

NOVEL

a play
by Ryan Bernstein

Victoria Morris, Lexikat Artists
9615 Brighton Way Suite 426
Beverly Hills, CA 90210
victoria@lexikatartists.com
cc: ava@lexikatartists.com

Jacob Leaf, Creative Producer
jkail2554@gmail.com
(203) 858-4141

Characters:

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

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

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

Beth (40s-50s, any ethnicity, 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*.
- The play should function like a frog in slowly boiling water. Subtlety is key, even in the increasing madness, ultimately building up to the last scene, which should be the only true boil.
- For the purposes of the play, only Hal's hands should shake, though his body is frail.

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:

Goodman Theatre (Reading, 2025)

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)

NOVEL received its first public performance at The Arts Asylum in Kansas City under the direction of Producing Artistic Director Korey Childs, directed by Ashton Botts.

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 coat, carrying a backpack. She references a piece of paper and sits. As she does so, Warren puts a bookmark in his book and stares at her, sizing her up.

WARREN

Here for the interview?

CHARISE

Mhm.

A beat.

CHARISE (re: the book)

Cramming?

WARREN

“Cramming?”

CHARISE

Reading his books before the test.

WARREN

There’s no test. It’s an interview.

Charise shrugs.

WARREN (re: *Unbearable Silence*)

I’ve read all of his books. This at least ten times. It’s my favorite.

CHARISE

Hm.

WARREN

What?

CHARISE

It’s really your favorite?

WARREN

The book that took horror mainstream? Yeah.

Doesn't go far enough. For my taste.

CHARISE

Oh, your "taste."

WARREN

Mhm.

CHARISE (enjoying getting a rise out of him)

Charise pulls out a portfolio of her work and starts looking through it.

I've met him before.

WARREN

Really?

CHARISE

Yeah. When he came to my college to do a reading. Of course, he hasn't done visits to many colleges. Mainly just the Ivies. (He raises his eyebrows, waiting for her to bite.) That's why he was there. I went to Brown. University. (Noticing her portfolio.) We didn't need to bring our writing did we?

WARREN

No. I brought my portfolio just to be prepared.

CHARISE

What college did you say you went to?

WARREN

I didn't.

CHARISE

How did you hear about the program?

WARREN

I was referred.

CHARISE

Like... recruited?

WARREN

No. Referred.

CHARISE

WARREN

I don't understand.

CHARISE

Okay.

WARREN

Like this program is really on the DL. So how were you... oh.

CHARISE

What do you mean "oh"?

WARREN

Were you like... um... was it an initiative?

CHARISE

An initiative?

WARREN (pulling out his phone)

I—can just look you up. What's your name? (A beat.) I'm Warren. Warren Ruth.

CHARISE

How did you end up applying?

WARREN

The chance to study under Hal Morgan. Full tuition, room and board. Not to mention...

Charise raises her eyebrows. Warren scoots closer.

If you're accepted, you're guaranteed to get published.

CHARISE

Says who?

WARREN

People.

CHARISE

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

WARREN (trying to look her up)

What was your name?

Charise removes her coat, revealing a smart blazer.

CHARISE

Is there a reason you're dressed so casually, Warren?

WARREN
Because Maine is frigid. Is it too casual?

CHARISE
Maybe not where you're from.

WARREN
I'm from *Atlanta*.

CHARISE
Really?

WARREN
Where are *you* from?

CHARISE
Omaha.

WARREN
What's *that* like?

CHARISE
Normal.

WARREN
It's... Kansas, right?

CHARISE
Nebraska.

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

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

WARREN
I'm sure they think you have a lot to say.

CHARISE
They think?

WARREN
Especially as a person of...

CHARISE

As a person of what?

WARREN

I do still believe we need your diverse perspective in fiction, now more than ever.

CHARISE

Shut your mouth.

Beth enters. They don't see her.

WARREN

Whoa.

CHARISE

And what makes *your* "perspective" so interesting?

WARREN

I'm saying your experience *is* interesting—

CHARISE

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

WARREN

Toni Morrison is one of my favorite novelis—

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. Charise 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

You're Charise Parker?

CHARISE

Yeah.

BETH

I see.

Beth scrutinizes her.

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

CHARISE

Best of luck, Warren.

Beth exits with a smirking Charise. Warren is momentarily stunned. 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 squints.

WARREN

Sorry, is it supposed to be this... [bright]?

BETH

Too bright?

WARREN

A little bit. Feels like an interrogation...

BETH (laughing)

No, just a conversation. I'll 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 human being. May we have your permission to video-record this interview?

WARREN

Oh. Sure. Mr. Morgan, I'm not sure you remember me. We met at Brown—

BETH

That's so nice, Warren. But we do have limited time.

CHARISE

So who exactly sent you my name?

BETH

There will be time for questions at the end. We believe good writers come from anywhere, even less traditional backgrounds.

CHARISE

You mean community colleges?

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?

CHARISE

Um... yeah?

BETH

Thank you. Shall—

WARREN

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

BETH

To protect our techniques. We guarantee you will be published. 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?

CHARISE

Y—Metropolitan Community College.

BETH

And you graduated?

WARREN

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

BETH

Do you think you are a good writer?

WARREN

On a scale of one to ten?

How good of a writer are you?

BETH

The best.

CHARISE

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

WARREN (a big swing)

What would you say if we disagreed with that assessment?

BETH

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

CHARISE (shrugging)

Are you an only child?

BETH

Yes.

WARREN

Parents together?

BETH

My dad and mom split up.

CHARISE

Do you get along with your family?

BETH

I mean, we have fights, like everyone.

WARREN

No.

CHARISE

Who instigates the conflicts?

BETH

I do.

CHARISE

Uh... I'm not sure. I love using my life as a canvas for my writing.

WARREN (looking nervously to Hal)

What's your father like? **BETH**

A human virus. **CHARISE**

Your mother? **BETH**

She wants what's best for me. **WARREN**

How often do you see your parents? **BETH**

Um... pretty often. **WARREN**

You live with your parents? **BETH**

Only recently. But I have a lot of time to write. I'm working on a new novel, actually— **WARREN**

What is your sexual preference? **BETH**

What do you mean? **WARREN** (laughing nervously, looking to Hal)

What is your gender of preference, sexually? **BETH**

Men. But it informs the genre I write, and I think there's an opening in the market for— **WARREN** (squirming, looking away from Hal)

How many long-term relationships have you been in? **BETH**

A few... **WARREN**

Longest relationship? **BETH**

Six months? **WARREN** (starting to get weirded out)

BETH
Have your parents ever met one of your partners?

WARREN
How exactly is this relevant to my writing?

BETH
It's very relevant.

WARREN
They haven't.

BETH
Never met your male partners... were you raised religious?

WARREN
Yes.

BETH
Are you still?

WARREN
Are we going to talk about my writing?

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

WARREN
I don't know what I believe.

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

BETH
Hm. Have you ever been in trouble with the law?

CHARISE (suddenly defensive)
Why?

BETH
We're trying to see—

CHARISE
What do you know?

BETH

Having a criminal record won't put you out of the running.

CHARISE

I don't.

BETH

How old were you when you lost your virginity?

CHARISE

Excuse me?

BETH

This helps us get to know you as a writer.

CHARISE

Are we ever going 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.

HAL

What are the people like?

CHARISE

Boring. Self-important.

HAL

How would *they* answer these questions?

CHARISE

They... wouldn't get it.

Do you? **HAL**

What? **CHARISE**

Do you “get it,” Charise? **HAL**

Hal returns to his seat, but on the way:

HAL
I heard what the boy said to you in the hallway. You are here because you are a good writer. And that’s the only reason.

BETH
Perhaps it’s time to bring in Warren—?

HAL
(To Beth.) No. She needs to show me. (To Charise.) Describe how you felt when you first saw me.

CHARISE
I... was intimidated.

HAL
Don’t lie.

CHARISE
I was disgusted by your frailty.

HAL
Good!

BETH
Why do all your characters hate themselves?

WARREN
I don’t understand.

BETH
Let me rephrase. Do you hate yourself?

WARREN
I don’t hate myself.

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**

WARREN **BETH**
I AM NOT A COWARD. Why do you hate yourself?

WARREN
Because of my instincts. How my body... betrays me.

BETH
Have you ever fantasized about harming a sexual partner?

WARREN
Yes.

BETH
Who makes you feel inferior?

CHARISE
Nobody. Anymore.

HAL (banging his crutch)
Who left you?

CHARISE
No one.

HAL
Boyfriend?

CHARISE
No one.

Your father left you.

HAL

It's his fault.

CHARISE

HAL
What would you say to your father on his deathbed?

You made me like this.

CHARISE

What do you want to be?

BETH

Normal.

CHARISE

Whose fault was it?

HAL

I'm not crazy. It was *his* gun!

CHARISE

Show him your power!

HAL

Charise walks to the camera tripod, grabs it.

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 conjure greatness that will have you begging for forgiveness, greatness like you could never fathom!

Warren and Charise pant, frenzied.

HAL
Put down the tripod, Charise. (Weaponizing his pause.) Now.

Charise puts down the tripod.

That will be all.

BETH

What?
WARREN

That concludes your interview.
BETH

But you didn't ask about my writing.
WARREN

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

What is this? I want to talk about my novel!
WARREN (upset)

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

No, thank you.
WARREN (furious)

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?

WARREN (frustration boiling over)
There isn't a Hal Morgan. You haven't published anything in years. I can see things you can't. I would be a prophet, and I would eclipse you. (Instant regret.) ...I'm sorry. I don't know why/I—

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

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

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 bet 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.

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.
I'd like to begin. I want to welcome you both. Pardon the last minute arrangements, but one of our admitted students had to defer from the program due to a book deal. Luckily, we had an alternate.

WARREN
... who is 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

I know it sounds harsh. But trust me: you should be excited! You are not going to believe the changes you will go through. I run a tight ship so you can focus on letting Professor Morgan mold you into the best version of yourself. 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.

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.

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?

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.

HAL

Five months. You have *five months* to put in the work that will decide if you will be celebrated, or banished to obscurity. This mindset begins *now*.

BETH (brightly)

Well! Now we've got business out of the way, we can move on to what really matters: getting to know you. Please find a comprehensive personality test in the stack. During the next five 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. There is a picture of a 30ish woman on his desk. 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.

HAL

You want to know why society is on a fast-track to hell? It's because people don't read anymore. We face an epidemic. Of morons. We have no interest in self-reflection. That's why we're here. To write something true. Something painful. Something provocative. So they cannot help but crack open your book and look at the painful parts of themselves. See their hypocrisy. See themselves as the "selfish little clods of ailments and grievances" they are. And inspire them to change. It is painful. But is pain bad?

WARREN

No.

HAL

Why?

WARREN

It helps us... feel things.

HAL

No. That's only part of it. Good writing should be brutal. We have no Churches, no Mosques, no Synagogues, no Quaker Halls that can make us examine ourselves the way a truly great novel can. A novel can be a dangerous thing. It can call revolutions, turn history, find truth. Does every human have the capacity to connect to higher truth?

CHARISE

No.

WARREN

Yes.

HAL

I have often wondered. Not every human is brave enough to mine for it themselves. 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. 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. You need to write what you *don't* know.

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. It shakes slightly.

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.

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.

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. Ask yourself. What is your pain? Warren has generously brought up mine.

Warren is scribbling notes. Charise is deep in thought.

HAL

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

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. Hal stands over Beth, who appears distressed.

BETH

It's too soon.

HAL

It's not up for discussion.

BETH

There isn't enough time to—

HAL

Elizabeth.

Charise enters.

BETH

You're early.

HAL

Teach her to knock.

Hal exits. Beth wipes her eyes, composes herself.

CHARISE

What's going on?

BETH

I... misunderstood one of Professor Morgan's assignments.

CHARISE

He was pissed.

BETH

Was he?

Beth pulls a file out of her filing cabinet, grabs a clipboard, and sits in a chair. She motions for Charise to sit.

BETH

Let's talk about your questionnaire.

You guys boning?

CHARISE

No. Sit.

BETH

Beth looks at Charise, and starts taking copious notes. Charise is self-conscious, then sits. When Beth isn't writing in a notepad, she's nervously tapping her pencil on a clipboard.

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.

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 15. 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.

What did you notice about his face?

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 didn't want to stab him in the palm.

No.

Why would you stab someone in the palm?

BETH

CHARISE

BETH

CHARISE

BETH

CHARISE

BETH

CHARISE

BETH

CHARISE

BETH

CHARISE

BETH

CHARISE

BETH

I don't know.

CHARISE

The tapping is like a metronome's hypnotic beat.

What color was the pencil?

BETH

Blue.

CHARISE

What color blue?

BETH

Sky blue.

CHARISE

What did you want to do with the pencil?

BETH

I don't—

CHARISE

What was he doing?

BETH

Grinning.

CHARISE

What did you want to do?

BETH

Wipe the grin off his face.

CHARISE

What color was the pencil?

BETH

Sky blue.

CHARISE

What was he doing?

BETH

Leering at me, taunting me!

CHARISE

BETH

What did you want to do?

CHARISE

She said I'm weak if I don't stand up to him.

BETH

How did you stand up to him?

CHARISE

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

BETH

And you drove the pencil into his palm instead.

A beat. Beth takes a note.

BETH

Who told you to stand up to him?

CHARISE

What?

BETH

"She said I'm weak if I don't stand up to him."

CHARISE

I... misspoke.

BETH

Hm. Tell me about your application essay. You were negative about 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 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. That's all for today.

Charise gets up.

It's the reason I fought to get you in this program. Your ability to see things as 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. Blinding a sister with a pencil. 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 an age when you first knew suffering. Paint a picture of the character of young Charise Parker.

A beat.

Your parents divorced when you were young. 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?

CHARISE

At first... nothing happened. Then it... started to gag. Throwing up lumps of blood. It tried to walk back 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, disappointing. The writing of cowards. If you won't try to know yourself, give up. I brought you here to turn your truth 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. "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

It would be a shame. You've made so much progress here, away from the distractions of the modern world. 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 crosses into the office, examining Warren's stack of pages. Warren follows.

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 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 late. Enjoy the meditation.

Beth breathes again, reminding them.

WARREN

Okay. It's just we're reviewing my pages today. I could 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? Create something that will hook the easily-distracted minds of today’s world? You have to shock. Inflamm. Provoke. It’s the only thing that commands attention. So you need to look inside, find your primal scream. Where does it come from? Vengeance? Pain?

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

HAL (cont'd)

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?

HAL

It will help him grow.

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

WARREN

No!

HAL

Charise. Go.

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.

HAL

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

WARREN

To... start a movement.

HAL (cutting)

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

WARREN

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

HAL (mocking)

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

WARREN

To be... to be...

HAL

"To be? Or not to be?" You want to die? Because I haven't seen anything that makes your life worth living.

WARREN

I want to be published.

HAL

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

WARREN

I want to publish a novel.

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!

Warren's face splits into a smile. 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 a dining area, Charise and Warren eating plates of cake. Beth is clearing dinner plates.

HAL

One year older. One year closer to being a published novelist.

Warren beams at them.

BETH

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

WARREN

It’s my favorite. I’m just still a little full.

HAL

Full of inspiration! And not hiding things from me anymore.

WARREN

That’s right sir. I’m seeing myself clearly. (He takes a bite of cake.) Mmm. 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.

BETH

How unfortunate!

WARREN

Until Professor Morgan suggested I started keeping a dream journal.

Charise seems like she’s struck by a sudden headache, putting her hands to her face.

WARREN (to Charise)

Are you okay?

HAL (ignoring Charise)

Tell me about your dreams.

WARREN

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 have a knife?

BETH

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

CHARISE

I need a knife.

BETH

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

CHARISE

Why?

HAL

Have you ever dreamed of Charise, Warren?

WARREN

I... I don't think so.

HAL

Charise?

CHARISE

I dream about her.

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 kind of weird.

WARREN

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

CHARISE

I'm not Charise.

Charise looks off into the distance, transfixed.

Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh...

HAL

Continue, please. You invented a word?

WARREN (starting to ramble, increasing speed)

I invent words. For this novel, "arcnesia," which 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. (A beat.) Why haven't you published any new novels, Professor Morgan?

Warren shuts his eyes. Charise stares at him.

HAL

Enough about me. Tell me about this violence.

WARREN (with the pace of a runaway train)

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.

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 you.

BETH

We have not poisoned you! Please, listen—

CHARISE

Stab the fork in their eyes.

HAL

Who? Who is telling you?

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

If I tell you the truth you'll give me the antidote? (Charise begins to shiver.)

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 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'm dissociating.

BETH

You'll be safe in this room.

CHARISE

I need my medication. She's here. In my mind. The neighbor girl...

HAL

Tell me about the neighbor girl. That's the only way to save yourself. Reach ego death.

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

Does she talk to you?

CHARISE

I don't have to talk to you.

But Beth is clinking the fork on a plate in a hypnotic rhythm. It breaks Charise down.

BETH

The neighbor girl. She talks to you?

CHARISE

Yes.

BETH

What does she say?

CHARISE

She...

BETH

She talks to you?

Yes.

CHARISE

What does she say?

BETH

That I'm not crazy.

CHARISE

You're not crazy.

BETH

No.

CHARISE

What are you?

BETH

Not crazy.

CHARISE

What *are* you?

BETH

What the fuck are YOU?

CHARISE

A beat.

You think your little pencil tricks will work on me here? I'm not her.

HAL

Who are you, Charise?

CHARISE

I don't have to tell you anything.

HAL

Are you the neighbor girl?

CHARISE

A writer has to *write*. You aren't a writer.

BETH

Where is the neighbor girl?

CHARISE

You're a washed up old hack.

Who is possessing you, Chaise?

HAL (amused)

She can't be... possess me...?

CHARISE

What happened to the neighbor girl?

HAL (impatient, banging his crutch)

She's dead. I killed her.

CHARISE

The tapping stops. Charise stands still.

You *killed*...

BETH

I shouldn't tell.

CHARISE

Did you really kill...?

BETH

I'm in an evil dream.

WARREN

I shouldn't have told them.

CHARISE

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

WARREN

Why would you think you'd go to Hell?

HAL

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

WARREN

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

CHARISE

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

HAL

I NEED TO BE ALONE.

CHARISE

A beat. Beth goes and unlocks a door.

BETH

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

HAL

And a pen and paper. A bad trip can be overcome if you're drawing, or writing, or...

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...

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.) You try having a glass heart and having it smashed over and over and tell me you

WARREN (cont'd)

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 and holds him.

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.) But you need to go in there with her.

BETH

What is *wrong* with you? You know he'll do anything you tell him to.

HAL

This is for his growth.

BETH

This is for *your* entertainment.

Hal walks Warren to the isolation room.

WARREN

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

HAL

Advance the plot.

Hal pushes Warren in, locks the door. Guards it, 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.

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.

CHARISE

Warrren.

WARREN

What are you?

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.

They want us to write.

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

CHARISE

Have you been crying?

WARREN

I... I've been having interesting thoughts. Aren't you having interesting thoughts?

CHARISE

I'm scared.

WARREN

Good! That's good writing. Right?

Warren writes.

CHARISE

Why won't you talk to me?

WARREN (re: his anguish)

I don't want to waste this.

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.

What?

WARREN

Is this even English???

CHARISE

Warren takes back the notebook, scrutinizing it.

No. This is English. Isn't it?

WARREN

No, Warren.

CHARISE

Charise moves closer to Warren.

Look at me. What did you think of me? When you first met me?

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

WARREN

I didn't leave an impression?

CHARISE

You... stuck your finger in my mouth.

WARREN

Did you like that?

CHARISE

No I didn't *like that*.

WARREN

Charise begins to rub Warren's back.

What are you doing?

WARREN

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

CHARISE

Go touch Hal.

WARREN

I want to touch you. Please?

CHARISE

Warren resists, but starts to relax.

CHARISE

Doesn't that feel good? It makes me feel good.

WARREN

It...

She starts to breathe on his neck.

WARREN

What are you doing?

CHARISE

I bet I can make you shiver.

She licks her finger, touches his neck. Blows.

WARREN

You're making me feel weird. Like a rabbit with a wolf.

CHARISE

This is what I need to feel okay.

WARREN

I don't like it.

CHARISE

You seemed to like it.

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

CHARISE

I just wish I could see...

WARREN

What?

CHARISE

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

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

CHARISE

See their soul.

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

CHARISE

Have you ever...

WARREN

I don't want to!

CHARISE

But have you ever...

WARREN

Not with a woman.

CHARISE

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

WARREN

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

CHARISE

Or is it what you want to do?

WARREN

What?

CHARISE

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

WARREN

I don't...

CHARISE

Don't you want to see my soul?

Charise pushes Warren on the ground.

I promise I'm more man than any man you've been with.

WARREN

What?

CHARISE

You know how the neighbor girl died?

WARREN

You killed her.

CHARISE (snaking her fingers in his mouth)

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 saw my dad's gun in its case. She told me to get it out. We smoked and played with the gun. 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. No one had ever touched me. And I don't know how... the sound. Then she was on the floor. Blood on the wall. The bottom of her face was gone. I never saw her afraid. We weren't allowed to be. But I can't forget her eyes above... her split-open face. I tried to keep her from bleeding... touching blood, broken teeth, gums... I'll never forget the way it felt... seeing her inside.

By now Charise and Warren's faces are touching.
Her fingers are in his mouth. He pulls them out.

WARREN

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

CHARISE

I just want to feel okay.

WARREN

I don't...

CHARISE

They want us to advance the plot.

WARREN

You said they want you to kill me!

CHARISE

Is that what you want?

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

CHARISE

I know something about Hal you don't know.

WARREN

Is this you? Or is this them?

CHARISE

He found his daughter. Hanging in his bedroom.

WARREN

How could you know that?

Charise climbs on top of Warren.

CHARISE

You find out a lot about people when you break into their rooms.

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

CHARISE

I know your fantasies, Warren. Your journal is your only good writing.

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

Hal sits alone onstage.

HAL

You've both been missing classes. Missing deadlines. And I'm trying to figure out why. But I realize it's not your fault. It's mine. I have made you afraid of me. I have lost your trust. And I realize that I have pushed you to expose your pain... without exposing my own. I hope you don't mind me getting personal.

My daughter has been on my mind every day since our last exercise. I try not to dwell... but I've been thinking about how she died. About death in general. But mostly about her. Meredith was my muse. She saw things so clearly. The way her mind worked... it was *evil* how the things she thought of.

Beth becomes illuminated, standing behind him. She pushed herself. Visited the darkest corners of her mind every second of every day, and pushed me to do the same. It overwhelmed her.

So when I tell you... I understand what this costs you... I do understand. But I do it because the effort will be worth the rewards. And I do it because I believe in you, deeply.

Lights up on Warren and Charise, enraptured.

You may be expecting me to. But I will not apologize. I stand by everything you've encountered here. It will make you a better writer in the end. Our time on earth is short. Our time together here is even shorter. You need to think about what you'll leave behind. Nothing we say here matters. Nothing you do matters. *Unless* you leave it behind in your writing. Someday we will all be dust like Meredith. Only your books will remain. That is why we must use our time wisely. We are all hurtling towards death. Some faster than others.

Beth claps her hands. Warren and Charise stand at attention.

HAL

We continue forward. We will not slow down. But we need to focus on our common humanity. Find ways to *see each other clearly*. Your assignment... to write if you were each other. Warren as Charise. Charise as Warren. To understand.

Beth starts to tap a pencil. Warren raises his hand.

HAL

No. Don't think. Just react. Warren, you are Charise.

WARREN

I am Charise.

HAL

Charise, you are Warren.

CHARISE

I am?

Don't resist.	HAL
You are Warren.	WARREN
	Hal nods, motions Warren to paper. Warren begins to write.
What is Charise scared of?	HAL
Being...	WARREN
First thing that comes to your mind.	HAL
Charise is afraid of being alone.	WARREN
No I'm not!	CHARISE
You are Warren.	WARREN/HAL
I am afraid of being alone.	WARREN
So what do you do?	HAL
I... invent the neighbor girl in my mind.	WARREN
What happened to the neighbor girl?	HAL
I broke her. Like my favorite toy.	WARREN
Bad writing.	HAL

WARREN

I killed the only thing that loved me.

HAL

Better. (To Charise) Warren, when did you feel the most pain?

CHARISE (bored)

The day my dad told me I was going to conversion therapy.

HAL

What did you do?

CHARISE

Why am I spending weeks being Warren?

HAL

Do you think you have nothing to learn?

CHARISE

No.

HAL

Tell me about the character of Warren.

CHARISE

He's insecure. He's created a false self.

HAL

Tell me about your false self, Warren.

Beth continues tapping. Charise finally begins to write.

CHARISE

I want to feel I have control.

HAL

What does that look like?

CHARISE

Making people do what I want them to do.

HAL

What do you want them to do?

CHARISE
See me as I wish I was. Ascendant. Talented.

WARREN
I am talented—

CHARISE/HAL
Shh.

HAL
What was Charise's darkest moment?

WARREN
She was going to be evicted.

CHARISE (at the broken confidence)
What the fuck?

HAL
You were. How did that feel?

WARREN
I felt like I was worthless. Like I failed.

HAL
Twenty pages on why you're a failure.

WARREN
By when?

HAL
Tomorrow.

WARREN
Tomorrow?

CHARISE (payback)
My parents were going to put me in a mental institution.

WARREN
No they weren't!

HAL (interested)
Why would they do that?

They know I'm defective.

CHARISE

Why did they want to lock you up?

HAL

I'm a deviant. I'm a predator. I'm a danger.

CHARISE

And what does your revenge look like?

HAL

I... steal my enemies away. I flay them, bit by bit, til they tell me I'm a God.

CHARISE

Forty pages.

HAL

When?

CHARISE

Now. (to Warren) Write about your first sexual experience, Charise.

HAL

It was painful.

WARREN

Too easy.

HAL

It was painful for *him*.

WARREN

Good.

HAL

He didn't want it.

WARREN

Oh?

HAL

No one wanted me. But I took what I wanted.

WARREN

Did you hurt him?

HAL

I held him down. It was revenge. He went insane.

WARREN

Who was it?

HAL

A boy at school.

WARREN

You can do better.

HAL

It was... my stepbrother. He never messed with me again.

WARREN

You want the ones who don't want you.

HAL

Yes.

WARREN (realizing)

Warren, are you finding your book?

HAL

I flay them for not worshiping me.

CHARISE (astonished)

Pain is the only way to see you as a god.

HAL

I have eighty pages!

WARREN

All cliches. Rewrite them.

HAL

I am a serial killer.

CHARISE

Yes.

HAL

CHARISE

“The first boy I killed criticized my poetry.”

HAL

Go deeper.

WARREN

“He talked a big game, but I knew I took his virginity... the stepsister, the one he hated most.”

HAL (touching his temple, confused)

What... what... what...

WARREN

Sir?

HAL (bouncing back)

What if they suspected?

CHARISE

“My parents were treating me for the wrong problem, because they knew they could never face the truth.”

HAL

What if they *knew*?

WARREN

“I could tell his friends at school, and destroy him. He always knew I could destroy him. So I made him whenever I liked.”

HAL

Is it true?

WARREN

It’s the most honest thing I’ve ever written.

HAL

It was my daughter’s exercise. To get in the heads of those she loved. To become them.

Beth stops tapping.

BETH

Sorry.

Beth starts again, but Hal stops her, then surveys the piles of newly penned pages littering the floor.

HAL

The past weeks have been productive. But now we will not be meeting for the next three.

WARREN

What?

HAL

You will spend this time writing a section of each other's novels. Charise, the childhood of the cult leader Lyle Harper. Warren, the story of the first victim of the serial killer "the Cornhusker." You will have this time to make these passages pristine while I am on leave. These sections will go in your final novel. Work with each other. You need each other.

WARREN

How can she write my work?

HAL

Better, perhaps.

WARREN

No I mean... like... who owns it?

HAL

You cannot be concerned with ownership.

WARREN

But if *my* writing is in *her* book?

HAL

Do you want to get published?

WARREN

Yes.

HAL

If I told you that you will, does it matter how?

WARREN

It... but who gets the rights?

HAL

Maybe you should focus on getting *your book* right. There is a reason the word playwright is not built from the word "write" w-r-i-t-e. It comes from the word wrought, as in to meld metals into new forms. All of your consciousness is being melted down here so we can use your molten selves to shape something new. Does the iron worker ask whose minerals are whose? No. He focuses on creation. So focus on creation.

WARREN

I see what you are saying, but—

HAL

WE ARE RUNNING OUT OF TIME.

Warren and Charise fall silent. Hal stands, walks to the door. Upon standing, it is apparent he is in much worse condition over the course of the weeks in the scene.

HAL

Three weeks.

WARREN

Professor Morgan? Do you think your daughter would've liked my work?

Hal considers him. Then exits without a word. Charise and Warren stare down at their mess of pages, then at each other. Lights down.

Act II, Scene 2

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's gone. 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. Makes me feel right at home.

WARREN

My childhood bedroom was in the basement.

CHARISE

Basement bedroom. Attic bedroom. Hiding us away. It's like they knew we were no good. What are you writing?

WARREN

The passage. For your book.

CHARISE

Destroying my book. 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.

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 my narrator to first-person. Makes him unreliable. I think it works.

WARREN

Yeah?

A beat. They keep reading.

WARREN

Does the cult start at a...

CHARISE

Conversion therapy camp. You like it?

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. It's like the silver bullet to all of my problems I've been having.

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. FANBOYS. "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.

Thanks.

WARREN

They write in silence.

Warren?

CHARISE

I came here to write alone.

WARREN

Oh.

CHARISE

They continue to write.

I think it's getting in my head. What's happening here.

And?

WARREN

Do you feel something is very wrong?

CHARISE

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

WARREN

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.

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.

CHARISE

She touches his back. He moves away.

What... what is this?

WARREN

What is what? **CHARISE**

What is... us? **WARREN**

“What are we?” **CHARISE** (mocking)

Are we friends? **WARREN**

Are we? **CHARISE**

What else would... [we be]? **WARREN**

We’re more than that. **CHARISE**

It’s like I’m turning into you. **WARREN**

Do you have a sister? **CHARISE**

I’m an/only— **WARREN**

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 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—

Agent? **WARREN** (does she know?)

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.
She touches him.

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

Warren shakes her off.

WARREN

You're not going to use anything I wrote for you, right?

CHARISE

What?

WARREN

This isn't yours right? You're not going to steal any of my ideas?

CHARISE

Are you listening to me?

WARREN

You don't understand what the integrity of my voice means to me.

CHARISE

You think I want to *steal* anything you wrote?

WARREN

If you publish my ideas...

CHARISE

I'm worried about our *safety*.

WARREN

You think you're safer out there?

CHARISE

I was going to be evicted, and I still feel I'm safer out—

WARREN

Oh boo hoo! Boo hoo hoo hoo hoo!!!! BOO HOO HOO HOO HOO! (A beat.) You're fucking smarter than that, Charise. You wanted to be evicted so you could play the victim. You play the victim card so well.

CHARISE

I told you that in confidence. And if you tell Hal anything else I told you, I'll fuck you up—

WARREN

You told them my parents wanted to send me to a mental institution! Just to deflect.

CHARISE

You want to analyze me?

WARREN

I knew I can't trust you.

CHARISE
You can't trust yourself!

WARREN
Then why did I save your book?

CHARISE
You saved my book?

WARREN
So you have to promise not to steal my work.

CHARISE
Your superiority complex is... woooooooooooooooo.

WARREN
You're trying to get into my head, make me doubt myself, doubt Hal, doubt this program!

CHARISE
Hal's a bad writer who is obsessed with his dead daughter!

WARREN
Your grammar sucks! You don't know good writing if it bit you in the ass!

CHARISE
I'm leaving. Tomorrow. I don't need the program! I'll get published anyway.

WARREN
Oh, really CORN STATE?

CHARISE
Oh really BROWN?

WARREN
I got fucking expelled from fucking Brown!
Warren starts to cry.
It's the only Ivy with no core curriculum!

Charise rolls her eyes. Puts her arm around him.
Warren pulls her into a hug.

CHARISE
What did you do, Warren?

WARREN
My writing... was too...

Pretentious?

CHARISE

Intense.

WARREN (with no irony)

Charise starts to laugh, pulls away from Warren.
But he pulls her back into a hug.

CHARISE

You're so hard Warren. You put the "ass" in "badass." And the "bad" in "bad writer."

WARREN (coming up for air from the hug)

We both need this Charise. Please don't make me stop believing in it.

CHARISE

Why is it so important to you?

WARREN

I want to be published.

CHARISE

But why?

WARREN

I don't... understand the question.

CHARISE

Why do you need to get published? Just like... why?

Warren is stumped.

Is it because... you don't have anything else?

Warren gathers his writing and goes to exit.

WARREN

Fuck you.

CHARISE

I didn't mean...

WARREN

Yeah. Okay? It's because this is all I have.

CHARISE

I'm sorry.

WARREN

I don't have a fucking dead friend in my head all the time to keep me company.

CHARISE

Warren.

WARREN

I've never had a fucking real friend in my life who wasn't my English teacher.

CHARISE

You've had friends.

WARREN (with self-loathing)

I know the way I... I see myself. I can see myself.

A beat.

I'm scared. But scared is good. Don't leave me. I don't think I can do this without you.

Charise pauses. Then nods.

Do you promise you won't leave me?

Charise nods again. Warren smiles and goes to give her back her pages.

CHARISE

No. You keep them. I trust you with them.

WARREN

Aren't you afraid of me stealing your ideas?

CHARISE

I'd rather you learned something. Besides... I like the idea of there being a little bit of me in your book.

Lights down.

Act II, Scene 3

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. Three months in, much progress. Our last exercise has clearly been fruitful.

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

HAL

Your novels are coming along. Your ideas have clearly impacted each other. Today, I thought we would look to the remaining trouble spots... in your own work.

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 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 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!

Please. Stay with me. **BETH**

Why would I stay with you? **WARREN**

Because I love you. **BETH**

You don't love me. **WARREN**

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

You sent me away. **WARREN**

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

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

I don't want you to hurt people! **BETH**

—TO CONVERSION THERAPY. **WARREN**

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

Warren? **WARREN** (suddenly taken out of it)

Lyle. **BETH**

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

I'm dying, Lyle. **BETH**

WHO AM I SUPPOSED TO BE?

WARREN

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.

WARREN
She... doesn't have cancer?

HAL
Not at this time.

WARREN
You made it up?

BETH (to Hal)
You sent that letter?

WARREN
You don't know?

BETH
Of course not.

WARREN
This is... so [fucked.]

Warren digs his nails into his face.

HAL
Charise.

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

BETH
Are you alright, Charise?

CHARISE

My head... is pounding.

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.

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 begins 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.

HAL

Show him who's boss.

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.

BETH

Stop this.

HAL

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

BETH

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

HAL

It's an exercise.

BETH

Stop. I said STOP.

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

BETH

You two. Outside.

HAL

Stay.

BETH

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

HAL

This is for their novels.

BETH

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

HAL

Good art isn't ethical!

BETH

Go. Now.

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 exits. Beth scrutinizes Hal. Lights down.

Act II, Scene 4

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.
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. 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

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

I do see.

CHARISE

You said you fought to get me into this program. So it's your fault. All of this... gaslighting us into submission. And I'm scared... you might have permanently broken me.

Beth suddenly cracks. Covers her face.

BETH

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 checks the hall, scared of being overheard.

BETH (whispering)

If you tell anyone this, I'll deny it. I was married. To Meredith Morgan. Hal's daughter.

CHARISE

The one who—?

BETH (whispering)

Let me finish. I promised to help him, not knowing what he was capable of. I thought it was a writing program. I didn't know it...

CHARISE

Why would you help him?

BETH (whispering)

My former father in law... is a very sick man. His Parkinson's is accelerating, making him even more erratic. I'm here to keep him from doing anything drastic. I'm afraid of what would happen if people knew what happened here. We're talking lawyers. Prison time. (Composing herself.) I want to help you.

CHARISE

You know Beth... I think I'm better at detecting insincerity than you are.

BETH

Excuse me?

CHARISE

You're a bad actor. Rehearsal is important. Make it seem effortless.

BETH

Rehearsal?

CHARISE

"She said I'm weak if I don't stand up to him."
"I wanted to stab him, take out his stupid blue eye, but he put up his hand!"
"I killed a dog! He threw up chunks of blood. I'll never forget the pain!"

BETH

What are you saying?

CHARISE

"What are you saying?"

BETH

Are you mocking me?

CHARISE

"Are you mocking me?"

BETH

Do not fuck with me!

CHARISE

There we go. *There* we go. It's nice to see the real... whatever your name is.

BETH

So it's all been a front?

CHARISE

More like... trying to give the judges what they want. To win the trauma-olympics.

BETH (amused)

Interesting. What do *you* want?

CHARISE

Oh? Interested in me now? I 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... 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

Prove it.

Beth gets keys from the cabinet. Holds them out.

CHARISE

What's it for?

BETH

Hal's desk. Once you see... you'll understand.

Charise takes the keys. 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 way to make this all worth it.

Beth extends the contract to Charise. Lights down.

Act II, Scene 5

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

The gallows.

HAL

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. 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. I don't feel your pain. Your fear.

WARREN

I started a movement—

HAL

Aren't you afraid you are insignificant, Warren?

Who am I supposed to be?

WARREN

You exposed your soul to us.

HAL

And your soul is *shit*.

HAL **WARREN**

I wrote a masterpiece.

You don't appreciate your life.

HAL

You're not really going to kill me—?

WARREN

And so you deserve to die.

HAL

Hal increases the crank speed.

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. And what have you learned?

HAL

I reached into my subconscious, found the truth that will illuminate other lives!

WARREN (hoping this is the answer)

You've learned NOTHING. 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

I can't...

WARREN

Unloved by your family, your imagined God. Your family signed you away into my care, Warren. You were a burden to them. They didn't see—

HAL (breathing heavily)

I want... to stop.

WARREN

What does it feel like?

HAL

STOP.

WARREN

Tell me what it feels like.

HAL

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.

You're torturing me!

WARREN

Beth rushes in with Charise. Everything freezes.

What are you doing?

BETH

An exercise...

HAL (exhausted)

Let him down. NOW.

BETH

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

HE ALMOST KILLED ME!

WARREN (on the verge of a mental collapse)

Warren, I should've done something sooner. Go. Take your sick day.

BETH

Warren leaves the office. Beth surreptitiously points Charise to the desk.

You are not in your right mind.

BETH (to Hal)

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

HAL

Beth RIPS down a length of the rope, causing a loud and dramatic distraction.

Stop!

HAL

No more of this.

BETH

As Beth winds the rope around her elbow, Charise unlocks the desk, pulling out a recording device and a manuscript. Beth points Charise to the door. Charise exits with a manuscript. Beth places the coil of rope on Hal's desk.

You're losing control, Hal.

BETH

I'm missing her.

HAL

BETH
This is not worthy of her. You can't get emotional.

HAL
Believe it or not... there are still things I am afraid of.

BETH
"To fear the unknown is the hallmark of a coward." A great author wrote that.

HAL (with some warmth)
Not that great. Have a drink with me?

Beth nods, goes to Hal's desk, and removes a bottle of top-shelf whiskey and two glasses. She pours herself a glass, and starts to pour his.

Just the bottle, Elizabeth. It's going to be a long night.

Beth hands the bottle to Hal. They raise a glass to each other, then bring the whiskey to their lips.

Act II, Scene 6

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
	Calm now. I need you to hear this. 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

NEITHER 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... a deep twisted root... he ran to the men in the woods because of the unbearable, inevitable truth... the fear that deep down, he was...”

A beat.

I’m not a psychopath.

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

Beth told me you were expelled from Brown because 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

Don't be scared. Your fear has held you back. And you know it. So kill your fear. Then go wrap the noose around *his* neck until you get the confession! You have power. This agency you have is your masterpi—no—*your life* is your masterpiece.

Charise hands Warren the tape recorder.

Now go take it back.

Warren nods. Lights down.

Act II, Scene 7

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 (slightly slurring)

Ah. Hello Warren.

WARREN

You're drunk.

HAL

The critical prowess of Warren Ruth. There are gloves on the table. Please put them on.

Hal inspects the whiskey bottle while Warren inspects the latex gloves.

You know what I like about whiskey? Time moves faster. Has more pace. I had a problem after my daughter died. You know that? It pulled me down into the vortex. Where I got my best ideas from. 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? It's *my story*.

HAL

Maybe elements, here and there.

WARREN

I was never getting published, was I?

HAL

You are, in a way. Put those gloves on.

WARREN

From you stealing my work?

HAL

We all shared ideas here. You used my methods. Charise wrote for you. You for her.

WARREN

These are my... truths. My ideas.

HAL

Many have great ideas. But a writer has to *actually* write something. Where did you get the idea for the noose, Warren? Hm? I planted it for Charise to find. During her little late-night visits to my office. We all share here. We mine each other's pain. That's the process. And now your ideas, your pain, will finally be published. 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 and Beth in Beth's office.

BETH

He's with him now.

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

This is what's best.

CHARISE

He won't do it.

BETH

I think I know him better.

HAL

When I was your age, I thought I knew everything. I thought my writing had meaning. But only when I was older, when I became a father, that I found real purpose. In creation. I thought that would save me from a meaningless death. But look at me: ending alone in agony.

WARREN

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

HAL (holding up the noose)

I wanted you to understand how painless it would feel.

WARREN

You think that was *painless*?

HAL

Nothing is more painful than how I've been dying.

WARREN

Dying?

HAL

Not anymore. If you help me.

Hal puts the noose around his own neck. Beth hands Charise the pen.

HAL

I hoped you would find it an honor. Your writing inspired my ending. They say hanging can be painless. For Meredith's sake, I hope it was. A painless death for your hero. A poetic death to end years of agony.

BETH

This is an opportunity. Everyone gets what they want.

WARREN

Where are my pages? Are they with Beth?

HAL

Elizabeth is a formidable woman. She healed me, like she healed her patients.

CHARISE

I always have a choice.

BETH (to Charise)

I know this can seem overwhelming.

HAL

She helped me use my pain.

WARREN

Her patients?

BETH (to Charise)

And I know I seem detached. But I am protecting myself.

HAL

Elizabeth Klein is one of the leading psychologists in America.

WARREN

Why would a psychologist...

HAL

Controversial, yes. But a genius.

BETH (to Charise)

To empathize with you is dangerous, because of your nature.

HAL

Why do you think you are here?

BETH

But I want what is best for you.

HAL

And now you get your truth as well. And in my book, you will finally see yourself clearly.

BETH

And this will allow you to tell your story.

WARREN (pleading)

Don't make/me...

HAL

You are a psychopath.

WARREN

I'm not a/psychopath.

HAL

She's been studying you and Charise.

WARREN

ADMIT YOU STOLE/FROM ME!

BETH

I've learned so much from you.

HAL

For a book empathizing with the insane.

BETH (to Charise)

And together, we can help the world understand the mind of a psychopath.

Beth hands Charise the contract.

WARREN

I'm not a psychopath! I'm a/writer.

BETH

First we co-write our book. We pioneer treating mental illness. Together, we break through.

HAL

This book is not your masterpiece. I have given you the potential to become great in your life.

WARREN

I want my story. I *want* you/to admit you stole.

HAL

Shortsighted. You want to be the next Hal Morgan? Put your hand on the crank. Turn it.

CHARISE

What about Warren?

BETH

He will get the honor he wanted.

CHARISE

You mean the confession?

BETH

No no.

WARREN

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

HAL

I became great because of the suffering I saw. My daughter's lifeless body. I am giving you the gift of a singular life experience. To kill with no consequences. It will make you a better writer. Perhaps a vessel worthy of my legacy.

WARREN

I don't want your legacy.

HAL (holding the noose)

You want to eclipse me. See the symbolism? This is how you become the next Hal Morgan.

WARREN

I want my story! I want my book!

CHARISE

Do you hear him screaming?

HAL (weary)

And yet you're still focused on the book. You don't have the perspective. You don't see the big picture.

WARREN

You stole my story! Tell them tell them tell/TELL THEM!

HAL

You speak like an insane children, not a great writer. You can't see that I made you the author of something great just for *existing*?

Charise runs out of Beth's office.

WARREN (something snapping)

I AM THE AUTHOR.

Warren dumps Hal from his chair onto the floor. Hal falls behind his chair, desk, or offstage, out of sight. Warren takes the crutch and brings it down on Hal's head. Hal holds up his hands.

HAL

No!

Warren hits Hal again.

STOP. Please—

But with rising glee, Warren continues to beat Hal to death with his own crutch. Charise enters and watches in horror.

CHARISE

WARREN!

Warren stops. He looks down at Hal. Drops the bloody crutch. He removes his blood-splattered glasses. His eyes are wide and wild.

WARREN

He confessed. I finally got him to confess.

What did you do?
CHARISE (anguished)

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

We're never getting published! They're studying us. Warren. They think we're/psychopaths.
CHARISE

I'm not a psychopath.
WARREN

LOOK AT YOURSELF. (Barely audible.) Is he dead?
CHARISE

I don't...
WARREN

You killed/him.
CHARISE

YOU TOLD ME TO KILL/HIM.
WARREN

I didn't think you would!
CHARISE (terrified)

You knew she was studying us? I thought you were/my friend!
WARREN

I... I am your/friend!
CHARISE

Beth enters.

WARREN
You used me!! You lied!

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

Well. This is not what he wanted...
BETH

Beth walks into the room, leans down and checks Hal's pulse. Her fingers are covered with blood.

It hurts me to see what you did to him.

I got the confession.
WARREN (brandishing the recording device)

BETH

Quiet. You threw the whole plan off balance. This *certainly* doesn't look like suicide.

WARREN

Didn't you hear me? I got the confession. I said I/got the—

BETH (to herself)

I can't think if you're talking. She pushed him to do it... *she* escalated... he was unstable...

WARREN

You're insane. You're both insane.

BETH

You don't get to decide that. You aren't a doctor. You don't get to decide anything.

WARREN

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

BETH (DEFCON)

YOU WILL NEVER SPEAK TO ME LIKE THAT AGAIN.

Beth breathes. Regains control. Turns maternal.

I'm sorry. You don't know how it pains me to see him like that. Look at him. You don't know what we have been through together. But you need to take responsibility for your actions. You did not kill him because I manipulated you. *You* made the decision to bash his skull in instead of using the noose. You will tell the police exactly why you killed him so inhumanely. Do you understand? (A beat.) I'd like you to tell me you understand.

WARREN

But... I don't.

Warren begins to cry. Beth leans down, holds him.

BETH

You're overstimulated. You can only take so much. But I want you to know: you are not bad. I'd tell my wife: your nature is dangerous, *only* if not controlled. This/Isn't your fault.

WARREN

Why did he say those things?

BETH

He didn't see you clearly. He didn't know what you truly wanted.

WARREN

I want to be published!

BETH

No no. You don't want that. You just want to be understood. Meredith taught me that. Beneath it all is someone who wants to be understood. And I understand you.

She waits. Warren nods. Beth pulls the contract from her pocket. She holds out a pen to Charise.

And what a contrast the two of you will make. The one I couldn't cure. And the one I could.

WARREN

Who is Meredith? What is that?

BETH (easy as 1, 2, 3)

Meredith was my wife. This is a contract. Charise and I are co-writing a book.

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...

CHARISE

I didn't want him to... I don't feel right. I want to get out. I don't want to be here. Please. Please. I'm afraid.

WARREN

And you're writing a BOOK?
I'll tell people what happened.
You told me to. YOU AS GOOD AS KILLED HIM.

BETH

ENOUGH. Charise. We sign now.

Beth forces the pen into Charise's hand.

Charise?

Turn your suffering into something of value. The research is too important. Think of the pain it will save others. Meredith could have lived if she knew there was a chance for her to be cured. I don't know. What else can you do? Tell me... what do you do with all this pain?

Beth looks at Hal's body. Suddenly reality hits her.

A moment, then she steels herself.

You must *help* others. So let me help you. Let me change your life. Because life can take things away. This can all go away. So if you want to live outside of a psych ward, to heal, to inspire, you'll take this opportunity. I have the power to do that. Because there's a degree on my wall that says I *get* to decide when you are sick and when you are cured.

Charise's muttering reaches a crescendo as she grips the pen and screams a primal scream of rage, fear, and defiance. A beat. The sheer chaos leaves Beth stunned. Charise has a jolt of clarity.

Now I know.

CHARISE

Know what?

WARREN (uneasy)

How to get published.

CHARISE

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—Beth? Warren? Herself?—the lights go down. End of play.