

# **NOVEL**

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a play  
by Ryan Bernsten

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## **Characters:**

**Hal** (60s, he): celebrated author with nervous system disorder

**Beth** (40s, she): administrator and dedicated observer

**Warren** (20s, he): a writer used to getting his way

**Charise** (20s, she): a writer with a hot temper

**Kit** (20s, they): an academic with a love for character studies

## **Setting:**

Northern Maine University, Strother Hall.

A secluded, set-away place for study & research.

## **Setting:**

A cold, cold present day.

*“Every secret of a writer’s soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind, is written large in his works.”*  
— Virginia Woolf

**Scene 1**

Lights up on the hallway of an academic building at a remote university. It is sterile, like the ward of an old-fashioned asylum, and lit with crisp light. Warren, in a cardigan and stylish frames, sits on a chair, reading a copy of *Unbearable Silence* by Hal Morgan. Charise, wrapped in a warm winter coat, enters. She references a piece of paper, looks up at the doorways around her and takes off her coat. As she does so, Warren puts a bookmark in his book and stares at her, smiling expectantly.

**WARREN**

You too?

**CHARISE**

Excuse me?

**WARREN**

Are you here for the interview?

**CHARISE**

Yeah, I am.

**WARREN**

I have all his books.

**CHARISE**

Excuse me?

**WARREN**

*Garden of Sin, Letters from Death, The Children's Wake, Unbearable Silence.* I grew up reading him. I met him at a signing, and he is just... lucid. And sinister. And brilliant. I asked him how to become a writer, and he told me, "keep thinking dark thoughts." Isn't that amazing? He's the prince of the thriller.

**CHARISE**

The professor guy?

**WARREN**

The professor guy! Hal Morgan is the greatest novelist of our time, and yes I consider him a literary fiction author, not like the genre writer the snobs at the Times try to make him out to be. Do you consider him genre or literary fiction?

**CHARISE**

I don't know that much about him...

**WARREN**

You're joking. He's a recluse, but he's an icon. How did you hear about his program?

**CHARISE**

I was referred.

**WARREN**

Referred? How were you—? Oh.

**CHARISE**

What do you mean, "oh?"

**WARREN**

You were like... recruited?

**CHARISE**

No. I was referred.

**WARREN**

Are you published, or—?

**CHARISE**

A professor at my school referred me to the program. I won a prize.

**WARREN**

I went to Brown, and won a few prizes there.

**CHARISE**

I bet you did.

A beat.

**WARREN**

I'm Warren.

**CHARISE**

Is that your first name?

**WARREN**

Yeah. My first name is a last name. And my last name is a first name. Warren Ruth.

**CHARISE**

A girl's name. Not really the surname of a novelist.

**WARREN**

What's your name?

I'm Charise. Charise Parker.

CHARISE

He opens his mouth, then shuts it. It's a good name.

WARREN

They say they only accept three people to the program.

CHARISE

I heard that.

WARREN

And full scholarship...

CHARISE

Heard that too.

WARREN

And it's not like the other writing programs, where most people flame out and go into academia or something. These people actually get published. Guaranteed success.

CHARISE

Like who?

WARREN

They don't want people finding out about the program. When it says that Ezra Lynch got his MFA at NYU? Sure, but after that he went *here*. He was studying under Hal Morgan while he wrote *Suburban Sick*. Before he... well, killed himself.

CHARISE

You're really into the psychological thrillers aren't you?

WARREN

Of course. Why else would I want to study with Hal?

CHARISE

I'm into them too.

WARREN

What's your favorite?

CHARISE

The ones I write.

A beat.

I'm from Seattle.

**WARREN**

So you're used to this weather.

**CHARISE**

It's gray there too, but never this cold. God, I didn't believe them, but they were right... it really is cold, Maine.

**WARREN**

It is.

**CHARISE**

A beat.

And you?

**WARREN**

Hm?

**CHARISE**

Where are you from?

**WARREN**

Omaha.

**CHARISE**

Wow. What's that like?

**WARREN**

Pretty normal.

**CHARISE**

It's... Kansas, right?

**WARREN**

Nebraska.

**CHARISE**

Fascinating. I'm sure you have *a lot* to write about.

**WARREN**

What do you write about then, if you're so interesting?

**CHARISE**

**WARREN**

Oh! I wasn't joking. Like I'm sure you actually have a lot to say. Especially as a person of...

**CHARISE**

As a person of what?

**WARREN**

We need your diverse perspective in fiction, now more than ever.

**CHARISE**

Shut your mouth.

Beth enters. They don't see her.

**WARREN**

Whoa.

**CHARISE**

You think we need your generic white man "perspective"? You with your cardigan and Warby Parker glasses. What makes your experience so interesting?

**WARREN**

I'm saying your experience *is* interesting—

**CHARISE**

—and I'm some sort of splash of color to cleanse the palette—

**WARREN**

Toni Morrison is one of my favorite novelists!

Charise laughs, then pinches Warren on the arm.  
Hard. He doubles over in pain.

**CHARISE**

Don't ever say Toni's name in front of me.

**BETH**

Oh, dear.

They both freeze.

**WARREN**

Did you see that? Did you see what she did?

**BETH**

I did, I did. Charise, isn't it?



Yeah.

**CHARISE**

Warren gets back up on the chair gingerly, hoping this will seal his victory and her loss.

**BETH**

Professor Morgan is ready for your interview.

**WARREN**

Really?

**BETH**

Right this way.

**WARREN**

I'm sorry... excuse me, but did you see her *pinch* me?

**BETH**

I did see that. It looked like it hurt.

**WARREN**

It did.

**BETH**

Gosh... Okay, Charise. This way, please.

**WARREN**

Doesn't that... raise some concerns? Could that be a disqualifying factor perhaps?

**BETH**

Not at all. From my understanding, that sort of... spark, is exactly what Professor Morgan is looking for.

**CHARISE**

Nice meeting you, Ruth.

Charise and Beth exit, leaving a very angry Warren. A beat. He stands. He kicks a chair.

Lights down.

**Scene 2**

Lights up on Warren. He's in a lecture theatre with a spotlight on him, looking out towards the audience. Hal addresses him from the dark seats. Beth sits beside him with a camera on a tripod.

**WARREN**

Wow, the lighting is... kind of bright.

**HAL**

We have a small panel here to review your interview.

**WARREN**

Mr. Morgan, I have to say, I am such a—

**HAL**

This panel is meant to remain anonymous, and we will direct questions to you. We enjoyed your application materials—

**WARREN**

Thank you.

**HAL**

And my colleagues and I will be asking some questions about your ability to use your imagination to connect with the human condition. We have quite a record of professional—in addition to academic—success and are looking to create masterpieces through our program. We take this very seriously.

**WARREN**

Yes.

**BETH**

May we have your permission to video record this interview?

**WARREN**

Oh. Sure. Yeah, fine.

**HAL**

This is an unusual writing program.

**WARREN**

I know.

**HAL**

We expect total commitment from our students over their nine months.

**WARREN**

I want to write something great. I have it in me.

**BETH**

Mr. Ruth, are you comfortable with signing a non-disclosure agreement if accepted to this program?

**WARREN**

Um... sure. Sure. Why?

**HAL**

As I'm sure you've read, our methods are experimental and effective. This is not a writing workshop. It is an exploration of your experience. Mining for your voice. And like the most ardent miners, we use every tool available to us. Some students have found it... overwhelming.

**WARREN**

Not me.

**BETH**

Excellent. Would you mind giving a verbal confirmation for the camera that you consent to this interview?

**WARREN**

I consent to this interview.

**HAL**

This interview requires one thing from you: total honesty. Good writing doesn't tolerate bullshit, and a shrewd reader can sniff it out. We will be on alert.

**BETH**

What Hal means is... relax. Say what's on your mind. Okay?

Lights up on Charise in the same room, though conducting their interviews at separate moments.

**WARREN/CHARISE**

Okay.

**BETH**

Number one: before criticizing somebody, do you try to imagine and understand how it would make them feel?

**WARREN**

I think that's one of the most crucial aspects of being a workshop partner. You need to do a compliment sandwich almost, say something about the piece that has merit then—

Bullshit.

**HAL**

Could you tell me ways in which you could make another person feel guilty?

**BETH**

I don't know... like cry and stuff?

**CHARISE**

Disappointing.

**HAL**

Fine. Okay. In a workshop environment, I think it's important to be honest. Brutally honest, even. I'm not here to be a passive participant. I will make my thoughts known, respectfully, but I will make them known. Because I believe I know what I'm talking about. More than most people. More than anyone I've met, anyway.

**WARREN**

A beat.

Good.

**HAL**

Something unlocks inside of Warren.

Could you please tell me some *specific* ways in which you could make another person feel guilty?

**BETH**

Of course. No, I can cut her short—

**HAL** (stage whisper to the panel)

To make the guilt crippling, best to start subtly. Bring up something someone else did that's similar and talk about how fucked up it is. Like I know my sister's cheating on her husband. I talk about how my friend cheated on his boyfriend and his boyfriend killed himself when he found out.

**CHARISE**

Let her stay.

**HAL**

Do you tend to focus more on your own thoughts and ideas than what others might be thinking?

**BETH**

**WARREN**

That's sort of a prerequisite to being a great novelist.

**BETH**

Do you know how to pay someone compliments to get something out of them?

**CHARISE**

I can butter up anyone to get what I want. My creative writing professors thought I worshipped the ground they walked on, when I thought they were just adjunct losers with a few mediocre publications. Still, you saw my letters of rec. Glowing.

**HAL**

Do you believe in morality of actions?

**WARREN**

No.

**HAL**

Does seeing people cry upset you?

**CHARISE**

No. It interests me.

**BETH**

Are you good at predicting how someone will feel?

**WARREN**

That's a writer's job. Play out situations in your head.

**BETH**

Do you sometimes provoke people on purpose to see their reaction?

**CHARISE**

Of course. I love getting a rise out of people.

**BETH**

Do you use that for fodder in your writing?

**WARREN**

Obviously.

**HAL**

Do you believe the motto "I'll scratch your back, if you scratch mine?"

**CHARISE**

Sure, but I'd prefer if you just scratch my back.

**BETH**

Do you sometimes tell people what they want to hear to get what you want from them?

**WARREN**

Yes, but I've been forbidden to do so in this interview.

**HAL**

Would you write about something that would betray the secret of someone you loved?

**CHARISE**

I'd call it fiction.

**BETH**

Tell me about your mother.

**WARREN**

Not much to say.

**HAL**

Say something true.

**CHARISE**

She's weak. A wasted life.

**BETH**

Be honest about your father.

**WARREN**

Selfish and deluded.

**HAL**

Tell me the worst thing you've ever thought about someone you're supposed to love.

**CHARISE**

I wish my father was dead.

**BETH**

If you could murder your worst enemy, would you?

**WARREN**

If I could get away with it, yes.

**HAL**

What did you think of my condition, upon meeting me?

**CHARISE**

Disgusted by your frailty.

**BETH**

If you were to become terminally ill, what would be your first hard decision?

**WARREN**

I would wonder how I could exploit it for my benefit.

**HAL**

How would you torture your worst enemy?

**CHARISE**

I'd drill through each of their limbs until they write a pleasing poem about how it feels...

**BETH**

Stage a dramatic public execution to crush dissent.

**WARREN**

I'd take one of those carousel amusement park rides with the swings, the one where you sit in a chair and get spun around in the air, and I'd replace every swing with nooses...

**CHARISE**

And I'd publish the poem under my own name.

**WARREN**

And their nooses would be made of barbed wire.

**HAL**

What God do you worship?

**CHARISE**

Chaos. The original God of the Universe.

**BETH**

What gives you sexual gratification that is forbidden?

**WARREN**

Christ on the cross.

**HAL**

Would you destroy someone's life in order to get ahead?

**CHARISE**

Fuck yes.

**BETH**

Do you think you can accomplish anything?

**WARREN**

Fuck yes.

**BETH**

Do you think you're better than me?

**WARREN/CHARISE**

Yes.

A beat. Warren and Charise breathe heavily, frenzied.

**HAL**

Well.

**BETH**

That concludes today's interview. We will be speaking with other candidates over the next few days.

**HAL**

*Several* other candidates.

**BETH**

You will be notified of your status in three week's time.

Lights down.



**Scene 3**

The same hallway. Warren arrives with a backpack as Kit walks down the hall.

**WARREN**

Excuse me? Do you know where room 423 is?

**KIT**

Are you in Prof. Morgan's program?

**WARREN**

Yes. Yes, I am. Feels good to say that out loud.

**KIT**

Yeah, I'll show you. I'm heading that way too.

**WARREN**

Why's that?

**KIT**

For class.

**WARREN**

*You're* in the program?

**KIT**

Yes I am.

**WARREN**

Are you a... writer?

**KIT**

Yeah.

**WARREN**

Oh. What do you write?

**KIT**

Young adult fiction.

**WARREN** (unable to disguise his horror)

Oh! How interesting.

**KIT**

You?

*Literary fiction.*

**WARREN**

Nice.

**KIT**

A beat.

**WARREN**

I was so anxious when I didn't hear back at the three week mark. I kept refreshing my computer every two minutes until Thursday at 5:24 pm. What time did you find out?

**KIT**

I don't remember.

**WARREN**

Which floor are you on?

**KIT**

Oh, I'm not living in the building.

**WARREN**

I thought all three students were. To create camaraderie.

**KIT**

Special medical circumstance.

**WARREN**

What is it?

**KIT**

Private.

**WARREN**

I bet your interview was thrilling.

**KIT**

Lecture's this way.

Lights up on Hal, sitting in a chair in front of the lecture theatre, crutches spread like the legs of a crab. Beth stands behind him, smiling blithely.

**HAL**

I'm the founder of this program. It's my money, my time, my legacy. You've read my books. Have you read my books, Charise?

**CHARISE**

No.

**HAL**

Very good. Honesty. That's what we're all about here. C.E.O. You know what that stands for here, Warren?

**WARREN**

Chief executive—?

**HAL**

Candid. Emotions. Only. That's my role here. To ensure you'll only have candid emotions. That you only say what's on your mind, no matter how rude or bleak or unacceptable to the outside world. You are not in the outside world. This, here, is your world. You will be filling this hall, here, with your inner world. Manifesting it for you to explore and to create, ultimately, something that will outlast all of us. And yes, that means getting published.

**BETH**

Some logistics for you. Strother Hall is entirely ours. It is off limits to other students. Your rooms upstairs, the bathroom, the classrooms, the broom closets, all yours.

**CHARISE**

Where do you stay?

**HAL**

I live in a suite on the ground floor.

**CHARISE**

What about her?

**BETH**

I have other accommodations. You are allowed to explore campus within the hours of 1 pm to 3 pm. Then, you are allowed to check out books from the library, go into town to run errands, fill prescriptions—

**WARREN**

What about the gym?

**BETH**

We have a small exercise studio on the fifth floor.

**CHARISE**

We can go out at night, can't we?

**HAL**

No.

What?  
**KIT**

What if I want to date?  
**CHARISE**

You came here to write.  
**HAL**

They didn't mention this in my interview.  
**KIT**

Can we have guests over?  
**CHARISE**

If you have a sex addiction, write about it.  
**HAL**

**BETH**  
Breakfast will be at 8, lunch at 12, dinner at 6:30. We're sending around a form asking your dietary restrictions along with a list of ground rules and the non-disclosure agreement.

Beth begins to distribute papers.

No phones during class hours?  
**WARREN**

**BETH**  
Correct. And you will download software called Seahawk, which will monitor incoming and outgoing messages.

Jesus!  
**WARREN**

**HAL**  
It seems harsh. It seems spooky. Hell, it seems like something out of one of my books. But it's important for us to see where your heads are at. Because we will be shaping your novel based on your emotional state. Coaching you. Be candid about your feelings. But be discreet. Any divulgence of our methods here warrants an immediate dismissal.

**BETH**  
And please, please, please, please do not make us go through the legal ugliness we encountered a few years ago.

**HAL**

I don't understand why someone would want to lose that kind of money just to be blacklisted at every publishing house in the country.

Warren raises his hand.

**WARREN**

So this non-disclosure thing... I was talking to my cousin, and he's a lawyer—

**HAL**

A lawyer?

**WARREN**

I just wanted to make sure I wasn't signing something that would—

**HAL**

Get him the fuck out of my program.

**WARREN**

No, I wasn't—

**HAL**

GET HIM THE FUCK OUT.

**WARREN**

I just don't understand—

**HAL**

You're not supposed to understand! You're supposed to submit. Then write. Then thrive.

Warren signs the contract. Charise and Kit follow suit.

**WARREN**

I'm sorry.

**BETH**

If there aren't further questions, I'm going to be distributing a short personality test...

Beth begins passing out papers, holding a small basket.

**BETH**

If you could have your phones unlocked and put them in the basket please, so I can install the program...

**HAL**

We are going to be mining for what your book is “about.” Sure, it may be about one art critic who’s addicted to prescription drugs, but what is it about to you? The human condition? Why are you the one to tell it? This personality test is us getting a blueprint of who you are, and helping us find what you’re meant to say...

**CHARISE**

“What’s my most unusual sex fantasy?”

**HAL**

And begin.

Lights down.

**Scene 4**

Hal's office. He sits in an armchair, speaking with Charise. She holds a notepad and a pencil.

**HAL**

Why do you think it was that Dr. Klein and I found your questionnaire so... unusual?

**CHARISE**

Who is Dr. Klein?

**HAL (quickly)**

Oh. The chair of the department.

**CHARISE**

He's reading our stuff?

**HAL**

Why would I find it so unusual?

**CHARISE**

I was honest?

**HAL**

Why else?

**CHARISE**

Maybe it was a little... dark?

**HAL**

Dark. What would you classify as "dark"?

**CHARISE**

A little violent, maybe?

**HAL**

You wrote that you once drove a colored pencil through the palm of your step-brother Beau, is that correct?

**CHARISE**

Yes.

**HAL**

What did you remember about that incident?

**CHARISE**

Is this the most interesting thing you got from my questionnaire?

**HAL**  
What can you tell me about that incident?

**CHARISE**  
I can't remember anything else.

**HAL**  
Anything that comes into your mind.

**CHARISE**  
The pencil was blue.

**HAL**  
Mhm.

**CHARISE**  
And we got into a fight over my step-dad.

**HAL**  
About what?

**CHARISE**  
Whether or not he'd buy both of us cars when we turned 16.

**HAL**  
He said your step-father wouldn't buy you one.

**CHARISE**  
And I wouldn't get one because Mom was poor.

**HAL**  
What did you feel then?

**CHARISE**  
I can't really remember.

**HAL**  
What did you notice about his face?

**CHARISE**  
It was a long time ago.

**HAL**  
What was he wearing?



Probably a jersey.

**CHARISE**

What else? What was he doing when you decided to stab him?

**HAL**

Kind of grinning.

**CHARISE**

What else do you remember?

**HAL (starting a hypnotic rhythm)**

Not much.

**CHARISE**

What did he look like?

**HAL**

He was grinning.

**CHARISE**

What color was the pencil?

**HAL**

Blue.

**CHARISE**

You've now given me this detail three times. This suggests your mind is otherwise occupied.

**HAL**

What are you getting at?

**CHARISE**

You didn't want to stab him in the palm with that blue-colored pencil did you?

**HAL**

No.

**CHARISE**

How could you possibly stab someone in the open palm while you're coloring? Do people hold their palms face-up on a table?

**HAL**

No.

**CHARISE**

So how did it happen? **HAL**

I don't know. **CHARISE**

What color was the pencil? **HAL (back to the hypnotic rhythm)**

Blue. **CHARISE**

What color blue? **HAL**

Sky blue. **CHARISE**

And what was he doing? **HAL**

Grinning. **CHARISE**

And what did you do with that sky blue pencil? **HAL**

I don't— **CHARISE**

What was he doing? **HAL**

Grinning. **CHARISE**

And what did you want to do? **HAL**

Wipe the grin off his face. **CHARISE**

What color was the pencil? **HAL**

Sky blue.

**CHARISE**

And what did you want to—

**HAL**

I tried to stab him in his stupid face take out his stupid blue eye, but he put up his hand—

**CHARISE**

And you drove the pencil into his palm.

**HAL**

Mm.

**CHARISE**

A beat. Hal takes a note.

**HAL**

Tell me about your application essay.

**CHARISE**

What about it?

**HAL**

You said that you're attracted to darker, more complicated novels.

**CHARISE**

I like psychological thrillers.

**HAL**

But what makes a novel dark? What does it reveal about the world?

**CHARISE**

All novels are dark.

**HAL**

How do you mean?

**CHARISE**

It's not that I only see the darkness of a well-known dark novel, like *Lolita* or *A Clockwork Orange*. It's that I see the darkness of other books that others can't seem to see.

**HAL**

Perhaps you're hyper-focused on darkness?

That's not it.

**CHARISE**

Maybe you even fetishize it a bit?

**HAL**

You think I like being like this?

**CHARISE**

Like what?

**HAL**

**CHARISE**

Unprotected? It's like I have no immune system to shield me from seeing it. And so, yes, I'm unprotected. I see it and it seeps into me—all the sadness, all the pain, all the despair. And it makes me feel crazy—truly crazy—when I realize that no one else sees it. People only see the surface, and they either can't—or *won't*—see what's really going on. The way things are. Because they're either too blind or stupid to live in the real world. Yet I'm the one who's focused on darkness.

**HAL**

Isn't that the artist's curse? To see what others don't?

**CHARISE**

Maybe. But I—

**HAL**

Yet you're complaining as if you're the only one it affects. You think you're all-seeing?

**CHARISE**

No.

**HAL**

You think you're special.

**CHARISE**

Stop putting words in my mouth!

She lifts her hand—still holding her pencil—into the air. She stops herself when she realizes that the sharp end is pointed at Hal. A beat.

**HAL**

I want 4,000 words about the pencil incident. And tell me something that will make my skin crawl.

She nods.

**HAL**

Send in Warren.

Charise gets up, takes a moment to put on her coat, and exits. Hal takes notes on her application. Lights down.

**Scene 5**

A small office. Hal sits in an armchair, his crutches splayed from his wrists. Warren sits adjacent to him, alongside Kit.

**HAL**

Hmm... hmm...

An awkward moment as Hal considers pages in his hand. He suddenly crumples the paper and throws it onto the floor.

**HAL**

Utter garbage. Utter garbage, Mr. Lee.

Warren smirks, clearly pleased. Kit shuffles uncomfortably.

**KIT**

It's not Mr. Lee. I'm non-binary, Professor.

Warren gets up quickly.

**WARREN**

Tea, Hal?

**HAL**

No milk. What's that?

Warren fills an electric kettle with bottled water, and turns it on.

**KIT**

Non-binary.

**HAL**

Further evidence of your refusal to commit to any particular point of view. Read that thing I highlighted in that list of drug side effects you call a novel, Lee.

**KIT**

“Quelling the tears threatening to overcome her, Violet grabbed the train of her dress and ran out of the gymnasium. Victor had been using her for his image, she could see it now. Pressed up against the sophomore lockers, she saw the brilliance of his plan. Bringing the Muslim girl with the headscarf to the Candy Cane Ball was a stunt—”

**HAL**

Stop right there. (Exhales.)

**KIT**

It's based on my friend Nada, who's from Iran and moved to Michig—

**HAL**

No one cares about the minutia of ordinary lives! We need a novel, not young adult drivel. Something that gets at something bigger, something universal, something that sheds light on this piece of shit we call the human experience! I want to know the inside of your minds from reading this book like an explorer reads the stars. I want to know every treacherous, sick, perverted thought that's inside your head, so I can help you spin it into something that will outlast the miserable years you spend on this earth. And I can't do it if you're writing about some girl crying at the Candy Cane fucking Ball!

Kit doesn't look up.

**HAL**

Do you think your life is important?

**KIT**

Yes.

**HAL**

Warren? Do you think your life is more important than the other little lives out there?

**WARREN**

Yes, sir.

Warren hands Hal a tea.

**HAL**

Then please, write something that will shock me, something based on truth!

Charise enters.

**CHARISE**

Sorry I'm late, the printers were busted—

**HAL**

Charise, what's the worst thing you've ever done?

**CHARISE**

Being late to class.

**HAL**

In all seriousness, what's the worst thing you've ever done?

**CHARISE**

Seriously?

A beat.

**CHARISE**

I used to steal alcohol from our local grocery store. Maybe three thousand dollar's worth. Then they went under.

**HAL**

You're lying.

**CHARISE**

No I'm not.

**HAL**

It's not the *worst* thing you've ever done. You're at five lates and it's only October. You answer honestly, I expunge them. I catch you in another lie, you lose your spot here.

**CHARISE**

I—

**HAL**

In the previous years of the program, one student is cut come the end of the semester. One just isn't up to it. Between Charise's constant lateness and fetishization of violence, Mr. Lee's dangerous lack any interesting quality, and Warren's self-aggrandizement and messianic view of his own abilities, this is the weakest class I've ever had and makes me wish I had used my last few years of life doing something besides developing the perspectives of empty people—

**CHARISE**

I killed a dog.

**HAL**

You did.

**KIT**

You did??

**CHARISE**

When I was 12. Our neighbors had this yappy dog and it would keep me up at night. Kept me from sleeping. (off of Kit's look of horror.) It was old!



**WARREN**

How did you do it?

**CHARISE**

Rat poison and ground beef in sausage casing.

A beat. Suddenly Hal begins to laugh.

**HAL**

Well! There we go. Maybe spice up your story, Lee, your spineless protagonist could take a leaf out of Ms. Parker's book and poison that son of a bitch with laced kielbasa!

**KIT**

Excuse me. Restroom.

Kit packs their bag up and leaves the room.

**HAL**

Let's hope your pages about the pencil stabbing are as amusing as Lee's were dull, Parker.

Charise begins distributing her papers to the class. Hal notices that Kit has left behind a recording device on their chair, and surreptitiously makes a grab for it.

Lights down.

**Scene 6**

Warren and Beth sit in a small office. She puts out a plate of banana bread. Warren has been scanning the walls.

**BETH**

Hope you like banana bread. I had so many bananas that were about to go bad, I didn't know what else to do with them.

**WARREN**

That's nice of you.

**BETH**

My pleasure.

**WARREN**

You live alone?

**BETH**

No. I don't.

**WARREN**

Do you have kids or—

**BETH**

This isn't my time, Warren.

**WARREN**

I've never been in an office that's so bare.

**BETH**

Well, I don't have much time to decorate. I spend so much time reading your wonderful work.

**WARREN**

You think it's wonderful?

**BETH**

Certainly.

**WARREN**

No offense, I had hoped to have a meeting with Prof. Morgan about these pages.

**BETH**

Why's that?

**WARREN**

I feel like it's more his lane.

**BETH**

I have a Ph.D in English Literature.

**WARREN**

From where?

**BETH**

Tell me about this messiah character in your novel.

**WARREN**

Do you know his name?

**BETH**

Tell me about Lyle Harper. What are you trying to explore about yourself with this character?

**WARREN**

Well, I noticed I scored very high on the questionnaire in self-confidence. And I think that's pretty spot-on. I've spent so much time in writing classes with trust fund mediocrities and horse-faced girls writing about their ugliness that I started to doubt my own abilities. So I'm channeling this new self-confidence and trying to siphon it into a character who is discovering that he has a certain clarity that no one else on earth has. And he starts to realize that through his writing he can move people to a new understanding. And then he starts to gather a following.

**BETH**

I see strong similarities to David Koresh and the Waco Siege. Was that intentional?

**WARREN**

Not at all! He's not manipulating or harming his followers, he's—

**BETH**

But on page 42—

**WARREN**

Unless they cross him.

**BETH**

I was very struck by the passage with the sexual violence.

**WARREN**

The expulsion.

**BETH**

It was very graphic.

**WARREN**

Too graphic?

**BETH**

Nothing is too anything here. But I found it interesting.

**WARREN**

I wanted to really go for it. To explore the power dynamics of sex between men. What is the ultimate show of power? Sexual dominance.

**BETH**

And yet, after this scene your protagonist talks to God...

**WARREN**

Well, he believes he does.

**BETH**

And expresses a crippling fear of eternal punishment.

**WARREN**

Don't we all fear that our sins will bring us down? Either in an earthly arena or an eternal one?

**BETH**

What sins are these?

**WARREN**

Well...nothing personally. I'm just talking in generalities here.

**BETH**

Your personality test suggested that you have some sense of fear around sexuality.

**WARREN**

Not fear, no.

**BETH**

A sense of unease with intimacy.

**WARREN**

That's right.

**BETH**

Why is that?

**WARREN**

I've only been intimate with strangers recently.

**BETH**

How does that affect your feelings on the subject?

**WARREN**

Well, I suppose it takes the idea of love out of the equation. The lack of accountability makes it easier to manifest what I really want.

**BETH**

Because of the anonymity?

**WARREN**

Yeah. You can be more upfront about exactly what you're looking for. And that sort of transactional nature means that you can cut through the bullshit. Get what you want, get your rocks off, whatever they call it. And not worry about damaging someone.

**BETH**

Have you damaged someone?

**WARREN**

Maybe a couple of people. Before I realized that a relationship is a trap, something that keeps me away from expressing my true nature, my true feelings.

**BETH**

You feel you have to present a certain amount of artifice?

**WARREN**

Yeah. And I can keep playing that character for a while, the person they think I am or want me to be, but eventually it gets very boring. The mask starts to slip a little. I try to explore this in the relationship between my protagonist and his first lover as sort of my inciting incident—

**BETH**

Do you feel like you're wearing a mask here with me now?

**WARREN**

We're each playing our roles here.

**BETH**

What are those roles?

A beat.

I don't know. I usually know.

**WARREN**

Warren, can I be frank?

**BETH**

Sure.

**WARREN**

We don't often have people with your awareness in this program.

**BETH**

Gosh.

**WARREN**

The other two are falling behind. I need you to motivate them.

**BETH**

What sort of advantage would that have for me though?

**WARREN**

If two of our students fall behind... we could lose our grant funding. The head of our department reads everything, and everything but your writing has been disappointing.

**BETH**

Why is it bad for me to stand out?

**WARREN**

You can't stand out if this program has been cut short. If you can be a team player, Hal is willing to get you a one-on-one sit down with his agent. I think they'd really like your stuff, Warren. They're looking for a debut novelist with a unique voice.

**BETH**

If you can do that for me...

**WARREN**

We will.

**BETH**

Consider it done.

**WARREN**

Lights down.

**Scene 7**

The upper dormitory hallway at night. Warren walks down the hall in a bathrobe and headphones, rubbing lotion on his face. Charise enters from the other direction, wearing her coat.

**WARREN**

Well well well, where have you been?

**CHARISE**

I have my own social calendar. What are you listening to?

**WARREN**

The Daily.

**CHARISE**

Huh?

**WARREN**

The New York Times Podcast. They were looking for you earlier.

**CHARISE**

Who is they?

**WARREN**

Beth.

**CHARISE**

Oh.

**WARREN**

Someone tried sending you drugs in the mail.

**CHARISE**

I don't know what you mean.

**WARREN**

A peanut butter jar full of coke.

A beat.

**CHARISE**

*FUCK.* That usually works.

She rages, then deflates.

**CHARISE**

So am I in trouble with the police or what?

**WARREN**

I don't think the police found it.

**CHARISE**

Beth did?

**WARREN**

Why would you have someone send drugs? They read our mail.

**CHARISE**

No one's ever found it in the peanut butter. They just think it's a care package usually.

**WARREN**

They just sent you a box of peanut butter. Nothing else.

**CHARISE**

So...

**WARREN**

So I guess Beth found it... oh what's the word for this... extremely fucking suspicious? Where were you just now?

**CHARISE**

None of your business.

Warren moves in front of her door.

**WARREN**

Where were you?

**CHARISE**

Why do you fucking care so much?

**WARREN**

Why do you think?

**CHARISE**

I don't know, are you in love with me?

**WARREN**

Caught me.



**CHARISE**

Let me into my room.

**WARREN**

If you get expelled—

**CHARISE**

—I was hooking up with a guy on the wrestling team, they're not going to—

**WARREN**

If you get expelled, that leaves me and Kit. Who, I'm not sure if you've noticed, is the worst writer in America. And if that's who I'm going to be sent out to agents with, it's going to totally devalue the program. I'll seem like a joke by association.

**CHARISE**

By association, huh?

**WARREN**

Regardless of what you think of my writing, I've read cereal boxes with more pathos than Kit's work.

**CHARISE**

At least Kit's diverse... ish. I know you care about diversity, don't you?

**WARREN**

I think you're a genuinely good writer.

**CHARISE**

Okay.

**WARREN**

You've got a really unique... not unique, sorry but like... lucid way of writing about things. You see things as they are. You're not afraid to be vicious. To stab any sentimentality straight in the eye.

**CHARISE**

Great reference.

**WARREN**

And I think you make me a better writer too.

**CHARISE**

Well I'm glad someone's there to point out your prose jerk-off sessions.

**WARREN**

Please don't fuck this up. I need you here.

Okay. How will you help me?  
**CHARISE**

What do you mean?  
**WARREN**

How can you help me get coke?  
**CHARISE**

I'm not really good at that stuff—  
**WARREN**

And I need to fuck a living human male at least once every three weeks.  
**CHARISE**

Well I can't help you there.  
**WARREN**

You can though. If I can't sneak out, you gotta sneak someone in.  
**CHARISE**

How do I do that?  
**WARREN**

Be fucking creative.  
**CHARISE**

Are you telling me I need to get you sex and drugs so you don't sabotage yourself in the program?  
**WARREN**

I'm just saying, if you're gonna act like my mom, you might as well have some of the responsibilities for my mental wellbeing.  
**CHARISE**

Jesus. You are a sociopath, you know that?  
**WARREN**

At least I'm not a sneaky slut.  
**CHARISE**

Oh, I'm a sneaky slut?  
**WARREN**

Mhm.  
**CHARISE**

Why would you say that?  
**WARREN**

Kit been in your room?  
**CHARISE**

No!  
**WARREN**

Mhm.  
**CHARISE**

I gave them a book to read one time.  
**WARREN**

At midnight?  
**CHARISE**

I'm offended by this whole allegation.  
**WARREN**

I didn't think you'd go after little femmes.  
**CHARISE**

Shut the fuck up.  
**WARREN**

I've got bigger dick energy than both of you combined.  
**CHARISE**

Sure.  
**WARREN**

Want me to prove it?  
**CHARISE**

Like hell I do.  
**WARREN**

A beat.

Okay so that phrase... has always confused me.  
**CHARISE**

"Like hell I do?"  
**WARREN**

**CHARISE**

Is it an affirmative or a negative?

**WARREN**

I didn't do anything with Kit and I'm not doing anything with you.

**CHARISE**

How are you surviving, without the dating apps, without being—

**WARREN**

I'm focusing on writing!

**CHARISE**

You need to live to write!

**WARREN**

No! Just get your rocks off and get back to work. This is the whole fucking problem!

**CHARISE**

What?

**WARREN**

You're not a serious writer! You're just like a hedonist who writes about the fucked-up shit you do to scratch your fucked-up itches.

**CHARISE**

Dude, if you psychoanalyze me I will literally come for your jugular like no one ever has before. I have a portrait painted of you so accurate that you would rupture if I ever articulated it, Warren Ruth.

**WARREN**

Oh I'm fucking scared.

**CHARISE**

You are scared. You're a fucking coward.

**WARREN**

COWARD? DO YOU KNOW WHAT I'VE DONE?

**CHARISE**

All you do is write about Hell. What if it's real, what if it's not, will I go there, it's so clear you're scared of a cosmic force out there that doesn't exist.

**WARREN**

If you knew the half of the things I've done...

**CHARISE**

“Oh no, I blew a guy in a truck stop,” “oh no, I got passed around at a party,” God is so angry!

**WARREN**

You killed a dog.

**CHARISE**

Exactly, I’ve actually done something—

**WARREN**

I have done things that would have you retching on the floor.

**CHARISE**

Like fucking what?

**WARREN**

You are nothing, *nothing* compared to me.

**CHARISE**

Your superiority complex is... wooooooooooooooooo.

**WARREN**

Yeah, well at least I fucking work for things instead of passively strolling through life waiting for affirmative act—

**CHARISE**

What the FUCK did you say?

**WARREN**

You heard me.

Charise moves towards Warren as if to attack him, but Beth enters, holding a peanut butter jar.

**BETH**

We all did.

Charise and Warren both stop what they’re doing.

**CHARISE**

You’re spying on us now??

**BETH**

I heard voices raised.

**CHARISE**

Let us handle this.

**BETH**

I came to return this to you.

**CHARISE**

Yeah, it wasn't the peanut butter I was actually interested in.

**BETH**

Look inside.

She hands the jar to Charise. Beth nods for her to open it. She does, and looks up surprised.

**BETH**

Be discreet.

**CHARISE**

Really? You're not going to tell on me?

**BETH**

We're not here to change you. We're here to help you find the most authentic version of yourself.

**WARREN**

Sorry, but isn't that illegal?

**BETH**

Certain drugs are allowed to be administered for scientific or academic purposes, and since this is technically an academic purpose, we agreed there was an administrative loophole.

**WARREN**

No. Sorry, no. She can't be rewarded for bad behavior like this.

**CHARISE**

Fuck you, Warren.

**WARREN**

You're turning in work late left and right and you're getting approval to snort coke?

**BETH**

I'm sorry, but I've already gone to the big boss and had it approved.

**CHARISE**

See? She got approval. If you've got a problem, go take it up with Dr. Klein.

A beat. Beth loses her composure momentarily.

**BETH**

*What?*

**WARREN**

Who's Dr. Klein?

A beat.

**BETH**

What do you mean Dr. Klein?

**CHARISE**

Isn't that our Head of Department?

**BETH**

Oh. Yes. She's away on sabbatical. But no, by boss I meant Professor Morgan.

**CHARISE**

Well tell the old guy thanks for the coke. If he wants a line, I owe him.

**BETH**

There's one condition.

**CHARISE**

Shocking.

**BETH**

We're going to be doing a family dinner, just the five of us. Friday night. 6pm.

**WARREN**

Will there be coke available?

**BETH**

So please make sure you have all your assignments done before then. Late work will not be accepted.

**WARREN**

I'll bring an *hors d'oeuvre*.

**BETH**

No, no. You write. We're having it catered according to your dietary requirements, so something for everyone. Enjoy your night.

Will Kit be there?

**CHARISE**

Of course. You're classmates.

**BETH**

Tell the "big boss" I say thank you.

**CHARISE**

Beth exits. Warren and Charise stare at each other.

Well... goodnight.

**CHARISE**

She opens up the peanut butter and takes a sniff.

I can do anything I want. And they'll never kick me out. So you keep busting your ass. I'll enjoy my natural talent, thanks.

**CHARISE**

She exits. Lights down.



**Scene 8**

Charise, Warren, Kit, and Hal all dine. Beth sits in the room, occasionally topping up their water glasses.

**CHARISE**

Could I get a knife, please?

**BETH**

I assumed you didn't need it for the salad or *amuse-bouche*. I'm sorry.

**WARREN**

The *amuse-bouche* was fantastic.

**HAL**

Dig in, no need to be neat. We made all your favorites, all according to your dietary requirements. I bet they didn't do *that* for you at Oberlin, did they, Lee?

**KIT**

No sir.

**CHARISE**

It's okay. I'm fine. I don't need a knife.

**WARREN**

What did you study at Oberlin, Kit?

**KIT**

Psy—English Literature and Psychology.

**CHARISE**

Why were you so weird about that?

**KIT**

I feel like you'd take me less seriously.

**WARREN**

I had an ex who went to Oberlin. He studied English Lit.

**KIT**

Oh?

**WARREN**

When did you graduate?

2015.

**KIT**

Yeah, he was 2014. Small school, you would've met.

**WARREN**

What's his name?

**KIT**

Preston Lopez.

**WARREN**

Oh, yeah, I think I know...

**KIT**

Let's see if you're Facebook friends..

**WARREN**

Suddenly Hal bangs his crutch on the table.

**HAL**

No phones at dinner! You're getting sloppy with the rules, Elizabeth. Please collect them.

Beth brings a basket, and holds it in front of each of them. Charise's reaction is notably delayed.

**CHARISE** (reluctant to part with her phone)

I'm expecting a call from my mom...

**HAL**

You'll get it back after dinner.

**CHARISE**

What time will that be?

**HAL**

Whenever we wrap up here. Warren, you've hardly touched your gumbo!

**WARREN**

I'm sorry.

**HAL**

Beth made it special, don't be rude.

Cowed, Warren begins to eat.

**HAL**

Now, who's learned something interesting in their studies? Something new that pertains to their novel, their sense of self, anything!

**WARREN**

I read something recently that really resonated with my current work. It's a phrase called—

Suddenly, Charise jumps, gazing at something in the corner of the room in alarm.

**HAL**

Charise?

**CHARISE**

I thought I just saw...

She looks off into the distance, transfixed by something.

**CHARISE**

Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

**HAL**

Continue, please.

**WARREN**

Well, it's a phrase called "nodus tollens." Have you heard of it?

**HAL**

I have.

**KIT**

I haven't.

**WARREN**

It's from this blog I follow called the Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows. It kind of finds a way to articulate really nuanced things that the English language can't wrap its mouth around. Shades of muddier emotions like *schadenfreude* that are hard to explain.

Charise suddenly looks at the ceiling.

**CHARISE**

What's that?

**WARREN**

*Schadenfreude* is the feeling of pleasure you get from seeing someone else in pain. A daily occurrence for you.

But Charise isn't listening. She's looking in horror across the room.

**WARREN**

Are you okay?

**HAL**

Why did this feeling resonate with you?

**WARREN**

Well, the definition is sort of like realizing that the life you're currently living doesn't really fit into the plot of the rest of your story. I think of my life as a plot sometimes, which I'm told is psychopathic, but it helps me organize things. And this feeling, it's meant to express a tonal shift, like if you're watching a romantic comedy and suddenly it veers into horror. But what I'm feeling right now, and what I'm trying to convey with my work, felt lonelier, like a sudden lurch into an unfamiliar place, with the realization that this life wasn't quite what you signed up for and you have no idea how to get back on the track of what you thought your life was supposed to be.

Warren suddenly shuts his eyes. Charise looks wide-eyed at him.

**HAL**

And where does that feeling come from?

Kit picks up a small pad of paper and begins writing down notes.

**WARREN** (increasingly manic)

There's this feeling that I would follow the hero's journey, that things would be difficult for a reason, that I would struggle and overcome and it would all fit into some kind of larger plot. But instead, I feel this nothingness. This meaninglessness. The constant undercurrent of alienation and violence and self-hatred that I haven't lived up to what I always thought I was destined for. And that's why I write, to cope with the disappointment and not being able to cope with the day-to-day.

**HAL**

Tell me about this violence.

**WARREN** (babbling now)

Last year my boyfriend broke up with me because he said "I wasn't capable of being vulnerable" which isn't true, I just didn't like him, but I was living in his apartment in New

**WARREN (cont'd)**

York and he paid for it, so I had to move home to Seattle and get a job at this shitty chain restaurant where I was surrounded by the biggest bunch of losers. People who made their money then went out and spent it all at the bar. But the worst was my boss, *Patty*. She was this stuck up 40 year old with no prospects, making everything a *teachable moment* about folding napkins or up-selling wine, like she was mentoring me. And she thought she was better than me! So one night I was feeling low, feeling like my entire life had been wasted, and these customers with two kids complained about me, saying I misled them about the *crispiness* of the *chicken special*. So I got chewed out by *Patty*, that bitch, and I came over to get the bill, and, get this, they didn't tip me. They didn't even fucking tip me. I looked up and saw them walking to the door. And they looked back at me. They looked back at me and smiled. So I took their empty wine bottle from the table and hurled it at them. The glass shattered on the floor next to them, and they weren't smiling anymore. As I chased them to their car, I could see the glass from the wine had cut their legs. They got in their car and locked the doors. I pounded on the window, showing them that I had the power. The kids were crying, but I kept yelling "Do you know who I am? DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM?" (a beat) ...I don't feel very well.

**CHARISE**

I don't feel well.

**HAL**

We'll get you some fizzy water.

**WARREN (getting up)**

I think I'm going to throw up.

**HAL**

You are not excused.

**CHARISE**

I need to be excused!!

Charise rushes to the door.

**HAL**

Elizabeth, did you—

**BETH**

It's locked.

**CHARISE**

Jesus.

**BETH**

Please, please, continue to eat. This is supposed to be a fun exercise.

**WARREN**

I'm not hungry. I'm not feeling right. I'm not—

**CHARISE**

They've poisoned us. I knew they've poisoned us.

**BETH**

We have not poisoned you! Please, listen—

**CHARISE**

THEN YOU EAT IT!

**BETH**

I'm... allergic to shellfish.

**CHARISE**

Eat his! Or I'll stab you with this fork!

**HAL**

Good! Tell me more about your feelings of violence!

**WARREN**

I want to call my mom. I need to call my mom.

**HAL**

Turn your fright into *our* fright! Scare us so you don't feel scared!

**CHARISE**

I wasn't honest about the neighbor's dog.

Charise begins to shiver.

**CHARISE**

If I tell you the truth will you give me the antidote?

**HAL**

Yes.

**BETH**

Hal.

**HAL**

What?

**BETH**

We haven't poisoned you. We've given you a dose of LSD.

**CHARISE**

No no no no no no no—

**BETH**

It's one of the best ways to bring your internal life into the external in a way that you can manifest, and we can use this material—

**HAL**

We are recording your innermost demons, the rare wild truffles of your soul, and from that you will make a dish that will delight and open the eyes of the sleeping people with no knowledge of what lies beneath the surface of their minds.

**CHARISE**

I'll dissociate.

**BETH**

You'll be safe in this room.

**CHARISE**

I'm not just me anymore.

**HAL**

What do you mean?

**CHARISE**

She's here. In my mind. The neighbor girl... I'm thinking of her.

**HAL**

Tell me about the neighbor girl.

Warren begins to shake violently. Kit goes to him.

**CHARISE**

The neighbor girl was younger than me. I sort of groomed her, half bullied, half mentored. And one day, I dared her, I dared her to kill the dog. And I said, I'll make the sausages, you feed it to her. I didn't have the courage to do the killing. So I convinced her to do it...

**BETH**

And?

**CHARISE**

And a month later she killed herself. Took her dad's gun and shot herself under the chin. But it didn't kill her right away. The bullet missed her brain and ripped through her face. She was laying in the garage for hours, breathing through her split-open face...

**WARREN**

She had the courage to pull the trigger...

**KIT**

What's wrong, Warren? Why are you shaking?

**HAL**

He's on a bad trip because he's starting to perceive reality as it is. A bad deal.

**WARREN**

The story... the suicide...

**BETH**

Are you having suicidal thoughts?

**WARREN**

I just want it all to end.

**HAL**

You want to kill yourself Warren?

**WARREN**

I don't want to go to Hell.

**BETH**

Why would you think you'd go to Hell?

**WARREN**

I'm not a good person. If someone could read the inside of my mind they'd see a bad person.

**BETH**

Then why would you write?

**WARREN**

Purging. Confession. I think I want people to know.

**CHARISE**

Why is the universe against us?

**WARREN**

Us?

**CHARISE** (motioning to herself)

Us.



**HAL**

What are you afraid of in Hell, Warren? What sins will you have waiting there?

**WARREN**

The Old Testament God... waiting to strike us down.

**HAL**

I believe Warren has sex with men, is that correct?

Warren shakes his head, not wanting to discuss it.

**HAL**

Is it because the old testament god calls it an abomination?

**WARREN**

It's not... it's not...

**HAL**

"Oh really? Sodomy? Forcing yourself into the bowels of another man is not an abomination, Warren? You think God would look kindly on that?"

**WARREN**

Stop.

**BETH**

What are you doing?

**HAL**

"You allow other men inside of you, ripping your insides and defiling your God-given duty to become a father and provide for a family."

**BETH**

Hal!

**HAL**

"And you'll burn in Hell because of it."

**KIT**

This is too far.

**HAL**

These are the thoughts in his mind!

**WARREN**

The world is burning. Why should I be a father?

**HAL**

You know the answer.

**WARREN**

Because I need someone to care for me when I'm old. Because at some point I'll have pushed everyone else in my life away from me.

Charise breaks down.

**CHARISE**

I need it to stop. I NEED IT TO STOP.

**BETH**

Do you feel unsafe?

**CHARISE**

I'm in an evil dream.

**BETH**

There's nothing evil here.

**CHARISE**

Please... let me sleep.

**HAL**

Tell me more about the neighbor girl. Who found her lying there after she—

**CHARISE**

I NEED TO SLEEP.

A beat.

**BETH**

I'm going to unlock the isolation room.

**CHARISE**

Isolation room?

**BETH**

A place for you to unwind.

Beth goes and unlocks a door. Kit stands, and starts pacing, uneasy.

**KIT**

This was a mistake.

Quiet.

**HAL**

There's a bed in there, water, crackers, whatever you need.

**BETH**

And a pen and paper. Maybe you need to get out of your own head and create something. A bad trip can be overcome if you're drawing, or writing, or engaged in some kind of physical activity to get your mind off of...

**HAL**

Hal suddenly smiles.

I just want to sleep.

**CHARISE**

Beth ushers Charise into the isolation room. Hal turns to Warren, who is staring off into space.

Go with her. Take a lie down.

**HAL**

Hal, what are you doing?

**BETH**

Seeing what happens.

**HAL**

What do you mean?

**WARREN**

The best sex I ever had was when I was on a bad trip. Made one of my best chapters.

**HAL**

Why would you...?

**WARREN**

Release the horror you feel. Get your catharsis. Advance the plot!

**HAL**

Warren suddenly begins to sob. Hal and Beth look thunderstruck.

Warren?

**HAL**

**WARREN**

That's what this is all about, isn't it?

**BETH**

What's all about?

**WARREN**

Conversion therapy. That's what this is.

**BETH**

What? No!

**WARREN**

It was too good to be true, I knew it, I knew it, I knew it.

**BETH**

No! No. This is just an exercise to get you down to your core—

But Warren has knelt at a chair, and buried his face in his hands. Beth and Hal seem stunned.

**WARREN**

You try having a glass heart and having it smashed over and over and over and tell me you wouldn't be warped, you wouldn't be defective! I wish I could remove these parts from myself, I wish I could kill them and just fit...

Kit looks at Beth with cold fury.

**BETH**

Kit, this isn't what we...

**KIT**

I told you! I told you he wasn't!

**BETH**

Kit, let's take this outside.

**KIT**

It's fucked! All of this!

Kit goes to the door, and pulls out a ring of keys.

**KIT (to Hal)**

You told me this would be ethical! You want to spend your last years pushing two innocent people to the brink of insanity? I was fine with you humiliating me, dehumanizing me, using me for cheap labor—

**BETH**

Hal's gone out of control. He's lost sight of—

Kit unlocks the door, and turns to Beth.

**KIT**

Do you know how long I've dreamed of working with you? How much it meant to me?

**BETH**

Kit, please, not here.

**KIT**

A year ago I would've done it for free. But give up my integrity, my silence, my humanity? For what? A *stipend*? For my name on a publication? For... THESE ARE HUMAN BEINGS!!!

**HAL**

If you walk out, you're never coming back!

Kit swings open the door and looks back at Beth.

**KIT**

It's not them that are fucked up, it's you!

Kit exits, leaving the silence, except for Warren's sobs and the sound of Charise hyperventilating from the next room. Lights down.  
(*Optional Act Break.*)

**Scene 9**

Hal sits in his office with Beth, Charise and Warren.

**HAL**

I'd appreciate if you'd hold your questions until the end, and please let us speak.

**BETH**

We promise there will be plenty of time.

**HAL**

That particular exercise was one that once worked very well under circumstances that were slightly different.

**BETH**

We made the erroneous assumption, based on Charise's drug use, that you were both more seasoned than you are. And that's our fault completely.

**HAL**

Apologies are not something I take lightly. As I demand authenticity from you, I expect the same for myself.

**BETH**

Because of our behavior, we take responsibility for the fact that Kit has left us. Kit did not consume the affected food in the *amuse-bouche*, causing them to feel alienated and like an outsider from the program.

**HAL**

No doubt you will be aware of an existing feeling of otherness in the program.

**BETH**

For your suffering, we have decided to award a bursary of 4,500 dollars, the remaining money that we would've spent on Kit, to each of you.

**HAL**

With our humblest apologies.

**BETH**

We love having both of you here, and we hope you know we want nothing but the best for you.

**HAL**

We now open the floor to questions.

Warren and Charise exchange glances.

Well...

**WARREN**

May we be candid now?

**CHARISE**

Each of them pulls out a stack of paper.

**WARREN**

We were able discuss the events of the weekend...

**CHARISE**

And decided that we actually thought the exercise was extremely informative.

**BETH**

You... you did?

**WARREN**

Yes. *And* we spent the rest of our weekend taking notes from what we experienced and turning it into pages.

**CHARISE**

And Warren's pages are even good.

**WARREN**

Not as good as Charise's.

Hal and Beth are dumbstruck.

**WARREN**

And as far as the news of Kit... we can all be candid here.

**CHARISE**

Fucking worst writer in North America.

**WARREN**

Maybe in the hemisphere.

**CHARISE**

So all in all, we should be thanking you.

**WARREN**

But we welcome the stipend obviously.

**CHARISE**

And we hope you like what you read.

A beat. Then Hal laughs.

**HAL**

You two... you are full of twists and turns!

**BETH**

So gracious!

**HAL**

You wanted Kit out from the beginning!

**WARREN**

You think I wanted my work going out to agents alongside the fucking Iranian *Princess Diaries*?

They all share a relieved laugh.

**BETH**

So you're still in?

**WARREN**

More than ever.

A moment.

**HAL**

Let's read those pages, then, if we were so helpful!

**WARREN**

I brought copies.

Warren begins to distribute copies.

**WARREN**

First of all, I've changed it to first person, and it's added a completely new dimension. Is Harper a reliable narrator? I also realized during our exercise that I was putting pressure on myself to sort out the middle of my novel when I hadn't even sorted out the beginning. So I rewrote the opening. It's now set in a conversion therapy camp in the 1990s.

**HAL**

You got that from our exercise?

**WARREN**

Well I had a freakout that I was a part of some plot to convert me, and perfect paranoia is perfect perception, so...



**CHARISE**

I've read it, and all the sort of psycho messianic *Godspell* bullshit is really fixed by adding atmosphere, place.

**WARREN**

And, thanks to some chats with Charise, I've set it in Omaha.

**CHARISE**

I've tried to help him grasp the verisimilitude of the Midwest, a Christian family from the Great Plains—

**WARREN**

And all the characters fit right into this new frame. The teacher character is now a youth pastor, the cousin is now a fellow homosex... what's wrong?

A beat.

**BETH**

What?

**WARREN**

Why do you both look so... I don't know... let down?

**HAL**

What? Not at all! Go on!

**CHARISE**

Yes you do. You look kind of disappointed for some reason.

**BETH**

Not at all!

**CHARISE**

I can smell bullshit.

**BETH**

We're thrilled! Thrilled to see you being so...

**HAL** (to Beth)

Helpful to each other.

**WARREN**

Is that a problem?

**BETH**

Please go on, you're misreading the situation.

**HAL**

Go on! Read the opening lines for us.

**WARREN**

Well... so his first disciples come from the camp, so I decided to—

**HAL**

Don't explain, just read!

**WARREN**

Okay. "He stood on the dais in the shadow of a giant wooden cross. This shadow ran from the platform across the faces of the fifteen young men perched on roughly hewn benches in the middle of the forest. He was reciting scripture, yet he noticed how their eyes, once glazed, now burned with attention as the words left his lips—"

Beth, who has been watching with some concern, suddenly departs from the room.

**WARREN**

Is it bad?

**HAL**

It's excellent. Go on, keep reading, please.

**CHARISE**

You call us out when we're acting full of bullshit. Why won't you level with us?

**HAL**

Because your bullshit sensors are not as finely tuned as ours. Your thoughts on the text, Charise.

**CHARISE**

Fuck. Okay. Well, from what I've read, beyond those 45 words, I seem to feel that he rushes into the plot a little. The scene starts with the main character openly questioning the leadership of the camp, and it doesn't give us any time to get a sense of the status quo at—

Beth comes back into the room.

**BETH**

Hal, could I see you for one second?

**HAL**

No, Elizabeth, we're in the middle of a lesson.

**BETH**

It's just for a second.

Excuse me. Apologies.

**HAL**

Hal gets up and slowly makes his way to the door.

Make us a pot of tea.

**HAL**

Hal exits. Charise and Warren look at each other.  
A long, slow beat.

What the hell?

**CHARISE**

Do you think they think we fucked?

**WARREN**

Why would you think that?

**CHARISE**

I don't know. They seem worried we're getting to be... friends?

**WARREN**

We're not friends, Warren.

**CHARISE**

A smile. It's unclear if she's joking.

Lights down.

**Scene 10**

Beth's bare office. She's holding office hours with Warren.

I'm glad we're meeting.

**WARREN**

Me too.

**BETH**

I've been polishing the first thirty pages of *Nodus Tollens* all week.

**WARREN**

Wonderful.

**BETH**

Yeah. I really think they're ready to go off to Hal's agent.

**WARREN**

A beat.

Ah. Well. That might be a little... premature.

**BETH**

Oh. And why is that?

**WARREN** (suddenly icy)

We're frankly a little worried about you, Warren.

**BETH**

You told me my voice was unique... you told me I had /an awareness!

**WARREN**

You seem to have had a period of benign adjustment, but the administrators are concerned about some of the things you said during our exercise last week.

**BETH**

You remember them?

**WARREN**

We record everything. I need to keep a diligent log to ensure I don't lose any details, and it seems that you have been showing troubling patterns.

**BETH**

Troubling how?

**WARREN**

May I be frank?

**BETH**

Sure?

**WARREN**

Do you have a lot of feelings?

**BETH**

Feelings?

**WARREN**

Do you feel a lot of emotions?

**BETH**

Yeah. Of course.

**WARREN**

Beth seems surprised by this.

**BETH**

What emotion would you say you experience most of the time?

**WARREN**

I mean... sort of contentment. I guess.

**BETH**

Let me clarify. What extreme emotion?

**WARREN**

Why isn't Prof. Morgan here?

**BETH**

This is less of a creative meeting, and more of an administrative one.

**WARREN**

I'm sorry, I don't understand... am... am I in trouble?

**BETH**

No, no, no. I'm going about this all wrong...

She types in a password to her computer. She mistypes it.

**BETH**

I always get nervous when people watch me type my password... one more time.

She tries again.

**BETH**

Okay. Yes. There was a quote that stood out to me. I'm going to read it back to you. These are your words: "You try having a glass heart and having it smashed over and over and over and tell me you wouldn't be warped, you wouldn't be defective."

**WARREN**

I said that?

**BETH**

Do you think you have a glass heart, Warren?

**WARREN**

I've... had some heartbreaks, if that's what you mean.

**BETH**

But a glass heart. You have a lot of feelings then?

**WARREN**

I...

**BETH**

Would you like some more LSD?

**WARREN**

I'm not sure if you're joking.

**BETH**

Please be candid Warren. I know it seems silly, but we're afraid we've been approaching your development all wrong. Maybe you are writing the wrong kind of book.

**WARREN**

I try to cover up my feelings. I was a sensitive kid. Things would make me cry all the time. A neighbor would move, I'd cry. I'd lose a game, I'd cry. I'd read *Bridge to Terabithia*, waterworks. And as I grew up, I realized life was really cruel. And it kind of broke me. A lot of people broke me. So I had to build defenses. I had to learn not to feel. I had to separate my emotions from myself. And that's the casing around my glass heart I guess. I don't want to feel anything if I can avoid it. I'd rather be someone without empathy than someone who feels too much.

**BETH**

How do you feel about *Nodus Tollens*? As a piece?

**WARREN**

What about it?

**BETH**

Would you ever abandon it?

**WARREN**

Do you think I'm writing the wrong thing?

**BETH**

What do you think about it?

**WARREN**

I think it's the best thing I've ever written.

**BETH**

Would anything stop you from completing it?

**WARREN**

What do you mean?

**BETH**

Say that glass heart of yours got another smash. What would you do?

**WARREN**

Giving up on a book is like killing yourself. I'd kill myself if I knew what I'd be missing. That's the trick isn't it? You're so close to calling it quits on a book, escaping from all the anguish and anxiety and false starts, but there's this little nag in the back of your head. What if it suddenly gets better? What if I finally hit that good plot point, that good character, that twist? What if I was only days from a breakthrough? Days from being saved. And that's why I keep trying. A glimmer of hope that things could all turn around. That's the thing isn't it? How do you keep hoping for things to get better when there are so many unfinished drafts sitting in your hard drive? To just give up and be free from all of the exasperation, you'd also be missing something. If I left an unpublished novel behind, it would be like killing myself without knowing if someday it would be discovered and...

**BETH**

If it became successful?

**WARREN**

Exactly. Why would I suffer through the likely outcome that I'll fail, but also why wouldn't I want to know if I'd succeeded and created something that would outlive me? That's the thing. I want to create something that will outlive me.

**BETH**

So you need to die knowing that others see your work as a masterpiece.

**WARREN**

Right. Then I can die happy.

**BETH**

So it's all about you knowing.

**WARREN**

Exactly. Then all the fractures would be worth it.

**BETH**

Given the choice between living and potentially never being successful or dying without having seen the effects of your posthumous fame, which would you choose?

**WARREN**

So in this scenario... there's a chance I may never be discovered if I stay alive?

**BETH**

Yes. But there's a chance you will, and you'll see yourself celebrated.

**WARREN**

And if I die...

**BETH**

You'll be guaranteed your work will be loved and read by millions.

**WARREN**

For how long?

**BETH**

You'll be immortal.

**WARREN**

Shit. I'd take that.

**BETH**

You think you're very important don't you?

**WARREN**

I just need to make my pain into something. Otherwise I can't make sense of it.

Beth studies him.

**BETH**

So you really just want to write.

**WARREN**

It's the only way I've found to cope with the pain of the world.

Lights down.



**Scene 11**

A snowy day. Light streams through the hallway windows. A rummaging on the doors, and then Kit falls into the hallway, followed by Charise. Kit tries to leave, Charise blocks the door.

**CHARISE**

What the fuck are you doing here?

**KIT**

I'm running late, I really have to—

**CHARISE**

You left! They said you left.

**KIT**

I did leave. I couldn't handle the program.

**CHARISE**

They said you went back to Detroit.

**KIT**

I'm back getting some of my materials, some of my belongings.

**CHARISE**

What's in your bag?

**KIT**

What?

**CHARISE**

You said you were back to get some things. What's in your bag?

**KIT**

Just some books and stuff.

**CHARISE**

Empty it, please.

**KIT**

No.

**CHARISE**

You know I'm a little paranoid about liars, I just want to make sure you're telling the truth.

I'm not a liar.

**KIT**

Cool. Empty your bag.

**CHARISE**

Kit is torn between running out the door and acquiescing, then opens their bag slowly for a look inside.

See. Just books.

**KIT**

Those aren't novels.

**CHARISE**

Non-fiction.

**KIT**

Let me see those textbooks.

**CHARISE**

I'm really late.

**KIT**

For what? You leave the program then suddenly you're a student here on campus?

**CHARISE**

I'm doing a research intensive with a professor.

**KIT**

In what?

**CHARISE**

English.

**KIT**

Then what the fuck are you reading about science for?

**CHARISE**

I'm not.

**KIT**

I saw your books—

**CHARISE**

**KIT**

It's nice to see you, Charise. Don't tell Dr. Klein—

**CHARISE**

WARREN!

**KIT**

I'll text you both!

**CHARISE**

Don't you dare—

But Kit has scrambled out the door. Charise takes a breath, then opens the door and screams after them:

**CHARISE**

You're a bad writer!

Warren enters in a bathrobe.

**WARREN**

What?

**CHARISE**

Were you fucking asleep?

**WARREN**

Yeah.

**CHARISE**

It's 1:30.

**WARREN**

I have a cold.

**CHARISE**

I saw someone very interesting strolling around campus on my way back from the gym.

**WARREN**

I don't give a shit, Charise.

**CHARISE**

You should.

I'm going back to sleep.

**WARREN**

Kit.

**CHARISE**

Kit's gone.

**WARREN**

No, they're not. Because I just saw them walking to class with a fucking backpack like a freshman biology student.

**CHARISE**

Don't wake me up again.

**WARREN** (*starting to leave*)

Go outside! They're right there—

**CHARISE**

We've been texting. Kit's back in Detroit working at a book shop—

**WARREN**

I saw them!

**CHARISE**

You see things.

**WARREN**

Are you calling me a liar?

**CHARISE**

More like a "master of fiction." See ya later, Charise.

**WARREN**

You're the only person I have who understands and you refuse to see it!

**CHARISE**

I like that it's fucked up here, okay? It's the only thing that feels real in this world.

**WARREN**

Something is going on here.

**CHARISE**

Says the girl who thought they poisoned us.

**WARREN**

They spiked our food with LSD.

**CHARISE**

Yeah, for art!

**WARREN**

Do you know how crazy you sound?

**CHARISE**

Do you know how ungrateful you sound? This is the best and the weirdest writing program in the world and you act like you didn't expect weird things to happen!

**WARREN**

I didn't expect someone who is supposed to be in Detroit to be rushing to class!

**CHARISE**

Why would Kit lie to me? Why would they be wandering around campus?

**WARREN**

Exactly the questions I want your help answering.

**CHARISE**

Charise, you're my friend, but you're kind of...

**WARREN**

A drama queen?

**CHARISE**

I was going to say an unreliable narrator.

**WARREN**

Charise takes off her sweatshirt and screams into it.

Why are you always so meta??

**CHARISE**

Because that's the frame of mind I need to be in to win in this program.

**WARREN**

It's not about winning.

**CHARISE**

I don't know what else anything could possibly be about.

**WARREN**

Warren exits. Charise goes to the window and gazes out, looking for signs of Kit.

Beth enters, holding a coffee mug.

**BETH**

I'm sorry... I couldn't help but overhear you and Warren having a little tiff.

**CHARISE**

No offense, but you are the last person I want to see right now.

**BETH**

Okay.

**CHARISE**

Don't guilt me, looking wounded. You're not as innocent as you pretend to be.

**BETH**

Do you want to talk about anything?

**CHARISE**

With you, no.

**BETH**

Did I hear you say you saw Kit?

**CHARISE**

What's your deal? Ears everywhere, always eavesdropping and taking little notes, appearing everywhere and always looking so timid.

**BETH**

I want to see you all succeed. You're like my—

**CHARISE**

Don't give me that "you're like my kids" bullshit.

**BETH**

Kit is back collecting their belongings and meeting with a professor about a transfer into a different graduate program.

**CHARISE**

Why the fuck are you drinking out of a Harvard mug?

**BETH**

Oh. My husband and I visited last April. It was always a dream of mine to attend Harvard.

Sucks you didn't.

**CHARISE**

Yes. It does suck.

**BETH**

Sucks you're just an administrator.

**CHARISE**

I like my work.

**BETH**

Where did you go to college?

**CHARISE**

University of Maine at Farmington.

**BETH**

A beat.

**CHARISE** (suddenly very kind)

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to... my mom went to state school too. First generation in our family. What did you study there?

**BETH**

American History.

**CHARISE**

Really! What was your focus?

**BETH**

American involvement in the First World War.

**CHARISE**

I love that period.

**BETH**

Me too.

**CHARISE**

Teddy Roosevelt was such a great leader during that war.

**BETH**

He was.

**CHARISE**

Why do you work here if you studied history then?

**BETH**

I love Hal's books.

**CHARISE**

What's your favorite?

**BETH**

All of them. *Unbearable Silence*, mostly.

**CHARISE**

Isn't Tom Rawlings an incredible protagonist?

**BETH**

Let's talk about your favorite book.

**CHARISE**

What's your favorite quality of Tom Rawlings?

**BETH**

He's very loyal.

**CHARISE**

And he's also a fucking liar.

A beat.

**CHARISE**

Roosevelt wasn't president during World War I. Wilson was. And *Unbearable Silence* has a female protagonist. I know this because Warren is always going on about it.

**BETH**

It seems you caught me on a bad day.

**CHARISE**

Yeah, no shit.

**BETH**

I get very nervous when subjected to questioning.

**CHARISE**

I get violent when people lie to my fucking face.



**BETH**

I get scared for students who make threats to faculty.

She smiles, and looks up at a security camera.

**BETH**

Would you like a cup of tea?

**CHARISE**

No thanks.

**BETH**

Your performance review needs to happen anyway. Why don't you come into my office and have a cup of tea with me?

**CHARISE**

I don't like tea.

**BETH**

How about coffee? Hot chocolate? Vanilla porter?

**CHARISE**

Will you go light on the LSD?

Beth laughs.

**BETH**

I insist.

Beth and Charise exit.

**Scene 12**

Inside Beth's office. Charise is texting, not looking up at Beth.

**CHARISE**

Where the fuck is Hal?

**BETH**

He's unwell.

**CHARISE**

I checked his quarters. All the lights are off.

**BETH**

That's because he's resting.

**CHARISE**

Is he in the building?

**BETH**

Maybe. Maybe not.

**CHARISE**

You are all such goddamn liars.

Charise laughs unkindly.

**BETH**

Who are you texting?

**CHARISE**

None of your business.

**BETH**

You know I can check.

**CHARISE**

Be my guest.

Beth pulls out a laptop, types in a password. Charise suddenly shows Beth her text thread.

**CHARISE**

I was texting Warren.

Beth puts down her laptop. Charise eyes it.

**BETH** (reading)

“Remember that thing that Lou Credence does at the end of *The Children’s Wake*? Pull. Now. Please. Emergency.” Well. What does that mean?

**CHARISE**

Warren and I have been re-reading Hal’s books. We want to try to impress him with how well-researched we are.

**BETH**

What does “pull now” mean?

**CHARISE**

You’ve read his books. You know.

**BETH**

I’m forgetting that part.

**CHARISE**

Jokes. I wanted him to pull it from the library shelves for me. I need it ASAP.

**BETH**

Ah. Of course.

**CHARISE**

You worried?

**BETH**

Please don’t project onto me. I couldn’t help but notice from your pages that you suffer from tremendous paranoia.

**CHARISE**

Yeah, no. I don’t.

**BETH**

Your main character seems to always be thinking that people are plotting the worst, plotting against her—

**CHARISE**

Why are you gas-lighting me?

**BETH**

Is that what you think I’m doing?

**CHARISE**

Ask Kit. They’re the one with psychology textbooks in their backpack.

**BETH**

What textbooks are you referencing?

**CHARISE**

Cut the shit. Tell me what's going on here.

**BETH**

There's nothing going on here.

**CHARISE**

Why is Kit carrying around textbooks about—?

**BETH**

It's what they studied in undergrad.

**CHARISE**

I saw what they were studying.

A beat.

**BETH**

Can I be frank, Charise?

**CHARISE**

About fucking time.

**BETH**

We don't often have people with your awareness in this program.

**CHARISE**

K.

**BETH**

Professor Morgan and I believe your future is unlimited... if you can get out of your own way.

Charise checks her phone.

**CHARISE**

And how could I go about that?

**BETH**

If you want the truth from me, I'm going to need something from you.

**CHARISE**

And what is that?

I'm going to need your loyalty.

**BETH**

Yeah, I don't give my loyalty to state school administrators.

**CHARISE**

Is that what you think I am?

**BETH (with sudden mirth)**

Beth takes a long sip out of her Harvard mug. Charise watches her, and something clicks.

I...

**CHARISE (realizing)**

You really are so very promising.

**BETH (smiling)**

Oh my god.

**CHARISE**

And I'm going to be able to help you. But we need you.

**BETH**

What are you going to...

**CHARISE**

I need you to understand...

**BETH**

Oh my god...

**CHARISE**

And to trust me.

**BETH**

How could I trust...?

**CHARISE**

A sudden sound of a fire alarm. Beth is panicked.

**BETH**

Let's go!

**BETH**

Beth ushers Charise out of the office.

Wait, I forgot my backpack!

**CHARISE** (off)

Hurry!!

**BETH** (off)

Charise returns, sees Beth's laptop, cracks it open.

It hasn't returned to the password screen.

She starts to scan through files. She knows what she's looking for now.

And she finds it.

She quickly takes pictures on her phone.

Charise?

**BETH** (offstage)

Coming...

**CHARISE**

She stops. She's found the thing that makes sense.

She takes a picture.

**CHARISE!**

**BETH**

I'm coming... *Dr. Klein.*

**CHARISE** (to herself)

Beth returns, and stands and watches Charise examining her laptop.

She stands, unreadable.

Finally, Charise closes the laptop, turns around and is face to face with Beth.

They stare at each other as the fire alarm blares.

Beth smiles.

Lights down.

**Scene 13**

Warren stands in his dorm room with a suitcase.  
He is distraught. Charise enters.

**CHARISE**

Where the fuck have you been?

She notices him packing.

**CHARISE**

What are you doing?

**WARREN**

Packing.

**CHARISE**

Why?

**WARREN** (with pure hatred in his voice)

They're going to kick me out of the program.

Warren holds up a hand, covered in blue ink.  
Charise starts to laugh.

**CHARISE**

Is that from the fire alarm? I thought ink was an urban legend—

**WARREN**

No, it's clearly not. And they're going to know it was me who pulled it. Because you were trying to get me expelled—

**CHARISE**

I was trying to get answers.

**WARREN**

—when I thought you needed help, I thought you were in trouble, because I cared about you—

**CHARISE**

We *are* in trouble, they're NOT kicking you out—

**WARREN**

You've been jealous and trying to sabotage me since the day we met.

**CHARISE**

Warren, listen to me.

**WARREN**

I'm going to ruin your life.

**CHARISE**

Warren.

**WARREN**

I was stupid to think I cared about you. I was stupid to think we were friends, when all you ever wanted was to get ahead, and I'm going to make my sole mission to destroy you at every turn, to make sure you are never, ever published—

**CHARISE**

NONE OF US ARE GETTING PUBLISHED.

A beat.

**CHARISE**

They're not trying to help us because they think we're great writers. They're studying us because they think we're psychopaths.

A beat. Warren laughs.

**WARREN**

You *are* a psychopath.

**CHARISE**

I might be. But I don't think you are.

**WARREN**

Do you... always have to be superior to me?

**CHARISE**

Warren. I'll let you break my computer, delete all my files. None of it matters. I just need you to listen to me.

**WARREN**

You are out of your mind.

**CHARISE**

I'll devote every moment I have to helping you get published if you just listen to me for one second.

A beat. Warren sighs.

**WARREN**

What, Charise?



**CHARISE**

When you pulled the fire alarm, it was so I could get into Dr. Klein's computer—

**WARREN**

Who?

**CHARISE**

Beth, she's... shit, just let me show you.

Charise puts a flash drive into her laptop.

**WARREN**

Where did you get that?

**CHARISE**

I stole it from Beth's computer. It's a grant proposal.

**WARREN**

This program is run on grant-funding, dumbass.

Charise presses a button on the computer. Lights up on Beth, dressed professionally. She has an air of authority about her that she's never had before.

**WARREN**

That's Beth?

**BETH (onscreen)**

I'm honored to be considered for this distinguished award. My research is one of the best kept secrets in the field of clinical psychology and this funding would allow me to continue with this important work.

**WARREN**

Clinical psychology?

**BETH**

As Dr. Blumenthal mentioned, my name is Dr. Elizabeth Klein and I was, until my dismissal, a senior lecturer in psychology at John's Hopkins University. For those of you who have a taste for controversy, you may have heard my name. I've been called a pioneer. I've been called a puppeteer. I've been called as manipulative as the subjects I study. The experiment I'm here to talk about today is called Cognitive Writing Self-Analysis, CWSA. Virginia Woolf once said, "every secret of a writer's soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind, is written large in his works." I believe this to be fundamentally true. As many of you know, over the past six months we've conducted a thorough psychological analysis of two patients with narcissistic personality disorder with psychopathic tendencies. Our research is controversial yet groundbreaking in two ways: first, the patients are not

**BETH (cont'd)**

aware that they are being studied. Instead, we create an environment that appeals to their sense of superiority. We make them believe they have been selected for the world's most elite—and fictional— writing workshop.

**WARREN (over Beth)**

No. No. No. No. No.

**BETH**

This allows us to create an environment where the subjects compete to be the most candid, the most shocking, and—ultimately—the most revealing of what would typically be their most closely-guarded and protected thoughts. We have pages and pages of writings from the patients describing arson, brutal rapes, violence towards animals, and the murder and dismemberment of other humans. This allows them to play out their fantasies in a nonjudgmental, non-clinical environment, where they are in fact lauded for revealing their inner-character. This environment normalizes in containment what in normal society would be considered anti-social, despicable behavior. The final product—a portfolio of their writing—provides more material for analysis in months than other psychologists harvest in years. Because we encourage them to write about their own experiences, we find candid confessions in plain sight. They often identify their own pathologies through stories of childhood traumas and play out fetishizing scenarios through the characters of their invention. It comes down to the question, then: if we have the true blueprint to the mind of a psychopath, can we understand them? Empathize with them? Guide them into being good, even without their knowledge? Outsmart them into living good moral lives?

Warren begins pacing.

**BETH**

To my critics, this research is personal. I was married to a man whom I discovered to be a psychopath for 10 years. After two children, thousands of dollars of therapy, and unimaginable emotional abuse, I learned what my husband was. And I faced a choice. Do I raise a family with the man I thought I loved whose natural disposition is to psychologically abuse me or do I leave him, and suffer the full wrath of a psychopath? In my newest book, you will discover the choice I made. In *Loving Those Who Cannot* I explain how to manage your child, husband, boss, brother, barista, even, who you suspect may lack the constraints of human decency that most of us have been blessed with. One in one hundred people are classified as a psychopath. You know one. But you don't have to abandon them. Because like a virus or a cheetah or an octopus or any other living thing, they are programmed a certain way. They did not choose this life. And when you see into their very core, their vast emptiness, you cannot help but to feel pity. And that's why I've done everything I can to make them believe that they are in control, that they are loved, that they are important. Because I don't want my husband to hurt unnecessarily. But I don't want him to hurt others, as he is programmed to do.

Warren closes the laptop.

**WARREN**

I don't think I'm a psychopath.

**CHARISE**

Of course you don't.

**WARREN**

Are you?

Charise shrugs.

**CHARISE**

Different standards seem to be applied. I am what they say I am. I was checked into a looney bin for a few months last year. They told me I had borderline, but, I said "fuck you, I don't trust doctors." So maybe I'm completely fine. Or yeah, maybe I am a psychopath. It's just another way for this world to tell me my voice isn't worthy.

She suddenly laughs.

**WARREN**

What?

**CHARISE**

Those questions, from our interview. They were the same questions they asked me in the hospital.

**WARREN**

Oh my God... you're right.

**CHARISE**

They sent you too?

**WARREN**

My mom checked me into a place. A year ago. She had been reading my journals, my writing and she said "this is really concerning stuff." Like she knows anything! And I had kind of had a breakdown at school a few years earlier, and she finally said enough is enough and made me go "cool off for a bit." But the doctors didn't tell me anything was wrong with me. I told them, "look, I'm not a bad person, I just don't know how to handle my emotions sometimes. I'm an artist, I need to channel them into art." They believed me. Told me I was sensitive. I showed them my writing. They told me it was great. Outstanding. Should be published! It's the first time I actually felt seen. They told me about this program, they told me that writing was going to make me healthy again. They let me out. I applied here, I got in. I was so excited, I was filled with—joy. Joy! It was real. I do feel things. I'm feeling things right now!

What are you feeling?  
**CHARISE**

Anger. No, not anger. Fury.  
**WARREN**

You are?  
**CHARISE**

Yeah. Yeah! She used us. She used us!  
**WARREN**

They.  
**CHARISE**

A beat.  
**WARREN**

Kit?  
**CHARISE**

No... no... they, as in Hal and Dr. Klein. But Kit too! Kit's just as guilty.  
**WARREN**

What?  
**CHARISE**

They weren't a writer. Kit was their assistant. A Ph.D student in psychology.  
**WARREN**

There to... observe us?  
**CHARISE**

Yes.  
**WARREN**

No wonder they were such a fucking bad writer.  
**CHARISE**

And Hal roasting them was all an act.  
**WARREN**

Hal. No. Hal wouldn't be a part of this. For what?  
**CHARISE**

I'm about to break your heart. The Guardian Books Podcast. Yesterday.

She plays the interview from the computer.

**HAL** (from the computer)

“Well, I’d say the book is a thriller, yes, but it’s more literary. More meta than anything I’ve written. It’s a novel based on the struggles of two writers in an hostile academic environment.”

**INTERVIEWER 1** (from the computer)

“You’ve never described your works as literary before.”

**HAL** (from the computer)

“Maybe it’s because I’m staring down the barrel of death. And I want this book to be the one they remember me by.”

**INTERVIEWER 1** (from the computer)

“Barrel of death...?”

**HAL**

“For you listeners, you can’t see but I have damned crutches! Damned fucking crutches that comes with the blessed package of advanced Parkinson’s. Therefore, my novel *The Glass Heart* will be my final work. My legacy work.”

**WARREN**

No.

**INTERVIEWER 1** (from the computer)

“Where did you get the inspiration for this novel?”

**HAL**

“It’s a memory of my own writing school days. The viciousness of the writing world, the Darwinian survival to be relevant, skilled, and, most of all, published.”

This is too much for Warren. He chucks the laptop on the floor, but the podcast still plays.

**WARREN**

They’ll never publish us now.

**CHARISE**

They were never going to publish us. They were never going to let us into the elite circles. We’re crazy, to them. Institutions can be psychopathic as they want. But individuals can’t.

**WARREN**

Maybe we still can. Maybe—

**CHARISE**

You're a mental patient now. On record. No one wants to read the novel of a mental patient!

**WARREN**

But... they told me I was a good writer. I am a good writer!

**CHARISE**

You're a... good storyteller, Warren.

**WARREN**

What's that supposed to mean—

**CHARISE**

And there's more than one way to tell a story.

A beat. The podcast is still playing.

**HAL**

"My years on the national stage have been happy ones, but I'm ready to bookend my career with something different. I've been lucky enough to be doing some adjunct teaching at my alma mater, and that sort of easy lifestyle bodes well for a writer—"

**WARREN**

Like a podcast.

**CHARISE**

Yeah.

**WARREN**

I can read my novel as chapters on a podcast.

**CHARISE**

Not your novel. Forget your novel. We need to teach them a lesson.

**WARREN**

I don't think people are going to listen to us griping about Hal Morgan on "RevengePod."

**CHARISE**

Not griping. You know true crime podcasts?

**WARREN**

Yeah?

**CHARISE**

I think it's about time for a *true* crime podcast.

True crime? **WARREN**

“Killing Hal.” **CHARISE**

Well, not literally— **WARREN**

Charise pulls out a flash drive.

**CHARISE**  
They recorded us. Kit has some. I have some. Chapter by chapter, we play Kit’s recordings. And we end with an episode where we kill Hal. Live.

You’re joking. **WARREN**

I am not. **CHARISE**

I would never kill anyone. **WARREN**

Then you’re the lamest psychopath ever born. **CHARISE**

And neither could you. **WARREN**

Of course I could. **CHARISE**

Then you do it. **WARREN**

I’ll kill the doctor. You kill the author. **CHARISE**

I’m not going to murder my hero, you fucking idiot. **WARREN**

**CHARISE**  
Isn’t that part of the hero’s journey of development? The son must kill the father, the hero must kill the mentor, the writer must kill their darlings.

**WARREN**

Yeah, well, surprise, but even if we did post it, they'd take it down. If we killed them and put it online, they don't let content like that just get downloaded on iTunes for 99 cents—

**CHARISE**

We're not just killing Hal Morgan on Apple FUCKING Podcasts, Ruth! We put it on the dark web, where that shit spreads like a virus. You can get a following, then you can read your book to thousands, millions of people as the dude who killed Hal Morgan. That shit will live forever.

**WARREN**

No. No. I could get a job. Yeah, a normal job, and I could write.

**CHARISE**

NO! If you don't go straight into an institution, which you probably will, Hal and Klein will still block you at every turn.

**WARREN**

Then I'll self-publish, and someone would read it. Someone would read my work.

**CHARISE**

Self-? *Self-publish*?? LOOK WHAT THEY'VE DONE TO US! They've killed us, or as good as! They've made us lab rats and poked and prodded and stoked our hopes and exploited our fears for their own profit, for their own novel, for their own careers. We're raw material to them! If you sit back and take this, you're letting yourself be oppressed again and again. Like the Church did to you. Like your restaurant manager did to you. Like the fucking psychiatric elites did to us. If you want us to be fucked, again and again and lobotomized in silence, in anonymity, in darkness, do nothing. Let them give the final blow to your little glass heart. Or do you want to go out with a giant FUCK YOU that will change the world?

Warren sits in silence. Charise sits next to him.

**CHARISE**

You wanted your story to be a great one. Our novels aren't our masterpieces. It's our lives! Our ability to create change. To set wheels into motion. Or to end something.

**WARREN**

All I wanted was to write a novel.

**CHARISE**

Why would you write a novel... when you could BE novel.

Lights down.



**Scene 14**

Hal's office. He sits, looking old and frail for a moment, reading a manuscript over his glasses.

A knock.

**HAL**

Come in, Charise.

Warren enters.

**HAL**

Ah. I'm supposed to be meeting with Charise, just now...

**WARREN**

We swapped spots. She's with Doctor Klein.

**HAL**

That's not on the arranged schedule. You're supposed to be meeting with...

A pause. He realizes what Warren's said.

**WARREN**

With who?

**HAL**

With Beth.

**WARREN**

Dr. Klein, you mean.

**HAL**

Take a seat then.

**WARREN**

I'll stand.

**HAL**

It's rude to stand, with someone who isn't capable of standing.

**WARREN**

I don't know what you're capable of.

Warren produces a recording device and puts it down on the chair opposite Hal.

**HAL**

That isn't acceptable.

**WARREN**

It was okay for Kit to record our sessions. Why not me?

**HAL**

You must think you're quite clever, and you are probably quite in need of answers...

**WARREN**

Not clever to you. Crazy. Psychopathic.

**HAL**

Sit down.

**WARREN**

Where's my manuscript?

**HAL**

It's with Beth. Dr. Klein. The prearranged meeting, you see. There's a reason for these organizational—

**WARREN**

I'm never getting published, am I?

**HAL**

You are.

**WARREN**

From you stealing my work then?

**HAL**

Your work. Your life isn't your work. You don't own intellectual property to your life, Ruth. You own what you create, not what I observe.

Warren reaches for one of Hal's crutches. Hal is too quick for him, and snatches it, but before he can grab the other one, it's in Warren's hands.

**WARREN**

So what are we? Your little guinea pigs? Observing us as fodder for your novel?

**HAL**

You're looking at this all wrong. Are you not the raw material for creation? Does your life not matter? Are you not becoming immortal through expert hands—

Warren brings the crutch crashing down on the arm of Hal's chair.

**WARREN**

I am the creator of me!

**HAL**

You didn't create you. You don't own you—

**WARREN**

—I wrote my stories—

**HAL**

—you are the product of your parents, your genetic makeup, the intricacies of your mind.

**WARREN**

So you've stolen my work?

**HAL**

Your work is *Nodus Tollens*. Not *The Glass Heart*.

Warren smacks the arm of the chair again.

**WARREN**

How does this end?

**\*Warren touches Hal's face with the crutch.\***

**WARREN**

Am I supposed to kill you? Is that what this is? So they can psychoanalyze my motivations to publicize MY NOVEL you stole?

**HAL**

Warren... do you not realize... you aren't the first one to go through this program.

The sound of a woman's scream from upstairs.  
Beth's? Charise's?

**HAL**

And you won't be the last.

**WARREN**

She's gone for Dr. Klein. I'm supposed to go for you.

Hal smiles back. By all means.

**WARREN**

But part of me is afraid that that is *exactly what you want me to do!*

**HAL**

The way you think. It really is a beautiful thing, Warren.

The sound of gunshots from upstairs. Hal looks at Warren calmly.

**HAL**

Do you remember Charise having a gun?

**WARREN**

No...

**HAL**

I wonder who was that shooting then.

**WARREN**

I don't...

**HAL**

It sounds almost... military. As though... it wasn't Charise shooting at all.

**WARREN**

What are you doing?

**HAL**

The doubt you feel... I've seen it before.

**WARREN**

Charise... is she...?

**HAL**

I hope very much she's alright. Dr. Klein always seems to have everything under control.

**WARREN**

Is she one of you?

**HAL**

Of course, I'm not sure if I know what you mean by one of us...

**WARREN**

Hal. Am I supposed to kill you?

**HAL**

Well, it's a fascinating predicament. What is real? Who is your friend?

**WARREN**

You said I'm not... that I'm not...

**HAL**

Footsteps, Warren.

**WARREN**

Is Charise dead?

**HAL**

Who said anything about dead?

**WARREN**

I need you to tell me what to do!

**HAL**

It's a beautiful thing, the agency you have!

**WARREN**

I am not a character in your novel!

**HAL**

Indecisive. A shade I've never seen from you.

**WARREN**

Don't make me—

**HAL**

The complexity of your inner life, the emotional logic pushed to the brink. This is a teachable moment!

Something in Warren snaps.

**WARREN**

SHUT UP!

He raises the crutch above his head.

Lights down.

**Scene 15**

Simultaneous. Dr. Elizabeth Klein and Charise sit in Dr. Klein's office. They are listening to the conversation between Hal and Warren on a baby monitor. **\*The recording begins at the bolded section of the last scene.\***

**WARREN**

*Am I supposed to kill you? Is that what this is? So they can psychoanalyze my motivations to publicize MY NOVEL you stole?*

**HAL**

*Warren... do you not realize... you aren't the first one to go through this program.*

**BETH**

You might want to plug your ears real quick, Charise.

Beth screams at the top her her voice.

**BETH**

He doesn't seem like the killing type, does he?

**CHARISE**

He's not.

**BETH**

Of course. But people seem to be what you tell them they are, don't you think?

Beth strides over to her computer, hooked up to a tremendous speaker.

**HAL**

*The way you think. It really is a beautiful thing, Warren.*

She plays the sound of gunshots. Terribly loud.

**BETH**

Sorry about that.

**HAL**

*Do you remember Charise having a gun?*

**WARREN**

No...

**HAL**

*I wonder who was that shooting then.*

**CHARISE**

This was a mistake.

**BETH**

Oh?

**CHARISE**

Yes. Our deal is off.

**BETH**

Charise, of course I don't want to make you do anything you'd regret.

**CHARISE**

You're a manipulative bitch. I'm not going to sit here and let—

**BETH**

You are sitting here of your own volition. You are free to leave at anytime.

**CHARISE**

I know that. Don't you think I know that?

**WARREN**

*Charise... is she...?*

**HAL**

*I hope very much she's alright. Dr. Klein always seems to have everything under control.*

**BETH**

I'm sorry. I thought you understood. I thought you understood that this is what's best for everyone, including you.

**CHARISE**

I'm not going to play him like you played me.

**BETH**

Then go stop him. By all means. I just thought you understood this was your best chance.

**CHARISE**

Best chance at what? Being like you?

**BETH**

Being cured.

**CHARISE**

So helping you makes me cured? That's convenient.

**BETH**

I am the leading clinical psychologist in America. You'll be cured because I'm saying you're cured. You've shown progress. He was beyond help. Look what he's about to do.

**HAL**

*Well, it's a fascinating predicament. What is real? Who is your friend?*

**CHARISE**

I'm going to stop this. Right now.

She gets up and walks to the door.

**BETH**

I know you feel like you've betrayed your friend. But your choice to invest in your future isn't weakness. Your instincts for survival, your ability to put your interests first... that is what makes you strong.

Charise stops at the door.

**BETH**

What you're doing here is important, Charise. You will be giving hope to so many like you that they can live a normal life. That change is possible. All through sharing your story.

**WARREN**

*Is Charise dead?*

**HAL**

*Who said anything about dead?*

**BETH**

Warren realizes what this means too, deep down. He sees the big picture. Everyone gets what they want. His act of violence will sear his story into the public consciousness.

**CHARISE**

He won't kill him. He... he wouldn't.

**BETH**

And you, you'll get speaking tours, publish books. Join me and you'll be the poster child of my work!

**HAL**

*The complexity of your inner life, the emotional logic pushed to the brink. This is a teachable moment!*



*SHUT UP!*

**WARREN**

*The sounds of Hal being beaten with the crutch.*

Charise seems genuinely horrified.

**BETH**

Look at corporations. Governments. Churches. You can be as cruel as you want in America, but you can't go it alone. You have to be part of an institution to protect you.

*The sound of beatings continue, and Hal cries out.*

**CHARISE**

No. Dr. Klein, we can't—

Beth holds up her hand.

*The sound of the beatings go on, until the sound of one particularly heavy blow. Then silence. No Hal. Just Warren breathing heavily. Crying.*

Beth sighs and shakes her head, almost wearily.

**BETH**

It's tragic, but it's a lesson we all learn.

**CHARISE**

What lesson?

Beth rises, taking stock of the world she has created.

**BETH**

The world only respects a sociopath... when they have power.

Lights down. End of play.