CHERISH THE DAY
A one-act play by Patrick R. Spadaccino

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Cast of Characters

RICK, a nurse, aged 20-40. Competent, compassionate, supportive.

PHILLIP WRIGHT, a trauma surgeon, aged 35-50. Introspective, nostalgic, emotional.

KRIS BERWICK, a marketing executive, aged 35-50. Bright, spirited, practical.

Place

Granville Community Hospital, New Hampshire.

Time

A cloudy day in September.

Production Notes

The set consists of a black box bench and a chair. The bench should be long enough to lie on and should not have a back rest; it is placed center, slightly offset towards stage right. The chair is placed near the stage left side of the bench and on the same line, slightly angled towards center. (See set plot below.)

If your budget permits, you may use a hospital gurney instead of a bench. In either case, the chair should look as though it belongs in a hospital examination room; it should not be a piece of furniture that might appear in one’s home, such as an armchair or kitchen chair.

You may use subtle ambient sound effects to suggest a hospital environment. (Please obtain the copyright owner’s permission before using sound recordings in your production.)

Rick and Phil wear hospital ID badges and scrubs (light blue for Rick, pale green for Phil). Rick carries a patient chart; Phil is equipped with a stethoscope. Kris wears business professional attire, neither too casual nor too formal.

The script contains basic blocking directions, and the Author’s Note in the appendix provides additional information about the characters and their intended portrayals.
ACT I
Scene 1

(LIGHTS up.)

(RICK and PHIL stand stage left. Both wear scrubs and hospital IDs. RICK holds a chart. PHIL wears a stethoscope around his neck.)

(KRIS sits on a bench at center stage with her hands folded in her lap. She looks straight ahead. Her facial expression is neutral.

(A chair is placed near the stage left side of the bench, slightly angled towards center.)

RICK
Here she is, doctor. (Reads from chart.) Kris Berwick. I’m gonna head back up. Silver Creek Memorial redirected a patient. They’re en route. We’re prepping OR 9 for surgery.

PHIL
Thanks, Rick.

(RICK exits. PHIL crosses towards KRIS.)

(KRIS doesn’t acknowledge or even notice PHIL until he speaks to her.)

Hi Kris.

KRIS
Hi Phil. Tough day.

PHIL (sits wearily in the chair)
The toughest. Rick showed me your chart when you came in. I can’t stay long, but I wanted to check on you before you left.

KRIS (a bit cold, but not angry)
You always were a thoughtful man.

PHIL
It’s been a long time. I never thought I’d see you again.

KRIS
Why would you expect to see me? Your last letter was far from ambiguous.

PHIL
Wow. Coming in hot, just like old times. I might have led with something like, “how have you been? Nice to see you after all these years.”
You were the polite one, remember? In person, at least. Your courtesy didn’t seem to extend to the written word.

You know why I wrote that letter.

Do I?

When we broke up, I wanted to remain friends, but…

What? Say it.

Things changed. We stopped talking, stopped having fun. You became distant; sometimes even cruel.

So, you blamed me.

Oh, there was plenty of blame to go around. *(Takes a breath, sighs.)* Can we please start over? Maybe talk about happier days?

We can talk about whatever you want.

*(PHIL after thinking for a moment)*
Remember that co-ed softball team we joined, just to have an excuse to hang out?

*(KRIS’ demeanor changes when she talks about the good times she and PHIL shared. Her emotional distance evaporates; she is playful and engaging.)*

Of course! The Fireballs. *(Thinks; remembers.)* When we first started dating, we kept our relationship secret because of my jealous ex-boyfriend. And since we didn’t share any classes, we found an activity we could do together. We actually had a lot of fun during those games—and afterwards, too, when we went to Duffy’s for nachos and beer. I introduced you to pumpkin ale. Frosted mugs, cinnamon sugar rims. So good.

Yeah. Haven’t had one for years. Remember the game when you heard me curse for the first time?
KRIS
How could I forget? We were still getting to know each other, and even though I had a mouth like a pirate, you never swore in front of me. Until—

PHIL
Until that line drive hit me right in the…well, you know.

KRIS (playfully)
Still?! Balls. You can say balls, you know. I won’t think less of you. Go on, try it.

PHIL
Fine. (PHIL looks over his shoulder, then speaks hesitantly, almost mouthing the word.) Balls.

KRIS (laughing)
See? Don’t you feel better? Unfiltered communication can be so liberating.

PHIL
I certainly wasn’t worried about filters that day. I unleashed such a stream of profanity…

KRIS
…and I laughed and laughed. My wonderful, sensitive, potty-mouthed boyfriend. I kissed that potty mouth for a long time that night—and offered to teach you how to use a first baseman’s mitt to, you know, actually catch a softball.

PHIL
Yes. (His smile fades.) Kris, what happened? Why did you pull away?

KRIS (her smile also fades; she is distant again)
You wrote the letter. You tell me.

PHIL
I guess you could say it was an act of relational self-defense. After we broke up, we still bumped into each other around campus, but you weren’t “there” anymore. Whenever we socialized with our mutual friends, it seemed like there was a stranger in the group who thoroughly hated me.

KRIS
You think I hated you?

PHIL
I thought so at the time, but you were always difficult to read. Finally, I decided that not knowing how you really felt would probably hurt less. I guess I also wanted to preserve the memory of what we had. I couldn’t bear watching our friendship slowly change into a pale imitation of itself, until it finally faded away into nothing. The real mystery is why I’m still thinking about all this.
Kris
Overthinking was definitely one of your superpowers. You never could get out of your own head. Why *are* you still thinking about this? About us?

Phil
I realize that college was a lifetime ago, and I suppose it’s typical to file these kinds of memories under “what could have been,” and then move on. But there’s nothing I find quite so uncomfortable as an unanswered question, an unfinished story. Ironically, needing to know the unknowable is partly why I’m so good at my job…and not so good at everyday life.

Kris
There are plenty of happy memories, too.

Phil
So many. Remember that scuba diving lesson we took during spring break? I was afraid of sharks, so you and I devised our own underwater alert system. This was the sign if either of us saw a shark. *(He forms his hand into a shape like a mouth.)*

Kris *(smiles)*
We’d only been down there for about five minutes when I made that signal. I’ll never forget your face. *(Kris assumes an exaggerated expression of terror.)* You spit out your regulator and tried to swim to the surface, arms flailing, bubbles everywhere. I grabbed you to keep you from ascending too quickly, then I started laughing and lost my regulator, too; more bubbles. It’s a miracle we didn’t drown. The instructor was so angry!

Phil
You had a twisted sense of humor. And I was your favorite target.

Kris *(flirty)*
I usually made it up to you.

Phil
Yes, you did. Those were such golden days. We had no idea…

*(Phil is lost in thought for a moment. Kris looks at him but remains silent.)*

Anyway, after graduation, I stayed in touch with a few of our friends. I heard that you stopped pursuing a singing career years ago, and that you’re a marketing executive now. I wondered why you moved back here, and I almost reached out. Regardless, I was glad you found a way to express both your creative and analytical sides. I always knew you were brilliant.

Kris
And you became a trauma surgeon. One of the best. You mentioned that you’re good at your job, but…do you also find your work fulfilling? Are you happy?
PHIL
Fulfillment and happiness are such fluid states. One day, you report to the ER, see patients, do a little paperwork. Life isn’t perfect, but it’s not bad, either. You think about what you might eat for dinner, what you might do over the weekend—just common, everyday thoughts. Then, you see a face you haven’t seen for years, and everything about your day changes. Your focus suddenly shifts from appreciating what you have, to wondering what you left behind.

KRIS
There he goes again. My Philosophical Phillip. You never met a feeling you couldn’t describe in two thousand words or more.

PHIL (sad smile; he knows it’s true)
Yes. I was the emotional one, you were the practical one—even in matters of the heart. The night you broke up with me, you said that being together had become too complicated. We weren’t ready for marriage, graduation was looming, and you thought splitting up would be easier than trying to pursue our careers and maintain a relationship. And you capped it off with one of your favorite sayings: “it is what it is.” I was shocked. I didn’t know what would happen after we graduated, but I thought we still had time to figure it out. Suddenly, I wasn’t the guy you loved; I was just an inconvenience. I could never reconcile such cold, calculated finality with that other expression you were so fond of: “cherish the day.” You always told me to cherish the day; to live for every moment, every opportunity.

KRIS
It was a great way to live. Still is.

PHIL
The first time I heard you say that, I teased you for ripping off the expression “seize the day.” I claimed that all you did was change one word. You set me straight. I still suspect that you studied the original Latin just to prove me wrong.

KRIS (impishly)
I was simply trying to share my research and broaden your horizons. A better translation of the expression is “pluck the day; don’t trust in the future.” And though it’s fine to acknowledge that life is fleeting, it’s just as important to enjoy every moment. Hence, I coined a completely different expression.

PHIL
And as all good visionaries do, you condensed your own motto into an acronym: “CTD.” Whenever I lost sight of the present and became wrapped up in my fears and insecurities, you’d just say, “CTD.” Drove me crazy.

KRIS
Why?
PHIL
Well, I agreed with the principle, but it seemed to me that when something is important enough, it deserves to be said out loud, in full. Cherish the day. Those are important words.

And do you? Cherish the day, I mean.

PHIL
I try, Kris. (Pause.) I would have been happy with your friendship—with some part of you, however small. You said we’d always be friends.

KRIS
Hey, you’re the one who freaked out. Remember that little stunt you pulled? You got drunk and started roaming the streets, crying like a baby and talking about killing yourself. You know, I was the one who stayed by your side while you puked all night long. I never saw anyone puke that much. That stuff was nuclear.

PHIL (drily)
Immaturity, red wine, and despair don’t mix well.

KRIS
Evidently. After that night, I didn’t know what to do, how to act. So, I pulled back. A couple weeks later, we were all supposed to go bowling, but you cancelled at the last minute. Your letter was waiting for me when I got back to my dorm. You said I was a terrible friend; that you’d never forgive me for shutting you out. You said you never wanted to see me again.

PHIL
I know, Kris. And I still regret saying that. In my foolish heart, I half-hoped you’d protest, that you’d storm over to my place, demand that I explain. And then, maybe we’d finally be able to talk the way we used to; maybe we’d both get some closure. But you never came. And we never spoke again.

KRIS
And here we are.

PHIL
And here we are. I have to go, but I needed to see you.

KRIS
I know. Are you glad you did? I have no answers for you.

PHIL
No, no answers.
(PHIL rises. He turns towards KRIS but remains standing in front of the chair.)

PHIL
When I think about college, I still remember the first time you told me you loved me. You took my breath away. It was one of the most beautiful moments I’d ever experienced. Still is. (His voice breaks.) I should have…

KRIS
Stop. Don’t dwell on what you should have done. Focus on what you’re going to do now. Today. CTD, my sad, sweet dummy.

PHIL
It’s too much, Kris. Life is…too much. I know these sentiments are long overdue, but I’m sorry I ever wrote that letter. And I do forgive you. I doubt I’ll ever forgive myself, though.

(RICK enters. As he crosses towards PHIL, KRIS slowly shifts from her seated position. She lies face-up on the bench with her hands folded on her chest and her eyes closed.)

RICK
Dr. Wright?

PHIL (wiping his tears away)
Yes, Rick, what is it?

RICK
They sent me to get you. We’re ready in OR 9. (Notices PHIL’S tears.) Hey, are you okay?

PHIL
(Crosses behind the bench; looks down at KRIS.)
Yes, I’m fine. Sometimes it gets to me. That’s all.

RICK
You wanna know a secret? Every now and then I sneak into the supply closet on the sixth floor and just let it all out for a few minutes. It helps a little. (Looks over at KRIS.) Such a shame we couldn’t help her.

PHIL
Lost too much blood before the EMTs arrived. She was DOA.

RICK
I’ve said it for years. They need to do something about that intersection.
PHIL
Yes. They do. You go along, Rick. I’m right behind you.

(RICK begins to leave. PHIL speaks quietly, as if to himself.)

CTD.

RICK (turns back)
I’m sorry, doctor…what was that?

PHIL
It’s just an acronym I learned in college. A bit of advice from an old friend. We abbreviate so many important concepts; distill them down into strings of letters. ER, OR, DOA…CTD. It stands for “cherish the day.”

RICK (sadly, with another glance at KRIS)
Amen, doc. I’ll see you upstairs. (Exits.)

(PHIL leans over, kisses KRIS on the forehead, and places his hands over hers.)

PHIL
Be at peace, Kris. I’ll always love you. And I’ll try. I really will.

(PHIL rises, and, after one last look at KRIS, exits. He is crying again.)

(LIGHTS down.)

(End of play.)
Author’s Note

Spoiler alert: please read the play before reading these notes.

I synthesized this play from an amalgam of both fictional constructs and personal experiences. Some of those experiences were painful, some were pleasant, but all were transformative.

The story is a study in contrasts: the fragility of human relationships, juxtaposed with the strength those connections can often possess. It is also a cautionary tale about the power of words, and the consequences of too lightly breaking the bond between friends. Mostly, however, this story encourages us to live each day to its fullest.

To best convey the play’s central themes, the three actors should avoid telegraphing the play’s ending or its ongoing conceit: that Kris is actually dead. The entire conversation between Kris and Phil occurs in Phil’s imagination, and is his way of saying goodbye to his old friend. Accordingly, each actor’s demeanor should initially imply that Kris is in the hospital for a surgical procedure.

At first, Rick is empathetic, efficient, and businesslike, but he shouldn’t seem overly upset about Kris. Later, when the truth is revealed, it becomes evident that he does indeed grieve over the loss of life that occurs in his line of work.

Phil should initially appear nervous, but the audience should ascribe his discomfort to the surprise of encountering an estranged friend; Phil should not yet appear to be grieving. His later reminiscences contain traces of both warm nostalgia and deep regret, but the actual source of his distress should only become apparent at the end of the play.

Kris is spirited and full of life, yet evinces a subtle level of detachment that the audience could interpret as emotional distance, or perhaps anxiety about being in the hospital. Kris only answers Phil’s questions when he already knows (or can guess) the answer. On other occasions, Kris asks leading questions but never supplies information. Her dialogue is essentially Phil’s best guess at what she might have said, and also reflects his own regrets.

Portraying the characters with these details in mind will highlight the importance of Kris’ guiding philosophy, and help make the denouement that much more powerful.

Thank you for your commitment to theatre, and for sharing this story with your audiences. May we all truly “cherish the day.”

Faithfully,

P.R.S.

April, 2020