

Swallow the Reader
(EXCERPT)

by Drew Paryzer

The People

Debbie	10. An imagination with a vivid girl. She has never known normal.
Leslie	Mid-30s. Debbie's father. Handsome. Gentle to all, except himself.
Butch	13. Debbie's brother via their mother. He burns his life, huffs the fumes.
Abby	Mid-20s. Adulthood still feels like a game of dress-up to her.
Foreman (a voice)	
Judge (a voice)	
Two Policemen	Can be double-cast with Abby and The Reader.

The Not-Quite-People

The Reader	Mid-20s or older. She resembles Debbie. The calmness of omniscience.
Quackers	Can be double-cast with The Reader. A bitter, exacting duckling professor.
Slug	Played by Leslie. Sluggish.

The Place

A piece of land on the outskirts of Puyallup, a town in Washington State.

Half of the stage is taken up by Leslie's small one-story house. It's mostly one room: a living space furnished with a couch, a table, chairs, an endtable with lamp, and a dresser. A small kitchen space is partially visible, leading offstage. There's a window above the sink. A couple of mattresses are propped up against a wall. A rotary phone's on the table.

This home is a mess. Scattered about are food tins, full ashtrays, beer cans in various states of empty, tools, articles of clothing, and so on.

The front door opens into an un-manicured wilderness: thick grass, patches of soft moss on slick rocks. A section of the landscape is always covered in fog. At the land's edge is a strip of fine sand, as might be found on a beach.

A dirt path leads from the house's front door into a wooded distance. It winds and bends whimsically; it's decidedly not the quickest route between the two points.

Lastly, there is a small area downstage-center where an unnatural light shines. This is Debbie's internal space; it is where The Reader appears. Only Debbie registers what is spoken here.

The Time

1963 in the first act; 1964 in the second.

The Notes

The interludes in the first act should be scored; Pacific Northwest folk songs (such as "Acres of Clams") can be used as a guide for this.

The sections in quotes that The Reader speaks are verbatim from *Alice In Wonderland*.

'--' signifies that the next line butts up against the preceding word.

'//' signifies where the following line overlaps the current one.

Quote

"There's something like a line of gold thread running through a man's words when he talks to his daughter, and gradually over the years it gets to be long enough for you to pick it up in your hands and weave it into a cloth that feels like love itself." --John Gregory Brown

Act One

(1)

Night.

Debbie is lying on the couch, eyes closed.

The lamp on the endtable is on, illuminating a book: "Alice in Wonderland".

The Reader is in her separate nest of light. Facing Debbie.

The Reader (*quiet*)

The White Rabbit.

Stillness.

The Reader (*louder*)

The White Rabbit.

Alice. Started to her feet. Burning with curiosity.

Debbie.

Debbie (*low*)

I'm going to sleep.

The Reader

Alice was tired of sitting by her sister.

Debbie is tired of laying down.

Debbie (*low*)

Leave me alone.

The Reader

But you're scared.

Scared to be alone.

Let me read to you.

Pause.

Debbie sits up. Looks at the book.

The Reader

The White Rabbit.

Alice ran across the field.

Burning with curiosity.

Down a rabbit-hole.

Debbie takes up the book and opens it to a bookmark.

The Reader narrates her reading experience.

The Reader

"She looked down at her hands, and was surprised to see that she had put on one of the Rabbit's little white kid gloves while she was talking. 'How *can* I have done that?' Alice thought.

'I must be growing small again.'"

That's not right, Debbie.

Growing? Small? Impossible.

You're not reading it right you don't know how to read. Stupid girl.

"How *can* I have done that?' Alice thought. 'I must be growing small again.'" She got up and --"

Still bad, very very bad --

"She got up and went to the table to measure herself by it, and found that --"

You still read it wrong, even if you keep going you won't be right you'll never be right --

Debbie closes the book, lies back down. The Reader goes silent.

Leslie emerges from the woods in the distance, stumbling drunkenly down the path. He's clutching some typewritten papers.

The Reader

The White Rabbit.

Debbie (*low*)

Not listening.

The Reader

The White Rabbit is drunk, coming into your home, sending your life into a free-fall --

Debbie starts reading again, to interrupt The Reader.

The Reader

"Alice got up and went to the table to measure herself by it, and found that, as nearly as she could guess, she was about two feet high, and was going on shrinking rapidly."

Just two feet tall, Debbie, useless and small, something stepped upon or swept through a crack in the wall, or put in a pocket and forgotten, then remembered with rage and you're running away but your feet are so small and you're locked in a --

Leslie unlocks the front door. Debbie drops back down onto the couch, eyes closed.

Leslie enters. Puts his coat on a chair, and a jar with a slug in it out of his coat and onto the table.

He wobbles towards Debbie, attempting quiet.

Just as he approaches Debbie leaps up, accosts him.

Debbie

Ha *ha!*

Identify yourself, you trespasser!

Leslie (*hiding his face with his papers*)

Nobody!

Nobody here.

Debbie

Nonsense! If you were nobody, you could not speak!

Leslie

But what if I'm a
In an imagination?

Debbie

You have a body!

Leslie

Are you so sure?

Debbie

Positively positive!

Leslie

But no face!
See?

Debbie

I do. I cannot deny it. You are faceless.

Leslie

I am juuuuuust a dreeeeeeam.

Debbie

Then there's only one way to know if you're real.
Only one foolproof test.

Leslie (*like a ghost*)

OooooooOOOOOOOooooooohhhhhhh

Debbie

The Tickle Test.

Leslie stops.

Debbie

Ha! I smell your fear!

Leslie (*playing along*)

No!

Debbie

Yes! You're real!
Not only real -- you're a real monster!

Leslie

Foiled again

Debbie

A real tickle monster!
I'm gonna get you this time!

*Debbie tickle-leaps onto him.
Leslie counter-tickles her into a fit. Put his papers on the table.*

Debbie

Stop! Stop! Stop!

He does. They stare each other down, panting.

Debbie

Go!

Leslie wins this tickle battle as well.

Debbie

Stop!!!

*As Debbie catches her breath, he drains the dregs of every beer can in sight.
He is tickle-tackled again by her in the midst of this, and beer is spilled onto the papers.*

Leslie *(trying to dry the papers off)*

Debbie wins
The monster
Loses

Debbie

I'm sorry
I ruined them
I didn't mean to

Leslie

No. Those? No.
Can't be ruined.
Those papers, that's the story of our future.
Those mean
Important people keep you all the time with me
Keep the sad away
Keep you safe. My Queen.
It's beginning of a fantasy beautiful beautiful

He's stumbling a bit. Debbie goes to him, holds him, guides him to the couch.

Debbie

A fantasy?

Leslie

Yes just a few some weeks of
Talking and
Meeting
And then, yes

Debbie

My life is a fantasy now, Daddy.
As long as I have you.

Leslie

Oh sweetie but --
You know I'll never hurt you?

Debbie

I know.

Leslie

Nobody should
Ever
Hurt you.

Pause.

Leslie

Were you waiting up
To tuck you in

Debbie

I was reading.

Leslie

Oh
I forgot
Reading to you tonight

Debbie

It's okay. Tomorrow.

Leslie

No no no I said tomorrow yesterday and I said tomorrow the day before yesterday and how
many more tomorrows before I keep a promise to my most beautiful girl

Debbie

It's very late now, I understand --

Leslie

Putting my words in the wood-chipper
Worthless
You don't deserve any of this
A father like this

Debbie (*proffering the book*)

Just a little from Chapter Two? I would love that so much and then we can sleep.

Leslie

Yes?
Yes

He takes the book.

Leslie (*reading*)

"How *can* I have done that?' Alice thought. 'I must be growing small again.'"

Debbie (*confused*)

Growing small.

Leslie (*reading*)

"She got up" --
What?

Debbie (*putting her head on his knee*)

Nothing. Keep going.

Leslie (*he's lost his place*)

I don't
I'm sorry I'm

Debbie

Anywhere. Read anywhere.

Leslie (*reading*)

"'I'm sure those are not the right words', said poor Alice, and her eyes filled with tears again --"

Leslie is choked up.

Debbie

You can go two more chunks down.
I know that part already.

Leslie

Two.
Two.

"But, alas! the little door was shut again, and the little golden key was lying on the glass table as before, 'and things are worse than ever --'"

Leslie gets teary again. Debbie embraces him.

Debbie

Daddy I can get you a big glass of water.

Leslie

Do I keep getting worse to you?

Debbie

When you read to me, everything is perfect.

Leslie *(he resumes after a pause)*

"Her first idea was that she had somehow fallen into the sea, 'and in that case I can go back by railway,' she said to herself."

Dinner! You didn't have dinner

Debbie

I made some. Keep going?

Leslie

What was it.

Debbie

Beans.

Daddy please don't

Leslie

You just ate it out of the, the

Debbie

I love you.

Please read, you would be the best Daddy . . .

Leslie *(now tottering)*

"Fallen into the sea --

In case that --

Go back --"

He collapses into his hands. Debbie guides him down to the couch.

Leslie

I can't even read

Can't do anything

Debbie comforts him. He weeps for a moment before his breaths turn even. Asleep. Debbie goes to the table, takes up Leslie's typewritten papers.

Debbie (*reading*)

"The Petitioner, Leslie Herbert, herein having filed a petition on September 8th, 1963, pursuant to the Uniform Child Custody Jurisdiction and Enforcement Act, requests an order of custody of the following minor children:
Butch Johnson, age thirteen.
Debbie --"

Leslie (*mostly asleep*)

Slug's for Butch.
In the jar

Debbie looks at the jar.

The Reader

Debbie Herbert. Age ten years. Old enough to tread water in a pool of tears but much too young for the pool of beers so he has to drink it dry and then you'll have to say goodbye, Debbie, you'll have to say goodbye --

Debbie (*low*)

Not listening to you.

Leslie

Slug
For your brother

Debbie puts the papers down. Goes to Leslie, kisses his forehead.

The Reader

You can't ignore me.

Debbie

Good night, Daddy.

The Reader

I am the story of your life.

Debbie (*low*)

The End.

The Reader and Debbie look at each other. The Reader shakes her head.

-Interlude-

*Debbie takes the jar from the table and goes outside.
She releases the slug. It crawls toward a single, bright-yellow daffodil sticking out from
the grass.
Debbie picks the flower, puts it in her hair.
Leslie arises in the house, joins Debbie. Adjusts her daffodil for her.*

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*Morning.
The fog parts to reveal a row of joists -- the skeleton floor of a new house.
A few floorboards are laid on top of them, on the far side.
Leslie surveys the scene. Attaches a toolbelt that's lying on the ground.
Leslie's boss -- the Foreman -- watches from off.*

Leslie

So what do we have here.

Debbie hops between the joists. Turns around, hops back. Ends with a flourish.

Leslie

Very nice.

But remember what I say?

There's a time for play and there's a time for . . .

Debbie

Being the Daffodil Queen!

Leslie

And also a time for . . .

Debbie

Queen of the Daffodil Parade!

Leslie

And also a time --

Debbie

Riding on a big pretty float all covered in flowers and I'm such an important lady!

Leslie

Now Debbie, when you come with me to --

Foreman *(from off)*

Herbert! Stop fucking around and start laying boards!

Leslie *(to Foreman)*

I'm checking the levels, alright? And I'd appreciate it if you didn't speak crass around my kid,
please and thank you kindly --

Foreman *(from off)*

And I'd appreciate if you spent more time working and less time breastfeeding, please and thank you --

Leslie *(to Foreman)*

Hey. Listen. She has as much a right to be here as you or I.

Foreman *(to Leslie)*

Are you kidding me?

Leslie *(to Foreman)*

She's here to work, too, and she's gonna make this the best darn floor in the neighborhood. Just you see.

The Foreman's laughing fades, as he walks away.

Debbie

Should I go home?

Leslie *(to Foreman)*

She deserves to be here.

Beat.

Leslie *(to Debbie)*

So tell me what you think about those floorboards.

Debbie

Well, they're . . .

Very close together.

Leslie

That's right. Anything else you see?

Debbie

They're

They're on a --

Oh! On top!

Leslie

There you are

Debbie

All the long pencil lines and and there are tiny little nails in them!

Leslie

Well, they're not little. They're actually quite long. They're just proud.

Debbie

Daddy
I thought we weren't playing anymore

Leslie laughs. Kisses her.

Leslie

You call it a proud nail when it isn't hammered in all the way, when its head's sticking up just a bit.

Debbie

Oh

Leslie

But see now, those boards are level. They're ready.
So we can get those nails all the way in.
Think you can finish the job?

Debbie

Maybe

Leslie

Maybe? That's a bad word. I won't have that kind of language at our construction site.
C'mon, I'll do the first few with you.

Debbie

Daddy I feel weird

Leslie

How so?

Debbie

I know the nails don't have feelings, but I don't wanna pound them on their heads
They just wanna look around
I know that's silly but I can sort of feel them, feel them looking.

*Pause. Leslie gets on top of the boards on the far end, lifts her up.
They bend down over one of the nails.*

Leslie

Maybe this one's seen enough.
Maybe it would rather be a good helper, be part of a strong floor.
But it can't do it alone. It needs our help.
What would it ask us, do you think?

Debbie

Well

It would ask us to do it a little at a time, so it wasn't so sudden.

He puts a hammer in her hand. She taps on the nail, finding just enough intensity to coax it all the way down in.

Leslie

That was brave, Debbie. Don't forget how brave you are --

Debbie

Why did you and mom stop loving each other?

A beat. Leslie pulls out a Marlboro and lights it up, in one motion. He takes the hammer back, starts pounding in the rest of the nails.

Leslie

What made you think of that?

Debbie

I don't know.

I'm sorry.

Leslie

Love doesn't stop, Debbie.

Even when you stop feeling it, or showing it, it doesn't go away.

It sticks where it touches.

Nobody can wipe out love, once it's given.

Love is stronger than people are.

He lines up the last nail.

Leslie

Because people . . .

Well, it takes a lot to keep two pieces together.

He hammers it down in one blow.

Pause.

Debbie

You need hurt.

Leslie

What?

Debbie

The nails, and the boards, and the stuff outside on the walls . . .

Leslie

Siding.

Debbie

The siding, and the roof, and all of it.
You can't just lay them down nice and neat and call it a house.
You have to hurt them all in little ways. To bring them together.

A beat. Leslie takes off his toolbelt. Bows low to her.

Leslie

My Queen, my Daffodil Queen.
My wisest ruler.
What is your bidding?

Debbie

Well
Um
I bid you now construct me a royal moat!
So none may trespass!

Leslie

Will that be with root beer, my Queen?

Debbie

Heavens, no!
That is a waste of deliciousness, you clown!

Leslie

Fine, fine! Dr. Pepper it is!

Debbie

Dance, clown! Dance for my enjoyment!

They do a silly dance together on the floorboards, laughing.

Foreman (from off)

You're finished, Herbert!
You hear me? You're fired!

He doesn't hear. They continue to frolic.

-Interlude-

Leslie and Debbie dance together off the boards, as the fog descends back over them. Debbie spins into the house; the daffodil falls out of her hair and into the grass as she does this.

Leslie has noticed the empty bottle on the ground. He gets on his knees, looking for the slug.

Debbie is at the table inside, reading her book.

(3)

A few hours later.

Leslie is combing through the grass with his hands. He whistles.

Abby is walking the winding path down towards the house.

When she is near, she coughs, to try and get his attention. He doesn't hear.

Abby

I'm sorry --

Leslie leaps up, frightened. Registers her.

Leslie

Oh!

Abby

I tried calling

Leslie *(dusting himself off)*

Oh, you did?

Abby

But it just rang and rang so

Leslie

I'm sorry for the

Dirt here

Abby

Oh, are you.

Pause.

Abby

I'm sorry again for the, the scare

Leslie

No, not scary, more like

Abby

Must have an old number, decade old number

Leslie

Oh, probably not.

Abby

No?

Leslie

Nah, we just don't pick up the phone.

Pause.

Abby

Never?

Leslie

We use for when we have to
Make the call.

Abby

And why is that?

Leslie

It's just never related to what you're doing, you know?
Whatever they're wanting.

Pause.

Leslie

I mean it *is* great to see you --

Abby

I didn't take it the other way --

Leslie

You look
Wonderful.
You really do.
Abby.
How's your ma and your --

Abby

I'm here to inform you that I've been assigned to your case.

Pause.

Leslie

Pardon?

Abby

I am the social worker assigned to your case.

Pause. Leslie is still confused.

Abby

Your custody case?

Leslie

Oh

Oh my god of course.

I was just, I'm just shocked, I thought you were still // in high sch--

Abby

College?

Leslie

Yes. College school, yes.

But we all do grow up, don't we. And fast.

Pause.

Abby

I'll be coming around to conduct interviews and gather information for the court.

I'll be speaking with you and your children about your lives here.

And making some observations.

I'm obligated to let you know.

Leslie

Abby, dear, you know I filed it against my

My ex-wife.

She's the one to, you know, focus in on.

Abby

Your children are the ones to focus in on.

And you are part of their lives, too.

Leslie

Thank God for that.

Abby

We need the full picture.

Whether they're best suited to stay with you,

Or with her,

Or with both,

Or with neither.

Leslie

Neither?

What in the world does that mean

Abby

Surely you know of the --

You talked to a lawyer, I'm sure.

Leslie

This is about their mother and I, that's what this is about, I filed it for that reason.

Abby

The state must be prepared to step in as an option, in cases where --

You surely consulted a lawyer --

Leslie

Lawyers? I don't have the --

Pause.

Leslie

I mean, I do have enough, I just need to be smart with how I

And it's not that I think talking to a lawyer isn't smart, I'm just --

I'm thinking about the essentials here, Abby, the food and the love and . . .

Pause.

Abby

We'll need you to start answering your phone, Leslie.

Court's orders.

Okay?

Pause.

Leslie

Look.

What people say about me

In town

Abby

Nobody says anything, you're never *in* town.

Leslie

Exactly, yes, so they start to assume things --

Abby

You don't need to worry about --

Leslie

Based on some old rocking-chair gossip.

Abby

You're asking me to look at you with clear eyes.
Is that it?

Leslie

Yes.

Abby

But what if I can't?

Pause.

Leslie

Then it's not fair --

Abby

What if I look quite kindly on you, and just kept it a secret when they gave me your file?

Pause.

Leslie

I'm sure you told them we know each other --

Abby

Everybody knows everybody --

Leslie

But that we've never had a proper conversation --

Abby

Yes --

Leslie

And that's all true.

Abby

Not anymore.

Leslie

But you weren't lying to anybody.
There's nothing wrong about this.
Right?

Abby smiles.

Pause.

Abby

Answer your phone, Leslie.

Leslie

You're not gonna corner me into a date, now are you?

Abby *(laughs)*

You get back to petting your grass now, old man.

Leslie

I was doing nothing of the sort.

I was searching for a slug. For my boy.

He loves 'em.

Abby looks around. She points to the daffodil that fell out of Debbie's hair.

Abby

Look there. The yellow.

Leslie

That's a daffodil.

Abby

I know.

Leslie

I'm looking for a --

Abby

I know what you're looking for.

I just found something better.

She laughs. Then bolts down the path, out of sight.