dead. He has been for close to ten years now.

(The heartbreak isn't old.)

MARA

Oh...that's right...

LILLY

I'm sorry Mom.

(Lilly crouches to meet her mother's eyes.)

Can I ask you something?

MARA

Yes.

LILLY

Dr. Hendrickson would kill me for saying this but, do you want me to remind you?

MARA

That he's gone.

LILLY

That he's dead.

MARA

...it honestly doesn't matter.

LILLY

Okay.

MARA

Nothing you say brings him back.

LILLY

You are right.

MARA

Not your fault.

LILLY

I'm...I'll be right back.

(She leaves.)

MARA

You didn't clean up your mess.

(Mara starts to move objects-shirts, boxes, etc in a futile effort to clean. The distant sounds of a breezy boardwalk effervesce into the room. A fanciful harmonic catches Mara's attention.

(Sid appears. He has a tray strapped to his body and a floating red balloon tethered to one hand.)

SID

You're not even going to look at me?

(She doesn't.)

Mara...

(She doesn't respond.)

SID (CONTINUED)

You look like hell.

(She doesn't respond well.)

I mean you lost weight.

MARA

You're gone.

SID

Apparently not.

(Mara thinks on this for a second. Either he's lying or perpetrating some hoax. She raises her hand to slap him.)

SID

I don't think that will work.

Sorry, but death has a privilege.

MARA

No. Anger has a privilege. That's Shakespeare.

SID

So you haven't lost your marbles.

MARA

No I'm just pissed. I want to just...

SID

Me too...

MARA

I was going to say strangle you.

SID

Human contact is human contact sometimes.

MARA

Why did you leave?

SID

Sometimes...

MARA

I don't want to hear it.

SID

Yes. You deserve to.

MARA
No. Clearly it's more fun than me.

SID
Cancer generally is Mara.

MARA
Thank god I won't go that way.

SID
Damn right. You won't feel a thing. All those amyloid plaques and the twisted, hairy threads of neurofibrillary tangles will take away the pain.

MARA
What did you just say?

SID
Hey it's one of the benefits. Partial omniscience.

MARA
I don't believe you.

SID
Ask.

MARA
When will it rain next?

SID
Tonight.

MARA
Who shot JFK?

SID
LBJ

MARA
When will I die?

SID
In a week.

MARA
You're such a liar. I should-

SID
What? LBJ did shoot JFK.

MARA
Not that. It's- Why can't you ever take me seriously?

I- SID
Give me a straight answer. MARA
Mara I am. SID
(This sinks in.)
I don't believe you. MARA
(She does.)
Go.
You can't make me. SID
Ghosts have a privilege.
If you didn't come to apologize I-I...just leave. MARA
Mara, you don't feel anything seeing me again? SID
Yeah. I feel sick. MARA
This smile. SID
Makes me angry. MARA
My eyes. SID
I guess vanity never dies. MARA
Just let me- SID
You make me sad. MARA
(This stings. He slowly starts to leave.)

SID
My trade secret. It worked didn't it?

MARA
Not as well as it did on the balloons.

SID
Got the stain out.

MARA
Most of it. I never wore that dress again.

SID
That was for my sake...So I could breathe.
You didn't hate me then.

MARA
And then you ran away.

SID
You kissed me.

MARA
You gave me a gift. That stupid rock...And it was a peck on the cheek.
I never did know why you ran away.

SID
Because you deserved better.

MARA
What?

SID
Better than some busker's kiss in the middle of a dirty boardwalk. We should have kissed
in the ocean, on a mountain...under a streetlight...or never at all.

MARA
What was it? Three or four days later...

SID
I came. That rock worked.

MARA
You did...

SID
I told you.

MARA
Blind luck. I barely had it in my hand...

I went door to door. SID

You never told me that... MARA

Mara, you need that rock. SID

Don't be a fool Sid. MARA

I'm serious. SID

I lost it. How am I supposed to keep track of all the things I'm supposed to keep track of? MARA

You need that rock Mara. You have to find it. SID

I never needed it- MARA

Mom... LILLY (O.S.)

Oh please don't say that... SID

Look, they're moving you into a facility for old people. Do you want that?

For old people. MARA

Old stupid people. You're not stupid, are you? SID

Sometimes- MARA

You're not. So get out of here. Lilly means what she says. You better run...or you're going to end up at Deer Run. SID

Are you joking right now? MARA

Mom... LILLY (O.S.)

SID
Not at all. It's a terrifying place.

MARA
She would never do that to me.

SID
They have applesauce.

MARA
Oh god.

SID
I want you coming to me vibrant and sassy, not gummy and broken.

MARA
One week?

SID
One week.

MARA
What do I do?

SID
Find me.
I want you coming to me vibrant and sassy, not gummy and broken.

(Sid vanishes.)

MARA
But-

(Mara quickly puts on her shoes and looks at the junk sculpture she created.)

LILLY (O.S.)
Mom...

MARA
I feel like I'm forgetting something.

(She leaves anyways, limping as she goes once her shoes are on.)

(The scene shifts to another part of the house where Nick sits building a model airplane while Lilly calls to Mara.)