

Plays for Young Audiences

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Flora & Ulysses

By
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Based on the Novel by
Kate DiCamillo

Flora & Ulysses was first presented by South Coast Repertory in 2017.

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Cast

Flora	a ten-year-old girl
Tootie Tickham	her neighbor
Donald Tickham	Tootie's husband, an off-stage voice
Ulysses	a squirrel (a puppet whose thoughts are voiced by the puppeteer)
Phyllis Buckman	Flora's mother
George Buckman	Flora's father
William Spiver	an eleven-year-old boy, towheaded and small for his age
Dr. Meescham	an elderly woman
Rita	the waitress at Do-Nut World
Ernie	the cook at Do-Nut World
Mr. Klaus	a cat (puppet)
Alfred T. Slipper	a.k.a. The Amazing Incandesto; looks a lot like George Buckman

Doubling (using cast of seven, total)

Option 1:

Rita doubles with Dr. Meescham or with Mrs. Tickham

George Buckman doubles with Mr. Tickham and Alfred T. Slipper (The Amazing Incandesto)

William Spiver doubles with Ernie

Option 2:

Mrs. Tickham/Rita

George/Alfred T. Slipper

Donald Tickham/Ernie/Dr. Meescham

Note

Although the play can certainly be produced without projections, the script has been written with that possibility in mind. My thought is that, for most of the play, projections are used in a limited way: words, phrases and sentences that provide glimpses into Flora's thoughts or excerpts from things she has read, and to show us what Ulysses is writing. Projected phrases could appear as if typed on a typewriter, like the one used by Ulysses. Optionally, phrases could also be spoken, either live by a member of the cast, or in recorded voice-over.

During the final climactic sequence, beginning with the night Ulysses is shanghaied by Phyllis, I'm thinking it would be great if the projection world could open up wide and become an illustrative and dynamic part of the story-telling, perhaps in the style of graphic novels. Changes in locales would be supported by projections of city streets, woods, skylscapes, etc. The battle with Mr. Klaus could be accompanied by comic-book style "blams," "kapows" and "zings." Etc.

Projection: "It all began with a vacuum cleaner ..."

Spotlight on a large, crazy-looking vacuum cleaner. Then the light widens to reveal Flora and Mrs. Tickham.

MRS. TICKHAM

It's a Ulysses Super-Suction, Multi-Terrain 2000X. My birthday present from Mr. Tickham.

Projection: "Really. A vacuum cleaner."

FLORA

It's nice.

MRS. TICKHAM

(not really)

Yes. Is he watching from the window?

FLORA

What?

MRS. TICKHAM

Mr. Tickham. Is he in the kitchen window watching me?

FLORA

Oh, yes. I see him.

MRS. TICKHAM

He insisted I take it outside and try it on the lawn.

(imitating Mr. Tickham)

"It's indoor/outdoor! It's the crown jewel of vacuums." The thing already sucked up a pair of Mr. Tickham's underwear. What next? But I guess I'll have to give it a try, or I'll never hear the end of it.

A squirrel enters. He is a puppet, perhaps a rod puppet, perhaps slightly larger than life-size. He is of course controlled by a puppeteer. When a line is attributed to the squirrel, it is in fact the puppeteer, voicing the animal's thoughts in the third person.

Neither Flora nor Mrs. Tickham notice the squirrel, who moves quietly in the background, looking for food.

MRS. TICKHAM

Well, here goes nothing.

She turns on the vacuum. It makes a loud roaring noise, and then it pulls Mrs. Tickham with a lurch, dragging her around the yard. Flora is quietly amused. She is less amused when the machine heads straight for the unwitting squirrel.

FLORA

Watch out for that squirrel!

Flora makes a dash to intercept the out-of-control vacuum. The squirrel looks up with alarm. The action freezes, the lights focus in on the squirrel.

SQUIRREL

(directly to audience)

Not much goes on in the mind of a squirrel. The average squirrel brain spends ninety percent of its time entertaining variations on a single thought: "I wonder what there is to eat."

Projection: (a thought bubble that seems to rise from the squirrel's head) -- "I wonder what there is to eat."

SQUIRREL

So when this particular squirrel got swallowed up by the Ulysses 2000X, he did not think: "Here, at last, is my fate come to meet me!"

Projection: "Here, at last, is my fate come to meet me!" a thought that is then crossed out.

SQUIRREL

Nor did he think, "Oh, please, give me one more chance and I will be good."

Projection: "Oh, please, give me one more chance and I will be good." Crossed out.

SQUIRREL

Instead, what he thought was, "Man, I sure am hungry."

Projection: "Man, I sure am hungry." The word hungry is then underlined, once, twice, three times.

SQUIRREL

And then he heard a terrible roar, and he was sucked right off his feet.

The action resumes and the squirrel is sucked into the vacuum. The machine makes a god-awful dying-dinosaur groan and then shuts off. As Flora runs to the scene of the carnage:

MRS. TICKHAM

Oh, dear. I think I've killed a squirrel.

FLORA

Help me!

Flora grabs the vacuum. It's heavy, but with Mrs. Tickham's help, she manages to lift it off the ground and shake it vigorously. Nothing happens, so she bangs it on the ground, then lifts and shakes again. The squirrel drops out and lands on the ground. It doesn't look good; it's missing a lot of fur. And Mr. Tickham's extra-large jockey underwear is wrapped around its head. Flora gingerly removes the undies. The squirrel is breathing heavily. Then, with a final shudder, the breathing stops. Flora puts a finger on its chest.

FLORA

No heartbeat. I think it's dead.

She gets on her knees, lowers her head to the squirrel and, after studying it for a moment, she puts her mouth on the squirrel's mouth.

MRS. TICKHAM

Have you lost your mind?!

Flora breathes into the squirrel's mouth, then pauses.

FLORA

Tastes like squirrel.

MRS. TICKHAM

What?

FLORA

Fuzzy, damp, slightly nutty.

She breathes into the squirrel's mouth again, then begins to count. The puppeteer, who has been a silent witness to all this, now steps forward. Lights shift.

SQUIRREL

Something strange happened to the squirrel's brain. Things went blank and black, and then, into the blank blackness came a light so beautiful, so bright, that the squirrel had to look away. He was floating in a great lake of light, and it was wonderful, it was the best thing ever.

FLORA

Breathe!

Lights shift back to reality. The squirrel takes a deep, shuddering breath. Then another.

FLORA

It worked! He's breathing!

MRS. TICKHAM

For heaven's sake. Where did you learn to do that?

FLORA

It's called the kiss of life. It was in *Terrible Things Can Happen to You!*

MRS. TICKHAM

What's that?

FLORA

It's a series that runs in the back of my favorite comic book, *The Illuminated Adventruer of the Amazing Incandesto.*

SQUIRREL

The squirrel's brain felt larger, roomier – as if several doors in the dark room of his self had suddenly been flung wide. And the squirrel thought:

Projection: Thought balloon: "I wonder what there is to eat."

The squirrel shuffles over to the vacuum cleaner. He sniffs at its base.

MRS. TICKHAM

What's it doing?

FLORA

I'm not sure.

The squirrel lifts the vacuum off the ground. He shakes it until random bits of crackers, and other food items fall out of it. (This feat can be accomplished with the aid of the puppeteer. It will help if the vacuum isn't nearly as heavy as it looks.)

MRS. TICKHAM

That can't be. That can't *be*.

The pair stare incredulously at the squirrel shaking food bits out of the vacuum and then scarfing them down.

FLORA

If you'd read *The Amazing Incandesto!* you'd know that impossible things happen all the time.

MRS. TICKHAM

But a squirrel with super strength?!

FLORA

Why not?

MRS. TICKHAM

I don't know.

FLORA

The world will misunderstand him.

MRS. TICKHAM

You bet it will.

MR. TICKHAM (OFF)

Tootie? Tootie, I'm hungry.

FLORA

Your name is Tootie? Tootie Tickham. Listen, Tootie. Go inside. Feed your husband. Say nothing to him or to anyone else about any of this.

MRS. TICKHAM

Right. Say nothing. Feed my husband. Right.

She exits toward Mr. Tickham.

MR. TICKHAM (OFF)

You're not just going to leave the Ulysses 2000 sitting out there, are you?

FLORA

Ulysses. *Ulysses.*

(bending down and holding her hand out to the squirrel)

Come here, little guy. It's okay. Listen to me. My name is Flora. Your name is Ulysses.

SQUIRREL

I am Ulysses, thought the squirrel. It was astonishing. Everything was astonishing. The setting sun made a halo of light around the girl's round head. When did things become so beautiful?

Flora picks him up and cradles him like a baby.

SQUIRREL

He felt spectacular. Strong, smart, capable, and –

Projection: "Hungry. Very, very hungry."

The set transforms to include the kitchen, living room and Flora's bedroom. Her mother, Phyllis, sits at a typewriter in the kitchen, clacking away and sucking on a Pitzer Pop (like a Tootsie Pop). Hiding Ulysses as best she can, Flora tries to slip past her mother.

PHYLLIS

What are you doing?

FLORA

Nothing. Are you writing another romance novel?

PHYLLIS

As a matter of fact.

FLORA

What's this one called?

PHYLLIS

"On Feathered Wings of Joy."

FLORA

Pop says you're so in love with books about love that you didn't know how to love him anymore, and that's why you got a divorce.

PHYLLIS

Ha! Your father wouldn't recognize love if it stood up in his soup and sang.

FLORA

Why would love be singing in a bowl of soup?

PHYLLIS

(whacking the carriage return on the typewriter.)

I'm on deadline here. Go upstairs and do your homework.

FLORA

I already did it.

PHYLLIS

Well then ... do it again.

FLORA

Goodnight.

As Flora walks out of the kitchen and into the living room:

PHYLLIS

And no comic books! Remember our contract: "I, Flora Belle Buckman, promise to turn my face away from the / idiotic highjinks of comics and toward the light of true literature."

FLORA

(overlapping)

"/the idiotic highjinks of comics and toward the light of true literature."

(to Ulysses:)

Talk about idiotic highjinks, how about those ridiculous romance novels she writes?

Projection, a thought bubble rising from Flora's head: "I hate romance." Then, loud enough for her mother to hear:

I hate romance!

PHYLLIS

You're a natural-born cynic, Flora Belle Buckman!

FLORA

(to Ulysses)

She's right about that. Which is why I like *The Amazing Incandesto* and I hate romance.

On her way to her bedroom, Flora passes a little gaudy Bo-Peep lamp, standing on a table at the foot of the stairs.

FLORA

(to Ulysses)

That's Mary Ann, Shepherdess to the Lost. My mother bought her after she sold her first book. *(imitating mother:)* "She's so beautiful. I love her with all my heart." She never says *I'm* beautiful. I hate that lamp.

They reach her bedroom and Flora sets Ulysses down on the bed. She takes a good look at him.

FLORA

You lost a lot of fur.

(Ulysses looks at his threadbare tail.)

Can you understand me?

(Ulysses makes some vague movement that might be assent.)

Nod if you understand me.

(Flora nods. Ulysses nods back. Flora smiles.)

Wow. I hope I'm not imagining all this.

Projection: "Do not hope; instead, observe."

FLORA

"Do not hope, instead observe." That's also from *Terrible Things Can Happen to you*. *Terrible Things* says hope gets in the way of action. *(Beat.)* So. I'm going to try to explain what happened to you, okay?

(Ulysses nods vigorously. Flora smiles hopefully again.)

Somehow, when you got vacuumed up by the Ulysses 2000X, you acquired certain ... powers. Do you know what a superhero is? Of course not. A superhero is someone with special powers who fights the forces of darkness and evil. Like *The Amazing Incandesto*. Look.

(She shows Ulysses the comic book. Alfred T. Slipper is revealed in a separate light and then transforms as described.)

Alfred T. Slipper, an unassuming, nearsighted, stuttering janitor, works at Goodness Knows Chemicals. He lives a quiet life with only his parakeet, Dolores, for company. Then one night he slips into a giant vat of *Incandesto* cleaning fluid and it changes him. Now, when there's some act of malfeasance by an evildoer, he turns into *The Amazing Incandesto*, a righteous pillar of light so bright that the most heinous villain is blinded by its brilliance and ... basically gives up. And that's what a superhero is.

(lights out on Alfred)

And I think you might be one, too.

PHYLLIS (OFF)

Flora! Are you doing your homework?

FLORA

But how will *you* fight evil?

Ulysses scratches his head thoughtfully. During the following, he circles himself into a sleeping position. His eyes close.

PHYLLIS (OFF)

Flora Belle! Stop talking to yourself. People will think you're strange.

FLORA

(shouting)

I'm not talking to myself!

PHYLLIS

Then to whom are you speaking?

FLORA

To a squirrel.

PHYLLIS

Not funny, Flora Belle.

FLORA

"Holy bagumba!" – as Dolores the parakeet would say.

(seeing that Ulysses has fallen asleep)

It's no wonder you're tired. You've had quite a day.

Flora lies down on the bed and opens the comic book.

Projection: a thought bubble – "I wish Pop was here."

George enters her bedroom, maybe from the closet or somewhere else surprising. In this memory, he is cheerful.

GEORGE

Time to get ready for bed, Flora.

FLORA

Hi, Pop.

GEORGE

Put away the comic book, please.

FLORA

But I'm almost finished. Anyway, you're not really here, you're just a memory.

GEORGE

(cheerfully)

That is correct. I'm currently asleep in my lonely little apartment on the other side of town.

FLORA

Exactly.

GEORGE

Who's your friend?

FLORA

That's Ulysses. He's a squirrel with super powers.

GEORGE

(imitating Alfred's parakeet, Dolores)

"Holy unanticipated occurrences!"

His parakeet voice is good, and it makes Flora giggle.

FLORA

Dolores! Do it again!

GEORGE

"Holy unanticipated occurrences!"

(Flora giggles delightedly. George switches to a deep, dramatic narrator voice.)

"He is an unassuming janitor . . ."

FLORA

"But he will dare to battle the darkness of the universe!"

GEORGE

"Do you doubt him?"

GEORGE AND FLORA

"Do not doubt him!"

GEORGE

"Alfred T. Slipper will live to fight the forces of evil! He will become known to the world as..."

GEORGE AND FLORA

“Incandesto!”

The two share a smile. Then George disappears whence he came. Flora’s smile fades. She looks at Ulysses.

FLORA

(quietly)

He is an unassuming squirrel. But he will become known to the world as ... *(whispering)*
Ulysses.

She falls asleep, still in her clothes. Lights shift to create a sense of nighttime in the house. After a bit of silence, Ulysses wakes up.

SQUIRREL

His heart was beating very fast. Something had happened, but what? He couldn’t think. He was too hungry to think.

Ulysses sits up and looks around the room. He jumps off the bed and goes through the door and down the stairs (if there are stairs). He lifts his nose and sniffs.

Cheese? Something cheesy.

He heads into the kitchen. He climbs onto the table where the typewriter sits.

Cheese puff!

He gobbles the cheese puff greedily.

More!

He finds the bag of cheese puffs lying open near the typewriter. He puts his head inside the bag and eats noisily. When he’s had enough, he retracts his head from the bag and burps. He spies the typewriter. He goes to it. He studies it. He reaches out tentatively and pushes a key. Nothing happens. He punches.

Projection: “S” He punches a second key. A “Q” appears after the “S.”

SQUIRREL

He worked slowly. It took half the night. Was he fighting evil? Who could say? But as he worked, his whiskers trembled and his heart sang.

Ulysses crawls back in bed with Flora. Morning light up as Phyllis enters the kitchen, wearing an excessively romantic bathrobe, and glares at the typewriter.

PHYLLIS

Flora Belle Buckman!

Flora wakes up.

FLORA

(sleepily)

Don't call me Flora Belle.

(noticing the sleeping Ulysses)

What's that on your paws?

She touches a paw gingerly with her fingertip, then looks at her finger. She puts it in her mouth.

FLORA

Cheese powder. Uh-oh.

PHYLLIS

Flora! Get down here! Now!

Flora scrambles off the bed and makes her way downstairs, into the kitchen, where she finds her mother pointing at the typewriter.

PHYLLIS

What is this?

FLORA

Um. That's your typewriter?

PHYLLIS

I know it's my typewriter. I'm talking about the piece of paper in it. I'm talking about the words on the paper.

Phyllis rips the paper out of the typewriter and hands it to Flora.

FLORA

(squints at the paper)

Sss ... Squirtel! It says squirtel!

PHYLLIS

Keep reading.

FLORA

Squirtel. I am. Ulysses. Born anew.

Flora's eyes go wide and she smiles broadly.

PHYLLIS

You think that's funny?

FLORA

No.

PHYLLIS

I have told you and told you to leave this typewriter alone.

FLORA

I didn't ...

PHYLLIS

I am a professional writer. That typewriter is the tool of my trade. Plus, you ate the whole bag of cheese puffs.

FLORA

No I did not.

Phyllis points at the empty bag sitting next to the typewriter.

PHYLLIS

You cannot eat a whole bag of cheese puffs, Flora. You'll become stout.

FLORA

But ...

Projection: Thought bubble: "The squirrel could type!"

FLORA

I'm sorry.

PHYLLIS

Are those the clothes you had on yesterday? Did you sleep in your clothes again?

FLORA

No. Yes.

PHYLLIS

I don't know what I'm going to do with you, Flora Belle Buckman. But as of this morning, the typewriter gets moved into the sewing room, so I don't have to worry about anyone ruining it.

The doorbell buzzes, a loud, obnoxious buzz.

PHYLLIS

That will be your father. He rings that doorbell to make me feel guilty.

(another loud buzz)

See? Don't just stand there, Flora Belle, answer the door.

The doorbell buzzes loudly again. As Phyllis exits with typewriter, Flora hurries over to the door and opens it. It's Mrs. Tickham.

FLORA

Tootie Tickham!

Tootie enters and whispers conspiratorially.

MRS. TICKHAM

Where's the squirrel?

FLORA

(also whispering)

Upstairs.

MRS. TICKHAM

I've come to see if what I think happened yesterday actually did happen, or if I'm the victim of a bizarre hallucination.

FLORA

Ulysses can type.

She holds out the piece of typing paper, still in her hand.

MRS. TICKHAM

Who can type?

FLORA

The squirrel. He's a superhero.

MRS. TICKHAM

For heaven's sake. What kind of superhero types?

Projection: Thought bubble over Flora's head: "Good question."

PHYLLIS (OFF)

George?

FLORA

It isn't Pop! It's Mrs. Tickham!

Phyllis floats in, a big, fake smile on her face. In the bedroom, Ulysses wakes up and makes his way to the top of the stairs.

PHYLLIS

Mrs. Tickham, what a lovely surprise.

MRS. TICKHAM

I just came to pay Flora a visit.

PHYLLIS

You came to see Flora? Why?

Suddenly, Ulysses leaps onto the top of the shepherdess lamp, which wobbles precariously. Tootie screams. Flora and Phyllis turn to look at the cause of the scream, then Phyllis screams, too.

FLORA

Holy bagumba.

PHYLLIS

How did that thing get in here? If it breaks my lamp, I don't know what I'll do. Mary Ann is my precious baby.

FLORA

(walking to the lamp)

Oh, brother. I'll get him off the lamp, okay?

PHYLLIS

Don't touch it! It has a disease!

The doorbell buzzes, followed by a small voice:

VOICE

Great-Aunt Tootie?

They all turn in the direction of the voice.

PHYLLIS

Answer the door, Flora Belle.

Flora goes to the door and opens it to find a small boy, hair so blond it looks white, eyes hidden behind enormous dark glasses.

MRS. TICKHAM

William, I told you to stay put.

WILLIAM

I heard screaming. I came as fast I could, but unfortunately I had a minor but extremely violent encounter with some kind of shrub. And now I think I'm bleeding. But no one should be concerned. Who are you and what are you doing?

This last is to Flora, who has been staring intently into William's eyes, trying to see past her reflection in his glasses.

FLORA

I'm looking you directly in the eye to determine whether or not you have criminal intentions. It's what you're supposed to do.

WILLIAM

According to whom?

FLORA

According to *The Criminal Element Is Among Us!*, which is a bonus feature in some issues of *The Amazing Incandesto*.

MRS. TICKHAM

He isn't a criminal. He's my nephew.

WILLIAM

Great-nephew.

MRS. TICKHAM

His name is William.

WILLIAM

William Spiver, actually. I prefer to be called William Spiver. It distinguishes me from the multiplicity of Williams in the world. It's a pleasure to meet you, whoever you are. I'd shake your hand, but I'm afraid I'm blind.

MRS. TICKHAM

You're not blind. He's not blind.

WILLIAM

I'm suffering from temporary blindness induced by trauma.

PHYLLIS

How sad.

MRS. TICKHAM

He's not blind.

WILLIAM

I'll be staying with Great-Aunt Tootie for the summer.

MRS. TICKHAM

Imagine my surprise and excitement.

PHYLLIS

How wonderful. A little friend for Flora.

FLORA

I don't need a little friend.

PHYLLIS

Flora is very lonely.

FLORA

I'm not lonely.

PHYLLIS

She spends far too much time reading comics. I worry it has made her strange.

FLORA

I'm not strange.

WILLIAM

I have to tell you that I smell something out of the ordinary, something not usually smelled within the confines of the human domestic sphere. The blind have an excellent sense of smell.

MRS. TICKHAM

Here we go.

WILLIAM

And if I'm not mistaken, what I smell is squirrel.

They all turn to look at Ulysses, still perched on top of the lamp.

PHYLLIS

It's got to go. Flora Belle? Get rid of it. But wear gloves.

WILLIAM

Flora Belle. What a melodious name. I would be honored to be your friend, Flora Belle.

PHYLLIS

See how easy that was? Now if you'll excuse me, I must get back to work on my novel.

Phyllis exits.

MRS. TICKHAM

(about the squirrel)

What are you going to do with him?

FLORA

Take him back up to my bedroom, I guess.

She gently removes Ulysses from the lamp and begins to go up the stairs. Mrs. Tickham and William follow.

FLORA

Oh. We're all going. I see.

WILLIAM

I, on the other hand, cannot see. Would it trouble you terribly, Flora Belle, if I put my hand on your shoulder so you can guide me? The world is a treacherous place when you can't see.

FLORA

It's a pretty treacherous place when you *can* see.

WILLIAM

That's a cynical thing to say.

FLORA

Yes it is. I'm a natural-born cynic.

As they head up to Flora's bedroom:

WILLIAM

You're awfully young to be a cynic.

FLORA

I'm ten years old.

WILLIAM

I am eleven, but I have an old soul.

FLORA

You don't look eleven.

WILLIAM

I'm small for my age. Excessive trauma can hinder growth.

FLORA

What trauma are you talking about?

WILLIAM

I'd rather not discuss it right now. Let's just say the universe is a random place, Flora Belle.

MRS. TICKHAM

Flora, may we return to the subject of my possible hallucination and your theory of a rodentine superhero?

WILLIAM

What are you talking about?

FLORA

Nothing.

MRS. TICKHAM

Just keep quiet for a moment, William. Can you do that?

WILLIAM

(sighing)

I'm an old pro at keeping quiet.

Flora pulls out the typing paper, which she had stuck into her pocket earlier. She hands it to Mrs. Tickham.

MRS. TICKHAM

(reading)

Squirtel!

WILLIAM

Squirtel?

MRS. TICKHAM

Squirtel. I am. Ulysses. Born anew.

FLORA

See?

WILLIAM

What does that even mean?

FLORA

The squirrel's name is Ulysses. And he has super powers.

WILLIAM

Wait a minute. Are you positing that the squirrel typed those words?

FLORA

Positing? Yes. That's what I'm *positing*.

Ulysses sits up on his hind legs, looks at William, then Tootie, and finally Flora, a questioning expression on his face.

WILLIAM

You, a self-styled cynic, believe that your squirrel is a superhero?

Projection: Thought bubble: "Do not hope; instead, observe."

FLORA

(removing William's hand, which has been perched on her shoulder all this time)

He typed those words.

WILLIAM

Prove it. Scientifically.

FLORA

How?

WILLIAM

Make the squirrel type something else.

Flora gets her laptop, opens it and puts it in front of Ulysses. Ulysses looks at it. The three humans gather closely behind him. He looks at them.

SQUIRREL

He understood that this was an important moment. So much depended on him typing something. He had to do it, for Flora. He grew very still.

WILLIAM

What's happening?

FLORA

Just wait.

MRS. TICKHAM

He's gone into some kind of trance.

FLORA

Shhh.

Ulysses begins to type, and a projection of the letter "i" appears.

FLORA

It's an "i".

WILLIAM

So what? Anyone can accidentally hit an "i".

MRS. TICKHAM

Would you please hush up, William.

Ulysses continues to type.

SQUIRREL

He typed. The people waited. Destiny bestirred itself.

Eventually, line by line, the following is projected as Flora reads:

FLORA

i love your round head,
the brilliant green,
the watching blue,
these letters,
this world, you.

i am very, very hungry.”

Flora turns to William.

FLORA

Still think it's accidental?

Mrs. Tickham faints. Flora bolts into action, throwing a pillow at William.

WILLIAM

Hey! Why'd you do that?

FLORA

Put it under her head.

Flora grabs Tootie's feet, lifts them, then hands the feet to William.

FLORA

Here, hold these.

WILLIAM

What?!

She kneels by Tootie's head and begins gently slapping her cheeks.

FLORA

Terrible Things says “When someone faints, restore blood flow to the brain by raising the person's legs.”

Mrs. Tickham begins to rouse.

MRS. TICKHAM

The squirrel. The squirrel wrote ... poetry.

WILLIAM

I don't get the last line. What does it mean?

FLORA

It means he's hungry. He hasn't had any breakfast.

WILLIAM

So it's literal.

Ulysses nods.

MRS. TICKHAM

It's poetry.

Ulysses nods.

WILLIAM

Maybe, but it isn't good poetry.

FLORA

Do you doubt him?

WILLIAM

Of course I doubt him!

FLORA

Do not doubt him. Take off your glasses. I need to see who you really are.

WILLIAM

I never take off my glasses.

FLORA

What, they're glued to your head by evil forces beyond your control?

WILLIAM

Yes. No. Actually, I'm afraid that if I take my glasses off, the whole world will unravel.

For a moment, Flora almost believes he believes it.

MRS. TICKHAM

Children, please.

FLORA

Every superhero has an arch-nemesis. Maybe you're his.

PHYLLIS

(off)

Floooooorrrraaaa Bellllle, your father is here.

FLORA

I'll deal with you later. Right now you have to go. Take him home, Tootie Tickham.

MRS. TICKHAM

Yes, all right. But first ... Ulysses, I too am a great lover of poetry, and what you wrote moves me. I'd like to share a small poem I have committed to memory, by a great poet named Rainer Maria Rilke. Would you like to hear it?

Ulysses nods enthusiastically. Mrs. Tickham, clears her throat, then recites:

MRS. TICKHAM

"You, sent out beyond your recall, / go to the limits of your longing. / Embody me. / Flare up like flame / and make big shadows I can move in."

Ulysses has listened to her recitation raptly.

FLORA

(impressed)

Flare up like flame.

PHYLLIS

(off)

Flora! Let your father in!

Flora hurries downstairs, followed by Tootie and William, and opens the door. George is there, wearing a dark suit and tie and a hat with a brim, even though it's a summer Saturday. He is less

confident than he seemed in Flora's memory, and less happy. In fact he emanates sadness.

FLORA

Hi, Pop.

GEORGE

Flora.

He sighs. He does a lot of sighing.

FLORA

Pop, this is –

GEORGE

(to no one in particular)

George Buckman, how do you do?

MRS. TICKHAM

Pleased to meet you. I'm Tootie Tickham. And this is my extremely disturbed and neurotic nephew, William.

FLORA

He prefers William Spiver.

WILLIAM

And I'm her *great* nephew, actually.

FLORA

He's temporarily blind.

GEORGE

George Buckman, how do you do?

MRS. TICKHAM

We were just leaving.

Mrs. Tickham goes out the door but William lingers.

WILLIAM

Flora Belle, before I go I wish to apologize.

FLORA

For what?

WILLIAM

It wasn't the worst poem I've ever heard.

FLORA

No?

WILLIAM

That distinction belongs to Sybil Flounder, a second grade classmate who wrote an entire poem about the contents of her nasal passages.

FLORA

So what Ulysses wrote was better than a poem about boogers?

MRS. TICKHAM

Come along, William.

WILLIAM

(to Flora)

But ... Will we ever meet again?

FLORA

Who can say, William Spiver? The universe is a random place.

William follows Mrs. Tickham off.

FLORA

I'm not quite ready, Pop. I need to ... brush my teeth.

GEORGE

Oh, that's okay. I'll wait.

He sighs again, as Flora goes back up to her bedroom, where Ulysses sits waiting for her.

PHYLLIS

(shouting, from off)

George? Are you in the house now? Is Flora with you?

GEORGE

I am in the house. Flora is with me. That is, she's –

He sighs. The clack-clack-clack of the typewriter echoes through the house.

PHYLLIS

(still shouting from off)

What are you two going to do today?

GEORGE

(shouting)

I don't know, Phyllis!

PHYLLIS

(entering)

You don't need to shout, I can hear you perfectly well.

Flora comes downstairs. She has stuffed Ulysses under her shirt.

PHYLLIS

What do you have under your shirt, Flora?

FLORA

Nothing.

PHYLLIS

Is it that squirrel?

FLORA

No.

GEORGE

What squirrel?

PHYLLIS

Don't lie to me.

FLORA

Okay, it's the squirrel. I'm keeping him.

PHYLLIS

Listen to me: that squirrel is diseased. Did you see its fur? Did you see the crazed look in its eyes?

FLORA

Let's go, Pop.

PHYLLIS

This will not work, Flora Belle. That squirrel is not staying.

FLORA

I know. He's going. With me and Pop.

GEORGE

What squirrel?

(Flora pulls Ulysses out from under her shirt.)

Oh.

Flora heads into the kitchen while George and Phyllis stay in the living room. Flora puts Ulysses on her shoulder.

FLORA

Sit on my shoulder. Do not hope; instead, observe. And listen. *The Criminal Element* says, in order to understand what's going on, you must become a Giant Ear.

In sync with the above, a projection in the graphic style of The Criminal Element: "You must become a Giant Ear!" Flora and Ulysses cock their ears listen carefully to the following.

PHYLLIS

George, we have a problem.

GEORGE

We do?

PHYLLIS

The squirrel.

GEORGE

The squirrel?

PHYLLIS

The squirrel is not well.

GEORGE

He is an unwell squirrel.

PHYLLIS

There's a sack in the garage. And a shovel.

GEORGE

Okay. Sack and shovel.

Long beat.

PHYLLIS

I need you to put the sick squirrel out of its misery.

GEORGE

I don't follow.

PHYLLIS

For the love of Pete, George! Put the squirrel in the sack, and then hit him over the head with the shovel.

George and Flora gasp. Ulysses stands at attention.

PHYLLIS

Then use the shovel to dig a hole and bury the squirrel.

GEORGE

Hit the squirrel with the shovel? Oh, Phyllis, no.

PHYLLIS

Yes, George. It's the humane thing to do.

FLORA

Ulysses! It's all becoming clear. William Spiver isn't your arch-nemesis. *She is!*

Projection: "Holy bagumba!"

The set transitions to the donut shop and the puppeteer hands the squirrel to Flora, who gently puts him into a shoebox.

Lights up on a donut shop called "Do-Nut World." A sign says, "Try our special Giant Do-Nut with Sprinkles!" Flora sits at a table with George.

FLORA

Why do you always drive so slow, Pop? We could have walked here faster.

GEORGE

Speed is what will kill you. That, and taking your eyes off the road. Never, ever take your eyes off the road or your hands off the wheel. Now then, get whatever you want. I'm going to have eggs sunny-side up and a Giant Do-Nut with sprinkles.

Flora surreptitiously opens the lid of the shoebox a crack. Ulysses pokes his head out. His whiskers twitch happily.

FLORA

I don't know why you look so happy. There's a shovel in the trunk, remember? A shovel with *your* name on it.

GEORGE

What did you say?

FLORA

Nothing.

GEORGE

You really should have left the squirrel in the car.

FLORA

Someone might steal him.

GEORGE

Who would steal a squirrel in the parking lot of Do-Nut World?

FLORA

The Criminal Element says criminals are everywhere. And *anyone* can be a criminal. It says "the human heart is like a deep, dark river. If we are not careful, that river can carry us along in its hidden currents of want and anger and need, and transform each of us into the very criminal we fear." Do you think that's true, Pop?

GEORGE

What are you going to have for breakfast, Flora?

FLORA

Pop, I need to talk to you.

GEORGE

About what?

FLORA

That sack. And that shovel.

GEORGE

What sack? What shovel?

FLORA

The sack and the shovel that you put in the trunk of the car, Pop. What are they for?

GEORGE

I intend to dig a hole.

FLORA

For what?

GEORGE

A thing that I'm going to bury.

FLORA

What thing are you going to bury?

GEORGE

A sack!

FLORA

Why would you bury a sack?

GEORGE

Because your mother asked me to.

FLORA

Why did she ask you to bury a sack?

GEORGE

Why did she ask me to bury a sack? That's a good question. I need to use the little boy's room.

He exits hurriedly.

FLORA

(peeking into the shoebox)

Listen to me. Keep an eye on George Buckman. He's a good man, but his heart is a dark river.

SQUIRREL

Ulysses knew he should be worried, but he was too busy thinking about poetry! Food and poetry! What wonderful words. What a wonderful, beautiful, delicious, Do-Nut World!

A waitress, Rita, comes to the table.

RITA

What can I get you?

SQUIRREL

Ulysses read the woman's nametag. "RITA!" (*projection of the nametag*) The exclamation point seemed insincere somehow. But he didn't care. She was going to bring them food.

FLORA

(whispering to Ulysses)

Lie low.

RITA

Well? What's it gonna be?

FLORA

(still to Ulysses)

But be prepared.

RITA

Whatcha got in there?

FLORA

Where?

RITA

In the box. Got a baby doll in the box? You talking to your baby doll?

FLORA

I'm ten years old. I know how to administer CPR. I know how to survive at the South Pole by eating seal blubber. Also, I'm a natural-born cynic. I do not. Have. A baby doll.

RITA

Aw, come on. Let me see her.

Rita bends down, her head close to the shoebox.

FLORA

Don't get so close.

RITA

Cootchie-coo.

Rita pokes her pencil into the shoebox slowly. Suddenly, Ulysses pokes his head out. Rita screams. Ulysses leaps out of the shoebox and is airborne. A brief freeze into tableau.

SQUIRREL

He had never been so frightened in his life. The woman's face was monstrous. Her hair was monstrous. That exclamation point on her nametag was monstrous. His animal instincts kicked in and he acted without thinking.

The tableau unfreezes and Ulysses continues his leap, landing on top of Rita's head and getting tangled in her beehive hairdo. She screams again and swats at him, Ulysses hanging onto her head for dear life as Rita runs around the restaurant in a panic.

RITA

Get it off of me!

FLORA

Ulysses! Remember who you are!

SQUIRREL

He listened to the voice of the person he loved. Flora.

Ernie, the cook, comes out of the kitchen, holding a spatula.

ERNIE

What the –

RITA

(to Ernie)

Don't just stand there! Do something!

Ernie approaches Ulysses cautiously, brandishing the spatula.

FLORA

(to Ulysses)

Do something!

SQUIRREL

That was good advice. So he did something. He flew.

Ulysses launches himself from the top of Rita's head and flies straight at Ernie, then swerves to avoid him. George enters, returning from the bathroom. He ducks as Ulysses flies by.

FLORA AND GEORGE

Holy bagumba!

Flora looks at her father. He breaks out into a big, happy smile.

FLORA

Pop?

(going over to him and slipping her hand into his)

His name is Ulysses.

GEORGE

Ulysses. Ha!

They both smile as they watch Ulysses fly around the restaurant. Then George begins laughing with delight.

FLORA

(whispering to herself)

Do not hope.

(out loud, to her father)

This malfeasance must be stopped. Right?

GEORGE

Right.

Flora sticks out her foot and trips Ernie as he passes by in pursuit of the squirrel. He falls with a splat. Meanwhile, Flora sees that Ulysses is headed for a collision.

FLORA

Ulysses!

Ulysses looks back and as a result crashes hard into a wall [or window or door]. He falls to the floor.

FLORA

Ulysses!

*She runs over to the squirrel and kneels, taking him into her arms.
Projection in the graphic style of Terrible Things: “Remember, all
head wounds bleed excessively! Do not panic!”*

FLORA

He’s bleeding, but don’t panic.

GEORGE

Okay. Use this.

*He pulls off his necktie and hands it to her. She dabs at the blood
on Ulysses’ head.*

FLORA

Ulysses?

Rita has gone to Ernie and helps him get up.

RITA

I think it was a rat!

ERNIE

It was flying!

RITA

It was in my hair!

ERNIE

(pointing at Flora)

You! You tripped me!

RITA

She’s the one who brought that thing in here. Dressed it up like a baby doll.

FLORA

I did *not*.

(turning her attention back to Ulysses)

He’s breathing and his heart is beating. He’ll be okay.

ERNIE

I'm calling the cops!

GEORGE

Do you really think a squirrel in your hair is cause for police action?

RITA

I think that thing gave me rabies! My stomach itches.

George helps Flora up and escorts her to the exit. She cradles Ulysses in her arms.

ERNIE

I'm definitely calling the cops.

GEORGE

(announcing it to the world)

George Buckman, how do you do! *(to Flora:)* Run!

Blackout. Act break.

*

George and Flora stand outside George's apartment building. Flora holds Ulysses.

GEORGE

Now, before we go into my apartment building, I need to caution you about Mr. Klaus.

FLORA

Okay.

GEORGE

Mr. Klaus is huge and angry and orange and he wanders the halls peeing on the apartment doors and vomiting in the stairwell.

FLORA

Wait, this is your landlord?

GEORGE

No! Well, yes, my landlord *is* named Mr. Klaus, but I'm talking about his cat, who is also named Mr. Klaus, and who, in addition to the nasty habits I've already mentioned, likes to lie in

wait until some unfortunate person comes along and then he pounces on your ankles and bites and scratches and growls. I have the scars to prove it.

FLORA

Cats can smell your fear. It's a scientific fact.

Projection, in Terrible Things font: "The smell of fear incites a predator!"

GEORGE

Which is why we have to run, not walk, to my apartment. Ready?

Flora holds Ulysses close and nods. They run off stage. A moment later they run all the way across the stage as though through a hallway. A moment later they run across again. This time pursued by a large cat. (This chase sequence might also be accomplished entirely with shadows.) George and Flora burst through the door of his apartment and slam it behind them, both breathing heavily. George is laughing again. Flora looks at Ulysses.

FLORA

He's still out cold. What if he has a concussion? What if he dies? Can superheroes die?

GEORGE

We won't let him die.

FLORA

The sign on the door across the hall says a doctor lives there.

GEORGE

That's right. Dr. Meescham.

FLORA

I'm going to see if he can help with Ulysses.

GEORGE

Well, you see Dr. Meescham isn't –

Flora goes out the door. Through some stage magic, George and the door of his apartment disappear and another door appears, bearing a sign that reads "Residing Within: The Doctors Meescham!" Flora raises her fist to knock on the door, but before

she can do so, it opens, revealing an old lady. Opera music emanates from the apartment behind her.

OLD LADY

(with an unidentifiable Old World accent)

At last. I'm so glad to see your face.

(Flora turns to see who she's talking to.)

I am speaking to you, little flower.

FLORA

Me?

OLD LADY

Yes, you. Flora Belle, beautiful flower of Mr. George-Buckman-How-Do-You-Do. Your father has spoken of you with much love.

FLORA

I'm looking for a doctor. I have a medical emergency.

OLD LADY

Come in, come in!

She yanks Flora over the threshold and into the apartment. Perhaps the door rotates to suggest that we are now inside the apartment with the two of them. Flora looks at the closed door nervously. The opera music is a bit louder now.

FLORA

My father talks about me? To you?

OLD LADY

Often he speaks of little else. Now then, what is the specific medical emergency to which you have referred?

FLORA

(looking down at the squirrel in her arms)

Oh. It's Ulysses. He's hurt pretty badly.

OLD LADY

Ulysses? A hero's name. Let us have a look at your hero, then.

She moves to an armchair, sits and holds out her arms. Flora gently hands Ulysses over to her.