

Five Minutes on the Low Road



*A near-death
musical*



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I was the contender,
up on the leaderboard.
Always running faster,
collecting my reward.

“Make the quota.”

“Get the bonus.”

“Winners always win.”

Profiting in empty coin
While hollowed out within.

“How’s the conference looking? Keynote?” Steve asked.

“Awesome!” Tanya replied. “Planning committee is green across the board. Sales numbers are strong, taking business from Pfizer. People will be charged up.”

“Right. Say, how’s the Alpha program?”

Tanya felt her shoulders tense again with the competitive undertone. “It’s OK, why do you ask?”

“Just wondering.”

✂ ✂ ✂

“You know you have to take organic chem,” Tanya said.

“Can’t I do it next semester?” Angela protested.

“You risk it being full then, everyone waits too long. I did.”

“But there’s other things I want to do.”

“Look, I see a lot of people and I see the decisions they make and the consequences.”

Angela snorted. “So you know better than me what I want . . .”

“I didn’t say that!”

✂ ✂ ✂



“Still driving to the conference tomorrow?” Jeff asked.

“Yep.”

“Well, I guess the weather isn’t horrible.”

Echoes of sirens, flashing red and blue lights and shouting.

A compassionate yet commanding voice ordering her to open her eyes.

Pain. Then not.

Tanya didn't awaken, as such. It was more like she'd always been there. There in . . . what . . . ? an operating room? Yet peaceful.

*"I mind where we parted in yon shady glen,
On the steep, steep side of Ben Lomond . . ."*

. . . *Hel-looo . . . What's going on?* She tried to speak.

The nurse spoke. "Your Scottish playlist again?"

"Aye, lassie!" quipped the surgeon in a deep, mock-Scottish brogue.

"But the broken heart will ken nae second spring again . . ."

"Pretty but the songs are so dark. All about war and stuff — what I can understand, some of it doesn't even sound like English. Who on Earth was 'Cherlie'?"

The surgeon lost the accent. "Bonny Prince Charlie, last of the Stuarts. What happened to her?"

"Car crash. Why don't people stay off the roads when there's freezing rain?"

After a pause: "Her blood pressure's falling."

Wow her hair is just like mine . . .

Flatline sound. The music seemed to get louder.

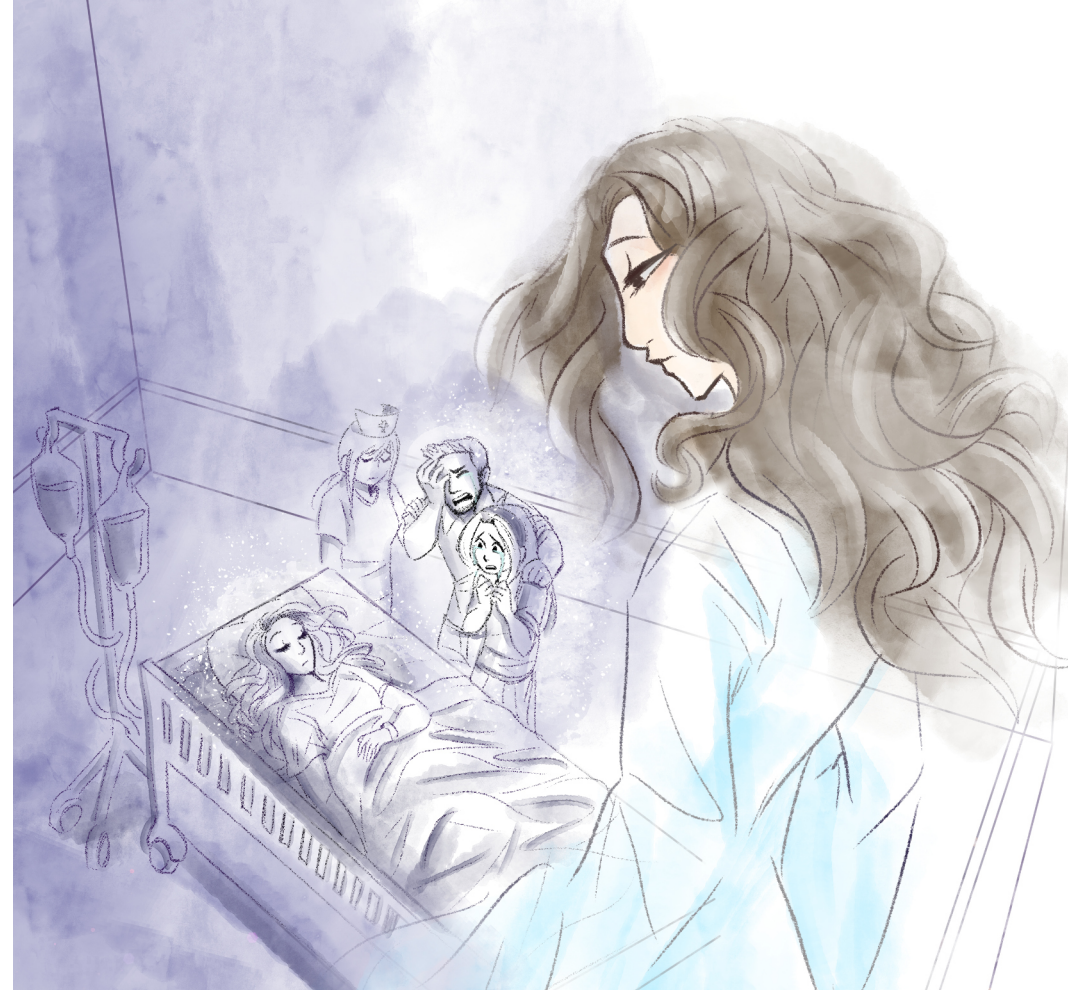
*"Oh ye'll tak' the high road and I'll tak' the low road
And I'll be in Scotland afore ye . . ."*

"Turn that damn thing off!"

The nurse went to the speaker and while reaching for it knocked a small box on the floor . . . Gloves? PharmaSpan products. Tanya recognized her team's design.

"Epinephrine, stat!" and things shifted . . .

Now Tanya was staring down at the woman in the ICU . . . and Jeff and Angela were there . . . Jeff looked like he hadn't slept in days. Angela looked numb.



*I guess that **is** me.*

She wanted to console Jeff. *It's OK, I'm right here.* But of course he couldn't hear. She stayed with him. A minute? An hour? A day? It was a *moment* — measuring it felt alien. And yet the moment moved to another . . . another flatline sound.

"CODE BLUE" . . . medical team rushing in again, Jeff paralyzed by her bed, face contorted in agony, nurse holding his hand . . . impaled on his grief . . . *Jeff my sweet Jeff, it will all be fine . . .* and then another moment . . .

One final image, of a snowflake on a scarf, melting as a person walks through a door, growing in size until it filled her vision with iridescent ice crystals wheeling through rushing rivulets down a dark green mountain slope . . .

Shatteringly brilliant light. A liminal space. A tunnel, and yet not. A tunnel implies other-ness. The tunnel is **other** than the earth it pierces . . . but this was all unity. Contrast, and direction, and progression from “here” to “there” still existed . . . and didn’t. She was moving while still, growing while holding constant, and the universe wheeled around her. Her mind expanded to the corners of reality, and yet she was still Tanya.

*That **was** pretty small, there on the other side. How could I forget this place? I’ve been away so long. Trapped on Earth.*

Gradually the new space came into focus. She was in a beautiful meadow, grass underfoot, flowing water — in the distance hills shaded from light green to green so dark it looked purple.

Closer, she noticed a field of flowers. Brilliant, rainbow-like colors, as if their petals were made of living ruby and sapphire . . . singing? She could hear the hues. See the music, interleaving as multicolored, streaming currents amidst the flowers. The music creating the flowers creating the music.

***Earth** was the dream*, she thought. *This, this is real. Realer than real.* And yet — her life on Earth had meaning as well, its own beauty and truth and purpose. She considered it with compassion.

“Dah dum dum de dum dah de dum, dah de dum”

That melody again. From the operating room. She recognized it. Memories of old comedy shows: when they’d trot out a Scottish character in a kilt the band would play it . . . no significance for her otherwise.

“Dah dum dum de dum dah de dum, dah de dum Loch Lomond”

And there he was. Or had he always been there? Was he a trick of

I have been away so long,
trapped upon the Earth
How could I forget this place,
and lose it from the moment of my birth?

Now the sleep has left my eyes,
and I tremble as I feel
my consciousness widening
in this world that’s realer than real.

It’s like Earth was the dream,
a passing illusion,
as permanent as a snowflake
on your scarf when you walk in the door.

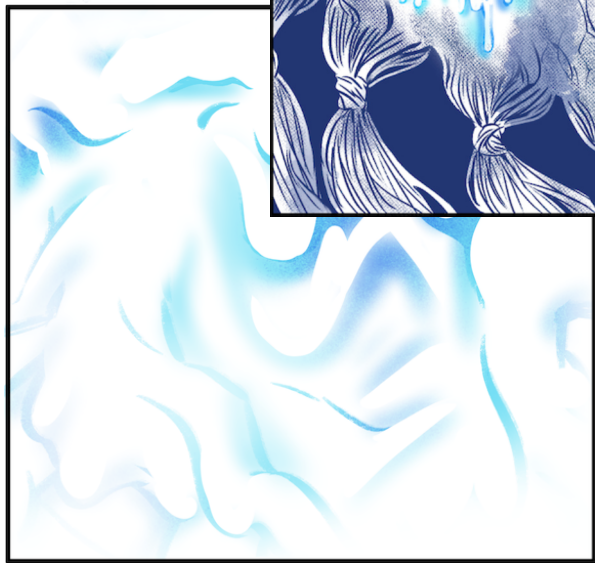
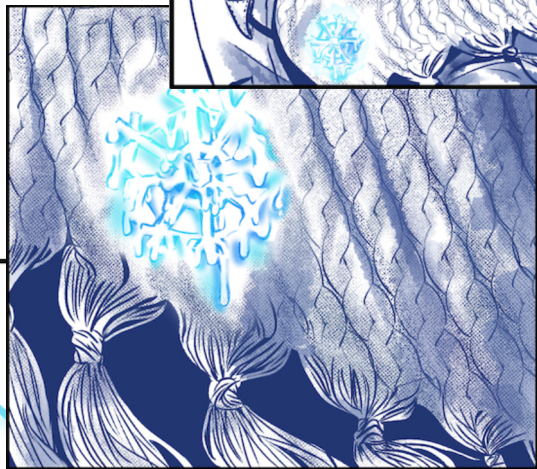
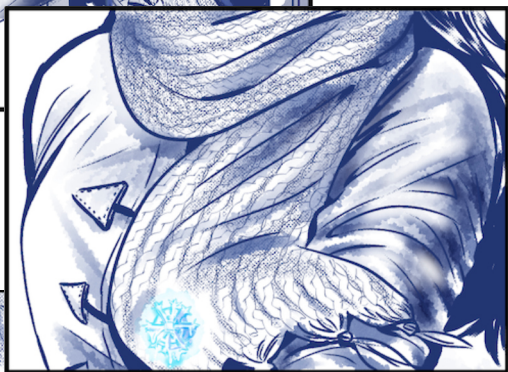
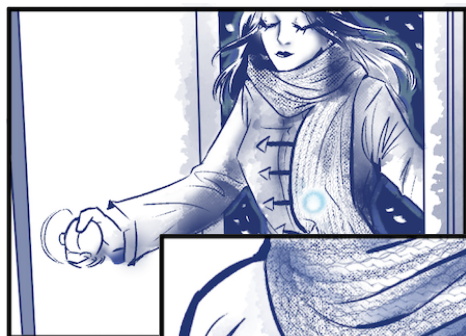
Oh Earth was the dream,
a tattered mirage of before.
Trapped inside a fantasy,
fumbling and searching for more.

Surrounded by flowers in bloom,
are they lilies made of sapphire?
I hear their colors and see their music
like rainbows in a choir.

But do I hear a voice?
Whispering louder
A breath in my ear since I came,
singing and calling my name.

Oh where do I go now
and what do I do now
in this everlasting day?

*as permanent
as a snowflake
on your scarf
when you walk
in the door.*



the light? An angelic outline too bright to bear?

No . . . a kindly older gentleman with a white beard . . . glowing . . .

“Hello?” she ventured, tentatively.

“Hello there, Tanya.”

“I know you. I mean, we’ve never met. But you’re my Mom’s older brother. I don’t know how that can be — my Mom never had a brother? I’m so confused.”

“I didn’t live long, that time. Three hours, to be precise.”

“What? I thought I knew the family history.”

“Your grandparents were so broken up about it that they never told your Mom. Happens a lot.”

“I love it here. It feels so much more real! I can stay now?”

“Well — let’s take a look at your life so far.”



“This was you,” Uncle said, almost ritually.

“This was me,” she agreed.

There she was with Steve. “I guess they liked my proposal better” and now hearing and feeling Steve’s hurt and betrayal. “You’re breaking my heart with this petty competitiveness.”

And then her words to Angela: “This is what we do to have nice lives!” and Angela’s feelings of utter inadequacy. “I can’t take this. I’m not as good as you. I know I’m a letdown and a failure.”

Tanya again focused on Uncle.

“You must think I am horrible. I’m an awful person at work and at home and oh my God . . . ”

“The judgment is all yours. You are your own worst critic. All the review does is show you the truth of your actions and their impact



How can I remember what it's
like to be so free?
How can I recall the love and
light that shines up here?
In the dark amnesia of that penitentiary.
Back again on planet Earth,
forgetting what my soul is worth.
I don't want to fall back into sleep . . .
but I have a promise I must keep.

on others. And all we ask is whether this is what you set out to do, to be, when you entered in your agreement to go to Earth?”

“Of course not! I got sucked in, I got brainwashed, I got turned into a tool!”

“Your body is hanging on and you can go back. We think you should, but you have the option this time.”

“I don’t want to go back. It’s too much of a prison.”

A brief vision of Angela and Jeff flickered, timelines stretching into unknown possibilities. She saw into Angela’s futures without her . . . and most of them looked darker.

“This would be a very hard life for them. Jeff will struggle with being a single parent, and Angela will drift and spiral down without you.”

“You don’t play fair! How will I remember the light here? I’ll forget and just be Tanya the Tiger again and make all the same mistakes.”

Echoing in the distance, she heard Angela’s voice crying

“Mommmmm . . . ”

“You will do well. We know you will.”

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“You’re seriously thinking about quitting PharmaSpan?” Jeff sputtered.

“It’s just not a fit anymore,” Tanya said.

“But what about the mortgage?”

“We’ll downsize.”

“I can’t believe you’re saying this! We had a deal, I’d hold down the homestead and you would climb the leaderboard and travel the world!”

“Agreements sometimes need to change.”

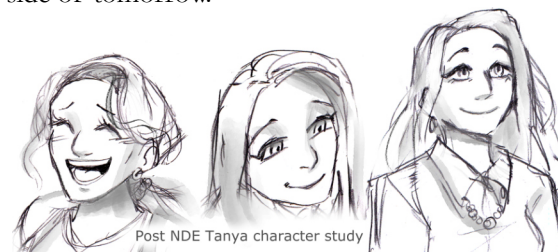
“Well, here’s ours, to love, obey, and cherish until . . .”

The implication dawned on Jeff mid-sentence, and his face paled. Tanya gently concluded:

“Until death do us part.”

❧ ❧ ❧

Trials await Tanya, and her trajectory is bittersweet, but by the end of the story she has new directions and has healed as best she can. She no longer fears the death that may come tomorrow. And she is fully committed to the here and now — living, loving, and serving on “this side of tomorrow.”



Post NDE Tanya character study

Before I return, before I go back,
before I wake up again,
I’ve got to share what I learned
on the other side when
I was reminded,
our time we just borrow.
And dollars won’t repay that debt
on this side of tomorrow.

To sing like the nightingale
sharing my music afar! oh,
I still have mountains of work to do,
love to give, life to live,
on this side, on this side of tomorrow.

Acknowledgements

Five Minutes on the Low Road is an original research-based work of musical theater. Script was initially drafted in writers' workshop at New Musicals, Incorporated (www.nmi.org). Excerpts have been presented at the Twin Cities-based Nautilus Rough Cuts showcase. Currently it is in development under the auspices of the New Musical Theater Exchange (www.nmte.org) in Minneapolis.

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The story presented in *Five Minutes on the Low Road* is an amalgam. All story points are based on multiple accounts, or created purely as imaginary-yet-plausible within the known literature and associated cosmology. **Any resemblance to any individual, living or dead, is coincidental.**

Sources studied include:

- *The Big Book of Near-Death Experiences* by P.M.H. Atwater (Hampton Roads Publishing, 2007)
- *Journal of Near-Death Studies*, various issues
- The online database of the Near-Death Experience Research Foundation (www.nderf.org)

The title *Five Minutes on the Low Road* refers to the traditional Scottish folk song, "Loch Lomond." In the well-known chorus starting "You take the high road, and I'll take the low road," the "low road" is the road of the spirit home.

(continued from back cover)

They may conflict with the medical establishment, which has more than once characterized such patients as delusional. Researchers have noted that 75–78% of adult experiencers divorce. Nearly all change careers, sometimes with impact to their loved ones.*

Most importantly: **Experiencers come back more empathetic and less fearful, with a deep sense of human unity and a desire to be of service.**

Whatever you believe about the "other side of tomorrow," I'd hope we'd agree that more people living those ideals would be a good thing . . . on this side of tomorrow.

This is why we are telling this story.

Charles T. Betz

* Atwater, 88–89, 120; *J. Near-Death Stud.*, 40(3), 182–183.

Book, music, lyrics, and original concept by Charles T. Betz. Additional book, lyrics, and music by Josiah Thomas Turner, Kennedy Center Emerging Playwright. Dramaturgy by Josiah Thomas Turner. Orchestrations by Ben Jossi, winner of the Louis Armstrong Award, the Woody Herman Award, and the Founders Award.

Story here adapted from libretto by Charles T. Betz with graphics by Luke O'Leary (lukeoart.carrd.co). Layout and design by Charles T. Betz.

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Welcome to *Five Minutes on the Low Road*.

Powerful voices are telling us that empathy is a weakness, that seeing the world through the eyes of another is something to be avoided. That the fate of civilization and our spiritual well-being hinges upon curbing our capacity for empathy.

I disagree.

The only way we will get through our uncertain future is by connecting with and caring for each other.



“Death” in some cases is not permanent. A person flatlines on the operating table and by every measure they are dead . . . and yet they come back, with a story. Tunnel of light, bliss, guides and counselors, an exercise of required empathy called the “life review,” and then they return. The “near-death experience,” or NDE.

You can be skeptical about what’s on the “other side.” What you cannot reasonably be skeptical about is the existence of these cases. Tens of thousands documented, starting with Plato. People come back and tell stories of remarkable consistency.

Experiencers may come back claiming direct knowledge of heaven, and speaking of the unity of all religions, which may not be well received if they are in a traditional religious community.

(continued over)

To stay in touch with Five Minutes on the Low Road, please scan here. Emails will be occasional and no contacts shared. We anticipate a Kickstarter campaign and ongoing updates about readings, competition submissions, and further development.

