

NOVEL

a play
by Ryan Bernstein

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Characters:

Warren (20s, male): an ambitious, neurotic writer who craves validation.

Charise (20s, female): a self-assured, tenacious writer who stirs the pot.

Hal (60s-70s, male): a celebrated, vindictive author with a nervous system disorder.

Beth (40s-50s, female): a placid, methodical administrator with a talent for observation.

Setting:

A former boarding school in Northern Maine.

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

A cold, cold present day.

Notes:

[Brackets] indicate what a character might say aloud (but doesn't).

/ indicate moments of interruption and overlap.

Like a good novel, NOVEL should have *pace*.

Synopsis:

When does ambition become psychopathy? NOVEL explores institutional abuse and madness as two writers mine their trauma to create a masterpiece in a writing program helmed by a horror novelist, only to find themselves trapped in a twisted experiment.

“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

Development/Award History:

The Arts Asylum (Developmental Production, 2025)

Kansas City Public Theatre (Theatre Lab, 2024)

Quarterfinalist, ScreenCraft Stage Play Competition (2023)

Charlotte Street Foundation (Reading, 2022)

Kansas City Scratch Series (Reading, 2022)

Act I, Scene 1

Lights up on the hallway of an academic building. It is sterile, like the ward of an old-fashioned asylum. Warren—in a cardigan and stylish glasses—sits in a chair, reading a copy of *Unbearable Silence* by Hal Morgan. Charise enters in a warm coat. She references a piece of paper and sits. As she does so, Warren puts a bookmark in his book and stares at her, smiling expectantly.

WARREN

Are you here for the interview?

CHARISE

Yes.

A beat. Charise eyes Warren's book.

CHARISE

We didn't have to read anything, did we?

WARREN

I thought I'd refamiliarize myself with the themes of his books. What's your favorite Hal Morgan?

CHARISE (hasn't read him)

Hmm. That's hard. What's yours?

WARREN

I've read them all least four times, but probably *Inevitable Fate*.

CHARISE

A classic. What do you like most about it?

WARREN

The use of surprise. The twist. The abusive mother whose daughter is actually her younger self? It's why he's the greatest horror novelist of all time. And I actually have the chance to study under him! What about you?

CHARISE

I was referred.

WARREN

Referred? Oh.

What do you mean, “oh?”

CHARISE

You were like... recruited?

WARREN

No. I was referred.

CHARISE

Are you published already, or—?

WARREN

A professor referred me. I won a prize.

CHARISE

I've won a few prizes.

WARREN

Wow—you're so accomplished!

CHARISE (is she mocking him?)

Warren scoots closer to her and extends his hand.

I'm Warren. Warren Ruth.

WARREN

Warren Ruth. Sounds like an insurance agency.

CHARISE

What's *your* name?

WARREN

Charise. Charise Parker.

CHARISE

A beat.

I'm surprised I've never heard of you before. Winning prizes and all.

CHARISE

Well, I've never heard of *you*.

WARREN

Maybe they'll hear of us both someday. (A pause.) I like how casual your outfit is.

CHARISE

Charise removes her jacket, revealing a smart blazer.

WARREN

Too casual?

CHARISE

Not at all. You look very cozy and handsome. I think I overdressed.

A beat. Warren sizes up if she's flirting or taunting.

WARREN

How many other programs did you apply to?

CHARISE

I didn't.

WARREN

Smart. Go for the best. Hal Morgan, full tuition, room and board. Not to mention...

Charise raises her eyebrows. Warren scoots closer.

Everyone knows if you get in, you're guaranteed to get published.

CHARISE

Say who?

WARREN

People in the know.

CHARISE

Sounds like you've got it *all* figured out, Preppy.

Warren looks at his cardigan self-consciously.

WARREN

I wasn't ready for this cold. God, Maine is bleak.

CHARISE

Where are you from?

WARREN

Atlanta. You?

CHARISE

Omaha.

Wow. What's *that* like?

Pretty normal.

It's... Kansas, right?

Nebraska.

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

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

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

As a person of what?

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

Shut your mouth.

Beth enters. They don't see her.

Whoa.

What makes your "perspective" so interesting?

I'm saying your experience *is* interesting—

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

Toni Morrison is one of my favorite noveli—

Mid-sentence, Charise suddenly *fish-hooks Warren's open mouth*, forcing her index finger inside to pull him by the cheek toward her.

CHARISE

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

BETH

Oh dear.

They both freeze. She releases him.

WARREN

Did you see that?

BETH

I did.

Warren sputters, extremely violated.

WARREN

Did you see her *put her fingers in my mouth*?

BETH

I did see.

CHARISE (proudly)

I fish-hooked him.

A beat.

BETH

Professor Morgan is ready for your interview, Charise. This way, please.

Beth exits with a smirking Charise. Warren is momentarily stunned, trying to figure out how to sanitize his desecrated mouth. Lights down.

Act I, Scene 2

Lights up on Warren and Charise in a lecture theatre in two separate interviews, each with spotlights directed at them.

WARREN

Wow, the lighting is...

BETH

Too bright?

CHARISE

Is this an interrogation?

BETH

Just a friendly chat.

CHARISE

Who's *that*?

BETH

Professor Morgan. I will be asking you a few questions today to understand/you as—

CHARISE (re: Hal's crutches)

What's with the crutches?

BETH

—as a writer, a thinker, a human being. How your brain works. May we have your permission to video-record this interview?

WARREN

Oh. Sure. I just have to say, Mr. Morgan, I am such a huge fan—

BETH

Nothing makes Professor Morgan happier. We're here because we love writers. The program has quite a record of success, thanks to his leadership. We create masterpieces.

CHARISE

So who exactly sent you my name?

BETH

There will be time for questions at the end.

CHARISE

It's just... you reached out to *me*.

BETH

Our scouts find writers from backgrounds that may be less traditional. Professor Morgan believes good writers come from anywhere.

CHARISE

You mean community colleges?

BETH

We have other interviewees coming in after you. Shall we try and set you up for success in the full allotted time?

CHARISE

... sure.

BETH

Do you mind giving verbal confirmation for the camera that you consent to this interview?

WARREN

I consent to this interview.

BETH

And are you comfortable signing a non-disclosure agreement if accepted?

WARREN

Um... yeah.

BETH

Thank you. Shall—

WARREN

Just... *why*? Out of curiosity.

BETH

Our methods are groundbreaking—they are techniques we want to protect. We guarantee you will be published. No other program can. Shall we begin?

Warren and Charise both nod.

BETH

Full name?

WARREN

Warren Saul Ruth.

BETH

Date of birth?

CHARISE

May 12th.

BETH

Where did you do your undergraduate work?

WARREN

Brown.

CHARISE

Y—Metropolitan Community College.

BETH

And you graduated?

CHARISE

Wasn't hard.

WARREN

I... I had the highest GPA in my whole department.

BETH

Do you think you are a good writer?

WARREN

I... (A beat.) On a scale of one to ten?

BETH

How good of a writer are you?

CHARISE

The best.

WARREN (a big swing)

I'm the next Hal Morgan. (A beat.) I mean... I want to be.

BETH

What would you say if we disagreed with that assessment?

CHARISE (shrugging)

Question your taste. Maybe you're racist. Maybe you're stupid.

BETH

Are you an only child?

Blended family.

CHARISE

Parents together?

BETH

Yes.

WARREN

Do you get along with your family?

BETH

No.

CHARISE

I mean, we have fights, like everyone.

WARREN

Who instigates the conflicts?

BETH

Uh... I'm not sure.

WARREN (looking nervously to Hal)

If you had to pick.

BETH

I do.

CHARISE

WARREN

I love using my life as a canvas for my writing. Getting a rise out of people helps me craft more believable dialogue, heightened situations.

BETH

What's your mother like?

CHARISE

All she cares about is herself. Herself and the men she's with.

BETH

Your father?

CHARISE

A human virus.

BETH

Do you correspond with your parents on the phone or in person?

WARREN

Usually... uh... in person.

BETH

You live with your parents?

WARREN

I... only recently.

BETH

Do you find yourself reverting back to earlier versions of yourself living with them?

WARREN (astonished)

I... yes. That's exactly how I feel.

BETH

But you're happy there.

WARREN

I have a lot of time to write. I'm working on a new novel, actually—

BETH

What is your sexual preference?

WARREN (laughing nervously, looking to Hal)

What do you mean?

BETH

What is your gender of preference, sexually?

Warren squirms, looking away from Hal.

WARREN

Men. But it informs the genre I write, and I think there's an opening in the market for—

BETH

How many long-term relationships have you been in?

CHARISE

Zero.

BETH

Longest relationship?

Depends how you define... six months? **WARREN** (starting to get weirded out)

Have your parents ever met one of your partners? **BETH**

I... How exactly is this relevant to my writing? **WARREN**

It's very relevant. **BETH**

They haven't. **WARREN**

Never met your male partners? But they know about them? **BETH**

I... some of them. **WARREN**

Hal holds up a finger, as if to indicate "skip ahead."

Were you raised religious? **BETH**

Catholic. **WARREN**

Are you still? **BETH**

Are we going to talk about my writing? **WARREN**

Yes. Do you believe in God? **BETH**

Agnostic. I used to. I... think I don't now. **WARREN**

How old were you when you stopped believing in God? **BETH**

Nine. **CHARISE**

BETH

Have you ever been in trouble with the law?

CHARISE (suddenly defensive)

Why?

BETH

We're trying to see—

CHARISE

I don't see how that's relevant.

BETH

How old were you when you lost your virginity?

CHARISE

Excuse me?

BETH

This helps us get to know you as a writer.

WARREN

Who is going to see this video?

BETH

This is a safe space.

WARREN (laughing nervously, looking to Hal)

... I would *really* prefer to talk about my writing!

Hal stands up. Beth shuts up immediately and motions to Hal, deferring. Hal stands and uses his crutches to walk to Charise. It's dramatic, slow, and awkward. He reaches her. Considers her.

HAL

Why do you think we are asking you these questions?

CHARISE

You're trying to goad me.

HAL

Have you been in many writing classes?

CHARISE (wary)

I have.

What are the people like?

HAL

Boring. Self-important.

CHARISE

How would *they* answer these questions?

HAL

They... wouldn't get it.

CHARISE

Do you?

HAL

What?

CHARISE

Do you "get it," Charise?

HAL

Hal returns to his seat, but on the way:

Describe how you felt when you first saw me.

HAL

I... was intimidated.

CHARISE

Don't lie.

HAL

How many sexual partners have you had this year?

BETH

I... I don't want to talk about my sex life... not in front of... my favorite writer.

WARREN

Are you a coward?

HAL

... what?

WARREN

Are you a coward?

HAL

I... no.

WARREN

Then say it. "I am not a coward." Say it!

HAL

I'm not a coward.

WARREN

SAY IT!

HAL

I AM NOT A COWARD.

WARREN

How many sexual partners have you had this year?

BETH

Seven!

WARREN

Have you ever fantasized about harming a sexual partner?

BETH

Yes.

WARREN

When I first saw you, I was disgusted by your frailty.

CHARISE

Good! Who makes you feel inferior?

HAL

Nobody. Anymore.

CHARISE

I used to think about strangling him.

WARREN

Hal bangs his crutch.

How did you show them you can't be controlled?

HAL

I hit him when he left.

CHARISE

Who left you?

HAL

No one.

CHARISE

Boyfriend?

HAL

No one.

CHARISE

He was married. I knew he was using me. But I'd always go.

WARREN

Your father left you.

HAL

I didn't even want him around.

CHARISE

I'm the voice of my generation, being used by a closeted algebra teacher!!

WARREN

He thought you were worthless. He left you and is living the life he deserves without you—

HAL

He deserves to be dead.

CHARISE

He'd make me feel expendable after. Like I was dirty. I'd imagine *slamming* his head into the headboard, his wife finding him there.

WARREN

What would you say to your father on his deathbed?

HAL

You're alone. Unloved. You squandered your life, drunk and humiliated, woman to woman, all of them laughing at your shriveled husk of a body.

CHARISE

I planned that one night, I'd close my hands around his throat. Wouldn't let go.

WARREN

How would you desecrate his grave?

HAL

CHARISE (feeding off of the joy)

Blow up a dirty bomb at his funeral, so everyone would die a slow death for respecting him.

HAL

How did he make you doubt yourself?

CHARISE

He said that I'm broken inside. That I can't be cured. That it was my fault.

WARREN

I felt so humiliated. He made me want to rip myself from my body, made me want to be—

BETH

What do you want to be?

WARREN

Pur—I don't know.

CHARISE

Normal.

HAL

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO BE?

CHARISE

It was *his* gun!

WARREN

I want to be pure!

HAL

Prove your father wrong! Show him your power!

Charise walks to the camera tripod, grabs it. Beth cries out, but Hal holds up his hand.

CHARISE (into the camera)

I will become a published writer and prove you wrong. Show what you hated in me was my greatness. That I don't need to be cured—I need to be *unleashed*. My writing will unleash greatness that will have you begging for forgiveness, greatness like you could never fathom!

Charise holds up the tripod, as if she will seize it as ransom. Warren and Charise pant, frenzied.

HAL

Put down the tripod, Charise. (A long beat that turns cold.) Now.

Charise puts down the tripod.

BETH

That will be all.

WARREN

What?

BETH

That concludes your interview.

WARREN

But you didn't ask about my writing.

BETH

We will be notifying you of your status in three weeks' time.

WARREN (upset)

What is this? I want to talk about my novel!

BETH

I'm sorry, Warren, but that's all the time we have. Thank you.

WARREN (furious)

No, thank you.

Warren starts to walk to the door.

HAL

You said you're the next Hal Morgan. But there already is a Hal Morgan. So how would you destroy me?

BETH

Charise? Did you hear me?

WARREN (frustration boiling over)

I would fucking eclipse you. I can see things you can't. I would be a prophet, no one would remember you existed.

Warren instantly regrets his words.

I'm sorry. I don't know why/I—

Hal gets up and walks out of the room on his crutches.

BETH

We will be speaking with other candidates over the next few days.

But...

CHARISE (watching Hal leave)

The door slams.

That will be all.

BETH

Lights down on Charise and Warren's interviews.

Act I, Scene 3

Beth tidies a bare office space, organizing packets of paper and rearranging chairs. Charise enters, watches her. Beth continues on with her work, scowling joylessly. Finally, Beth turns around, sees Charise, and screams in surprise.

BETH

Oh my—!

CHARISE

Boo.

BETH (clutching her chest)

You scared me! I wasn't expecting you to unpack so... so quickly...

CHARISE

I didn't bring a lot. Who am I trying to impress?

BETH

Professor Morgan. With your writing.

Charise points to her brain.

CHARISE

Don't need to pack much for that.

An awkward beat.

BETH

Well. The meeting doesn't start for eight minutes.

CHARISE

That's okay.

Charise takes a seat. Beth continues to tidy. Charise stares at her.

BETH

Wouldn't you like to grab some water or something before the orientation?

CHARISE

That would be great, thanks.

Beth continues tidying as though she hasn't heard.

I would like some water.

CHARISE

There's a cooler in the hallway.

BETH

I don't know where it is.

CHARISE

Down the hall.

BETH

Would you get it for me?

CHARISE

You can get it yourself.

BETH

Do you not want me to be alone in here?

CHARISE

It's my office.

BETH

Big decorator, huh? (Motioning to the file cabinets.) Anything exciting in those cabinets?

CHARISE

Would you like to wait outside?

BETH

I could tell you didn't like me. During the interview.

CHARISE

I don't understand why you'd assume I have a say.

BETH

I think you liked the boy.

CHARISE

We liked both of you. That's why you were accepted to the program.

BETH

Where is he?

CHARISE

BETH

Almost here. He had farther to travel than you.

CHARISE

Did you like his writing more?

BETH

I'd really be more comfortable if you waited outside.

CHARISE

I thought you liked uncomfortable questions. Or is that only when you're safe behind a table?

Beth begins to place a packet of paper on each of the chairs. Charise gets up and walks over to a file cabinet. She puts her hand on the handle. Fast as a whip, Beth pulls Charise's hands off.

BETH

Outside. Now.

Charise relents. But the sound of clumping is coming down the hall. Both women freeze, listening. Hal enters silently. Beth helps him into his chair and tries to take his crutches, but Hal shoos her and leans them on his lap. Hal puts on reading glasses and looks over the syllabus, ignoring Charise.

CHARISE

Buenos días, papi.

Hal looks over his glasses at her with an icy stare, then looks down at his papers.

BETH (to Hal)

Warren's almost here. He missed his connection. He'll come here straight away.

Hal nods, shoos her away.

CHARISE

I read some of your books.

Hal looks up at her for a long time.

... and?

HAL

I think I have a lot to learn from you.

CHARISE

Hal gives a small snort and looks back down at his papers. Beth's cell phone buzzes. She rushes off.

CHARISE

I'm so impressed by the twists in your writing. I want to follow in your footsteps. How do you master the art of surprise?

Hal continues reading, ignoring her. Charise is chastised. A beat.

Hal suddenly launches one of his crutches against the wall. It hits the filing cabinet with a BANG. Charise seems spooked. Hal holds up his hand, as if to say "like that."

Warren rushes into the office, a roller bag and backpack in addition to his coat.

WARREN

I'm so sorry I'm late. The van took forever from the airport. I forgot how far this place is out of town.

Beth enters.

BETH

I told you that you could drop your belongings off.

But Warren is already pulling out a paper and pen from his backpack, clearly flustered but trying to seem calm. Beth whispers in Hal's ear. He nods.

WARREN (noticing Charise)

Oh. It's you.

CHARISE

Who are you?

WARREN (whispering)

Warren. Again. Did I miss anything?

CHARISE (obviously lying)
He was critiquing your work.

WARREN (fooled)
What?

CHARISE
You're so fucking dumb.

WARREN
What? What did he say?

BETH
Children?

A hush.

BETH
I'd like to begin. I want to welcome you both. I know we needed some last minute arrangements, but due to unexpected circumstances, one of our admitted students had a book deal that necessitated their deferral from the program. Luckily, we had an alternate.

WARREN
... who was it?

BETH
Some logistics. Strother Hall is a former boarding school, donated and repurposed as a retreat for writers. Your dorms are on the second floor by the library. Every classroom or parlor in the building is accessible and available for your writing, besides our offices.

CHARISE
Where do you two stay?

BETH
We have other accommodations. You may explore the campus between classes, but it gets dangerously cold in the upcoming winter months. We recommend you stay indoors.

CHARISE
We can... *leave*. Right?

BETH
No. The dining room is in the basement. Breakfast will be at 8, lunch at 12, dinner at 6. This is a form requesting your dietary restrictions and medications, this is a list of ground rules, and this is the non-disclosure agreement.

Beth begins to distribute papers.

WARREN (reading)

All writing will be done by hand?

BETH

Correct. And you will be giving up your phones to us today.

CHARISE

But what if we need to talk to our friends?

BETH

Write a letter. This is a writer's retreat. You are here to write. Phones in the baskets please.

Beth holds out a basket. Warren drops a phone in.

CHARISE

Going to miss Grindr?

WARREN

I know what I signed up for.

Charise still holds her phone. Beth gently takes it.

BETH

This may sound harsh. I run a tight ship so Professor Morgan can focus on molding you. You'll thank us in the end. Now, please find in your stack the non-disclosure agreement. This is very important. If you breach it—

HAL

You will not have a career in this life.

Warren raises his hand.

WARREN

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

An icy beat.

WARREN

There's not a problem! I just thought maybe he could look at it. I want to make sure I wasn't signing something that would be an issue for a contract *later on*. With a publishing house. Or is there any way...

Charise signs her contract and hands it to Beth.

WARREN

Actually, he's... not that great of a lawyer. He, uh, went to... Cornell. I'll just...

Warren is reading the contract quickly through, as though looking for red flags.

BETH

Second thoughts?

WARREN

No.

HAL

Maybe he should consider law school.

WARREN

Sorry?

HAL (like he's speaking to someone deaf)

Maybe. You. Should consider. Law school.

Hal stares at him. Warren signs. He holds out the paper to Beth. She doesn't take it.

WARREN

Take it. (He holds the paper out more desperately to Beth.) I'm sorry. Please just take it.

Beth takes the paper and places it on her desk.

BETH

In the meantime, you will find a comprehensive personality test in the stack. During the next nine months, we are going to be mining for what your novel is "about." What are the questions of your life? This personality test is our way of getting a blueprint of who you are.

CHARISE (reading)

"How would I like to be executed?"

BETH

Please begin.

Lights down.

Act I, Scene 4

Hal sits in his lamp-lit, book-lined office in his chair, crutches nowhere to be seen. The lamps fill him with warmth we haven't seen from him yet, and he speaks as though he is conducting a fire-side chat. Warren and Charise sit on the floor, cross-legged.

HAL

People don't read anymore. We face an epidemic... of *morons*. People are more impressionable. Easy to control. They don't think for themselves. That's where a novel comes in. There's a reason people ban books. Because they can redirect the human mind. Create new neural-pathways, new streams of consciousness. Once you can get someone to *actually open your book*, you have tremendous power. But can we actually control how a mind is changed?

WARREN

Yes.

HAL

No. Of course we can't. We cannot control *how* they will be interpreted. We can just force them to face what *we* choose to bring to their attention. Mortality. Hypocrisy. Trauma. Repressed sexual desires. Darkness lives in every subconscious. But not every human is brave enough to mine for it themselves. It is a painful process. As writers, we must do this work for them. Desecrate our psychology, surrender our sense of self to find this truth and reveal it to readers. Does every human have the capacity to connect to higher truth?

CHARISE

No.

WARREN

Yes.

HAL

It is unknowable. I have often wondered. Most people experience love, joy, pain. But why do we as writers have the unique ability to access truth?

WARREN

We can separate.

HAL

Go on.

WARREN

We aren't, well, slaves to our reality. We can view ourselves from a distance.

HAL

View what in ourselves, I wonder.

CHARISE

Is that a question?

HAL

It is *the* question.

CHARISE

Well, we can use our life as raw material. Write what you know, all that.

HAL

I think that's a tired cliché. Set it places you know. Explore themes you know. But you need to write about/what...

WARREN

What you *don't* know.

HAL

Precisely.

CHARISE

You mean... working through the questions of your life... gives a novel the momentum, the authenticity...

HAL

Keep going...

CHARISE

You use writing to unspool your own mind. It's a map of a puzzle you're solving!

HAL

Yes, Charise!

WARREN

Like how you wrote *The Children's Wake* after your daughter died!

A cold beat.

Sorry. I don't know if... that's probably painful to...

Hal holds up a hand.

HAL

My pain is gone. It now lives in my books. *Your* pain is my concern. Your anguish is a road map to finding what you *need* to write. Your primal scream into the cosmos. And here, we can guarantee it will be interpreted by those who matter.

WARREN

The critics.

HAL

The historians. The sociologists. Those who examine the turning points of public memory. Your legacy is being shaped here and now.

A beat.

Your assignment: write about the worst thing you have ever done or ever thought of doing.

WARREN (raising his hand)

How many words?

Hal stares at Warren as though he's wet himself.

HAL

Until it's *right*. Now. What is the most important thing to remember while you're writing?

WARREN

Writing is re-writing.

HAL

No.

CHARISE

Write for yourself.

HAL

Closer.

WARREN

Follow your bliss!

HAL

Nearly there. Think of what I've been saying.

WARREN

Follow your... legacy?

Charise suddenly laughs. Hal motions to her. Yes?

CHARISE

Follow your pain.

HAL (nodding approvingly)

Follow. Your. *Pain*. Because your pain is the most guarded part of you. The truest part of you. And the bravest thing you can do is release it for the world to examine. It's a frightening prospect... but your pain is the fountainhead of your masterpiece. A roadmap to your soul. Ask yourself. What is your pain?

Warren is scribbling notes. Charise is deep in thought.

HAL

And ask yourself... does that pain frighten you? (A beat.) Well. Does it?

WARREN (looking up)

Sorry?

CHARISE

I don't have fear anymore. I've learned to tame it.

WARREN

Same. 100% same.

Hal stands slowly. Walks over to Charise. Places a hand on her shoulder: well done. Warren, jealous, raises his hand.

WARREN

I totally agree with all this talk about pain, Professor Morgan. And it isn't scary to me. At all. Just... what if we wanted to write scenes that are lighter. More comedic?

Hal considers Warren, then stumbles backward, unbalanced without his crutches. Warren shoots up to help. Hal holds up a hand, as he catches himself on his chair. Hal settles himself back into a seated position.

HAL

I'm surprised by your question.

WARREN

Why?

HAL

There is *nothing* more amusing than someone in pain.

Lights down.

Act I, Scene 5

Beth's office. She sits in a chair, speaking with Charise. When Beth isn't writing in a notepad, she's nervously tapping her pencil on the table.

BETH

Why do you think it was that we found your questionnaire so... unusual?

CHARISE

You're reading our materials too?

BETH

Of course I am. It's my job to help Professor Morgan mine for your voice. That's what these meetings are about. To lighten his load.

CHARISE

So you're like a grown-up T.A.?

BETH

Why would I find your questionnaire so unusual?

CHARISE

I was honest?

BETH

You wrote about an incident... (referencing a file) when you were 16. After your father left.

CHARISE

Was it too dark?

BETH

What would you classify as "dark"?

CHARISE (re: the tapping)

Can you, uh... can you stop that?

BETH

Stop what?

CHARISE

Tapping.

Beth stops tapping.

BETH

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

CHARISE

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

BETH

What can you tell me about that incident?

CHARISE

I can't remember anything else.

BETH

Anything that comes to your mind?

CHARISE

The pencil was blue?

BETH

Okay.

CHARISE

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

BETH

About what?

CHARISE

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

BETH

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

CHARISE

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

BETH

What did you feel then?

CHARISE

I can't really remember.

Beth taps her pencil, imperceptibly building pace.

BETH

What did you notice about his face?

CHARISE

It was a long time ago.

What was he wearing?

A jersey.

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

Kind of grinning.

What else do you remember?

Not much.

What did he look like?

He was grinning.

What color was the pencil?

Blue.

You've given me this detail three times.

What are you getting at?

You didn't want to stab him in the palm did you?

No.

Do people hold their palms face-up on a table?

BETH

CHARISE

BETH

CHARISE

BETH

CHARISE

BETH

CHARISE

BETH

CHARISE

BETH

CHARISE

BETH

CHARISE

BETH

CHARISE

No.

BETH

How could you possibly stab someone in the open palm?

CHARISE

I don't know.

The tapping is like a metronome's hypnotic beat.

BETH

What color was the pencil?

CHARISE

Blue.

BETH

What color blue?

CHARISE

Sky blue.

BETH

What was he doing?

CHARISE

Grinning.

BETH

What did you want to do with the pencil?

CHARISE

I don't—

BETH

What was he doing?

CHARISE

Grinning.

BETH

What did you want to do?

CHARISE

Wipe the grin off his face.

What color was the pencil?

BETH

Sky blue.

CHARISE

What was he doing?

BETH

Leering at me, taunting me!

CHARISE

What did you want to—

BETH

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

CHARISE

And you drove the pencil into his palm instead.

BETH

A beat. Beth takes a note.

BETH

Tell me about your application essay. You were negative about your academic experiences.

CHARISE

I think all institutions protect liars.

BETH (subtly mirroring Charise's body language)

How do you mean?

CHARISE

When I was at... when I was out East...

BETH

You lost your full ride because of bad behavior.

CHARISE

"Bad behavior." They *said* it was bad behavior.

BETH

You were off your medications.

CHARISE

No. I was telling the truth. I felt commodified by the academic-industrial complex. They

CHARISE (cont'd)

act like they want us to talk about what's *really* going on. But people mask their racism with "correctness." Professors can't admit what they don't know. And I call out bullshit when I see it. So when I say the uncomfortable thing, I'm the crazy one? Academia exists to uphold the facade. And they only see the surface and can't—or *won't*—say the way things really are. But they seem happy being that way. Being fake. So people will accept them.

BETH

Do you want to be accepted?

CHARISE

Not by people like them. Like you. I don't think you like me. I think you think I'm trouble.

BETH

No. I just find that perhaps you think you're smarter than you are.

CHARISE

Excuse me? I'm smart. Smarter than you. But it's my honesty, honesty that/turns people—

BETH

You think you're all-seeing? Or are you afraid you don't know anything at all—?

CHARISE

You better stop putting words in my mouth!

Charise lifts her hand—still holding her pencil—into the air, the sharp end pointed at Beth. A beat.

BETH

Well now. How did you find that?

CHARISE

What do you mean?

BETH

We're trying to get you to access raw emotions. Did it feel raw? It seemed like it.

CHARISE (discombobulated)

I don't know...

BETH

Only use it if it's helpful. But I think there could be something here Professor Morgan could like. That's all for today, Charise.

Charise gets up.

It's the reason I fought for you in this program. Your ability to see things the way they are.

Charise nods, exits. Beth takes notes on her file.

Act I, Scene 6

Hal in a chair in his lamp-lit office. Warren sits at a small desk, writing. Charise is absent.

WARREN

I have some revised pages, sir, if you want to/read them.

Charise rushes in, still in pajamas. Hal holds out a hand, points it to a chair.

HAL (glacial)

How nice of you to join us, Charise.

CHARISE

I couldn't find my, uh... never mind. Sorry.

Charise sits at a desk. Hal breathes in and out slowly, as though calming himself. He smiles.

HAL

How did we feel about the pages we submitted?

CHARISE

Pretty good.

WARREN

Very confident.

HAL

Well, it seems you both feel you're off to a strong start! How wonderful. Let's look beneath the surface, shall we?

Hal holds up a stack of pages. His hands shake.

What did you think of Charise's pages, Warren?

WARREN

Well... she writes a lot about violence.

HAL

Yes. But is it good writing?

WARREN

Um, what do you mean good?

HAL

Do you not know how to identify good writing?

WARREN

Well. It seemed a little... on the nose. To me. The main character, I mean it's clearly Charise.

HAL

Why do you say it's Charise?

WARREN

It's just obvious. Set in the Great Plains. The way she describes her own physicality, talks about her father leaving, how she writes the sister character.

CHARISE

Does that take you out of it?

WARREN

A bit, yeah.

CHARISE

I'm trying to figure out how many layers of disguise to put on myself.

WARREN

I'm not sure it would distract me if I didn't know her.

CHARISE

Have an opinion.

WARREN

Okay. Yeah. It feels lazy to me. To just write your life verbatim. There's no invention in it.

HAL

No invention. Do you have a sister, Charise?

CHARISE

No. I had a neighbor. I guess she was like a sister.

HAL

Then why does it matter if the character is Charise? What matters is a good story, whether it's spun from imagination or lived in truth. Sometimes the best fiction is truth we don't want to admit. But the problem/is—

CHARISE

There's a problem?

WARREN

I just think it feels indulgent! Sibling jealousy. An act of violence with a pencil. Blinding a sister. It doesn't feel/authentic to me.

HAL

I believe I was interrupted. (A beat.) The problem is. Perhaps we've only scratched the surface of your mind, Charise. How old were you when the pencil incident happened?

CHARISE

I was fifteen.

HAL

Too old. Take me back to your primal age. Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. When you were “unprotected.” Paint a picture of the character of young Charise Parker.

CHARISE

Angry. Betrayed. Abandoned.

HAL

Your parents’ divorce. How did you cope?

CHARISE

I’ll write about it.

HAL

Was it with violence?

CHARISE

I told you I’ll write about it.

HAL

What’s the worst thing you’ve ever done?

CHARISE

I already wrote about it.

HAL

It’s not the *worst* thing you’ve ever done. You’ve been late for class three times and it’s only October. You answer honestly, I expunge them. Once more, you lose your spot here.

CHARISE

I don’t have my phone to wake/me up—

HAL

Sometimes a student needs to be cut, come end of the semester. Isn’t up to it. Perhaps—

CHARISE

We killed a dog.

HAL

We did?

WARREN (horrified)

You did??

CHARISE

When I was 11. Our neighbors had this yappy dog and it would bark all night. Kept me from sleeping. (To Warren.) What? It was old.

WARREN

How did you do it?

CHARISE

Rat poison in sausage casing.

HAL

What happened to the dog? Paint a picture.

CHARISE

At first... nothing happened. Then it... it started to gag. Throwing up lumps of blood. It tried to walk home to its owner... but started convulsing. It barely made it into the bushes. We never saw it again.

Warren covers his mouth in disgust.

HAL

I want to be very plain. The pages *both* of you submitted were very, very disappointing. Lacking bravery. Below the caliber of this program. The writing... of *cowards*. I need total honesty. I have to read the inside of your minds through your writing like an explorer reads the stars. If you won't know yourself, you might as well give up. I need to know every treacherous, sick, perverted thought that's inside your head, so I can help you spin it into something that will outlast you. But I can't. If you. Keep things. From me!

Beth pops her head in.

BETH

Excuse me, Professor Morgan. May I speak to Warren quickly?

Hal gets up from his chair with his crutches.

HAL

I'm done with them. Class dismissed. No more weak writing.

Hal exits. He leaves behind a recording device on his chair. Warren follows Beth out. Charise notices the device. Beth pops her head in again.

BETH

Charise.

Charise grudgingly exits too, looking back.

Act I, Scene 7

Warren and Beth stand in the hallway. Charise lingers.

BETH

Charise. I'm speaking to Warren.

CHARISE

Okay.

BETH

I'd like some privacy.

CHARISE

Oh sure. Have fun... (under her breath) with your *favorite*.

Charise exits. Beth looks at Warren.

BETH

I got your note that you wanted to speak to me.

WARREN

Oh, yeah. I left that over a week ago.

BETH

Apologies. I've been busy sorting out an issue with the caterers. (Off his look.) You don't think I do everything myself do you?

WARREN

I guess I haven't really... thought about it.

BETH

Good. Focus on writing. That's what you're here for. (A beat.) I've been enjoying your pages. A cult is a surprising topic.

WARREN

You like them?

BETH

I do. The opening lines prime the reader for intrigue. What was it? "All his life he'd sought a transformation that had never come. But/everything would change today."

WARREN (delighted)

"Everything would change today." That's exactly how I felt about my life before I came here! (A beat. Did he say too much?) Anyway, I wanted to ask... it's my birthday coming up.

BETH

Happy birthday.

WARREN

Yeah, thanks. I was wondering if... well, I know a guy in Portland. "Know a a guy." Wow. Like a guy I dated, not a drug guy. (He laughs nervously.) I wanted to see if he could come pick me up and, you know, take me out for a night. To celebrate. So I'd need my phone to...

It's clear from Beth's expression this is not okay.

I don't have to, obviously! I just thought it would be fun to get out, blow off some steam...

BETH

I'm afraid that would be very damaging to your progress.

WARREN

Oh. Right.

BETH

This program is designed to connect you with your creative self away from the distractions of the modern world. Leaving the retreat, interacting with those out of your rhythm, using your phone even, would set you back weeks. And it would be a shame because you've made so much progress here. Don't you feel your mind resetting? More inspired? Less distracted?

WARREN

I do.

BETH

Some free advice. Keep pushing yourself. I find often only one of our students gets a deal. We'll send your work to agents before you know it, and we need your writing to stand out.

WARREN

Really? When?

BETH

Soon. I think they'd really like your work, Warren. They're looking for a debut novelist with a unique voice.

Warren nods, goes to exit.

BETH

And Warren? I'm a November Baby too. Let me know what kind of cake you like, and I'll see if I can work some magic.

Beth smiles. Warren smiles back. Lights down.

Act I, Scene 8

Nighttime. The hallway outside of Hal's office. Warren arrives, carrying pages. He knocks on the door of the office. Light is coming from under the door.

Professor Morgan?

WARREN (quietly)

The sound of movement in the office.

WARREN

Sorry, Professor Morgan. I know it's late. But I saw your light on.
... I just had a question about my pages.

Charise exits the office.

CHARISE

Your pages suck.

WARREN

What... wait, what are you doing in there?

CHARISE

Oh, nothing.

WARREN (mouthing)

Is he in there?

CHARISE

What do you care?

WARREN (whispering)

What's going on?

CHARISE

I'm pretty tired, Warren. I think I'm going to sleep.

WARREN (hissing)

What the fuck were you doing in there?

CHARISE

You're acting crazy.

WARREN (raising his hand to knock on the door)

Profes—

Warren toggles between going to knock on the door to changing his mind and backing away.

CHARISE (amused)

Want me to read your pages?

WARREN

No!

CHARISE

I'm as good as Hal now.

WARREN

What?

CHARISE (torturing him)

You heard me.

WARREN

Is he tutoring you? Oh my god. Are you... are you... fucking him?

Charise laughs to the point of snorting.

CHARISE

You think I'm that desperate to get published? I know *you* are, but...

WARREN

What were you doing with him in there?

Charise holds up a hairpin.

WARREN

You broke in. Why?

CHARISE (cagey)

I was looking f... I just like to sit in there. Helps me get into the headspace of a great writer.

WARREN

You've never even read his books.

CHARISE

How do you know that?

WARREN

I'm not stupid. You don't care about him. You don't care about this program.

CHARISE

Then why am I here?

WARREN

You want it on your resume. What were you looking/for in there?

CHARISE

My resume?

WARREN

I'm here because I want to write. Were you looking for who else applied/to the program?

CHARISE

You think I don't want to write?

WARREN

You barely work. Unless Hal/tells you to.

CHARISE

Next time I write something, I'll fucking give it to you, k?

WARREN (now genuinely curious)

Are our phones in there?

CHARISE

His desk is locked.

WARREN

So you were just... sitting in there? Hoping it would make you a better writer by osmosis?

CHARISE

I don't need to be a better writer by osmosis. I can write a masterpiece in my sleep.

WARREN

Do you know how many people would kill to be here?

CHARISE

Clearly someone moved on to something better to make room for you.

WARREN

You think *I* was the alternate?

CHARISE

You were obviously the alternate.

WARREN

I've been wondering why you haven't been trying.

Charise examines Warren's stack of pages.

CHARISE

You write all of this. Most of it's crossed out. What percentage of it is good? Usable even. 10%? When I write something, it's all good. The first time.

WARREN

It takes work.

CHARISE

For you.

WARREN

Do you know what it's like out there? You're more likely to get struck by lightning than get published. You know what you have to do to see your book on a shelf? You have to be a movie star. You have to run for President. You have to... kill someone! We have a chance to actually see our work become something, to influence people. And so I will write every single hour of every single day. I will follow every insane rule I have to if it means I have that chance. If it can save me. Or else you don't... you don't know what will happen to me.

Charise exits into the office. Warren seems bruised, until she returns with a bottle of whiskey.

CHARISE (softening)

I found this in Hal's stash. Here.

She takes a pull, offers it to Warren.

You know what I did before I came here?

WARREN (taking a pull)

Wrote masterpieces in your sleep.

CHARISE

I was trying to pay off my college debt working at Starbucks. A week before I got here, I had an eviction notice on the door of my apartment.

WARREN

How much could an apartment cost in Omaha? Ten dollars?

CHARISE

You need this program for your ego. I need it to eat.

They sit and drink Hal's whiskey.

WARREN

How do you have college debt from *community college*?

CHARISE

It's about time you asked me a question about my life.

WARREN

Go on then. Tell me something about yourself, Corn State Commuter College.

CHARISE

Okay Brown. I will tell you something. I actually didn't start out at Corn State. I went to Yale/for a year—

WARREN

No, you didn't.

CHARISE

—*for a year*. But I left.

WARREN

Couldn't keep up?

CHARISE

Yeah, never mind. I don't know why I'm telling you anything.

WARREN

Couldn't afford it?

CHARISE

You've never faced anything that even resembles adversity.

WARREN

You don't know that.

CHARISE

Good luck to you, fuckface.

WARREN

Good luck fucking Hal to get to the top.

CHARISE

Good luck writing something worthwhile before you're back in your parents' basement—

WARREN

You think that's where I'll be?

CHARISE

—living off a trust fund from your great-grandfather so you can fuck around with words—

WARREN

My parents were trying to put me in a mental institution!

The words hang in the air. Warren backtracks.

That was a joke.

CHARISE (empathetic)

They were?

WARREN

Forget it.

CHARISE

Did you go?

WARREN

No. It's not true.

Warren, frazzled, leaves, dropping some papers.

CHARISE (admitting)

My medication's gone missing. I was looking for it in his office.

WARREN

Why would Hal steal your medication?

Charise doesn't answer. Warren picks up his pages.

WARREN

Well. There's more than one way to self-medicate.

Warren approaches her, takes the bottle out of her hand. Cheers to her. She laughs, takes a pull too.

CHARISE

You're a bad writer. But at least you're not boring.

Lights down.

Act I, Scene 9

Charise and Warren sit in Hal's office. Instead of Hal, Beth is perched in his chair. Tranquil music plays. Beth breathes slowly, in and out, setting an example. Warren and Charise aren't into it.

WARREN

Is Professor Morgan coming?

BETH

He is running behind. Appreciate the meditation.

Beth breathes again, reminding them.

WARREN

It's just, we're working on my pages today. I'd love to use this time to prepare for feedback...

CHARISE

Here's some feedback: I hate your pages. (To Beth.) Did you hear back from the pharmacy?

BETH

There's an issue with your insurance.

WARREN

Wait. Do you really hate them?

CHARISE

It's always bad with you.

WARREN

Are you joking? Is it actually bad?

BETH

Children! Please enjoy the meditation.

CHARISE

We're not children. And we don't need to meditate. I need my/medicine—

BETH

There is more than one way to clarify the mind. I thought it would be valuable to center yourself after a busy month. Before things become more... intense.

WARREN

More intense?

BETH

Oh yes.

Hal enters, looking ill. Beth vacates his chair.

HAL

Thank you, Elizabeth.

He motions her to the door. She doesn't move, and he does so again. She starts to leave.

HAL

Why does it sound like a fucking rainforest in here?

BETH

We were doing a mindfulness exercise.

HAL

Mindfulness.

Beth turns off the music and takes her cue to exit.

HAL

How's your mind, Charise?

CHARISE

Fucked.

HAL (amused)

And yours, Warren?

WARREN

Feeling ready.

Hal raises his eyebrows like he has no idea what Warren's talking about.

WARREN

To review my pages today.

Hal looks at Charise, seemingly confused.

HAL

Did you know we were supposed to read Warren's work today?

CHARISE

Yeah?

HAL

I have no recollection of reading it.

WARREN (hurt)

That's okay. I wrote out an extra copy.

Warren hands Hal a thick stack of papers. Hal looks up at him, amused.

HAL

Thank you for your “pages.”

Hal dumps the pages on the floor at his feet.

How do we advance the plot? Make it feel inevitable, when there are no original stories left. Because everything is derivative. We must find a way to make it feel new. How can we disguise the monomyth? By shocking the audience with something brave. Something they’ve never seen before. Write for yourself, not for others. Because if you consider other people’s opinion, you will write... poorly. Very poorly.

Warren raises his hand. Hal pointedly ignores him.

HAL

If you don’t have the courage to write what your spirit compels you, if you are trying to impress invisible eyes... you will twist yourself into knots until you are unrecognizable. You will be a commodity, a barometer, not/a truth-teller.

WARREN

Sir? Will... will you be reading my pages?

HAL (raising his eyebrows)

What makes you think I haven’t read them?

WARREN

You said you haven’t...

HAL

I said “I have no recollection of reading them.”

WARREN (not understanding)

Sorry... I don’t/follow....

HAL (again as though talking to a deaf student)

Because in order for you to write something worth remembering, you might try. Listening. To what. I. Am. Teaching. You.

WARREN (pausing, then raising his hand)

Just to clarify, we’re not talking about my pages today?

Hal reaches down to Warren’s pages out of sheer frustration. He reads aloud.

HAL

“The shadow of a wooden cross darkened the faces of young men sitting on roughly hewn benches in the forest full of towering pine trees. As Lyle Harper recited scripture on the dais, he noticed how their eyes, once glazed, burned with attention. The benches were made of oak, perhaps from the nearby clearing of trees. Trees that were old as the tradition of worship, trees that had perhaps seen the blood of human sacrifice.”

A beat. Hal stares into space; he almost seems to be having a stroke.

WARREN (very concerned)

Sir?

HAL

What if... I don't give a fuck about what the trees have seen?

WARREN (making notes)

Agreed. Yes. Yep. I can remove that part.

HAL

I'm asking you. (He waits for Warren.) **WHY DO I CARE ABOUT THE FUCKING TREES?**

WARREN

I-I thought it was setting the scene. Beth told me it had potential.

HAL

Has anything ever *happened* in your life, Warren?

WARREN

Of course.

HAL

Well, I certainly couldn't tell from this... *botany textbook!*

WARREN

Things have happened to me.

HAL

So pointless. To even waste time on you. Someone needs to... (A beat.) Charise. Come.

Charise walks over to Hal. He whispers in her ear.

CHARISE

Really?

It will help him grow.

HAL

Charise nods and walks behind Warren. Warren is momentarily distracted, until he hears a RIPPING NOISE. Hal is ripping up Warren's pages.

No!

WARREN

Charise. Go.

HAL

Charise puts Warren in a chokehold. Hal continues to rip Warren's pages with relish. When he's finished, Hal pulls his chair close to Warren, knees touching.

Do you know what the most boring kind of character is? One who doesn't know what they want. Your characters are boring as sin. What does Lyle Harper want?

HAL

To... start a movement.

WARREN

Groundbreaking. A cult leader wanting to start a movement. Give this man a Pulitzer!

HAL (cutting)

To be close to... to....

WARREN

"To... to..." What do *you* want, Warren? Don't let go, Charise.

HAL (mocking)

To be... to be...

WARREN

"To be? Or not to be?" You want to die? Because I honestly don't think I can get through that thick, needy skull.

HAL

I want to be published.

WARREN

To be published! Selfless! Manuals? Brochures? No wonder your writing is empty!

HAL

I want to publish a novel.

WARREN

Hal *SLAPS* Warren. Warren is speechless.

HAL

That's not what you want. You want to see your name glorified. You want to be a cult leader? You want to be God?

Warren seems terrified. Hal raises his hand again.

HAL

You want to be God? Is that it?

WARREN

I want to... be...

HAL

What?

WARREN

FREE.

HAL

Free from?

Warren doesn't speak. Hal nods and Charise tightens her grip.

WARREN (panicking)

Help me!

HAL

Free from?

WARREN (nearly choking)

My body.

HAL

Where does the rest of you go? OPEN UP, DAMN YOU!

Warren pantomimes writing.

HAL

You want to split your soul from your body. That's what your book is isn't it? The sinful body, the pure soul.

Warren doesn't say anything. Hal grabs his face.

HAL

ISN'T IT? The sinful body, the pure soul?

WARREN

Yes.

HAL

Yes what?

WARREN

Yes, sir.

HAL (shaking his head)

Yes, you what?

WARREN

YES I WANT TO SPLIT MY SOUL FROM MY SINFUL BODY.

A beat. Hal motions to Charise to let Warren go. She does. Warren pants and wipes tears from his face. Hal puts a fatherly hand on his shoulder.

HAL

Then write that. Write that!

Hal throws fragments of Warren's pages in the air.

HAL

WRITE THAT! WRITE THAT!

Charise joins in throwing the paper over Warren. Warren suddenly starts to laugh. It's like baptism. Warren picks up fragments of his writing and tosses them in the air with something like ecstasy as his torn-up writing rains down around him.

WARREN

I WILL! I *WILL* WRITE THAT!

Lights down.

Act I, Scene 10

In the darkness, we hear Hal, Charise, and Beth sing "Happy birthday dear Warren... Happy birthday to you." Lights up on all in the dining area, Charise and Warren eating plates of cake. Suddenly, Charise stands. A beat.

CHARISE

I... I don't know why I did that.

BETH

Warren, you've hardly touched your cake. Don't you like it?

Warren begins to eat.

HAL

Of course he does. It's his party. Another year older. And not hiding things from me anymore. Isn't that right?

WARREN

That's right sir. I'm seeing myself clearly. (To Beth.) I'm writing about a man trying to split his soul from his body.

BETH

How interesting. And how is that process for you?

WARREN

I had some writer's block. Until I started keeping a dream journal.

HAL

Very incisive. Tell me about your dreams.

Charise begins to search among her silverware frantically, clattering noisily.

WARREN (distracted)

Well... last night, I dreamed there was a war. And I was a soldier in it. They made me... I had to blow up a building. But there were people in it. And I had a change of heart, at the last minute. I didn't want them to get hurt. But it was too late.

CHARISE

Could I get a knife, please?

BETH

I'm sorry. I didn't think you'd need a knife for your cake.

Can I have a knife?

CHARISE

I... I don't think we have knives.

BETH

No knives? Why?

CHARISE

Have you ever dreamed of Charise, Warren?

HAL

I... I don't think so.

WARREN

Charise? Has Warren ever appeared when your unconscious mind is spinning stories?

HAL

Warren? Um... I...

CHARISE

Charise blinks multiple times, as though trying to clear her eyes.

What?

BETH

Have you ever dreamed about Warren?

But Charise is suddenly fascinated by her fingers.

CHARISE

I feel... can you come back to me?

WARREN

I forgot to tell you, Professor Morgan. I invented a new word in my writing.

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

WARREN

Are you okay?

CHARISE

I thought I just saw...

She looks off into the distance, transfixed.

CHARISE

Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

HAL

Continue, please. You invented a word?

WARREN (starting to ramble)

I love to invent words. The feeling of picking out the perfect outfit for the weather? "Climatosync." (*kly-MA-toh-sink*). "Triumfespair" (*TRI-uhm-fes-pehr*) is the feeling of getting exactly what you want at a terrible price. And now, in this novel, "nihilogenropathy" (*nih-ih-loh-JEN-roh-pah-thee*). It means the plot of your life doesn't make sense to you anymore. The arc of your story is spiraling out of control into another genre. I think of my life as a plot, which I'm told is psychopathic, but I'm trying to capture my main character's awareness of his life as a story, awareness of a lurch into an unfamiliar genre, comedy to dread, romance to sudden violence because that's what *I feel*. An undercurrent of alienation and violence and self-hatred and fear that I don't really understand anything at all.

Warren shuts his eyes. Charise stares at him.

HAL

Tell me about this violence.

WARREN (becoming truly unhinged)

I was having some... mental health stuff. At school. Brown. University. I thought it was going to be this really liberal, really open place... but they were worse than in Georgia. Snobs. Try-hards. They didn't think my work had... edge. So I started writing about what scared me. Which was me. The things I thought about. The professors who didn't see me, suddenly on trial for abuse. The East Coast pseudo-intellectuals who thought they were so fucking smart, on the rack, having their fingernails plucked out because they haven't even read Martin Amis. All of the snobs, trapped in the student union as it goes up in flames, all the doors barred. And one day in class the professor told me it was disturbing, and I was like hey, you wanted edge, and then some girl said it made her feel unsafe. Unsafe! They made me feel unsafe. Unwelcome. Unheard. So I finally just snapped and stood up and yelled "DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM? DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM?" ... I don't feel very well.

WARREN

I don't feel well.

BETH

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

(To Hal.) It's locked. (To Warren and Charise.) Please, please, continue to eat.

WARREN

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

CHARISE

They poisoned us. I knew they poisoned us.

BETH

We have not poisoned you! Please, listen—

CHARISE

Then you eat it! 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.

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

HAL

Yes.

BETH

Hal. (Maternally.) We haven't poisoned you. We've given you a dose of LSD.

CHARISE

No no no no no/no no no no—

BETH

We're bringing 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.

CHARISE

I'll dissociate. I need my medication.

BETH

You'll be safe in this room.

CHARISE

I'm not just me anymore. She's here. In my mind. The neighbor girl...

HAL

Tell me about the neighbor girl.

CHARISE

The neighbor girl was older than me. We pushed each other. To see how far we would go. It was a game. And one day, I dared her, I dared her to kill the dog. I said "I'll make the sausages, you feed it." I didn't have the courage. She did. She always did.

BETH

She's there in your mind?

CHARISE

All the time.

BETH

Where is she now? Where is she now, Charise?

Charise begins to shake violently

HAL

We'll give you your medication. Just tell us where she is.

CHARISE

She's dead. I killed her.

BETH

You *killed*...

CHARISE

I was 14. She dared me to steal my dad's weed. We smoked in his basement. I was going out of my mind. I didn't want her to know I was scared. The game said don't be scared.

CHARISE (cont'd)

I saw my dad's gun in its case. She told me to get it out. We smoked and played with the gun. She put the trigger to my temple. We kissed it. She talked about what it would feel like to shoot each other. It was a game. Our game. Killing the fear. Making it serve us. She dared me to let her touch me. I said only if she... sucked on the barrel. She put it in her mouth. And her eyes... no one had ever touched me. I was seeing stars. And I don't know how... the sound. The sound was like a bomb. And suddenly she was lying on the floor. Blood was on the wall. And the bottom of her face was gone.

Warren digs his nails into his head.

WARREN

This is Hell. Isn't it? I'm in Hell.

CHARISE

I never saw her afraid. We weren't allowed to be. But I can't forget her eyes above... her split-open face. So scared. I tried to keep her from bleeding. I put my hands on where her mouth was, hoping I could make it better... touching blood, broken teeth, gums... I'll never forget the way it felt... seeing her inside.

Charise touches her own face, teeth, gums.

HAL

And your father was the one who found you?

CHARISE (to herself)

It was *his* gun.

HAL

He blamed you. Didn't he? Didn't he?

But Charise is in her own world, touching her face frantically. Warren is pulling out his hair.

WARREN

I don't want to go to Hell... /I don't want to go.

BETH

Why would you think you'd go to Hell?

WARREN

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

HAL

And now you are facing your judgment, Warren.

WARREN (recognizing Hal)

Old Testament God... waiting to strike me down.

BETH

What are you doing?

HAL

You are in Hell because you have desecrated my will, your body, with the sin of Sodom.

CHARISE

I'm in an evil dream.

HAL (taunting)

You defile your God-given duty to become a father. And you'll burn for it.

BETH (real anger)

This has gone far enough. (To Warren.) Warren. Look at me. You are not in Hell. You are not a bad person. Hal is just playing a game.

CHARISE (breaking down)

Why are they ignoring me?

BETH

Do you feel unsafe?

CHARISE

I need it to stop. I need to be alone.

HAL

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

CHARISE

I NEED TO BE ALONE.

A beat. Beth goes and unlocks a door.

BETH

I'm going to unlock the isolation room. A place to unwind. There's a cot, water, crackers...

HAL

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 suddenly smiles.)

CHARISE

I just want to sleep.

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

HAL (fatherly)

Warren. Go with her.

BETH

Hal, what are you doing?

HAL

Seeing what happens. (To Warren.) My best writing came from bad trips. Go with her.

WARREN

Why would you...?

HAL

She can help you leave Hell... and experience Heaven.

Warren suddenly begins to sob.

WARREN

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

BETH

What's all about?

WARREN

Conversion therapy again. 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.

Warren buries his face in his hands.

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 my body and just...

Beth walks over to Warren, glaring at Hal. She holds Warren.

BETH

You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. I won't let anything bad happen to you.

WARREN

Do you promise?

HAL

You're going to be a great writer, Warren. I swear on my life.

Hal helps Warren to his feet.

HAL

But you need to go in there with her. To see what happens.

BETH

What is *wrong* with you?

HAL (dismissing Beth)

Perhaps two will go in, and one will emerge.

BETH (hissing)

You know he'll do anything you tell him to.

HAL

This is for his growth.

BETH

This is for *your* entertainment.

Hal, on his crutches, walks Warren to the isolation room.

WARREN

But what am I... supposed to do in there?

HAL

Advance the plot.

Hal pushes Warren in and locks the door. Guards it with his crutches, listening.
Beth stares daggers at Hal.
Lights down.

Act I, Scene 11

Warren stumbles into the room. Charise is standing in the corner, facing the wall, mumbling to herself.

CHARISE

I can't... I'm not supposed to... I won't. I won't!

WARREN

Charise?

Charise still faces the wall.

CHARISE

We spoke. I can't... I can't remember the words...

WARREN

Charise?

Charise turns around, sees his face. She suddenly leans toward him, and hurtles towards him like a phantom.

CHARISE

Warrrrrrrrrrren.

WARREN

What are you.

CHARISE (sing-song)

She told me something you don't know.

WARREN

She told?

CHARISE

She thinks they're going to kill us.

WARREN

Don't say that.

CHARISE

They're *warping* our minds.

WARREN

It's for our own good. Look.

Warren finds a pencil and paper on the ground.

WARREN

They want us to write.

Warren picks up the pencil and begins to write.
Charise stares at him.

WARREN

Aren't you having interesting thoughts?

CHARISE

Yes.

Warren keeps writing. This soothes Charise.

CHARISE

What are you writing?

WARREN

About conversion therapy. (He pauses.) What are you thinking?

CHARISE

She's wondering...

Warren keeps writing. Pauses. Waits.

WARREN

What?

CHARISE

... wondering if they want me to kill you.

WARREN

Don't do that.

CHARISE

Okay.

She watches him write.

Can I read?

Warren shows her. Charise looks at it and laughs.

WARREN

What?

Is this even English???

CHARISE

Warren takes back the notebook, scrutinizing it.

CHARISE

They're like little symbols!

WARREN

No. This is English. Isn't it?

CHARISE

No, Warren.

WARREN (haunting him)

Warren. Charise. Warren. Charise. /Warren. Charise. Warren. Charise.

CHARISE

Charise. Warren. Charise. Warren.

Charise moves closer to Warren.

What did you think of me? When you first met me?

WARREN

I... I wasn't really thinking about you.

CHARISE

I didn't leave an impression?

WARREN

You... stuck your finger in my mouth.

CHARISE

Did you like that?

WARREN

No I didn't *like that*.

Charise begins to rub Warren's back.

WARREN

What are you doing?

CHARISE

When I feel bad... I always need to touch somebody. To make me feel normal.

Go touch Hal.

WARREN

I want to touch you.

CHARISE

Warren resists, but starts to relax.

Doesn't that feel good?

CHARISE

It... does.

WARREN

She starts to breathe on his neck.

What are you doing?

WARREN

I bet I can make you shiver.

CHARISE

She licks her finger. Presses it on his neck. Blows. Warren indeed shivers.

Works every time. Do me?

CHARISE

She turns her back to him indicating he should rub her back. He does, reluctantly. She makes noises of affirmation.

You're good at this.

CHARISE

She leans back, rubs her hand up his face. Snakes her finger in his mouth again. For a moment, Warren lets her. She traces his gums, then, suddenly, he pulls away.

Don't stop.

CHARISE

You're making me feel weird.

WARREN

Don't stop.

CHARISE

Like a rabbit with a wolf.

WARREN

This is what I need to feel okay.

CHARISE

I don't like it.

WARREN

You seemed to like it.

CHARISE

I don't want you... in my mouth.

WARREN

I just want to feel okay.

CHARISE

Charise reaches for his face again. This time, she grabs the skin of Warren's jaw. A beat. She tugs.

I just wish I could see...

CHARISE

What?

WARREN

What's... *under* you. I want to see people's insides. Peel back the layers. See what's under the skin.

CHARISE

She tugs the side of his face hard towards her as through pulling off a mask.

See their soul.

CHARISE

A beat. It's like they're about to kiss.

Have you ever...

CHARISE

I don't want to!

WARREN

But have you ever...

CHARISE

Not with a woman.

WARREN

Why did you think that's what I was going to say?

CHARISE

I... that's what they want us to do.

WARREN

Or is it what you want to do?

CHARISE

What?

WARREN

Is that. What. You. Want. To. Do?

CHARISE

I don't...

WARREN

Don't you want to see my soul?

CHARISE

Charise pushes Warren on the ground.

I don't...

WARREN

They want us to advance the plot.

CHARISE

You said they want you to kill me!

WARREN

Is that what you want?

CHARISE

Charise holds up a pencil. Turns the point toward his eye.

CHARISE

They left me a weapon. Pick your eye.

WARREN

I don't want to...

Charise climbs on top of Warren.

CHARISE

She wants me to kill you. I don't want to kill you, Warren.

She leans down. Touches his lips. Parts them with her finger.

CHARISE

I want this to be something good. Don't you deserve something good?

Warren petrified, nods.

WARREN

They're watching us. They have to be watching us.

CHARISE

Let them watch.

Warren sits up, holds Charise in fear.

CHARISE

Shhhhhhhhh.

Charise runs the pencil down Warren's face.
Lights down.
End of Act I.

Act II, Scene 1

An empty attic classroom. Warren is at a desk, writing. Charise appears with a satchel, watches.

CHARISE

I haven't seen you in days.

Warren jumps.

WARREN

Oh. Hi.

CHARISE

You're not in your usual spot.

WARREN

I wanted a change of scenery.

CHARISE

You're not hiding from me, are you?

WARREN

You're the one who's been skipping meals.

CHARISE

I went to your dorm, knocked.

WARREN

How do you know I wasn't sleeping?

Charise holds up a hairpin.

WARREN (amused)

That's a pretty huge invasion of privacy.

CHARISE

I went to Hal's office. He wasn't there. Beth's office. She *was* there. So I thought I'd do a sweep of the classrooms on the third floor.

WARREN

I like the light up here.

CHARISE

Me too. I've written up here at night.

WARREN

You write at night?

CHARISE

Mhm. I like it up here because it reminds me of my childhood bedroom. It was in the attic. Low ceilings. Kind of stifling. Makes me feel right at home.

WARREN

My childhood bedroom was in the basement.

CHARISE

Wonder what that does to our psychology. Basement bedroom. Attic bedroom. Hiding us away. It's like they knew we were no good. What are you writing?

WARREN

A new passage.

CHARISE

The good old apocalyptic cult. Can I read?

He passes her some pages. A beat. Charise pulls a stack of papers out of her bag.

CHARISE

Something for you to look at while I read.

WARREN

Shit. Did you write all of this?

CHARISE

Mhm.

WARREN

When?

CHARISE

In the last week. No classes with Hal. No interruptions. I think they still feel weird about...

WARREN

Hal's just busy. He's still a working writer.

A beat. They read each other's work.

WARREN

You wrote this in a week?

CHARISE

Yeah.

WARREN

Wow.

A beat. They keep reading. Charise scoots closer.

CHARISE

You changed your narrator to first-person. I think it works. Makes him unreliable.

WARREN

Exactly what I was trying to do. And now the cult starts at a—

CHARISE

Conversion therapy camp. It's really good. You got that from our exercise?

WARREN

Yeah. I was actually thinking of setting it in the Midwest. So I was wondering/if...

CHARISE

If I could give you a slice of Omaha life?

WARREN

I just want to ask you some questions.

CHARISE

Of course. (Pointing to her work.) What do you think of mine?

WARREN

Does it matter?

CHARISE

I'm asking aren't I?

WARREN

I never got the impression you care what I thought. Since your writing comes out perfect.

CHARISE

I didn't realize you had any writing skill... until now. What do you think of the opening?

WARREN

It's... really good. Frustratingly good. It's unnerving the way he talks about women...

CHARISE

But...?

WARREN

Can I give you one piece of feedback?

CHARISE

Yeah.

WARREN

You comma splice. A lot. Know what that is? It's when you have two independent clauses that should have a conjunction connecting them with the comma. Sorry, not any conjunction. A FANBOY. "For, and, nor, but, or, yet, so..." Are you following?

CHARISE

"Fanboy." I love it. For a title.

WARREN

Oh. Glad to be of some help.

CHARISE

It's just disarming enough for a book about a serial killer. I'll work on the comma splices. I.... really value your feedback. And I'd like more of it.

WARREN

Thanks.

They write in silence.

CHARISE

Warren?

WARREN

I came here to write alone.

CHARISE

Oh.

They continue to write.

I don't feel good. About what's happening here.

WARREN

And?

CHARISE

Don't you feel something is very wrong?

WARREN

Of course I do. That's the point. To get us to unlock our most authentic selves.

But doesn't it feel like...

CHARISE

What?

WARREN

Like we're their lab rats?

CHARISE

Warren shakes his head and goes back to writing.

CHARISE

I don't know what's real anymore. I haven't gone this long without my medication in years. I haven't felt right since... you're *all* I have to keep me sane. You're the only person I have.

She touches his back. He moves away.

WARREN

What... what is this?

CHARISE

What is what?

WARREN

What is... us?

CHARISE (mocking)

"What are we?"

WARREN

Are we friends?

CHARISE

Are we?

WARREN

What else would... [we be]?

CHARISE

We're more than that.

WARREN

No we're not!

CHARISE

Do you have a sister?

WARREN

I'm an/only—

CHARISE

This is what it's like. We're like siblings. Siblings in a fucked up little family. We need to talk about what's going on. To stay sane. To put the pieces to[gether]... to understand the truth. I *need* you to think about it. Take yourself out of it. Take publishing out of it. Take the agent out of it./Isn't it—

WARREN (does she know?)

Agent?

CHARISE

Yeah. We'll probably get an agent out of it.

WARREN

But you said...

CHARISE

What?

WARREN (suddenly)

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

CHARISE

I'm being honest. I feel it... like in my skin. Something wrong is happening here.

WARREN

Says the girl who thought they poisoned us.

CHARISE

They spiked our food with LSD!

WARREN

For art!

CHARISE

Do you know how crazy you sound?

WARREN

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

CHARISE

You remember what they made us do.

WARREN

What do you... made us... *you* made us...

CHARISE

I made us what?

WARREN

You made us... (He falters, looking at her face for the first time.) Have you lost weight?

CHARISE

I don't know.

Warren looks away, back at his pages.

Warren?

She touches him.

I'm just trying to say... I'm scared.

Warren shakes her off.

WARREN

I... really need to write.

Charise leaves. Warren looks down at his pages, goes back to writing. He looks for his pages, realizes Charise has taken them.

WARREN (calling after her)

Charise!

She doesn't respond. Warren charges offstage.

WARREN (offstage)

Those are mine.

CHARISE (offstage)

What the fuck?

WARREN (offstage)

GIVE THEM BACK.

CHARISE (offstage)

No they're not.

The sound of a scuffle.

WARREN (offstage)

You're trying to steal from me now?

CHARISE (offstage)

You're fucking insane!

Warren returns onstage with his pages. He smooths his hair, which has come undone. He holds up his disheveled pages. Lights down.

Act II, Scene 2

Hal's office. Warren and Charise sit in chairs. Hal is in his chair, older and more tired than usual.

HAL (a bit more labored)

I hope you... all enjoyed a nice. Little respite. Over the past weeks. Much of your writing has been fruitful. From our last exercise.

Hal picks up a cup of tea from the table next to him. His hand shakes violently.

HAL

Your novels are coming along. Today, I thought we would look. To the trouble spots.

Hal takes a sip of tea, and struggles to put the tea on the table.

CHARISE

Can I help, sir?

Hal waves her off.

CHARISE

Let me pass out the pages for you.

HAL

We will not be reading. From your pages.

Beth enters.

HAL

We will be doing... an exercise. Starting with Warren. To get into your characters' heads.

WARREN

What do you mean?

HAL

To help you... enter Lyle Harper's mindset. The scene where he confronts his mother. Before the mass suicide. Pens away. Stand up.

Warren stands.

WARREN

Will we be getting our pages back, sir?

HAL

Focus on the exercise.

WARREN

It's just... you haven't given us any of our writing back for weeks.

Beth approaches Warren and hugs him.

WARREN

What are you doing?

HAL

If we explain, it won't work. Think about your character. Think about the scene.

Hal turns down the lights.

BETH

My baby...

HAL

Hug her back, Lyle.

Warren doesn't return the hug.

WARREN

I'm not in the mood.

HAL

The mood?

WARREN

Can we do Charise first?

HAL

No.

WARREN

My mom has cancer.

HAL

Good. Add it to the book.

WARREN

No. Not Lyle's mom. *My* mom. I got a letter.

HAL
You must be so upset.

CHARISE
What kind of cancer?

WARREN
Does it matter?

BETH
I'm sorry, Warren.

HAL
This shock would be terrible. To waste.

BETH
Hal. I'm not sure this/is...

HAL
This is why we're here. To turn pain into art.

Beth hesitates.

HAL
You still have maternal instincts left. Don't you?

Before Beth can answer, Hal bangs his crutch. She is startled.

WARREN
Don't make her if she doesn't want to—

But Beth hugs Warren.

BETH
I'm so sorry. I should've protected you better.

WARREN
I...

BETH
I let your father do what he thought was best.

WARREN
I said I don't want to.

BETH

He hated who you were growing up to be. I always loved you as you were.

HAL

Think of the character.

WARREN

I... you sent me away.

HAL

Yes.

BETH

Because I want you to be better. I want you to be healthy.

WARREN

I *am* better.

BETH

You just need help. Help I wasn't able to give you.

WARREN

Who am I supposed/to be?

HAL (whispering)

Stay with her.

WARREN

I feel like I'm being watched. Studied. Followed. All the time.

BETH

Don't say that. Why are you saying that?

WARREN

I think people are plotting against me.

BETH

You're talking crazy. What do you do with those men out in the woods?

HAL (whispering)

Remember your power.

WARREN

I show them who I really am. I'm a prophet.

BETH

There are no prophets.

WARREN

I have followers. Disciples. They love me. Worship me.

BETH

I'm not going to let you leave here.

WARREN

They don't see me as broken! They... they see me as pure light!

BETH

I've made so many mistakes...

WARREN

I came to say goodbye.

BETH

I did this to you. I know I did this to you!

WARREN

I was born with this power. And people finally see it.

BETH

Your father said you were broken. I told him he was wrong. Maybe I/was wrong

WARREN

You never saw me for what I am.

BETH

Please. Stay with me.

WARREN

Why would I stay with you?

BETH

Because I love you.

WARREN

You don't love me.

BETH

Of course I/love you. I'm trying to help you. To make you better.

WARREN
You sent me away.

BETH
Because I didn't know how to/help—

WARREN
If you loved me, why did you send me SEND ME AWAY—

BETH
I'm sorry!

WARREN
—TO CONVERSION THERAPY.

BETH
I'm sick! Warren, I'm dying.

WARREN (suddenly taken out of it)
Warren?

BETH
Lyle.

WARREN
I'm not supposed/to be... Warren?

BETH
I'm dying, Lyle.

WARREN
WHO AM I SUPPOSED TO BE?

She goes to hug him, but he rebuffs her. Warren sits down, reeling.

HAL
Nicely done. That was Beth's mistake, Warren. Not yours.

Beth sits down.

HAL
As it goes, Warren... your mother is healthy. That letter was manufactured. To prepare you for today.

She... doesn't have cancer?

WARREN

Not at this time.

HAL

You made it up?

WARREN

You sent that letter?

BETH (to Hal)

You don't know?

WARREN

Of course not.

BETH

This is... so [fucked.]

WARREN

Warren digs his nails into his face.

Charise.

HAL

Charise who has been nearly catatonic, rubbing her temples, jumps.

Are you alright, Charise?

BETH

My head... is pounding.

CHARISE

HAL
Your antagonist. A serial killer called "The Cornhusker." Correct?

CHARISE
He... yes.

HAL
Why does he husk them, Charise?

CHARISE
He... wants to see their... their... what's underneath.

HAL

Warren is your victim. He's locked in your basement. You are The Cornhusker.

WARREN

I'd like to have a moment...

HAL

Charise.

CHARISE

Sorry, what?

HAL

It's time for the exercise.

WARREN

I need a moment.

HAL

Now.

A beat.

Charise. Beth has something for you. Something to make you feel better.

Hal nods to Beth. Beth stands, goes to Hal's desk and pulls out a small pharmacy package.

HAL

We got things sorted. With insurance.

Charise rushes to Beth.

BETH

I'm sorry. They make everything so complicated.

Beth extends the bag.

HAL

We were able to cover the costs.

Charise reaches for it.

But... why. Don't. We. Do. The exercise. First?

BETH

Hal. It's her medicine.

HAL

And she'll have it. After.

Charise walks over to Hal. Looms over him.

CHARISE

She'll have it. Now.

Charise rips the medicine out of Beth's hand.

The Cornhusker demands it.

Charise takes two pills.

HAL

Remember. He didn't want you. He rejected you. But you used your power. You *took* him.

CHARISE

I've been watching you for a long time.

HAL

Good.

CHARISE

You walk up and down my block every day. You know what I've been thinking about?

Charise sticks her face down by Warren's neck.
Traces his clavicle. Relishes touching him. Warren
isn't playing along.

CHARISE

Peeling off this nice stretch of skin here. Peeling you bit by bit. Til you're just a husk. Seeing the look in your eyes as I flay you. Seeing the real you.

HAL

He's not scared of you. Make him scared.

CHARISE

You think your family is looking for you? Think they know they'll never see you again? Til' they find your bones in the quarry, after I melt you in this vat. After I've seen your soul.

Charise beings to rub up the side of his face.

The inside of your mouth... is the softest I've ever felt.

She tries to snake her fingers inside. Warren
stands up, truly insane from the insanity.

WARREN

I'd like to take a sick day.

Charise looks to Hal. Hal nods at Charise. Charise
slaps Warren across the face. Warren is stunned.

Show him who's boss.

HAL

Charise drops her pills. She grabs Warren and begins to wrestle him into the chair. Warren, emotional and frustrated, fights back, trying to get her off of him. Hal watches, amused.

Stop this.

BETH

Don't stop. (*Warning.*) Elizabeth.

HAL

Hal, we can't let them hurt each other.

BETH

It's an exercise.

HAL

Stop. I said STOP.

BETH

Charise and Warren stop, looking between her and Hal. Beth picks up the discarded medicine.

You two. Outside.

BETH

Stay.

HAL

This is not what we agreed to. They are in my care.

BETH

This is for their novels.

HAL

This is for *you*. This has to be ethical.

BETH

Good art isn't ethical!

HAL

Go. Now.

BETH

Warren leaves. Charise stays behind.

CHARISE

I need my medicine.

BETH

Come get it from my office tomorrow.

CHARISE

I'm not leaving without it—

BETH (a sudden, commanding scream)

GET OUT!

Charise, startled, exits. Beth scrutinizes Hal.
Lights down.

Act II, Scene 3

Beth balances lumber against her file cabinet. A knock on the door. A rope coil sits on the cabinet.

BETH

Come in.

Charise enters. Beth smiles and puts a plate of banana bread on the table.

BETH

Ah! Charise. I hope you like banana bread. I had so many that were about to go bad.

CHARISE

I'm sure you can understand why I'm not super hot on eating food you give me.

Beth laughs and pops a piece in her mouth. Charise takes a piece cautiously as Beth goes to her file cabinet and extracts a pill bottle.

BETH

As promised. I can't believe how much they gouge you.

CHARISE (motion to the file cabinet)

What's the rope/for?

BETH (quickly)

We were able to cover it. For the inconvenience. From now on, it's on the program.

Charise rips open the bag, gulps two pills.

BETH

I bet that's a relief.

CHARISE

Shut up.

BETH

Excuse me?

CHARISE

You're not as innocent/as you pretend to be...

BETH

I'm trying to help/you.

CHARISE

If you wanted to help me, you'd call me a car to get me out of here.

BETH

Is that what you want?

CHARISE

I've been going out of my mind without my medicine. Don't pretend you care.

BETH

I know you don't have anyone to look after you here. I know your parents haven't cared for you. If I'm correct, they checked you in to a hospital and/abandoned —

CHARISE

I really hope you don't have kids. I think you'd be a fucking terrible mother.

BETH

I'm trying to encourage you. To empower you as a writer, to feel like the/best version of—

CHARISE

What the fuck do you know?

BETH

I do have a Ph.D.

CHARISE

Oh? In hoarding medication?

BETH

The insurance company had delays.

CHARISE

Bullshit. He made you wait. So he could watch me going out of my mind.

BETH

I didn't give up my life to come hide medication from students.

CHARISE (cutting)

I'm sure you gave up a *very exciting life* as a glorified secretary.

BETH (suddenly animated)

You think *that's* [what I am]...?

CHARISE

You're a fucking sociopath.

BETH

Do you even know the clinical definition of a sociopath?

CHARISE

It doesn't matter. I've been called everything in the book.

BETH

Do you think labels matter?

CHARISE

Stop talking to me like... can't you see I'm fucking done, Beth??

A beat. Beth suddenly cracks. Covers her face.

BETH

You're right. You're right. Goddamn it. I know... I know what kind of pain you've been in. My... wife. When she went off her medications... it was torture.

Charise is spooked as Beth regains her composure.

That's all for today, Charise.

CHARISE

What do you mean that's all for today? You have a/wife?

BETH

I had a wife.

CHARISE

Please. I need the truth.

Charise takes Beth's hand. Holds it. Begging for connection. Beth removes herself from her grip.

BETH

I... I shouldn't be talking to anyone about this. Let alone a student. But I feel... so alone here, Charise. So the truth. Here's the truth as I see it. Hal is a very sick man. His Parkinson's is accelerating, making him even more erratic. I'm afraid of what would happen if people knew what happened here. We're talking lawyers. Prison time. (Composing herself.) I want to find a way to help you.

CHARISE

You think that will work on me? I'm not Warren. I don't need your fucking "agent."

BETH

You're right. You're right. This is bigger than an/agent.

CHARISE

I just want you to get me out of here.

BETH

In the back of my mind... that's what I've wanted. But I also think...

Charise looks at her expectantly. Beth inhales.

Okay. I think it would be a waste. Think about it logically. Everything you've been through. Think about the trauma that has happened to you over these months. At the hands of Hal Morgan. See what I'm saying? No. Okay. I think there's money to be made here, Charise.

CHARISE

You say there's money to be made. Okay. Prove it.

BETH

I need money too. But I don't know how I could... (An idea.) You need to see for yourself.

Beth gets keys from the cabinet. Holds them out.

CHARISE

What's it for?

BETH

Hal's desk. Once you see what we're up against... I think you'll understand.

A beat. Charise takes the keys.

CHARISE

Why are you doing this?

BETH (conflicted)

I... well how can you trust me if I don't trust you?

Beth goes to her file cabinet. Pulls out a contract.

BETH

I've been thinking about this for a while now. I know you don't think I'm, well, someone to put your faith in. But once you do, *if* you do, I think this could be beneficial. For us both.

CHARISE

What is it?

BETH

A deal.

Beth extends the contract to Charise. Lights down.

Act II, Scene 4

Warren enters Hal's office; he doesn't notice Hal sitting in a corner. Instead he sees a new wooden structure built in the small space: roughly constructed gallows with a noose hanging ominously.

WARREN

What the hell?

HAL (speaking with effort)

You recognize it then?

Warren jumps.

WARREN

Professor Morgan.

HAL

Impressive... isn't it? Like you pictured?

WARREN

They're gallows.

HAL

Gallows you created. Where Lyle Harper. Meets his end. See the crank? Out of your imagination. So his neck doesn't snap. He dangles in the air, slowly strangling. Levitating. Ascending into heaven. It's a beautiful picture, Warren.

Hal grabs the noose.

And yet... the passage is.... not quite working. I don't feel genuine terror. As he meets his death. His speech is empty. Of pathos. I want you to experience it. To feel what he feels.

Hal tries to put the noose around Warren's neck.
Warren jumps back.

WARREN

When is your agent coming?

HAL

My agent?

WARREN

Beth told me your agent was coming for me.

HAL

Oh. Soon. Very soon.

WARREN

When?

HAL

When your novel is ready. Do you want him to read it before it's a masterpiece?

Warren shakes his head. Hal tries to put the noose on Warren's neck again.

WARREN

Where is Charise?

HAL

She isn't ready. You are ready.

Hal tries yet again to noose Warren, who resists.

WARREN

So the agent is coming?

HAL

Yes. He already knows about you.

Warren still resists.

These exercises only ever made your writing better. How you become the next Hal Morgan.

Warren allows Hal to place the noose around his neck. Hal walks to a crank, begins to turn it. The rope becomes increasingly taut, until it is pulling Warren's neck upwards. Hal stops the crank.

HAL

Why do I have to kill you today?

WARREN

Because... um... (He adjusts the noose to a more comfortable angle.) I'm a prophet.

HAL

You're a pathetic egomaniac. A psychopath. Who can't. Even. Focus.

WARREN (distracted by the noose)

Wait. Slow down.

Hal increases the crank speed.

HAL

I don't feel your pain. Your fear. What is your legacy?

I started a movement—

WARREN

Aren't you afraid you are insignificant?

HAL

Who am I supposed to be?

WARREN

I'm going to kill you.

HAL

You're not really going to kill me—?

WARREN

You exposed your soul to us.

HAL

And your soul is *shit*.

HAL **WARREN**

I wrote a masterpiece.

I reached into my subconscious, found the truth that that exists in my life. It will/illuminate other lives—

WARREN

Your life doesn't matter. You deserve to die.

HAL

This is getting... tight.

WARREN (re: the noose)

I tried to teach you. To write the truth. To confront yourself. And accept the horror that is this life. Like a prophet. And you failed.

HAL

I can't...

WARREN

You don't see your truth.

HAL

I don't think I can... I can't [breathe]...

WARREN

This is your moment of anagnorisis. Can you see it?

HAL

WARREN

I can't...

HAL (breathing heavily)

Look harder. Unloved by your family, your imagined God. No friends. All these months... no one contacted you, Warren. We watched/your phone—

WARREN

I want it to stop.

HAL

You want to give up?

WARREN

STOP.

Hal keeps turning the crank. A excruciating beat, underscored only by the sound of the crank until Warren's feet are lifting off the floor.

WARREN

You're torturing me!

Beth rushes in with Charise.

BETH

What are you doing?

HAL (exhausted)

An exercise...

BETH

Let him down! NOW.

Hal releases the crank. Warren drops to the ground. Beth rushes to him and pulls off the noose. Warren looks up, gasping for air.

WARREN (on the verge of a mental collapse)

HE ALMOST KILLED ME!

BETH

I should've done something sooner.

Beth surreptitiously points Charise to the desk, and blocks her from Hal's view.

You are not in your right mind.

BETH (to Hal)

Don't tell me. What I am...

HAL

Charise unlocks the desk, pulling out a recording device and a manuscript.

Take him out of here.

BETH (to Charise)

Charise takes Warren by the arm and they exit. Beth exhales. She stares at Hal.

How are you?

BETH

Exhausted.

HAL

I know.

BETH

Beth goes to Hal's desk and removes a bottle of top-shelf whiskey and starts to look for a glass.

Just the bottle, Elizabeth.

HAL

Beth hands the bottle to Hal. Puts a hand on his shoulder. Squeezes. Exits.
Hal sits, looking at the whiskey bottle, broken, as if saying goodbye to it.

Act II, Scene 5

The same empty attic classroom. Warren rushes inside, on the verge of a mental breakdown. Charise follows, reading Hal's manuscript.

	WARREN
	He almost killed me! The sick, sadistic... he strangled me. I was like... <i>this</i> close... to not breathing. I couldn't breathe! Do you understand? We need to go. We need to leave. I thought he was... I couldn't breathe!
I saw.	CHARISE
	CHARISE
There's nowhere to go.	
	WARREN
	I don't think the agent is coming, Charise. Hal didn't know when I asked. I asked!
I need to tell you something.	CHARISE
	WARREN
Warren.	And the way he was talking to me. It was like... I was worthless.
	WARREN
	That I didn't matter... that no one cared about me. But people care about me. You're my friend. Right?
	CHARISE (an imperceptible hesitation)
I'm your friend.	
	WARREN
	I matter. I'm a good writer. But it was an exercise. Just an exercise... exer—exorcism, really! (He laughs, unstable)/Exercise, exorcise! It's the same word!
	CHARISE
Hal is stealing your work.	
	WARREN
	I was afraid for a moment... that I wasn't really going to get published. But we/are.
	CHARISE
Publish? Did you hear what I said?	
	WARREN
	I don't know where my pages are. I don't know how I'm going to get published/if I don't...

CHARISE

NONE OF US ARE GETTING PUBLISHED.

WARREN

What are you talking about? We'll get published. We *have* to get published. It's the best thing I've written and once I get it/from Hal...

CHARISE

Hal is stealing all of your work.

WARREN

He's just keeping the pages.

CHARISE

I just need you to listen to me.

WARREN

What would it have been for?

CHARISE

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

WARREN

It's still the exercise.

CHARISE

Listen to me.

WARREN

It's all an exercise!

CHARISE (begging)

LISTEN TO ME!

Charise shakes the manuscript in Warren's face.

CHARISE

"The Glass Heart" by Hal Morgan.

WARREN

Glass heart?

Charise hands the manuscript to Warren. Warren reads, his pace growing frantic.

WARREN (reading)

“All his life he’d sought a transformation that had never come.”

CHARISE

It’s your story, Warren.

WARREN

“Lyle Harper did not matter. The Georgia boy... rejected by East Coast elite, unloved by his mother, shunned by his church... his glass heart had been shattered one too many times...”

CHARISE

I’m so sorry.

Warren flips to the end of the book.

WARREN

“He saw himself clearly, for the first time... He was a deep twisted root at the bottom of... he ran to the men in the woods because of the unbearable truth... the fear that deep down, he was in love with his own... his own...”

A beat.

But I don’t have a sister.

CHARISE

That’s [right]... you don’t.

Warren stands frozen, brain breaking.

WARREN

I don’t understand. Why did he.../why did he...

CHARISE (finishing his sentence)

Why did he steal?

WARREN (fury rising)

WHY DID HE CHANGE MY WRITING?

A beat. Charise points to the manuscript.

CHARISE

It already has notes. From Hal’s agent.

WARREN

I know the agent’s name. I can find him, tell him these are my words. And he’ll... publish it!

CHARISE

We’re never getting published. This program is a fraud. Hal is only here to steal.

WARREN

I'll tell people. I'll tell them what Hal did.

CHARISE

No one will believe you.

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!

A beat. Warren paces.

CHARISE

Why didn't you tell me you got expelled from Brown?

WARREN

Who told you that?

CHARISE

I thought we were friends.

WARREN

I wasn't expelled. I was on probation.

CHARISE

She told me your writing was scaring other students, that you were threatening violence...

WARREN

Why are you bringing this up?

CHARISE

Because if Hal is stealing from you, this proves that your work isn't dangerous! That you're a great writer. A visionary. Like/a prophet, ahead of his time.

WARREN

It *isn't* dangerous.

CHARISE

If he publishes your work under his name, that means you'll forever be the boy expelled from Brown. Your life will be an endless loop of being a victim, a pariah because of your... of your... your genius!

WARREN

You think so?

CHARISE

I didn't realize how much you needed this. Your writing isn't just about seeing your own name in bookstores. It's about proving your voice matters. But he stole your chance to be the voice of our generation.

WARREN

You don't really think that.

CHARISE

I *do*. I'd step aside for you. I'd do... whatever it took.

Charise holds up the recording device.

But I can't if you don't get a confession from Hal.

WARREN

No no/no no...

CHARISE

It's the only way we can prove/it's your work...

WARREN

It's too late!

CHARISE

You worshiped him, and he used you. He plundered the secrets/of your *soul*.

WARREN

Maybe he was going to give me.../credit?

CHARISE

Credit? I saw what he was doing, Warren. He was trying to *kill* you. I know he was. So he could throw you away. You're a threat to him as long as you're alive, as long as you can talk.

WARREN

So what do I do?

Charise grabs Warren's face.

CHARISE

You crush your fear. The fear that's held you back from greatness all this time. I can see it in you. In your eyes. It makes you weak. And you know it. So kill it. Purify yourself from your fear. Then you wrap the noose around *his* neck until you get the confession! You have power. This agency you have is your mast—no—*your life* is your masterpiece.

Charise hands Warren the tape recorder.

Now go take it back.

Warren nods. Lights down.

Act II, Scene 6

Lights up on Hal's office. The gallows remain. Hal holds an empty bottle of whiskey, drunk. His crutches lean against his chair. Warren enters, holding Hal's manuscript.

HAL (slurring)

Ah. Hello Warren.

WARREN

You're drunk.

HAL (slurring)

Genius. The critical prowess of Warren Ruth. Sees what the common man can't.

Hal inspects the whiskey bottle.

What I like about whiskey. All spirits, actually. Is time moves faster. It has more pace. The dull moments go. I had a problem after my daughter died. You know that? I liked it too much. It pulled me down. Into the vortex. Where I got my best ideas. In the pit.

WARREN

You didn't get them from stealing?

Warren holds up the manuscript.

I read it. All of it.

HAL

And? (A beat.) What did you think?

WARREN (incredulous)

It's mine.

HAL

That's your narcissism speaking.

WARREN (furiously pointing to the book)

Conversion therapy? Splitting the soul from the body? It's *my story*.

HAL

Elements. Here and there. Improved. Edited for clarity.

WARREN

I was never getting published, was I?

HAL

You are, in a way.

WARREN

From you stealing my work?

HAL

You own what you create. Not what I observe. You did not write “The Glass Heart.” You don’t own intellectual property to what you say.

WARREN

These are my... truths. My ideas.

HAL

“Ideas.” Many have told me. They have “great ideas.” But a writer... has to *actually* write something. There are no original ideas. But if you do believe they are your original ideas... it’s what you wanted. Your ideas will be published! (A beat.) Your name just isn’t on it.

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.

HAL

I don’t understand why you’re upset.

WARREN (screaming)

I’M NOT UPSET!

Lights up on Charise in and Beth in Beth’s office.

BETH

Is he in there now?

CHARISE

Yes.

Beth goes to her file cabinet, pulls out the contract and a pen. Beth places it on the table.

BETH

This is what’s best.

Beth hands Charise the pen, then exits.

WARREN

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

HAL

Open your mind. See the service I’m doing you. Your work will never be commodified—

WARREN

My story doesn't belong to you./I wrote my pages! Every *day*—

HAL

You don't own you. You are the product of the circumstances of your existence. *They*/inspired me.

WARREN

So you admit it. You've stolen my thoughts. (Warren hits the arm of the chair.) Admit it!

HAL

At the moment, you're a clumsy writer. Emotional. Indulgent. Nonsensical. But your ideas. Actually quite powerful. Once I fixed them.

WARREN

This is my one great masterpiece, the product/of my pain.

HAL

This is not your masterpiece.

WARREN

Why do you/get to decide?

HAL

This is the book you needed to burn, in/order to—

WARREN

WHY DO YOU GET TO DECIDE?

Warren slams the crutch on the arm of Hal's chair. Charise goes to a table, where the contract is waiting. Charise reads the contract. Picks up a pen.

HAL

Because I made the sacrifices. When I was your age, I traveled the world to find my truth, to see myself clearly. I stood on the ramparts of a bell tower, looking down on the medieval square, the truth of my life ringing in my ears. I *would* become a great writer. But I would inflict pain. And I would be punished with an agonizing death. Every fiber of my being told me I should jump then. End my life on the cobblestones below. But I was not a coward! I accepted my fate.

WARREN

What the fuck are you even saying? Where are my pages?

HAL

Why won't you listen to the story I/am trying to—

WARREN

Are they with Beth?

HAL

Elizabeth is a formidable woman. Always one step ahead. I was her patient after my daughter died. I had so much guilt. Rage. But Elizabeth healed me.

On the word “patient,” Charise looks at the contract again, noticing something she’s never seen.

CHARISE (to herself)

Dr. Elizabeth Klein.

HAL

She helped me use my pain.

WARREN

Her patient?

HAL

Beth is one of the leading psychologists in America.

WARREN

Why would... a psychologist...

HAL

Controversial, yes. But a genius.

HAL

Why do you think you are here?

Charise, panicking, runs to Beth’s file cabinets. She begins rummaging through them. Charise pulls out files, medical charts, notes, photos of Charise. Hal takes the noose and places it in his lap.

WARREN (pleading)

Just admit you stole my writing.

HAL

And now you get your truth as well. So you can finally see yourself clearly.

WARREN (pleading)

Don’t make/me...

HAL

You are a psychopath.

WARREN

I'm not a/psychopath.

HAL

In so far as labels matter. Referred to Dr. Klein by your university.

WARREN

ADMIT YOU STOLE/FROM ME!

HAL

She's been studying you and Charise. For a book about the insane.

Charise begins to ransack Beth's office.

WARREN

I'm not a psychopath! I wanted to be/a writer.

HAL

You said you wanted to be/the next Hal Morgan.

WARREN

I *want* you/to admit you stole.

HAL

If this is what you want, you will keep writing. Your next book may not be a masterpiece. Your fifth may. Or you may never write one. But it is a lonely life. Look, my reward: ending alone in agony.

WARREN

What do you mean ending? You tortured *me* for/your ending.

HAL (holding up the noose)

No death could be more painful than how I've been dying, Warren.

WARREN

Dying?

HAL

Not anymore. If you help me.

Hal puts the noose around his own neck.

HAL

I hoped you would find it an honor.

WARREN

What is this?

HAL

The access you've gotten. So many would kill for it. And in exchange, you will save me from my agony.

WARREN

I...

HAL

So do it, Warren. And I'll give you what you need.
You're standing at the bell tower, Warren. Are you a coward? *Are you a coward?*

Warren starts the crank. Hal takes a breath.

HAL

Thank you, Warren. Thank you.

Warren stops.

WARREN

Just say the manuscript was mine.

CHARISE (terrified)

Oh my god.

HAL

But that's not true.

WARREN

Why won't you help me?

HAL

I am helping you. You still have the joy of writing for writing's sake. I have given you the tools to write your masterpiece. You are not strong enough. They will take your purity. You will be controlled by institutions and machines you will never see.

WARREN

I need them to know it was mine. Or they'll put/me away.

HAL

You don't want to be published now, Warren.

WARREN

I did want/to be—

HAL

You wanted to be understood.

WARREN

I wanted to be, I *need* to/be published!

HAL

And in my book, you will finally/see yourself clearly.

WARREN

I wrote it. It was mine. Tell them tell them/TELL THEM!

CHARISE (terrified)

/WARREN!

HAL

Warren, I made you an author of a story just for *existing*.

WARREN (something snapping)

I AM THE AUTHOR.

Warren raises the crutch above his head. Hal recoils. Warren brings it down toward Hal's skull. Lights suddenly go down on Warren and Hal. Charise hears a CRACK and Hal's yells of pain. The yells go on, accompanied by the sound of beatings, a struggle. Charise covers her mouth, covering a scream. The sound of one particularly heavy blow. Then silence. Footsteps. Warren, splattered with blood, walks into Beth's office. He is holding Hal's crutch. Warren removes his blood-splattered glasses. His eyes are wide and wild.

WARREN

He confessed. I finally got him to confess.

CHARISE (anguished)

What did you do?

WARREN

What you told me to. So we can get published.

CHARISE

We're never getting published! Beth is a psychologist. We're being studied because they think we're psychopaths!

I'm not a psychopath.

WARREN

CHARISE
LOOK AT YOURSELF. (Barely audible.) Did you kill him?

Beth enters unseen, her hands covered in blood.

I don't...

WARREN

You killed/him.

CHARISE

YOU TOLD ME TO KILL/HIM.

WARREN

No, Warren!

CHARISE (terrified)

Warren sees the contract on the table. Charise tries to block him, but it's too late.

What is this?

WARREN

It's... I didn't know...

CHARISE

I thought you were my friend!

WARREN

I... I am your/friend!

CHARISE

But you used me to get published!

WARREN

You are/my friend!

CHARISE

WARREN
Why? Why were you my friend?

CHARISE
Oh my god, Warren, I did something bad!

BETH
Well, Charise, it seems we were both mistaken. You thought he wouldn't do it. I thought he would, just with a noose. I didn't see bludgeoning as a contingency.

WARREN (holding up the recording device)

I got the confession.

BETH

Either way, we've ensured there's proof of the murder and who conducted it. The police are on their way.

WARREN

I got the confession! Didn't you/hear me?

BETH

It will make a compelling conclusion to our account of what/occurred here.

WARREN

DID YOU HEAR ME?

BETH

Notice the details of this moment, Charise. It will be one of your more interesting chapters.

WARREN

You manipulated me. I won't let you steal my work. I WON'T LET YOU—

Warren charges at Beth, who detonates.

BETH (DEFCON)

YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP AND SIT DOWN. I SAID. SIT. DOWN.

Warren cowers on the floor. Beth looms over him.

BETH

Don't you ever raise your voice to me. You're a fucking mental patient, do you understand that? You killed a man because you are insane. Not because I manipulated you. Hal is dead. You are a murderer. They are publishing his book. And you are going to an asylum.

Beth inspects the contract.

BETH

Charise, you haven't signed your contract.

She holds out a pen to Charise.

I know this can seem overwhelming. But this is what is in your best interest. The story of how I cured you is the ticket to a normal life. Your debt, gone. All by giving hope to so many that change is possible.

WARREN

You... are insane.

Beth suddenly makes a move towards Warren.

BETH

You don't get to decide that. You aren't a doctor. And who would believe you? You were expelled from/Brown for threatening to kill students, writing how you would—

WARREN

That's not true... it was/just a story.

BETH

—murder students, *now* guilty of first-degree murder. You don't get to decide/anything.

CHARISE

Warren. I swear I didn't know she wanted you/to kill...

WARREN

I bashed his brains out/because of you!

CHARISE

She said it would/be painless...

BETH

It doesn't matter how he did it. What difference does it make if Hal's brains are all over the carpet? All that matters is that it is done.

You see what happens? Going alone is not an option when you're a psychopath. Well, *were* a psychopath. You need an institution to protect you.

CHARISE

I don't want this.
It's not true.

I'm not normal.

I'm not normal. I am sick. It's not true. I'm not better.

IT'S NOT TRUE!

WARREN

You as good as killed him. I would never have killed him if he... he hadn't stole. I'll tell people what happened.

They'll believe me. I'm not a psychopath. You're the psychopath! You as good as killed him.

BETH

Charise, there's a piece of paper on my wall that says *I get to decide what is true*.

CHARISE

I don't feel right. I want to get out. Please. Please. Please. I don't want to/be here.

WARREN

You're a murderer! You killed him. I'm not a psychopath. YOU are. I'll tell everyone what you did. How you killed/him.

BETH

ENOUGH.

Beth slams the pen down.

BETH

Let me make this simple. This deal is your only chance. To guarantee you money so you can eat. Buy medicine. Have a life that matters. Be in rooms with important people who see you as an expert, not a diseased mind. Someone to be believed. Not to be “put away.”

Beth tears up the contract.

You know what? I’m not waiting anymore. If you want to live outside of a psych ward, you will take what I give you because I have the power. You are sick when I call you sick and you are cured when I call you cured!

A beat. Charise grabs the pen from the table, then screams a primal scream of rage, fear, and defiance. Warren seems to draw strength from it. He rises. Charise looks at him with a jolt of clarity.

CHARISE

I think I know...

WARREN (uneasy)

Know what?

CHARISE

How to get published.

Charise considers the pen like a weapon. She looks at Warren. Then at Beth. As Charise turns the sharp end of the pen towards her intended target... the lights go down. End of play.