

SwitchBack

Adrian Osmond

EVER CHANGING
NEVER RESTING
SWITCHBACK IS THE RIDE OF YOUR LIVES

adrian@sweetscar.co.uk

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c/o Sally Hope
Sally Hope Associates
108 Leonard St
London, UK
EC2A 4XS
020 7613 5353

HOW TO CREATE SWITCHBACK

SwitchBack embraces the live, unrepeatable nature of theatrical performance. It creates an original experience each evening out of the same raw elements. A band may vary their set and respond to the roar of the crowd. In a game of cards, you might deal the same hand twice in a row, but the result remains unpredictable. Likewise, *SwitchBack* explores the ways in which the same events can be played in different sequences, develop new emotions, and move towards unforeseen outcomes.

The scenes of *SwitchBack* are interchangeable with each other. There is no prescribed or definitive order to the events. All the sections should be included in every performance (apart from *coda* section), but they should be presented in a different order each time. As each complete sequence of scenes should last less than an hour, two new versions of *SwitchBack* should be presented at each performance, with an interval placed between them. *Coda* should only be performed at the end of the second *SwitchBack* each night.

As with any script, there are numerous interpretations of each moment, and new possibilities should arise out of new sequences. Many lines and actions can shift between the characters as well; a few suggestions are provided, but there are more alternatives, from entire sections being switched from one character to another (changing names and personal pronouns accordingly), to breaking up sentences or passages for redistribution; passing a single phrase from one to the other may have significant impact. Some shifts can be subtle, others extreme (even the blood of 22 can transfer to Chase). Where appropriate, sections can overlap with each other (fusing actions and dialogue from two or three sections). Most stage directions are suggestions, not instructions, as are entrances and exits (i.e. who witnesses what). More so than most scripts, this text is simply a blueprint for a production.

The action should occur in “real time”, without breaks or shifts of time between sections (except when moving into *coda*). Sequences could be chosen randomly, but may be more successful if constructed carefully (e.g. ending the first version with the same section that the second *SwitchBack* opens with, or ending the second version [before *coda*] where the first began). Whatever else, at each performance the two *SwitchBacks* should contrast, with sympathies shifting between the characters, and their desires dividing and intertwining.

It is vital that the sequencing does not become an intellectual game or a gimmick. The process should enable exploration beyond conventional dramatic structure, delving into the structure of our own lives, the decisions that we make, and the choices that we leave behind.

We teeter on the brink of countless opportunities, both glorious and disastrous. Our feelings are in constant flux, frequently propelled by a desperate need to embrace everything and everyone. So often we hear phrases such as “it’s too late for that now”, or “I never saw myself doing that”. We can become detached from our own selves and actions, with our behaviour governed by time and circumstance.

The nature of *SwitchBack* means that each version may feel like the middle of the story, as if we arrive after exposition, and disconnect before resolution. Instead of addressing each section as a separate entity, the scenes should be connected by emotions, actions and motivations that spread throughout the sequence. Again, what is written on the page is merely the shadow of what can be constructed around it. The audience needs to be drawn in through simple, sensual beauty, through the hesitant (or violent) interaction between the characters.

SwitchBack relies on a dynamic balance between freedom and control. In performance, its success resides in embracing both of these

sensations simultaneously, just as the range of choice in our own lives can feel both terrifying and liberating. The printed text should provide a finite, constant anchor, and give the company the security with which to reach towards the possibilities that performance can possess.

Paradoxically, there also needs to be a sense that the characters are trapped within an unbreakable frame, an inevitable cycle; every scene must occur somewhere in the sequence, after all.

CHARACTERS

Chase (m), Hope (f)

SETTING

a remote cabin

SOUND

To begin and end the first *SwitchBack*, stage and auditorium should be plunged into darkness as a roller-coaster thunders past with people screaming in its carriages. The same should occur at the start of the second *SwitchBack*, which then concludes with *coda*.

Section numbers are included for technical purposes only.

“Though the lover’s discourse is no more than a dust of figures stirring according to an unpredictable order, like a fly buzzing in a room, I can assign to love, at least retrospectively...a settled course: it is by means of this historical hallucination that I sometimes make love into a romance, an adventure.” Roland Barthes

“You can make fresh start with your final breath.” Bertolt Brecht

1: NOTHING'S WORKING

Chase is wearing muddy, stained clothes. Or underwear and a dressing gown, with scraps of paper falling out of the pockets.

He opens up the fridge, the light doesn't come on. It's practically bare. He runs his hand along the shelves, closes the fridge door.

He picks up a stack of cassettes, flicks through them. He keeps flicking through cassettes, can't decide, goes back through them again. He chooses, open up the cassette player, makes sure he's putting in the right side, then presses play. Nothing happens. He tries again. Repeatedly.

He turns on the taps, nothing runs.

Hope: What are you doing now?

Chase: Thought some music might give us a new perspective. But nothing's working. Everything's broken. They've turned off the water.

Hope turns the tap, water runs out.

Chase: How did you do that?

Hope: A woman's touch. *(offering him a glass)* You want some? Green glass or red?

Chase: Not right now. I've been spending too much time on the toilet. I keep thinking the septic tank will overflow, you know?

Hope: You want me to change this light-bulb?

Chase: I can do it.

Hope: Why don't you get on with some writing. You got some spares?

Chase: Under the sink.

Hope: Is it bayonet or screw cap?

Chase: What's the difference?

Hope: Screw caps screw and bayonet... got those proddy bits on the side, like Frankenstein's neck.

Chase: The monster's neck.

Hope: What?

Chase: Frankenstein was the doctor. It's an easy mistake.

Hope: So tell me Chase, how do you end up with seven boxes of light-bulbs and not even a can of chicken soup?

Chase: The bulbs were on a special offer. Soup wasn't.

Hope: You should've asked me to bring something.

Chase: I didn't know how long I was going to stay.

Hope: I'll get a ride to a store before I go.

Chase: Just like old times? Filling in my blanks. You gonna make a list too?

Hope: These are all the same. 100 watt screw cap. Where's the nearest town? I could try going now if you want.

Chase: No, no, stay, this is good. (*He takes the bulb.*) Why are there so many versions? I thought changing these things was meant to be simple. Isn't that the point of those jokes?

Hope: I've been learning jokes. Don't laugh.

Chase: Why?

Hope: Whenever you're having a drink – ... or, well, whenever you're out and people start swapping punch lines and its my turn I can never remember any. So I bought a book. You want to

hear some? How many narcissists does it take to screw in a light bulb?

Chase: Dunno.

Hope: One. He holds the bulb and the world revolves around him. How many perverts to screw in a light bulb?

Chase: Dunno.

Hope: Just one, but it takes a whole casualty department to get it out. How many divorced men to screw in a light bulb?

Chase: Yeah, like the *man* gets the house. It's not happening. It's bright enough anyway.

Hope: Maybe it's the fuse. Is the fridge still on?

Chase: The cord just needs a yank.

Hope: Where are the fuses?

Chase: I can get it going. I can do this at least.

Hope: Get off the chair and let me have a go.

Chase: Just let me fucking do it!

Chase strikes the socket and the bulb flicks into action, the cord swinging wildly.

OR

Chase throws the bulb across the room, smashing it.

Chase: There. Works like a dream.

Pause. The place is a mess.

Chase: This is good.

Hope: What?

Chase: *This*. You want some coffee? There isn't any coffee. Tea?
How about a cigarette? I'm going to have one.

Hope: I'm not smoking any more.

Chase: What do you take in your tea? I think there's still some milk.

Hope: Just water is fine.

Chase: You taken your pills yet? The milk's off.

Hope: If you put something solid down on paper you'll feel better.

Chase: Hope. Let's not give up just yet, ok?

Pause.

Hope: I brought a box of your clothes that I found. They should still fit
you.

Chase: Sure. I'll try them on later.

Hope: Try them on now.

Chase: Maybe later, y'know?

Hope: I should never have come.

2: LET'S GO

Hope: Says in the local paper the annual carnival's arrived. They've got rides, animals.

Chase: What sort of animals?

Hope: Livestock. Thoroughbreds.

Chase: Not elephants?

Hope: That's more of a circus-type package. There'll be crazy mirrors, ghost trains. I could watch my reflection grow fat and tall. Can you imagine? It'd be a complete novelty to me.

Chase: I've never seen an elephant.

Hope: Yes you have. We went to that random zoo.

Chase: It was too hot. The elephants were hiding.

Hope: That was the giraffes.

Chase: No, the giraffes were there, but we missed feeding time.

Hope: Maybe it was the gorillas.

Chase: It was definitely just feeding time we missed for the giraffes because they'd been trained to eat grain from your hand, and we missed it because we were both drunk and being bad in the darkness of the aquarium, and I distinctly recall this because you said that the giraffes might not trust the smell of my palms. Which somehow has stuck with me. And even if I *have* seen a herd of elephants I have absolutely no recollection of it, which is really the point.

Hope: I thought the *point* was that there's a carnival in town and I thought we might go.

Chase: When? Now?

Hope: Well, not necessarily this minute, but before I leave, sure.
What do you say?

Chase: I don't know. I've got a lot of work to do.

Hope: Wouldn't it be good to get some fresh air?

Chase: There'll be animal dung.

Hope: Forget the animals. You can win me a stuffed one.

Chase: I'm staying till I'm finished.

Hope: You have to go outside some time.

Chase: Why?

Hope: You'll starve, for one thing.

Chase: That'd give me something to write about.

Hope: What happens when I go?

Chase: I'll find out soon enough.

Hope: Chase, what happens when I go?

Chase: At some point I'll step out the door. It's inevitable. And when I leave this place will look exactly the same as when I arrived. I'll take my coat off the broken hook I placed it on weeks ago. The closet door will swing open. The stains will bleed out of the walls. The old familiar smell will permeate the room. Dust and dirt will reside in the same corners. I won't have left a mark.

Hope: I don't know where the truth lies with you.

Chase: What?

Hope: If I left you'd follow, wouldn't you?

3: WHY SHE CAME

Chase: So how about this for a story? He comes out to a deserted place owned by a friend. There's nothing there, he's warned, a few scraps of furniture and loose plumbing, that's all. That's ok, the man says. I'm going out there to get some space, put history on paper. Any comforts will be a distraction. His friend is trying to sell the place, he's been trying for a while, but there's a problem with his ex-wife that's holding up proceedings.

Hope: The man isn't successful.

Chase: He's a good writer.

Hope: He's good, sure, he got a decent advance on his first novel but it didn't sell well.

Chase: It was about a fishing community rather than gangsters or drug-addled porn merchants.

Hope: Now the people around him are growing weary of waiting for the second. His star is waning.

Chase: He gets a bus to the nearest town to buy food and supplies. Then he realises he can't carry it all.

Hope: He hitches a lift.

Chase: He hitches five lifts. By which time the milk has gone sour. He crumples to the floor and sleeps.

Hope: When he wakes up he's cold. Frustrated. He's come to write but the words won't happen. And he's forgotten most of the items he meant to buy. But he's loathed to leave the house.

Chase: Not till he's created something remarkable. It's a vow he makes to himself. But nothing is arriving.

Hope: One morning he opens his eyes and discovers his cheeks are caked in tears.

Chase: Has he been asleep?

Hope: He thinks he's been sleeping.

Chase: There's no time for sleep. He dials a number. The one number in his head. The one written on the wall. He hears her voice on a machine. She doesn't say her name, just the number. He calls again. He does that all morning. Just listening to the same syllables falling from her invisible lips.

Hope: There's such a shock when it isn't the machine. When it's the real woman. And in that pause, in the hesitation, she hears who it is.

Chase: What earrings is she wearing when she comes?

Hope: She isn't wearing any.

Chase: Yes she is.

Hope: She's as plain as possible.

Chase: She's wearing the ones he gave her. The very first gift. These little sea horses. So cheap she can't wear them around company.

Hope: She's wearing them for him?

Chase: That's the way he sees it.

Hope: What if it's a coincidence?

Chase: She'd have to have forgotten how she got them. And you don't forget a thing like that. It's a sign.

Hope: Of what? That she wants to go back? That she's willing to try again? It was just a coincidence. He imagined it.

Chase finds Hope's things, pulls out the earrings, puts them in her hand.

Chase: Fact.

4: HANG OVER

Chase: Can you take your bra down.

Hope: My bra?

Chase: It's hanging over my head like mistletoe.

Hope: It's not mine.

Chase: Well who put it there then?

Hope: Whoever was living here before. Who else is there?

Chase: No one. *No one*. It's not a sign.

Hope: It's nothing to do with me.

Chase: Nor me.

Hope: So get rid of it.

Chase: I can't reach it.

5: PEANUT BUTTER & COFFEE

Chase: There's a detail from your childhood I want to use in my story. How your mother put peanut butter in an egg-cup when you got home.

Hope: Have you got any peanut butter?

Chase: I'll look.

Hope: It was after swimming lessons. I hated them. So afterwards she'd give me an egg cup-full as a reward. I'd scoop it out with my finger and lick it clean.

Chase: How old were you?

Hope: Five. Only five. Except one day I got dropped off after swimming and the peanut butter cup wasn't there. And I climbed up to my mother's bedroom smelling of chlorine and she was still asleep. Which wasn't part of her normal routine. I'm not sure I'd ever seen her snoozing before. And now I couldn't wake her. I jumped up and down on the bed but her eyes wouldn't open. And when the phone went I answered it and I told the priest my mummy wouldn't get up. Can you believe that it was the priest? Divine intervention. I stayed with him while they kept her under surveillance. Not that I knew that at the time. The only explanation I got was that she'd drunk too much coffee the night before. And, yes, about five years later, I was staying with my father, there was just the one bed and he refused to sleep on the sofa or put me on the sofa, and I was twitching next to him under the covers with this street light streaming across my lids. And I went to the kitchen, lined up four cups of coffee and drank them in a row. Which, of course, didn't help at all. What are you writing?

Chase: Nothing.

Hope: You're writing something.

Chase: I know.

Hope: Don't you have any stories of your own? If you went outside what would you see?

Chase: Forest. Dirt. Air.

Hope: No. You'd look back at the house, in through the window, rub some grime off the pane and inspect your own mess.

Chase: Don't go.

Hope: I didn't.

Chase gives her an egg-cup with peanut butter.

Hope: What's this?

Chase: It's what you wanted.

Hope: This is just a spiral wire. It's spilling out the sides. And the peanut butter's chunky.

Chase: You don't want it?

Hope: I'm not five any more.

6: RING

Hope: The phone's off the hook.

Chase: I know. I took it off. In case Terry tries to call. Says he's finally sold this place on.

Hope: I gave Sam the number.

She puts the receiver back.

The phone rings. Neither of them answer it.

OR

The phone rings. Hope picks it up; Chase rips the wire from the wall.

OR

The phone rings. As Hope moves towards it, Chase storms out of the room. Hope doesn't answer it.

7: TAKE OFF

Chase exits. Hope picks up Chase's cigarettes. She finds some matches.

She smokes for the first time in years. Cries.

Then she stands, looks at herself in the mirror. Starts to take her clothes off.

Chase enters, interrupting.

8: SWALLOW

Hope takes a pill, bites it in half, and washes it down with some water.

OR

Hope picks up several pills, washes them down with water.

OR

Hope picks up a bottle of pills, shakes some of the contents into her hand. She looks at them, then washes them down with water. Then she pours the rest of the bottle into her open mouth and swallows.

9: WITH CHILD

Hope: Chase? Chase?

Chase: I'm still here.

Hope: What's a different phrase for being pregnant?

Chase: "Expecting"?

Hope: Doesn't fit.

Chase: You doing a crossword?

Hope: Give me another.

Chase: Up the spout.

Hope: Too graphic.

Chase: You could be in the family way. How about a bun in the oven?
On slow bake.

Hope: I don't want a joke.

Chase: All right. With child.

Hope: With child. With child.

Chase: Hope. Why do I get the feeling that you're any or all of the
above? Is that what you're trying to tell me?

Hope: I just did.

Chase: How many weeks gone?

Hope: Ten.

Chase: It's not mine this time. Is it.

Hope: How could it be?

Chase: True. How could it. Sam's then.

Hope: I don't know if I'm going to keep it.

Chase: What does he say?

Hope: What if it doesn't last?

Chase: You and Sam?

Hope: The baby.

Chase: Why are you telling me this?

Hope: I thought you might know what to do.

Chase: I didn't before.

Hope: That was different. You didn't know.

Chase: I didn't know a lot of things.

Hope: That's true.

Chase: I know it's true. That's why I said it. Have you told him?

Hope: No.

Chase: You're telling me but not him?

Hope: Do I have to go through all this again?

Chase: You already are.

Pause.

Chase: What if we forget about him?

Hope: What?

Chase: What if you stayed on and we made a home here? We could really fix this place up. We've always been good at that. I could talk to Terry, do a little negotiation, keep the place till the spring at least. No, but I'm being practical now, we could bring everyone down, make it into a big adventure, turn this place around in a weekend – so long as enough of us stay sober

and bang the nails in straight. Giles and Jerry could fix up the ceiling, Terry and me could focus on the plumbing. Can you imagine having everyone in this place for a few days? The old team. We could adopt a dog, take it for early morning walks. A real family feeling. What do you say?

Pause.

Chase: You're my baby.

Hope: But I'm not your baby any more. Am I?

Chase: No. You're not.

Hope: And if something happens to me it's not your fault.

Chase: Like what?

Hope: It's not you any more. I'm not your responsibility.

Chase: Like what? What are you talking about, Hope?

Hope: I'm tired of making choices.

10: PAST AND PRESENT

Chase: How tall is he? Sam.

Hope: It's not important.

Chase: It is to me.

Hope: Why?

Chase: I want to know. I want a clear image of him.

Hope: So you can imagine us together?

Chase: How tall?

Hope: Taller than me.

Chase: Hair?

Hope: Brown. Short. He likes to keep it short.

Chase: And how did you meet him?

Hope: His son's one of my pupils.

Chase: But he's not married?

Hope: His wife's dead.

Chase: That's good. For you, I mean. What does he eat for breakfast?

Hope: What?

Chase: Bet he's a bacon and eggs man. Or a high fibre diet.

Hope: He doesn't do breakfast.

Chase: Ah. Always on the go. And who made the first move?

Hope: There wasn't one. No definitive moment.

Chase: It was all very gracious and careful.

- Hope: Yes, it was. He'd pick up his son at the end of the piano lesson and we'd chat for a few seconds. And as the weeks went by, seconds turned into minutes.
- Chase: Until he couldn't keep his son kicking seats in the car, so you traded an afternoon for an evening. And what did you talk about?
- Hope: This and that.
- Chase: Treading cautiously around past damage.
- Hope: Until one of you allows a subject to be brought up.
- Chase: Like why you're not drinking.
- Hope: Or why the curtains don't get drawn. And the need for secrets seeps away.
- Chase: And trust translates into safety. And you want to spend some time feeling safe, don't you?
- Hope: That's what we're looking for.
- Chase: Which side of the bed does he sleep on, Hope? The right side. Isn't it. Who falls asleep first?
- Hope: I try to.
- Chase: Does he hold you?
- Hope: Yes.
- Chase: But it's never forceful. You could climb out of his grip if you wanted.
- Hope: But I don't want to, not yet. He covers me with his embrace. Wraps me inside his body. He whispers in my ear.
- Chase: He whispers in your ear.
- Hope: He tells me the demons will fly away, that he can feel them leaving.

Chase: And you want to believe him.

Hope: Until the morning I believe it.

Chase: And your faith makes him forget his own fears and pain. It's a loving cocoon.

Hope: He wants to dress in my skin. To live inside my presence.

Chase: His wide hands prolong that moment of forgetting. Before the worries flood in, of what's happened and what's coming next.

Hope: Soon as you realise that, it's gone.

Chase: So don't.

Pause. They aren't talking about Sam any more. They haven't been talking about Sam for some time.

Chase: I'm glad you're happy.

Pause.

Hope: Nobody knows, do they, Chase? Nobody knows.

Chase: That's right. They'll never know.

Hope looks at Chase. Maybe Chase looks back. Perhaps the connection is brief. Perhaps it is long, unbearable to exist inside, but unbearable to break.

11: A GLIMMER

Hope: It's closing in again.

Chase: That's ok.

Hope: It's not ok. Chase, I can't work out what I'm meant to be doing. I can't remember where I went wrong.

Chase: It's not a fork in the road, there's no pinpoint when it shifted –

Hope: When you –

Chase: I lied, I cheated, you lied, you cheated –

Hope: You first.

Chase: Shh. Shh. Look, let's go back. You remember us camping that first summer? And we followed that old railroad track for miles? You remember?

Hope: And you wanted to turn off the track.

Chase: That's right, and you wanted to head back, but I said no, let's keep going, so we did?

Hope: We did.

Chase: And dusk came and we didn't know where we were, we were ploughing through the night of those endless fields? And you could feel the darkness coming closer.

Hope: And you saw a firefly.

Chase: I saw a firefly, the only glimmer around, and I took that light as a good omen and promised you that by the time we saw a seventh firefly we would reach the camp.

Hope: You had to keep singing me songs.

Chase: Did I?

Hope: You sang Little Richard and Frank Sinatra.

Chase: And with the sixth firefly we reached the village. And as we went down the path towards the camp, you spotted the seventh.

Hope: Chase? I felt nice and safe when that happened. If we were a movie, it would have ended that way. But now it's just another story.

12: SPIDER

Hope notices a spider in a glass. Or a jar with some insects collected in the bottom. Perhaps Chase has been killing flies and collecting their remains in a receptacle.

She empties the creature(s) onto the table, or in her hand, or on the floor. Then she crushes one. And while this takes place, she sings:

Hope: What shall I give him? Poor as I am. If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb. If I were a wise man, I would do my part. Yet what can I give him? Give my heart.

I killed it.

OR

Chase does the same, singing:

Chase: I've got no strings to hold me down, to make me fret or make me frown. I had strings but now I'm free, there are no strings on me. I've got no strings so I have fun, I'm not tied up to anyone. They've got strings, but you can see there are no strings on me.

I killed it.

OR

The spider is left to its own decisions.

OR

The spider is already dead when tipped out of the jar.

13: COUNSEL

Chase: I've been seeing someone. For a little while.

Hope: Well that's great.

Chase: I was, I mean. It's all over now. Actually, you know her.

Hope: I do?

Chase: You remember that last winter? When we were still in the city together?

Hope: Yes.

Chase: And we went to those counselling sessions?

Hope: Yes.

Chase: And you remember the counsellor?

Hope: Yes.

Chase: Well.

Hope: You were fucking the counsellor?

Chase: Well, not *then*. Not while we were paying her. But I still had the number, so I thought –

Hope: She was fifty.

Chase: Late forties.

Hope: She was *married*.

Chase: Like that stopped either of us before.

Hope: You were fucking the counsellor?

Chase: You were gone by then.

Hope: And this seemed sensible how?

Chase: I never said that it seemed sensible. When did I say that?

Hope: So it didn't seem sensible?

Chase: I wasn't looking for sensible. We'd go to those sessions, right? Talk some issues out. But one or both of us had gone too far before stumbling through the door. And we'd travel home by bus. Those wet, narrow buses. To the same food every night. Those endless bowls of rice.

Hope: You liked rice.

Chase: I *did* like rice, yes, but... I'd think back to her suit, and her earrings. That endless patience, and she seemed like someone that could set a few things straight. I mean, that was her *job*, right?

Hope: I was organised.

Chase: Not by then.

Hope: You wanted her to tame you.

Chase: It didn't work like that. She got her fired.

Hope: How?

Chase: I wasn't the only client she saw for extra-curricular activities. But she *was* organised. All written down in an hour-by-hour schedule.

Hope: Why are you telling me these things?

Chase: I don't know. How am I supposed to know that?

Hope: You want to tell me how it started?

Chase: No.

Hope: You want to tell me locations?

Chase: No.

Hope: You want to tell me how often and how long and wet and hands and licks and tongues and teeth? You want to tell me the whole catalogue? How many there really were? And why?

Chase: No. No, Hope, I don't. Do you?

14: DANCE

Chase: Hope. Come here. Put your hands around my neck. I'll put mine around your waist. That's it. Let's dance.

They do. But perhaps not for long.

15: IMPACT

Hope: You're in a rush but you don't know where you're going.

Chase: Life's such a disappointment. You can't do it all.

16: LOST CHILD

Hope: What if the baby is an accident?

Chase: Which one?

Hope: In our story. If it comes when they're happiest.

Chase: Are they completely happy?

She thinks.

Hope: Yes.

Chase: And she decides to keep it.

Hope: She doesn't have a choice.

Chase: There's always a choice.

Hope: They decide together. But she gets ill. And no one can tell them why or what it means. The baby keeps growing. She's not getting any better.

Chase: He prays. A genuine prayer that she makes it through. He swears he'll sacrifice anything to keep her.

Hope: What do you mean "keep her"?

Chase: Stop her from dying.

Hope: It's terminal?

Chase: It could be.

Hope: He's religious?

Chase: There's nothing else to fall back on. He makes a deal. Himself rather than her. He'll take it on. Let the disease move through her, pass on to him.

Hope: And what does his God say?

Chase: Nothing at first. But the woman gets better.

Hope: And for him this is some sort of miracle?

Chase: Yes, except... except when you're sick what's inside gets sick too. So it's not him that it passes onto. And when you turn the page over he's in a hospital being told by a doctor he has to decide. The mother or the baby.

Hope: What?

Chase: The mother or the baby. He gives his consent. He waits outside the operating room. And when the baby arrives, it doesn't scream. Doesn't even get to give a solitary howl. And what the man doesn't realise yet is that his decision was wrong.

Hope: In what way?

Chase: That he would lose his lover as well.

17: FOREIGN FUCK

Chase: You want a cigarette?

Hope: I don't smoke anymore. Remember?

Chase: Oh. You sure about that?

Hope: Not since I got back.

Chase: So you're all balanced out now? Waiting for your corpse to arrive. Fit you like a glove. It's... I don't know. You act like you're not dressed in your own skin any more. Like you've been sterilised. Washed through.

Hope: When daddy gave me the plane tickets he said "these will wipe you clean". The culture of another country would get my head in perspective was what he said, draw a line in the dust behind me. Maybe he thought I wouldn't make it back. That my problems could belong to somebody else.

Chase: So tell me this. How come I can smell the smoke on you?

Hope: And at one point... there was this one point at which I thought I would disappear.

I was out of it, I'd gotten off at the wrong stop, found myself stuck in this bombed-out town in France. They used to build ships there, but no one needs ships any more, do they? Still, the place had been strategically important in some previous war, so I thought may as well, left my bag at the station and was waiting under a shelter for the next tour guide to arrive.

And it was raining as usual, falling straight down on the empty parking lot. He arrived late, sidled up. Taller than I expected, in a huge dark overcoat and a hat that covered his ears. He beckoned for me to follow. We went through the market squares and approached the old town quarter, and it was only

once we were walking down the cobbled streets that I realised he hadn't yet said a word. He wasn't talking. We weren't walking fast, it was a relaxed rhythm. So there wasn't anything to fear. But I knew this was another man.

All the houses were painted different colours, same as the leaves that scattered over the stones. And – it's funny the things you think in moments like this – I thought that the people entering their front doors would be colour-co-ordinated with the shade of their walls, that I would notice them approaching from a distance and be able to identify who belonged to which house. Only orange people allowed in the orange building, there'd be little signs saying you have to be orange to live here.

His place was on the top floor. A carpet of red wine. Like you could squeeze a corner of it and pour the dye into a glass. He put his hat on a peg. And then he began to take off his clothes. I was in the middle of the room, dripping. In silence. And he was completely naked. The mattress was just a few feet from the bathroom, maybe some removal men had dumped it there and no one had ever gotten around to shifting it. And he just stood there by the mattress. So I had to approach him.

I came so close that I could see all the individual curls in his beard. The cracks in his lips. The flecks of green in his eyes. He didn't kiss me. I stripped myself bare, got in the bed. And he followed.

You still listening? I had this idea, I suppose, of what would happen, the caresses, the sensations, but in the end it didn't work like that at all. He was thrusting, and it was so dry, and it got tighter and more painful, but he kept on pushing, harder and harder. He wouldn't give up. The problem he was shoving into me was getting deeper and wider while I'm

shrinking in front of my very own eyes. And I'm thinking, this is what it's like, then, being fucked by a foreigner. It's never the way you expect.

I look up at the roof beams, jutting down through the walls. And I've never felt so alone. Except, what it was, it was feeling so much that I couldn't feel anything at all. Does that make sense? And I wake up, I thought I'd only dozed off, and he's beside me with his eyes open holding a little steel gun against his hairy chest.

So I don't do anything sudden, just try to keep level, get into the bathroom, and I stand, can't feel my legs, don't look back, fiddle with the lock, can't get it to turn, my hands smelling of his cum, I vomit in the sink, rinse out my mouth, and... and I'm in this other country, but the bathroom is just the same, the same as what I'm used to. Except all the products, the shampoo, toothpaste, all the labels are in French. I'm looking in the mirror, shaking, I can see the door in the mirror, I'm waiting for it to open. That's when the gun goes off.

There's a hole below his left nipple, around where the heart should be. A simple little hole. It's too late to plug it up. There's not much blood anyway. Just a slow trickle. The pillow is still wet where my hair has been. Nothing's happening. I feel like I've wretched the years out of me. It gets darker. I take his head and lay it in my lap. I don't know what else to do. Stroke his forehead. Over and over. There's nothing else to do. I keep on with that for... maybe hours.

I didn't know his name. This wasn't me. It was a chance occurrence, that's all. I'd been waiting for someone else. I looked through the drawers and a short pile of papers, but there were just clippings and fading magazines, no wallet or identification. So I washed my hair, put my clothes back on, and left.....

In SwitchBack 1, as Hope talks:

Chase: Don't stop. Don't stop. Don't stop.

This time she finishes.

In SwitchBack 2, as Hope talks:

Chase: Don't. Don't. Stop. Don't. Stop. Stop!

And, at some point, he stops her.

18: CHASER

Hope picks up a bottle.

Chase: Don't.

Hope: You want a glass?

Chase: Just don't. Once you start...

Hope: You have no right now. You're out of time.

Chase: You've got a choice. You said we always have a choice.

Hope: No.

Chase: You said that just now.

Hope: No. You did.

Hope pours a drink. Stares at it. Drinks. Or Chase takes it from her and downs it.

Hope: How can anyone love me if you can't?

19: TOO LATE

Chase: I love you.

Hope: Don't.

Chase: I love you so much.

Hope: Don't say that. Please.

Chase: Why?

Hope: You don't mean it.

Chase: How do you know?

Hope: It's too late for that now.

Chase: So there was a right time?

Hope: I wish you'd told me earlier.

Chase: When? Since you got here?

Hope: When it would have made a difference.

Chase: Why is it too late?

Hope: Just don't.

Chase: Explain this to me. I'm here. You're here. I say I love you. I don't understand, I mean I really, genuinely don't understand.

Hope: You cut the tongue clean out of my mouth. I waited for the phone to ring. I waited. For you to come back. For the sound of your boots kicking mud off on the step. I'm growing into myself again. You say these promises but I know you better. The words disappear as soon as they're spoken. Whatever you say now won't make a difference.

Chase: When I walk down the street I expect to see two shadows stretching out. Everything is a reminder. Washing dishes.

The way rice sticks to plates because I never rinse them after the meal. Doris Day movies. Children's TV. Shivering hands when I forget to wear my gloves. Every week more mail for you comes flipping through the door and I stick a label with your address over mine. Our one point of contact. I want to cook you scrambled eggs. I want to hold your hair back as you puke. You're right. It *is* too late. I'm no longer myself without you.

Chase kisses her.

Chase: Tell me that I'm the only one. It's always been me.

Hope: How do I make you understand? You give me myself. But when I'm with you I'm always reaching for something that won't come. I'm never myself. It's not you holding me. I can smell the past on your breath.

Chase: This was better when I imagined it.

Hope: Why did you call me?

Chase: Because I got stuck. Because I'm stuck. Why did you come?

Hope: You needed me.

Chase: But you don't need anything? Well fuck it then. Doesn't matter anyway.

He kisses her again. She responds or ignores or spits.

Distant thunder as they come together.

20: REMINDER

Hope: Don't move. You look like my father.

Chase: You still owe me money.

21: INCISION

Hope: I don't need you for pain. I can pick at scabs alone.

22: BLOOD

Hope whispers.

Hope: I want to be you. I want to *be* you.

She keeps repeating this until she runs outside, screams.

Chase goes to the fridge. He doesn't take anything from it.

He looks through a box full of old clothes, puts a shirt up against his chest, trousers up against his leg to look at the length.

OR

Chase pulls out of the bag part of an old Santa Claus outfit, including a red & white hat. He doesn't have the heart to try it on. He looks in Hope's bag, finds the pills.

He sits down as if nothing has happened.

Hope comes back inside with her hand down her trousers, deeply distressed. Chase doesn't look at her.

Chase: Did you get what you wanted?

Hope pulls out her hand, it's covered in blood. He doesn't notice.

Hope goes to the sink, washes her hands.

Chase: Did you take your pills yet?

Hope: Not yet.

Chase: What time is it anyway? Feels like a Monday. Is it Monday?

23: SICK

Hope: I'm sick again.

Chase: How sick?

Hope: Sick enough that I'm going to get sicker. So. What have you got to say about that?

24: THE SWITCHBACK IN FLAMES

Chase: I left the house last night. You didn't see that, did you? I waited till you stopped pretending and really drifted away. Even checked your pulse. Snuck down the steps, slid through the trees. No one saw me come out of the bushes. My shoes stained with dew. The wind was low for once, just the odd rustle along the path. And soon I knew where I was meant to be going. Moved towards a range of coloured lights bursting up from a clearing.

I moved past the shooting stalls. Past the plaster horses of the carousel. Past the smells of melting butter and manure. Stared up at the sprawling height of the roller coaster. What was it called again? The Cyclone. All wooden, and I'd never seen a wooden one before, not even as a child. For all I knew it could be rotting, but it's the safest ride, just a sensation, that flying out of the car.

So they strapped me in, pushed the lever down hard. Clacking started underneath and I began to rise. Then I fell, muscles shuddering, carriages juddering over track. I was plummeting up and down, dipping and twisting, an unbreakable loop, and I'm the only person. All this for me. The Ferris wheel turning with every cage empty. Even at the top I was a solitary figure. But I wasn't scared any longer. My stomach stopped dropping. The vibrations calmed. Everything levelled out, after a while I was just ... numb. It didn't really seem to matter. This was all right after all. I could just stay. So I did.

I don't remember what happened next, until, no, yes, it was dawn, only no, the rays weren't coming from the sun, they were behind me. The track was on fire. These flames were chasing the carriages, much faster now, reaching, lapping at

the wheels. The heat was tremendous, I mean *fantastic*. I could feel it spreading through my body, my nostrils stinging, burning hair engulfing, this rush of energy screaming through my veins. The whole switchback was ablaze. Cotton candy dripping into pink sugar puddles at my toes, and I knew something was about to happen, I thought “at last something is going to happen”, we’re roaring up to the precipice, faster than ever before, to shoot clear off the track, leap like a spark off a comet, up and on through the clean black night.

Thunder, closer.

Sometimes it feels like everything is converging. You know? That every step, every sidelong glance is propelling us towards some true destination. That even an accident has purpose.

And then this morning I wake with my cheek pressed into the grooves of this floor. And I have no idea what this room is, how it came into being, or why I’m crouched in its corner.

I look out the window and it doesn’t matter if it’s dark or light. I’m not sure if I could tell the difference, because whatever’s out there is only making any possible meaning much, much dimmer.

An hour ago I thought I heard some kids whispering outside this room. Even checked. My imagination. As usual.

Chase goes to the front door, opens it. (Or opens curtains to look through the window.) There’s nothing out there. He closes the door.

Opens it again. There’s a fire raging outside. Closes it.

25: CODA

A choreographed climax, used only at the end of the second SwitchBack each night.

To music. Becoming unbearably loud.

The performers reprise brief, stylised moments from what has passed, each independent of the other: muttering phrases, adopting positions, emotions.

These moments become repetitious, quicker, more manic, until it seems as if each performer is caught in a groove, rushing about the space, never holding a state for more than a flicker of time. It's exhausting.

They are running past each other, almost colliding. Then they do collide, but keep on moving, several times. And then they collide and grab onto each other, gripping, ripping, tearing; protecting and destroying simultaneously.

They drag each other down to the ground, still biting, scratching, pushing and pulling. The space is falling apart, everything that appeared solid is collapsing, engulfed in flames.

They curl up in a ball, panting, wailing. They become a tighter unit, almost inseparable. As if somehow they might hide from this world.

The music fades. The audience is lit.

END