A Denver Center World Premiere

THE WHALE

by Samuel D. Hunter
Directed by Hal Brooks

Scenic Design by Jason Simms
Costume Design by Kevin Copenhaver
Lighting Design by Seth Reiser
Sound Design by William Burns
Dramaturgy by Mead Hunter
Fight Direction by Geoffrey Kent

CAST

Charlie ........................................... Tom Alan Robbins*
Liz .................................................. Angela Reed*
Elder Thomas ................................. Cory Michael Smith*
Ellie .............................................. Nicole Rodenburg*
Mary ............................................. Tasha Lawrence*

Place & Time — Northern Idaho, present day

PRODUCTION STAFF
Production Manager — Edward Lapine
Stage Manager — A. Phoebe Sacks*
Production Assistant — D. Lynn Reiland
Production Intern — Shanique Haughton

*Members of Actors’ Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.

On The Whale the Denver Center Theatre Company’s Production Staff is responsible for costumes, wigs, lighting, props, furniture, scenic construction, scenic painting, sound and special effects.

Developed in the Colorado New Play Summit by the Denver Center Theatre Company, Kent Thompson, Artistic Director.

The Whale was developed with the support of PlayPenn, Paul Meshejian, Artistic Director.

Winner of the 2011 Sky Cooper New American Play Prize at Marin Theatre Company, under the leadership of Artistic Director Jasson Minadakis and Producing Director Ryan Rilette.

The Whale was developed in part at the Icicle Creek Theatre Festival.

Producing Partner  Carol E. WOLF

2011/12 Season Sponsors

THE RICKETSON THEATRE
JAN 13—FEB 19, 2012
CHARACTERS

CHARLIE Early to mid forties, male, weighing around 600 lbs.

LIZ Early to mid forties, female.

ELDER THOMAS 19, male.

ELLIE 17, female.

MARY Early forties, female.

Setting

Northern Idaho, the present.

Note

The play is better served by being performed without intermission—but, if it’s essential, an intermission can be taken in between Wednesday night and Thursday morning.

Dialogue written in italics is emphatic, slow, deliberate; dialogue written in ALL CAPS is impulsive, quick, explosive.
THE WHALE

MONDAY MORNING.

The main room of a small, white-walled, desolate apartment in a cheaply constructed two story building. The room is dominated by a large couch that sags in the middle, reinforced by several cinder blocks.

Within arm’s reach of the couch are: a small computer desk on rollers with a laptop on top, a large pile of papers, a walker, a claw for reaching, and a whole universe of full, empty, and half empty food containers (donuts, candy bars, fried chicken, burgers, two liter soda bottles, etc.). Little effort has been made to clean up trash or organize.

CHARLIE, a morbidly obese man in his early forties, dressed in oversized sweatpants and an oversized sweatshirt, sits on the couch in front of his laptop, speaking into a small microphone hooked up to his computer.

CHARLIE. This is from a paper I got from a student last year, a freshman at UC Santa Barbara. He was writing this for an American Lit class. It’s a paper about The Great Gatsby.

(pulling out an essay)

“There were many aspects to the book The Great Gatsby. But I was bored by it because it was about people that I don’t care about and they do things I don’t understand. In conclusion, The Great Gatsby wasn’t so great, LOL.”

(stops reading)

The problems with this essay are painfully obvious. The student has no discernible thesis, almost no analysis whatsoever. I’ll be posting the paper in its entirety, what I want you to do is read through it a few times, and then post a three to four paragraph response providing concrete ideas for revision. Also, those of you who haven’t given me paper four, I need it by five o’clock, no exceptions. And remember—the more revision you guys do on these papers, the better. The more you can change, chances are the stronger these papers will be. Alright?

AFTERNOON.

CHARLIE, in the same position before, in front of his computer, masturbating to gay porn.

After a few moments, his breathing becomes more and more shallow. He pushes the computer desk away from him. He feels some sharp pain in his chest.

He hits his chest once or twice, it doesn’t help. He reaches toward his walker, but accidentally knocks it over. He tries to stand a few times but doesn’t make it. All the while, the gay porn is still playing in the background.
CHARLIE takes some deep breaths, wheezing loudly, trying to calm himself down.

A knock at the door.

CHARLIE Liz?!

Another knock.

CHARLIE It's not locked, just come in! I need help, I—!

ELDER THOMAS enters, wearing a white shirt, black tie, and black slacks. He holds some books and a bike helmet.

ELDER THOMAS Oh, my God. Oh, Gosh, are you—? (pause) I should call an ambulance. Should I call an ambulance?

ELDER THOMAS notices the gay porn, still playing. CHARLIE quickly reaches over and shuts his laptop.

ELDER THOMAS I don't have a phone, do you have—?

CHARLIE uses his claw to reach for something under the couch, pulling out a few sheets of paper. He hands them to ELDER THOMAS.

CHARLIE Read this to me.

ELDER THOMAS Wait, what?

CHARLIE Read it to me, please.

ELDER THOMAS I have to call you an ambulance! I don't know what to do, I'm just—

CHARLIE I don't know what's going to happen in the next five minutes. Please, read it to me. PLEASE JUST READ IT TO ME.

ELDER THOMAS OKAY! OKAY, I JUST— (reading, quickly) "In the amazing book Moby Dick by the author Henry Melville, the author recounts his story of being at sea. In the first part of his book, the author, calling himself Ishmael, is in a small sea-side town and he is sharing a bed with a man named Queequeg—" (stops) What is this?? Why am I reading this?? I need to call someone—!

CHARLIE (pleading) PLEASE JUST READ IT. ANY OF IT.

ELDER THOMAS (reading) "I was very saddened by this book, and I felt many emotions for the characters. And I felt saddest of all when I read the boring chapters that were only descriptions of whales, because I knew that the author was just trying to save us from his own sad story, just for a little while. This book made me think about my own life, and then it... It made me feel..."
ELDER THOMAS  Do you want me to—?
CHARLIE  Stay with me.

Pause.

ELDER THOMAS  I really should—
CHARLIE  I’m not sure what’s going to happen right now. I’d—rather there was someone here with me. If that’s alright.
ELDER THOMAS  Yeah, okay.
CHARLIE  Thank you.

Pause.

ELDER THOMAS  What was—? That thing I read to you about Moby Dick?
CHARLIE  It was an essay. It’s my job. I do online tutoring, online classes on expository writing.
ELDER THOMAS  But why did you want me to read that to you?
CHARLIE  Because I thought I was dying. And I wanted to hear it one last time.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON.

CHARLIE  sits on the couch, LIZ stands over him, taking his blood pressure. ELDER THOMAS sits in the corner.

LIZ  You should have called an ambulance.
CHARLIE  You know that I don’t have health insurance.
LIZ  Being in debt is better than being dead. What’s wrong with you? Why is there a Mormon here?
CHARLIE  Did I have a heart attack?
LIZ  No, you didn’t have a heart attack. (reading his blood pressure) Huh.
CHARLIE  What is it?

Pause.

LIZ  Tell me what you felt.

CHARLIE  Pain, in my chest. It was hard to breathe, I felt like I couldn’t intake air.
LIZ  How are you sleeping?
CHARLIE  I’m tired all the time. I’m sleeping on the couch now, I can breathe better.

LIZ takes out a stethoscope. She checks his breathing.
LIZ  You’re wheezing.
CHARLIE  I always wheeze, Liz.
LIZ  You’re wheezing more. Take a deep breath.
CHARLIE takes a deep breath.
LIZ  Did that hurt?
CHARLIE  A little. What was my blood pressure?
LIZ  237 over 135.

Pause. LIZ puts the stethoscope away.
CHARLIE  Oh.
LIZ  Yeah. Oh.

Pause.

CHARLIE  Could you hand me my walker? I haven’t been to the bathroom all day, I’m ready to explode.

LIZ  hands him his walker, CHARLIE gets up with some effort. It’s obvious he’s having chest pain. LIZ watches him.
LIZ  You want help?
CHARLIE  No, I’m fine. Just—. Sorry.
LIZ  What are you sorry about?
CHARLIE  Sorry. I don’t know. Sorry.

CHARLIE makes his way to the bathroom, wheezing loudly. ELDER THOMAS and LIZ look at one another.
ELDER THOMAS  I should go.
LIZ  Thank you. For helping him. (pause) You on your mission?

ELDER THOMAS  What?

LIZ  Is this your mission? You’re on your mission now?

ELDER THOMAS  Oh—yeah.

LIZ  Where are you from?

ELDER THOMAS  Iowa.

LIZ  You grew up in Iowa and they sent you to Idaho on your mission?

ELDER THOAMS  Yeah, I don’t know. Some of my friends got to go to Los Angeles. A few went to Africa. It’s—fine. (pause) Is he going to be—?

LIZ  No. No, he’s not.

ELDER THOMAS  He’s sick?

LIZ  He’s very, very, very sick. (pause) I grew up Mormon.

ELDER THOMAS  Really? Oh, that’s—that’s actually nice to hear, I actually haven’t run into a lot of others. Surprising, small town in Idaho, you’d think you’d... Do you go to the church over near the highway, or the—?

LIZ  I fucking hate Mormons. (small pause) I shouldn’t say that, I don’t fucking hate Mormons. I fucking hate Mormonism. I hate the sin, not the sinner. How can you believe in a God like that? He gives us the Old Testament, fine, we’ll all be Jews. Then Jesus shows up and he’s like, “Hey so, I’m the son of God, stop being Jewish, here’s the New Testament, sorry.” And then he shows up a second time, and he’s like, “Oh, shit, sorry! Here’s this other thing, it’s called the Book of Mormon.” And after all that, we’re still supposed to wait around for him to come back a third fucking time to kill us all with holy fire and dragons and—

ELDER THOMAS  That’s a really unfair summary of my beliefs.

LIZ  I’m just saying, why would God not just give us all the right answers to begin with?

ELDER THOMAS  He has a plan.

LIZ  A plan that he’s constantly revising.

ELDER THOMAS  I guess.

Pause.

LIZ  Look—it was good of you to stay with him. But if you’re waiting around to convert him, or—

ELDER THOMAS  We don’t “convert people”. Our message is a message of hope for people—

LIZ  —people of all faiths, I know, you’re sweet. But he’s not interested in what you have to say. It’s the last thing he wants to hear. (lights up a cigarette) Listen, you can go if you want. I know Charlie appreciates what you did.

ELDER THOMAS  He said he wanted to hear about the church.

Pause.

LIZ  Charlie said he wanted to hear about the church?

ELDER THOMAS  Yes.

Pause.

LIZ  No, he doesn’t.

ELDER THOMAS  Why not?

LIZ  I just know.

ELDER THOMAS  How?

LIZ  Because it’s caused him a lot of pain.

ELDER THOMAS  How?

LIZ  It killed his boyfriend.

Pause.

ELDER THOMAS  You’re saying the church—

LIZ  —killed his boyfriend. Yes, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints killed Charlie’s boyfriend. (pause) And I should add that, personally, the Mormon Church has caused me a lot of pain in my life. That fat disgusting gay thing is the only thing I have any more that even resembles a friend, and I am not letting you come over here to talk to him. Especially not now, not this week.

ELDER THOMAS  Why not this week?

LIZ  Because he’s probably not going to be here next week.

ELDER THOMAS  Where is he going?
CHARLIE comes back out from the bathroom on his walker, moves toward the couch.

CHARLIE I’m sorry you had to come over, Liz. And I’m sorry—

LIZ It’s alright.

CHARLIE I’m sorry that I always think I’m dying.

Pause.

LIZ Charlie, your blood pressure is 237 over 135.

CHARLIE That’s not much more than it usually is.

LIZ Yes, it is. And your normal blood pressure is at near-fatal levels as it is.

Pause.

CHARLIE I’m sorry, I’m feeling better now. You can go back to—

LIZ Go to the hospital.

CHARLIE I’m sorry.

LIZ Stop saying you’re sorry. Go to the hospital.

CHARLIE Liz—I’m sorry—

LIZ I’m calling an ambulance and they’re going to take you to the hospital!

CHARLIE I can’t!

LIZ You’re going to die, Charlie. You have congestive heart failure. If you don’t go to the hospital, you will die. Probably before the weekend. You. Will. Die.

Pause.

CHARLIE Then I should probably keep working. I have a lot of essays this week.

LIZ GODAMMIT CHARLIE.

CHARLIE I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I know, I’m—an awful person. I know. I’m sorry.

Pause.

ELDER THOMAS Do you still want to hear about the church?

LIZ NO. HE DOES NOT.

ELDER THOMAS Okay. That’s fine, I’m sorry, I—I’ll go. (pause) I still don’t understand why you wanted me to read that essay to you.

Pause.

CHARLIE It’s a really good essay.

ELDER THOMAS I actually thought it was pretty bad.

CHARLIE It got a bad grade. But—it’s a really, really good essay.

ELDER THOMAS exits. A few beats pass.

LIZ Did you tell that little fucker you wanted to hear about the Church?

CHARLIE He’s just a kid, Liz. He helped me out.

CHARLIE grunts in pain, holding his chest a bit.

LIZ What?

CHARLIE I’m fine.

LIZ No, you’re not.

Pause.

CHARLIE I think—I need to call Ellie.

LIZ Ellie?

CHARLIE Yeah.

Pause.

LIZ What, so you’re like—giving up?

CHARLIE What else am I supposed to do?

LIZ Go to the hospital you fat fuck!

CHARLIE Okay, I could go to the hospital. Get a bypass operation or whatever. Rack up several hundred thousand dollars of hospital bills that I won’t be able to pay back, ever. Then I’ll come back home, maybe, and last—what? A year? At the most? All so I could spend another year in what I’m sure is no small amount of pain.

LIZ Nice positive thinking, Charlie. This affects me too, you know? You’re my friend.

CHARLIE I know. I’m sorry.
LIZ You say you’re sorry again, I’m going to shove a knife right into you, I swear to—

CHARLIE Go ahead, what’s it gonna do? My internal organs are two feet in at least.

LIZ smiles despite herself.

LIZ Fuck you. (pause) I know what’ll make us both feel better.

CHARLIE What? (pause) No.

LIZ Come, on. You’ll love it.

LIZ goes into her purse, taking out some makeup.

CHARLIE Liz, I really hate this.

LIZ Fuck you, you love it. You know you do.

CHARLIE I really don’t.

LIZ sits down next to CHARLIE.

CHARLIE You’ll be a pretty young thing in no time.

LIZ takes out some lipstick, starts putting it on CHARLIE.

CHARLIE Liz, I don’t like this. I feel really uncomfortable. Liz, please!

CHARLIE gets frustrated, pushing LIZ away. LIZ stares at him for a second, angry.

CHARLIE I’m sorry. (pause) It’s fun. I’m having fun, I like it. I’m sorry, it’s fun. (pause) Did you bring food?

Pause.

LIZ Yes.

CHARLIE I’m really hungry.

LIZ turns around. She takes a bucket of chicken out of her bag. She goes back to CHARLIE, putting the bucket of chicken in his lap. CHARLIE opens it and takes out a piece of chicken. LIZ puts makeup on CHARLIE as he eats.

LIZ Stop for a sec.

CHARLIE stops eating, LIZ finishes putting the bright red lipstick on CHARLIE. When she’s done, he continues to eat.

LIZ There, look at you. What a pretty young thing you are.

CHARLIE continues to eat as LIZ applies the makeup.

NIGHT.

CHARLIE, alone, much later that night, wiping the makeup off his face with a paper towel. The television is on at a low level. As he finishes, he turns off the TV, staring forward silently for a moment.

CHARLIE (soft) In the first part of his book, the author, calling himself Ishmael, is in a small sea-side town and he is sharing a bed with a man named Queequeg.

CHARLIE takes a breath, and tries to lie down on the couch.

CHARLIE The author and Queequeg go to church and later set out on a ship captained by the pirate named Ahab—

CHARLIE’s breathing becomes faster.

CHARLIE —who is missing a leg, and very much wants to kill the whale which is named Moby Dick, and which is white.

CHARLIE has some severe pain in his chest as he moves into a lying down position. The pain continues, becoming overwhelming.

CHARLIE In the course of the book, the pirate Ahab encounters many hardships. His entire life is set around trying to kill a certain whale. I think this is sad because this whale doesn’t have any emotions, and doesn’t know how bad Ahab wants to kill him.

CHARLIE has finally gotten into a position where he can sleep. The pain starts to subside.

CHARLIE He’s just a poor big animal. And I feel bad for Ahab as well, because he thinks that his life will be better if he can kill this whale, but in reality it won’t help him at all. This book made think about my own life. This book made me think about my own life. This book made me—

Lights quickly snap to black.

In the darkness, there is the faint sound of waves lapping against the shore—so quiet that it’s nearly indistinguishable. The sound continues for a moment, rising just a bit in volume, becoming a bit more discernable, before lights rise on:

TUESDAY MORNING.

CHARLIE sits on the couch. ELLIE stands near the door. There is an awkward silence.

ELLIE How much?
CHARLIE: I haven’t been able to weigh myself in years, it’s hard to know. Five-fifty? Six hundred?

ELLIE: That’s disgusting.

CHARLIE: I know. It is disgusting, I’m sorry.

ELLIE: Does this mean I’m going to get fat?

CHARLIE: No, it doesn’t. I was always big, but I just—let it get out of control.

| Pause. |

ELLIE: Who was the woman?

CHARLIE: What woman?

ELLIE: There was a woman in the background, when you called me.

CHARLIE: Oh, that’s—my friend, Liz.

ELLIE: You have a friend?

CHARLIE: Yeah. She’s a nurse, she used to do in-house calls for the hospice—

ELLIE: Is she, like, your fag hag? Because it seems like she could do a lot better.

| Pause. |

CHARLIE: Was your mom okay with you coming here?

ELLIE: I didn’t tell her. She would’ve freaked out. (pause) Why don’t you just go to the hospital?

CHARLIE: I don’t have health insurance.

ELLIE: But you might die.

CHARLIE: It’s not worth it. (pause) It’s really good to see you. You look beautiful. How’s school going? You’re a senior, right?

ELLIE: You actually care?

CHARLIE: Of course I care. I pester your mom for information as often as she’ll give it to me. (pause) So why aren’t—don’t you have school?

ELLIE: Suspended until Friday.

CHARLIE: Oh. Why?

ELLIE: I blogged about my stupid bitch lab partner. She told her stupid bitch mom and the vice principal said it was “vaguely threatening”.

CHARLIE: You don’t like high school?

ELLIE: Only retards like high school.

CHARLIE: But—you’re going to pass, right?

ELLIE: I’m failing most of my classes. My dumbass counselor says I might not graduate. I’m a smart person, I never forget anything. But high school is such bullshit. Busywork.

CHARLIE: It’s important.

ELLIE: How would you know? (pause) So, what? You want me to like help you clean yourself or go to the bathroom or something? Because if you need someone to help you do that stuff, then you need to find someone else.

CHARLIE: You don’t need to do anything disgusting, I promise.

ELLIE: Just being around you is disgusting. You smell disgusting. Your apartment is disgusting. You look disgusting. The last time I saw you, you were disgusting.

CHARLIE: There’s no way you could remember that. You were two years old.

ELLIE: I’m a smart person, I never forget anything. In the living room, with that old red couch and the TV with the wood frame. And you were on the floor, and mom was screaming at you and you were just apologizing over and over, you were so pathetic. I remember that. Can I have one of those donuts?

| Small pause. |

CHARLIE: Yeah, sure.

ELLIE: grabs a donut from a package sitting on the couch.

ELLIE: You weren’t all that heavy back then. I mean, you were fat, but not like this.

CHARLIE: Yeah.

ELLIE: Why did you gain all that weight?

| Pause. |

CHARLIE: I’d like us to spend some time together this week.

ELLIE: Why?

CHARLIE: We don’t even know one another.
ELLIE So?

Pause.

CHARLIE I can pay you.

ELLIE You want to pay me to spend time with you?

CHARLIE And I can help you with your work. It’s what I do for my job, I help people edit their essays—

ELLIE Are you serious?

CHARLIE picks up some essays sitting next to him.

CHARLIE It’s what I do all day long. I can help you pass your classes.

ELLIE How are you like, qualified to edit essays?

CHARLIE I have a masters degree. In English, from the U of I. I teach online classes, it’s my job.

ELLIE You teach online?

CHARLIE Yes.

ELLIE Your students know what you look like?

Pause.

CHARLIE I don’t use a camera. Just a microphone.

ELLIE That’s probably a good idea. (starts collecting her things) Counselor dumbass says that if I show a lot of improvement in one subject that I might be able to pass. I can rewrite my old essays for credit, so you have to rewrite all of those, and write every other essay for the rest of the semester. And they have to be really good.

CHARLIE I really shouldn’t write them for you.

ELLIE Well, it’s what you’re gonna do if you want me around. How much can you pay me?

CHARLIE Whatever I have. Whatever’s is in the apartment—the TV, my computer, anything. And all the money I have in the bank.

ELLIE How much money do you have in the bank?

CHARLIE A hundred and twenty—

ELLIE You want me to be here all week for a hundred and twenty dollars?

CHARLIE Thousand. A hundred and twenty thousand dollars. (pause) I never go out, I don’t have health insurance, all I pay for is food, internet, three-fifty a month in rent. And I work all the time.

ELLIE You’d give all that money to me? Not my mom, to me?

CHARLIE Yes. All of it. Just—don’t mention it to your mom. Okay? (pause) Also… I’ll write the essays for you, but I’d like you to do some writing yourself. Just for me. They don’t have to be perfect, I’d just like you to write an essay or two for me.

ELLIE Why?

CHARLIE You’re a smart person, I bet you’re a strong writer. I want to know what you have to say. Plus, I’m a teacher. I want to make sure you’re getting something out of this.

ELLIE I don’t even understand you.

ELLIE goes to the door. She turns to CHARLIE.

CHARLIE Stand up and walk over to me.

ELLIE What?

CHARLIE What?

ELLIE Come over here. Walk toward me. Come over here, beside me.

CHARLIE pauses for a second, then reaches for his walker.

ELLIE Without that thing. Just stand up, and come over here.

CHARLIE Ellie, I can’t really—

ELLIE Shut up. Come over here.

CHARLIE takes a few deep breaths, then tries to stand on his feet. He is unsuccessful at getting off the couch, and his chest starts to hurt him immensely. His breathing becomes quicker.

He tries again, this time he nearly gets up on his feet, but falls backward when the pain becomes unbearable. He is wincing from the pain, lying back on the couch, wheezing loudly.

ELLIE stares at him, unmoved.

NIGHT.

CHARLIE sits on the couch reading essays and eating an extra large bar of chocolate.
LIZ enters without knocking, with a small suitcase and a few shopping bags. CHARLIE quickly hides the chocolate behind a pillow on the couch.

LIZ Hey.

CHARLIE Hi, Liz, I love you, but I’d really like you to knock before you—

LIZ Shut up for a second. I brought you something.

CHARLIE Takes a small machine with some electrodes attached to it.

LIZ What is that?

CHARLIE I don’t remember what it’s called, something ridiculous, I don’t remember. But it’s for you, it’s going to help you out. You ever heard of “biofeedback”?

LIZ I have a lot of papers—

CHARLIE Listen to me, I’ve made a decision. Since you’re a bastard and you’re refusing to go to the hospital, I’m going to treat you here. This machine here, it senses perspiration. It’s an indicator of stress. So the idea is, if you know what makes your stress level go up, you can learn to control it. And that’ll reduce your heart rate, lower your blood pressure. (puts electrodes on CHARLIE, turns on the machine) You see that number right there? That’s how much you’re sweating. You wanna try and make that number go down.

CHARLIE I’m really uncomfortable.

LIZ Okay, okay. Just take a deep breath. You’re calm. You’re very, very calm.

CHARLIE Takes a deep breath. LIZ watches the machine.

LIZ There, the number’s going down. Isn’t that better? It’s about establishing a relationship between your brain and your body. Now you know you’re calming yourself down because the little machine is telling you so.

CHARLIE I didn’t need a machine to tell me how to take a few deep breaths and stop sweating.

LIZ Yes you did. Now you just need to do this all the time.

Pause.

CHARLIE Ellie came over.

LIZ She did?

CHARLIE Yes. (pause) She’s—amazing.

LIZ Yeah?

CHARLIE And—angry. Very angry.

LIZ Well, I’d be angry too. Daddy running off when I was a kid and turning gay and gaining five hundred pounds. CHARLIE CALM DOWN THE NUMBER’S GOING UP.

CHARLIE Sorry, sorry.

CHARLIE takes a few deep breaths.

CHARLIE She’s coming back tomorrow. I’m writing her essays for her, for school. She’s failing most of her classes, I think. She’s smart, I can tell she’s smart, she just doesn’t have any work ethic—

LIZ No, Charlie, I’m sorry but this is a terrible idea.

CHARLIE What do you mean?

LIZ You haven’t seen this girl since—what? She was two years old? And now you want to reconnect with her by doing her homework for her? Not to mention the amount of stress that something like this could cause you, and in your condition—

CHARLIE It’s fine. It’ll be fine.

LIZ What is she gonna do if something happens to you? If you need help? She doesn’t know what to do, I’m the only one who… (quick beat) Dammit, Charlie, would you stop sweating? You’re gonna break the machine for Christ’s sake.

LIZ starts taking the electrodes off of CHARLIE.

CHARLIE I just want to spend some time with her, get to know her. I’m—worried about her.

LIZ Why?

CHARLIE She has this—website.

CHARLIE opens up his laptop, pulls up a website. LIZ looks at the computer.

LIZ I don’t understand, what am I looking at?

CHARLIE She calls it a “trash site”. She posts pictures of her friends, her mom even, and she just—insults them. It’s sort of like a blog, but the only thing she ever talks about is how much she doesn’t like people.

LIZ Hm. She’s an angry little girl.

CHARLIE Yes, she is. And I’m worried.

LIZ She’s just an angry teenager. She’ll be fine, she’s got her mom to look out for her.
LIZ goes to her shopping bags, takes out some food for CHARLIE.

LIZ When I was a kid, when my dad would really piss me off—I used to go to the supermarket over on Johnson, you remember that big place that used to be out there?

CHARLIE Sure.

LIZ I used to just—trash the place. And I was really good at it, I never got caught. I’d walk in really normally, wait until I was in an aisle with no one in it, and then I’d—very quietly—destroy it. Open all the jars and boxes, spill everything on the floor. Pour out the milk, smash the produce under my feet. By the time I was done, they didn’t know what hit them. Like this silent tornado had swept through the whole store. I was one angry little girl. (pause) You should just be thankful that Ellie’s doing this shit on the internet and not getting herself into real trouble. You want a meatball sub? I brought three.

CHARLIE Yes, please.

LIZ hands CHARLIE the meatball sub. CHARLIE starts eating it, fairly quickly.

LIZ Just don’t get too involved. You’re her father only in terms of DNA, that’s it.

CHARLIE I want to make sure she’s doing okay.

LIZ She has a mother, Charlie. She’s not alone, she’ll always have her mom.

CHARLIE Well, she—

CHARLIE stops.

LIZ What? (no response) Charlie, you okay?

CHARLIE has begun to choke on the meatball sub. He points to his throat.

LIZ Oh God. Oh God, are you choking?! You’re choking?! Okay, I don’t—lean forward!

CHARLIE leans forward as best he can, LIZ hits his back a few times. It doesn’t help.

LIZ Okay, okay—lean over the arm!

CHARLIE struggles to lean over the arm of the couch, stomach down. As best as she can, LIZ pushes on CHARLIE’s back, attempting the Heimlich Maneuver. Finally, she puts all her weight into it, and CHARLIE spits out the piece of food.

LIZ Shit. Oh, shit, Charlie.

CHARLIE (breathing heavily) I’m okay. I’m okay.

LIZ sits back down. CHARLIE rolls back into a sitting position on the couch. Long

pause.

LIZ You fat piece of shit, what’s wrong with you?!

CHARLIE I’m sorry.

LIZ Chew your food like a normal human being! You could have died right in front of me, all because you’re trying to eat that fucking sub as fast as you can! You’re worthless Charlie, you know that?!

Pause.

CHARLIE I’m sorry, Liz.

Long pause. LIZ calms down. She looks at her watch, then grabs the remote control, turning on the television.

LIZ House is on. Preview looked good, a guy whose arm has a mind of its own, something like that. (pause) You want a Dr. Pepper?

Pause.

CHARLIE (quiet) I’m sorry, Liz.

LIZ I asked if you want a Dr. Pepper.

Pause.

CHARLIE (quieter) I’m sorry.

Lights quickly snap to black.

The sound of waves returns, this time just a bit louder, rising in volume until lights rise on:

WEDNESDAY MORNING.

CHARLIE sits in front of the computer, as before, speaking into a microphone.

CHARLIEA lot of you had some questions about my most recent assignment, so I just wanted to clear up some misconceptions. This is a new teaching strategy I’m trying out, so please bear with me. First, when I asked you to “make it more personal”, I was not being “creepy” as Tina436 recently commented. And when I asked you to “not edit your bad grammar or potentially subjective, unspecific, or just plain stupid ideas”, I had not gone “apeshit insane yoo” as UNCMark45 recently commented. Do you all realize that I can access the class discussion forum?

(pause)
Listen, at this point in this class, I’ve given you all I can in terms of structure, building a thesis, paragraph organization. But for once—just write it. See what happens. It won’t count toward your final grade, you can rewrite it later if you want, I just—I want to know what you really think. I want you to be honest.

(pause)

Also—if you have any larger questions about essay writing, or any essays that you feel are ready for me to look at—you must send them to me by Friday at the latest. Okay?

**AFTERNOON.**

CHARLIE sits on the couch, ELLIE sits in a chair on the other side of the room, typing on her iPhone. CHARLIE is reading an essay.

CHARLIE This is...(pause) You say here that Walt Whitman wrote “Song For Myself.”

ELLIE (not looking up) Yeah?

CHARLIE It’s called “Song of Myself.”

ELLIE That doesn’t make any sense.

CHARLIE Yeah, well, it—... Okay, I’ll just change it.

CHARLIE writes something in the essay. He keeps reading.

CHARLIE Okay. “In the poem ‘Song of Myself’ by Walt Whitman, the author tells us how amazing he is. He tells us that he is better than everyone else, and that people should listen to what he says, because he is so wonderful.”

ELLIE You don’t need to read it out loud. Just correct it.

CHARLIE But it’s not—... This really isn’t what the poem is about.

ELLIE Yes it is. I read it. It was really long and boring and it was about how great he thinks he is.

CHARLIE But he’s not really talking about himself, he’s using the metaphor of “I” to refer to something a lot more universal. That’s what’s so amazing about the poem, on the surface it seems really self-involved and narcissistic, but actually it’s about exploding the entire definition of the “self” in favor of this all-encompassing—

ELLIE Oh my God I don’t care.

Pause.

CHARLIE You just want me to write it for you?
CHARLIE Yes.
ELLIE I thought you wanted to get to know me.
CHARLIE I do. But I don’t want to force you to be here, that’s not fair. It’s up to you.

ELLIE looks at him for a second, then puts away the iPhone.
CHARLIE Have you told her that you’re coming over here?
ELLIE No. She’d be pretty angry. Plus, she’d want the money.
CHARLIE Is she—happy?
ELLIE When she drinks.
CHARLIE Oh. (pause) Do you guys still live over in that duplex over on Orchard?
ELLIE You don’t even know where we live? How’d you get my cell-phone number?
CHARLIE Facebook.
ELLIE Oh. You don’t stay in touch with mom?
CHARLIE Sometimes. She really only tells me things about you.
ELLIE Why?
CHARLIE Because that’s all I ask about.

Pause.

ELLIE When I was little we moved to an apartment on the other side of town, near the Circle K.
CHARLIE Is your mother—with anyone now?
ELLIE No. Why, you interested?
CHARLIE Oh, no, I was just—
ELLIE I’m kidding. Jesus. How could you be with anyone? (pause) Why did you gain all that weight?
CHARLIE Oh, that doesn’t—
ELLIE I’m so bored.

CHARLIE It doesn’t have to be boring—it won’t be boring if you write something honest. Write what you really think.

ELLIE You want me to write what I really think?

CHARLIE Yes. Don’t worry about it being good, I’m the only person who will see it. Now, I’m going to be in the bathroom for a while, but I’ll start working on your essay after—

ELLIE I’m not helping you to the bathroom.

CHARLIE I didn’t ask you to help.

With a lot of effort, CHARLIE manages to stand up with his walker. He makes his way to the bathroom. ELLIE starts writing absent-mindedly. After a sentence or so, she gets bored. She opens up CHARLIE’s laptop and starts looking around.

A knock at the door.

ELLIE is about to call for CHARLIE, then stops. She thinks for a moment. ELLIE goes to the door, opening it. ELER THOMAS stands in the doorway.

ELDER THOMAS Oh, hi—

ELLIE What?

ELDER THOMAS I’m... I was looking for Charlie?

ELLIE He just waddled into the bathroom. What do you want?

ELDER THOMAS Oh, I was... I was here to talk to him. I can come back, though, if—

ELLIE No, it’s fine. Come in.

ELDER THOMAS comes inside, ELLIE shuts the door behind him.

ELDER THOMAS Are you his—friend?

ELLIE I’m his daughter.

ELDER THOMAS Oh. Wow, I... I didn’t know that.

ELLIE You surprised?

ELDER THOMAS Yes.

ELLIE What’s more surprising? That a gay guy has a daughter, or that someone found his penis?

ELDER THOMAS I really should go.

ELLIE Don’t be a pussy. That nametag makes you look like a retard.

ELDER THOMAS We—have to wear them.

ELLIE I don’t care. What are you doing here again? Who are you?

ELDER THOMAS Charlie said he—wanted to hear about the church. I’m with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. I came by the other day, he wasn’t feeling well, I thought I’d try him again. I brought some reading materials, and I have a little presentation—

ELLIE I’m bored.

ELDER THOMAS Oh.

Pause.

ELLIE I’ll tell you one thing I like about religion. What I like about religion is that it assumes everyone is an idiot and that they’re incapable of saving themselves. I think they got something right with that.

ELDER THOMAS That’s not really what I—

ELLIE I’m not finished talking. I’m saying that I appreciate how religion makes people realize that, I appreciate that. But what I don’t like about religion is that once people accept Jesus or whatever, they think they’re more enlightened than everyone else. Like, by accepting the fact that they’re stupid sinners, they’ve become better than everyone else. And they turn into assholes.

Pause.

ELDER THOMAS I don’t really know what to say. I have some pamphlets—

ELLIE Hold still.

ELDER THOMAS What?

ELLIE takes out her iPhone, takes a picture of ELDER THOMAS.

ELDER THOMAS Why did you just do that?

ELLIE Are you coming back tomorrow?

ELDER THOMAS I don’t—I’m not sure—
ELLIE Come back tomorrow, I’ll be here around the same time.

ELDER THOMAS I’m sorry, what’s happening?

CHARLIE comes out of the bathroom with his walker, sees ELDER THOMAS.

CHARLIE Oh.

ELDER THOMAS Hi, Charlie. I was just—

ELLIE takes a picture of CHARLIE, then puts the iPhone back in her bag.

ELLIE Will you have that done by tomorrow?

CHARLIE Sure.

ELLIE Five page minimum.

CHARLIE I know. It’ll be good, I promise.

ELLIE extends a hand to ELDER THOMAS.

ELLIE I’m Ellie.

They shake hands.

ELDER THOMAS Elder Thomas.

ELLIE Weird. See you later.

ELLIE exits. CHARLIE and ELDER THOMAS look at one another.

ELDER THOMAS Are you ready to hear about the Church?

Pause.

CHARLIE Yes.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON.

CHARLIE sits in the same position as before. ELDER THOMAS holds some pamphlets. CHARLIE is glancing through one of them absentmindedly.

ELDER THOMAS It was written by prophets, pretty much in the same way that the Bible was written. Through revelation and prophecy by the Nephiite prophet Mormon, who lived in the Americas in the fourth century. He transcribed the history of his people onto a set of golden plates, and then hundreds of years later Joseph Smith, a man from upstate New York, translated the book from the gold plates in about sixty-five days or

so—

CHARLIE You go to the church on the highway, right? The older one, the one out near the U-haul.

ELDER THOMAS Um—yeah. And to translate this book in sixty-five days is pretty remarkable because it means he had to translate the equivalent of about eight single-spaced pages per day—

CHARLIE What’s your name?

Pause.

ELDER THOMAS I told you. It’s Elder Thomas.

CHARLIE But what’s your real name?

ELDER THOMAS Thomas.

CHARLIE That’s your last name, right? What’s your first name?

ELDER THOMAS You don’t need to know my first name.

CHARLIE Oh.

Pause.

ELDER THOMAS What’s also really incredible is that the Book of Mormon actually contains many distinct literary styles, including ancient Hebrew poetry and—

CHARLIE Why is that incredible?

ELDER THOMAS Well, it—how would some farm boy living in upstate New York have known how to write in the style of ancient Hebrew poetry? It’s living proof of God’s intervention.

CHARLIE Hm. (pause) You know, actually—I know all this.

ELDER THOMAS What do you mean?

CHARLIE I’ve read just about every Wikipedia article about Mormonism—

ELDER THOMAS I don’t know if Wikipedia is the best source for—

CHARLIE I also read the Book of Mormon.

ELDER THOMAS The whole thing?

CHARLIE Sure. A couple times.
ELDER THOMAS Did you—like it?

CHARLIE I thought it was… Devastating.

ELDER THOMAS Huh. Okay. I don’t know about that.

CHARLIE That one story about—Sherem? Sherem was questioning whether Jesus was actually God, so God struck Sherem down. And Sherem repented as he was dying, said that he was wrong, and so everyone believed in Jesus. God killed this man to—prove a point. That story, it’s—devastating.

ELDER THOMAS Yeah, that—I never thought about it like that, but— (pause) You know what I think is amazing? The Bible is great and everything, I mean—it’s a really great way to come to understand God. But it’s so—distant. This thing written thousands of years ago, on the other side of the planet, in languages we don’t speak. It’s been translated and translated, probably rewritten over and over and over. But the Book of Mormon—it’s like, a direct link to God’s word. One translator, writing in English, right here in America, just a few generations ago. It’s—

CHARLIE Devastating.

ELDER THOMAS No. No, it’s—hopeful. It makes you feel like there’s some meaning to being here, right now, in America. Do you see that? (pause) You’re so close in time and space to God’s revelation, Charlie, that should make you feel proud. It should inspire you. It should keep you from doing this to yourself.

Pause.

CHARLIE I’m not interested in converting, Elder Thomas. I don’t find the Mormon Church hopeful. I don’t find it amazing, and I don’t find the proof convincing.

ELDER THOMAS Wait so why did you want me to—? (pause) Um. I want to just make sure that—. I want to make sure you know that I’m just coming over here to talk about the church. That’s it.

CHARLIE Well, yeah. What?

ELDER THOMAS I just… I don’t know if— (pause, then suddenly) You’re not attracted to me, right?

CHARLIE Oh my God.

ELDER THOMAS It’s just, with the—. What you were watching, the first time I came in here—

CHARLIE I am not attracted to you. Please, understand me when I say that. I am not attracted to you. You’re a fetus. (pause) Is that what you really think of me?

ELDER THOMAS No, I—

CHARLIE No, really. Tell me the the truth. Do you find me disgusting?

Pause.

ELDER THOMAS No. (pause) It’s just that—you said you wanted to hear about the church.

CHARLIE I did want to hear about the church. Your church, the one by the U-Haul, near the highway. I wanted to hear about that church.

ELDER THOMAS I don’t understand.

CHARLIE You can go now, I’m sorry if I—

ELDER THOMAS Is this about your—? Your domestic… Your life partner—boyfriend?

Pause.

CHARLIE How do you know about—?

ELDER THOMAS Um—your friend, Liz. She told me, she said that your—whatever, he had gone to the church?

Pause.

CHARLIE Look, you don’t want to hear about this, you’re just a kid—

ELDER THOMAS I’m not a kid, I’m nineteen. (pause) Charlie—I’ve been going door to door for a while, you know? But no one understands that—I want to get to know them. The good and the bad, everything. How are we supposed to talk about your spiritual life if I don’t know anything about who you are?

Pause. CHARLIE considers for a moment.

CHARLIE His name—my partner’s name, it was Alan. (pause) It sounds strange, but he was actually a student of mine. He was only a couple years younger than me, he had gone back to school after his mission. His parents were trying to get him to marry someone from the church, I think he barely knew her. But he was gonna go through with it—until he met me. It was ridiculous, he was the engaged son of a Mormon bishop, I had a wife and kid at home. But we just—couldn’t stand to be apart. (pause) You really want me to keep going?

ELDER THOMAS Yes. Really, yes.

CHARLIE I thought he’d be able to get over all this religious stuff, but—. It got worse and worse, to the point where every time we’d drive by that church he’d start to hyperventilate. His parents had abandoned him, refused to talk to him at all. But one
night, about ten years ago, his father showed up here and he looked at Alan and he said, “I’ve written a sermon for you. You have to come tomorrow, because the sermon is for you.” I told Alan not to go, but... The next morning he came home after the service, and he was just—hollow. It took him over, and he just—stopped everything. He stopped bathing, he stopped eating, he stopped sleeping. And a few months later, he was gone.

ELDER THOMAS What was the sermon about?

CHARLIE I don’t know. I guess I was hoping you could find out.

Pause.

ELDER THOMAS I don’t—I’m not even from here, I don’t know if—

CHARLIE I know—never mind. It’s ridiculous.

Pause.

ELDER THOMAS I’m going to ask around, alright? I’ll see if anyone remembers that day, the last day he was there. Who knows, someone might remember.

CHARLIE You’d do that?

ELDER THOMAS Of course. I just want to help. That’s why I’m on a mission in the first place, right?

LIZ enters through the door with an extra wide wheelchair and a shopping bag.

LIZ Alright, I got you something. I did some asking around, and this doctor said—

LIZ notices ELDER THOMAS.

LIZ What the hell, Charlie?

ELDER THOMAS I was just—

LIZ Charlie?

CHARLIE It’s fine, Liz.

LIZ What did I say about your stress level? You don’t need someone coming over and telling you that you’re going to hell.

ELDER THOMAS I never said that, I would never say that.

LIZ Leave.

CHARLIE Liz—

LIZ Get out.

ELDER THOMAS Okay.

ELDER THOMAS heads for the door.

CHARLIE Liz, stop it. He didn’t do anything to you, for Christ’s sake. He’s just a kid.

ELDER THOMAS I’m nineteen. (pause) I’ll just go—

LIZ Actually—stay. We’ll have a chat. (to CHARLIE) I brought you this.

CHARLIE Thank you. What is it?

LIZ What the fuck does it look like? It’s a fat guy wheelchair.

CHARLIE Why do I need a wheelchair?

LIZ I was talking to one of the E.R. doctors, he told me that moderate activity would be a good idea. That a sense of independence would help you keep your spirits up. I guess that’s important, I don’t know. Now you don’t have to sit on that couch all day long.

CHARLIE How much did you pay for this thing?

LIZ Nothing. We ordered it specially for a patient a few months ago, it’s just been sitting around.

CHARLIE What happened to the patient?

LIZ Try it out. Now you can make it to the bathroom more easily, maybe you could even get outside once in a while.

LIZ moves the wheelchair next to CHARLIE. CHARLIE braces himself on the couch and manages to pull himself up, wheezing loudly. He sits in the wheelchair, barely fitting inside. He tries it out, wheeling himself a few feet. It takes quite a lot of effort, and it’s obvious that he’s in pain.

LIZ There, see?

ELDER THOMAS I should probably go—

LIZ Not before we have our little chat.

ELDER THOMAS Oh, I. What?

LIZ wheels CHARLIE toward the bathroom.

CHARLIE Liz, what are you doing?
LIZ You probably haven’t been to the bathroom all day.

CHARLIE Liz—

LIZ Give us a few minutes.

_Elder Thomas_ sits down.

LIZ pushes him out of the room. _Liz turns back to Elder Thomas, stares at him._

LIZ Take a seat.

_Elder Thomas_ sits down.

LIZ So, Iowa?

Elder Thomas What?

LIZ You’re from Iowa.

Elder Thomas Uh. Yes.

LIZ What part?

Elder Thomas Waterloo?

LIZ You asking me?

Elder Thomas No, I— I’m from Waterloo.

_Pause. Liz smokes._

LIZ So listen. You’re just a kid, you don’t know anything. But I want to be very clear with you about a few things if you’re going to keep coming over here. (pause) I know this is fun for you. You get to travel around, act superior than everyone else. Plus you get to go home, get married, get some boring job, have tons of kids, and when you die you get your own planet. It all sounds pretty awesome. But, there are other kinds of people. People like Charlie, for whom this amazing plan doesn’t fit. You can’t fit a round peg in a square hole, and you certainly can’t fit a morbidly obese gay peg in a Mormon hole. That came out wrong. (pause) Point is—you’re a sweet kid, but he doesn’t need this right now.

Elder Thomas I disagree.

_Pause.

LIZ Excuse me?

Elder Thomas Sorry, I just—I think this is exactly what he needs right now. He’s refusing to go to the hospital, he’s dying—what he needs is some spiritual guidance.

LIZ And you’re gonna give him that?

Elder Thomas No. God will.

LIZ I see. (pause) My brother went on a mission. Went to Switzerland.

Elder Thomas Oh.

LIZ Yeah. He was the good kid. I however was the black sheep—by the time I was thirteen, I refused to go to church, told my dad I didn’t believe in God. Even had to move out of the house, went to live with my aunt and uncle in Boise until I graduated. But not my brother—he was a good Mormon. He wrote me a letter a few months into his mission, he told me he was cold all the time. That he was cold all the time, and lonely, but he preferred being out there in Switzerland because he didn’t want to come back and get married.

Elder Thomas He didn’t want to—?

LIZ Not at all. Dad had set it all up, pushed him into getting engaged to this girl from the church he barely knew. When he came back, he refused to go through with the wedding. Fell in love with someone else, started a whole new life. Until one day, when he went back to the church—I don’t know what religious bullshit my dad heaped on him that day, but it sure fucked him up. And after that he just started wasting away until he was—just gone. (pause) That was my little brother, Alan. My little brother. A sweet, sensitive little kid who was crushed under the church that you think can save Charlie.

Elder Thomas Oh.

_Silence. Liz stares at him, smoking._

Elder Thomas I’m sorry.

LIZ What the fuck are you sorry about? (pause) Where’s your companion?

Elder Thomas What?

LIZ You always have to be in pairs. I know that. It’s sort of a big deal for you to be out here alone, isn’t it?

_Pause.

Elder Thomas Elder Johnson. He’s—not feeling well.

LIZ Not feeling well?

Elder Thomas Why does it matter?

LIZ It’s a pretty big deal for you guys not to—

Elder Thomas Well, to be honest, he’s having some—problems and he’s pretty useless right now, but I thought I could do some good. By myself. Help just _one_ person.
LIZ And that one person is Charlie.

ELDER THOMAS Yes.

CHARLIE comes out of the kitchen with three or four subs in his lap. LIZ doesn’t notice him.

LIZ Listen to me. He doesn’t need your help, he doesn’t want saving. In a few days he’s probably going to be dead, and right now what he needs is for you to leave him alone. I am the only person who knows how to take care of him, do you understand? I am the only one who can save him.

CHARLIE Liz.

LIZ turns around, sees CHARLIE. ELDER THOMAS quickly gathers his things and exits. LIZ forces a smile.

LIZ Everything go alright in there?

(no response)

I’ve got an hour or so before I need to get back, we could watch some Maury. Wheel yourself over here, c’mon.

LIZ turns on the television. CHARLIE stares at her, not moving.

NIGHT.

CHARLIE, alone, in his wheelchair. He is laying some blankets out for the night onto the couch. He’s about to try to move onto the couch, when he notices ELLIE’s notebook. He wheels himself over to it, picks it up, opens it.

CHARLIE (reading) “This apartment smells. This notebook is retarded. I hate everyone.”

CHARLIE looks at it for a minute, smiling a little.

CHARLIE “This apartment smells. This notebook is retarded. I hate everyone.”

CHARLIE closes the notebook and holds it to his chest, on the verge of tears. After a moment he puts the notebook down.

CHARLIE tries to get off of his wheelchair to lie down on the couch—he feels some sharp pain in his chest and sits back down in the wheelchair. He takes a few deep breaths, calming himself down. He sits in his wheelchair for a second, trying to get comfortable. He closes his eyes.

CHARLIE (soft) I felt saddest of all when I read the boring chapters that were only descriptions of whales, because I knew that the author was just trying to save us from his own sad story, just for a little while. This apartment smells.

CHARLIE takes a few deep breaths, wheezing.

CHARLIE This apartment smells. This notebook is retarded. I hate everyone. The author was just trying to save us from his own sad story, just for a little while. I hate everyone. The author was just trying to save us from his own sad story. I hate everyone. The author was just trying to—

Lights quickly snap to black.

In the darkness, once again we hear the sound of waves—louder now, and more distinct, building a little in volume before lights rise on:

THURSDAY MORNING.

CHARLIE sits on the wheelchair, in front of his laptop, speaking into the microphone.

CHARLIE KimmyBallz429, I read your recent post on the discussion forum about strategies for coming up with a good thesis. You said that I want you to “just pick a sentence from the book and say it’s good or some shit”.

(pause)

I think I owe you all an apology. I’ve been teaching you all to rewrite and rewrite and rewrite, to edit your thoughts and change them and make them clearer, more precise, more objective. And I’m starting to realize that that’s horsehish. You don’t have any true reaction to these books because I’ve taught you to edit your reactions, to reshape them and reconfigure them over and over. And after all that, you don’t even have a reaction at all. You just end up hating it. And hating everyone else.

(pause)

How about this? Don’t write about the book. Forget the assignment, forget the readings. Hell—forget everything you know about what makes a good essay and just—write. Just sit down, and write me something. Just give me something truthful. Okay?

LATER THAT MORNING.

ELLIE stands by the door, holding an essay.

ELLIE So it’s good?

CHARLIE It’s really, really good.

ELLIE What grade am I gonna get?
CHARLIE  It's a really good essay.

ELLIE  Yeah, whatever. Okay bye.

ELLIE turns to the door.

CHARLIE  I was hoping you could write a little more in your notebook.

ELLIE  Oh my God.

CHARLIE  You've only written a couple sentences so far—could you write me some more?

ELLIE  I kind of hate you.

CHARLIE  Yeah, but you hate everyone. (pause) Look, just keep going with what you were doing. Forget the poem, forget about writing an essay. Just keep going, write about whatever you want, whatever you're thinking—

ELLIE  Shut up, just give me the notebook.

CHARLIE hands ELLIE the notebook, she sits down, opens the notebook. She is about to write, then looks at CHARLIE.

ELLIE  My mom found out. That I'm coming here.

Pause.

CHARLIE  How?

ELLIE  Small town bullshit. Her friend Judy saw the car parked outside here. (pause) She asked me how big you were.

CHARLIE  She knows that I—?

ELLIE  She just heard you gained weight. She doesn't know you're a monster. (pause) She made me promise to stop coming over.

CHARLIE  Did you tell her about the money?

ELLIE  I'm not retarded.

CHARLIE  You know, you use that word a lot, it's sort of offensive.

ELLIE  That's a retarded thing to say.

Pause. ELLIE writes a bit, CHARLIE watches her.

CHARLIE  I was in a strange place in my life when I married your mom.

ELLIE  Did I fucking ask?

CHARLIE  Sorry. I just thought you... I'm sure your mom has told you the whole story anyway.

ELLIE  No, she hasn't, she doesn't like talking about you. Ever. But I'm pretty sure I know the story anyway. You come home one day, "Oh, honey, I'm so repressed. I need to self-actualize or some stupid shit." And mom starts screaming, then you're on the ground, just like I remember, looking pathetic and fat. Is that it?

Pause.

CHARLIE  I understand that you're angry.

ELLIE  Oh my God.

CHARLIE  But you don't need to be angry at the entire world. I'm the asshole, just be angry at me, don't take it out on—

ELLIE  You think you're the only person who's ever fucked me over? Trust me, I have a list. And you're no more important than any other asshole that's treated me like dirt.

ELLIE goes back to writing. CHARLIE watches her. A few moments pass.

ELLIE  You could have sent her money, you know.

CHARLIE  What?

ELLIE  If you have all that money. You could have been sending money to my mom.

CHARLIE  I did.

ELLIE  I mean more than just child support.

CHARLIE  I did. (pause) I'm so sorry, Ellie. I'm so, so sorry.

ELLIE looks up from her notebook for a second, then goes back to writing. A few moments pass. ELLIE puts the pen down, looks at CHARLIE.

ELLIE  I'm hungry.

Pause.

CHARLIE  There's stuff for sandwiches in the kitchen.

ELLIE  Okay, (pause) I'll make you one, but it's going to be small. And I'm only using turkey or chicken, and no mayonaise.

Pause.
CHARLIE Thank you.

   ELLIE gets up, starts walking toward the kitchen.

CHARLIE What were you writing about?

ELLIE I was writing about how when you die, you won’t fit through the door or the windows. So they’ll probably have to take you out in pieces.

   ELLIE exits into the kitchen.

AFTERNOON.

CHARLIE is asleep in his wheelchair. ELLIE is sitting on the couch typing on CHARLIE’s laptop, smoking pot from a small glass pipe.

A knock at the door.

ELLIE puts the pipe in CHARLIE’s hand. CHARLIE doesn’t wake up.

ELLIE Yeah?

ELDER THOMAS (from outside) I, uh—hello?

   ELLIE pauses for a second, recognizing the voice, then takes the pipe out of CHARLIE’s hand. She goes to the door, opening it. ELDEN THOMAS stands in the doorway holding his bicycle helmet.

ELLIE What?

ELDER THOMAS Oh, I—

ELLIE What?

ELDER THOMAS Hi. (sees the pipe) Are you—?

ELLIE I’m bored. Come inside.

ELDER THOMAS Maybe I should—

ELLIE Oh my God stop talking. Take that nametag off, I told you, you look like a retard.

   ELLIE closes the door behind ELDER THOMAS.

ELDER THOMAS (seeing CHARLIE) Is he—?

ELLIE Do you ever finish sentences? He’s asleep.

ELDER THOMAS I can come back.

ELLIE He’ll be asleep for a while.

ELDER THOMAS Oh. Is he okay?

ELLIE I don’t know. I ground up some Ambien and put it in his sandwich.

ELDER THOMAS Oh my God, is he—?

ELLIE I only gave him a couple, he’s fine. I can take three at a time.

ELDER THOMAS Why did you—? You have Ambien? Where did you get Ambien?

ELLIE I had sex with a pharmacist. Just kidding, gross. My mom eats them like tic tacs. Do you ever wear anything different?

ELDER THOMAS Is he okay? Should he be taking sleeping pills?

ELLIE I told you, I can take three at a time, and I only weigh—guess what I weigh. If you guess too high I’ll punch you.

ELDER THOMAS But he’s sort of sick, you know, so I don’t know if sleeping pills—

ELLIE Yeah, anyway. Why is your name “Elder”?

ELDER THOMAS It’s not my real… During the mission, we all get called “Elder”. My last name is Thomas, so… I’m Elder Thomas.

ELLIE It makes you sound, like, important. Which you’re not.

   ELLIE takes a hit from the pipe. ELDER THOMAS watches.

ELDER THOMAS No, I’m not.

ELLIE Does this make you nervous?

ELDER THOMAS No, I— Well, yeah, it does.

ELLIE It’s just pot, it’s not like I’m smoking crack or anything. You probably have no idea what I’m talking about.

ELDER THOMAS Don’t—I know what you’re talking about. I know what drugs are.

ELLIE You only think you know what drugs are because your parents told you a whole bunch of lies about them. You probably think that smoking pot will turn you into a homeless person or something.

ELDER THOMAS You know, I’m not an idiot. I’ve smoked pot before.
ELLIE Oo, I’m so impressed.

ELDER THOMAS I’m not trying to impress you, I’m just saying—

ELLIE You have not smoked pot.

ELDER THOMAS Yes, I have. It was—kind of a problem.

ELLIE A “problem”?

ELDER THOMAS My bishop told me I had an addiction.

ELLIE That is the stupidest fucking thing I have ever heard in my entire life.

ELDER THOMAS I was doing it every day. I had a problem.

ELLIE You were a stoner. You had a hobby.

*ELLIE takes a hit, blowing it in ELDER THOMAS’ face.*

ELDER THOMAS Okay, I’m leaving.

ELDER THOMAS gets up.

ELLIE If you leave, I’ll feed him the rest of the pills I have in the bottle.

ELDER THOMAS stops.

ELDER THOMAS What?

ELLIE There’s probably twenty or thirty more. I’ll crush them up and mix them into some water and pour it down his throat.

ELDER THOMAS Why would you say something like that?

ELLIE Sit down.

ELDER THOMAS You wouldn’t really do that, would you?

ELLIE Oh my God sit down.

*ELDER THOMAS pauses, then comes back to the couch and sits down.*

ELLIE Why do you keep coming back here?

ELDER THOMAS He wants me to come over, he told me. He needs help.

ELLIE That’s a stupid reason. Take a hit.

ELDER THOMAS What? No.

ELLIE You’ve never smoked before.

ELDER THOMAS Yes, I have.

ELLIE You’re some sheltered little Mormon boy, you haven’t done anything. You don’t know anything. God, I can’t even look at you.

ELDER THOMAS Why do you talk like that, is this how you treat everyone?

ELLIE Yes. Why does he want to talk to you?

ELDER THOMAS I think he needs God to be in his life right now.

ELLIE That’s an even stupider reason. Do you think he wants to have sex with you? That’s so gross, oh my God. Take a hit.

ELDER THOMAS He doesn’t want to—! I don’t want to take a hit!

ELLIE Why are you such a pussy? You wear a bicycle helmet. Take a hit.

*ELLIE shoves the pipe into ELDER THOMAS’ chest.*

ELDER THOMAS I told you—

ELLIE If you don’t take a hit, I’m going to call the police and tell them you tried to rape me. Take a hit.

Pause.

ELDER THOMAS I don’t understand you at all.

ELLIE Oh my God.

*ELDER THOMAS takes the pipe.*

ELDER THOMAS Is there a carb on this?

ELLIE Oo, I’m so impressed.

ELDER THOMAS I wasn’t trying to—

ELLIE There isn’t a carb.

*ELDER THOMAS takes a hit. He exhales. ELLIE takes out her iPhone and snaps a quick picture ELDER THOMAS as he exhales.*

ELDER THOMAS (coughing) What are you doing? Why did you just—?
ELLIE Calm down. Take another hit.

ELLER THOMAS What are you going to do with that picture?

ELLIE I’m gonna masturbate to it, is that what you want me to say? You’re a pervert. Take another hit.

No response. ELLER THOMAS stares at her.

ELLIE Look, I’m just fucking with you, alright? I’m not gonna kill anyone, I’m not gonna tell anyone you raped me. I don’t understand why people believe everything I say. People are such idiots, it’s so easy, it’s ridiculous.

ELLER THOMAS You aren’t going to feed him more Ambien?

ELLIE No.

ELLER THOMAS Did you really put some in his sandwich?

ELLIE That I did. Just a couple. So he’d stop bugging me.

ELLER THOMAS Why don’t you just leave?

ELLIE I don’t know.

ELLER THOMAS If you hate him so much why do you keep coming over?

ELLIE I’m done answering questions now.

ELLER THOMAS Okay. (silence) Can I have another hit?

ELLIE It goes against your religion, and that makes you a hypocrite. Go ahead.

ELLER THOMAS takes another hit—another big one.

ELLER THOMAS I never really thought I had a problem. I did it every day for a while, then I stopped. If I was able to stop then how is it a problem?

ELLIE That’s the only smart thing you’ve said since you came in here.

ELLER THOMAS This is really good weed.

ELLIE No it’s not. You just haven’t smoked in a while.

ELLIE takes another picture of him.

ELLER THOMAS I really wish you wouldn’t do that.

ELLIE Yeah, I heard you the first time. Do you find me attractive?

ELLER THOMAS I—

ELLIE Because I’m not attracted to you at all, just to let you know.

Pause.

ELLER THOMAS Okay.

ELLIE I’m not trying to be mean or anything. But I just don’t think you’re good looking or interesting. Or intelligent.

ELLER THOMAS (a little hurt) Oh.

ELLIE Oh my God grow up. Maybe someone else finds you attractive, just not me. Maybe my dad finds you attractive.

ELLER THOMAS I really wish you wouldn’t say that.

ELLIE It’s so easy to make you uncomfortable, it’s a little sad. You can cash that out.

ELLER THOMAS You don’t mind?

ELLIE No.

ELLER THOMAS takes another big hit from the pipe. He’s pretty high by this point.

ELLER THOMAS I don’t know if I’m going to be able to bike back to my apartment.

ELLIE Wow, you’re pretty high, aren’t you?

ELLER THOMAS Yes. I am. And if my parents knew I was getting high, that I was getting high while I was on my mission—

ELLIE You’re not on a mission.

Pause.

ELLER THOMAS What?

ELLIE I said you’re not on a mission. Jesus. (pause) I remembered your name from your retarded name-tag, I never forget anything. The Mormon website has a search engine for, like, everything. Anyway, there was a list of twelve people on missions in northern Idaho, and you’re not one of them.

Pause.

ELLER THOMAS They didn’t update the website.

ELLIE I’m not a retard.
ELDER THOMAS I need to go.

ELLIE You keep saying that. Why are you pretending to be a Mormon missionary?

ELDER THOMAS I’m not—I am on a mission—

ELLIE Oh my God.

ELDER THOMAS I mean I—was. I was on a mission.

ELLIE Here?

ELDER THOMAS I have to go.

*ELDER THOMAS stands up, a little shaky on his feet.*

ELLIE What happened?

ELDER THOMAS Why do you care?!!

ELLIE Because I think we have a blossoming friendship.

*Pause. ELDER THOMAS looks at her.*

ELDER THOMAS I thought you said I wasn’t attractive or interesting or intelligent.

ELLIE So?

ELDER THOMAS So why would you want to be my friend?

ELLIE Because everyone else I know is even less attractive, interesting, and intelligent than you.

*Pause.*

ELDER THOMAS You won’t tell anyone?

ELLIE Who am I gonna tell?

*Pause. ELDER THOMAS goes back to the couch, sitting next to ELLIE.*

ELDER THOMAS I was in Eastern Oregon, in Pendleton. It’s where they do that big annual rodeo, the famous one—

ELLIE I really, really don’t care about that.

ELDER THOMAS Anyway, I was on my mission there. Last year.

ELLIE What happened?

ELDER THOMAS I left. I didn’t want to do it anymore. (pause) We just kept going from house to house asking people if they wanted to hear about the church, most of the time they’d just shut the door. Sometimes they’d let us talk, they’d sort of listen, and then they’d say thank you, and we’d never hear from them again. So after a while, it was like—what am I actually doing here? Am I really, like, really helping people?

ELLIE No you were not.

ELDER THOMAS I started to feel that way, too.

ELLIE I don’t feel that way, I know that you weren’t helping people. Like, for a fact. It doesn’t help people to tell them how to believe in God. Why would that help people?

ELDER THOMAS It might bring them eternal salvation.

ELLIE Oh my God you actually think that?

ELDER THOMAS Yeah… Maybe.

ELLIE “Maybe”? You’re shitty at being a religious person.

ELDER THOMAS I just—I want to believe it. My family, all my friends, they seem like—totally happy. I wanna be like that.

ELLIE So why did you come to Idaho?

ELDER THOMAS I got kicked off the mission.

ELLIE For smoking pot?

ELDER THOMAS For assaulting my companion.

*Pause.*

ELLIE You’re full of shit.

ELDER THOMAS No, I’m not.

ELLIE Oh my God you so are.

ELDER THOMAS Seriously.

ELLIE So what, like, you went on a “pot bender”?

ELDER THOMAS I wasn’t smoking at all. The moment I stepped foot in Oregon, I
made a promise to myself that I wouldn’t smoke any more. And I didn’t.

ELLIE  Which is a shame if it’s your first time in Oregon. So why did you beat him up?

ELDER THOMAS  He just… He didn’t care. About anything. We’d go out every day, and we’d go from door to door, and no one would listen, and he didn’t even care. I tried to talk to him about different sections of town we could go to, different ways to engage them, different ways to help these people… But you could tell, if we spent our whole mission there ministering and hadn’t helped one single person, he wouldn’t have cared. His faith was just—. He didn’t need to earn it or prove it at all. And one day, we were out in this little farming community, and we weren’t helping anyone, and he kept complaining about being hungry, and how hot it was out that day, and—I just lost it. I went nuts.

(pause)

He told me his parents would sue me, that I’d go to jail. All I wanted to do was finish this mission, I wanted to see Mormonism help one person. So, I just got on a bus. I still have a few thousand dollars left in my checking account. I went to the church here in town a couple times, I found this nametag in the common room.

ELLIE  You have like huge pores on your face, did you know you have huge pores?

ELDER THOMAS  Were you listening to me? Why did you just say that?

ELLIE  So what’s your real name?

ELDER THOMAS  Why do you want to know?

ELLIE  Because we’re friends now.

Pause.

ELDER THOMAS  Elder Paulson.

ELLIE  Takes a picture of him.

ELLIE  You’re slightly more interesting now.

ELDER THOMAS  Thank you.

The door bursts open revealing MARY, a woman of about forty but who looks considerably older.

ELLIE  Shit.

MARY pushes past ELLIE, sees CHARLIE. She stops immediately. Long silence as she stares at CHARLIE. She moves toward him slowly.

ELLIE  Mom—

MARY  Shut up.

She stands next to CHARLIE, looking down at him. She slowly puts a hand on his head, holding back tears.

MARY  Charlie.

CHARLIE  doesn’t move.

MARY  Charlie.

No response.

MARY  looks at ELLIE. ELLIE looks away.

ELLIE  Yeah okay sorry.

LATE AFTERNOON.

CHARLIE  sits in his wheelchair, awake but very groggy. LIZ is listening to him breathe with a stethoscope. MARY sits on the couch smoking a cigarette. ELLIE stands by the door, ELDER THOMAS in the opposite corner.

Throughout the scene, CHARLIE’s breathing is much more shallow, and his wheezing is much worse.

LIZ (to MARY)  You know, he’s not breathing so good. Second-hand smoke isn’t really a great idea.

CHARLIE  She’s fine, Liz.

LIZ  What, are you a doctor?

MARY  No, and neither are you.

MARY  puts out the cigarette in an empty soda can. MARY stares at CHARLIE.

LIZ  Are you having more pain?

CHARLIE  Yes, wheezing’s getting worse.

LIZ  How easy it to move?

CHARLIE  Not very.

LIZ  How about any confusion? Have you felt disoriented, confused, forgotten where you are or what you’re doing?
CHARLIE: No. Would that be bad?

LIZ: Yes. That would be very bad.

CHARLIE: So—am I okay?

LIZ: No, you’re not “okay.” But as far as the sleeping pills, you’re fine. I think she only gave you a couple.

ELLIE: Yeah, that’s what I told you.

*LIZ takes off the stethoscope, moves toward ELLIE.*

LIZ: Listen to me. I was a very angry, very stupid little girl once too, but this goes beyond smoking pot and posting shit on the internet. If you would have given him more pills than that, you could have—

ELLIE: Yeah, except I didn’t give him more than that. I gave him two pills.

MARY (to ELLIE): Ellie, how much money did he offer you?

CHARLIE: Mary. Don’t.

MARY (to CHARLIE): All of it? It would have to be all of it. It would take quite a lot of money to make that girl do something she doesn’t want to do.

ELLIE: How do you know about—?

MARY (to ELLIE): You think I’m an idiot? You think for one second I would believe that you were coming here out of the kindness of your heart?

ELLIE: You’re not getting any of it. He said I could have all of it.

LIZ: Charlie doesn’t have any money.

MARY: What?

LIZ: I do all his shopping, I know exactly how much is in his checking account.

*Pause.*

MARY (to CHARLIE): She doesn’t know?

CHARLIE: Mary—

MARY (to LIZ): Where do you think all the money from his teaching has been going? The account for Ellie—by now it has to be huge. (to CHARLIE) Over a hundred thousand at least, right?

LIZ: This is ridiculous, he never leaves the house—

MARY: And he works all the time.

LIZ: (to CHARLIE) This isn’t true, is it? (pause) Charlie, we could have gotten you anything you needed—special beds, physical therapists, fucking health insurance— Last year when my car broke down, and I had to walk through the snow to get your groceries—

CHARLIE: I offered to get your car fixed—

LIZ: And I refused because I thought you had seven hundred dollars in your bank account. (pause) You had all that money that you were keeping a secret from me? Why were you doing that? What, you think I would try and take it from you?

CHARLIE: No, of course not, I... It’s for Ellie. It’s always been for Ellie. (pause) If there was ever some kind of emergency, I would have given you money—

LIZ: Would you? You’ve been keeping this from me for years, you really think I can trust you? (looks at her watch) I gotta get back to work.

*LIZ starts grabbing her things.*

CHARLIE: Please don’t go.

*LIZ exits with her things. Pause.*

ELLIE: Mom—you’re not getting any of my money.

MARY: Oh, shut up, Ellie. (pause) Both of you, leave. Right now.

*Pause.*

ELLIE: I need the car keys.

MARY: You can walk.

ELLIE: It’s like two miles!

MARY: Do you really think that I care?

ELLIE: I hate you.

*ELLIE exits. ELDER THOMAS moves out of the corner, moving toward CHARLIE.*

ELDER THOMAS: I’ll come back.

CHARLIE: Looks at him.
CHARLIE Yeah, okay.

ELDER THOMAS exits. A long moment of silence.

MARY stares at CHARLIE. She stands up, still looking at him. She circles his wheelchair, looking at him from all sides.

MARY Jesus, Charlie.

Pause. MARY looks away. She takes a cigarette out of her purse, lights it up.

MARY So this—heart thing. It’s serious, yeah?

CHARLIE Pretty serious.

MARY You gonna be okay?

Pause.

CHARLIE I’ll be fine.

Pause.

MARY Do you have anything?

CHARLIE What? (pause) Oh, uh—maybe, in the kitchen. There might be something above the sink, the highest cabinet on the left.

MARY exits momentarily, returning with a bottle of vodka and a glass. She pours a large drink for herself, drinks.

MARY Our deal was we’d wait until she was out of the house to give her the money.

CHARLIE What’s the difference?

MARY The difference is she’s seventeen and in high school. She’s going to spend it on ponies or marijuana or something.

CHARLIE I think she’s a little smarter than that.

MARY (taking a long drink) I really wish you wouldn’t have done this, Charlie. This is the last thing I need right now. (pause) How has it been? Getting to know her.

CHARLIE She’s—amazing.

MARY chuckles.

MARY You still do that.

CHARLIE What?

MARY That optimism. It’s so annoying.

CHARLIE (smiling) Well, you’re a complete cynic, I was just trying to balance us out.

MARY I guess I do miss that. That one thing.

CHARLIE Just that?

MARY That, and the cooking. Last month I tried to make a pie and I nearly set the entire apartment building on fire, Ellie threw all our pots and pans into the dumpster so I’d never try to do it again. You still cook?

CHARLIE Not for years now. It’s—hard for me to get into the kitchen.

Pause.

MARY Charlie, I… I never knew you were doing this to yourself.

CHARLIE You never asked me how I was doing.

MARY You never asked me how I was doing either. Every month it’s just, “how much money do you need?” and “how’s Ellie?”

CHARLIE You didn’t tell me she was failing out of high school.

MARY Well, now you know. I guess I just didn’t need the lecture from you about my involvement in her education.

CHARLIE That’s not what I—(long pause) How are you doing, Mary?

Pause.

MARY Fine.

CHARLIE Are you working?

MARY No.

CHARLIE Do you need me to send more money?

MARY No.

Pause.

CHARLIE It’s good to see you. (pause) Mary, I know that I screwed everything up. I know it must have been terrible. And humiliating. And I know that I’m not supposed to be around her—hell, you could call the police if you want to—
MARY Christ, you really think I’d do that?

CHARLIE You fought me pretty hard for full custody. And I don’t blame you, after what I did. But I just want to see her—I’ve always just wanted to see her. Is it so awful that she has a gay father?

MARY No, actually, it’s not. (pause) She’s—awful, isn’t she?

CHARLIE What?

MARY Ellie. She’s awful. She’s a terror.

CHARLIE No, she’s—she has a strong personality, but—

MARY Charlie, she doesn’t even have any friends. Not a single one. She’s so cruel that no one at school will even talk to her. (pause) When she was nine, ten, I thought—I’m not giving him the satisfaction. I’m not letting him see this awful little girl and blame it all on me. No way.

CHARLIE Wait, is that why you’ve been keeping her from me all this time? You thought I would think you were a bad mother?

MARY At first. But later on—when she was fifteen, sixteen. I was worried she would hurt you.

CHARLIE “Hurt” me? That’s ridiculous—

MARY You’ve been around her for two days now, and already she’s almost killed you. (pause) I was protecting you, Charlie. You’ve always been so fucking sensitive, ready to break down over anything... And here’s this girl—this girl who takes pleasure in hurting people, this terrible girl. (pause) Believe me Charlie, I don’t take any pleasure in admitting it, I’m her mother for Christ’s sake. I spent way too many years saying to myself, she’s just rebellious, she’s just difficult. Charlie—she’s evil.

CHARLIE She is not evil.

Pause. MARY goes to CHARLIE’s laptop, types.

CHARLIE What are you doing?

MARY Just—,

MARY shows the computer to CHARLIE.

CHARLIE This is Ellie’s site, I’ve seen this.

MARY Did you see what she posted this morning?

CHARLIE looks at the computer for a minute.

MARY When I saw these pictures of you... I thought I should come over.

CHARLIE continues looking at the computer.

CHARLIE (reading) “There’ll be a grease fire in Hell when he starts to burn.”

Pause.

MARY Don’t feel bad, I’ve made quite a few appearances on that little site of hers. (pause) You okay?

Pause.

CHARLIE She’s a strong writer.

MARY That’s your response?

CHARLIE This isn’t evil, this is honesty. Do you know how much bullshit I’ve read in my life?

MARY My God, things never change. I don’t understand you, Charlie.

CHARLIE Every time I called you, I’d ask about her and you’d tell me she was doing fine. If she’s so evil, why didn’t you ever—

MARY What was I supposed to tell you? That she was off treating her friends like dirt and slashing her teachers’ tires? You didn’t want to hear about that stuff.

CHARLIE I could have helped her!

MARY She doesn’t want your help! She doesn’t want anyone!

MARY gets up, wandering aimlessly around the room, drunk by this point and a little shaky on her feet.

CHARLIE Mary, sit down.

MARY You think I didn’t want her to have a dad? You adored her. The only reason you married me in the first place was to have a kid, I know that.

CHARLIE Mary. Please.

MARY stops, gets her drink and sits back down.

MARY This brings back memories, doesn’t it? (pause) Listen. I... I never got to say that I was sorry.

CHARLIE What would you have to be sorry about?
MARY That’s not what I mean, I... I mean about you—friend.

CHARLIE Oh. (pause) His name was Alan.

MARY I know his fucking name, Charlie. (pause) I saw him once, after you left. In the K-mart parking lot. I should have wanted to run him over, or punch him in the face, but when I went up to him, he was so—... He was carrying these bags, he could barely lift them, he was so thin. Looked like he was about to fall over. I went up to him with all these amazing things I was going to say, hurl at him like bricks. And I looked at him, and I—asked him if he wanted some help. He let me carry a couple of bags to his car for him, he said thank you, and I left. I never even told him who I was. (pause) When I heard what happened, I thought about coming by. Bringing Ellie to see you. I should have done that, I guess, and I’m sorry.

CHARLIE It’s okay. I’d be angry at me too. (pause) But thank you. For saying that.

Pause.

MARY You’re wheezing.

CHARLIE Yeah. It’s gotten worse.

MARY Are you having trouble breathing? Should I call someone?

CHARLIE No, it’s—

MARY Let me hear.

MARY puts her ear to CHARLIE’s chest, listening to him breathe.

CHARLIE How do I sound? (no response) That was the first time we were all together in fifteen years. You realize that? (pause) Back when Ellie was first born, we did that road trip to the Oregon Coast together. And we stayed in Newport, and Ellie loved the sand so much. You and I layed on the beach together, and Ellie played in the surf, and later that day I went swimming in the ocean. Last time I ever went swimming, actually. And I kept cutting my legs on the rocks, and the water was so cold, and you were so mad that my legs bled and stained the seats in the minivan. And you said for days after that I smelled like seawater. You remember that?

CHARLIE puts his hand on MARY’s back as she listens. Silence.

MARY You sound awful.

CHARLIE I’m dying, Mary.

MARY looks at him.

MARY Fuck you.
producing pain in his chest. He winces.

Another loud knock.

CHARLIE Liz?

ELDER THOMAS (offstage) Can I come inside?

CHARLIE What the hell are you—? Are you okay?

ELDER THOMAS (offstage) I’m fine, please let me come inside!

CHARLIE Yes, just—!

ELDER THOMAS enters.

CHARLIE Are you—? What’s wrong?

ELDER THOMAS I’m sorry, I’m really, really, really high.

CHARLIE Why are you high?

ELDER THOMAS My parents called me tonight.

CHARLIE So?

ELDER THOMAS My parents found out where I am. They found out that I’m in Idaho.

CHARLIE I don’t understand.

ELDER THOMAS Your daughter, she sent pictures of me smoking pot to the mission in Oregon, and told them where I was. And my parents saw the pictures, and they called the church here in town, and they told them where I was staying, and I can’t figure out if she was trying to help me or hurt me. Do you ever get that feeling with her?

CHARLIE I don’t. Really understand—

ELDER THOMAS I thought my parents were going to disown me, and you know what they said? They said they loved me, they cared about me, and they wanted me to come home. How awful is that? (pause) But then—I got this amazing e-mail, and I knew I had to come over to tell you.

CHARLIE What was—?

CHARLIE feels a sharp pain in his chest, he bends his head down in pain.

ELDER THOMAS What’s wrong?

CHARLIE I’m fine.
swallow him for three days until Jonah prays for salvation, and God commands the whale to spit him out onto shore.

_Pause._

CHARLIE You’re lying to me.

ELDER THOMAS No, I’m not.

CHARLIE You’re making this up.

ELDER THOMAS I swear, Charlie, I’m not. This isn’t a coincidence, this is God. God is speaking to you, to both of us.

CHARLIE _laughs a little bit, the laughter causing pain in his chest._

CHARLIE Is this what it fucking comes down to? I always thought, whatever was in that sermon must be so terrifying, so moving... A fucking _whale_? A guy being swallowed by a fucking _whale_, this is what killed him?!

ELDER THOMAS It’s about someone refusing the call of God, don’t you understand? Your boyfriend, he turned his back on the church. He chose his lifestyle with you over God. And when his dad made him come back to church, made him _really listen_ this story, to God’s word—he knew. He knew God wasn’t in his life anymore. And without God, he couldn’t do anything, he couldn’t go on living. But it’s not too late for you. You can still know God. You can still ask God to make the whale spit you out.

_Pause._

CHARLIE You think Alan died—because he chose to be with me? You think God turned his back on him because he and I were in love?

ELDER THOMAS Yes.

_Silence. CHARLIE stares at him._

CHARLIE Get out of my apartment.

ELDER THOMAS No.

CHARLIE Get out of my apartment.

ELDER THOMAS No.

_Pause. CHARLIE stares at ELDER THOMAS._

CHARLIE You know, I wasn’t always this big.

_Pause._

ELDER THOMAS Yeah, I know—

CHARLIE I mean, I was never the best looking guy in the room, but—Alan still loved me. He still thought I was beautiful. And sexy.

ELDER THOMAS Okay—

CHARLIE Halfway through the semester, he started meeting me during my office hours—we were both crazy about one another, but we waited until the course was done before we...

ELDER THOMAS This isn’t important—

CHARLIE It was just after classes had ended for the year, it was a perfect temperature, and we went for a walk in the arboretum. And we kissed.

ELDER THOMAS Charlie, stop.

CHARLIE Listen to me. We used to spend entire nights lying next to one another, naked—

ELDER THOMAS Stop.

CHARLIE We would make love—

ELDER THOMAS I don’t want to hear about—

CHARLIE _WE WOULD MAKE LOVE._ And I hope that there isn’t any God, because I hate thinking that there’s an afterlife, that Alan can see what I’ve done to myself, that he can see my swollen feet, the sores on my skin, the patches of mold in between the flaps—

ELDER THOMAS Okay, stop—

CHARLIE —the infected ulcers on my ass, the underwear that Liz made for me out of old bed sheets covered in shit and piss, the sack of fat on my back that I can’t reach anymore that turned brown last year—

ELDER THOMAS STOP!

CHARLIE This is disgusting?

ELDER THOMAS YES!

CHARLIE I’m disgusting?

ELDER THOMAS YES, YOU’RE DISGUSTING! YOU’RE—...

_Long silence. CHARLIE stares at ELDER THOMAS._
CHARLIE Get out of my apartment.

Pause. ELDER THOMAS exits. CHARLIE breathes heavily, wheezing, trying to calm himself down.

The lights quickly snap to black.

In the darkness, the waves are heard once again—this time definite, sharp, and aggressive, rising quickly in volume until lights rise on:

FRIDAY MORNING.

CHARLIE, at his computer, speaking into a microphone. A small web cam rests next to his laptop, not hooked up. CHARLIE is noticeably weaker, and is having trouble maintaining his line of thought.

CHARLIE So, here we are. Your complaints have been heard. The powers that be have decided to replace me with someone else—someone more “stable” and “traditional” as the e-mail to me said. This person will no doubt make you rewrite and rewrite and rewrite, just like I did for seventeen years, analyzing every word, every punctuation mark for clarity and precision of meaning, and… (pause) You all sent me your essays. Your new essays, the ones you didn’t rewrite. The ones you didn’t think about, and…

CHARLIE types for a second, pulling up something on his computer.

CHARLIE KristyStar9, you wrote: “My parents want me to be a pharmacist, but I don’t even know what that is.” Peter6969, you wrote: “I’m sick of people telling me that I have promise.” AdamD567, about two pages in, you wrote: “I think I need to accept that my life isn’t going to be very exciting.” You all wrote these—amazing, things, I just—(pause) I want to be honest with you now. I’ve been just a voice to all of you all semester, and now you’ve been so honest with me, I just…

CHARLIE pauses, then plugs the web cam into his computer. He stares at it for a second. He moves the camera away from him, then tilts it down, filming his body. He brings the camera back up to his face.

CHARLIE These assignments—they don’t matter. This course doesn’t matter. College doesn’t matter. These beautiful, honest things you wrote—they matter.

CHARLIE pauses a second, then throws his computer and the camera across the room. They crash against the wall.

AFTERNOON.

CHARLIE is sitting in his wheelchair. LIZ stands in the doorway, staring at the broken computer, holding her bag.

CHARLIE I’m sorry.

LIZ Don’t.

LIZ makes her way inside, closes the door slowly. She moves over to CHARLIE.

CHARLIE Liz—

LIZ I said don’t.

LIZ stares at him for a second. She reaches into her bag, pulling out a stethoscope. She puts it on, then moves toward CHARLIE, putting it on his chest.

LIZ Breathe in.

CHARLIE breathes in.

LIZ More.

CHARLIE I can’t. Hurts.

LIZ takes the stethoscope off, puts it back in her bag. She looks at CHARLIE.

LIZ I really hate you for putting me through this again, you know that? (sitting down) Those last few months before Alan… And I’d come over here, and I’d scream at him, shake him. For God’s sake, eat something! You stupid piece of shit, you just need to eat something! (pause) I’d come back and the food would be gone. Not because he ate it—but because he hid it somewhere. Threw it out the window, to the neighbor’s dog. You were beside yourself, had no idea what to do… God, that was awful.

CHARLIE It was awful for me, too.

LIZ Well, you weren’t the one who found him. In your bed, underneath the covers, curled up like a fetus. God, you think you only see things like that in documentaries.

LIZ reaches into her bag, taking out two sub sandwiches.

LIZ I got you two meatball subs. Extra cheese. I don’t know what I’m doing. (pause) You have money. You need to go to the hospital.

Pause.

CHARLIE No.

LIZ You can afford this. Go to the hospital.

CHARLIE No.

LIZ slaps him. CHARLIE is unaffected.

LIZ How dare you do this to me again!!
Pause. CHARLIE's breathing is increasingly shallow.

CHARLIE She helped him.

LIZ What?

CHARLIE She wasn’t trying to hurt him. She was trying to help him.

LIZ Who are you talking about?

CHARLIE The Mormon kid. He’s going home. She did that. She wasn’t trying to hurt him.

*The sound of waves from before is heard, steadily increasing in volume as the scene progresses.*

LIZ Oh, God, Charlie?

CHARLIE I have to believe she cares. She didn’t do it to hurt him, she did it to send him home.

LIZ Do you feel light-headed? Charlie, look at me.

CHARLIE She was trying to help him!

LIZ Who?!!

CHARLIE Ellie. She was trying to help him, she just wanted him to go home.

LIZ Oh my God. You need—we have to call someone. I don’t know what to do, I can’t help you!

CHARLIE looks at LIZ.

CHARLIE People. Are. Amazing.

ELLIE charges in through the front door holding the essay from before. She stops when she sees CHARLIE, looking at him for a brief moment.

ELLIE What’s wrong with him?

LIZ He’s dying.

Pause.

ELLIE So call someone.

CHARLIE No.

ELLIE Call an ambulance.

CHARLIE No. Liz. Please don’t.

ELLIE Call a fucking ambulance!

LIZ takes her cell phone out.

CHARLIE Liz. Please.

LIZ Fuck you, Charlie. I’m not letting this go on any more, I’m calling an ambulance. I’m not going through this again!

ELLIE I need to talk to him.

LIZ starts dialing.

LIZ So talk.

ELLIE Alone.

LIZ I’m not leaving you alone with him.

ELLIE I need to talk to him alone!

CHARLIE Liz. Please.

LIZ Oh, fuck this! Fine. I’m calling an ambulance. and I’m waiting downstairs. Charlie, don’t move, okay? Don’t exert yourself, don’t try to do anything. Just wait here, we’ll get you to the hospital, and you’re going to be fine. You understand me?

LIZ exits.

ELLIE What’s wrong with you?

CHARLIE I can’t. Breathe very well.

Pause.

ELLIE The ambulance is coming. They’ll take you to the hospital, you should have gone a while ago. *(pause)* Why did you do that?!

CHARLIE What?

ELLIE holds up the essay.

ELLIE I failed.

CHARLIE It’s. A really good essay.
ELLIE No, it's not a really good essay! I failed! (pause) Are you just trying to screw me over one last time before you die? I don’t care that you’re dying! I don’t care about you! Do you want me to fail out of high school, is that why you did this?

CHARLIE I didn’t. Write it.

ELLIE This is the essay you gave me yesterday.

CHARLIE You didn’t. Read it.

ELLIE I don’t need to read it, it got an F!

CHARLIE Read it.

  ELLIE looks at the paper for a second.

ELLIE This is… I know what this is.

CHARLIE I knew you would. You never. Forget anything.

ELLIE I wrote this. (pause) I wrote this in eighth grade for English, why do you—?

CHARLIE And I felt saddest of all. When I read the boring chapters. That were only descriptions of whales. Because I knew. That the author was just trying to save us. From his own sad story. Just for a little while.

ELLIE Why do you have this?

CHARLIE Your mother. She sent it to me. Four years ago. I wanted to know how you were doing. In school. So she sent it. And it’s the best essay. I’ve ever read.

  Pause.

ELLIE Why are you fucking with me like this?

CHARLIE I’m not. (pause) You’re so beautiful. Ellie, you’re beautiful.

ELLIE Stop saying that.

CHARLIE You’re amazing. This essay. Is amazing.

ELLIE Stop saying that!

CHARLIE You’re the best thing. I’ve ever done.

  CHARLIE has a severe chest pain, he doubles over.

  ELLIE is frantic.

ELLIE What’s the matter?!!

CHARLIE Ellie.

ELLIE I can’t be here right now, I have to go, I can’t—

CHARLIE You’re perfect. You’ll be happy. You’ll care for people.

ELLIE The ambulance is coming, they’ll help you!

CHARLIE No. They won’t.

  Pause.

ELLIE You’re going to the hospital.

CHARLIE No.

ELLIE Shut up, you just need surgery or something!

CHARLIE Read it to me.

ELLIE What?!!

CHARLIE If you want to help. Read it to me. You can help me. If you read it.

  ELLIE is holding back tears at this point.

ELLIE You asshole. You fat fucking asshole!

CHARLIE You’ll help. If you read it.

ELLIE Fuck you.

CHARLIE Please.

ELLIE Fuck you!

CHARLIE Ellie.

ELLIE Dad, please.

  Pause.

  ELLIE looks at the essay.

ELLIE and CHARLIE are in the same position as they were in their first scene together. The sound of waves gets louder and louder.
ELLIE (reading) “In the amazing book *Moby Dick* by the author Henry Melville, the author recounts his story of being at sea. In the first part of his book, the author, calling himself Ishmael, is in a small sea-side town and he is sharing a bed with a man named Queequeg.”

CHARLIE braces himself on his wheelchair. The waves increase in volume.

ELLIE “The author and Queequeg go to church and later set out on a ship captained by the pirate named Ahab, who is missing a leg, and very much wants to kill the whale which is named Moby Dick, and which is white.”

Wheezing heavily, and with a huge amount of effort and pain, CHARLIE manages to stand up.

ELLIE “In the course of the book, the pirate Ahab encounters many hardships. His entire life is set around trying to kill a certain whale.”

CHARLIE, staring at ELLIE, manages to take one step forward. His breathing becomes quicker. The waves are louder still.

ELLIE “I think this is sad because this whale doesn’t have any emotions, and doesn’t know how bad Ahab wants to kill him.”

CHARLIE takes another step.

ELLIE “He’s just a poor big animal. And I feel bad for Ahab as well, because he thinks that his life will be better if he can kill this whale, but in reality it won’t help him at all.”

Another step.

ELLIE “I was very saddened by this book, and I felt many emotions for the characters.”

Another step. His ankle shatters. He winces from the pain, but doesn’t stop. He takes another step forward. And another. His breathing is more and more rapid.

ELLIE “And I felt saddest of all when I read the boring chapters that were only descriptions of whales, because I knew that the author was just trying to save us from his own sad story, just for a little while.”

CHARLIE takes one last step toward ELLIE.

ELLIE “This book made me think about my own life, and then it made me feel glad for my—”

CHARLIE looks up. A sharp intake of breath.

The waves cut off. The lights snap to black.

END OF PLAY.