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The God-Shaped Hole

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Abbe Melissa Loomer

June 2011

Thesis Committee:
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The Thesis of Abbe Melissa Loomer is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

Cast of Characters

JANE ASHBY: 34 years old, indecisive high school teacher.

CHAR ASHBY: 62 years old, loud mouthed, dying of cancer, Jane's mom.

NICO OLIVA: 14 years old, Jane's student, sarcastic Communist.

DIEGO OLIVA: 43 years old, Nico's father, old fashioned, gardener.

THE GOD-SHAPED HOLE

“What else does this craving and this helplessness proclaim but that there was once in man a true happiness, of which all that now remains is the empty print and trace? This he tries in vain to fill with everything around him, seeking in things that are not there the help he cannot find in those that are, though none can help, since this infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite and immutable object; in other words by God himself.”

- Pascal

SCENE ONE.

Midday in the living room of a family home. CHAR lives here alone and has simple suburban tastes. The room is filled with boxes.

JANE unpacks the boxes, and displays her pictures, religious books, and artifacts. Her tastes are far more eccentric than her mother's.

JANE

I just don't understand what you mean when you say "nothing".

CHAR enters from the kitchen with another box and sets it down with some effort.

CHAR

I mean, I'm nothing. Nothing, nothing, nothing.

JANE

(not judgmental)

So you're saying you're an atheist?

CHAR follows in JANE's wake repacking the artifacts back into the boxes.

CHAR

Oh no! God, no.

JANE

Whose God are you talking about, when you say that?

CHAR

Oh for Christ's- For goodness sake. I am your own mother. How can you not know what I am?

JANE

Exactly.

CHAR

I just never saw what was so wrong with being nothing. It never bothered me.

JANE

But what do you believe in?

CHAR

I guess I just believe it's up to me to decide for myself.

JANE

But, you never did.

CHAR

Did what, honey?

JANE

Decide.

CHAR

And you're one to talk.

JANE

At least I'm trying to figure things out for myself. I'm looking for the answers. You never even asked the questions.

CHAR

I guess I just never got around to it, dear.

JANE

Well, don't you think now's a good time?

A pregnant pause. They each stop their business.

CHAR

Listen, Janey. This is just not a subject for, for what? For polite conversation. Oooh, why don't you tell me about your sex life?

She continues to re-pack.

JANE

What are you doing with all my stuff?

CHAR

I'm putting it away.

JANE

No, you're re-packing it.

CHAR

I just don't want the place to look too cluttered. I'm expecting company.

JANE

Who?

CHAR

Can't you just put all the religious mumbo jumbo in your old bedroom?

JANE

You asked me to move in with you. If you don't want me here I can take all the religious mumbo jumbo and go back to my place.

CHAR

Oh! A spider!

She points to a corner.

CHAR

Kill it! Quick!

JANE

Mom, I don't kill spiders.

CHAR

Janey, the whole reason I asked you to come live with me is so you could do the things I am no longer capable of doing! That includes taking out the trash, washing the linens, and *killing spiders!*

JANE finds a red plastic cup and drops it, effectively trapping the spider underneath.

JANE

I don't know how you survived without me all these years.

CHAR

Is this "not killing spiders" thing from your Buddhist phase?

JANE

They're not phases.

CHAR

Going from one religion to the next willy-nilly like you do-

JANE

At least I put some thought into my spirituality-

CHAR

It's strange. It's just strange. Are you going to leave the spider under that cup?

JANE

Yes! Yes, I am! I'm not going to kill one spider for you, not one. Now you have a pet spider and he lives under that cup and you will learn to love him!

CHAR

I don't know what you're getting so worked up about. Come here.

JANE does and CHAR begins slathering moisturizer on her face.

JANE

What are you doing?

CHAR

You always break out this time of year, ever since puberty. Your skin's so dry, you get that from me. Just hold still.

JANE

I am a grown woman!

CHAR

All the more reason for you to start practicing proper skin care. You're not getting any younger. There.

JANE takes CHAR by the shoulders, forcing her to be serious.

JANE

Mom. You're sick.

CHAR

No, Jane, I'm dying. Sick is something you get better from.

A beat.

JANE

Don't you ever worry about what happens? After?

CHAR

I worry about what'll happen to you. That's all.

JANE

(Not truly believing this.)

I'll be fine.

A KNOCK. DIEGO peeks in the house. He's covered in dirt and has grass stains on his knees.

DIEGO

We're all done out here, Mrs. Ashby.

CHAR changes her persona completely, becoming a welcoming hostess.

CHAR

Diego! How many times do I have to tell you to call me Char? Come in, come in!

He lingers uncomfortably.

DIEGO

(to JANE)

Hello.

CHAR

Diego, this is my daughter, Jane.

DIEGO

Hi.

CHAR

Did I mention she was going to be staying with me for a while?

CHAR winks and JANE gives her a death glare.

DIEGO

A couple times. She's been so excited. We re-did the guest bathroom for you.

JANE

That was you?

DIEGO

Well, she picked out the new sink and I installed it. You look different than in your pictures.

JANE

I do?

DIEGO

That's probably normal though. People always smile so big in pictures. No one smiles like that in real life.

CHAR

Look at you guys already chattering away like you were old friends. I have some puttering around I need to do in the kitchen, I'll be back in a jiff.

JANE

(through clenched teeth)

Do you need any help?

CHAR

No, no. You stay here and chat with Diego.

CHAR leaves. There is a moment of awkwardness.

JANE

So. You're my mom's gardener?

DIEGO

She's my favorite customer. No one talks to their gardeners, usually, but she always invites me in for soda after I mow the lawn and we get to talking. About her life. Her neighbors. You.

She talks about me?

JANE

Oh yeah.

DIEGO

That's a little embarrassing. You must have been bored to death.

JANE

No. Not at all.

DIEGO

There is a moment.

I have a confession. I know you.

DIEGO

What?

JANE

I've seen you. At Mass, at St. Paul's.

DIEGO

Oh.

JANE

I recognized you from your mother's pictures, but I didn't want to say anything. I was afraid you'd think it was rude. You never talk to anyone.

DIEGO

Not usually, no.

JANE

Are you new there? I could introduce you to some people? They have a lot of Bible Studies for single folks.

DIEGO

Oh, no. I'm more of a worship quietly type. But thanks.

JANE

A beat.

DIEGO

I'm going to go wash up. Don't want to leave grass stains on the couch.

JANE

Second door on the left. But I guess you already know that.

DIEGO leaves down the hall and CHAR peeks in from the kitchen.

CHAR

Where is he?

JANE

In the bathroom. What are you doing?

CHAR

He's very nice.

JANE

He's your gardener. You're trying to fix me up with your gardener.

CHAR

No! Well, I just thought you might want a friend while you're staying with me. I go to bed so early these days. I don't want you to get lonely.

JANE

First men from your work, then your doctors, now your gardener. One might think I was depreciating in value.

CHAR

I don't know about all that. I just know he's nice. He planted my lemon tree free of charge, you know. And for the past seven years he's been helping me around the house when I needed to switch a light bulb or something, and who knows where you were.

JANE

Probably at my apartment, fifteen miles away. I'm not interested in dating this man, mom. I'm happiest when I'm alone.

Another KNOCK interrupts them.

CHAR

Liar.

NICO enters, also grass stained. A tattered book sticks out of his back pocket.

NICO

Can I get some water or something?

JANE and CHAR look at each other, each expecting the other to know who this boy is.

NICO

It's really hot outside.

He recognizes JANE.

NICO

Oh hey, Ms. Ashby. I didn't know this was your house.

JANE

You're in my World History class. Um. It's...

NICO

Nico.

JANE

Right, of course.

NICO

It's okay. I'm not there a lot. Plus, I sit in the back so I can sleep without you noticing.

JANE

Oh.

NICO

How 'bout that water?

CHAR

I'll get it. Ice?

NICO

Yes, please.

CHAR exits back to the kitchen. NICO sits on the sofa, making himself comfortable. He takes out his book and starts reading, completely oblivious to the awkwardness of the situation.

JANE
I'm sorry, what are you doing here?

NICO
Reading.

JANE
And before that?

NICO
Mowing the lawn with my dad. Is he around, by the way?

JANE
(Finally realizing.)
Your dad! I mean, yes. He's washing up. I'm sure he'll be right out.

NICO
Cool.

NICO goes back to reading. Throughout the rest of the scene he pays little attention to anything but his book.

JANE
What are you reading?

NICO
(Without looking up.)
The Communist Manifesto.

JANE
Oh. Of course. I mean, why wouldn't you be?

NICO
What?

Nothing.

JANE

(Awkward silence, then DIEGO enters from the hallway.
He sees NICO.)

DIEGO

I told you to wait outside.

NICO

I was suffering from heat stroke.

DIEGO

I apologize for the rudeness of my son.

JANE

He's fine. Actually, he's one of my students.

DIEGO

You're a teacher? Your mother never mentioned.

CHAR re-enters with a pitcher of ice water, cups, and a
tray of bagel bites.

CHAR

I thought you all might want a snack.

NICO

Great. Hey, why's there a cup on the floor?

NICO reaches to pour himself a of glass water and get a
bagel bite but is stopped by his father.

DIEGO

Nico, you should always serve a lady first.

He pours a glass for JANE.

JANE

No, no thank you.

CHAR

It's just water, Jane.

I'm not thirsty. JANE

Yes, you are. CHAR

I said, no. JANE

Drink the water! CHAR

You know I can't! JANE

By now their mother/daughter tiff has caught the attention of both of their guests.

I'll take the water. NICO

He does and drinks it, while the women stare daggers at each other.

JANE

(To Diego.)
I'm sorry for seeming rude, but I'm fasting.

Oh. Can I ask why? DIEGO

It's Ramadan. JANE

But, you're not Muslim. Are you? NICO

I thought you were Catholic? DIEGO

JANE glares at her mother.

JANE

It's complicated. If you'll excuse me.

JANE leaves the room, both guests gaping after her.
CHAR shakes her head, exasperated.

LIGHTS OUT.

SCENE TWO.

JANE'S classroom has a desk and a whiteboard that still holds scrawling notes on the Crusades.

JANE sits at her desk grading papers. NICO enters, wearing his backpack and holding a permission slip.

NICO

Ms. Ashby, you busy?

JANE

Not at all, Nico. How are you today?

NICO

Same as everyone else.

He waits a moment.

JANE

What can I do for you?

NICO

Um, I want to start this club, see, and I need a teacher supervisor.

JANE

I thought Club Week was last month.

NICO

It was, and Mr. Symanski was my supervisor, until he suspected me of cheating on my math quiz and said he didn't want to invest any of his free time in a student "of my low moral standards." Anyway, today's the first club meeting, and they're going to shut us down if I don't find a teacher who'll stick around after school to supervise a fuck-up like me. Excuse my language.

JANE

Were you cheating?

NICO

What?

JANE

On your math quiz.

NICO

Maybe. But it's not a math club I want to start.

JANE takes the permission slip from him and examines it.

JANE

What club is it?

NICO

Young Communists of America.

JANE

Oh.

NICO

Can you believe we didn't already have one?

JANE avoids answering by focusing on the permission slip.

JANE

You know, no student has ever asked me to supervise a club before. Or to write a letter of recommendation, for that matter. All the other teachers always complain about their mountains of letters of rec this time of year, and I've never written one. I wouldn't know where to start. Did you know that we don't get paid for that sort of thing? Rec letters and after school clubs.

NICO

If you have your own thing going on, I can ask someone else.

JANE

No. I'll do it. I'd be happy to. Here.

She signs the slip and hands it to him.

NICO

Cool.

JANE

So, when does this meeting start?

NICO

Whenever the first person shows up, I guess.

JANE

Great. That's great.

A long silence. They are both hoping someone else shows up, but it doesn't look likely.

Nico gets out his book and starts reading again. Jane tries to get back to her paperwork, but she keeps on looking up at Nico.

JANE

So. Communism, huh?

NICO

Yep.

JANE

Most people your age don't even fully understand the doctrines of Communism.

NICO

Most people my age are morons.

JANE

I see.

JANE decides she's being too invasive and tries to go back to her work. NICO looks up from his book.

NICO

Communists get a bad rap, you know? Historically it hasn't always panned out, I know that. But, ideally, it's a good system. It's fair.

JANE

How did you- when did you know that you wanted to be a Communist?

NICO

My dad's Cuban. I'm pretty into my heritage. Then one thing led to another and the other thing led to Communism.

JANE

You and your dad are pretty close, huh?

NICO

Yeah right. I live with my mom, or did until recently, and will again soon. My dad hates Cuba. He left in the '80's before I was born and never went back. He hates Communism, too, but I guess that probably goes without saying. But fuck him, someone has to give a shit about the working class, and in this country even the working class doesn't give a shit about the working class, you know? You're probably a Democrat, aren't you?

JANE

Would you watch your language, please? I don't want to have to write you a referral.

NICO

Republican?

She laughs.

JANE

Independent. I try to be neutral.

NICO

Apathetic, you mean. That's even worse than being a Republican. They may be dead wrong, but at least they care enough to have an opinion.

JANE

You're awfully sure of yourself.

NICO

Not everyone is blessed with being right all the time. It's a burden and a gift.

JANE

I wouldn't know.

NICO

Well, you're an Independent Muslim Catholic, I don't think you have much wiggle room to judge me for being a Communist, do you?

A beat.

JANE

You are absolutely right.

NICO

I don't think anyone is coming.

JANE

I wouldn't give up yet. High schoolers aren't exactly known for their punctuality.

NICO

To be honest, I didn't even really want to start this stupid club. I just wanted a reason not to mow lawns with my dad every afternoon.

JANE

Well. You can stay here for a while, even if no one else shows up. I mean, a club is a club even if it doesn't have members. Maybe you can take out an ad in the school paper?

NICO

That sounds like a lot more work than I'm willing to put in.

JANE

It's not. It's a little sheet of paper you fill out in Student Services.

He looks skeptical.

JANE

If you want, I can do it for you.

NICO

That would be really cool, thanks. I've never even set foot in Student Services. I think if I did it would ruin my rep. If I had a rep.

JANE

Well, maybe first you should work on building up a rep, and then you can worry about ruining it.

NICO

I'll put that on the to-do list. If people show up I guess I would have to plan activities or something.

JANE

Probably. Or they won't stick around long.

NICO

Hm. This whole club thing is stressing me out already.

DIEGO enters. He doesn't notice JANE.

DIEGO

Here you are. I have been looking all over for you, young man.

NICO

Who says "young man" anymore? This isn't the fifties.

DIEGO

I've been waiting in front of the school for a half hour. We're going to be late for the Fishborn house.

NICO

I told you I started an after-school club. I'm not going to be able to help with the Fishborn house anymore.

DIEGO

This is the club? Where's the rest of the students?

JANE rises from her desk.

JANE

Excuse me, Mr. Oliva. Hi. Jane Ashby, we met last week?

DIEGO

Of course, how could I forget? I'm sorry if my son's been loafing around bothering you.

JANE

He wasn't bothering me. Nico did start a club, it just hasn't... gathered steam yet. I'm the faculty supervisor.

DIEGO

Oh. Great. It's nice to see he's showing some initiative.

JANE

Absolutely. So, in the future, after-school clubs end at 3:30. The bright side is you'll be able to avoid the end of school rush of traffic when you pick him up.

DIEGO

Well, you seem to be a good influence on him, thank God.

NICO

Come on, Dad. Let's get out of here.

DIEGO

How's the fasting going? You must be starving by now.

JANE

I can eat after sundown.

DIEGO

In that case, would you like to come over for dinner this weekend?

JANE

Oh. No, thank you.

DIEGO

Oh come on. I can... boil rice and that's pretty much it, but I'm sure Nico and I could put something together.

JANE

I don't think that would be appropriate. But thank you for the offer.

DIEGO

Please. I feel like we got off on the wrong foot when your mother introduced us. I promise we won't eat until sunset.

NICO

I can make mac and cheese.

JANE looks at NICO. He seems eager for her to go.

JANE

So, rice and mac and cheese. Sounds great. What can I bring that compliments that?

DIEGO

Surprise us. Come on, Nico.

DIEGO leaves and NICO begins to follow.

NICO

(To Jane.)

Hey. Thanks.

She's not sure what he's thanking her for, but she watches him leave, intrigued.

LIGHTS OUT.

SCENE THREE.

CHAR's house looks the same but there is a pillow on the couch, as if someone has been sleeping there.

JANE puts on chapstick and grabs her purse, about to leave.

CHAR (O.S.)

Wait, wait, wait.

CHAR enters holding a dated looking dress.

CHAR

How about this one?

JANE

Mom, I'm just going to wear what I'm already wearing.

CHAR

When a man asks you out on a date-

JANE

It's not a date, it's mac and cheese.

CHAR

You could at least put some effort in to look nice.

JANE

That dress looks like it's from the 70's.

CHAR

Your father bought this dress for me. He loved this dress.

JANE

I do, too. It looks great. On you.

CHAR

We used to go dancing and I would wear this dress. This place called The Gas House. People don't go dancing anymore, do they?

JANE

I don't think so.

CHAR

It's a pity. Such a nice way to get to know someone. Your father was an excellent dancer.

JANE

I know, mom. I know.

A beat.

CHAR

We weren't always happy, darling. Your father and I. I know I make it seem like that. We weren't happy all the time. But, still. It was enough. Enough to make a life for ourselves. I want you to have that. A life.

JANE

Well, what I had with Charlie wasn't enough.

CHAR looks at the dress again.

CHAR

It certainly wouldn't fit me anymore. When I die-

JANE

Mom, please don't start sentences like that-

CHAR

When I die, I want you to have this dress. Oh! You could wear it to my funeral!

JANE

I'm leaving.

CHAR

Oh, no you're not. Come here.

JANE

I'm going to be late.

CHAR

Come here!

CHAR forces JANE into a chair and begins brushing her hair.

JANE

Ow.

CHAR

Janey, that does not hurt. I swear sometimes you act like you're seven-years-old again.

JANE

What are you doing?

CHAR

Your hair's gotten long. When was the last time you got it cut?

JANE

I don't remember.

CHAR

Probably not since Charlie-

JANE

Mom. I'm going to be late.

CHAR

I can't believe you went around all day, to work and to church-

JANE

Friday night's are temple, not church-

CHAR

Did you even brush your hair this morning?

JANE

Mom! Would you please-

CHAR

Okay, okay, I'm done.

JANE

Great.

CHAR looks at her for a moment.

CHAR

You look beautiful, Jane.

JANE considers this for a moment, decides it's probably not true.

JANE

Thanks, mom.

JANE leaves and CHAR sits on the couch, wringing her hands.

LIGHTS OUT.

SCENE FOUR.

DIEGO's apartment is sparse, loudly betraying that it is the home of a bachelor in his forties.

DIEGO and NICO are cooking.

DIEGO
What's the worst thing that could happen?

NICO is pointedly ignoring his father.

DIEGO
Maybe you would learn something? Maybe you'd make a friend!

Again, silence.

DIEGO
Is it so much to ask for my son go to Mass with me?

Nothing.

DIEGO
It's very difficult to argue with you when you won't answer.

NICO
"Silence is argument carried out by other means" - Che Guevara

DIEGO
"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." - Jesus Christ

NICO
I'm an atheist, dad. If I stepped over the threshold of a church I'd probably burst into flame, and think about what an embarrassment that would be for you in front of your priest.

DIEGO
Don't say things like that! I'm trying to make a positive difference in your life, here.

NICO
That's real nice in theory. But I like my life the way it is. Can we please leave it alone?

DIEGO

I'm worried about you, that's all. It's not just about religion, it's about being around other people your age. You don't ever seem to hang out with anyone from school.

NICO

I don't know anyone at this school. All my friends are back at Mountainside.

DIEGO

That's exactly my point. There are a lot of young people at St. Paul's. There are some pretty girls.

NICO

Now you want me to go to church so I can get a date?

DIEGO

That's not what I'm saying, Nico. I just want you to open up your mind. You're a little young to have things so figured out for yourself that you won't consider any other ways of thinking.

NICO

You barely even know me. You spend like two weeks total with me in the past fourteen years and you think that makes you in charge of my immortal soul, but you're going to have to give it up.

DIEGO

"But he that shall deny me before men, I will also deny him before my Father who is in heaven." - Jesus Christ.

NICO

"If Christ himself stood in my way, I, like Nietzsche, would not hesitate to squish him like a worm!" - Che Guevara.

A thick beat. Diego crosses himself.

DIEGO

I will not stand here and let you blaspheme the Lord. Go to your room.

NICO

Fine.

NICO starts towards his room but before he can get there the doorbell RINGS. They exchange a look before DIEGO motions for NICO to get the door.

JANE enters with a plastic bag.

JANE

I brought ice cream.

DIEGO

Come in, come in. I'm just finishing up. Nico, please take her coat to the hall closet on your way to your room.

NICO takes her coat.

JANE

Are you not eating with us?

NICO

I'm not really hungry, as it turns out.

JANE

But... Rice! Mac and cheese! Ice cream! How can you resist?

NICO and DIEGO glare at each other.

JANE

Please, stay. I don't want you banished to your room on account of me. Really, it'll be more fun if we all eat together.

DIEGO

He has homework to do.

JANE

Well, it's only Friday. He has all weekend.

NICO

She has a point.

DIEGO looks between JANE and NICO, not wanting to look like the bad guy.

DIEGO

You're right, of course. You're welcome to join us, if you want, Nico.

Okay, I will. NICO

Okay. DIEGO

DIEGO is still upset. NICO puts JANE'S coat in the closet, then they all sit down at the table and DIEGO serves them.

I like your apartment. JANE

Thank you. DIEGO

I've always liked this area. JANE

Oh? DIEGO

Yes. JANE

A beat.

Nico, how's school going this semester? JANE

Well, I have this really crazy World History teacher that's cramping my style, but other than that- NICO

Nico! DIEGO

It's a joke. She knows I'm kidding, jeez. NICO

DIEGO

Jane, would you like to lead us in Grace?

NICO groans and DIEGO shoots him a look.

JANE

Oh, no. Why don't you do it? Or Nico?

NICO

Hell no.

DIEGO

Nico! What's wrong with you? We have a guest!

JANE

No, it's okay. I'll- I'll do it.

JANE and DIEGO bow their heads. NICO watches JANE closely while she speaks.

JANE

Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for this lovely meal of macaroni and cheese and rice and for the occasion that brings us together in fellowship this evening. We ask that you bless this meal, our generous host, and this bright young boy. In your name we pray.

JANE AND DIEGO

Amen.

NICO

You're really good at that.

JANE

Thank you.

They eat.

NICO

So what's up with you and religion? How does a person become sort of Catholic and sort of Muslim?

DIEGO

Nico, it's not polite to talk about religion at dinner.

JANE

No, it's fine.

JANE thinks for a moment.

JANE

I'm not really sure how to explain it, let's see. Okay, so whenever I go out to dinner at a restaurant, I can't ever decide what to get. I always want to hear what everyone else is getting first, then I inevitably end up ordering the sampler appetizer platter so I can have a little bit of everything. But when the food comes I always nibble off everyone else's plate, and never finish the sampler platter. And at the end of the meal, when everyone else is getting up to leave I get this terrible pang of regret, really unreasonable regret, and I wish I had ordered the salmon. Or something. And that's just food, you know?

NICO

So, in this scenario, Catholicism is like pot stickers? In the sampler platter of life? And Islam is what? Fried potato skins?

JANE

I guess. But it's not just Islam and Catholicism. It's Judaism, and Buddhism and Hinduism. All the isms you can think of, really. I just like to cover my bases, because, well, what if you just choose one and... and you're wrong? That sounds terrible, doesn't it? You both must think I'm crazy.

NICO

Not at all.

DIEGO keeps eating.

JANE

The thing is, it didn't used to be like this. My parents weren't religious. My mom still isn't. I wasn't raised as anything. My wedding was at the court house and my dad's memorial service was in our backyard. No mention of God or Heaven.

DIEGO

You were married.

JANE

I was.

JANE has broached a subject that she doesn't want to talk about, so now tries to talk around it.

JANE

It was okay being nothing. It was easy. But then, something... happened. And it started to gnaw at my insides, you know? So I decided to try and be something instead of nothing. But it's like being in that restaurant, with all those choices, so instead of becoming something I became a little bit of everything.

NICO

Is it better? Than being nothing?

JANE

Some days. Some days it's the same. Sooner or later I'll order the salmon and be full. I hope.

A long pause.

DIEGO

So, Jane, do you like the rice?

JANE

It's very good. So's the mac and cheese. Easy mac?

NICO

Velveeta.

JANE

Ooh. High rollin'.

DIEGO puts down his glass just a little too hard. He tries to stay polite.

DIEGO

Nico, don't you have some homework to do?

NICO

Real smooth. If you want to be left alone, just ask.

A look from DIEGO.

NICO

Okay, okay. I'll be in my room if you two crazy kids need anything.

JANE

(meekly)

‘Night.

NICO

See you on Monday. Ms. Ashby.

NICO exits to the hallway.

JANE

Do you want me to help clean all this up?

DIEGO

No. I can do it later. You know, I’m really glad you decided to come over tonight. You look nice. I forgot to tell you that earlier.

JANE

Thank you.

ROCK MUSIC seeps into the room from the hallway.
DIEGO massages his brow.

DIEGO

I’m sorry about... Nico and I are still in transition. Getting used to each other.

JANE

It’s alright. I didn’t even notice.

DIEGO

Of course you did.

JANE

Okay, I did. But it’s fine. He used to live with his mom, right?

DIEGO

Right. She took him and left me right after he was born.

JANE

I’m sorry.

DIEGO

You probably get kids, right? Understand them. I mean, you work with them every day, you must speak their language.

JANE

I don't really understand most people, no matter what age they are. Should I maybe fix us some ice cream?

DIEGO

Not right now. You look nice. Did I say that already?

JANE

You did. And thank you, again.

DIEGO

I'm sorry. I'm out of practice with this sort of thing. I like you.

JANE

Oh.

DIEGO

Does that make you uncomfortable?

JANE

No. I - I appreciate you being so honest.

DIEGO

It's been a while since I've liked someone.

JANE

Me, too.

DIEGO

It seems like a simple thing. When you're a kid you like a different person every week, but...

He kisses her. Slowly at first and she reciprocates.

NICO appears at the doorway, spying on them. He watches the kiss with great intensity. He touches his own lips, absently.

DIEGO pulls away.

Is this okay?

DIEGO

JANE doesn't say anything for a moment, then nods slightly. Diego kisses her again, pulling her to the couch.

JANE

Wait. Can we just take a moment here and-

DIEGO

Jane. You're so beautiful.

JANE

I am?

DIEGO kisses her again and this time the kiss accelerates even faster. His hand slides up her blouse before she swats it away.

JANE

Stop.

DIEGO

I'm sorry. I didn't mean to-

NICO hides again while JANE frantically pulls herself together. She gathers her things as she's speaking.

JANE

I'm sorry. I need to go. This has just-and you're my mother's gardener. It's Ramadan - and Nico... Thank you for a lovely dinner. Good night.

DIEGO

Don't go.

JANE

Dinner really was great.

JANE exits in a hurry. DIEGO slumps to the couch.

NICO enters.

NICO

And to think I ever wondered why mom left you.

DIEGO

Were you spying on us?

NICO

You practically assaulted her. And that's my teacher! God, what is wrong with you?

DIEGO

What's wrong with me? What's wrong with you? You idolize a dictator, you cheat in school, you blaspheme the Lord, and now you're some peeping-Tom. The sooner your mother gets her life together the better.

DIEGO storms out of the room, leaving NICO alone.

NICO goes to the hall closet and finds JANE's jacket.
He inhales it deeply.

LIGHTS OUT.

SCENE FIVE.

CHAR'S house has changed. It has been arranged so that CHAR can sleep on the couch and doesn't have to go up and down the stairs. The couch has pillows and blankets on it. There are a few more upside-down red cups scattered on the floor.

CHAR is lying on the couch, bundled in, attempting to do a crossword puzzle.

JANE enters with a glass of water.

CHAR

Thanks, sweetie.

She drinks and sighs deeply, putting down her puzzle.

CHAR

Even doing the crossword exhausts me these days. Ugh. I don't know how much more daytime TV I can watch.

JANE

Here, I'll read it, you give me the answers.

JANE picks up the crossword and the pencil.

JANE

British pirate. Nine letters, starts with "C".

CHAR

Cavendish.

Jane writes it in.

CHAR

Georgianna called. She wanted to come over today and see me but I told her I didn't feel up to it. I lied. I haven't had my hair dyed in weeks, and I didn't want her to see.

JANE

Only you would think about your hair at a time like this. I'm sure Georgianna couldn't care less what your hair looks like.

CHAR

That's not the point.

JANE

I'll do it for you tonight and we can have Georgianna over for lunch tomorrow, how 'bout that?

CHAR

You are my shining, golden savior.

JANE

I know. Plataeu. Four letters, second letter is an "e".

CHAR

Mesa.

JANE

Of course.

She writes it in.

CHAR

You could use some highlights yourself, while we're at it.

JANE

You never stop.

CHAR

Charles called today, too.

JANE stops dead.

CHAR

To check on me, not to talk to you. I was once his mother-in-law, you know.

JANE

I didn't realize that you two still spoke.

CHAR

We don't. He'd just heard I was sick. He asked about you.

JANE

Don't tell me that, mom. I don't want to know that.

CHAR

He was a nice boy.

JANE

Yes, he was. Then he became a man, and we got married. Then things got hard, and he left me.

CHAR

But you're so much better now. Don't you ever think that he might give it another chance? If he could just see you now-

JANE

Am I "better", mom? Because I don't feel any better. I don't feel any different than I did then. So, if something was wrong with me then, it's still wrong with me. It's been ten years, Charlie and I are never getting back together. Don't think you can put me through this just because you're dying and the rules don't apply for you anymore, because there are still rules.

A heaviness falls over them.

CHAR

I'm sorry. You're right. I just thought you'd want to know he called. If you had found out through someone else and I hadn't told you - I just thought you'd want to know. We don't have to talk about it any more. What's the next word?

JANE is breathing heavily.

JANE

I have to go. I don't want to be late for Shabbat services.

CHAR

You can miss going to temple this one Friday night.

JANE

I'll be back later and we can dye your hair.

JANE kisses her mother's head and begins to leave.

CHAR grasps weakly and holds onto JANE's arm, keeping her there.

CHAR

Do you think I'll go to Hell?

JANE

Mom-

CHAR

Honestly. Is that what you think?

JANE

I don't want to talk about this.

CHAR

You always want to talk about this. Here's your chance. It might be your only one.

JANE

I don't know.

CHAR

Which religions think I'm going to Hell?

JANE

Well. Most Christians. Muslims. Mormons. You know that the Mayans believed that the only people to go to Heaven would be sacrificial victims and women who died in childbirth? And according to Unitarians, there is no Hell. Everyone gets to go to Heaven.

CHAR

Really? I hope they're right.

JANE

A lot of people say that's just wishful thinking.

CHAR

Well, what's wrong with that?

JANE

Nothing. Nothing's wrong with that.

CHAR

What about reincarnation?

JANE

What about it?

CHAR

It would be neat. To come back as something else. A dolphin, or something.

JANE

Or a spider?

CHAR

(making a realization)

Huh.

NICO enters gingerly. He's holding JANE'S jacket.

NICO

Anyone home? Oh, hi. Good. I just let myself in. Is that weird?

The women compose themselves, startled out of their moment.

JANE

Yes, that is weird. What are you doing here?

NICO

You left your jacket at our place last weekend. So I thought I'd bring it back. I didn't want you to be... cold.

JANE

You could have just brought it to class. I see you every day.

NICO

Okay, I got in a fight with my dad. Again. I didn't know where to go.

CHAR

Come in, come in. You poor thing, can I get you something? Please excuse my hair, I don't even think I brushed it today, goodness.

NICO

It looks good. Bed head is really in, you know.

CHAR

What a sweet boy. What do you want? Chocolate milk? Let me go whip something up.

JANE

Mom, sit down. You're tired.

CHAR

I am not. The doctor says I need a little physical activity, and goodness knows the walk to the kitchen is all I get. You leave me be.

CHAR gets up, with a little help from JANE. She swats JANE away, implying she can walk by herself, but then pulls JANE's face close to give her a kiss on the cheek. An apology. CHAR leaves to the kitchen.

NICO

Is she all right?

JANE is drained. She and NICO both sit on the couch.

JANE

No.

NICO

Thanks for letting me hang out here.

JANE

How are you?

NICO

Same as everyone else.

JANE doesn't say anything.

NICO

I'm sorry about my dad, you know, the other day. I don't know what happened, but you left so quickly-

JANE

Nothing happened, did he say something happened?

NICO

I just assumed that he did something to piss you off. He didn't say anything. I just know what a dick he is, that's all. So I'm sorry. That he was a dick. To you.

JANE

(Still distracted from her earlier conversation.)

It was a mistake for me to be there anyway, Nico. It was unprofessional. It's my own fault.

NICO

Are you alright, Ms. Ashby?

A moment of silence.

JANE

Yes. No.

NICO

I guess you probably don't want to talk about it.

A beat.

JANE

What's going on with you and your dad?

NICO

Same stuff. My mom called and said it was going to be a while still. My dad shit a brick when she told him so I took off and wandered around for a while. Ended up here.

JANE

That's a long walk from your dad's house.

NICO

Well, I took a bus.

JANE

Hm.

NICO

She didn't even ask to talk to me.

JANE

That's funny.

NICO

How is it funny?

JANE

No. I'm sorry, of course it's not funny. I meant it's a coincidence. My ex-husband called today. To talk to my mother. I didn't even know they still spoke. I haven't heard from him in ten years.

NICO

Why'd you guys get a divorce?

JANE

I don't think that's something you're supposed to ask people.

NICO

My parents split up because of me.

JANE

I'm sure that's not true.

NICO

No, it is. Because my mom got pregnant and my dad didn't want kids. That's what my mom always told me and he hasn't exactly done a lot to prove otherwise.

JANE

Well. Both Charlie and I wanted kids.

NICO

Why didn't you have any?

JANE

I did. I had a son.

NICO

What happened to him?

JANE

Nothing. Nothing ever happened to him. He didn't even have a name. He was still-born. It was a long time ago. I don't even know what made me think of him.

She looks at NICO intently.

JANE

How old are you?

NICO

Almost fifteen.

JANE

Still so young. My son would have been about your age now.

She touches his face.

JANE

Sometimes I wonder what he would have been like, if he'd have gotten the chance to be something. Maybe he would have been rebellious. Maybe he would have been a Communist.

NICO

Don't cry, all right?

This seems to bring her out of her trance. She pulls back.

JANE

I'm not going to cry. I'm sorry for unloading all this on you. You've just caught me at a bad moment. This is probably why students shouldn't go to their teacher's houses. So they can't see that we're actually real people.

NICO

I don't mind. You can unload on me all you want. I swear. I just don't like it when people cry. My mom used to cry a lot. It makes me nervous.

JANE

I promise I won't cry.

NICO

So, is that when it happened?

JANE

When what happened?

NICO

You know. When you got all screwed up. No offense.

JANE

Yeah. Yeah, that's when it happened.

A beat.

NICO

You know what?

JANE

What?

NICO

I think it's okay that you still think about your son.

JANE

Thank you.

NICO scoots closer.

NICO

Also, I don't think you're weird or crazy or anything, you know, with the all the religious stuff. I think you're cool. People just don't get you, but screw them. They don't get me either.

After a moment she kisses him, lightly on the lips. It is slow, soft, sweet, everything that the kiss with DIEGO was not.

NICO moans lightly and moves in slowly to deepen the kiss.

NICO

Mm. Ms. Ashby...

JANE pulls away, shocked at herself. She is speechless.

NICO

I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. Ms. Ashby? I'm sorry. Say something.

JANE

I can't believe I just did that. I'm a - I'm a terrible person.

NICO

No!

JANE

I'm Mrs. Robinson. I'm worse, I'm that middle school teacher from Oregon.

NICO

Who?

JANE

No, she was from Washington... Somewhere.

NICO

Ms. Ashby-

JANE

Idaho? Oh my God, I'm going to jail.

NICO

You need to calm down.

JANE

I am. I'm going to jail.

NICO

You're not going to jail.

JANE

I've ruined you. A fourteen year old boy. I've traumatized you. You'll be in therapy for the rest of your life.

NICO

I'm not traumatized. Not by the kiss at least. I'm a little traumatized by how psycho you're acting right now.

JANE

I have to go. It's - It's the Sabbath. I'll see you on Monday. Don't forget, you have a paper on the Crusades due.

JANE leaves. The door SLAMS.

NICO, frazzled, sits for minute. He looks around the room, finding a picture of JANE. While looking at it he touches his own face, the same way she touched it.

He peeks into the hall to make sure no one is coming and gets out a small marijuana pipe. He lights it and takes a hit.

CHAR enters from the kitchen, still moving gingerly. She holds a chocolate milk.

He quickly hides the pipe.

CHAR

Did the Oliva boy go home? (She sees him.) Oh.

NICO

Ms. Ashby had... church, or something.

CHAR is disappointed, thinking JANE left because of her.

CHAR

Oh.

CHAR eases herself onto the couch then sniffs the air.

CHAR

What's that smell?

NICO

I don't smell anything.

CHAR

No?

NICO

No.

CHAR

Hm. Well, I am a sickly old lady. Sometimes I imagine things. I should probably take my medicine.

With that she takes a joint out of a medicine bottle and lights it.

NICO is shocked.

CHAR motions for him to join her on the couch.

NICO

You smoke?

CHAR

I smoke legally, which is more than you can say.

They each take a hit and hold it for a moment, before blowing out a cloud of smoke.

She slides the chocolate milk over to him.

Throughout the conversation they continue smoking and he drinks his chocolate milk.

NICO

What do you have?

CHAR

Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma.

NICO

That's cancer, right.?

CHAR

That's cancer.

NICO

You have hair.

CHAR

Thanks for noticing.

NICO

I mean, is it going to fall out?

CHAR

It already did. My first round of chemo, two years ago. Thank God it grew back. I could not pull off bald.

A beat.

NICO

Can I ask you a question?

CHAR

I have a feeling that you're going to with or without permission.

NICO

What's under all the red cups?

CHAR laughs.

CHAR

Spiders.

NICO

Like, living spiders?

CHAR

Some of them are still alive, I'll bet. Don't ask me, my daughter's a loon.

NICO

I don't think she's a loon.

CHAR looks at him for a moment, studying him.

CHAR

What's she like? (She pauses.) As a teacher?

NICO

As a teacher? Kind of boring. Distracted, I guess. Honestly? I don't pay a lot of attention, so I don't know.

CHAR

Oh. (A moment.) What's she like as a woman?

NICO gets lost in the thought of JANE "as a woman".

NICO

She's not boring. She's... enigmatic.

CHAR

Enigmatic. I don't even know what that means.

NICO

She's hard to understand.

CHAR

Well, that's true.

NICO

She seems so unsure. About everything.

CHAR

She certainly doesn't get that from me.

NICO puts his pipe away. He walks to a red cup and peeks underneath.

NICO

This one's still alive. Hi, little guy.

He scoops the spider into the cup and covers it with his hand.

NICO

Can I have this?

CHAR

Yeah, sure. You going to keep it for a pet or let it free?

I don't know yet. NICO

I think you should keep it. CHAR

You do? NICO

I do. CHAR

CHAR lays down on the couch.

I guess I should get going. NICO

See you around. CHAR

He turns off the lights as he leaves the house. CHAR waits until he's gone until she looks under a cup.

LIGHTS OUT.

SCENE SIX.

JANE is alone at church, confessing. She crosses herself.

JANE

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. My last confession was two weeks ago.

A beat.

JANE

Confession has always been my favorite part of Catholicism. It's like going to a therapist, but with judgement. I like the judgement part. Usually. I like the heavy feeling of taking responsibility for what I've done. But, I've got some doozies this week, Father. I've denied my faith in Christ by following teachings that are opposite to those of the church, but that's just par for the course. I've been disrespectful to my mother, as always, and she's dying, by the way, which I think probably makes the sin even worse. And... I've committed worse sins. Sins, I can't even say out loud. But God knows them. It's just that, I'm so worried, all the time, Father. I'm so worried about being wrong, all the time. Do you think my son is in Heaven? Because if my son isn't in Heaven, and my mom doesn't go to Heaven, what's the point in it for me, you know? I have doubt, Father. And I feel so broken and empty. God, please fill me with faith so that I don't feel so empty. I mean if God can't fix me, who can?

She waits for a moment for an answer and gets none.

JANE

I am sorry for these and all the sins of my past life.

LIGHTS OUT.

SCENE SEVEN.

DIEGO's apartment is dimly lit and empty.

A KNOCK is heard. NICO, clad in an undershirt and PE shorts, emerges from the hallway, clearly still half asleep. He opens the door and JANE enters, disheveled.

JANE
Is your dad here?

NICO
Good morning to you, too.

She looks at him pointedly.

NICO
He's at church.

She enters carefully.

NICO
So. Hi.

JANE
Hi.

NICO
Is everything alright? With your mom?

JANE
The same.

Pause.

NICO
I'm trying to run through the possibilities of why you might be here.

JANE
What have you got so far?

NICO

To see my dad. To talk me into finishing my homework so I don't fail your class.
To bust me for smoking out with your mom.

JANE

You smoked marijuana with my mother!

NICO

It was a stressful day. Have I hit on the reason you're here, yet?

JANE

I guess I don't really know. I told my mother I was going to church.

NICO

So why didn't you?

She doesn't say anything.

NICO

You wanted to see me. Because of what happened on Friday.

JANE

To tell you it can't happen again.

NICO

You told me that already.

JANE

I'd be fired. It's serious, you can't possibly understand how serious it is.

NICO

I'm fourteen, I'm not stupid. I read the news.

JANE

You do?

NICO

No, not really. But I won't tell anyone, if that's what you're worried about. I don't have anyone to tell, anyway.

JANE

Good. Then we're clear. That's good.

JANE examines a jar with leaves in it.

What's this?
JANE

My pet spider, Marx.
NICO

JANE looks at him with surprise.

Pet spider?
JANE

Yep.
NICO

Marx as in Groucho?
JANE

NICO looks at her like "obviously not".

Oh. Right.
JANE

NICO
You look like you're gonna have a panic attack or something, Ms. Ashby. I swear I won't say anything. You can stop worrying.

I know you won't.
JANE

NICO
Why don't you sit down? I can make coffee. De-caf for you.

I probably shouldn't stay.
JANE

NICO
My dad won't be back for hours.

NICO goes to start the coffee.

JANE

So, how's the paper coming?

NICO

I'm not going to lie to you. I haven't started it.

JANE

When were you planning on doing it?

NICO

I wasn't.

He approaches her, defiantly.

JANE

I can't understand your attitude about school. You're so smart.

NICO

Thanks.

JANE

I'm serious. You could go to college. You're only a freshman, it's not too late to-

NICO

Start applying myself?

JANE

Yes!

NICO

What if I said I was thinking of failing your class on purpose so I could be in it again next semester? So I could spend more time with you.

JANE is caught off guard.

JANE

I would wonder if you felt the same way about Mr. Symanski, and all the rest of your teachers. Nico-

She touches his arm. Electricity. She pulls away. There is an awkward moment.

NICO

I'm suddenly very aware of my extreme lack of pants. The coffee looks like it's ready.

NICO pulls a pair of pajama bottoms out of a hamper with dirty laundry in it.

JANE turns around self consciously while he pulls the pajama bottoms on. She pours a cup of coffee and touches the spider jar gingerly.

He approaches her when his pants are on.

NICO

Coffee?

She hands his cup to him and they sit on the couch together.

NICO

You don't want any?

JANE

I'm still fasting.

NICO

Right. So. Where were we? Ah, yes. You were reaming me for my lack of enthusiasm about the public school system. Go on. Or were you done?

JANE

I think I was done.

NICO

Oh good. I get enough of that from my dad.

JANE

I'm sorry. It's none of my business. Except for I'm your teacher, so it sort of is. But, I'm done. Really.

NICO

I'm glad you came over.

JANE just smiles.

NICO

I was afraid that you wouldn't want to... to be my friend anymore. And it's nice to have someone to talk to.

JANE

Yes, it is.

NICO

Tell me about your husband. Your ex-husband.

JANE

No. That's a can of worms that doesn't need to be opened.

NICO

Come on, I wanna get a picture of a guy that can sweep you off your feet.

JANE

No.

NICO

Please? I'll tell you about my ex.

JANE

You have an ex?

NICO

Everyone has a ex. First graders have exes.

JANE

How long were you two together?

NICO

Three months.

JANE raises an eyebrow.

NICO

Hey, that's like three years in Teen Time.

JANE

Teen Time?

NICO

Yep.

JANE

Were you in love with her?

NICO

I don't know. I guess that probably means no, doesn't it?

JANE

Probably.

NICO

Don't be like that. Don't be like every other adult and assume that just because I'm young I feel things less.

JANE

You're right. I'm sorry.

NICO

It's okay. I wasn't in love with her, but that doesn't mean I'm too young to be in love.

JANE

I know. I was your age when I fell in love with Charlie.

NICO

You were?

JANE

Yeah. We went to high school together.

NICO

He was probably like the Straight A-Prom King-Yearbook Centerfold type, right?

JANE

No. He was just a normal guy.

NICO

That doesn't give me anything!

JANE

He was tall. We dated through high school, which was longer than we were married. We went here, actually. I mean, to Roosevelt.

NICO

No way.

JANE

If you knew where the library was you could probably look us up in old yearbooks. I graduated, what? Over fifteen years ago. Wow.

NICO

I just might do that. I wanna see the babe that you were in high school.

JANE

Ha, then you'll be sorely disappointed.

NICO

Did he look... In high school, did Charlie look anything like me?

JANE pushes the hair out of his face.

JANE

A little bit.

He catches her hand and holds it on his own face.

JANE

Don't do that.

He lets her hand go.

NICO

Sorry.

They sit in silence.

JANE

I should go, I think.

NICO

Yeah. I guess.

They both stand awkwardly.

NICO

Ms. Ashby. What's your first name?

JANE

You don't know my first name?

NICO

No. I don't know any of my teacher's first names.

JANE

It's Jane.

NICO

Do you think I could call you that? When we're not in class?

JANE

Sure. You know more about me than most people do. I don't see why you shouldn't call me by my name.

NICO

Cool. Jane. Yeah, I like that.

She starts to leave.

NICO

Wait.

She stops.

NICO

Which religion are you leaning towards?

JANE

It's not like that. It's different all the time.

NICO

I mean, today. Right now. What are you leaning towards?

He walks towards her.

JANE

I don't know. I really don't know.

NICO

If you had to answer it. If your life was on the line.

JANE

I - I -

NICO

If my life was on the line. If the whole world depended on your answer.

JANE

I can't. I don't-

He kisses her on the lips. She doesn't resist.

NICO

I'm not sorry. I don't want to be sorry. Jane.

JANE

Nico-

NICO

How do you feel?

Beat.

JANE

Alive. I feel alive.

He kisses her again, hard this time, passionate. They lay down on the couch and continue kissing.

The heat rises as we hear Jane's voice overs, one layered over the other until the prayers seem to meld into each other.

JANE (V.O.)

Our Father who art in
heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily
bread,
and forgive us our
trespasses,
as we forgive those who
trespass against us,
and lead us not into
temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
Amen.

JANE (V.O.)

Asato maa sadgamaya
Tamaso maa jyotirgamaya
Prtyor maa amrtan gamaya
Aum shaanti shaanti
shaanti

Sh'ma Yisrael, Adonai,
Eloheinu, Adonai, Echad
Baruch Sheim, K'vod,
Malchuto, L'olam Vaed

LIGHTS FADE.

SCENE EIGHT.

CHAR'S house holds more hints of CHAR'S progressing illness; medicine and medical equipment are cluttered around the couch where CHAR is napping. The red cups are still on the floor.

A KNOCK on the door is heard and it continues until CHAR shakes herself awake, weakly. She calls to the unknown visitor.

CHAR

Hopefully the door's open because I'm sure as heck not getting up to let you in.

DIEGO lets himself in. CHAR never gets off the couch.

DIEGO

Hello, Mrs. Ashby.

CHAR

Diego! It's not Thursday is it?

DIEGO

It's Sunday.

CHAR

Phew, for a moment there I thought I'd slept the week away. Please come in. I'd get up, but I'm afraid I'm not getting around so great these days.

DIEGO

I don't want to bother you, but... well, is Jane here?

CHAR

No, she's not. What time is it? She must still be at church.

DIEGO

It's eleven. I didn't see her there.

CHAR

Well, there are a lot of church's in the city and you know how she likes to make her rounds. Who knows which one she went to today? Lutheran, Catholic, Presbyterian. My daughter is a buffet of crazy.

DIEGO

She's not that bad.

CHAR

No, you're right, of course. I'm sure she'll be home soon. Was she expecting you?

DIEGO

No, no. I just - Maybe I should just call her.

CHAR

Don't be silly. Stay here and wait. I could use the company.

DIEGO

It's just, I haven't heard from her since last week. Did she say anything to you? About me?

CHAR

Oh. Honey, no, I'm sorry. But she doesn't really talk to me about that sort of thing, you know, so that doesn't mean she's not interested.

DIEGO

I just didn't know if she said anything about the other night? At my place?

CHAR

She said she had a nice time, that's all. Why?

DIEGO

Nothing.

CHAR

I know the difference between a "nothing-nothing" and a "something-nothing" and that was a "something-nothing".

DIEGO

I'm just afraid I didn't make a great impression.

CHAR

I'm sure you did, hon. Come on in and set with me.

DIEGO sits on the corner of the couch.

DIEGO

I like her. I don't meet many women, so that doesn't happen often.

CHAR

Well, I'm sure she likes you, too. Why wouldn't she?

DIEGO

Well.

CHAR

You just can't give up on her, that's all. Sometimes it takes her a while to figure out what's best for her. You know when she was a little girl she didn't believe in being sick, who knows how that idea got stuck in her head. She wouldn't take any medicine, soon as she was old enough to fight me and her father off. She'd just say over and over "I'm not sick. I'm not sick." She thought she was a superhero or something, always lifting pillows over her head like they were boulders and she had super strength. She wouldn't even take cough syrup, even the kid's stuff that tastes like fruit, you know? So sometimes at night when she was asleep and coughing up a storm I'd sneak into her room with a spoonful and just dump it down her throat while she slept. She choked a bit, sure, and she always got real mad at me, but after that she went back to sleep as quiet as anything. She's the same way now, even though she's a grown woman. Doesn't know what's best for her.

DIEGO

And you do?

CHAR

Of course. I'm her mother. Don't you know what's best for Nico?

DIEGO

I don't know. I didn't know him when he was little. I don't know if he took his cough medicine. And now all I really know about him is that he hates me and everything I believe in.

CHAR

That's not true.

DIEGO

Yes, it is.

CHAR

Well, even if it is, it won't always be. He's fourteen. He's supposed to hate you. Try not to take it too personally.

DIEGO

The thing is, I can't blame him. I never wanted to be a dad. It's terrible, but it was easier when I could pretend I wasn't one. But now-

CHAR

You're a dad.

DIEGO

Now I'm a dad. And I want to be a good one.

CHAR

It's just like anything else. Practice makes perfect. Except that's never been true, has it? Because there's no such thing as perfect. So let's just say practice makes good enough. And good enough will have to do.

DIEGO

One can only hope.

JANE enters from the front door, flustered.

JANE

Hey mom, I'm- Mr. Oliva. Diego, hi. Um. What are you doing here?

CHAR

He's here to see you, honey.

JANE

He is? You are?

DIEGO

Hi. I just thought I'd stop by, and see if maybe I could take you to dinner this week? Or lunch, I could bring lunch by the school-

JANE

No! I mean. I don't think so. It's- It's really not appropriate for me to, um, have relations with parents of my students. It's not - well, professional. Yes, it's unprofessional.

CHAR is clearly listening in on the conversation while trying to pretend she isn't.

DIEGO

Maybe we could go to the kitchen and talk about this.

JANE

No, no. I just, I have a lot of papers to grade so it's probably best if you go.

CHAR

Hear the fellow out, Janey!

JANE

Mom!

DIEGO

Jane. I'm sorry for getting ...carried away if that's what this is about. I promise that wasn't me. I like you a lot.

JANE pauses. This conversation is exceptionally uncomfortable for her but she tries to be as honest as possible.

JANE

That's not it, not really. I promise. You're a nice man. You are.

DIEGO

There's someone else, right?

JANE looks at her mom.

JANE

I don't... know how to answer that. I'm sorry.

DIEGO hangs his head.

DIEGO

No, I'm sorry. I'll just go then. Mrs. Ashby, I'll see you Thursday.

He starts to leave.

DIEGO

Good luck, Jane. On finding whatever you're looking for.

JANE walks him out.

CHAR

Well, aren't you just a regular Elizabeth Taylor?

JANE

Mom-

CHAR

Turning away a perfectly nice man like you had dozens to choose from. And he came here all romantic trying to woo you.

JANE

Will you stop, please? Oh God. Jesus Christ, what have I done?

JANE sits.

CHAR

It's okay, honey. You're okay. You don't have to date him. You don't have to date anyone.

JANE

Mom.

JANE holds her mom's hand and takes a deep breath.

JANE

Did you eat any of the breakfast I left out for you?

CHAR

Ugh. It tastes like grits. Everything I put in my mouth tastes like grits. I hate grits. Who knew that when you were dying all food slowly starts to taste like the worst imaginable substance in the world?

JANE

You need to eat something.

CHAR

Were you this pushy when I was healthy?

JANE

No, you were pushy enough for the both of us. But someone has to pick up the slack.

CHAR laughs.

CHAR

I wish... I wish you had a child. You'd be such a good mother.

JANE

(pained)

Thank you.

CHAR

I think you'd understand me a bit more if you had a daughter.

JANE

I understand you, mom.

CHAR

It's me that doesn't always understand you, I guess. You're... enigmatic.

JANE

Enigmatic?

CHAR

Yes.

A beat.

CHAR

You know what I was thinking this morning?

JANE

What were you thinking?

CHAR

I was thinking of all of the ways a person could die.

JANE

That's not morbid at all.

CHAR

I mean, besides in your sleep at a ripe old age. A person could die a lot of ways and I was thinking about all the ways I'd rather die.

JANE

Do I have to listen to this?

CHAR

No, but I'm going to say it either way. I made a mental list. For instance: I would rather get eaten by tigers. I would rather jump out of an airplane and have my parachute malfunction. I would rather get stepped on while lying on a bed of nails. Okay, your turn.

JANE

This can't be a healthy conversation.

CHAR

Do you know how boring it is to sit and wait to die? Humor me, here. I need to be humored.

JANE sighs.

JANE

I would rather... suffocate in down feathers after having the world's biggest pillow fight.

CHAR

Good one!

JANE sits on the floor next to the couch and leans her head down near her mother's.

CHAR

I'm losing myself here. Every day a little more. I'm afraid I'll lose all of myself before I die. Wouldn't that be terrible? To be gone, but here?

JANE

Gone but here. That would be terrible.

LIGHTS FADE.

SCENE NINE.

JANE and NICO sit on the floor of her classroom and he's holding out his pipe.

JANE
No, no, no. Absolutely not. No.

NICO
You would like it. Really. I think it would calm you down.

JANE
I don't want to be calm.

NICO
Fine. Suit yourself.

He lights his pipe and starts to smoke.

JANE
What do you think you're doing?

NICO
What does it look like I'm doing?

JANE
Don't think I won't have you expelled!

Nico kisses her and shotguns the smoke into her mouth. The kiss makes her limp and she exhales smoke. She slumps to the floor, defeated.

NICO
You alright?

JANE
Same as everyone else.

NICO
Hey, that's my line.

JANE
This is insane.

NICO

Consider it a club activity. For a club where you and I are the only members.

JANE

Apparently no one wants to be a Communist at this school.

NICO

Can you believe it?

JANE

Yes. I must be the worst teacher who ever lived.

NICO

Don't say that. You're a great teacher.

JANE

I'm a mediocre teacher, at best.

NICO

Who can tell the difference?

A moment. Nico continues smoking.

NICO

How's your mom doing?

JANE doesn't respond.

NICO

I could come over. Help out or something.

JANE

No. No, it's a tough place to be right now. You shouldn't have to experience that.

NICO

I can handle it.

JANE

No one can handle it. Not even me. And you're so young.

NICO

Hey! My birthday's coming up!

JANE

So's mine. You're not the only one who gets older, you know.

NICO

I know, I'm just saying. You don't have to shield me like I'm a little kid. You're not my mom.

JANE

That's pretty evident.

NICO

You need to relax.

He offers her the pipe again and she gives him a glare.

NICO

Fine. I'm just saying that everyone should break the rules a little now and then.

JANE

I think you and I have broken enough rules.

NICO

Doesn't it feel great?

JANE looks at him and can't help but smile.

JANE

Sometimes.

NICO

See? It's a liberating thing. It's a bursting out of the seams, extending your boundaries thing. You fill your life with what you choose, but ultimately it's your life. You have to make your own rules and live by them, not someone else's.

JANE

You are definitely high.

He smooths her hair for her.

NICO

Hey. Do you have a brush?

JANE

What?

NICO

A brush. A hairbrush.

He puts his pipe away.

JANE

Why? Does my hair look weird?

NICO

No. You seem so stressed out. People say it's calming when someone brushes your hair.

JANE

I've never heard that.

NICO

You know when you go get your hair cut, having someone else brush your hair? It's relaxing. I swear. Sit here.

JANE hands him a brush out of her purse. He sits in a chair and she sits in between his knees. He begins to brush her hair.

NICO

It feels like being taken care of, you know? Doesn't that feel good?

JANE'S eyes close. He continues brushing.

NICO

I could braid it for you. I used to braid my mom's hair for her when she was a maid, so the dust and chemicals wouldn't get all in it. Her hair's real long and thick. She dyes it. Do you dye your hair?

JANE

No.

NICO

Good. I like it.

JANE

Thank you.

He leans around her and kisses her neck, then keeps brushing.

NICO

I'll be eighteen someday, you know?

JANE

And then what?

NICO

High school goes by fast, then you won't have to feel guilty anymore.

JANE

I can't imagine what it's like to not feel guilty. I've felt guilty since before I can remember.

NICO

It's the God-shaped hole.

JANE

What?

NICO

The God-shaped hole. You've never heard that?

JANE

No.

NICO

It's this theory people use to try and get you to be religious. This theory that we all have this gaping, empty hole in us, and if only we accept God that hole will be filled. My dad talks about it to try and make me go to church. But I've known a lot of religious people and they still have that empty feeling, they still don't feel complete, they're not really any happier than any of the rest of us. What happens if even God can't fill the God-shaped hole?

The bell RINGS.

JANE

You'd better go. Your dad's going to be waiting.

He gets up and gets his backpack while JANE sprays some air freshener to mask the smell.

She kisses him goodbye, intending a peck, but NICO pulls her to him with urgency and completes the kiss.

He fixes her hair.

NICO

It looks nice.

The door opens and DIEGO comes in, hesitant. JANE and NICO push away from each other, panicked and guilty.

DIEGO

Nico. Time to go.

He avoids eye contact with JANE by looking around the classroom.

DIEGO

Still no members in your club, huh?

NICO

There are. They left already, I was still getting my stuff together.

DIEGO

Okay, that's fine. Hello, Jane.

JANE

Hi.

She busies herself at her desk. DIEGO looks at her for a moment, thinking.

DIEGO

Your hair looks different.

JANE holds her breath.

DIEGO

It looks good. Anyway. 'Bye.

JANE

'Bye.

DIEGO and NICO leave and JANE collapses at her desk.

LIGHTS OUT.

SCENE TEN.

CHAR lies on the couch, still and quiet. She appears as though she's sleeping but her breathing is labored. She's here but gone.

The red cups still litter the ground.

JANE enters from the kitchen with a cup of ice chips.

JANE

Georgianna just called, mom. She wanted me to tell you that her grand kids are in town. Little Kaitlyn is getting something of an attitude and repeating everything. And Jordan follows her around everywhere. Still isn't talking, but they took him to a speech therapist and decided that he's just a little slow, and it's nothing to be worried about. Apparently he carries around a purse and walks around in dress up shoes because he wants to be just like Kaitlyn, and it's making his dad crazy. Isn't that funny?

As JANE talks she rubs the ice chips on her mother's lips.

JANE

Does that feel good? Sounds like you're having a little trouble breathing. The nurse said maybe if I turned you on your side it would help. All right, brace yourself, you know how clumsy I am.

She adjusts CHAR so that CHAR is on her side.

She runs her fingers through CHAR'S hair, making sure it still looks good.

JANE

You hair looks nice. I'm glad we got around to dying it, aren't you?

JANE gets her brush out of her purse and begins to brush CHAR'S hair.

JANE

It's supposed to be relaxing to have your hair brushed. What do you think? Your hair has always been really nice and thick. I have dad's hair, not yours. Yours is so soft.

When she's done she sits on the floor next to her mother's head.

She gets out a crossword.

JANE

Okay, where were we? Let's see. Eight letter word. Deliberate destruction. Hm. You're so much better at this than I am. I don't know. Oh, how about this one: Christmas Greenery, starts with an "f". I'll bet it's "fir tree". Yep, that fits. "Fir tree". Look at that, I'm getting better.

She leans her head on the couch, stopping for a moment.

She notices the red cups, which are still everywhere.

JANE

God, all those cups. I've really made a mess of your house with those cups everywhere, haven't I?

She stands and walks to a cup. Looks at it.

JANE

They're so ugly. And all those dead and dying spiders. I should have listened to you. Why did I never listen to you?

In a fit of anger and despair JANE kicks over the red cups and stomps on all of the spiders underneath them. This is her breaking point and she lets herself get totally out of control.

JANE

There. There.

She calms herself and picks up all of the cups, cleaning up her mess, breathing heavily after her outburst. She goes back to CHAR and sits down again, rubbing CHAR's hand.

A long silence while JANE attempts to compose herself.

JANE

Mom, I have good news. I'm pregnant. You're going to be a grandma. But really this time, a real grandma. You're going to be a grandma. A grandma.

She touches her own belly, thoughtfully. Then she pulls CHAR'S hand to her belly to feel.

JANE

It's too soon to feel him kick or anything. But he's in there. That's your grand baby, mom. I'm glad you got to meet him.

LIGHTS OUT.

SCENE ELEVEN.

DIEGO'S house is empty

JANE enters without knocking, frazzled.

JANE

Nico?

NICO enters from the hallway.

NICO

Hey, what are you doing here? My dad'll be home any minute.

JANE kisses him, forcefully.

NICO

Hey, hey, calm down.

She can't calm down. She pushes him against a wall and continues kissing him, unable to contain her aggression, needing something from him that he can't give.

NICO

Ms. Ashby, stop, okay? My dad is gonna be home soon!

He manages to push her away. She is breathing heavily.

JANE

I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have come here.

NICO

What's wrong? Your mom?

She looks at him, deflated, and nods.

NICO

Are you okay?

JANE laughs a little.

JANE

Same as everyone else.

NICO

I doubt that.

A beat.

JANE

Every year on my birthday my mom tells me the story of how I was born. How she craved pickles when she was pregnant with me and my dad couldn't stand the smell. I'll never hear that story again.

She sits and he sits next to her.

NICO

My mom did that, too. I wonder if all moms do that.

JANE

They probably do. What did your mom say to you?

NICO

That she was in labor for more than twenty hours, but it was worth it. That I had two fat bruises on the sides of my head because they had to use those prongs to pull me out. She says I was still cute, even with the bruises, but there aren't any pictures to prove that theory.

JANE

And your dad wasn't there?

NICO

No. She said he couldn't handle the blood and the screaming. There are pictures of him at my Baptism, though. So I guess that's something.

JANE

I didn't realize you were baptized.

NICO

It's just water.

JANE

Maybe. Did you know that Eastern religions refer "original sin" as "ancestral sin"? Like sin can be passed down from parent to child. I was never Baptized. Neither was my son.

A beat.

NICO

How's your birth day story go?

JANE

She always said it was really easy. I was born five minutes til midnight, and she made a fuss when the nurse tried to put my birthday down as the next day. My father was there, but didn't even have time to put the scrubs on because he didn't want to miss it. My mom liked to say that it was the last time in my life I would ever do things the easy way.

She stands. Touches her belly.

JANE

Nico, there's something I should tell you.

She crosses to the jar with the spider in it and touches it.

NICO

What?

She thinks better of it.

JANE

I read your Crusades paper. I know you didn't do it til the last minute, but it was pretty good. You got a B plus.

NICO

Oh yeah? Hey, that's not bad.

JANE

No, it's not bad at all. I'm proud of you.

NICO beams.

NICO

Thanks.

He stands and walks to her.

NICO

I was thinking, we should get away from here. Just go somewhere else and live there, like Colorado, or something. I've never seen the snow. You could adopt me. My dad wouldn't care.

JANE

He would, too. Don't be ridiculous.

NICO

No, he wouldn't. He'd be relieved. You wouldn't even have to adopt me, we could just go. He probably wouldn't even report it. He wouldn't miss me at all.

JANE

What about your mom?

NICO

What about her? She up and left me for a job in New Jersey. She was probably relieved to finally be rid of the constant reminder of him.

JANE

I'm sure that's not true.

NICO

It is true. You're the only one who gives a shit about me. Don't you see?

JANE

We can't just leave, and you know it. We have lives here.

NICO

What life? What do you have here to stick around for? Your mom's dead.

A beat.

NICO

I'm sorry.

JANE

You're right. I don't have much of a life, but you do. You have a life here. You and your dad may not get along now, but-

NICO

Have you ever lived in the snow?

JANE

I haven't. I hear it's hard work, though. You have to shovel it off the car and the driveway. It's really heavy.

NICO

I don't mind. I can do all that, you would never have to.

JANE

Nico, tell me the truth. Are you high?

NICO

I'm always high. But that doesn't make this idea any less great. Just think about it.

JANE thinks for a moment.

JANE

What do you want to be when you grow up, Nico?

NICO

I don't know. Why?

JANE

You've never thought about it?

NICO

Sure I've thought about it, but it always seemed pretty bleak. I'll probably end up in a cubicle somewhere. Most kids think they're going to grow up to be journalists or athletes or firefighters, but they're idiots. Very few people grow up to be anything real like that.

JANE

I don't think your future is bleak.

NICO

Not as long as I have you.

JANE eyes him and makes a decision.

JANE

I've been so selfish. I'm sorry.

NICO

What are you talking about.

JANE

You're right. About the snow. It would be nice to make a fresh start.

Are you serious? NICO

Dead serious. JANE

No way. NICO

It's time for a change, I think. For both of us. JANE

Yes! This is going to be awesome! When should we leave? NICO

Now. Before I change my mind. JANE

Really? NICO

Yes, really. Go pack a bag. JANE

Okay! Sweet. I'll be right back. NICO

NICO goes to leave and JANE stops him.

Wait. Come here. JANE

He does. JANE goes to kiss him, but tilts his head down so the kiss lands on his forehead. Motherly.

She smiles at him and fixes his hair.

Okay, go. JANE

NICO goes to his room and JANE pulls out a piece of paper and writes on it.

NICO (O.S.)

You think Colorado, or Utah? I like Colorado better, I think. Utah sounds too Mormon, doesn't it?

JANE finishes writing the note and sets it next to the spider jar. She fondly touches the jar before sneaking out the front door.

After a moment NICO re-enters with a bag.

NICO

Ms. Ashby? Jane?

He sees the note and reads it.

NICO

No! No.

He runs to the door and opens it, calling for her.

NICO

Ms. Ashby!

She's gone.

He re-reads the note and sinks to the floor, allowing his crushed dreams to roll over him.

NICO

Oh God. Please, God.

After a moment, DIEGO enters from the front door with a bag of burgers.

DIEGO

I brought burgers and I remembered no pickles this time.

NICO stuffs the note in his pocket.

DIEGO

Nico? Are you alright? Nico?

DIEGO gets on his knees to hold his son. NICO embraces him and begins to cry.

NICO

Dad...

DIEGO

It's okay. It's going to be okay. I'm here, son.

DIEGO rocks his son back and forth, comforting him.

LIGHTS OUT.

END OF PLAY.