

NOVEL

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. 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 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 I 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

I heard that they only accept three writers into 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. It's the best kept secret in the literary world. Ezra Lynch got his MFA at NYU, right? But I've heard after that, he came *here*. That he wrote *Suburban Sick* in this program. 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.

WARREN

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

CHARISE

It is.

A beat.

WARREN

And you?

CHARISE

Hm?

WARREN

Where are you from?

CHARISE

Omaha.

WARREN

Wow. What's that like?

CHARISE

Pretty normal.

WARREN

It's... Kansas, right?

CHARISE

Nebraska.

WARREN

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

CHARISE

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

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 puts Warren in a headlock.

CHARISE

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

WARREN

Ow!! OW!

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?

CHARISE

Yeah.

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

BETH

Professor Morgan is ready for your interview, Charise.

WARREN

Really?

BETH

Right this way.

WARREN

I'm sorry... excuse me, but did you see her *attack* 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 Hal 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 huge—

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—

HAL
Bullshit.

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

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

HAL
Disappointing.

WARREN
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.

A beat.

HAL
Good.

Something unlocks inside of Warren. The tempo starts to pick up, becoming increasingly frenzied.

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

HAL (stage whisper to the panel)
Of course. No, I can cut her short—

CHARISE
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. So I talked about how my friend cheated on his boyfriend and his boyfriend killed himself when he found out. The look on her face was priceless.

HAL
Let her stay.

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

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 the 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 in the motto "I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine?"

CHARISE

Sure, but I'd prefer if you just scratched 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

Tell me about your mother.

CHARISE

She's weak. A wasted life.

BETH

Be honest about your father.

WARREN

Selfish and deluded.

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, and I'd replace every swing with nooses...

CHARISE

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

What God do you worship?
HAL

Chaos. The original God of the Universe.
CHARISE

What gives you sexual gratification that is forbidden?
BETH

Christ on the cross.
WARREN

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

Fuck yes.
CHARISE

Do you think you can accomplish anything?
BETH

Fuck yes.
WARREN

Do you think you're better than me?
BETH

Yes.
WARREN/CHARISE

A beat. Warren and Charise pant, frenzied.

Well.
HAL

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

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. I'm here to ensure 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 is your world now. 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, 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. During this time, you are allowed to check out books from the library, go into town to run errands, fill prescriptions—

CHARISE

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

HAL

No.

KIT

What?

CHARISE

What if I want to date?

HAL

You came here to write.

KIT

They didn't mention this in my interview.

CHARISE

Can we have guests over?

HAL

If you have a sex addiction, write about it.

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.

WARREN (reading)

No phones during class hours?

BETH

Correct. And you will download software which will monitor incoming and outgoing messages.

WARREN

Jesus!

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, he's a lawyer—

HAL

A lawyer?

WARREN

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

Get him the fuck out of my program.

HAL

No, I wasn't—

WARREN

GET HIM THE FUCK OUT.

HAL

I just don't understand—

WARREN

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

HAL

Warren signs the contract. Charise and Kit follow suit.

I'm sorry.

WARREN

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

BETH

Beth begins passing out papers, holding a small basket.

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

BETH

We are going to be mining for what your book is "about." Sure, it may be about an 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...

HAL

"What's my most unusual sex fantasy?"

CHARISE (reading)

And begin.

HAL

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?

What can you tell me about that incident?
HAL

I can't remember anything else.
CHARISE

Anything that comes to your mind.
HAL

The pencil was blue.
CHARISE

Mhm.
HAL

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

About what?
HAL

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

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

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

What did you feel then?
HAL

I can't really remember.
CHARISE

What did you notice about his face?
HAL

It was a long time ago.
CHARISE

What was he wearing?
HAL

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 instead.

HAL

Mm.

CHARISE

A beat. Hal takes a note.

HAL

Tell me about your application essay. You said that you're attracted to darker, more complicated novels.

All novels are dark.

CHARISE

How do you mean?

HAL

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 darkness 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 file. 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 in it. 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. Peter 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. (Hal exhales.)

KIT

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

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 that 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 in self-confidence on the questionnaire. 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 Branch Davidians. 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 the program has been cut short. If you can be a team player, Hal is willing to get you a meeting 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 *only* sent you 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 you 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... woooooooooooooooo.

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

I guess 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. This 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 manager, *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. 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 poisoned us. I knew they 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, 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. 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? You think God would look kindly on that?"

WARREN

Stop.

BETH

What are you doing?

HAL

"You allow other men to rip your insides and defile 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 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 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, 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 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 to 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, 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

See ya later, Charise.

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." Don't wake me up again.

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 psych 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 out of nowhere 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.

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)

“Do what Lou Credence does at the end of *The Children’s Wake*. Pull. Now. 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 gaslighting 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 and sees Beth's laptop, still 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 pulls out a flash drive and sticks it in.

Charise?

BETH (offstage)

Coming...

CHARISE

She pulls out the flash drive.

CHARISE!

BETH

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

CHARISE (to herself)

Beth returns 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 it 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 tenancies. 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 patients describing arson, 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. 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 was 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 work 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.

HAL

"I'm ready to bookend my career with something different. I've been lucky enough to do some adjunct teaching at my alma mater, and that sort of easy lifestyle bodes well for a writer. It's been tremendously healing, having time to tie up all the loose ends of my story. I've been able to rekindle my relationship with my ex-wife, who has a formidable career in her own right, as well as reconcile with my two children—"

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. They put us in the Stanford prison experiment and you want to self-publish? 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?

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

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 is a formidable woman. She always has the upper hand. Even when you think you're the one running things, she's always one hundred steps ahead.

WARREN

Is she one of you?

HAL

Of course, I'm not sure if I know what you mean by one of us... she is entirely in a league of her own. I met her when I was just as obscure as you are, and I never, never would've become who I am without her. Elizabeth is someone who sees everything so clearly. So logical, she's almost clairvoyant. She can predict your very thoughts. It's a gift to be seen by her, a gift to be understood so fully. She's someone who knows how the story of your life is best told... and ended.

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 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?

BETH

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

Beth screams at the top her her voice.

BETH

He didn't seem like the killing type, did 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 is a formidable woman.

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

Elizabeth is someone who sees everything so clearly. So logical, she's almost clairvoyant. She can predict your very thoughts. It's a gift to be seen by her, a gift to be understood so fully. She's someone who knows how the story of your life is best told... and ended.

Beth seems touched by this.

CHARISE

I'm going to stop this. Right now.

Charise 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!

CHARISE

I don't need you.

BETH

Of course you do. 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.

HAL

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

WARREN

SHUT UP!

The sounds of Hal being beaten with the crutch. Charise jumps to her feet. Beth holds up her hand.

BETH

It's the ending he wanted.

The sound of beatings continue, and Hal cries out.

HAL

Elizabeth!

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.