

I WANNA HOLD YOUR HAND

by Erik Patterson

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"Half of what I say is meaningless...
but I say it just to reach you..."

--The Beatles
"Julia"
The White Album

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CHARACTERS

JULIA, 30s, an actress. She lives with her husband in Brooklyn.

PAUL, 30s, Julia's older brother, a good son. A teacher. He flew out from Boston to be with his family.

MARY JEAN, 60s, their mother. Recovering from a brain aneurysm, censor-less in an almost childlike way.

JOSH, 30s, Julia's husband. Handsome, rugged, also an actor.

ADA, 30s, a book editor, a firecracker. She's engaged to:

FRANK, 30s, recovering from a brain aneurysm and a stroke, suffers from aphasia. Some of the things he says come out fluidly, effortlessly. Other times, it's a struggle. It's clear that the words are in there, somewhere in his head -- but as hard as he tries, he can't always get them out. Sometimes it's frustrating, other times: it just is what it is.

SETTING

New York City.

TIME

The last year or so.

NOTES

Words in brackets [like this] should not be said.

Slashes within lines / like this indicate an overlapping of dialogue.

While there are many locations, they should merely be suggested. Transitions between scenes should be fluid and quick.

MUSIC NOTE

While scene titles reference specific songs from The White Album by The Beatles, I would stay away from using Beatles music to underscore scenes or during transitions. In fact, the Beatles should be used sparingly, perhaps only when it specifically mentions that Julia and Paul are listening to music in Scene 10.

SIDE ONE

TRACK 1: "Back in the NYC"

A hospital chapel. PAUL sits in front of a pew. He speaks to the audience. Urgent. This is life or death.

PAUL

Hi. Hello, hi. It feels weird just talking like this, but I guess this is how people do it? So I'll just [start] --

When we were kids,
my sister Julia and I,
we didn't go to church like most of our friends.
Our God was a different kind of God than the one
most people believed in.

He lived in the record player,
and He had four names:
John, Paul, George, and Ringo,
depending on my mom's mood. Or my dad's.

They were Beatles freaks. Obviously.
I would say "are,"
but Dad's dead, and Mom's in a coma,
so tenses are tricky.

I teach High School English, I'm acutely aware of these things. Not that anyone else is. You try to teach grammar to kids, but words are the last thing they wanna think about.

I'm sorry. I don't even know what I was trying to say.
It's like my thoughts don't come out straight.
Like my head's on backwards.

Like:
all of these words
are in boxes
in my head
and I reach into a box
that has the right word
but then
I pull out the wrong one instead and I feel like
a fucking idiot excuse my language.

Now I remember: the coma thing: my mom.

She's in the other room, the ICU, and like I said, she is
-- was? -- a Beatles freak, so I gave her my iPod and I put
on Abbey Road and I hope she can hear it.

There's this story --

(MORE)

PAUL (cont'd)

my mom, she says she -- it's ridiculous, but -- she says she was there when John Lennon was killed. This was December 8, 1980.

My mom was friends with this woman Amy who lived at the Dakota Building, which is where John and Yoko lived -- that should be a fact everyone knows, but some of my students don't even know *who* the Beatles are, which completely boggles the mind and their parents should be shot -- but back to my mom -- on this particular night, my mom was at Amy's place, at the Dakota Building, having a "night away from the kids." The two of them say good-night. My mom leaves the building. And as she's walking down the street...she hears gunshots. She's scared, so she runs the rest of the way to the subway. Then the next day she hears the news about John Lennon. And mom realizes: she was fifty feet away when it happened.

My mom totally dines out on this story, but I never really bought it -- I mean, *come on* -- that she would be there at that exact [moment]??? My name's *Paul* for Christ's sake. No way she was there coincidentally when one of the Beatles got shot. Things like that don't happen in real life.

But my mom can get away with a story like that because: she's nice. She's just one of those really, really *nice* people. Not in an annoying way, in more of a -- it's like you, you marvel at her -- you listen to her talk and inside you're like: "How did this woman manage to get through so much life and stay so...*nice*." I mean, break some dishes or something. But she's just...[nice]. It's the way she was built. *Is* built.

The point is, my mom's the kind of person who tells you she was there when John Lennon was shot, and you believe her cuz you don't wanna believe that this woman could ever lie to you. That's my point. That's how she got away with this story for so long, even though she couldn't have possibly actually been there that night. It's too coincidental, or poetic, or sad. I don't know which word I want.

I have this student, Lolita Wang, that's her actual name. She says coincidences are the universe's way of being lazy. She probably read that on tumblr but it's the smartest thing any of my students has said lately so I gave her an A. She has a great name, doesn't she? Lolita Wang. It's an absurd name. There was a kid in my Sophomore class last year named Richard Holder. He was suspended for masturbating in the quad. Richard Holder. I am not making this up.

I've been sitting in the ICU with my mom all morning. Just sitting there, holding her hand. I talked to her for awhile.

(MORE)

PAUL (cont'd)

I told her all about what happened on Glee last night. She's a "Gleek." I know she'll be upset that she's missing it. I tried to watch NCIS for her, too, but I just couldn't do it. So they shaved half of my mom's head.

I asked one of the nurses why they didn't shave the whole thing and this nurse says:

"She'll want some hair when she wakes up."

And I'm like:

"But do you really think she'll only want half of it?"

I made them shave the rest.

They don't know my mom, I know my mom.

She doesn't want half a head of hair.

I told you about my dad, right?

I can't remember what I've said and what I haven't said.

It was this accident, this totally stupid...

...he's crossing the street, he gets hit by a car, and then boom: he's gone, just like that.

No goodbye, nothing.

But the weird thing is:

it happened on December 8th.

The anniversary of John Lennon's death.

There's that word again: coincidence.

I wouldn't believe it either, but it happened.

After John got shot, mom was in a daze for months. With dad, it only took a week before she was: business as usual. I was living in Boston when it happened. I came back here, back home, back to Brooklyn to take care of Mom, but she was... *fine*. I know everyone mourns in their own way and all -- and I even get her thing with John Lennon. This is gonna sound weird, but, okay, whatever, just: I know where I was when I heard George Harrison was dead. If you asked a hundred people who their favorite Beatle was, the first 95 are gonna say "John" or "Paul," you'd get one freakazoid who says "Ringo," and then four people who say "George." I'm a "George" man. Something about the sitar. But even though I love the guy's music, I'm not gonna go around saying I was in the room with George when he died. Because then I'd be crazy.

Sorry mom but it's crazy. And this talking to God thing? This feels crazy too. I've never understood how you can talk to someone who doesn't have a face.

But my mom had an aneurysm burst last week,

(MORE)

PAUL (cont'd)

and I've been sitting around
feeling powerless,
and alone,
and wishing I had someone, something --
some man,
some woman,
some ball of energy, anything --
someone bigger than myself to talk to.

I always tell my students to "be more specific." So right
now, I'm gonna pray, and I'm gonna give you a face.

(he closes his eyes)

John Lennon, if you're out there, if you can hear me, please
help my mom? She loves you. She really does. She loves you so
much she makes up stories about being there the day you got
shot. It's a crazy love, an all-consuming love, and I hope it
might mean something. I need it to mean something. Her name's
Mary Jean Johnson, she's at St. Luke's Hospital, on 12th
Street, the 13th floor, ICU 3. *Mary Jean Johnson*. She needs
help, so if you could help her, somehow, I'd appreciate it. I
don't know who else to ask. Thanks, John. I'll owe you one.

Lights shift.

TRACK 2: "Greet the Brand New Day"

About two weeks later. St. Luke's Hospital, NYC. The 13th Floor waiting room, outside ICU 3. No windows, small and confined, white and antiseptic.

Sitting in various chairs, we see: JULIA, knitting. JOSH, working on a crossword puzzle. PAUL, eating lunch.

Another man lies stretched out across three chairs, sleeping. He has a winter coat draped over his head to shield his eyes from the harsh halogen lights.

JOSH
Who composed "Bolero"? Five letters.

JULIA
Ravel.

JOSH
Perfect. R-A-V...?

JULIA
E-L.

JOSH
E-L. Ravel.

ADA enters, flustered. Takes off her coat, scarf, and gloves, and throws them onto a chair, with her purse.

ADA
Where's ICU 3? Do you, any of you [know] -- oh my god, Ada, breathe, just breathe. Okay, focus, ICU 3 -- anyone?

JULIA
It's just down the hall to the left.

ADA
Do I look okay?

Ada runs a hand through her hair.

JULIA
You look fine.

ADA
This is a fucking nightmare, my god. Thank you, sorry.
(she shakes out some sound)
Ahhhhh.

She can't get out any more words. She rushes out, leaving her things.

PAUL

Do you wanna guess?

JULIA

I hate this game. It's an awful game.

PAUL

It passes the time.

JULIA

It's her husband.

PAUL

I don't think so, no --

JULIA

Then who do you --

PAUL

She was worried what her hair looked like. It's a boyfriend. You don't worry about your hair if it's your husband.

JULIA

Yes you do --

JOSH

I need a five-letter word for a spice, beginning with a "c".

JULIA

Cumin.

(back to Paul)

She had a ring, she was wearing a ring.

PAUL

I still don't think they're married. She didn't look married.

JULIA

What's that even mean? She didn't "look married," who looks married --

PAUL

I mean she didn't look haggard.

JULIA

She *did* look haggard --

PAUL

Yeah, but that was hospital-haggard, not married-haggard.

JULIA

Do I look haggard?

PAUL

Completely.

JULIA

Shut up, I'm hospital-haggard too. Right honey?

(she nudges Josh)

Am I hospital-haggard or married-haggard?

JOSH

Hospital-haggard.

JULIA

Thank you.

(to Paul)

See?

PAUL

I think she's engaged, maybe. Not married, just: he's her boyfriend. They're engaged.

JULIA

Her fiance, then. That's what you're saying?

JOSH

Author of Voyage of the Beagle? Six letters.

PAUL

Darwin.

(back to Julia)

Yes, her fiance.

JULIA

Because of the hair thing.

PAUL

Yeah. And you're sticking with "he's her husband"?

JULIA

Yes.

PAUL

Loser buys sandwiches for the whole waiting room tomorrow.

JOSH

I think it's her mom.

PAUL

No way.

JULIA

Definitely not her mom.

JOSH

Why couldn't it be her mom?

PAUL

You're not here every day. When you're here every day, you can tell these things.

JULIA

I'm sorry, baby: it's not her mom. Hey, did I lock up the house when we left this morning? I don't remember locking it.

PAUL

You locked it.

JULIA

I'm gonna go check on mom. See if her eyes are open.

Julia gets up and exits.

JOSH

"Some like it hot." Six letters. Begins with a "t" and ends with an "e."

PAUL

Tamale.

JOSH

...thanks.

PAUL

Why do you insist on doing the crossword puzzle? You're so bad at it.

JOSH

Don't be a jerk, I'm good.

PAUL

You're not good.

JOSH

It passes the time.

Julia and Ada both come back in.

JULIA

They closed the room. Nurse switch-over. Mom's awake.

PAUL

She's alert?

JULIA

She squeezed my hand, yeah.

(to Ada)

Come in. Make yourself comfortable.

PAUL

Which is impossible, by the way. You'd think they'd try to make these rooms comfortable for the families. It's messed up. You can't get comfortable.

JULIA

But you can try. Come in.

ADA

I'm okay. I'll just [*stand here*] -- I'm fine. I'm fucking fine. I'm SO fucking fine.

Ada stays in the doorway, occasionally looking out, towards the ICU.

JULIA

This is my husband Josh --

JOSH

Hi.

JULIA

-- and my brother Paul -- he's sort of a doctor --

PAUL

I went through EMT training a dozen years ago, so not really.

JULIA

But he still knows stuff, ask him anything. And that guy asleep on the chairs over there, that's Dennis, his son Mark is in the bed across from our mom.

PAUL

Massive head trauma.

JULIA

And then Dennis's wife Denise --

PAUL

-- ridiculous, right? "Dennis and Denise?" --

JULIA

-- she's usually here too --

PAUL

She's taking Jeff -- their other son -- to the airport, he had to go back home --

JULIA

Sad. ... And this is Ada. She's here for her *fiance*. Brain aneurysm.

PAUL

...And I'll have the roasted chicken on whole grain.

JULIA

Shut up.

(to Ada)

Ignore him.

PAUL

Where was the aneurysm?

ADA

His brain?

PAUL

Right, this is the neuro-ICU, I meant specifically --

ADA

Oh, sorry -- this is what they --

She's been clutching a scrap of paper.
She unfolds it and reads.

ADA (cont'd)

"Subarachnoid hemorrhage from a ruptured aneurysm of the anterior choroidal artery." I don't know what that means.

PAUL

Same as our mom. How old is he?

ADA

Forty-three.

JULIA

That's young, that's good.

ADA

You're not supposed to propose to someone and then you're on the ground having a seizure and suddenly we're in a hospital talking about aneurysms and you're in a fucking coma. I mean, who does that? That's not how life's supposed to work.

JULIA

Our mom's aneurysm ruptured 15 days ago. She was in a coma for 12 days. Then she woke up 3 days ago.

ADA

Is she okay, is she...?

JULIA

She seems responsive. She looks at us. It's hard to tell.

PAUL

She can't talk yet because of the trach tubes.

JULIA

What's your fiance's name?

ADA

Frank.

JULIA

Frank. It's good that you're here for him.

ADA

He just got out of his -- I don't remember what it was called. I should have written it down.

PAUL

Ventriculostomy?

ADA

Yeah. That. That's what they said. I don't even know what a ven -- that -- is. I haven't had time to Google.

PAUL

They're gonna throw a lot of that vocabulary at you. Just write it down, then come in here and ask us --

ADA

Thank you --

PAUL

The aneurysm -- it burst this morning? Then what they're doing right now is: they're draining the cranial cavity. Which could take a while. But he's in good hands, they're good here. They've been good with our mom.

JULIA

The doctors are always saying they don't want to give you false hope, but you have to have hope.

PAUL

And there's this sandwich shop around the corner, it's the best. Get the roasted chicken with everything on it. Speaking of which, Julia --

JULIA

You just ate. I'll get you one tomorrow.

ADA

This is so...thank you for being so [*kind*]...this is surreal. He just...he asked me to marry him this morning. When I woke up, the ring...it was on my pillow. And then, we [*made love*]...and then this. ... The door's open again. I'm gonna --

She rushes out.

PAUL

Can I take a turn?

JULIA

Yeah, she's alert. Go.

Paul exits.

JOSH

Nine letters. Begins with an "e." The clue is "zone."

JULIA

Erogenous. Does it fit?

JOSH

Spell it.

JULIA

E-R-O-G-E-N-O-U-S.

JOSH

It fits.

JULIA

I miss you. I hope mom gets better soon so Paul can go back to Boston. It's Valentine's Day. I completely forgot. How sad is that? You forgot too, but it's okay. Nurse Kathy has a stuffed teddy bear on her desk, with a big, red heart. That's when I put two and two together. I've never seen Nurse Kathy smile, how does she have a valentine? But it's nice -- I love thinking there's someone for everyone in this smelly, old, messed-up world. Even that awful nurse. It makes me wet.

JOSH

Shhh...Dennis can hear you...

JULIA

He's asleep. I'm sending Paul to a hotel tonight. So we can have the place to ourselves. I miss the dimple in your stomach. I miss your tongue. I even miss your scratchy toes.

JOSH

Say the name of that spice again.

JULIA

Cumin?

JOSH

Say it sexy.

JULIA

Cumin.

JOSH

I love you so much.

They kiss as the lights shift.

TRACK 3: "See How the Other Half Live"

Same waiting room. A few days later.
Julia and Paul play cards. Ada paces,
on her cell phone. In hushed tones:

ADA

No, mom, no change. Frank is completely the same as he was
this morning. That's what I said...No, I'm not whispering
because I'm hiding something, let me --

JULIA

Do you have any 8's?

ADA

Let me speak -- mom? Mom?

PAUL

Go fish.

ADA

I'm whispering because I'm in the waiting room and we're not
supposed to use our cells in here / not because there's been
some sort of change --

PAUL

Do you have any 3's?

JULIA

Damn you, two 3's.

ADA

I told you, he's the same, no change --

PAUL

You are so about to go down.

ADA

That's what I just said --

JULIA

Just ask for another card, get it over with.

ADA

-- how many times do I have to say it?

PAUL

Do you have any Jacks?

ADA

Are you even listening to me? Mom? Are you crying?

JULIA

One Jack.

ADA
Stop crying. Oh my god, stop crying, please?

PAUL
Now all I need to win is a King.

ADA
I hate it when you cry.

PAUL
Do you have a King?

ADA
You're making this about you, it's not about you --

JULIA
I hate this game.

ADA
It's about Frank.

PAUL
Well?

ADA
Mom? Mom? Stop it.

JULIA
Yes, I have a King.

ADA
I said, stop it.

PAUL
I win.

JULIA
I want a rematch, I demand a rematch.

Paul shuffles the cards.

ADA
Mom, I'm gonna hang up if you don't stop. I'm serious. Please stop crying. You're gonna make me cry and I don't wanna cry. Mom, I'm hanging up. I'll call you later. Okay? Did you hear me? I'm saying good-bye. Good-bye.
(she hangs up)
Sorry about that.

JULIA
We weren't listening.

PAUL
We were. We were listening.

ADA

I told her not to come. There's just so much to focus on with Frank, I can't deal with her too. And I know it's a cliché that my mom drives me crazy but she drives me crazy and she's the last person I want to see right now, you know?

JULIA

Our mom's kinda the first person we want to see right now.

ADA

Oh god. I didn't -- I wasn't thinking. Of course. Sorry.

JULIA

It's okay.

ADA

It's not even true, what I just said. The thing is, when I told her not to come out here, I didn't think she'd actually listen to me. She never listened to me before. And now I can't take it back because I'm stupid and I'm stubborn. And then Frank's parents are gone. I don't mean they're dead, they just aren't around. Frank doesn't talk to them, I don't know how to find them. So now I'm here alone, and -- you didn't ask for my life story. I should shut up. I'm sorry.

PAUL

Do you want to play Go Fish?

JULIA

It's a really stupid game.

PAUL

Really stupid.

JULIA

But play. Please.

ADA

Sure. Okay.

She scoots her chair closer to them.
Paul deals out the cards.

ADA (cont'd)

Julia, do you have any 5's?

JULIA

I do.

ADA

Paul, do you have any 2's?

PAUL

You're a natural.

ADA

Just lucky. You guys are too. I mean, that you have each other. While you're going through all of this. Julia, do you have any Jacks?

JULIA

Go fish.

ADA

I keep waiting for Dr. O'Neil to walk into this room and say everything's gonna be okay. To tell me Frank's awake.

JULIA

I was with my mom, the first time she opened her eyes. I was standing there, talking to her, and she just opened them like it was nothing. Like she was waking up from a nap. Like she couldn't figure out what all the fuss was about. I got so excited, I ran to the nurses station to tell them.

ADA

I like that.

JULIA

Paul, do you have any Kings?

He hands over a King.

ADA

I wanna be with him when he opens his eyes the first time.

PAUL

Talk to him. You never know what'll get through, what he'll hear. I read this article about a guy who was in a coma for 30 years and then he woke up. He said he was aware of everything the whole time. *Everything*. Can you imagine?

ADA

No, I can't, that's awful.

JULIA

Ada, do you have any 9's? I know you have a 9, I can feel it.

ADA

What if Frank's in a coma for 30 years?

JULIA

You can't think like that.

ADA

What if he dies?

PAUL

You can't think like that either.

ADA

He makes maps. He works for the Department of City Planning. He looks at the city and turns it into these precise, intricate grids. Have you ever looked at a map, I mean really looked at one? Not to find out how to get where you're going - - but to see where you are?

JULIA

I guess I haven't really.

PAUL

I just let the GPS on my phone tell me where to go.

ADA

It's an amazing thing if you think about it. How each piece of the city is connected. You can't even see most of the connections. The pipes underground. The electrical wires overhead. But the city, they know how everything works together -- how it all fits -- because they have these maps. The maps that Frank makes. We walk through the city and he sees those pockets of data, the imperfect lines, the little pieces of connectivity. His brain is...beautiful, and I -- I just -- I hate to think about all of the horrible things that might be happening to it.

PAUL

You have to try to stay positive.

ADA

He's a good person. Why can't that mean something?

JULIA

It does. It means a lot. These things are just random.

ADA

Sometimes when I'm sad, he'll give me one of those little oranges from the supermarket. He'll call it my "sad orange." I'm supposed to eat it and pretend I'm giving the orange all my sadness. It's the strangest thing, but it works. Every time. It makes me happy. If he isn't around anymore, who's gonna give me sad oranges?

(beat)

I'm sorry. We were playing cards. I don't have any 9's. Go fish.

Lights shift.

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!

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Email erik@erikpatterson.org to request a full draft.

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