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Winsome Pinnock's One Under: Comprehending Loss in the Face of Inexplicable Tragedy

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WINSOME PINNOCK'S *ONE UNDER*: COMPREHENDING LOSS IN THE FACE OF
INEXPLICABLE TRAGEDY

by

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A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
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WINSOME PINNOCK'S *ONE UNDER*: COMPREHENDING LOSS IN THE FACE OF INEXPLICABLE TRAGEDY

The sudden disappearance of an individual from the lives of their acquaintances and family can elicit profound shock, grief, and an overwhelming sense of yearning for answers. Such is the premise of Winsome Pinnock's *One Under*, a play that delves into the complex aftermath of what one may call a cataclysmic event. This paper aims to analyze grief's various forms and stages by illuminating the multifaceted nature of human emotional responses to loss. Furthermore, this study explores Pinnock's structural choices of oscillating between Sonny, a central character's final hours, and the reactions of his loved ones to his disappearance, thereby creating a poignant interplay of past and present. By examining the characters' grief processing strategies, this study aims to shed light on the complex interplay of loss, memory, and identity, ultimately illuminating personal bereavement's unique emotions and contours.

As we embark on a deeper exploration of the thematic complexities within Pinnock's *One Under*, we must first acquaint ourselves with the play's cast of characters. Their interwoven narratives and interactions constitute the backbone of the evolving storyline. At the center of the narrative is Sonny, a young man whose life embodies the paradoxical coexistence of unfulfilled potential and the struggles accompanying racial identity. The play concentrates on his final hours leading up to his tragic decision to step in front of a train. Sonny's adoptive mother, Nella, is a white woman who grapples with the complexities of adopting and raising black children. She offers a unique lens into the intricate dynamics of racial and familial relations, underscoring her underlying fears of abandonment and the palpable disconnect stemming from the divergent racial experiences between her and her children. Sonny's sister Zoe

exemplifies the myriad ways grief can manifest, highlighting that coping with loss is an intimately personal journey. Her coping mechanisms contrast with those of Cyrus, the train driver implicated in Sonny's fate, and at one point, suspects he might be Sonny's biological father. Lastly, Christine, Sonny's love interest and companion during his final hours, provides an essential perspective on Sonny's complex and troubled state of mind. Her insights offer valuable clues into Sonny's mindset during his last known hours while concurrently complicating our understanding of his character. Through this collective lens of these diverse characters, Pinnock opens a window into a world rich with emotional and racial dynamics, effectively setting the stage for a comprehensive exploration of identity, grief, and paranoia. As we delve further into the narrative, we will discover how each character's distinct attributes and complex ties resonate with and contribute to these overarching themes.

Having set the theoretical and thematic context, we will now delve into the narrative universe of *One Under* by understanding its dramatic personae and their intricate relationships. In the ensemble of Pinnock's 2019 rendition of *One Under*, the cast is streamlined to six characters, each playing a pivotal role in the narrative and thematic development. Through the cast, Pinnock explores the complex repercussions of Sonny's disappearance, providing different perspectives on the profound impact of this loss. Sonny's absence carves a deep void in the lives of his loved ones, generating lingering questions regarding the circumstances of his death. Cyrus, a train driver implicated in Sonny's supposed death, Zoe, Sonny's foster sister and part caretaker of their mother Nella, and Christine, a local laundromat employee who once showed kindness to Sonny, all contribute to the narrative's emotional depth and complexity. The dynamics of these relationships are further amplified by the role of Nella, Sonny, and Zoe's foster mother. Despite fostering numerous children throughout her life, she only chose to adopt Sonny and Zoe,

illustrating a deeper familial bond. Mags, another train conductor who opens the play with Cyrus, provides crucial background information about London's train system and the grim frequency of suicide attempts. Each relationship offers perspectives into his state of mind during his final hours, highlighting the humanistic exploration of grief, loss, and connection. This diverse array of responses forms the basis for our subsequent examination, beginning with Cyrus.

Cyrus's role lends to the plot by inciting us to further inquire about his relationship with Sonny, and his presence acts as a narrative bookend by featuring him in the opening and closing scenes of the play. The opening dialogue between Cyrus and Mags centers on a man, presumably Sonny, jumping in front of Cyrus's train - an act referred to as "one under" in London, where such suicide attempts are distressingly frequent. Martin and Muffazel's research, "Suicide Patterns on the London Underground Railway System," substantiates this grim reality, recording 644 attempts between 2000 and 2010 (Marion 2017). In her conversation with Cyrus, Mags acknowledges this statistic by telling Cyrus, "By the law of averages, it should have happened to you years ago." (One Under 14) Having experienced this tragedy three times, she reassures Cyrus that life tends to regain its normalcy swiftly. Despite her reassurance, the repercussions of this incident are profoundly transformative for Cyrus. Rather than reverting to normalcy, his life spirals into a relentless quest for answers about the young man's tragic decision.

The psychological aftermath of Cyrus' experience with 'one under' forms the crux of his character development. As the symptoms of PTSD permeate Cyrus's life, they subsequently alter the dynamics of his relationships and decision-making while also forging a posthumous connection with Sonny. The impact of this incident aligns with research findings that highlight the emotional toll such experiences can take on train drivers. Mehnert's article in the Journal of

Psychosomatic Research, *Course and Predictors of Posttraumatic Stress Among Male Train Drivers After the Experience of "Person Under the Train"* finds half of the train drivers who experience such a traumatizing event subsequently receive a PTSD diagnosis (Mehnert 2012). Symptoms such as guilt, feelings of alienation, and anxiety are noticeable in Cyrus's behavior throughout the play. His relentless quest for answers, despite the high cost to his job, family, and home, further underscores the severity of his emotional distress, demonstrating the immeasurable impact of the incident.

Undeniably, the incident reshapes Cyrus's life, setting the trajectory for his actions and decisions. As the aftermath of the experience takes hold, he begins a relentless pursuit for answers. He anchors this quest in his early conversation with Mags, where he refers to the possibility of the young man being 'one of the lucky ones' - those who survive by falling into a drainage or "suicide" pit. Even though Cyrus's journey does not lead him to definitive answers about Sonny's decisions, it unravels clues about Sonny's character to the audience. These insights help to weave potential narratives around Sonny's final moments, providing a window into his potential mindset before the incident.

As Cyrus grapples with the uncertainties surrounding the incident, he begins to forge a relationship with Nella, Sonny's adoptive mother. This emerging bond is complex and, at times, opaque, serving as a coping mechanism for their grief. A shadow of deception overlaps their rapport, with Cyrus withholding the complete truth about his identity and motivations. As their relationship deepens, Nella shares stories about Sonny's childhood and his evolution into manhood. In sharing these memories, Nella unveils information about Sonny, adding complexity to Cyrus's and the audience's perception of Sonny. Each new revelation about Sonny's life brings new questions, gradually adding to the puzzle of Sonny's personality and experiences.

Nella depicts Sonny as a financially conscientious, academically inclined young man, adopted by a white family, navigating his world as a black individual. She admits facing struggles to fully understand him because she could not fully comprehend him due to racial and cultural differences. She also candidly discusses Sonny's past mental health struggles, which he seemingly surmounted. The portrait she paints of Sonny - a black boy adopted by a white family, diligent and interested in literature, yet grappling with mental health issues - adds depth to Sonny's characters and subtly underscores the racial and mental health issues that often remain unexplored in adoptive families. As Cyrus navigates Sonny's past, his endeavors intertwine him more deeply with Sonny's family, leading to his involvement in a task revealing new dimensions in the narrative.

Building upon the complexity of Cyrus; and Bella's relationship, Cyrus finds himself taking on a daunting task, cleaning out Sonny's flat. This task, which Nella finds herself unable to carry out due to her grief, not only enables Cyrus to seek shelter but also provides him a chance to uncover more clues about Sonny's life. Cleaning out the flat acts as a catalyst to bring Zoe, Sonny's adopted sister, into sharper focus in the play. Zoe's character brings a palpable tension into every interaction she has within the narrative, a tension which can be traced back to the dynamics of her family relationships. Whether assisting Nella with groceries or engaging with Cyrus, an undercurrent of unease is apparent. Nella attributes this to Zoe's perception of differential treatment between herself and Sonny. Adopted by Nella before Sonny, Zoe harbors feelings of being replaced, leading to a strained relationship with her adopted brother. Zoe's relationships add a significant dimension to the narrative, serving as a reminder of the far-reaching emotional effects of a single tragic incident. Especially her dynamic with Cyrus further intensifies the emotional turmoil and uncertainty in the narrative and illustrates the ripple effects

of grief. As the narrative unfolds and the impact of Sonny's absence lingers, tensions between Zoe and Cyrus escalate, primarily centered around Sonny's flat - a physical symbol of their shared loss.

Zoe and Cyrus find themselves at odds over the handling of Sonny's flat, a space laden with memories and personal artifacts. Zoe, seemingly more eager for closure, favors expediency, advocating for the quick cleaning and emptying of Sonny's flat. Showing little interest in delving deeper for answers and effectively putting a period on Sonny's life, Zoe avoids probing into the past. At the same time, Cyrus sees the task as an opportunity to seek out potential clues that might offer a deeper understanding of Sonny. During his final known hours, Cyrus meticulously scours the flat for remnants that might offer insight into his mindset. This divergence in their approaches underscores their disparate coping strategies in dealing with their grief, a divergence that is not only normal but inevitable in the face of tragedy. Cyrus justifies his approach to cleaning the flat by likening it to Sonny's shadow, representing the lingering preface of Sonny's life (*One Under 49*). The flat, as a snapshot of Sonny's life, Cyrus views each item as bearing the potential to unravel more about Sonny. His exploration of the flat eventually uncovers certain unusual items that he considers to be crucial clues, offering a tangible connection to the enigma that is Sonny. While Zoe and Cyrus's differing coping strategies add complexity to their interactions, the specifics of Sonny's flat introduce another layer to the narrative, offering a silent narrative that Cyrus is determined to decipher.

One of the first things Cyrus notes in Sonny's flat is a half-smoked cigarette, left to burn out in the ashtray, and a half-empty glass of beer on the table. These seemingly ordinary items pique Cyrus's interest when he conveniently finds a dry cleaning ticket under the glass. These everyday items provoke Cyrus's curiosity, mainly due to their peculiar arrangement. He

theorizes that these remnants might be intentional clues Sonny left, suggesting a deeper story. Cyrus perceives the dry cleaning ticket as a clue deliberately left by Sonny, a breadcrumb in the trail leading to the reasons for his actions during his final known hours. These findings could also be interpreted differently - a mere result of a rushed departure or perhaps a testament to Sonny's mental state in his final moments, marked by the hasty cigarette drag and unfinished beer. Zoe seems inclined to accept or convince herself of the less complicated interpretations and seeks comfort in rational explanations over the uncomfortable unknown. Pinnock's choice to leave these clues open-ended mirrors the uncertainty and confusion that often accompany grief, driving home the play's exploration of the nature of loss.

As Cyrus continues to analyze the clues left in Sonny's flat, his conviction that they hold the key to Sonny's motivations grow, leading to an unexpected revelation that adds another layer of complexity to the story. Cyrus shocks Zoe with the revelation that he believes he is Sonny's biological father, which, if true, only adds more weight to the questions surrounding Sonny's story. Driven by this paternal presumption, Cyrus is convinced that Sonny intended him to decipher the enigmatic clues left behind. Zoe's perception of Cyrus shifts dramatically upon this revelation, shifting from viewing him as a train driver, an intruding stranger entangled in Sonny's fate, to potentially a deeply connected figure from Sonny's past. Her newfound sympathy for Cyrus impacts her stance on his presence in Sonny's flat; instead of insisting on his departure, she permits him more time to sift through Sonny's belongings, recognizing his need for answers. This newfound understanding between Cyrus and Zoe underlines the complex nature of grief, showcasing how shared loss can alter relationships, reshape perceptions, and lead to unexpected alliances in the search for closure.

Despite this new understanding, Pinnock leaves Cyrus's paternal claim to Sonny

unresolved, presenting conflicting narratives between Cyrus and Nella. Cyrus narrates his version of events where he and a girlfriend conceived Sonny at fifteen, leading to Sonny's adoption. He is convinced of their biological link through Sonny's intense last gaze at him before the supposedly fatal leap and points to a cryptic conversation they shared, suggesting a prior relationship or knowledge of each other. Despite the lack of solid proof, dismissing Cyrus's story seems unreasonable. It is plausible that Sonny may not be his biological son but perhaps mirror what his son could have been. Given Cyrus's likely post-traumatic stress disorder, his perceptions and interpretations might not necessarily align with reality. There lies the possibility that Cyrus might be projecting his longing for a son onto Sonny, seeking clues to create a narrative that provides some solace. Nella contradicts Cyrus, insisting Sonny knew his biological father and even arranges a meeting between them upon Sonny's inquiry. While Bella's version could have happened, it raises questions about her credibility as Zoe does not recall any such event ever taking place. As with Cyrus's claim, more questions arise from Bella's story, adding to the ambiguity of the narrative and lack of definitive answers. Through these conflicting narratives, Pinnock masterfully portrays the complexities of grief and longing for understanding, underling the idea that truth can often be elusive, colored by the perceptions and needs of those left behind. Amidst the swirling confusion and mounting questions, Cyrus remains undeterred in his search for the truth, turning his attention to the dry cleaning ticket.

Unfazed by Zoe and Bella's lack of interest in unraveling the mystery, Cyrus continues his search, following the potential lead provided by the dry cleaning ticket. This seemingly innocuous object ushers him towards Christine, an employee at the laundrette, who provides him with a narrative about Sonny's activities, revealing she spent the last known night with Sonny. She recounts Sonny's unusual tale about betraying gangsters, an impending threat on his

life, and a planned disappearance with government assistance. To Christine, this story was nothing more than a joke, an eccentricity of Sonny's that she did not take seriously. Sonny's choice of Christine to spend his final hours with remains puzzling. Having previously encountered Christine during one of his mental health episodes, Sonny possibly sought her out due to her showing kindness during a past encounter. This choice could also perhaps show a moment of vulnerability on his part. Christine is the only white character in the play apart from his adoptive mother and significantly older than Sonny. This racial and maternal association might have influenced Sonny's choice, potentially hinting at some deep-seated longing for maternal affection. Additionally, Christine's past relationship with a gangster, a fact Sonny seems oblivious to during their encounter, raises further questions about his motivations. Regardless of the reasons behind Sonny's choice of Christine, the conversation they share raises the intriguing question of whether Sonny let slip any truths amongst his tales and jokes. In this tangled narrative, Pinnock challenges the audience to question their understanding of reality and leaves them grappling with human interactions' complexities. As Cyrus delves deeper into the intricacies of Sonny's last night, his search brings him to a potentially significant clue tucked away in an unlikely place - a library fine.

During his conversation with Christine at the laundrette, Cyrus requests her to open some mail that arrived for Sonny. Among these is a bill for a five-dollar fine from the library for a book, *Invisible Man*, by Ralph Ellison. Despite neither reading the book, Cyrus speculates it might hold significant clues into Sonny's psyche and actions. Given Sonny's meticulous nature with finances, as noted by his mother, the unexpected expense of a library fine offers two distinct interpretations. One possibility is that Sonny intentionally accumulated the fine, intending it as a clue for his family to read the book and find answers within its pages. Alternatively, it could

reflect his deteriorating mental health, an indication of carelessness that was out of character for Sonny. The choice of *Invisible Man* is no random selection; Pinnock subtly draws parallels between Ellison's novel and *One Under*, suggesting some credence to Cyrus's theory about the book as a clue. However, the play emphasizes Sonny's struggles with mental health and possible financial issues, leaving the possibility that the fine was less a deliberate clue and more a testament to his mental state the night before the tragedy. Like the previous clues, the library fine further compounds the mystery surrounding Sonny's actions, reaffirming Pinnock's exploration of ambiguity and the desperate human quest for understanding. In the quest to understand Sonny's actions, the characters grapple with grief, loss, and a pervasive sense of paranoia that further clouds their judgments and theories.

Pinnock's play design ingeniously interweaves an escalating series of questions into the narrative, with resolutions remaining elusive for both the characters and the audience. A significant element of the plot's complexity stems from the paranoia experienced by all characters. This pervasive air of uncertainty amplifies the paranoia among the characters, each succumbing to it to varying degrees. Cyrus finds himself embroiled in a web of conspiracy theories surrounding Sonny's death, suspecting a narrative far more elaborate than the surface suggests. This paranoia could manifest guilt associated with his PTSD or a valid suspicion hinting at a hidden and more profound truth about Sonny's circumstances. Cyrus's guilt is not solely tied to the belief that he caused Sonny's death; it is also intertwined with his past: his coerced decision to give up a child at a young age. He views the sudden appearance of Sonny, who he believes could be his son, as a second chance to reconnect with a son or someone akin to a son he lost. The guilt stemming from missed opportunities fueled his relentless pursuit of answers, but it is plausible that his quest might be an attempt to assuage guilt from his past.

Relinquishing a child to adoption often leaves the biological parents grappling with endless unanswered questions about their child's future, well-being, and eventual adulthood. Cyrus's quest for understanding is a cathartic release from the guilt and provides him with an attempt to reclaim lost parenthood opportunities beyond his control. Through this exploration of paranoia, Pinnock continues to expose the desperate lengths individuals will go to in the pursuit of closure. While Cyrus grapples with his paranoia-induced quest for answers, other characters are not immune to the effects of their anxieties. Paranoia manifests in the lives of Christine and Zoe, prompting them to question the motives of those around them.

Christine and Zoe contend with distinct forms of paranoia, which shape their interactions and perceptions by making them suspicious of the motivations of those around them. Christine's paranoia is characterized by an inherent disbelief in the authenticity of acts of kindness directed toward her. She struggles to comprehend someone displaying kindness towards her merely in reciprocation for her past generosity. Her paranoia, grounded in a lack of self-worth, results in a mistrust of Sonny's affection, attention, and financial generosity, subsequently affecting the trajectory of their evening together. Her paranoia creates a ripple effect, leading to an unexpected sexual encounter. Sonny's claim that this was not his original intent raises whether a different outcome might have emerged had Christine not been overwhelmed by her paranoid assumption of owing Sonny something in return. Similarly, Zoe's suspicion of Cyrus's intentions shapes her behavior. Initially, she is skeptical about Cyrus's eagerness to assist Nella. Her suspicion deepens when Cyrus moves into Sonny's flat, leading her to question his need to stay there and his frantic efforts to establish connections. Zoe's paranoia focused on deciphering Cyrus's motives, could distract her from her grief, consequently affecting her ability to process Sonny's death. The manifestations of paranoia in Christine and Zoe reveal the psychological complexities

of their characters and demonstrate how Pinnock uses this theme to further cloud the truth about Sonny's final known hours while testing the audience's capacity to decipher reality amidst a sea of doubts. While Christine and Zoe navigate through their bouts of paranoia, Nella, the adoptive mother, grapples with a distinct form of paranoia that underlines her insecurities and fears, further diversifying Pinnock's exploration of the theme.

In the play, Nella experiences a unique form of paranoia rooted in fear of abandonment and loneliness as an adoptive mother. This fear is fueled by her differences in skin color with her adopted children, Zoe and Sonny, and is a constant source of insecurity. As a white mother to black children in London, Nella feels an inherent disconnect due to her inability to fully comprehend the specific challenges they encounter due to their racial identities. The lack of shared experiences and understanding could hinder building a deeper emotional bond, exacerbating her fear of losing them as they transition into adulthood and forge their lives. This paranoia might have influenced her decision to withhold the truth about Sonny's meeting with his biological father from Cyrus. Even though Nella believes Sonny is dead, she might not have been willing to share the grief with another parent, asserting her right to grieve as a parent due to her emotional investment in Sonny's life. The paranoia of losing her children, compounded by her feelings of disconnect, possibly propels her fear that her children might exclude her from their adult lives. Nella's paranoia, set against her unique position as a white mother to black children, exposes the broader theme of identity and belonging in the play and the complex ways personal and racial dynamics interact. Through Nella, Pinnock invites the audience to ponder the manifold fears and uncertainties that color the intricate tapestry of familial bonds.

Transitioning from Nella's distinctive maternal paranoia, the analysis culminates in examining the intricate paranoia experienced by Sonny, which appears more pronounced than

the other characters. This heightened sense of paranoia could either be an accurate reflection of his heightened emotional state or a result of Pinnock giving us a more in-depth exploration of Sonny's character. Sonny is caught in the throes of grappling with his black identity within his societal context, manifesting a desire to become "invisible." This struggle with identity and the wish for invisibility are stark indicators of Sonny's paranoia. He attempted to achieve this invisibility by adorning himself in finer clothes, which, in his perception, helped him blend in better with his surroundings, subsequently altering his daily experiences. Sonny's racial identity constantly keeps him on edge, with the feeling of always needing to look over his shoulder. This paranoia finds another outlet during his encounter with Christine. In his narrative about gangsters, he mentions having a handler, a figure he points out to Christine through their hotel window. Whether or not this figure truly exists, Sonny's belief that he is under constant surveillance indicates his paranoia. The portrayal of Sonny's paranoia is particularly impactful, not only for its intensity but also for its revelation of Sonny's struggles with identity and his perception of the world. Through Sonny, Pinnock exposes the audience to a magnified perspective on the experiences of racial alienation and constant fear.

The analysis now broadens to examine how these instances of paranoia shape the overall presentation and interpretation of Pinnock's play. Pinnock masterfully manipulates the timing and content of the information reveals, instilling a sense of paranoia in the audience as well. This artful ambiguity leaves room for interpretation, causing the audience to question the validity of their perceptions and potentially succumb to their paranoia. Through the lens of this paranoia, the play acquires traits of a thriller or mystery genre, blurring the boundaries of classification. Catherine Love, in her review "One Under Review - Heartrendingly Tender and Enigmatic Portrait of Grief" in *The Guardian*, describes the play as having "the shape of a thriller, but the

only real mysteries are the complex patterns of grief and the unknowability of another's mental anguish" (Love). Her commentary encapsulates the driving force behind the play's mystery: grief. The collective grief experienced by the characters generates the potent paranoia fueling the play's plot. In this sense, Pinnock employs the theme of paranoia to craft a poignant exploration of grief and its intricate impact on psychological responses.

Turning away from examining the collective experience of grief that generates paranoia, the analysis now refocuses on an individual experience - that of Sonny. Sonny's experience of grief is intertwined with his paranoia despite being able to be easily observed, like the other characters. The audience is privy to flashbacks to Sonny's final known night throughout the play. These scenes are windows into his inner world; his vulnerabilities are laid bare through his farewell interactions with the other characters. Such interactions reveal more than casual conversations could, casting light on Sonny's internal struggle and the careful orchestration of his impending departure. Through these vignettes, the audience better understands Sonny's internal struggles. Sonny's meticulous approach to organizing his affairs, or setting up clues for others to follow, suggests a degree of forethought and planning. Irrespective of the particular storyline one chooses to believe, it is clear that Sonny's actions were not impulsive but calculated, hinting at underlying grief for the life he yearned for but could not attain. The flashbacks help unveil Sonny's past, portraying him as a young man brimming with potential but held back by internal and external battles. Whether it be the internal struggles that wage within him or societal barriers, Sonny grapples with the harsh reality of being unable to actualize his potential. Sonny's decision to vanish does not appear to be impulsive but rather a deliberate choice fueled by his inability to live the life he envisioned.

Pinnock's *One Under* examines the psychological aftermath experienced by individuals

left behind when a loved one or acquaintance suddenly vanishes. The ensuing grief, shock, and paranoia these characters grapple with mirrors the diverse reactions that one might exhibit following such unexpected, tragic events. The epigraph preceding the play prefigures this exploration of identity, grief, and paranoia, providing a tantalizing glimpse into the thematic tapestry of the narrative. In its brevity, it encapsulates a world of meaning, establishing a compelling connection with the audience even before the narrative unfolds. This succinct yet potent introduction sets an anticipatory tone, guiding the audience into the labyrinthine narrative of complex emotions and incidents about to unravel. Pinnock impressively illustrates the various manifestations of mental health responses throughout the grieving process, highlighting the unique nature of each individual's journey. There are no universal answers, no normal reactions. The quest for clarity often leads some characters down a path that only yields more questions, while others prefer the comfort of acceptance, seeking solace in the most straightforward explanations. The grieving process manifests uniquely in each individual, reflecting their responses and coping mechanisms. In their search for closure and understanding, some may plunge deeper into a labyrinth of questions while others may accept the simplest explanation, finding solace in the closure; however unsatisfying or incomplete it may be. Thus, *One Under* examines the complexity of human responses to loss in exploring grief, paranoia, and the quest for answers. In doing so, Pinnock challenges the audience to reflect on their perceptions of grief and the human instinct to seek understanding in the face of inexplicable tragedy.

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