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Autobiography and Authenticity: Writing Are You Sure?: Experiences of a Gay Foster Youth

Zachary A. Clein
University of Southern Mississippi

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Autobiography and Authenticity:
Writing Are You Sure?: Experiences of a Gay Foster Youth

by

Zachary Clein

A Thesis
Submitted to the Honors College of
The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Bachelor of Arts
in the Department of Theatre

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Approved by

John Warrick, Ph.D., Thesis Advisor
Associate Professor of Theatre History

John Warrick, Ph.D., Chair
Department of Theatre

Ellen Weinauer, Ph.D., Dean
Honors College

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine the importance of authenticity in autobiographical writing, then apply what has been discovered to the author's own autobiographical play. Researching for the project involved reviewing various forms of autobiographical writing performed on the stage (including *The Normal Heart*, a straight play/non-musical production, a musical, *From Foster Care to Fabulous*, and a "memory play" *The Glass Menagerie*). One thing became clear after reviewing these pieces of literature: emotional authenticity, not fact, was the driving force. This stems from the inherent power autobiographical writing possesses to inform audiences on important topics, which allows room for certain embellishments. Autobiographical work does not necessarily require every event within the story to be historically accurate. An important element is emotional authenticity, which allows the audience to connect to a topic that might not relate to them. Upon further research, it was determined for *Are You Sure?: Experiences of a Gay Foster Youth* to have the political/social impact it required to succeed, there would have to be a focus on the emotional authenticity of the piece.

Key Words: Autobiography, Authenticity, Foster Care, Metaphorical Truth, Gay, Memory Play, Foster Youth, Historical Fact/Accuracy

Dedication

Deb, Jeff, Sarah, Joel, and the entire family:

Thank you for making me a part of the family and for all the support.

This is my love letter to all of you.

Acknowledgements

I would like to take the time to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. John Warrick, for his incredible support in helping me with this project. He has pushed me to be my very best and consistently challenged me along the way to do better. It has been an honor learning from him. Thank you for everything.

Additionally, I would like to thank the entire theatre department for their support and kindness. I would not be the person I am today without their drive to be some of the best artists I've ever had the pleasure of learning from. The entire department is filled with nothing but some of the best in their fields, and they are constantly striving to make their students the best as well. It has been a privilege.

Finally, I want to take a moment to thank both the Honors College and the Luckyday Program for everything they have done for me. Being a part of both programs these last few years has consistently challenged me to do more than I ever thought possible. I have been given the opportunity to challenge myself through the trials of the Honors College while learning more about becoming a true leader thanks to Luckyday. The lessons I've learned from both will stay with me for the rest of my life.

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Chapter 1: Introduction/Heddon

In recent years I've discovered a passion for activism, especially in relation to issues dealing with foster care. Being a former foster youth offers me unique opportunities to practice activist tasks (public speaking engagements, participation in training videos, etc.), yet I've always been interested in activism with the arts. The political/social influence of the arts is hardly mentioned today and that history is something I wanted to explore, which led me to craft my own autobiography. Autobiographical writing has a history of creating political/social change, something I hope my story can succeed in. While writing the first draft of *Are You Sure?: Experiences of a Gay Foster Youth*, a few questions came to mind: "How accurate should I be?" "What does it mean to be 'authentic'?" "Is it okay to embellish my story?" Eventually, I determined authenticity and embellishment were not mutually exclusive concepts, especially with autobiographical writing. In other words, I could embellish while still being authentic. To reach that conclusion, I began my research by reviewing some of the historical context surrounding autobiographical writing.

Autobiographical writing gained ground as a powerful political tool in the early 1970s, during the second-wave feminist movement. Collective consciousness-raising activities were meant to help raise questions concerning the treatment of women and to enable them "to realise that their problems were not individual but were part of a collective oppression of the whole sex" (Heddon 21). These activities were common of "community autobiography" during the second-wave feminist movement (Heddon 32). However, the concept of "community" in this instance is problematic.

One criticism of the second-wave feminist movement was that political efficacy/power involved being dependent on a community conceptualized as singular and coherent (Heddon 32). All differences between women were either ignored, deleted, or erased to maintain a sense of “sameness”. The result of this meant the experiences of some women (white, heterosexual, middle class) were taken to be representative of all women, making the feminist movement unattainable to women of color or different sexualities. Reminiscent of the historical context prompting particular agendas of the second-wave feminist movement, it was a culture of homophobia that prompted so many shows to make their foundation the “real stories” – the lived lives – of real gay men/lesbians (Heddon 32).

Mct, a theatre company based in Glasgow, specified with a gay and lesbian agenda. The company was aware of the lack of representation of lesbians in theatre, and in Scottish theatre in particular (Heddon 33). In 1998, Mct began work on a production to ‘reach out’ to lesbians. The production employed a historically feminist mode of theatre practice with volunteers, none of whom had previous theatre experience, to create a performance that would eventually become *Fingerlicks* (1998) (Heddon 33). Primary material for *Fingerlicks* came from the participants’ experiences being lesbians in Scotland.

Fingerlicks’ performance of lesbian lives challenges the assumption the only proper way to live is with a heterosexual identity (Heddon 33). What adds even more meaning to the performance is the fact all the stories are performed by self-identified lesbians. This is politically crucial because this performance also challenges the historical “experts’ story” of the “dysfunctional, immature, under-developed, inverted lesbians” or,

alternatively, the ‘clergy’s story’ of “sinful and unnatural behaviour” (Heddon 33). While challenging these preconceived notions, *Fingerlicks* also does something else that is incredible: it gives control over to the women in these stories.

Making the author-performer of the lesbian narrative a subject in her own story, rather than a medical/psychiatric object of interest, creates a sense of empowerment. While debunking false narratives concerning the lesbian community, *Fingerlicks* also provides possible role models, with the majority of the stories concerning women “coming into being a lesbian,” possibly prompting more women to come forward (Heddon 34). Stories such as *Fingerlicks* contain inspirational, educational, and consciousness-raising potential due to its focus on identity. However, there is a question regarding authenticity and how it relates to the stories.

If one were to watch *Fingerlicks* hoping for a factually authentic account concerning the lives of lesbian women, they would be disappointed. After all, this is a retelling of real life experiences by lesbian women, not a genuine experience of their daily lives. Considering factual authenticity is not an option, we must go by a different definition.

Chapter 2: Beaty

Authenticity is not the same thing as fact because authenticity focuses on emotional/metaphorical truth instead. An essay by Bart Beaty, *Autobiography as Authenticity*, presents an argument referring to “truth” and “authenticity” as “an attempt to reconcile one’s life with one’s self and that therefore the core of autobiography is not historical accuracy but metaphorical truth” (Beaty 228). Beaty does provide a counterargument (or counterarguments) to this theory: it simply doesn’t work that way.

His counterargument states the nature of autobiographical writing is to replicate the “real world” and such arguments on the notion of “truth” or “authenticity” essentially ruins the agency of the autobiographical study (Beaty 228). This provides two different arguments for exploration: one focuses on metaphorical truth being the prime motivation of autobiographical writing, whereas the other is concerned with being factually true. However, the second argument is where Bart falls short because what he puts forward is not entirely plausible. Autobiographical writing, even though it is based in a certain aspect of reality, is not going to be completely historically accurate.

By its nature, autobiographical writing is going to be embellished considering it is also political. Returning to the example of *Fingerlicks*, we find a play that is metaphorically (lesbian women speaking about their life experiences) yet not completely accurate (staged setting). Once the writing for an autobiography begins, it is no longer a historical account but a story from the author’s imagination being told in the way they believe is best; which is something Patrick Burns did by making his autobiography a musical.

Chapter 3: Burns

From Foster Care to Fabulous is a one-man show with Patrick himself portraying a late-night TV show host version of himself as he goes through his life story. There are excited interludes during his show where he receives fan-mail from his father who’s in prison, tongue-in-cheek musical numbers about the “nomadic lifestyle” in foster care, and caricatures of important figures throughout his life (also portrayed by him). Comparing *From Foster Care to Fabulous* to *Fingerlicks* reveals some similarities and differences. Both plays long to inform general audience members of the hardships within the gay

community. One involves several women speaking out about their lives as lesbians in Scotland while the other is a musical about a gay man's time in foster care. Yet this does not necessarily mean one is more authentic than the other. In fact, *From Foster Care to Fabulous* has quite a few moments that can be considered metaphorically authentic, meaning it is not factually accurate, but it maintains a sense of emotional authenticity that is true from the authors' perspective.

One moment is when he is with his second foster family, a lesbian couple with surprisingly bigoted views of gay men. However, he spends his time reminiscing about how happy and excited he was over the prospect of them adopting a baby (so he can become a big brother), yet his experience with them changes quite suddenly:

SUSAN: This is a contract. It states that you are to treat us as roommates and not as parents.

PATRICK: What?

SUSAN: Yes. These are your chores. This states that you must find employment. This states that if your GPA drops you will be kicked out. This states that you are responsible for your own transportation; this states that you can't ask us for money and this states you can only use the phone in the kitchen.

PATRICK: Is this for real?

SUSAN: Yes. And when you get back from your summer program, you'll be moving to a new foster home. This isn't working out and I think that will be the best time to transition you.

PATRICK: Why? I thought everything was great. I like living here. I don't want to move.

SUSAN: I get more out of my relationship with the baby than I do out of my relationship with you. Besides, this is my house. You don't have a say.

PATRICK: And that was that. She said that to me when I was fifteen years old.

PATRICK: Later I heard that sometimes if you want to adopt a baby, agencies make you be a foster parent first. I mean, I don't know if that's what happened. I still don't know what happened. I have no more answers today than I did then and I didn't have any then. But, when I got back from my summer program I slept one night on the couch and the next day my social worker, April, came to take me to the next place. And you know what, those Dykes kept my playstation! (Burns 22)

He is baffled, hurt, and angry with leaving a perfectly safe environment. This scene also reveals something interesting: he doesn't have all the details concerning why he left. His speculation regarding their true motivations in fostering him is not based in any empirical fact, but a lack of information, revealing potential flaws with his narrative: did Susan truly react so cruelly to him? Were all the characters he portrayed in *From Foster Care to Fabulous* as black and white as he made them out to be? Maybe there is more nuance to these situations than he lets on, but nuance isn't the point of his story. Burns' priority reveals terrible living conditions of gay foster youth to the general public. His play has clear political, social undertones meant to inspire change and give hope to foster youth going through the same experiences he endured. Disseminating his message was his priority, even if it meant embellishing certain aspects. However, he isn't the only playwright making room for embellishments.

Chapter 4: Kramer

Larry Kramer wrote *The Normal Heart* in 1985, a play centered around the AIDS epidemic decimating the gay community and his attempts to warn others about the danger it presents. The story is based from his real life experiences, except he doesn't use his own name in the play but swaps it out for the character Ned Weeks. This alone demonstrates his willingness to embellish real world events. For example, in real life, while his brother was not the most understanding, he was not nearly as homophobic as he is portrayed in *The Normal Heart*. In real life, Kramer's brother, years after the narrative in *The Normal Heart* ends, facilitates legal representation for Larry Kramer's HIV/AIDS awareness organization ACT UP. From writing *The Normal Heart* to founding ACT UP,

Kramer's contributions to the gay community cannot be ignored, however, he is also a controversial figure within the same community.

It is no secret Larry Kramer maintains a critical viewpoint of the gay community. During an interview with Sarah Schulman, Kramer's book, *Faggots*, comes up in conversation. In *Faggots*, Kramer details his furiousness toward the gay community lost in the hedonism engulfing the 70s:

Faggots has a slightly different genesis than *The Normal Heart* and with AIDS. I was very much in love with the man who I now live with. But that was 17 years earlier, and I wanted him to fall in love with me, and he wouldn't or he didn't, or he loved me but he wouldn't live with me. And, those were the days of extreme whatever you want to call it – hedonism. Faggots is about a guy coming back to America or coming into the gay world – naïve and inexperienced with that world. Because there wasn't much of a gay world in those days, remember. It wasn't a community, it wasn't a political community. It was very little of all that. It was exceedingly diffuse, dispersed. And, I went out to look at that world. As my shrink said, "Why don't you go out and explore what the gay world is really like?" And that's what I found. Most of the stuff, in one way or another happened to me or people who are based on real people. There's not much made up in Faggots. That's not to say that one doesn't take a certain amount of license. And I wanted to know why our love affair didn't work out, and I came to this realization that no love affair, no relationship could withstand the baggage that we were putting on it by having so much sex with so many different people. Who can exist through that, in a relationship without one person or both going nuts? (Kramer 5-6)

Kramer believes promiscuity is a destructive force within the gay community so when the AIDS epidemic starts, he finds confirmation it truly is destructive. Using the AIDS epidemic, he pushes for gay men to abstain from having any sex. This is a tricky line to walk because what Kramer does is edge the line of vilifying sex.

Kramer believes the best way to stop HIV/AIDS from spreading is convincing gay men to abstain from sex. However, in retrospect, his argument doesn't hold very well. Abstinence-only education is flawed because of one simple fact: it doesn't work

(Fox). A broader approach to sex education which discusses protection as well as abstinence would have been the better option. However, Kramer did not seem to embrace that. Granted the AIDS epidemic was a confusing time and no one understood the best way to stop HIV from spreading, yet it is still difficult to embrace Kramer considering he continued to make wild claims long after the AIDS epidemic settled. In fact, he goes on to call gay men who take Truvada, an antiretroviral drug aimed at preventing HIV-negative and at risk men from contracting HIV, “cowards” because it would lessen “energy to fight, to get involved, to do anything” (Healy). His claim is a bold one that belittles the emerging gay community’s ability to define itself.

Kramer criticizes the gay community for not being a community yet he does not give it time to truly form. *Faggots* is released in 1978, only nine years after the historic Stonewall Riots in which gay community members rioted against an anti-gay legal system. Stonewall is widely considered the catalyst for the gay rights movement, allowing the gay community to start emerging. So while Kramer’s criticism is noted, it is also misplaced. However, no one can deny the important role he has played in the gay rights movement or his passion with his work.

It is his passion at the heart of *The Normal Heart* and the element that drives authenticity for the audience members. The frustration and anger Ned exudes is evident throughout as he has no choice but to watch his partner, Felix, slowly die from this disease. In fact, one has the impression that is all Ned believes he can do throughout the story, watch people around him die from a disease the government has no interest in helping defeat. The emotion is real to Kramer, even if what happened isn’t entirely accurate (his relationship with his brother for example). *The Normal Heart* adds to a

running theme of autobiographical writing researched for this project: all have, to various extents, focused on emotionally authentic experiences in lieu of factual accuracy. For example, *The Normal Heart* and *From Foster Care to Fabulous* have a lot in common.

Clear similarities involve both stories revolving around gay men fighting a governmental entity. However, there are some core differences between them, such as one being a whimsical musical and the other a tragic drama. The direction both plays go in reveal a lot of the authors and their viewpoints. Patrick Burns provides a hopeful viewpoint to counteract Kramer's pessimism; however, both plays use autobiographical writing to influence societal change.

Reviewing both *From Foster Care to Fabulous* and *The Normal Heart* proved vital to crafting *Are You Sure?: Experiences of a Gay Foster Youth*. Determining what liberties I could take in creating my story allowed me to explore more ideas (for instance, I hint at the importance of a telephone in the first draft but dive a little deeper in the second). For my second draft, I focused less on making it factually accurate and allowing the story to breathe naturally. However, even with this information, *Are You Sure?: Experiences of Gay Foster Youth* still felt incomplete.

Chapter 5: Williams

As my writing continued, I found interesting themes to explore, hoping it would make the follow of the story come together. Themes of masculinity and what that means became a touchstone, yet they did not fix any of the pacing issues I struggled with. While the first act flowed nicely, the second act still felt inconsistent. That is when I came upon Tennessee Williams *The Glass Menagerie*, a play consisting of a series of flashbacks from the character Tom Wingfield, who narrates and, to some extent, directs the narrative

of his past. It is also a fictitious play with largely autobiographical elements, Tennessee Williams crafted *The Glass Menagerie* from his own life.

Williams based many of the characters on himself and family members. His sister, Rose, became his inspiration for the character Laura (called Blue Roses during the play). One could look at *The Glass Menagerie* and wonder if it was somehow his way of reliving his own mistakes. While Williams is away, Rose falls victim to a botched lobotomy for her schizophrenia, which leaves her in a wheelchair for the rest of her life (Leverich 480). This makes the similarity between Williams and Tom (main character in *The Glass Menagerie*) even more striking considering both want to protect their sisters but end up failing. Understanding the autobiographical nature of *The Glass Menagerie* (especially the liberties taken with his life story) was instrumental in developing *Are You Sure?: Experiences of a Gay Foster Youth*.

This is where Tennessee Williams introduces the concept of a “memory play”, a play in which a character narrates the events to take place (Williams, 750). Here we learn his own philosophy for drama: when it comes to “deploying unconventional techniques”, there is only one valid aim, and that is a “closer approach to truth” (Williams 750). This line was interesting because by the very nature of the “memory play”, something he has described *The Glass Menagerie* to be, everything can’t possibly be true.

Instead he allows room for “unusual freedom of convention”, expressionism (present the world solely from a subjective perspective, distorting it radically for emotional effect in order to evoke moods or ideas) being one of the unconventional techniques he allows for telling a memory play (Williams 750). This section reveals the unusual techniques Williams embraces:

The scene is memory and is therefore non-realistic. Memory take a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart. The interior is therefore rather dim and poetic...

TOM: Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion. (Williams 752)

In these sections, Williams embraces the idea of metaphorical authenticity by focusing on the “emotional value” of memory. He remains consistent with this line of thinking when Tom makes a statement about “truth in the pleasant disguise of illusions”. The play is distorted through Tom’s eyes, which is how memory works.

For example, in the climax of the play, Tom’s sister, Laura, and someone he invited over to dinner, Jim, are talking to one another. Tom brought Jim over in an effort to match him and Laura together, but it does not work out the way it’s meant to. Throughout the entire scene Jim does what he can to bolster Laura’s confidence level; to do so he ends up dancing with her and then kisses her. It does not work out, however, because Jim is already seeing someone. This entire sequence is fascinating for a few reasons, one of which is Tom is not present. Since this is a memory play we already know we can’t fully trust Tom’s narrative since he is the one narrating the whole evening. If he isn’t there, then what we are seeing is something he heard secondhand, after the fact. Considering we see him leave right after the event, he most likely never learns about all that transpired between Jim and Laura (Williams, 784). Another moment to prove his narrative is fairly untrustworthy is the dance sequence. Laura is described as having some defect with her leg but during the dance sequence, she is doing fine (Williams, 780). In fact, the character descriptions themselves give the issue with her leg away: “a childhood

illness has left her crippled, one leg slightly shorter than the other, and held in a brace – this defect need not be more than suggested on the stage” (Williams, 751). These lines add more untrustworthiness to Tom’s narrative, since this is his memory, and by extension, fantasy, we as audience members do not know if what he says is what really happened or not. However, the convention of the “memory play” does not take away from the emotional authenticity of the moment or make the consequences of the evening any less real. In fact, Williams makes a strong argument for the use of memory plays by saying, “when a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn’t be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are” (Williams, 750).

Conclusion/Results

It is interesting how different the motivations are between Burns, Kramer, and Williams for their plays. For example, Burns and Kramer created their scripts with desires to inspire political/societal change, whereas Williams wrote his to usher in the death of a culture. However, all three of them have something important in common: they all focused on metaphorical authenticity.

That realization is what led to the latest incarnation of *Are You Sure?: Experiences of a Gay Foster Youth*. Whereas some audience members will expect to find factual truth with autobiographical writing, that is not what’s most important. What is important is revealing the emotional authenticity of the story using memory. Memory is incredibly unpredictable yet that is what autobiographies are. Autobiographical writing can create unpredictable pieces written by authors who have grown older, forgotten

things, and gained vastly different perspectives from what really happened. These are sins every autobiographical writer has made, and these sins will be made as long as autobiographical writing is an art form. Which is why *Are You Sure?: Experiences of a Gay Foster Youth* focuses much more on the authentic story Nick decides to tell instead of worrying about whether it is factual or not.

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Are You Sure?

A Play in Two Acts

By Zachary Clein

(Draft #1)

Act I

SETTING

Mitchell residence, rural town in Mississippi.

TIME

Summer of 2011.

Act II

SETTING

Pearson residence, suburban area in Mississippi.

TIME

Fall of 2011 to Christmas of 2018

ACT I

Scene 1

(Lights are down, inaudible screaming can be heard from offstage. Culminates in Nick yelling "NO PLEASE" then silence. Lights come on, showing a living room, midafternoon. Nick enters. He's wearing a suit and tie, looks like he's going in for an interview.)

NICK

(To Audience) What a way to start, huh? I apologize for the dramatics but it seemed like the best way to really spice things up, ya know? Kinda seems like being dramatic is the only way to get people's attention. *(Takes a beat)* But I guess I should show some of that Southern hospitality we are known for in Mississippi, I'm Nick. Nice to meet you all.

(Walks to the couch and takes a seat, looks around the room)

NICK

It's been a long time since I've been here. In case any of you were wondering, I lived here and boy do I have some memories of this place. Where do I start? Well I—

(Sound of footsteps cut him off, he stands up, suddenly alert. Takes a beat then comes up with an idea.)

NICK

(Chuckles) Actually, it'll be better if I just show you. *(Starts taking off the suit revealing a plain, white t-shirt underneath and gym shorts)* And to do that, I'll need you all to bear with me. Time to use that imagination the theatre needs its audience to have. Cause we are about to go back in time. I'm no longer the 22 year old man standing before you, but a 15 year old kid entering into something completely unknown and, frankly, quite terrifying. And- wait, I need my trash bag. Where is it?

(Someone runs the trash bag with clothes in it to him from offstage, then promptly exits)

NICK

Ah, thanks! Now, where was I? Oh yeah, *(footsteps get louder)* the year is 2011 and this is my first day in a foster home.

(NICK stands there, his demeanor completely different. No longer a confident man of 22, but a reserved boy of 15. LISA and MIKE MITCHELL enter.)

LISA

Are you Nick?

NICK

(Meekly) Yes.

LISA

Oh, well it's nice to meet you. Sorry, we just didn't hear you come in and your social work- wait, where is your social worker anyway?

NICK

Marie? Uh, she's in the car. She told me to come on inside and let you know we're here.

MIKE

(Chuckles a little) Why ain't I surprised? Stay here, I'll go talk to her.

(MIKE exits, LISA and NICK stand around awkwardly)

LISA

Sorry about that, we've had issues with her before and you'd think we'd be used to it but she still gets us ticked off.

NICK

It's okay. I understand.

(Both are silent yet again)

LISA

(Sits down on the couch, sighs) Well don't just stand there. Have a seat.

(NICK sits down next to her)

LISA

So, how was the trip? Hope she didn't torture you too much.

NICK

It was alright, kinda boring I guess. All she listened to was old music.

LISA

(Smiles) Oh yeah, like what?

NICK

I don't know, I think his name was Billy Ray Cyrus.

(LISA looks aghast)

LISA

Boy!!! That's old?! Guess you won't like my music. *(Takes a beat)* Plus Billy Ray Cyrus is not real country. That woman is gonna ruin you playing that crap. She should've showed you some Patsy Cline.

NICK

Who's Patsy Cline?

(LISA is stunned)

LISA

That's it, I need to fix this before the damage gets any worse.

(LISA gets up and walks to the radio, she plays Patsy Cline's "Walkin' After Midnight")

LISA

Time to educate you on a classic.

(The song starts and LISA starts swaying to the music, at some point she starts singing with the song. NICK watches with an awkward smile. Half way through the song, MIKE returns, yelling over the music)

MIKE

Now who's playing some Patsy in here without me?

LISA

(LISA laughs) Oh shut up and come over here you old coot! *(She grabs him and they dance till the music finishes, BOTH are laughing)*

MIKE

Been a long time since you brought out Patsy.

LISA

Well I had to show this kid some real country. Marie played Billy Ray Cyrus on the way over here.

MIKE

Oh okay, had to fix the damage then, huh? *(Then to Nick)* Little advice, want a lady to like you, then play them some Patsy Cline and you'll win them over like that *(snaps fingers)*.

NICK

Yeah, thanks for the advice. *(Awkwardly laughs)*

(LISA playfully pushes him away while shaking her head, MIKE laughs while walking over to where NICK is seated and sits down next to him. NICK seems a little more anxious than he was before.)

MIKE

Well Nick, I hate to be the spoilsport but we should go over some things before you get settled in, okay?

(NICK nods his head slowly, LISA stops smiling and turns the music off; stands next to where MIKE is sitting)

LISA

(To NICK) Want something to eat while we go over this stuff?

(NICK opens his mouth to say something then MIKE cuts him off)

MIKE

Marie said they had dinner on the way so he's good. *(To NICK)* Alright, well there are a few rules we have for you. One, we all have to pitch in with work around the farm. Do you like chicken? *(NICK nods his head again)* Good, cause the chicken houses will be your new home away from home. *(Chuckles)* Everybody has to do it, just part of living here.

LISA

Also, everyone who comes here asks so we'll just get this out of the way, we don't have internet, at least not for you. I use it to pay bills and other things for the chicken houses but that's about it. You aren't allowed on it. *(A little more forcefully than warranted)*

(She stops, looks a little lost. MIKE jumps in.)

MIKE

We just kinda believe you don't need the internet. Plus it's just a big distraction, with everything you have going on you don't need anymore of those. *(To LISA)* Okay, what else are we missing?

LISA

Food I think.

MIKE

Oh yeah, that's another thing. Of course we won't starve you or anything but we do lock the pantries and fridge. It's a safety precaution that way if a kid tries taking off they don't take any food with them. So if you want a snack or something ask us.

LISA

We have some nieces and nephews who come over every now and then to play. Do not touch them. You can talk to them and play with them if you want but no physical contact.

NICK

Sorry, but is it okay if I ask why? This whole thing is just really new to me.

MIKE

It's so people don't get the wrong idea. I mean you never know what someone is going through, especially in foster care, and people like coming to weird conclusions so it's better to just not give them somethin' to talk about especially since this is a small community.

NICK

(Realizing what he meant) Oh, okay.

MIKE

And that's "yes sir". When you're in our house you can call us whatever feels comfortable as long as it's respectful, but when you answer a question by us, or any of your elders, say "yes sir" or "yes ma'am", understood?

NICK

Yes. *(Quickly correcting himself)* Yes sir.

MIKE

Alright, I think that just about covers it- oh yeah, there is one more thing. See the phone over there? *(Gestures to phone)* You can use but only if we are around. We need to be sure you're not talking to anybody you shouldn't. Now I think that just about does it. We'll give you a couple days to get adjusted then Saturday we'll get you started with the chicken houses so you can see what those are like. If anything else comes up –

(DYLAN walks in)

DYLAN

Hey mamma I'm home.

LISA

Nice to see you too Dylan, thanks for being on time. Have you met Nick yet?

(Sarcastically)

DYLAN

(Looks at Nick) Nice to meet ya. *(To LISA)* Sorry, got held up with some stuff. There any dinner left?

(LISA and MIKE look at each other)

LISA

(Sighs) You realize how late it is, right? You wanted dinner, you should've been here on time. *(Yawns)* But speaking being late, I think I'll hit the hay for tonight. Goodnight everyone, nice to meet you Nick and I hope you get settled in alright. *(Whispers to DYLAN)* At least try to be nice.

(LISA exits)

(DYLAN walks over to the chair and plops down while prompting his feet up on the stool)

MIKE

Hey Dylan!

DYLAN

Yeah daddy?

MIKE

What are your plans for the weekend?

DYLAN

Ehh, not much. Probably gonna go to town and hang out with Ed and the other guys.

MIKE

Good, then you can spend it workin with Nick in the chicken houses.

DYLAN

What?! Come on daddy, that ain't fair!

MIKE

(Cutting DYLAN off) Well you should've thought about that when you decided to come in late and have an attitude with us. You promised you'd be here to meet Nick but you weren't. So, you both get quality time Saturday.

DYLAN

(Quietly) Yay, more time with another screw up.

MIKE

What was that?

(DYLAN gets up to leave)

DYLAN

Nothin' daddy. I think I'll just go to bed. Night.

(DYLAN exits)

(All is silent for a moment)

MIKE

Sorry about that, he doesn't take to new people very well. He'll come around.

(NICK nervously nods his head, he looks visibly rattled, MIKE notices this)

MIKE

Nick, is everythin okay?

NICK

Yes sir, I'm fine.

MIKE

Okay, well I'm gonna go to bed. Don't stay up too late. Goodnight.

NICK

Goodnight.

MIKE

(Stops and turns back, realizes he forgot something.) Oh yeah, been such a long day we

forgot to tell ya, Sunday be up by 6, that'll give you time to eat before we head to church.

(Turns to walk away)

NICK

Church?

MIKE

(Turns back) Yeah, church.

NICK

Umm, is it okay if I ask what kind?

MIKE

(Lifts an eyebrow) Southern Baptist.

NICK

Oh.

MIKE

Is that a problem?

NICK

(Quickly/anxiously) No.

(MIKE stands there with his arms crossed)

NICK

(Realizing his mistake) No sir.

MIKE

(Nods his head approvingly) Night.

(MIKE exits, NICK gets up and looks in the direction that MIKE walked off in. Once certain MIKE is gone, NICK goes to the phone. Phone rings multiple times then someone answers.)

NICK

(Whispering) Hello, Sam? It's Nick. Yeah it's nice to hear from you too. How's everything going? Same here. I don't know when I'll be back but I'm sure it'll be soon. Hey, it's alright. I promise. Okay, listen I should probably go cause I'm not supposed to be on the phone right now. Of course I'll call back, is this time good? Awesome, I'll call

soon. I miss you too. Okay, love you. Goodnight. *(To audience)* Trust me, I knew it was a bad idea. I just had to talk to him. You see, I had to –

(Noises offstage interrupt him)

Scene 2

(NICK runs to check if anyone is coming. Doesn't see anyone so he comes back.)

NICK

Right now, let's keep the story going. Sound good? *(Gives a gesture to the audience, asking their permission to continue)* Okay then, the next morning everything was pretty quiet until... *(Gestures with his hand once he says that and the sound of a door slamming is heard, sounds of footsteps can be heard and NICK ducks away. MIKE comes in and sits at his chair. Wipes sweat off his face. LISA enters. Visibly tired but also annoyed.)*

LISA

Geez, wake up the whole house while you're at it.

MIKE

Sorry, didn't realize I was being loud.

LISA

What are doing up this early anyway? It's 5:40 in the morning.

MIKE

(Scoffs) Been up earlier than that. Surprised you didn't hear the alarm go off. One of the feeders in the chicken house stopped working around four.

LISA

How bad is it?

MIKE

It's good now. Nothing to worry about.

LISA

(Sits down next to him) Okay, that's nice to hear. *(Smells him)* I think you need to take a shower. Smells like something crawled up you and died.

MIKE

Ehh, I thought about it. But I'm gonna be going out again soon so I don't see the point. Especially since Dylan left.

LISA

(Shocked) He did what?!

MIKE

Oh yeah, I saw him leaving as I was coming back from the chicken houses. I tried calling him but he ignored me. Boy has some balls.

LISA

Why wasn't that the first thing you told me?

MIKE

(Sighs) Listen Lisa, I'm tired and it's early. Let's not do this right now. *(Takes a beat)*
But I should've told you immediately, you're right. I just didn't think much of it cause we know why he's acting this way. He's done this before.

(LISA gets up from the table and goes to the kitchen)

LISA

It doesn't matter. We had this conversation with him. He can be upset but he needs to get over it.

MIKE

Can you really blame him Lisa? After what happened last time –

LISA

Well this time is different. We got a boy instead, that won't happen again.

MIKE

Well I'll talk to him. We knew it was gonna be an adjustment having Nick around.

(Changes subjects) What do you think of him?

LISA

Nick? Hmm, I don't know yet. He seems like a nice kid. A little quiet but that's about it.

When I spoke with Marie she was pretty vague about what happened.

MIKE

Didn't she say his dad called DHS?

LISA

She did but I guess he didn't tell her why.

MIKE

Shouldn't DHS do some kind of investigatin' into stuff like that? That makes no sense. I

mean it seems a little suspicious or am I crazy?

(LISA shrugs)

LISA

I don't know but like I said something tells me he's a good kid. Just needs a little help.

(Takes a beat) Do you think we can help him? I mean after what happened with Ben do

you think we can? *(Long pause, LISA changes the subject)* Well, I guess we just do what we can. He didn't have much stuff with him. We should probably get him some clothes. He looked to be about as tall as Ben. Maybe –

MIKE

I know what you're talkin about.

LISA

(Looking confused) What do you mean?

MIKE

Dylan will have a fit if you do it. Plus, you shouldn't expect to make him, him, you know.

LISA

(Visibly upset) No Mike, I don't know. What?

MIKE

Damn it, Lisa I just think it's a bad idea.

LISA

Well I don't give a damn what you think Mike, the boy needs clothes! This isn't about Ben!

MIKE

Sure coulda fooled me! *(Standing)*

LISA

(Walking over to where he's standing) Listen here Michael Jacob Mitchell, I might be your wife but I am also that boy's foster mother. He needs clothes, we have clothes. This is not about Ben it's about –

(Creaking noise comes from where NICK is standing, LISA and MIKE turn towards his direction, looking startled. NICK walks in to the kitchen. MIKE walks away while LISA's demeanor changes)

LISA

Well good morning to you sunshine. Have a good night?

NICK

Yes ma'am. Is everything alright?

MIKE

Nothin' for you to worry about. Dylan left somewhere so it'll be me and you today. First I'm gonna eat then we'll go out in the next couple hours to show you around the chicken houses.

LISA

Well before you do that, Nick, I need to grab something for you. *(Walks offstage)*

NICK

Is she alright?

(MIKE just nods, LISA comes running back in with a plaid button-up shirt in her hands, looks old yet well-preserved, almost as if it hasn't been worn in a long time.)

LISA

Here you go, put this on. *(NICK starts putting it on)* I would've given you some pants but they were a little long. We'll get you some new pants later. Gonna need them out there.

(NICK finishes buttoning up the shirt)

LISA

Oh, don't you look nice. *(Silence)*

(MIKE gives an "ahem", LISA breaks out of her stupor, she looks rattled)

LISA

Well, I guess you guys should get to work. I'm gonna go back to bed. Let me know if you need anything.

(LISA exits)

NICK

Is she okay? She seemed a little upset.

MIKE

(Sighs) She'll be okay. *(Silence)* You know, I was wonderin', and let me know if you don't wanna talk about it, but what happened to get DHS involved?

NICK

(Getting visibly nervous) Honestly, I can't say. Things were just hard for my parents I guess.

MIKE

Uh huh. *(Takes a beat)* I'll be back, there's something I need to talk to mama about.

(Notices the confused look on NICK's face) That's what I call Lisa sometimes. Back in a jiff.

(MIKE exits)

Scene 3

NICK

(To audience) I'll spare you all the gory, graphic visuals of the chicken houses. One, it's impossible to put something like that on a stage, and two, I never want to smell chicken shit again. But don't worry, I have plenty of things to tell about the chicken houses.

(NICK gives a devilish smile) Where do I start? Well after we ate, bad idea on my part, we both walked over to the chicken houses. I remember the walk, as if we were brave knights going to battle and our near certain deaths. We weren't knights but the inside was just as gory as a battlefield. There must've been thousands of chicks running around! The chirping so loud my ears were falling off. The smell, oh ho! It smelled like a thousand rotting corpses all took a shit at the same time, which wasn't far from the truth. There were bodies of dead chicks that got trampled on, just covered in dirt and poop from all the others. Also, it was hot. Mississippi hot with nothing but fans to blow the dirt in your face. To this day I'm still finding stuff in places it shouldn't be! *(Shivers)* Sorry, I'm getting side-tracked, back to the story, we got to work picking up dead chicks and making sure the feeders were still working. *(He starts walking to the chair MIKE sat in)* After a few hours, lunchtime came around so he let me go back to the house. As soon as I get in, I walk to a chair and –

(NICK plops down in the chair, MIKE and DYLAN can be heard offstage.)

MIKE

We talked about this!

DYLAN

Do you think I care?! You said “no more” but that didn't matter, did it?!

MIKE

He's having a rough time. If you're gonna be mad, get over it cause he's here as long as he needs to be and don't take it out on him!

(DYLAN barges in)

DYLAN

(Laughs a little) Had you working in the chicken houses?

(NICK nods)

DYLAN

That's perfect. Happy your first day is going well. *(Walks over to the fridge then back to the table and sits down, looks at NICK)* Listen man, I'm sor – *(Stops talking when he notices the shirt NICK is wearing. DYLAN gets visibly upset)*

DYLAN

(Looks down, trying to contain his anger.) Who gave you that shirt?

NICK

This shirt? *(Indicating the plaid shirt he's wearing)* Umm, Lisa gave it to me.

DYLAN

(Scoffs) Okay, cool. *(Gets up and walks to the counter, stops over there and looks at NICK)* By the way, it's Mrs. Mitchell to you. Show respect. Got it?

NICK

(Nervously) Okay. Sorry. *(Silence)* Umm, Dylan?

DYLAN

Uh huh.

NICK

Is it okay if I ask a question?

DYLAN

(Annoyed) Sure, why not?

NICK

Who's Ben?

DYLAN

(Gets noticeably uncomfortable) No one. Why?

NICK

I just heard them talking about him this morning.

DYLAN

Really? Huh. *(Takes a sip from his drink)*

(Both are silent, MIKE walks in. DYLAN turns away trying to avoid him.)

MIKE

Woo, it's a scorcher out there! *(Looks at NICK)* Well aren't ya hungry?!

NICK

Umm, honestly, I don't really feel like eating.

MIKE

Ha, yeah that happens with everyone's first time. Just give it a minute. *(Turns his attention to DYLAN, who's still turned away from him)* Hey Dylan, got somethin' good to eat?

DYLAN

Yeah.

(Situation is noticeably tense)

MIKE

How's the guys doin'?

DYLAN

Fine.

MIKE

Well don't chatter my ear off.

DYLAN

(More to himself) Sounds like you've been chattering a lot.

MIKE

(Moves in on DYLAN) What was that?

DYLAN

Nothin', forget it. *(Starts walking off but MIKE stops him)*

MIKE

No, you're gonna tell me what's going on.

DYLAN

(Barely containing his anger) Why should I?

MIKE

(Getting in his face, DYLAN tries to match his father. Both seem like animals fighting to be the alpha male) Because I said so.

DYLAN

Okay, tell me this then. Why is it you both never mention Ben but all of a sudden when this kid gets here *(gesturing to NICK)* you two become chatty?! Huh?! You two barely talk about him. It's like you've forgotten –

MIKE

Stop right there!

(DYLAN suddenly stops, he is clearly intimidated, he's seen his father when he's this angry and he doesn't want to make it worse)

MIKE

I loved that boy and that will never change. You forget he was my son too and –

DYLAN

(Finding his courage) Yeah right!

MIKE

What does that mean?!

DYLAN

Stop acting like you were his dad! Stop pretending you cared about him! You're not his father, you're the reason he –

(At this point MIKE grabs DYLAN by the collar of his shirt. DYLAN is noticeably scared, his courage melting away instantly. MIKE notices NICK, the fear and tension on NICK's face and lets DYLAN go.)

MIKE

(Still clearly furious) Never say that again. Do you hear me?

(DYLAN just nods his head, clearly shaken)

MIKE

Good. *(Changing the subject)* Nick go get a shower. You don't have to work in the chicken houses anymore today.

NICK

Yes sir. *(Gets up and walks offstage)*

MIKE

Dylan, go grab some work clothes, I'm gonna take a break and then we'll go work some.

There are some trays that need cleaning. Got it?

DYLAN

Sure.

(DYLAN exits. MIKE stands there for a minute rubbing his head. MIKE Exits. NICK comes back on and looks around to see if anyone is there. He is clearly still shaken.)

(NICK gets up from the table, looks around, then picks up the phone. After a moment it picks up.)

NICK

(Whispering) Hey, how are you? That's good. Sorry for calling so early. I just wanted to be sure you were okay. Yeah, I'm okay. Long morning. Really?! I'm so happy for you! I always knew you could do it an – hey, Sam? Is everything alright? Sam you there? Oh, hello sir. Wait please!

(Phone cuts off)

Scene 4

(NICK puts the phone down, MIKE walks in and sees NICK standing over the phone.

Silence)

NICK

Someone tried calling and no one else was around.

MIKE

(Looks suspicious) Okay, that's no problem.

(MIKE sits down, looks at NICK)

MIKE

Nick?

NICK

(Startled) Yes? I mean yes, sir?

MIKE

Are you sure you're alright? You look like you've seen a ghost.

NICK

Yes sir, I'm fine.

MIKE

Nick, have a seat. I wanna talk to you for a minute.

(NICK hesitantly takes a seat)

NICK

Is everything alright?

MIKE

Yeah, everythin' is good. Just wanted to get to know you better. That's all. Feels like we've hardly had a chance to just talk. Ya know?

NICK

It does kinda seem that way.

MIKE

So, tell me about yourself.

NICK

There's not really much to tell.

MIKE

Ah, come on. Don't try bein' modest on me.

NICK

I'm not trying to be. I just don't think there's much to tell about myself.

MIKE

I don't believe that. Everyone has a story to tell, just a matter of them willing to share it.

NICK

Do you have a story?

MIKE

Oh yeah, I've got a good one. Ya see, I grew up in this town. Been here my entire life. It was me, my momma, my stepdad, and my two big brothers. We weren't rich but we knew how to get by. *(Laughs)* I remember wantin' to play football in high school but we couldn't afford the gear. So, what do my brothers do? They go off and sell their records, good ones too, and make just enough to get me the gear to play. Should've seen the look on my face. I'm not a "funny" man by any means but I was ballin' my eyes out like I was one. I started playing a month after that and guess who I met at a game? *(Gestures towards the bedroom)* The rest is ancient history after that. Hmph, kinda funny when you think about it.

NICK

Wow, sounds like a really nice thing your brothers did for you.

MIKE

That's what family does. We look out for each other. But, now that I've shared that bit with you, it's your turn.

NICK

Well, I've never been a big football fan but I guess I love to write.

MIKE

Oh really?

NICK

Yes sir, it's just something I've always enjoyed. I don't know. I guess I just loved the idea of being swept up in a story. The very best stories can take you to amazing places to meet the most amazing people. It might sound corny, but it almost feels freeing.

MIKE

Sounds like this is something you have some real passion for.

NICK

Yeah, I guess it is.

MIKE

So is that your plan after high school? Writin'?

NICK

Maybe, but I want to go to college first. I already have a few ideas of where I want to go and maybe I can do it.

MIKE

Sounds really nice. Would your parents help out with that?

NICK

(Taken aback at the strange question) Sorry?

MIKE

Well school is expensive and you can't expect DHS to lift a finger to help out. The second you turn 18 they'll kick you out and send you flying. So, would you get help from your parents?

NICK

Maybe, umm, I don't know.

MIKE

(Looks like he's studying NICK's face.) Is it because they can't or they won't?

NICK

Umm.

MIKE

What happened with them Nick? Did they hurt you in any way or somethin'?

NICK

What? No, they didn't hurt me. It wasn't like that. They did the best they could. Just couldn't take care of me anymore.

MIKE

(Takes a beat) I can't promise everythin' will get better but know you have a safe place here. Okay?

NICK

(Feeling somewhat better) Thank you, sir.

MIKE

Now we just have to –

(Phone starts ringing)

MIKE

Hold that thought.

(MIKE gets up and walks over to the phone)

MIKE

(Answering the phone) Hello? Hey Marie, how are things goin'? Nick? Yeah he's right here. Why? I see. How bad was it? He said that? Okay. Okay. I hear ya, we'll talk to him. Thanks. *(Hangs up the phone, walks over to the table)* Nick.

NICK

(Visibly nervous) Everything alright, sir?

MIKE

Did you call someone without our permission?

NICK

(Slight pause) Yes, sir.

MIKE

Hmm, who was it?

NICK

Sam, sir.

MIKE

Remind me who that is.

NICK

My brother, sir.

MIKE

(Started walking around the table, around NICK, like a vulture circling it's prey) Okay, how old is he?

NICK

11, sir.

MIKE

11. Hmm, did you know your dad didn't want you talkin to him?

NICK

Yes sir.

MIKE

Of course you knew that. He also knew you called your brother. You knew that too, didn't you? *(Looks at NICK for confirmation, all NICK could do was slowly nod his head, visibly scared)* Cause he called Marie and told her he caught you two talkin. He's gone ahead and requested a no contact order from the judge for you and Sam. He also had an interestin reason for doing that.

NICK

What did he say? Sir.

MIKE

(Sitting down) Nick, I want you to think long and hard before answerin' my next question. Are you gay?

(Silence)

MIKE

Are you gay?

(Silence)

MIKE

I'm going to ask one more time and you better answer me. Are you gay?

NICK

(Takes a long, deep breath.) I think so. Yes, sir.

Scene 5

MIKE

(Takes a deep breath) Okay then. *(Gets up)* Wait right here.

(MIKE walks off to the bedroom, all is silent for a moment, then talking can be heard between MIKE and LISA, first inaudible then gets clearer)

LISA

(Offstage) Are you sure?

MIKE

That is exactly what I was told. He even said so himself.

LISA

Oh good Lord, if Dylan finds out then –

MIKE

I know, it won't be good.

(LISA and MIKE enter, LISA stands next to NICK while MIKE sits back down)

LISA

So, Mike just told me... something. How much of it is true?

NICK

I'm sure all of it, ma'am.

LISA

(Sitting down) Okay, we need to talk about this then. First off, you shouldn't have used the phone without telling us.

NICK

I just wanted to talk to my brother.

LISA

We understand that, but all it did was cause more trouble. We have no idea if your dad will do something else besides this no contact order. On top of that, as soon as the judge sees this, this will go into your file at DHS. Do you know what that means?

NICK

Not really.

MIKE

It means no matter where you go people will see this. Whatever other placements you get, they will see there is a no contact order between you and your brother. That will make people think twice before taking you in.

NICK

But if I already have a placement then that doesn't matter, right?

(LISA and MIKE look at each other)

LISA

We aren't sending you away but we do need to talk about this whole "gay thing".

MIKE

Nick, it just isn't right. I'm sorry son but there's no way around it. We are religious people and this goes against everythin' we've been taught. The Bible says it is a sin and that is a fact.

LISA

Are you sure you're gay and you just don't have, I don't know, admiration for how other guys look? (*NICK laughs a little*) You're laughing but I'm serious. Cause there is a serious difference between the two things.

NICK

(*A little pointedly*) I'm sure that's not what this is.

MIKE

Listen, Nick, I know this stuff might sound a little crazy but we're worried. Statistics show bein' gay increases your chances of gettin' AIDS, becomin' a sex addict, havin' unhealthy, if any at all, and even becomin' a pedophile.

LISA

This is something that not only hurts your mental wellbeing but your life here as well. Your life is already hard enough as it is being in foster care. Don't make it any harder than it already is.

NICK

It's not exactly something I can stop.

LISA

(*Gets up from the table*) You need to treat this more seriously! This is not a game.

(MIKE puts his hand on her shoulder to help calm her down. She shakes it away.) Mike, I can't go through this. *(She walks to the counter)*

MIKE

Nick, *(rubbing his head)* we've been dealin with a lot for a long time so you have to excuse Lisa. You see, our eldest son, Ben, he, umm, well –

LISA

He died. *(Looking at NICK, except with a disgust in her eyes)* Sui – Suicide.

NICK

I'm sorry, I didn't know.

LISA

I keep thinking about what we did wrong. What I did wrong. He didn't leave a note or anything but we had to of done something wrong. Right? Hated suicide. Never thought I'd have to deal with it myself. With my own son. *(Pause)* I remember when he was born. My first child. I never thought I could love something that much after I met him.

MIKE

He wasn't my blood so I didn't get to be there for that. But he was mine too. I miss him every day.

(MIKE starts crying a little. LISA walks over and puts a hand on his shoulder.)

LISA

(To NICK) We worry we'll never get to see him again. I always believed suicide was too much of a sin. Maybe, he won't be there when it's our time, ya know? That's why we're worried for you. *(Walks over to NICK)* Please, think about this. There's still time for you but you have to be willing to open up to it. Our pastor has a great program for

rehabilitating people with your... condition. Say the word and we'll put you in it. You'll be fine.

NICK

I'm sorry but I –

MIKE

(Pulling himself together)

MIKE

So, I'm gonna ask you one more time. Are you sure?

(Silence)

MIKE

(Sighs) Nick, I'm not goi –

NICK

(Quickly and with conviction) Yes sir, I am.

MIKE

(Sighs) Okay. *(Looks at LISA)*

(LISA gets up and walks over to the phone)

LISA

Hello, Marie? Yes it's Lisa. Sorry for calling you on the weekend but we have an issue.

Nick has been having homosexual tendencies so he can't stay here anymore. Okay. Trust me I know. We talked to him about it but he seems pretty sure. Okay, see you then.

(Hangs up phone) She said she can be here Monday to pick him up.

MIKE

That settles it. *(Gets up from table)* Well, I guess I'll go take a shower. Been a pretty long day.

(MIKE exits)

LISA

Yeah, you should probably do the same thing Nick.

NICK

Yes ma'am. *(Gets up from table)*

LISA

We really want you to be happy Nick. We really do. Wherever you go after this, I pray will be good for you.

(LISA exits, NICK addresses the audience)

NICK

Yeah, so that's how I left the Mitchell's place. Just barely a week. Must be a record.

(Laughs anxiously) Monday, Marie came on time. I was out doing yard work when Mike came and got me. I walk in and see her sitting at the table with all my stuff already in garbage bags. I say goodbye, then I get in the car and that's it. That was the last time I saw the Mitchell's. *(Takes a beat)* It felt like everything was one big game for survival, slip up just once, then it's over. Honestly, sometimes I just wished I was – Sorry but I think I need a few minutes. Actually this seems like a good part to stop for intermission. So, go get some water, use the bathroom, do what you need to do and we'll start back soon. Sorry, I'm – yeah, sorry.

End of Act I

Act II

Scene 1

(Lights come up, NICK walks back on stage with a garbage bag in hand. Entire room has been reorganized showing an entirely different space than before. NICK is wearing clothes more suited to fall. He pauses, looks around for a minute then goes to center stage to address the audience.)

NICK

Sorry about that earlier, it was a little harder than I thought, telling this story. But *(Puts garbage bag down)* I'm ready to keep going if you are *(Waits for audience to answer)*. Okay then, well considering we don't have a lot of time left, I can't show you everything that happened that summer. Truth is, you probably wouldn't want to see it, because after I left the Mitchell's, I spent the entire summer being pushed from place to place. Not many long-term shelters like taking gay teenage boys so I basically spent lots of time at emergency shelters. Now most emergency shelters, at least from my experience, are only short-term, say about two weeks at most. Every place was different, I guess that's the best word for it. At one shelter a staff member told me I'm going to Hell, and at another, one of the kids threatened to kill me. That's how I spent my summer and even part of fall. In fact, I was still in emergency shelters by the time school started back so that was fun. Now I had to worry about changing schools every time I moved. *(Walks over to table, pours a glass of water)* Sorry, mouth is a little dry, but if you're getting bored don't worry, I'm about done with this part of it. Then the real show can start. *(Takes a sip of water, hears sound of a car door shut)* Guess I better hurry. Where was I? Oh yeah,

luckily I didn't have to worry about school while in shelters cause I got a new social worker, her name was Anne, and she told me she was getting me out of here, this shelter. Honestly, it just sounded like another promise, DHS knows how to make broken promises when they want to, but she came through. She found a nice couple who were willing to take me in. Shouldn't be too long before Diane walks through that door, she's my new foster mother. Her husband, Jim, is still at work. She said she took the day off so she could come get me herself. *(Puts water down and walks back over to the garbage bag)* Sounded nice, but... I'm used to it by now.

(DIANE walks in, carrying one of his trash bags)

DIANE

Phew! I swear they really should've gotten you some luggage. Carrying bags like these around all the time is so unhealthy.

NICK

Luggage is too expensive for them.

DIANE

Well if they can afford all these different placements for you then they can get you some luggage. *(Sits down on couch)* Well, this is our home, you'll notice the dining room table is over there, that's where we usually eat dinner. Umm, the computer room is down the hall, to the left. If you need any schoolwork done feel free to use it.

NICK

Hmph

DIANE

What is it?

NICK

Nothing, it's just most of the other place I've been to didn't really like me using computers. My first foster home said internet wasn't really needed.

DIANE

I suppose that's one way to look at it. Me and Jim believe it is needed, not all the time of course, need room in your life for other things, but it would be harder to get things done that need to be done.

NICK

That makes sense. Speaking of Jim, where is he?

DIANE

At work. He's the head of the psychology department at the VA and they had a meeting today he couldn't get out of. He'll be back once it's over.

NICK

Sounds good, is it okay if I ask what you do?

DIANE

I'm a nurse practitioner with a specialty in HIV research.

NICK

Really? Sounds like it would be kinda scary.

DIANE

How so?

(NICK walks over to the couch)

NICK

Well it's HIV. Like, weren't you scared you might get it? I don't know, an accident happen and you get hurt.

DIANE

Well not anymore, when I was younger and first started with HIV patients I did have a couple bad dreams.

NICK

Like what?

DIANE

Hmm, I remember this one dream where I was helping an inmate, sometimes I do clinical work for inmates with HIV at the federal prison in Yazoo City, and this one dream I had was me taking some blood from the inmate then he attacks me. The guards got him off but the needle I used to take the blood stuck me. After that I woke up.

NICK

That sounds really scary!

DIANE

It was, but that was back in the 90s when everything about HIV was scary. Don't get me wrong, HIV is still scary but there was still so much we didn't know back then. Plus we didn't have the medicines we have now.

NICK

Sounds like you like your work.

DIANE

I'm definitely passionate about it. There's still a huge stigma on having HIV today and people link it with being gay too much. *(Notices NICK look a little anxious)* It's okay, I promise we don't care about you being gay.

NICK

Okay. I'm happy to hear to hear that.

(Sounds of a car pulling up can be heard)

Scene 2

(JIM walks in, he's a button-down shirt with a tie. His sleeves are rolled up with a suit case in one hand.)

DIANE

Hey, didn't expect you for another couple hours.

JIM

Once Michael brought started playing the two hour long introduction to his thesis *statement*, not the full thesis, but the statement I said see everyone tomorrow.

DIANE

Oh my goodness, Michael really needs learn, less is more. Sure you won't get in trouble with your bosses?

JIM

Ehh, I had more important things to do today. Like meeting our new house guest.

(Addresses NICK) Nice to finally meet you Nick. *(Extends hand to NICK to shake)*

NICK

Nice to meet you too.

(JIM goes to the chair to have a seat)

JIM

Did I miss anything exciting?

DIANE

Not really, we were just getting to know each other a little more. He asked about my work and we were just discussing that.

JIM

Ahh, okay.

NICK

What about your work? What do you do exactly?

JIM

Well I'm basically in charge of the major operations that go on in the VA's psychology department. I have patients, go to meetings, nothing too exciting really.

DIANE

That's not true, you've done some pretty cool things. Heck, Haley Barbour appointed him the head of the Mississippi Board of Psychology.

JIM

Yeah but his opinion matters as much to me as Fox News does. Which is to say, hmm, next to nothing.

DIANE

“Next to nothing”? I don’t think that’s right. Sounds like you’re being a little too generous with that.

JIM

I try sometimes.

(NICK laughs a little)

DIANE

If you think that’s funny you should hear about our life from *before* we came to Mississippi.

JIM

Well those are fun, but maybe we should go get some dinner first. We can tell him everything then.

DIANE

Sounds like a good idea, plus we need to talk about school registration, and it’s not too late so I think we have time to get a little school shopping done. Oh and we need to work out the details for Noah’s call.

NICK

Who’s Noah?

JIM

He's our son, him and his wife, Beth, live in New York City. You'll get to talk to them soon. We're doing a skype call with them tomorrow night. He's looking forward to meeting you.

DIANE

We don't do skype sessions a whole lot but this is a special occasion.

NICK

What is it?

JIM

First there's you –

(NICK laughs a little)

JIM

(Notices) What?

NICK

Sorry sir?

JIM

You laughed a little, everything okay?

NICK

(Realizing his mistake) Oh, umm, sorry, I was just, umm thinking of something funny.

JIM

(Glances at DIANE, unconvinced) Oh, okay. Must've been pretty funny.

NICK

Yeah, sorry I –

DIANE

Why are you saying “sorry”? It’s okay. (*Reassuringly puts a hand on his shoulder*) You aren’t on trial for laughing.

NICK

(*NICK nods*) Yes ma’am. (*Eager to change the subject*) Umm, what was the other reason?

JIM

Oh yeah, well you need to meet Sam.

NICK

Sam? (*Getting visibly nervous at the mention of the name*)

DIANE

Are you sure you’re okay Nick? (*To JIM*) Maybe we should stay in tonight.

NICK

No, I’m fine. Sorry, I used to know someone with that name that’s all.

DIANE

Oh, anyone important?

NICK

No, no one important. Anyway, who’s Sam? I’m guessing it’s not the same person.

(*Feebly laughs a little*)

DIANE

(*Notices how uncomfortable he is but doesn’t press*) Well it would be pretty impossible since he hasn’t been born yet.

JIM

Sam is going to be Noah and Beth's son in the next couple months. When he's actually here that is.

DIANE

The first grandbaby!

NICK

That's really exciting.

JIM

It really is,

DIANE

Well we can talk more about this in the car, I don't know about you two but I'm hungry. Ready for some food Nick?

NICK

Yes ma'am.

DIANE

Alright, we'll go get the car started and while we do that could you put the bags in your room? It's the last door to the right.

NICK

Yes, ma'am. (*Picks bags up and about to exit but stops*) How much money should I bring for school shopping?

DIANE

Why do you need to bring money for that?

NICK

That's just how the people at the shelter did it. I was told my allowance was for stuff like that.

JIM

Don't worry about that. We're taking care of you so that should be our job. Just drop your stuff off and we'll be in the car, okay?

NICK

Yes sir.

(DIANE and JIM get up)

DIANE

Did you hear that? He had to pay for school supplies himself?

JIM

(Sighs) I know, and they gave him garbage bags?

DIANE

That's DHS for you.

JIM

Hmph, and did he seem nervous to you? He got a little anxious when he heard Sam's name.

DIANE

We'll should talk about this later. Something tells me he's been through a lot. Tonight, let's just help him feel at home.

(BOTH exit, NICK enters)

Scene 3

NICK

They're gone? *(To audience)* Okay, well, what do you think so far? Before you answer that question, let me point something out here, they're talking about buying my school supplies for me. For those not familiar with foster care, sometimes it becomes the child's job to get the stuff themselves. In fact that's how it was throughout the entire summer I started in foster care. I was basically taking care of myself with the occasional visit by social workers, guardian ad litem, people whose job descriptions literally say, "for the best interests of the child" but never any real follow up on that promise. After a summer like that, it was hard to expect anything different, ya know? It was hard to trust anything as small as someone else getting me pencils or a backpack. But that's what they did. After dinner we went shopping and they didn't get the cheap stuff either. They let me pick what I wanted and when I pick a crappy \$10 backpack they said no and got me the \$50 one that would last for years. *(Starts tearing up)* Took a lot of self-control to hide how much that got to me. After an entire summer of being let down, I felt a piece of that chip away. But things were early, things could fall apart at any moment and I was ready for that. I kept thinking I might feel better after enough time passed but the truth is I only felt worse. I did start writing again, something I didn't think I could do when I left the Mitchell's but that's about the only good thing I felt. After about a month, I was worried it would all end soon. It was just one big time bomb and I was the fuse that would light it. At least, that's how it felt.

(JIM walks in)

JIM

Nick, are you okay?

NICK

Yes sir, sorry I was just brainstorming.

JIM

Oh okay, (*walks over to table where papers are*) for your writing? (*Picks paper up*)

NICK

Yes sir, (*rushes over to JIM*) but I'm not really done with them yet. Plus they're not that good and...

JIM

Not that good? I beg to differ. This is actually really nice.

NICK

You think so?

JIM

Well yes, I mean they could use some more work, you tend to drone on about small details but with some training I think these will turn out really well.

NICK

Thanks, I really appreciate hearing that.

JIM

Of course. (*Looks at another piece*) Is this a poem?

NICK

Kinda both a poem and story. I'm still working on it.

JIM

What's the difference between the two? Poems are stories, and stories are poems. Each form is different but do the same thing.

NICK

What's that?

JIM

They tell a story to the audience and find ways of bringing them in to this world the author is trying to show them. Whether that is through rhythm, repetition, and so forth. For example, mind if I read this poem? (*NICK nods his head*) Okay, "I remember the kites we used to fly. The monsters we would fight. The holes we would make and the time we would waste. I remember your laugh as we soared through the sky. The pain in your eyes, as we swam in a starry lake and dreamed of the lives we would take. That final night, as I sang you to sleep, I wondered what memories you'd keep. What would be dream and what would stay sure as I went away, to see you no more."

(Brief pause)

NICK

What about that one?

JIM

This poem has really clear imagery for one. You give really clear details like the kite, lake, flying, and so on. But the strongest aspect of that is the emotional subtext there is. I can feel a sense of longing in here. Almost like this person is a child who's growing up

but doesn't want to and they have to say goodbye to that part of their lives, (*Looks at NICK for second*) or a person they have to say goodbye to.

NICK

You got all that from there. (*laughs a little*)

JIM

Forget what I do? It's my job to read subtext. (*Hands paper back to NICK and walks to the couch*) Plus, I might do some writing myself someday. Whenever I retire that is.

NICK

You thinking about retiring?

JIM

Well not right away but maybe in the next few years. Of course I won't be completely done working, honestly I need something to do and I was never big golf fan so spending my time doing that never appealed to me.

NICK

So what do you want to do?

JIM

You know I'm not entirely sure yet. I might continue with my practice on the side, might find a part time job some place else, maybe I could finally get stuff off my bucket list. But I'm not as adventurous as I used to be when we lived in Boston. Like, did I tell you the what happened when our car got stolen?

NICK

I don't think so. (*Sits down in the chair opposite him*)

JIM

Now that's a good one. Well, we lived in this big house with several other people back in Boston and it wasn't really the safest neighborhood. We wake up one day and find out our van was stolen!

NICK

Oh my God!

JIM

Gets better, we didn't call the police and –

NICK

Why not?

JIM

I honestly couldn't tell you why we didn't. It was a long time ago and I don't remember our rationale. Maybe because the van was so old and we were gonna get a new one soon anyway. I honestly couldn't tell you. What I can tell you is we were young and, like most young people, we didn't always make sound decisions. But, the thing is we didn't need to call the police after all. About a week later, my brother Alex comes visit us. Me and Alex are walking back home when we see, you guessed it, the van.

NICK

You're kidding me!

JIM

Nope, I'm being completely honest! It was the van and we could tell because it had the same gigantic dent in the front of it that ours did. They had taken the wheels off and just laid them right next to the van, don't know why they did that, but, since it was insanely

early, around four in the morning if I remember correctly, people were still asleep. So what do we do? We put the wheels back on, hotwire the car, didn't have the key on me, and steal it back.

NICK

That can't be true! Weren't you scared the police would drive by or the people in the house would wake up?

JIM

Shitless.

NICK

(Laughs) That's amazing. I think that beat your pig named Bacon story by a longshot.

JIM

Poor Bacon, he tasted good though.

NICK

(Laughs) You and your brother must've been close to do that.

JIM

We were, but we were young, that made it easier.

NICK

So getting older made it harder to be close?

JIM

Well it didn't help. Especially since he lives in Boston now and we're down here. But that just means we have try harder. Sure, we live far away from each other but we do our best to stay close.

NICK

Oh, okay.

JIM

You're thinking about your brother, aren't you?

NICK

Yeah, it's just, his birthday is in a few days.

JIM

We can try talking to your social worker again. Maybe she can convince –

NICK

No, it's okay. He doesn't want to see me and that's fine. *(Takes a beat)* Besides, we have another Sam we need to focus on pretty soon. Only a few more weeks.

JIM

Yeah that's true. Getting pretty close.

(DIANE enters)

DIANE

Hello everyone, what's going on in here?

JIM

Just telling some war stories.

NICK

He was telling me about how he stole the car back.

DIANE

Uh, I was speechless when he did that. *(Sits next to JIM)* I was so mad he did something so stupid.

JIM

You are one to talk after that situation with the mugger.

NICK

Wait, mugger?!

DIANE

Yeah, it was us and another couple we were with. Jim and this other guy were walking a little ahead, so this mugger must've thought me and Charlotte, was that her name? (*JIM shrugs*) Well he must've thought we were alone. He tries grabbing my purse and I stand there and *fight* with him over it! They must've heard us fighting and ran back. The mugger saw them and got out of there.

JIM

You're forgetting the part where you yelled at him too. "You better run!"

DIANE

(*Smiling*) I don't remember that part.

JIM

I do, one of the many moments I realized I married a crazy person.

DIANE

Well I guess you're in good company then considering you stole a car.

JIM

Re-stole, there's a difference.

(*DIANE's phone starts ringing*)

Scene 4

DIANE

Oh, it looks like Noah wants to FaceTime. *(Answers the phone)* Hello, how you doing?

NOAH

Hey mom, we're doing fine. Is everyone there?

DIANE

(Everyone moves around the couch, DIANE talks to the phone) Everyone is here, can you see us?

NOAH

(From phone) Yeah mom, we can see and hear you.

DIANE

Awesome!

JIM

Hey Noah, how's everything going?

NOAH

Hey dad, everything is going well. Beth is having some dental issues so she can't really speak right now.

DIANE

Ahh, what's wrong?

NOAH

Nothing to be worried about, she went to the dentist today and they got it taken care of. She'll be fine in a couple days. What? I think she said she's happy to see you guys.

DIANE

We're happy to see you too Beth, hope you feel better soon.

NOAH

I'll take that to mean she said thank you.

(Everyone laughs)

NICK

Hey Noah.

NOAH

Hey Nick, how's everything going? School going well?

NICK

It's alright, Mrs. Peterson is giving me a run for my money though.

NOAH

Darn that Mrs. Peterson. I remember her when I was in school. She was pretty scary.

NICK

She's terrifying but how about you? How's the baby doing?

NOAH

So far so good, two more weeks to go but let's ask him. I'm sure his perspective is a little different from ours. How are you doing in there? About ready to come out? Can't wait to meet Mimi, Grampy, and Uncle Nick, huh? Something tells me he's ready to come out.

And I think Beth is ready for him to come out too.

(Laughs)

DIANE

Well I'm sure, but we'll probably go ahead and let you go. You both look pretty tired so we'll let you get some rest.

NOAH

Okay *(yawns)*, sounds like a good idea. Talk to you guys later. We love –

DIANE

Noah? I think we got disconnected.

JIM

That was a nice chat.

DIANE

It was, wasn't it?

NICK

Yeah.

JIM

You okay Nick?

NICK

Yeah, I'm okay. It was just the first time I was called Uncle Nick.

DIANE

Well that's what you are. You're part of the family.

NICK

Yeah, I guess so.

JIM

Nick, it's okay. Whatever is going on you can tell us.

NICK

It's just, it's hard to really trust that. I want to, I really want to trust that but...

DIANE

And you can. Nick, I promise no matter what happens you will always be family.

NICK

What if DHS takes me away though? What if I do something wrong and you guys decide I shouldn't stay anymore?

JIM

Hey, look at me. That would never happen. Like she said, no matter what happens you will always be family.

NICK

I want to trust that so much but, I just don't know. I thought I could trust my family but what they did... it made it impossible for me to trust that. (*Stands up and walks away, turns towards them*) You know what they did? My parents and brother were gone one night so I brought a guy over to hang out with. We were kissing and I didn't hear my parents come in the door. My dad started yelling, mom was crying, and finally they sat me down and gave a "talk" to me. Remember all that stuff the Mitchell's said to me? They said the exact same stuff! Except, when they asked me if I was sure I was gay I said no. So they put me in "therapy" and the stuff they did. They told me I was gay because I was close to my mother but had a distant relationship with my father. That the only way to get better was to learn how to be "manly" and start doing things that only men would do. Stop writing and start doing football or some other manly sport. Feeling depressed? Push it away cause real men don't worry about that! Every session he would remind me I would go to Hell if I gave in to my "homosexual demons" and after every session I fantasized of jumping off the bridge I walked past every day to get to the meeting. Once I

realized it wasn't working I begged my parents not to make me go anymore or I would kill myself. They said fine and called DHS that night. *(Stops for a moment)*

JIM

Nick, we had no idea –

NICK

(Cutting him off) That is what family is like for me. Fuck, I can't see my own brother anymore! *(Punches table)* So, honestly, I'd rather you go ahead and get it over with and call DHS. It'll happen sooner or later so it might as well be now. Yes, I'm angry but I'm also tired. I'm tired of waiting for the next shoe to drop. I'm tired of waiting for that social worker to show up in the drive way. I'm tired of, of... I'm just tired. *(Sits in the chair behind him)*

(All is silent for a moment, the DIANE and JIM walk over to NICK)

DIANE

Nick, I, we are so sorry about all of that. You've been through so much and we can't make that go away but we can promise you, and we don't care how many times we have to remind you, but we promise to always be there for you.

JIM

You haven't been here long but you are a part of the family. We consider you like our own son. You *are* our son. That's not ever going to change. Sure, we'll do things that get you mad at us and you'll do things that get us mad at you but us loving you will never change.

NICK

What about when I age out of DHS?

DIANE

Fuck DHS. We will do for you what we've done for every birthday in this household and that is celebrating it. That's what we'll do when you turn 18, 19, 20, and so on. If they try telling us you need to leave when you turn 18 then they will have to deal with us.

Because you will always have a place here. I noticed college pamphlets on the computer desk, and I'm so happy you're looking in to that. But remember, you will always have a place to sleep here.

NICK

What if –

JIM

No more “what ifs”. We don't know what will happen. We don't know what could happen next month, next year, or even next decade. So we can drive ourselves crazy with “what ifs” all day. However, what we can say is certain is that you are our son. No matter how much time passes that will *never* change.

DIANE

So try to believe that. I know it's hard, believe me, it can be really hard to show that part of yourself to someone else. Especially after everything you've been through but you have to try, okay?

NICK

Okay.

JIM

Also, if you ever feel like something is bothering you, let us know. If you feel depressed or alone or scared or anything, we'll help you through it. It's okay to feel bad, but you have to talk to us otherwise it won't get better. We want you to be happy and we want you to find someone who makes you happy. I promise, on your wedding day, if you decide you want to get married, we will be up there smiling and crying along with all the other people who will be there. Cause I'm positive you'll meet someone who you'll get to share crazy experiences with.

NICK

(Laughs) That's nice except gay marriage hasn't been –

JIM

It's coming, trust me.

(Everyone laughs)

NICK

(Smiling) Okay, thanks.

(NICK stands up and gives each of them a hug)

DIANE

Well, after that I think we could do for something a little sweet to cap off the evening.

Anyone up for a Bop's run?

JIM

That sounds like a good idea to me. Nick?

NICK

(Laughs) Yeah, that sounds good to me. Is it okay if I have a moment to get ready first?

DIANE

Sure, take your time. Let us know when you're ready to leave.

NICK

Will do.

(DIANE hugs NICK again)

DIANE

Thanks for telling us. We love you.

NICK

I love you guys too.

(JIM hugs NICK again)

JIM

Let us know if you need anything.

(DIANE and JIM exit)

NICK

(To audience) Before anyone asks, we did get some Bops afterwards. Tasted amazing too. Ha ha. Now I won't say everything got immediately better after that conversation, but it really helped. They told me I was part of the family, and every day since then they did things that proved it. A month later the baby is born and we all fly out to see them and I got to meet my first nephew, Sam. Of course, things weren't always sunshine between us. They were right, there were times when they got mad with me and I got mad at them. At first I was afraid I would wake up the next day to find my stuff in garbage

bags with a social worker waiting for me. I even told Diane this and she said that would never happen but, if it did, and I quote, “we would at least get you some good luggage before sending you off”. And they did get me some good luggage, when I got in to college. After working my ass off I finally got a good scholarship to study creative writing at New York University. I got a good part-time job, and since I had family in the area, I got to stay with them, I guess the free babysitting thing really sat well with them. Things have been going really well, now, I’m in my senior year. I met a good guy, Trevor, and things are going strong between the two of us. (*Movement is seen in the background as DIANE and JIM start setting things up for Christmas*) And as you can see, I’m still going back home every now and then. Jim retired this year and started working on his own book. Diane was awarded an award for best nurse practitioner in the state and all of us are getting ready for Christmas. I’m really excited cause Trevor is flying down to spend Christmas with us. His plane landed a little while ago and I was gonna pick him up but Noah and Beth decided they wanted a “nice drive”, in other words, get Sam out of the house so we can wrap presents without him noticing. Just got a text that they’re on their way back so we’re setting up for –

DIANE

Nick, who are you talking to?

NICK

No one, just practicing a presentation I have to give.

JIM

Oh yeah, for that foster care conference coming up?

NICK

Yeah, they wanted me to speak about being gay in foster care.

DIANE

Well it sounds really nice.

NICK

Thanks, I hope they feel the same way.

JIM

Don't worry, you've done this stuff a million times.

NICK

Doesn't make it any less terrifying.

DIANE

You know what's really terrifying? An unset table. (*Mocks terror*) Could you set the table please?

NICK

Really funny, you're a master comic.

JIM

Don't forget to put the fork –

NICK

The fork on the left. Don't worry, I got it. Man, you set the table wrong one –

JIM

Two –

DIANE

No four –

NICK

Time and everyone holds it against you.

(House phone starts ringing)

DIANE

You know I really think we should consider getting rid of the house phone.

Telemarketers have been blowing it up all month. *(Walks over to the phone and answers it)* Hello?

JIM

(DIANE chattering in the back can be heard) Got the fork on the wrong side.

DIANE

Uh, Nick?

NICK

Uh huh.

DIANE

I think you might want to take this.

NICK

(Putting down the silverware) Who is it?

DIANE

Sam.

NICK

(Walking over to the phone) Why would Sam call me on the house phone?

DIANE

(Handing the phone to him) No, your brother.

(NICK stands there, DIANE pats him on the shoulder and walks over to JIM. Chattering can be heard between the two of them. Then comes to a complete stop as NICK brings the phone to his ear)

NICK

Hello?

(Lights dim until it is completely dark)

The End

Are You Sure?

A Play in Two Acts

By Zachary Clein

(Draft #2)

Act I

SETTING

Mitchell residence, rural town in Mississippi.

TIME

Summer of 2011.

Act II

SETTING

Pearson residence, suburban area in Mississippi.

TIME

Fall of 2011 to Christmas of 2018

Characters:

Nick: 15 year old young gay man (also 22 during the narration moments) in foster care.

Lisa Mitchell: 47 year old foster mother to Nick.

Mike Mitchell: 48 year old foster father to Nick.

Dylan Mitchell: 17 year old son of Lisa and Mike.

Diane Pearson: 59 year old foster mother of Nick.

Jim Pearson: 60 year old foster father of Nick.

Noah Pearson: 35 year old son of Diane and Jim.

(The actors who play one family play the next. For example, Lisa/Diane, Mike/Jim, and Dylan/Noah are played by the same actors.)

ACT I

Scene 1

(Lights are down, inaudible screaming can be heard from offstage. Culminates in Nick yelling "NO PLEASE" then silence. Lights come on, showing a living room, midafternoon. Nick enters. He's wearing a suit and tie, looks like he's going in for an interview.)

NICK

(To Audience) What a way to start, huh? I apologize for the dramatics but it seemed like the best way to really spice things up, ya know? Kinda seems like being dramatic is the only way to get people's attention. *(Takes a beat)* But I guess I should show some of that Southern hospitality we are known for in Mississippi, I'm Nick. Nice to meet you all.

(Walks to the couch and takes a seat, looks around the room)

NICK

It's been a long time since I've been here. In case any of you were wondering, I lived here and boy do I have some memories of this place. Where do I start? Well I—

(Sound of footsteps cut him off, he stands up, suddenly alert. Takes a beat then comes up with an idea.)

NICK

(Chuckles) Actually, it'll be better if I just show you. *(Starts taking off the suit revealing a plain, white t-shirt underneath and gym shorts)* And to do that, I'll need you all to bear with me. Time to use that imagination the theatre needs its audience to have. Cause we are about to go back in time. I'm no longer the 22 year old man standing before you, but a 15 year old kid entering into something completely unknown and, frankly, quite terrifying. And- wait, I need my trash bag. Where is it?

(Someone runs the trash bag with clothes in it to him from offstage, then promptly exits)

NICK

Ah, thanks! Now, where was I? Oh yeah, *(footsteps get louder)* the year is 2011 and this is my first day in a foster home.

(NICK stands there, his demeanor completely different. No longer a confident man of 22, but a reserved boy of 15. LISA and MIKE MITCHELL enter.)

LISA

Are you Nick?

NICK

(Meekly) Yes.

LISA

Oh, well it's nice to meet you. Sorry, we just didn't hear you come in and your social work- wait, where is your social worker anyway?

NICK

Marie? Uh, she's in the car. She told me to come on inside and let you know we're here.

MIKE

(Chuckles a little) Why ain't I surprised? Stay here, I'll go talk to her.

(MIKE exits, LISA and NICK stand around awkwardly)

LISA

Sorry about that, we've had issues with her before and you'd think we'd be used to it but she still gets us ticked off.

NICK

It's okay. I understand.

(Both are silent yet again)

LISA

(Sits down on the couch, sighs) Well don't just stand there. Have a seat.

(NICK sits down next to her)

LISA

So, how was the trip? Hope she didn't torture you too much.

NICK

It was alright, kinda boring I guess. All she listened to was old music.

LISA

(Smiles) Oh yeah, like what?

NICK

I don't know, I think his name was Billy Ray Cyrus.

(LISA looks aghast)

LISA

Boy!!! That's old?! Guess you won't like my music. *(Takes a beat)* Plus Billy Ray Cyrus is not real country. That woman is gonna ruin you playing that crap. She should've showed you some Patsy Cline.

NICK

Who's Patsy Cline?

(LISA is stunned)

LISA

That's it, I need to fix this before the damage gets any worse.

(LISA gets up and walks to the radio, she plays Patsy Cline's "Walkin' After Midnight")

LISA

Time to educate you on a classic.

(The song starts and LISA starts swaying to the music, at some point she starts singing with the song. NICK watches with an awkward smile. Half way through the song, MIKE returns, yelling over the music)

MIKE

Now who's playing some Patsy in here without me?

LISA

(LISA laughs) Oh shut up and come over here you old coot! *(She grabs him and they dance till the music finishes, BOTH are laughing)*

MIKE

Been a long time since you brought out Patsy.

LISA

Well I had to show this kid some real country. Marie played Billy Ray Cyrus on the way over here.

MIKE

Oh okay, had to fix the damage then, huh? *(Then to Nick)* Little advice, want a lady to like you, then play them some Patsy Cline and you'll win them over like that *(snaps fingers)*.

NICK

Yeah, thanks for the advice. *(Awkwardly laughs)*

(LISA playfully pushes him away while shaking her head, MIKE laughs while walking over to where NICK is seated and sits down next to him. NICK seems a little more anxious than he was before.)

MIKE

Well Nick, I hate to be the spoilsport but we should go over some things before you get settled in, okay?

(NICK nods his head slowly, LISA stops smiling and turns the music off; stands next to where MIKE is sitting)

LISA

(To NICK) Want something to eat while we go over this stuff?

(NICK opens his mouth to say something then MIKE cuts him off)

MIKE

Marie said they had dinner on the way so he's good. *(To NICK)* Alright, well there are a few rules we have for you. One, we all have to pitch in with work around the farm. Do you like chicken? *(NICK nods his head again)* Good, cause the chicken houses will be your new home away from home. *(Chuckles)* Everybody has to do it, just part of living here.

LISA

Also, everyone who comes here asks so we'll just get this out of the way, we don't have internet, at least not for you. I use it to pay bills and other things for the chicken houses but that's about it. You aren't allowed on it. *(A little more forcefully than warranted)*

(She stops, looks a little lost. MIKE jumps in.)

MIKE

We just kinda believe you don't need the internet. Plus it's just a big distraction, with everything you have going on you don't need anymore of those. *(To LISA)* Okay, what else are we missing?

LISA

Food I think.

MIKE

Oh yeah, that's another thing. Of course we won't starve you or anything but we do lock the pantries and fridge. It's a safety precaution that way if a kid tries taking off they don't take any food with them. So if you want a snack or something ask us.

LISA

We have some nieces and nephews who come over every now and then to play. Do not touch them. You can talk to them and play with them if you want but no physical contact.

NICK

Sorry, but is it okay if I ask why? This whole thing is just really new to me.

MIKE

It's so people don't get the wrong idea. I mean you never know what someone is going through, especially in foster care, and people like coming to weird conclusions so it's better to just not give them somethin' to talk about especially since this is a small community.

NICK

(Realizing what he meant) Oh, okay.

MIKE

And that's "yes sir". When you're in our house you can call us whatever feels comfortable as long as it's respectful, but when you answer a question by us, or any of your elders, say "yes sir" or "yes ma'am", understood?

NICK

Yes. *(Quickly correcting himself)* Yes sir.

MIKE

Alright, I think that just about covers it- oh yeah, there is one more thing. See the phone over there? *(Gestures to phone)* You can use but only if we are around. We need to be sure you're not talking to anybody you shouldn't. Now I think that just about does it. We'll give you a couple days to get adjusted then Saturday we'll get you started with the chicken houses so you can see what those are like. If anything else comes up –

(DYLAN walks in)

DYLAN

Hey mamma I'm home.

LISA

Nice to see you too Dylan, thanks for being on time. Have you met Nick yet?

(Sarcastically)

DYLAN

(Looks at Nick) Nice to meet ya. *(To LISA)* Sorry, got held up with some stuff. There any dinner left?

(LISA and MIKE look at each other)

LISA

(Sighs) You realize how late it is, right? You wanted dinner, you should've been here on time. *(Yawns)* But speaking being late, I think I'll hit the hay for tonight. Goodnight everyone, nice to meet you Nick and I hope you get settled in alright. *(Whispers to DYLAN)* At least try to be nice.

(LISA exits)

(DYLAN walks over to the chair and plops down while prompting his feet up on the stool)

MIKE

Hey Dylan!

DYLAN

Yeah daddy?

MIKE

What are your plans for the weekend?

DYLAN

Ehh, not much. Probably gonna go to town and hang out with Ed and the other guys.

MIKE

Good, then you can spend it workin with Nick in the chicken houses.

DYLAN

What?! Come on daddy, that ain't fair!

MIKE

(Cutting DYLAN off) Well you should've thought about that when you decided to come in late and have an attitude with us. You promised you'd be here to meet Nick but you weren't. So, you both get quality time Saturday.

DYLAN

(Quietly) Yay, more time with another screw up.

MIKE

What was that?

(DYLAN gets up to leave)

DYLAN

Nothin' daddy. I think I'll just go to bed. Night.

(DYLAN exits)

(All is silent for a moment)

MIKE

Sorry about that, he doesn't take to new people very well. He'll come around.

(NICK nervously nods his head, he looks visibly rattled, MIKE notices this)

MIKE

Nick, is everythin okay?

NICK

Yes sir, I'm fine.

MIKE

Okay, well I'm gonna go to bed. Don't stay up too late. Goodnight.

NICK

Goodnight.

MIKE

(Stops and turns back, realizes he forgot something.) Oh yeah, been such a long day we forgot to tell ya, Sunday be up by 6, that'll give you time to eat before we head to church.

(Turns to walk away)

NICK

Church?

MIKE

(Turns back) Yeah, church.

NICK

Umm, is it okay if I ask what kind?

MIKE

(Lifts an eyebrow) Southern Baptist.

NICK

Oh.

MIKE

Is that a problem?

NICK

(Quickly/anxiously) No.

(MIKE stands there with his arms crossed)

NICK

(Realizing his mistake) No sir.

MIKE

(Nods his head approvingly) Night.

(MIKE exits, NICK gets up and looks in the direction that MIKE walked off in. Once certain MIKE is gone, NICK goes to the phone. Phone rings multiple times then someone answers.)

NICK

(Whispering) Hello, Sam? It's Nick. Yeah it's nice to hear from you too. How's everything going? Same here. I don't know when I'll be back but I'm sure it'll be soon. Hey, it's alright. I promise. Okay, listen I should probably go cause I'm not supposed to be on the phone right now. Of course I'll call back, is this time good? Awesome, I'll call

soon. I miss you too. Okay, love you. Goodnight. *(To audience)* Trust me, I knew it was a bad idea. I just had to talk to him. You see, I had to –

(Noises offstage interrupt him)

Scene 2

(NICK runs to check if anyone is coming. Doesn't see anyone so he comes back.)

NICK

Right now, let's keep the story going. Sound good? *(Gives a gesture to the audience, asking their permission to continue)* Okay then, the next morning everything was pretty quiet until... *(Gestures with his hand once he says that and the sound of a door slamming is heard, sounds of footsteps can be heard and NICK ducks away. MIKE comes in and sits at his chair. Wipes sweat off his face. LISA enters. Visibly tired but also annoyed.)*

LISA

Geez, wake up the whole house while you're at it.

MIKE

Sorry, didn't realize I was being loud.

LISA

What are doing up this early anyway? It's 5:40 in the morning.

MIKE

(Scoffs) Been up earlier than that. Surprised you didn't hear the alarm go off. One of the feeders in the chicken house stopped working around four.

LISA

How bad is it?

MIKE

It's good now. Nothing to worry about.

LISA

(Sits down next to him) Okay, that's nice to hear. *(Smells him)* I think you need to take a shower. Smells like something crawled up you and died.

MIKE

Ehh, I thought about it. But I'm gonna be going out again soon so I don't see the point. Especially since Dylan left.

LISA

(Shocked) He did what?!

MIKE

Oh yeah, I saw him leaving as I was coming back from the chicken houses. I tried calling him but he ignored me. Boy has some balls.

LISA

Why wasn't that the first thing you told me?

MIKE

(Sighs) Listen Lisa, I'm tired and it's early. Let's not do this right now. *(Takes a beat)*
But I should've told you immediately, you're right. I just didn't think much of it cause we know why he's acting this way. He's done this before.

(LISA gets up from the table and goes to the kitchen)

LISA

It doesn't matter. We had this conversation with him. He can be upset but he needs to get over it.

MIKE

Can you really blame him Lisa? After what happened last time –

LISA

Well this time is different. We got a boy instead, that won't happen again.

MIKE

Well I'll talk to him. We knew it was gonna be an adjustment having Nick around.

(Changes subjects) What do you think of him?

LISA

Nick? Hmm, I don't know yet. He seems like a nice kid. A little quiet but that's about it.

When I spoke with Marie she was pretty vague about what happened.

MIKE

Didn't she say his dad called DHS?

LISA

She did but I guess he didn't tell her why.

MIKE

Shouldn't DHS do some kind of investigatin' into stuff like that? That makes no sense. I mean it seems a little suspicious or am I crazy?

(LISA shrugs)

LISA

I don't know but like I said something tells me he's a good kid. Just needs a little help.

(Takes a beat) Do you think we can help him? I mean after what happened with Ben do you think we can? *(Long pause, LISA changes the subject)* Well, I guess we just do what we can. He didn't have much stuff with him. We should probably get him some clothes. He looked to be about as tall as Ben. Maybe –

MIKE

I know what you're talkin about.

LISA

(Looking confused) What do you mean?

MIKE

Dylan will have a fit if you do it. Plus, you shouldn't expect to make him, him, you know.

LISA

(Visibly upset) No Mike, I don't know. What?

MIKE

Damn it, Lisa I just think it's a bad idea.

LISA

Well I don't give a damn what you think Mike, the boy needs clothes! This isn't about Ben!

MIKE

Sure coulda fooled me! *(Standing)*

LISA

(Walking over to where he's standing) Listen here Michael Jacob Mitchell, I might be your wife but I am also that boy's foster mother. He needs clothes, we have clothes. This is not about Ben it's about –

(Creaking noise comes from where NICK is standing, LISA and MIKE turn towards his direction, looking startled. NICK walks in to the kitchen. MIKE walks away while LISA's demeanor changes)

LISA

Well good morning to you sunshine. Have a good night?

NICK

Yes ma'am. Is everything alright?

MIKE

Nothin' for you to worry about. Dylan left somewhere so it'll be me and you today. First I'm gonna eat then we'll go out in the next couple hours to show you around the chicken houses.

LISA

Well before you do that, Nick, I need to grab something for you. *(Walks offstage)*

NICK

Is she alright?

(MIKE just nods, LISA comes running back in with a plaid button-up shirt in her hands, looks old yet well-preserved, almost as if it hasn't been worn in a long time.)

LISA

Here you go, put this on. *(NICK starts putting it on)* I would've given you some pants but they were a little long. We'll get you some new pants later. Gonna need them out there.

(NICK finishes buttoning up the shirt)

LISA

Oh, don't you look nice. *(Silence)*

(MIKE gives an "ahem", LISA breaks out of her stupor, she looks rattled)

LISA

Well, I guess you guys should get to work. I'm gonna go back to bed. Let me know if you need anything.

(LISA exits)

NICK

Is she okay? She seemed a little upset.

MIKE

(Sighs) She'll be okay. *(Silence)* You know, I was wonderin', and let me know if you don't wanna talk about it, but what happened to get DHS involved?

NICK

(Getting visibly nervous) Honestly, I can't say. Things were just hard for my parents I guess.

MIKE

Uh huh. *(Takes a beat)* I'll be back, there's somethin I need to talk to mama about.

(Notices the confused look on NICK's face) That's what I call Lisa sometimes. Back in a jiff.

(MIKE exits)

Scene 3

NICK

(To audience) I'll spare you all the gory, graphic visuals of the chicken houses. One, it's impossible to put something like that on a stage, and two, I never want to smell chicken shit again. But don't worry, I have plenty of things to tell about the chicken houses.

(NICK gives a devilish smile) Where do I start? Well after we ate, bad idea on my part, we both walked over to the chicken houses. I remember the walk, as if we were brave knights going to battle and our near certain deaths. We weren't knights but the inside was just as gory as a battlefield. There must've been thousands of chicks running around! The chirping so loud my ears were falling off. The smell, oh ho! It smelled like a thousand rotting corpses all took a shit at the same time, which wasn't far from the truth. There were bodies of dead chicks that got trampled on, just covered in dirt and poop from all the others. Also, it was hot. Mississippi hot with nothing but fans to blow the dirt in your face. To this day I'm still finding stuff in places it shouldn't be! *(Shivers)* Sorry, I'm getting side-tracked, back to the story, we got to work picking up dead chicks and making sure the feeders were still working. *(He starts walking to the chair MIKE sat in)* After a few hours, lunchtime came around so he let me go back to the house. As soon as I get in, I walk to a chair and –

(NICK plops down in the chair, MIKE and DYLAN can be heard offstage.)

MIKE

We talked about this!

DYLAN

Do you think I care?! You said “no more” but that didn’t matter, did it?!

MIKE

He’s having a rough time. If you’re gonna be mad, get over it cause he’s here as long as he needs to be!

(DYLAN barges in)

DYLAN

(Laughs a little) Had you workin’ in the chicken houses?

(NICK nods)

DYLAN

That’s perfect. Happy your first day is goin’ well. *(Walks over to the fridge then back to the table and sits down, looks at NICK)* Listen man, I’m sor – *(Stops talking when he notices the shirt NICK is wearing. DYLAN gets visibly upset)*

DYLAN

(Looks down, trying to contain his anger.) Who gave you that shirt?

NICK

This shirt? *(Indicating the plaid shirt he’s wearing)* Umm, Lisa gave it to me.

DYLAN

(Scoffs) Okay, cool. *(Gets up and walks to the counter, stops over there and looks at NICK)* By the way, it’s Mrs. Mitchell to you. Show respect. Got it?

NICK

(Nervously) Okay. Sorry. *(Silence)* Umm, Dylan?

DYLAN

Uh huh.

NICK

Is it okay if I ask a question?

DYLAN

(Annoyed) Sure, why not?

NICK

Who's Ben?

DYLAN

(Gets noticeably uncomfortable) No one. Why?

NICK

I just heard them talking about him this morning.

DYLAN

Really? Huh. *(Takes a sip from his drink)*

(Both are silent, MIKE walks in. DYLAN turns away trying to avoid him.)

MIKE

Woo, it's a scorcher out there! *(Looks at NICK)* Well aren't ya hungry?!

NICK

Umm, honestly, I don't really feel like eating.

MIKE

Ha, yeah that happens with everyone's first time. Just give it a minute. *(Turns his attention to DYLAN, who's still turned away from him)* Hey Dylan, got somethin' good to eat?

DYLAN

Yeah.

(Situation is noticeably tense)

MIKE

How's the guys doin'?

DYLAN

Fine.

MIKE

Well don't chatter my ear off.

DYLAN

(More to himself) Sounds like you've been chatterin' a lot.

MIKE

(Moves in on DYLAN) What was that?

DYLAN

Nothin', forget it. *(Starts walking off but MIKE stops him)*

MIKE

No, you're gonna tell me what's goin' on.

DYLAN

(Barely containing his anger) Why should I?

MIKE

(Getting in his face, DYLAN tries to match his father. Both seem like animals fighting to be the alpha male) Because I said so.

DYLAN

Okay, tell me this then. Why is it you both never mention Ben but all of a sudden when this kid gets here *(gesturing to NICK)* you two become chatty?! Huh?! You two barely talk about him. It's like you've forgotten –

MIKE

Stop right there!

(DYLAN suddenly stops, he is clearly intimidated, he's seen his father when he's this angry and he doesn't want to make it worse)

MIKE

I loved that boy and that will never change. You forget he was my son and –

DYLAN

(Finding his courage) Yeah right!

MIKE

What does that mean?!

DYLAN

Stop acting like you were his dad! Stop pretending you cared about him! You're not his father, you're the reason he –

(At this point MIKE grabs DYLAN by the collar of his shirt. DYLAN is noticeably scared, DYLAN's courage melting away instantly. MIKE notices NICK, the fear and tension on NICK's face and lets DYLAN go.)

MIKE

(Still clearly furious) Never say that again. Do you hear me?

(DYLAN just nods his head, clearly shaken)

MIKE

Good. *(Changing the subject)* Nick go get a shower. You don't have to work in the chicken houses anymore today.

NICK

Yes sir. *(Gets up and walks offstage)*

MIKE

Dylan, go grab some work clothes, I'm gonna take a break and then we'll go work some. There are some trays that need cleaning. Got it?

DYLAN

Sure.

(DYLAN exits. MIKE stands there for a minute rubbing his head. MIKE Exits. NICK comes back on and looks around to see if anyone is there. He is clearly still shaken.)

(NICK gets up from the table, looks around, then picks up the phone. After a moment it picks up.)

NICK

(Whispering) Hey, how are you? That's good. Sorry for calling so early. I just wanted to be sure you were okay. Yeah, I'm okay. Long morning. Really?! I'm so happy for you! I always knew you could do it an – hey, Sam? Is everything alright? Sam you there? Oh, hello sir. Wait please!

(Phone cuts off)

Scene 4

(NICK puts the phone down, MIKE walks in and sees NICK standing over the phone.

Silence)

NICK

Someone tried calling and no one else was around.

MIKE

(Looks suspicious) Okay, that's no problem.

(MIKE sits down)

NICK

Sir?

MIKE

Yeah.

NICK

Can I ask you a question?

MIKE

Sure thing.

NICK

Can anyone be forgiven?

MIKE

(Sitting up straighter) What do ya mean?

NICK

You know, if you've done something bad, like really bad, can you be forgiven for it?

MIKE

I would like to so.

NICK

Okay, thank you sir.

MIKE

Uh huh. *(Silent)* Do you know someone who's done somethin' bad?

NICK

I guess so.

MIKE

Wanna talk about it?

NICK

(Takes a beat) It's not really mine to say.

(MIKE stares at NICK)

MIKE

Nick?

NICK

(Startled) Yes? I mean yes, sir?

MIKE

Are you sure you're alright? You look like you've seen a ghost.

NICK

Yes sir, I'm fine.

MIKE

Nick, have a seat. I wanna talk to you for a minute.

(NICK hesitantly takes a seat)

NICK

Is everything alright?

MIKE

Yeah, everythin' is good. Just wanted to get to know you better. That's all. Feels like we've hardly had a chance to just talk. Ya know?

NICK

It does kinda seem that way.

MIKE

So, tell me about yourself.

NICK

There's not really much to tell.

MIKE

Ah, come on. Don't try bein' modest on me.

NICK

I'm not trying to be. I just don't think there's much to tell about myself.

MIKE

I don't believe that. Everyone has a story to tell, just a matter of them willing to share it.

NICK

Do you have a story?

MIKE

Oh yeah, I've got a good one. Ya see, I grew up in this town. Been here my entire life. It was me, my momma, my stepdad, and my two big brothers. We weren't rich but we knew how to get by. *(Laughs)* I remember wantin' to play football in high school but we couldn't afford the gear. So, what do my brothers do? They go off and sell their records, good ones too, and make just enough to get me the gear to play. Should've seen the look on my face. I'm not a "funny" man by any means but I was ballin' my eyes out like I was one. I started playing a month after that and guess who I met at a game? *(Gestures towards the bedroom)* The rest is ancient history after that. Hmph, kinda funny when you think about it.

NICK

Wow, sounds like a really nice thing your brothers did for you.

MIKE

That's what family does. We look out for each other. But, now that I've shared that bit with you, it's your turn.

NICK

Well, I've never been a big football fan but I guess I love to write.

MIKE

Oh really?

NICK

Yes sir, it's just something I've always enjoyed. I don't know. I guess I just loved the idea of being swept up in a story. The very best stories can take you to amazing places to meet the most amazing people. It might sound corny, but it almost feels freeing.

MIKE

Sounds like this is something you have some real passion for.

NICK

Yeah, I guess it is.

MIKE

So is that your plan after high school? Writin'?

NICK

Maybe, but I want to go to college first. I already have a few ideas of where I want to go and maybe I can do it.

MIKE

Sounds really nice. Would your parents help out with that?

NICK

(Taken aback at the strange question) Sorry?

MIKE

Well school is expensive and you can't expect DHS to lift a finger to help out. The second you turn 18 they'll kick you out and send you flying. So, would you get help from your parents?

NICK

Maybe, umm, I don't know.

MIKE

(Looks like he's studying NICK's face.) Is it because they can't or they won't?

NICK

Umm.

MIKE

What happened with them Nick? Did they hurt you in any way or somethin'?

NICK

What? No, they didn't hurt me. It wasn't like that. They did the best they could. Just couldn't take care of me anymore.

MIKE

(Takes a beat) I can't promise everythin' will get better but know you have a safe place here. Okay?

NICK

(Feeling somewhat better) Thank you, sir.

MIKE

Now we just have to –

(Phone starts ringing)

MIKE

Hold that thought.

(MIKE gets up and walks over to the phone)

MIKE

(Answering the phone) Hello? Hey Marie, how are things goin'?' Nick? Yeah he's right here. Why? I see. How bad was it? He said that? Okay. Okay. I hear ya, we'll talk to him. Thanks. *(Hangs up the phone, walks over to the table)* Nick.

NICK

(Visibly nervous) Everything alright, sir?

MIKE

Did you call someone without our permission?

NICK

(Slight pause) Yes, sir.

MIKE

Hmm, who was it?

NICK

Sam, sir.

MIKE

Remind me who that is.

NICK

My brother, sir.

MIKE

(Started walking around the table, around NICK, like a vulture circling it's prey) Okay, how old is he?

NICK

11, sir.

MIKE

11. Hmm, did you know your dad didn't want you talkin to him?

NICK

Yes sir.

MIKE

Of course you knew that. He also knew you called your brother. You knew that too, didn't you? *(Looks at NICK for confirmation, all NICK could do was slowly nod his head, visibly scared)* Cause he called Marie and told her he caught you two talkin'. He's gone ahead and requested a no contact order from the judge for you and Sam. He also had an interestin' reason for doing that.

NICK

What did he say? Sir.

MIKE

(Sitting down) Nick, I want you to think long and hard before answerin' my next question. Are you gay?

(Silence)

MIKE

Are you gay?

(Silence)

MIKE

I'm going to ask one more time and you better answer me. Are you gay?

NICK

(Takes a long, deep breath.) I think so. Yes, sir.

Scene 5

MIKE

(Takes a deep breath) Okay then. *(Gets up)* Wait right here.

(MIKE walks off to the bedroom, all is silent for a moment, then talking can be heard between MIKE and LISA, first inaudible then gets clearer)

LISA

(Offstage) Are you sure?

MIKE

That is exactly what I was told. He even said so himself.

LISA

Oh good Lord, if Dylan finds out then –

MIKE

I know, it won't be good.

(LISA and MIKE enter, LISA stands next to NICK while MIKE sits back down)

LISA

So, Mike just told me... something. How much of it is true?

NICK

I'm sure all of it, ma'am.

LISA

(Sitting down) Okay, we need to talk about this then. First off, you shouldn't have used the phone without telling us.

NICK

I just wanted to talk to my brother.

LISA

We understand that, but all it did was cause more trouble. We have no idea if your dad will do something else besides this no contact order. On top of that, as soon as the judge sees this, this will go into your file at DHS. Do you know what that means?

NICK

Not really.

MIKE

It means no matter where you go people will see this. Whatever other placements you get, they will see there is a no contact order between you and your brother. That will make people think twice before taking you in.

NICK

But if I already have a placement then that doesn't matter, right?

(LISA and MIKE look at each other)

LISA

We aren't sending you away but we do need to talk about this whole "gay thing".

MIKE

Nick, it just isn't right. I'm sorry son but there's no way around it. We are religious people and this goes against everythin' we've been taught. The Bible says it is a sin and that is a fact.

LISA

Are you sure you're gay and you just don't have, I don't know, admiration for how other guys look? (*NICK laughs a little*) You're laughing but I'm serious. Cause there is a serious difference between the two things.

NICK

(*A little pointedly*) I'm sure that's not what this is.

MIKE

Listen, Nick, I know this stuff might sound a little crazy but we're worried. Statistics show bein' gay increases your chances of gettin' AIDS, becomin' a sex addict, havin' unhealthy, if any at all, and even becomin' a pedophile.

LISA

This is something that not only hurts your mental wellbeing but your life here as well. Your life is already hard enough as it is being in foster care. Don't make it any harder than it already is.

NICK

It's not exactly something I can stop.

LISA

(*Gets up from the table*) You need to treat this more seriously! This is not a game.

(MIKE puts his hand on her shoulder to help calm her down. She shakes it away.) Mike, I can't go through this. *(She walks to the counter)*

MIKE

Nick, *(rubbing his head)* we've been dealin with a lot for a long time so you have to excuse Lisa. You see, our eldest son, Ben, he, umm, well –

LISA

He died. *(Looking at NICK, except with a disgust in her eyes)* Sui – Suicide.

NICK

I'm sorry, I didn't know.

LISA

I keep thinking about what we did wrong. What I did wrong. He didn't leave a note or anything but we had to of done something wrong. Right? Hated suicide. Never thought I'd have to deal with it myself. With my own son. *(Pause)* I remember when he was born. My first child. I never thought I could love something that much after I met him.

MIKE

He wasn't my blood so I didn't get to be there for that. But he was mine too. I miss him every day.

(MIKE starts crying a little. LISA walks over and puts a hand on his shoulder.)

LISA

(To NICK) We worry we'll never get to see him again. I always believed suicide was too much of a sin. Maybe, he won't be there when it's our time, ya know? That's why we're worried for you. *(Walks over to NICK)* Please, think about this. There's still time for you but you have to be willing to open up to it. Our pastor has a great program for

rehabilitating people with your... condition. Say the word and we'll put you in it. You'll be fine.

NICK

I'm sorry but I –

MIKE

(Pulling himself together) You won't be able to stay then.

NICK

(Stunned) Wait, what?

MIKE

I said, you won't be able to stay.

NICK

But you said –

MIKE

That was before... this happened.

(NICK looks at LISA, she says nothing and doesn't look him in the eyes.)

MIKE

This what happened, huh? Your parents found out and... *(NICK is silent)*

LISA

I'm sorry Nick. I really am. It's just –

MIKE

We have to think of our family first. If Dylan found out, it'd be, well it'd be bad. That's not even mentioning what the neighbors would think.

NICK

(Containing his anger) Okay, I understand.

MIKE

It's just, Nick, it isn't natural.

LISA

That's right, God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve after all.

(NICK scoffs a little)

MIKE

(Noticing) You are not taking this seriously, are you? I mean, Nick, relationships are made up of two roles: the man and the woman. Who would you be in it?

NICK

I guess I'd be a man.

MIKE

I don't see that. You'd be the bitch in the relationship. Being a man means taking charge and having the balls to do what's right. That means pushing aside these "feelings" and listening to God. Don't you wanna get married? You can never get married, you know that right? Getting married to a nice *girl*, having a family, providing for that family, and pushing aside all this other crap. *That's* what it means to be a man. Understand?

NICK

Understood, sir.

(Silence)

MIKE

We want to help you. We want to give you a good home but... we can't back down from this. You asked me earlier if anyone could be forgiven, it was about this, wasn't it?

(NICK is silent) Well it's possible. You can still be forgiven but you have to work for it.

(Pause) So, I'm gonna ask you one more time. Are you sure?

(Silence)

MIKE

(Sighs) Nick, I'm not goi –

NICK

(Quickly and with conviction) Yes sir, I am.

MIKE

(Sighs) Okay. *(Looks at LISA)*

(LISA gets up and walks over to the phone)

LISA

Hello, Marie? Yes it's Lisa. Sorry for calling you on the like this but we have an issue.

Nick has been having homosexual tendencies so he can't stay here anymore. Okay. Trust me I know. We talked to him about it but he seems pretty sure. Okay, see you then.

(Hangs up phone) She said she can be here Monday to pick him up.

MIKE

That settles it. *(Gets up from table)* Well, I guess I'll go take a shower. Been a pretty long day.

(MIKE exits)

LISA

Yeah, you should probably do the same thing Nick.

NICK

Yes ma'am. *(Gets up from table)*

LISA

We really want you to be happy Nick. We really do. Wherever you go after this, I pray will be good for you.

(LISA exits, NICK hears some sounds from the hallway, DYLAN slowly enters)

NICK

You heard?

DYLAN

Yeah. Kinda hard not to.

NICK

Well, I guess that's it. You don't have to worry about me anymore.

(NICK starts walking away)

DYLAN

I'm sorry. *(NICK freezes)* I really am.

NICK

(Tears in his eyes, trying hard to fight back his anger, looks at DYLAN) Why do you care? You never wanted me here in the first place.

DYLAN

(Sincerely) I know, and I'm sorry about that too. It's been really hard, ya know? I know that's no excuse it's just...

NICK

What?

DYLAN

You remind me of Ben.

(NICK is silent.)

DYLAN

I know this doesn't mean much, but good luck. I hope you'll be alright.

(NICK just nods and DYLAN walks offstage, NICK is silent for a minute then addresses the audience).

NICK

Yeah, so that's how I left the Mitchell's place. Just barely a week. Must be a record.

(Laughs anxiously) Monday, Marie was here on time. I was out doing yard work when Mike came and got me. I walk in and see her sitting at the table with my stuff already in garbage bags. I say goodbye, I get in the car and that's it. That was the last time I saw the Mitchell's. *(Takes a beat)* It felt like everything was one big game for survival, slip up just once, then it's over. Truth is, after that I thought I could never be forgiven. What I did was... Sorry but I think I need a few minutes. Actually this seems like a good part to stop for intermission. So, go get some water, use the bathroom, do what you need to do and we'll start back soon. Sorry, I'm – yeah, sorry. *(Nervously laughs then exits)*

End of Act I

Act II

Scene 1

(Lights come up, NICK walks back on stage with a garbage bag in hand. Entire room has been reorganized showing an entirely different space than before. NICK is wearing clothes more suited to fall. He pauses, looks around for a minute then goes to center stage to address the audience.)

NICK

Sorry about that earlier, it was a little harder than I thought, telling this story. But *(Puts garbage bag down)* I'm ready to keep going if you are *(Waits for audience to answer)*. Okay then, well considering we don't have a lot of time left, I can't show you everything that happened that summer. Truth is, you probably wouldn't want to see it, because after I left the Mitchell's, I spent the entire summer being pushed from place to place. Not many long-term shelters like taking gay teenage boys so I basically spent lots of time at emergency shelters. Now most emergency shelters, at least from my experience, are only short-term, say about two weeks at most. Every place was "different", I guess that's the best word for it. At one shelter a staff member told me I'm going to Hell, and at another, one of the kids threatened to kill me. One thing's for sure, I can beat summer adventure stories no matter what now! *(Mimicking other kids)* "I went to New York City." "I went to a concert." "I went to band camp." *(Goes back to himself)* I was almost stabbed. Of course we all know band camp can get pretty wild so that might actually beat mine. *(Laughs a little)* But, basically, that's how I spent my summer and even part of fall. In fact, I was still in emergency shelters by the time school started back so that was fun.

Now I had to worry about changing schools every time I moved. *(Walks over to table, pours a glass of water)* Sorry, mouth is a little dry, but if you're getting bored don't worry, I'm about done with this part of it. Then the real show can start. *(Takes a sip of water, hears sound of a car door shut)* Guess I better hurry. Where was I? Oh yeah, luckily I didn't have to worry about school while in shelters cause I got a new social worker, her name was Anne, and she told me she was getting me out of the shelter I was in. Honestly, it just sounded like another promise, I was used to those at this point. DHS promised to keep me safe. The Mitchell's promised to let me stay. My family promised... Any way, she found a nice couple who were willing to take me in. Shouldn't be too long before Diane walks through that door, she's my new foster mother. Her husband, Jim, is still at work. She said she got off work early so she could come get me herself. *(Puts water down and walks back over to the garbage bag)* Sounded like a nice couple, but... I'm used to things "sounding nice".

(DIANE walks in, still wearing her doctor's coat and ID badge, carrying one of his trash bags)

DIANE

I swear they really should've gotten you some luggage. Ridiculous making you carry stuff around like this.

NICK

Luggage is too expensive for them I guess.

DIANE

I'm sure that's the case. *(Sarcastically. Sits down on couch and takes a deep breath)*

Well, this is our home, you'll notice the dining room table is over there, that's where we

usually eat dinner. Umm, the computer room is down the hall, to the left. If you need any schoolwork done feel free to use it. Jim and I use it a lot for work though so we'll just find a way to share.

NICK

Sounds good. By the way, where is Jim?

DIANE

At work. He's the head of the psychology department at the VA and they had a meeting today he couldn't get out of. He'll be back once it's over.

NICK

So, what about you? You a doctor as well?

DIANE

Close, I'm a nurse practitioner. How'd you guess?

NICK

You're wearing your lab coat. *(gestures to her coat)*

DIANE

(Looks down, notices the coat) Oh! I forgot I had this on. *(Gets up to put it on the coat rack)* You know? This reminds me of a funny story.

NICK

Yeah, like what?

DIANE

Well, Jim and I went to dinner one time and I completely forgot I was wearing it. So we're there eating and Jim doesn't let me know I'm wearing it. He doesn't say a thing! I don't realize I'm wearing it until someone sitting at the next table comes over and asks,

“excuse me, could I get your opinion on something?” I’m a little uncertain about this but I say “of course”. This woman (*DIANE laughs a little*) goes on to talk about this mole she found on her breast!

NICK

What?

DIANE

Exactly, now –

(A door shutting can be heard, JIM walks in.)

Scene 2

DIANE

Well speak of the devil.

JIM

Hey, sorry I couldn’t be here sooner. *(Walks over to DIANE and gives her a kiss, sits down in the chair opposite her.)*

DIANE

It’s okay, just convincing Nick here we aren’t boring people.

NICK

I definitely don’t think that.

JIM

(Hops up and walks over to NICK) Oh my goodness, that’s right. You’re Nick. *(Shakes his hand)* Nice to meet you, I’m Jim.

NICK

Nice to meet you too sir.

JIM

(Walks back to his chair) Sorry, it's been a long day. My mind is all over the place.

NICK

It's okay.

DIANE

I was just telling him about the time I left my coat on when we went out for dinner.

JIM

(Looks confused at first then remembers) You mean your lab coat? *(DIANE nods, JIM gets a big smile and straightens up in his chair)* Oh this is perfect. Did you get to the part about the woman yet?

DIANE

Just got there.

JIM

Good, I'm not too late.

DIANE

(Sighs yet smiles a little too) Anyway, where was I? Oh yeah, so she tells me about this mole, right? Well I look at Jim, who's face is turning red, crimson red *(glances at JIM who is already giggling)* and he acts like he can't hear a thing. So I turn back towards the woman and I try to tell her I'm not a dermatologist and that she should get it examined by one. I can't get a single word in. Every time I try to say *something*, she talks over me, telling me all about her family's medical history, the pinky toe she lost in fifth grade, her son's terrible girlfriend, *(as an aside)* she was really awful by the way *(NICK laughs a*

little), the cat she found in a Chinese restaurant, and the inevitability of all life coming to an end.

JIM

She was quite philosophical.

DIANE

Ya think Jim?

JIM

(Cracking up) Well nothing says inevitability of life like lost toes, bad girlfriends, and Chinese restaurants.

DIANE

With cats.

JIM

Right, with cats.

NICK

That's insane.

JIM

Wait, that's not the best part!

DIANE

Oh no, it definitely isn't. After a while I just end up sitting there like this *(puts her elbow on her knee with face cupped in her hand)* until finally I am able to get her attention and I say to her, "ma'am, I'm sorry but I'm afraid that's not my specialty, you need a

dermatologist, so I recommend you make an appointment at St. Dominic with Dr. Keith Evans, he is fantastic and can help you”.

NICK

What happened then?

DIANE

She looks at me and says, “why didn’t you say so” and walks away. (*JIM can be heard snickering*) I’m still stunned that happened but I turn around, look at my food but I can’t eat. I look at this thing here (*points to JIM who is outright laughing now*) and he just looks at me, still laughing and says –

JIM

(*Laughing*) “You have your lab coat on.”

DIANE

Really?! I had no idea! (*Sarcastically*)

JIM

(*Gets up, still laughing, walks over to her and hugs her, DIANE doesn’t move*) I love you.

DIANE

(*Looking at NICK, points to JIM*) I could do better, couldn’t I?

(*NICK laughs*)

JIM

(*Sitting back down*) It was funny! Couldn’t help myself. (*to NICK*) I’m always being picked on. Life is so hard.

DIANE

Especially when it’s so inevitable how it ends.

JIM

(Chuckles) Yeah, that's true. At least you never had to deal with her again.

DIANE

Can't say the same about Keith. When he called me to talk about cats and Chinese food, I knew.

JIM

Oh that's beautiful. At least she took your advice.

NICK

That sounds insane.

DIANE

(Laughs) Welcome to the family!

(NICK's laugh turns a little more awkward until he's silent. DIANE and JIM realizes how awkward things have gotten and all is silent.)

JIM

Well I don't know about all of you but I'm ready for some food. Kinda in the mood for Chinese food, anyone else?

DIANE

(Getting up) Sure, as long as there's no cats there.

JIM

Ha, I'll check Yelp to make sure there aren't any.

DIANE

That's good. Don't want any hairballs in our General Tso's chicken. *(to Nick)* Wanna put your stuff in your room before we head on out?

NICK

Umm, yes ma'am, that sounds like a good idea. Where is it exactly?

DIANE

Oh, it is down the hall, last door to the left. If you don't like it then we can change it up if you want. New paint. Stuff like that.

NICK

I'm sure it'll be fine, thank you.

JIM

Do you have any school supplies?

NICK

No, sir.

DIANE

Really? Hmm, that doesn't seem right. They never got you school supplies while you were in the shelter?

NICK

I was never in a shelter long enough to start school. I'd be in one shelter one week, then another the next.

DIANE

Oh.

JIM

We can go shopping after dinner. No worries.

NICK

(Picks up his bags and starts walking to his room when he stops and turns to DIANE)

How much money should I bring?

DIANE

What for?

NICK

School supplies.

JIM

Why do you need money for school supplies?

NICK

I was told allowance money was for stuff like that. Anything I needed, really.

DIANE

Oh, did you have to use your allowance money on other things too? Like toothpaste, soap, laundry detergent, and stuff like that?

NICK

Yes, ma'am. It was supposed to help me learn about budgeting, I guess.

DIANE

Hmph. Well you don't have to worry about spending your money on stuff like that. It's our job to take care of you so we'll get that stuff. Okay?

NICK

Umm, okay. *(Quickly correcting himself)* Yes, ma'am. *(Walks away)*

(JIM gets up)

JIM

You see how nervous he looked?

DIANE

Yeah. *(Silent)* Well, we should probably get going.

JIM

Yeah, you're right.

(JIM starts walking and pulls his keys out of his pocket, DIANE stops behind him.)

DIANE

Do you want me to drive?

JIM

That's okay, I'm fine.

DIANE

You sure? It wouldn't be a problem. I coul –

JIM

I'm fine. Promise.

DIANE

(Resigned) Okay.

(Both walk offstage, NICK sneaks back on)

Scene 3

NICK

They're gone? *(To audience)* Okay, well, what do you think so far? Before you answer that question, let me point something out here, they're talking about buying my school supplies for me. For those not familiar with foster care, sometimes it becomes the child's

job to get the stuff themselves. In fact that's how it was throughout the entire summer I started in foster care. I was basically taking care of myself with the occasional visit by social workers, guardian ad litem, people whose job descriptions literally say, "for the best interests of the child" but never any real follow up on that. After a summer like that, it was hard to expect anything different, ya know? It was hard to trust anything as small as someone else getting me pencils or a backpack. But that's what they did. After dinner we went shopping and they didn't get the cheap stuff either. They let me pick what I wanted and when I pick a crappy \$10 backpack they said no and got me the \$50 one that would last for years. *(Starts tearing up)* Took a lot of self-control to hide how much that got to me. After an entire year of being let down, I put up some strong walls. However, I felt a piece of that chip away. But things were early, things could fall apart at any moment and I was ready for that. *(DIANE walks in at this point and sits down in a chair, book in hand and starts reading, doesn't notice NICK)* I kept thinking I might feel better after enough time passed but the truth is I only felt worse. Every time I thought things would be alright, I would think about what I did. Truth is, I didn't think I could ever be forgiven. *(Walking over to the couch, where notebook is sitting on the table in front of it)* I started writing again, something I didn't think I could do when I left the Mitchell's but that's about the only good thing happening. After about a month, I was worried it would all end soon. It was just one big time bomb and I was the fuse that would light it. At least, that's how it felt. *(Sits down and grabs the notebook and pen next to it. Starts writing something down.)*

(JIM walks in)

JIM

You okay?

NICK

Yes sir, sorry I was just brainstorming.

JIM

Oh okay, *(walks over to table where the notebook is)* for your writing?

NICK

Yes, sir.

JIM

Mind if I take a look?

NICK

Umm

DIANE

It's really good. Let him see it Nick, maybe he'll notice something I missed.

NICK

(Hesitantly) Umm okay. Here sir. *(Hands the notebook to JIM)*

JIM

Hmm.

NICK

I'm not really done with them yet. Plus they're not that good and...

JIM

(Laughs) Calm down, it's actually pretty good.

NICK

You think so?

JIM

Yeah, your characters need fleshing out more but you're doing really well.

NICK

Thanks, I really appreciate hearing that.

JIM

Of course.

DIANE

Have you thought about college? I think USM has a great creative writing program.

NICK

Kinda, haven't really thought too much about it to be honest.

JIM

Why not? Your grades are really good. I think you'd do well there.

NICK

Maybe, it's just there aren't many opportunities for kids like me.

JIM

What do you mean? Because you're gay?

NICK

(Flinching a little) Umm, no because I'm in foster care. The odds aren't really in my favor.

DIANE

Oh, well I'm sure we can find a way. If this is what you want to do, you should go to school for it. Plus college is COMPLETELY different experience than high school. You'll probably get to meet some LGBT students over there.

NICK

(Feeling uncomfortable) Actually, umm, I think I have something to tell you both.

JIM

Okay, everything alright?

NICK

Yeah, it's just I was thinking about asking out someone from my class.

DIANE

Oh really. We had no idea.

JIM

That's nice, what's his name?

NICK

It's not a he. It's a she. Her name is Kate and she's really nice. I heard she has a crush on me and I've been thinking of asking her out.

(DIANE and JIM are stunned)

DIANE

Oh. So you *aren't* attracted to guys? Or are you thinking you're bisexual?

NICK

I, umm, I think –

JIM

I mean we're both okay with whoever you date. Whatever you feel you are, gay, straight, bi, or whatever, we're here and supportive of you. We just want to be sure you ask her out for the right reasons.

NICK

Why wouldn't I?

DIANE

We just want to be sure no one gets hurt.

NICK

No one's getting hurt. I like her. I think she's cute and nice and smart and funny and I, I, I just like her. Is that such a big deal? This is something I have to do.

JIM

First off, calm down, no one's getting upset with you or anything like that. Second, it isn't a big deal. If you like her then great, we look forward to hearing about the date. We didn't mean to upset you. I'm sorry.

DIANE

I'm sorry too Nick. We just worry about you. If there's anything you want to tell us, you can. Okay?

NICK

Okay, thanks. I'm sorry too.

(NICK starts to leave the room when DIANE asks him a question)

DIANE

Are you sure you're alright?

NICK

(Turns back) I'm fine.

(NICK exits)

DIANE

There's something going on.

JIM

Just give him some space. He'll come to us when he's ready.

DIANE

Easier said than done.

JIM

I know it's hard but –

DIANE

Actually Jim, you don't know.

JIM

Okay, what does that mean?

DIANE

(Sighs) He's a lot like you, you noticed? He keeps everything bottled up inside and if we aren't careful he'll end up exploding. Remember how you did the same thing? How it almost got you *killed*? I still worry to this day I might get a call saying you... you were...

JIM

(Walks over to her) You don't have to worry about me. I'm fine.

DIANE

That's exactly what Nick said.

(DIANE gets up and exits)

Scene 4

(JIM starts pacing around the room.)

JIM

Hey Nick!

NICK

(From offstage) Yes sir!

JIM

Could you come here for a minute?

(Footsteps can be heard, NICK enters)

NICK

Yes sir?

JIM

Hey, I just thought we should talk some more. Have a minute?

NICK

Umm, yes sir.

JIM

I didn't want to push but something was on my mind. Earlier you said, "this was something you had to do", what did you mean by that?

NICK

It's just something I have to do.

JIM

But why? Is it because you like her or is there something else?

NICK

I, uh, I –

JIM

It's okay. No one's in trouble. I'm just curious.

NICK

(Takes a breath) I guess I'm just realizing I need to think realistically.

JIM

(Confused) Okay, what does *that* mean?

NICK

It means I know I need to start thinking about my future. I need to be a man and realize that this is what being a man means.

JIM

Asking girls out?

NICK

Not just that but getting married, starting a family, providing for my family, being strong for my family, stuff like that.

JIM

What made you think this?

NICK

It's just something I've been thinking for a long time.

JIM

Hmm, okay. *(Silent for a moment)* Let me tell you a story.

NICK

Okay, should I be worried?

JIM

No, not anymore at least. You see, when I was 25, everything was going alright. I was almost finished getting my masters, me and Diane were married, we just had Noah, our son, and I was already set for an internship. I would work and Diane would finish her masters, everything was good. *(Takes a breath)* Then, one night, I woke up with the worst pain imaginable in my groin. It felt like someone was repeatedly using a sledgehammer right on my balls.

(NICK involuntarily crosses his legs and makes a disgusted sound)

JIM

I know right, it was terrible! So Diane gets me to the emergency room and it's about eleven-thirty but they don't get us in until around five that morning. They run some tests and by then it was too late. Testicular torsion. Heard of it?

NICK

No, what is it?

JIM

It's where a testicle basically twists on itself and cuts off circulation.

NICK

Oh my God! I'm sorry if this is too direct, but what's the point of this story?

JIM

(Laughs) Don't worry, almost there. Anyway, it's something that has to be found within the first few hours otherwise the testicle will die. Well, they were too late with mine. So instead of doing surgery to fix it, they had to remove it.

NICK

Oh man.

JIM

Yep, it was really hard after that. The physical recover wasn't too bad but I started feeling really depressed. It was like a part of what made me a man was gone, you know? Like I wasn't capable of taking care of my family anymore. It got harder and harder for me to get out of bed. *(DIANE quietly comes in and stands on the corner of the room, they don't notice her)* Most days, honestly, I just wanted to give up. Then one day, I was driving Noah back from daycare and I saw a deer ahead. It was almost like I just blacked out and all I could think about was how nice it would be to finally rest. Everything else seemed to just, go away. Then I heard Noah crying. I woke up and stopped the car right before we could hit the deer.

NICK

Wow. I can't believe that.

JIM

I told Diane about it and she demanded for me to see someone. I knew she was right. I wanted to be a man but I forgot how to be a good person. Could have killed myself and my son that day. Pretty much lost her trust too. To this day she still worries about me.

Can't say I blame her. *(Looks at NICK)* Forget about being a man Nick. Being a good person is what matters. Whatever you think you have to do, take a long hard look at yourself and ask, "will this make me happy?" "will this make me a better person?" Okay?

NICK

(Thoughtfully) Okay, I will.

DIANE

(Moves forward) If it's any consolation, I think you are an amazing person, husband, father, and so much more. *(She puts her hand on his shoulder)*

(JIM just smiles and kisses her hand)

JIM

That's another thing Nick, when you do start dating someone, make sure that person is someone you can count on. I wouldn't be who I am without her.

DIANE

And I wouldn't be who I am without you. *(To Nick)* You build each other up. That's what's important. When you do that, you know you've found someone to spend life with. Got it?

NICK

(Smiling slightly) Got it.

JIM

(Getting up) Well, I don't know about you two but I think I'm getting hungry. I'll cook.

DIANE

Like you do every night.

JIM

And I have not heard you complain once.

DIANE

What can I say, you're a good cook. By the way Nick, that's another tip, find a chef!

JIM

I'm thinking spaghetti. Sounds good? *(Everyone nods)* Okay, I'll go get it started!

(JIM exits)

DIANE

(Looks at NICK) Feeling alright?

NICK

Yeah, I'm feeling better. Thanks.

(DIANE smiles and exits)

Scene 5

NICK

(Gets up and addresses the audience) It was weird. Getting relationship advice that didn't involve the words "Hell" and "disgusting" in the same sentence. Hearing what he said, I don't know, it made me feel the best I've felt in a long time. In case you were wondering, I didn't ask Kate out. Even if I did like her she was too much of a diva for my tastes and you know, for a gay man to say that she must be bad. No, I decided that wasn't for me. I still wasn't comfortable saying "I'm gay" but I was moving in the right direction. *(JIM walks in and sits in his chair)* There was just, some other stuff in the way. Stuff I tried not to deal with. But then Noah calls and it's pretty unavoidable after that. Him and his wife

live in New York City and are having a baby. We don't know the name yet so we're hoping it's any day now.

JIM

How was school Nick?

NICK

It was alright. Mrs. Myers gave us a pop quiz today.

JIM

Another one? That's the third one this week.

NICK

Yeah she sa –

(A phone can be heard from offstage, DIANE can be heard)

DIANE

Hello? Oh hi Noah, how are you doing? You'd like to FaceTime? Sure, I think we're all open for that. Let me check with the others. *(DIANE enters)* Hey, Noah called and was wondering if we'd like to FaceTime. You both fine with that?

JIM

Sure, I'm always open to a good FaceTime session.

NOAH

Yeah, sounds like fun.

DIANE

(On the phone, she goes to the couch) Okay Noah, I'm gonna switch you over to FaceTime. *(She holds the phone front of their faces so they can see him)* Hey Noah, how are you?

NOAH

Hey mom, we're doing fine. Is everyone there?

DIANE

(Everyone moves around the couch, DIANE talks to the phone) Everyone is here, can you see us?

NOAH

(From phone) Yeah mom, we can see you. We can hear you too.

DIANE

Awesome!

JIM

Hey Noah, how's everything going?

NOAH

Hey dad, everything is going well. Beth is having some dental issues so she can't really speak right now.

DIANE

Agh, what's wrong?

NOAH

Nothing to be worried about, had some cavities that needed taking care of. Her mouth is still numb. What? I think she said she's happy to see you guys.

DIANE

We're happy to see you too Beth, hope you feel better soon.

NOAH

I'll take that to mean she said thank you.

(Everyone laughs)

NICK

Hey Noah.

NOAH

Hey Nick, how's everything going? School going well?

NICK

It's alright, Mrs. Myers is giving me a run for my money though.

NOAH

Darn that Mrs. Myers. I remember her when I was in school. She was pretty scary. Still doing pop quizzes?

NICK

Yeah, she likes torturing us. That's for sure. How about you? How's the baby doing?

NOAH

So far so good, two and half more months to go but let's ask him. I'm sure his perspective is a little different from ours. How are you doing in there? About ready to come out? Can't wait to meet Mimi, Grampy, and Uncle Nick, huh? Something tells me he's ready to come out. And I think Beth is ready for him to come out too.

(Laughs)

DIANE

What about the name? Have you both decided on one yet?

NOAH

Yes, actually, it was why we called. We finally have a name for the baby. Can we get a drumroll please?

(JIM and NICK start doing drumrolls on the table)

NOAH

In a couple months you will meet baby Samuel Christopher Pearson! Baby Sam for short.

(NICK and JIM stop the drumroll, DIANE and JIM look ecstatic, NICK looks conflicted)

DIANE

I love it!

JIM

I do too, how'd you come up with the name?

NOAH

A mixture of things. Beth's grandmother was Samantha and grampy's name is Christopher so it just sorta fell together.

JIM

That is really nice. We can't wait to meet him!

DIANE

I know! Just a couple more months. So exciting. But it looks like you both are pretty tired so we should go ahead and let you go.

NOAH

Okay *(yawns)*, sounds like a good idea. Talk to you guys later. We love –

DIANE

Noah? I think we got disconnected. Oh well, they were going to rest anyway. (*Her phone goes off*) Yep, he sent a message. “Got disconnected. Wifi doesn’t like us. Love you guys!” (*Starts texting back*) “Who does wifi love? We love you *three* too!”

JIM

That was a nice chat.

DIANE

It was, wasn’t it?

NICK

Yeah.

JIM

You okay Nick?

NICK

Yeah, I’m okay. It was just the first time I was called Uncle Nick.

DIANE

Well that’s what you are. You’re part of the family.

NICK

Yeah, I guess so.

JIM

Nick, it’s okay. Whatever is going on you can tell us.

NICK

It’s just, it’s hard to really trust that. I want to, I really want to trust that but...

DIANE

And you can. Nick, I promise no matter what happens you will always be family.

NICK

Can you both just be honest with me for once?! I've heard this stuff before okay! What if DHS takes me away? Will you even care?! Will I still be Uncle Nick then?

JIM

Hey, look at me. That would never happen. Of course you'll be "Uncle Nick". No matter what you'll always have a place here.

NICK

I want to trust that so much but I just don't know how. I thought I could trust my family but what they did... it made it impossible for me to trust that. (*Stands up and walks away, turns towards them*) You know what they did? My parents and brother were gone one night so I brought a guy over to hang out with. We were kissing and I didn't hear my parents come in the door. My dad started yelling, mom was crying, and finally they sat me down and gave me a "talk". Remember all that stuff the Mitchell's said to me? They said the exact same stuff! Except, when they asked me if I was sure I was gay I said no. So they put me in "therapy" and the stuff they did. They told me I was gay because I was close to my mother but had a distant relationship with my father. That the only way to get better was to learn how to be "manly" and start doing things that only men would do. Stop writing and start doing football or some other manly sport. Feeling depressed? Push it away cause real men don't worry about that! Every session he would remind me I would go to Hell if I gave in to my "homosexual demons" and after every session I

fantasized of jumping off the bridge I walked past every day to get to the meeting. Once I realized it wasn't working I begged my parents not to make me go anymore or I would kill myself.

JIM

Nick, we had no idea –

NICK

(Cutting him off) That's not even the worst part of it. You have no idea what I did. If you did you wouldn't be saying all this stuff. You'd want me gone too cause I'm just a selfish coward.

DIANE

Nick, What are you –

NICK

I begged them not to take me back there but they didn't listen, so you know what I did? I ran! I just left because I couldn't take it anymore. I went to that bridge. And I... I couldn't do it. I kept thinking about Sam. My brother was my world. And our dad, he hit us a lot. One time he grabbed what was basically a branch and threatened to hit Sam with it. I stood up to him and he hit me with it instead right on the back of the knee. Could barely walk for a month. I couldn't leave Sam alone with that. So I went back home and told them I would do it but it was too late. They told me to leave and never come back. DHS came that morning and got me. I left my brother with that because I was weak! He's only eleven and I have no idea what is happening to him. I wake up worrying if he's finally been beaten to death because I wasn't there to take the punishment. It's my fault.

JIM

Nick, that's not your fault.

NICK

It is! What you don't understand, is that is what family is like for me. Fuck, I can't see my own brother anymore! *(Punches table)* So, honestly, I'd rather you go ahead and get it over with and call DHS. It'll happen sooner or later so it might as well be now. Yes, I'm angry but I'm also tired. I'm tired of waiting for the next shoe to drop. I'm tired of waiting for that social worker to show up in the drive way. I'm tired of, of... I'm just tired. *(Sits in the chair behind him)*

(All is silent for a moment, the DIANE and JIM walk over to NICK)

DIANE

Nick, I, we are so sorry about all of that. You've been through so much and we can't make that go away but we can promise you, and we don't care how many times we have to remind you, but we promise to always be there for you. And you are not a coward for doing what you did. You didn't leave your brother.

JIM

That's right. You haven't been here long but you are a part of the family. Not only that, you're someone I know we can count on. You are one of the bravest people I have ever met. Your father is the one who should be ashamed. Having you as a son would a privilege. We consider you like our own son. You *are* our son. That's not ever going to change. Sure, we'll do things that get you mad at us and you'll do things that get us mad at you but us loving you will never change.

NICK

What about when I age out of DHS?

DIANE

Fuck DHS. We will do for you what we've done for every birthday in this household and that is celebrating it. That's what we'll do when you turn 18, 19, 20, and so on. If they try telling us you need to leave when you turn 18 then they will have to deal with us.

Because you will always have a place here. I noticed college pamphlets on the computer desk, and I'm so happy you're looking in to that. But remember, you will always have a place to sleep here.

NICK

But, my brother –

DIANE

We'll get involved. We'll do everything in our power to help. He's your brother and you shouldn't have to go through this alone. You won't have to go through this alone.

NICK

Do you think he'd forgive me?

DIANE

Nick, there's nothing to forgive.

NICK

What if –

JIM

No more "what ifs". We don't know what will happen. We don't know what could happen next month, next year, or even next decade. So we can drive ourselves crazy with "what ifs" all day. However, what we can say is certain is that you are our son. No matter how much time passes that will *never* change.

DIANE

So try to believe that. I know it's hard, especially after everything you've been through but you have to try, okay?

NICK

Okay.

JIM

Also, if you ever feel like something is bothering you, let us know. If you feel depressed or alone or scared or anything, we'll be there. We want you to be happy and we want you to find someone who makes you happy. I promise, on your wedding day, if you decide you want to get married, we will be up there smiling and crying along with all the other people who will be there. Cause I'm positive you'll meet someone who you'll get to share crazy dinners with.

NICK

(Laughs) That's nice except it isn't really legal for me –

JIM

It's coming, trust me.

(Everyone laughs)

NICK

(Smile drops) What about Sam?

DIANE

Like I said, we'll fight. We won't stop until he's somewhere safe.

NICK

(Smiling) Okay, thanks.

(NICK stands up and gives each of them a hug)

DIANE

I should go send Marie an email about this.

JIM

Yeah, I have some friends at DHS who might know what to do as well. I'll give them a call. *(Looks at NICK)* You okay Nick?

NICK

(Laughs) Yeah, I think I will be. Just need a moment.

DIANE

Sure, call us if you need anything.

NICK

Will do.

(DIANE hugs NICK again)

DIANE

Thanks for telling us. We love you.

NICK

I love you guys too.

(JIM hugs NICK again)

JIM

Let us know if you need anything. Love you.

NICK

Love you too.

(DIANE and JIM exit)

NICK

(To audience) Now I won't say everything got immediately better after that conversation, but it really helped. They told me I was part of the family, and every day since then they did things that proved it. They called Marie the next day and told her everything about Sam. She looked into it but there wasn't much she could do. We spent forever trying to get people to listen to us until finally someone told us he was already in foster care. Turns out he went in a month after I did cause our dad went to jail for some reason, I honestly didn't care what, and our mom couldn't take care of him. By the time we found out, Sam was in another state, and they wouldn't tell us where. *(Takes a pause)* I felt so hopeless knowing that, but, what could I do? Well, I'll tell you what I did. I kept searching. Couldn't give up. Not now at least. Besides, for the first time in a long time, I felt like living again. A couple months after that conversation the baby was born and we all flew out to see them and I got to meet my first nephew, Sam. They were right though, there were times when they got mad with me and I got mad at them. At first I was afraid I would wake up the next day to find my stuff in garbage bags with a social worker waiting for me. I even told Diane this and she said that would never happen but, if it did, and I quote, "we would at least get you some good luggage before sending you off". And they did get me some good luggage, when I got in to college. After working my ass off I finally got a good scholarship to study creative writing at New York University. I got a good part-time job, and since I had family in the area, I got to stay with them, I guess the free babysitting thing really sat well with them. Things have been going really well, now, I'm in my senior year. I met a good guy, Trevor, and things are going strong between the

two of us. It took a while but one day I was able to look in the mirror and say “I’m gay” and feel nothing but pride. Some people make coming seem like a small thing, it’s not, even if the people you come out to are okay with it. Coming out is like the only real control people like me have over anything, for that to be taken away, that’s difficult. But now, that part is over and done. (*Movement is seen in the background as DIANE and JIM start setting things up for Christmas*) And as you can see, I’m still going back home every now and then. Jim retired this year and started working on his own book. Diane was awarded an award for best nurse practitioner in the state and all of us are getting ready for Christmas. (*Takes a pause*) I still think about Sam, my brother Sam, not nephew Sam, every day. I’ve been looking for a long time but still haven’t found him. I was able to find out he got adopted, but I don’t know the name of the family, so he most likely changed his name. I just hope he’s happy. Honestly, I have a feeling he is. I mean, it’s better than thinking he’s somewhere bad. No, I believe he’s alright and having a good Christmas. However, there’s still our Christmas I need to worry about. I’m really excited cause Trevor is flying down to spend Christmas with us. His plane landed a little while ago and I was gonna pick him up but Noah and Beth decided they wanted a “nice drive”, in other words, get Sam out of the house so we can wrap presents without him noticing. Just got a text that they’re on their way back so we’re setting up for –

DIANE

Nick, who are you talking to?

NICK

No one, just practicing a presentation I have to give.

JIM

Oh yeah, for that foster care conference coming up?

NICK

Yeah, they wanted me to speak about being gay in foster care.

DIANE

Well it sounds really nice.

NICK

Thanks, I hope they feel the same way.

JIM

Don't worry, you've done this stuff a million times before.

NICK

Doesn't make it any less terrifying.

DIANE

You know what's really terrifying? An unset table. (*Mocks terror*) Could you set the table please?

NICK

Really funny, you're a master comic.

JIM

Don't forget to put the fork –

NICK

The fork on the left. Don't worry, I got it. Man, you set the table wrong one –

JIM

Two –

DIANE

Four –

NICK

Time and everyone holds it against you.

(House phone starts ringing)

DIANE

(Sighs) You know Jim I really think we should consider getting rid of the house phone.

JIM

Why?

DIANE

The only people who call are telemarketers. It's really annoying. *(Walks over to the phone and answers it)* Hello?

JIM

(DIANE chattering in the back can be heard) Got the fork on the wrong side.

DIANE

Uh, Nick?

NICK

Uh huh.

DIANE

I think you might want to take this.

NICK

(Putting down the silverware; to JIM) I think I put it on the wrong side. *(To DIANE)*

Who is it?

DIANE

Sam.

NICK

(Walking over to the phone) Sam? Okay, why is he calling on this phone?

DIANE

(Handing the phone to him) No, your brother Sam.

(NICK stands there, DIANE pats him on the shoulder and walks over to JIM. Chattering can be heard between DIANE and JIM. Then comes to a complete stop as NICK brings the phone to his ear. A single light is on NICK)

NICK

Hello?

(NICK's face lights up as the lights dim until it is completely dark)

The End

Are You Sure?:
Experiences of a Gay Foster Youth

A Play in Two Acts

By Zachary Clein

(Draft #3)

Act I

SETTING

Mitchell residence, rural town in Mississippi.

TIME

Summer of 2011.

Act II

SETTING

Pearson residence, suburban area in Mississippi.

TIME

Summer/Fall of 2011 to Christmas of 2018

Characters (In Order of Appearance):

Social Worker: a person of unknown age who is Nick's social worker, the social workers at the top of both acts are different people. The first social worker is male, the second is female.

Lisa Mitchell: 47 year old foster mother to Nick, a warm and sassy woman who firmly believes they can do what's best for Nick. Her hope is having Nick around can mend the pain within her family. There's a sadness buried beneath her kind exterior.

Mike Mitchell: 48 year old foster father to Nick, an aggressive yet stoic man who is against the idea of having Nick as a foster son. He has cut himself off emotionally from the rest of his family and is worried what might happen with Nick around.

Nick: 15/22 year old man from foster care, he must be played as a dual role because his younger and older personas are vastly different from each other. His younger self is timid, afraid, and guilt ridden. At this point he has not fully come out to anyone yet but that is not the main drive for his pain. His older self is someone who has already dealt with these emotions and exudes a sense of maturity/understanding his younger self does not have yet.

Dylan Mitchell: 17 year old son of Lisa and Mike, a rebellious young man who takes a lot after his father. He tends to get himself into trouble causing his parents constant pain.

There's a sadness and anger about him he tries to bury.

Diane Pearson: 59 year old foster mother of Nick, a warm yet firm progressive woman who works in researching HIV. She hopes she (and her husband) can give Nick the support he needs.

Jim Pearson: 60 year old foster father of Nick, he is a very kind man with fairly progressive views on certain topics. Deals a lot with depression but takes antidepressants to help himself. He hopes he (and his wife) can give Nick the support he needs.

Walker: 15/22 year old young man who is Nick's love interest. His main concern in the beginning is to be there for Nick and help him through his tough time adjusting to life with the Pearsons. Eventually, he becomes a lot more.

(The actors who play one family play the next set of characters. For example, Lisa/Diane, Mike/Jim, and Dylan/Walker are played by the same actors.)

ACT I

Scene 1

(Lights are down, two figures can be seen sitting at a table, inaudible screaming can be heard from offstage. Culminates in NICK yelling "NO PLEASE" then silence. Lights come on but are not enough, everything is still covered in shadow. We find ourselves in a living room however, something is off. There is a strange aura, almost like we are in a dream or memory. There's a couch, the imprints from years of use can be clearly seen. In front of it is a worn coffee table. A bookshelf stands between the dining area and the living room. On it are few books, in fact, the entire top row is empty aside from one book: a Bible with the initials B.M. on it and a picture frame turned upside down right next to it. On the table where the two figures are, dipping tobacco and a bottle for spitting it into can be seen in front of the male figure. Finally, next to the couch, is a small table with a landline phone on top of it, the phone glimmers in comparison to everything else in the room. Starts ringing. Continues ringing until the sound of someone answering can be heard, a man's voice is on the other end. He speaks in a dull, almost robotic way.)

Social Worker

Hello Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell, this is Stephen from DHS, I just wanted to let you know I'll be dropping Nick off very soon. He has everything he needs. If you have any questions about taking him to counseling or other wants feel free to contact me. I'm here to help after all.

(Phone cuts. The dial tone is the only noise onstage, then silence. Footsteps can be heard from offstage, NICK enters from stage-right, lights come on all the way. He is dressed in a nice suit, like he's going for a job interview. NICK stands there taking it all in. Takes a deep breath then

walks to the couch and sits down. Continues looking around then notices the audience, rubs his hands together almost as if he's anticipating something.)

NICK

(Sighs) You know, memory is a funny thing. One second something is fact, the next it's fiction. You have no idea what trick your mind will play on you. Hi, I'm Nick and this is... a place I stayed at one time. The two sitting in the chairs were my first foster parents. You'll hear all about them soon but I should probably give you a bit of a disclaimer first. I can't guarantee everything you'll see today will be fact, I can't promise everything actually happened, however, everything you're about to see is true. *(Gets up and walks over to the bookshelf, scoffs)* Because today I'm going to tell you my story, it's a story that took place over several years and is still going on in fact, but for the sake of today's show I've condensed it to within a few months, man I wish it was only a few months. Life would've been a lot easier if that were the case. *(Sounds of a car pulling up can be heard, MIKE and LISA start moving)* Well, I guess that's my cue. *(Starts undressing his suit, revealing gym shorts and a plain white t-shirt underneath, while undressing he continues speaking)* The year is 2011, it's near the end of summer and we find ourselves in rural Mississippi. We pull up to a chicken farm with chicken houses that stretched all across the area. Right in front of the house is a "Michele Bachmann for President" sign, on the door a Cross. Everything is sweet and orderly, like a scene from an episode of *Lassie*. Now, I think we're about ready to start, what am I missing? *(Looks down and realizes he doesn't have tennis shoes. He starts looking around when he sees a garbage bag with clothes in it thrown his way.)* Thanks! *(Takes shoes out of the bag and puts his suit in there instead, gets in position with bag in hand)* Anything else? *(Sound of a screen door can be heard opening.)* Oh yeah, I'm also gay. *(Door slams shut, both MIKE and LISA immediately look at NICK, who is completely different from the*

young man we just saw. This NICK is timid and frankly, terrified.) Hi, umm, sorry I was told to come on in. I'm Nick.

LISA

(Getting up from her chair) Oh hi there, it's nice to meet you. I'm Lisa. *(Extends hand)*

NICK

Nice to meet you too. *(Shakes her hand)*

LISA

(Awkwardly) So, where is your social worker?

NICK

Oh, umm in the car.

MIKE

(Sighs) I'll be back.

LISA

Lord have mercy Mike, could you not make a scene today?

MIKE

Nope. *(Walks out. Sound of a screen door opening and closing.)*

LISA

(Muttering) That man. *(To NICK)* Sorry about that, that's my husband, Mike. He may seem intimidating but trust me, he's a big softy! *(Chuckles, NICK gives a weak chuckle in return. Both stand around awkwardly until LISA breaks the silence.)* Well how bout you sit down. I'm sure it's been a long day. *(Gestures to the couch where she sits. NICK puts his bag down next to the couch and sits next to LISA)* Is that all your stuff?

NICK

It's, umm, yeah. That's all of it.

LISA

(With a knowing smile) Really? That's everything you own?

NICK

Well, maybe not everything but... enough.

LISA

What's "enough" exactly?

NICK

I got some clothes and one my favorite book.

LISA

You like to read? What book is it? *(Almost excitedly pulls out a copy of Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix, LISA's face drops)* Harry Potter? *(NICK smiles)* Oh.

NICK

The first one is my favorite.

LISA

You like stuff about wizards and witches?

NICK

I guess, it really depends on the story. *(Noticing the concerned look on her face)* Is something wrong?

LISA

Oh no, it's just, we don't really read stuff about magic here. Kinda goes against our beliefs.

NICK

(Downhearted) Oh. I'm sorry I –

LISA

No, it's fine. You didn't know. *(Hands him back the book)* If you like it then you can read it. Just keep it in your room. Okay?

NICK

Okay. *(Puts book back in his bag. Pauses)* To be honest, the magic isn't really why I like it. It was just nice having someone to relate I guess. Someone to take my mind off things. *(Trails off and gets nervous, he just opened up a little and it terrifies him)*

LISA

(Grabs his hands in a comforting way) Nick, it's okay. No matter what you've been through I promise, you're safe here.

(Before NICK could say something the screen door opens again and MIKE comes)

MIKE

Damn social workers! *(Walks over to his chair and sits down, spits some tobacco into the bottle)*

LISA

(Annoyed) What now? Don't tell me you went and stirred something.

MIKE

That social worker "forgot" the paperwork we had to sign then went and said we'd have to drive all the way to Jackson to get it!

LISA

They can't mail the stuff? Or fax it?

MIKE

(Shaking his head in an exaggerated fashion) Nope, not according to – *(Sounds of a car driving away, MIKE pauses waiting for it to end then points in the car's direction)* that asshole.

LISA

(Walking over to him) Well we can figure the paperwork out later. Right now let's help Nick get settled. You haven't even introduced yourself yet.

MIKE

Oh right, hi Nick. I'm Mike, nice to meet ya.

NICK

Nice to meet you too.

MIKE

(Upset) Sir.

NICK

(Confused) Sorry?

MIKE

You forgot the sir. It's "nice to meet you, *sir*". Show respect to your elders. That means saying "no sir", "yes sir", "no ma'am", "yes ma'am", get it?

NICK

(Clearly intimidated) Yes. *(MIKE gives him a scowl)* Yes sir!

MIKE

That's better. *(Looks at LISA who has her face in her hands)* You okay?

LISA

I'm fine.

MIKE

Okay, if you say so.

LISA

Nick, are you hungry? Have you had dinner yet?

NICK

Oh, we ate on the way. *(MIKE looks at him)* Ma'am.

LISA

(Looks at MIKE and back at NICK again, gives a forced smile) Okay, sounds good. Well then how about you go set your stuff in your room. It's the first room to the left.

NICK

Yes ma'am.

(Picks up his bag and starts walking to the other side of the room. Once he passes the dining room table MIKE calls to him)

MIKE

Hey Nick.

NICK

Yes sir?

MIKE

Before you do that, come here. *(NICK walks over and sits in the seat next to MIKE)* We should talk about the rules real quick before you get all settled in.

LISA

Oh come on Mike, do we really have to do that now? He just got in and –

(MIKE puts his hand up as a way to silence her)

MIKE

Okay, first things first, food. We don't typically allow eating outside of mealtimes, so that means no snacking between breakfast, lunch or dinner. Got it?

NICK

Yes sir.

MIKE

Good, next, school's about to start so you should know we only expect the best from people who stay in our house. That means if you ever get a "C" then we will take away TV privileges, fun reading, actually pretty much anything until that grade comes up, understand?

NICK

Yes sir.

MIKE

Good, now, we have younger nieces come over every now and then so make sure to stay away from them.

NICK

(Confused) Why? (Noticing the look on MIKE's face) sir.

MIKE

(Nodding his head in approval) Well this is a small community and people tend to talk.

NICK

About –

LISA

You'll be surprised what people will say.

MIKE

So just stay away from them, okay?

NICK

Yes sir.

MIKE

Now, we have a phone right there (*gestures to telephone*). You are welcome to use it but we have to be present whenever you talk on it and we have to approve who you speak to. Understood?

NICK

Yes sir.

MIKE

Good, (*to LISA*) I think that's everything. Am I missin' somethin'?

LISA

(*Deflated*) Church.

MIKE

Oh yeah, we go to church every Sunday mornin' and every Wednesday night. We expect you to be completely involved as well. Understood?

NICK

Yes sir. (*A look of concern on his face*)

MIKE

You okay?

NICK

Umm, yes sir it's just, what type of church is it?

(*LISA is about to say something but MIKE cuts her off*)

MIKE

Southern Baptist, why?

NICK

Oh no reason, sir. Just curious.

(Before MIKE could say something the door can be heard opening, in comes their son DYLAN)

DYLAN

Hey mama, I'm home. *(Notices NICK, a scowl spreads across his face)*

MIKE

(Voice has a passive aggressive tone) Hey Dylan, happy you could make it. Your friends doin' alright?

DYLAN

(Looking down while walking to the fridge, his reply is very curt) Yes sir.

LISA

(Clearly angry but holding it back) You're late. You said you'd be back two hours ago.

DYLAN

Got held up.

LISA

(To NICK) This is Dylan, our son. *(To DYLAN)* This is Nick, he's gonna be staying with us for a while.

DYLAN

(Keeping his gaze averted) Okay.

LISA

(Walking over to DYLAN) It wouldn't kill you to be polite.

DYLAN

Mama I –

MIKE

Are you talkin' back to your mama?

DYLAN

(Lowering his gaze) No sir.

MIKE

Then you heard her. Be polite.

DYLAN

(Makes eye contact with NICK) Hey there. Nice to meet ya.

(NICK gives a little wave. Awkward silence)

LISA

Well, Nick, maybe you should take your stuff to your room now. Get unpacked, rest up, I'm sure it's been a long day. Okay?

NICK

Okay. *(Looks at MIKE)* Ma'am.

(NICK grabs his trash bag and exits stage left.)

MIKE

(To DYLAN) You better be nice to that boy. We don't want any trouble, understand?

DYLAN

Yes sir. (*Walks off stage left*)

(*MIKE and LISA are alone. LISA puts her hand to head to her head.*)

MIKE

It'll be fine. Just the first day, that's all.

LISA

I don't know Mike, the way you were acting didn't feel like "first day" to me. (*Walks to living room area*)

MIKE

(*Gets up*) What's that supposed to mean?

LISA

(*Turns and faces MIKE*) It means you have some nerve to tell Dylan to be nice to him when you can barely do it yourself. What's the big deal? Why are you acting like more of a jackass than usual?

MIKE

(*Getting closer to her*) I told ya I didn't want to bring some other kid into the house. This was all your doin'.

LISA

We agreed this would be the best thing –

MIKE

No, that's what *you* said! I never once agreed to that.

LISA

Then why did you agree to foster him? Hmm? Why Mike?!

MIKE

Because yo – never mind. It doesn't matter.

LISA

(Confused) Oh it does. You just aren't willing to say.

MIKE

(Walks away) Whatever you say Lisa. That's what I'll do.

LISA

(Sighs) If you don't wanna talk about it then fine, but it's too late to have second thoughts considering he's already unpacking so you better learn to get along with him!

MIKE

(Resigned) Okay, I'll do my best. *(Exits stage left)*

(LISA stands there for a second, takes a deep breath then starts heading off for bed when she notices the upside down picture on the bookshelf, for a brief moment she considers sitting it upright but changes her mind at the last second and exits stage left. All is silent for a moment then NICK sneaks onstage. He stealthily goes to the telephone and calls someone, the phone rings multiple times as he looks around for anyone who might walk in on him, the phone answers.)

NICK

(Whispering) Hello? Sam? Is that you? – Hey it's me – Sorry, I can barely hear you – Yeah I have to whisper, everyone else is asleep. – There's a few people here. It's a family. A mom, dad, and their son. – No I'm okay. They've been treating me alright. How bout you? Are you okay? – Oh no, I'm so sorry. I wish I could be there. – I don't know when I'll be back. Soon though. I'm sure I'll be back soon. – I miss you too. But listen I should probably go. I don't wanna wake

anyone up. I'll talk to you soon though, okay? – Love you too, goodnight. (*Hangs up the phone, takes a moment to catch his breath, he looks worried, looks around again then quickly exits*)

Scene 2

(*Lights brighten up to indicate it's morning, LISA groggily walks on stage in a nightgown. She goes to the kitchen to get herself some coffee. MIKE walks in from outside. He is covered in dirt and makes more noise than meaning to, he has a wrapped up newspaper in hand, he puts it on the table.*)

LISA

Geez, wake up the whole house while you're at it.

MIKE

Sorry.

LISA

What are doing up this early anyway? It's 6:40 in the morning.

MIKE

(*Scoffs*) Been up earlier than that. Surprised you didn't hear the alarm go off. One of the feeders in the chicken house stopped working around four.

LISA

How bad is it?

MIKE

It's good now. Nothin' to worry about.

LISA

(Sits down) Okay, that's nice to hear. *(Smells him)* I think you need to take a shower. Smells like something crawled up you and died.

MIKE

Ehh, I thought about it. But I'm gonna be goin' out again soon so I don't see the point. Especially since Dylan left.

LISA

(Shocked) He did what?!

MIKE

I saw him leaving as I was coming back from the chicken houses. I tried calling him but he ignored me. Boy has some balls. You didn't see him?

LISA

(Sighs) No, the boy must've left before I got up. What are we gonna do with him? He just keeps getting into trouble and disobeying us. I don't know what else to do!

MIKE

Trust me, I know. Sooner or later though, he'll man up and do what's best. I'm sure he will.

LISA

And what if he doesn't?

MIKE

Then he'll learn how to deal with consequences like man.

(Silence)

LISA

What do you think of Nick?

MIKE

Don't have much of an opinion yet. He's only been here a few days. Seems nice.

LISA

He does. He's very gentle.

MIKE

"Fragile" works better if you ask me.

LISA

What do you expect? He was taken from his family. How would you feel if it was you?

MIKE

I'd have probably been a lot happier for it.

LISA

(Walks over to MIKE) I'm sorry, I didn't mean to –

MIKE

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

LISA

It's just... Nick is different from you. He doesn't have the thick skin you have and it seems like you're harping on him every second. I just wish you'd give him a break.

MIKE

(Sighs) I'm sorry Lisa, I'm tryin', I just have a bad feelin'.

LISA

Why? *(MIKE is clearly uncomfortable with the question, LISA gets annoyed.)* Mike, if you're gonna say stuff like that then you need to tell me what's going on.

MIKE

(Sighs and grabs LISA's hands) It's just, don't you think it's a little too soon, ya know, to bring another boy in the house?

LISA

(Slowly pulling her hands away) Too soon?

MIKE

Ya know, since Ben –

LISA

(Gets up and walks away) Oh my goodness, are you really making this about Ben?

MIKE

(Gets up) Have mercy woman, I'm not making this about Ben. I'm just worried you're doing this for the wrong reasons!

LISA

Wrong reasons?!?! I'm trying to help Nick! I have no idea what other "reasons" you might have in mind.

(At this NICK can be seen coming back on to stage, LISA and MIKE have not seen him yet)

MIKE

Lisa, you come to me, say you want to foster again even though I haven't heard you mention it once in years, and it just so happens to be on –

LISA

You better watch yourself Mike Mitchell before you say what I think you're about to say. So think long and hard about it cause –

(Sound of a creaking board goes off giving NICK's position away. MIKE and LISA look his way)

LISA

(Demeanor changes) Oh, morning there sunshine. Sleep well?

NICK

(Warily walks into the kitchen area) Yes ma'am.

MIKE

(Sits back down in chair) Mornin' Nick.

NICK

Good morning sir.

LISA

Well, don't be a stranger, come sit down. *(NICK sits down at the table right next to MIKE)* I was just about to make breakfast. Anything you might like?

NICK

Umm, I'm fine with anything, really.

LISA

Okay, I'll get us some eggs cooking. Anything you want Mike? *(MIKE shakes his head. LISA moves to kitchen area, starts cooking.)*

MIKE

(Looks at NICK, he looks like he's about to say something then goes against it. Unwraps the newspaper instead. Starts reading it) Oh Lord have mercy!

LISA

What?

MIKE

“President Obama Supports Bill to Repeal Defense of Marriage Act”, so it’s really happenin’.

LISA

Oh goodness, I swear that man will be the ruin of this country. Letting men marry men and women marry women. Grosses me out just thinking about it.

(NICK gets noticeably uncomfortable)

MIKE

Well, the Lord will find a way to fix things. He always does. Speaking of which, what’s the scripture for today?

LISA

Oh, well let me grab it real quick. *(Goes to the bookshelf and looks at the Bible on the top shelf. She hesitantly reaches for it then grabs it. She flips through the pages.)*

MIKE

We like readin’ some scripture in the mornin’, nice way to start the day. Mama usually picks it. *(NICK nods, MIKE notices how uncomfortable he looks)* You okay Nick? You look upset.

NICK

I’m fine, sir.

(MIKE is about to say something but is interrupted when LISA starts reading the Bible verse)

LISA

“Then I heard a voice from Heaven say, ‘Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.’ ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.’” Revelation 14:13.

MIKE

(Sadly) That's a nice one.

LISA

(Puts the book back) Yeah, I suppose. After all, it said "their deeds will follow them".

Sometimes that's not such a good thing.

MIKE

It could also be a good thing. Maybe the good outweighs the bad.

LISA

Yeah, maybe. *(Pauses)* Oh, I almost forgot the eggs. Let me get those.

MIKE

(Getting up) Actually Lisa, I think I'll just go on out again. Might as well get the stuff done while I can. *(Looks briefly at NICK then starts walking towards the door. Stops, looks at NICK again and comes to a decision.)* Hey Nick?

NICK

(Looks up, startled) Yes sir?

MIKE

I could really use some help out there. Mind givin' me a hand?

NICK

Oh, yes sir. I mean, no sir, I don't mind.

MIKE

Alright, go get yourself some proper clothes and we'll get started.

NICK

Yes sir. *(Gets up to go to his room then stops)* What should I get? I just remembered I don't really have a lot.

LISA

We need to go shopping, I completely forgot. *(Takes a beat, has a realization)* Actually, I think we might have something. I'll be right back.

(LISA exits offstage, MIKE and NICK just stay there awkwardly unsure what to say to each other.)

MIKE

So, is the bed comfortable enough for ya?

NICK

Oh, yes sir. It's great. Thank you.

MIKE

Of course. Anytime.

(Awkward silence again, LISA comes back onstage, she seems to be carrying a box of clothes, MIKE is nervous)

LISA

Here we go. You seem to be the right fit, so these will work perfectly. *(She rubs the box with a tender touch. She opens it and grabs a plaid button up shirt from it. Gestures NICK over.)* Let's see how this fits.

MIKE

Lisa.

LISA

(Starts buttoning the shirt up) It's been a while since anyone has worn this one.

MIKE

(More annoyed) Lisa.

LISA

(Finishes buttoning it up, looks at NICK affectionately) It looks really nice on you. A little big but I'm sure you'll –

MIKE

(Forcefully) Lisa!

LISA

(Annoyed) Yes Mike?

MIKE

Dylan is going to lose it if he sees him wearing that. You know that, right?

LISA

Well if Dylan was here then he might have a say in this, but he's not and Nick needs clothes.

MIKE

(Walking over to her) I just don't think –

LISA

I know Mike, I know. Just, go do your business, okay?

MIKE

(Sighs and rubs his forehead) Okay Nick, come on!

(MIKE exits as NICK looks on)

NICK

Umm, is everyth –

LISA

Everything is fine. Go on now, get to work.

(NICK nods and exits. LISA stays there, smiling then heads back to the eggs. She continues cooking them but suddenly stops. She grabs the pan and puts it in the sink, grabs on to the counter to steady herself. She's out of breathe, exits offstage to her room.)

Scene 3

(Lighting changes to indicate a few hours have changed. It is now afternoon, DYLAN comes through the door. Goes to the fridge and grabs a drink. Walks to the living room and sits down on the couch. NICK enters. He is dirty, sweaty, and tired. Notices DYLAN and gets nervous. DYLAN smiles.)

DYLAN

Had you out in the chicken houses, huh?

NICK

Umm, yeah. They did.

DYLAN

(Chuckles) What he have ya do?

NICK

Wash some lids.

DYLAN

(Disgusted look on his face) Ugh! That's the worst part.

NICK

Yeah, it was pretty gross. (*Walks over to sink, gets a glass of water. Drinks some. Los in thought. Silence*)

DYLAN

So... are you all finished with them?

NICK

(*Breaks from his trance*) Sorry? What was that?

DYLAN

I was just askin' if you finished the lids.

NICK

Oh, umm, not yet. Barely got half done.

DYLAN

Oh, okay. (*Silence*) Where's daddy?

NICK

He said he had to look at the feeders. Broke when we were out there.

DYLAN

Ahh... did he seem *alright*?

NICK

I guess he did. What do you mean?

DYLAN

Did he seem mad?

NICK

Isn't he always mad?

(The joke takes DYLAN aback, he slowly starts laughing followed by NICK. There seems to be a genuine moment where they connect.)

DYLAN

Yeah, I guess that's true. *(Stops laughing and takes a deep breath. Glances at NICK and back down again. Seems conflicted, like he wants to say something but not sure how.)* Hey Nick?

NICK

Yeah?

DYLAN

I'm sorry for how I treated ya man. I was a real jerk when we met.

NICK

(Looks down) It's okay.

DYLAN

(Gets up and starts walking over to NICK) No it's not. It's just – wait *(gets closer and looks at his shirt, he's upset)* where did you get this shirt?

NICK

(Nervous) Lis – *(Clears throat)* Lisa gave it to me. She said I needed some clothes to wear out –

DYLAN

Take it off.

NICK

(Confused) What?

DYLAN

(Forcefully) Take. It. Off!

(NICK unbuttons the shirt revealing his white t-shirt underneath and hands it to DYLAN. DYLAN holds the shirt and does his best to hold back his anger. Calls offstage)

DYLAN

MAMA! – MAMA!!

(From offstage hurried footsteps are heard, LISA enters.)

LISA

What's with all the yelling?!

DYLAN

(Holding the shirt in her face) Did you give *him* this shirt?!

LISA

(Sighs) Dylan, listen –

DYLAN

You know who's shirt this is!

LISA

Of course, I know whose shirt that is, Dylan! I'm not senile yet.

DYLAN

Why'd you give it to him?!

LISA

He needed a shirt so I got him a Goddamned shirt!

DYLAN

This isn't just a shirt, this was Ben's shirt!

LISA

(Yelling) I know that! I didn't forget!

DYLAN

Well you could've fooled me!

(LISA slaps DYLAN, both of them look shocked at what just happened. NICK is petrified. LISA pulls herself together and puts her hands to her mouth. DYLAN backs away.)

DYLAN

Mama –

LISA

No, Dylan. Don't say anything. *(Takes a moment to catch herself)* After all the trouble you've been causing, don't you *dare* come here and act like you are entitled to anything damn well want. The *boy* needed clothes, so I gave him some clothes. If you have a problem with that *(snatches the shirt from him)* then you can go somewhere else. *(Starts walking away then stops, turns towards DYLAN)* For the record, I have not forgotten, and if you *ever* say something like that again you'll get more than just a slap. Understand?

DYLAN

(Terrified) Yes ma'am.

LISA

Good. *(Looks at NICK. Notices the startled look on his face.)* You okay Nick?

NICK

Yes ma'am.

LISA

Are you sure?

NICK

(Takes a beat) Yes ma'am.

LISA

Okay. *(Looks back at DYLAN then walks off with the shirt in hand.)*

DYLAN

(Walks back to the living room and sits down. Still startled, looks down) She hasn't done that in a while. *(Looks up at NICK, who is still standing in the same spot, still clearly tense.)* You okay man?

NICK

(Shaking) Yeah, I'm okay. Just need to sit down. *(Walks to table and sits down with water in hand, silent as he sips his water.)* Are you okay?

DYLAN

Me? Yeah, I'm fine. I've gotten worse.

NICK

(Mulling over whether he should ask, makes a decision) What happened?

DYLAN

(Gets antsy) What happened was somethin' that shouldn't have happened. *(Gives sarcastic laugh)* Man, talk about perfect timin'.

NICK

(Clearly worried) What do you mean?

DYLAN

I mean you! This was the perfect time for you to show up.

NICK

Why?

DYLAN

Well, you see, that was just a taste of what happens around here. Usually it's daddy being the rough one but mama can be to if you push her buttons hard enough. *(Takes a beat)* It's just gotten worse in the last couple years. *(Gets up and walks over to the bookshelf)* You hear them fightin' last night? *(NICK nods)* Yeah, used to be once a week, now they fight every day.

NICK

What happened? *(DYLAN gets uncomfortable)* I heard them mention someone named Ben *(DYLAN flinches at the mention)* earlier. Is it because of him?

DYLAN

(Looks at Bible) You could say that.

NICK

What happened?

DYLAN

(Picks up the Bible) He was my brother. Now he's gone.

NICK

Gone?

DYLAN

Yeah, like *gone*.

NICK

(Realizing) Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know –

DYLAN

How would you? They don't ever talk about him. Nope, instead they like pretendin' he never existed. They put his Bible on the shelf here like a memorial but get rid of every picture they have of him. They keep his clothes but bury them away like they have diseases on them. The shirt you were wearin' was the first time I've seen that shirt since... well since Ben.

NICK

How did it happen?

DYLAN

(Sarcastic chuckle) Did it himself. *(Puts Bible on shelf)*

NICK

I'm sorry.

DYLAN

Yeah, me too. *(Silence)* I'm just gonna, umm, go to my room. If you need anything, um, holler, okay?

(NICK nods, DYLAN exits. NICK looks down then at the phone. He's deep in thought then goes to the phone. He dials a number again while watching both directions to see if someone is coming. The phone rings. Someone picks it up.)

NICK

Hello? – Hey Sam, it's me. – No, everything is fine. Just wanted to check up on you. Are you okay? – *(Laughs)* That's awesome! You'd be really good at th – Sam? What's wrong? Are you there? Sam? *(Horrificed look crawls across his face)* Hello... sir. I just wanted to – *(Sound of someone hanging up followed by dial tone)* Hello? Hello?! *(He stands there with the phone up to his ear, pure terror on his face. He is so distracted by the phone he doesn't notice the sound of*

the screen door opening and MIKE coming through. The sound of the door closing pulls him out of his stupor, NICK looks at MIKE straight in the eyes.)

Scene 4

MIKE

(Suspiciously) Were you on the phone?

NICK

(Shaking, hangs up the phone) Yes sir.

MIKE

Hmm, who were you talkin' to?

NICK

Oh, umm, no one. *(Quickly)* It rang and no one was around so I answered it. Just a telemarketer.

MIKE

(Takes a moment before answering, still unsure if he believes him) Okay. Well, in the future don't do that. Don't answer the phone. Anyone else can but not you. That way no one else gets suspicious of you, understood?

NICK

Yes sir.

MIKE

(Walks over to table and sits down) Good. *(Wipes some sweat from his face and takes a deep breath)* Dylan in?

NICK

(Still standing by the phone, worryingly looking at it) Yes sir. He's in his room.

MIKE

Okay, what bout Lisa? In the bedroom too?

NICK

Yes sir.

(MIKE nods his head.)

NICK

Is it okay if I take a shower?

MIKE

(Comes out of his thought) Hmm, what?

NICK

Can I go take a shower?

MIKE

Sure.

(NICK nods his head and starts walking off, a little faster than usual. He is obviously in a hurry but MIKE stops him.)

MIKE

Actually Nick, wait one moment.

NICK

(NICK stops where he's standing) Yes sir?

MIKE

Sit down for a second. I wanna talk to you.

(NICK hesitantly sits down next to him)

MIKE

Whatever is goin' on, you can tell us, okay? (*NICK nods*) I know I'm not the most "affectionate" person and I'm sorry for that. It's just not how I was raised.

NICK

(*Nods*) Umm, how were you raised?

MIKE

(*Chuckles*) Well, it wasn't the most pleasant experience. Don't need all the details but let's just say I had to toughen up real quick.

NICK

Does it ever get easier?

MIKE

It can, have to work hard for it though. Wantin' to be a man, a *real* man, is what got me through it. Every time somethin' got hard I just thought "I'll do better." I know that sounds kinda cheesy but sometimes that's all you have. So, this is just a long way of sayin', whatever is goin' on, you can tell us, okay?

NICK

Understood sir.

MIKE

Okay, go get yourself cleaned up and we – (*Phone starts ringing*) wait a sec. (*MIKE goes over to phone and answers it*). Hello, Mitchell residence. – Why hello, how are you doin'?' – Just fine, thank you. What can I do for ya? – (*Looks at NICK and away again*) Yes Nick is here. Why? – He did? – Why is that? – (*Looks at NICK again who is shaking in his seat*) Is that so? – Why weren't we told about this? – With all due respect it's your job to know this kind of stuff! – Oh trust me, we'll take care of it. Thank you for the call. (*Hangs up phone. Silence*)

(NICK puts the phone down, MIKE walks in and sees NICK standing over the phone. Silence)

Scene 5

(MIKE walks back over to the table and stands in front of it. He leans on one of the chairs. His face is full of controlled anger.)

MIKE

Nick?

NICK

(Shaking) Yes sir?

MIKE

Did you call your brother?

NICK

Ye – *(Clears throat)* Yes sir.

MIKE

And you did this knowing your father doesn't want you speakin' to him?

NICK

Yes sir.

MIKE

I see. *(Takes a beat)* Did you ask Lisa for permission?

NICK

(Shaking even more) No sir.

MIKE

So she doesn't know you called either?

NICK

No sir.

MIKE

I see. *(Moves closer to NICK)* Nick, I have one more question for you? *(Looks down at NICK)*

NICK

(Keeps his gaze averted, voice quivering) Yes sir?

MIKE

(Keeps gaze firmly on NICK) Are you gay? *(NICK is silent)* Nick? *(NICK is still silent)* I asked you a question. *(NICK doesn't budge)* I'm gonna ask one more time, are –

NICK

(Quickly) I can't answer that.

MIKE

(Getting frustrated) What do you mean you can't answer that?

NICK

(Getting angry yet too scared to show it) I can't answer that. I don't know.

MIKE

(Scoffs) You don't know. *(Pats the back of the seat then exits offstage to the bedroom, NICK sits there and releases a breath he was holding in. His shaking worsens.)*

NICK

(To himself) Hold it together. Hold it together. Hold it together. Hold it together. Hold it –

(From offstage)

LISA

What's going on?

MIKE

Just come in here. We need to talk.

(Footsteps are heard getting closer. NICK pulls himself together and takes a deep breath. Tenses up. MIKE and LISA arrive. LISA is flustered while MIKE is fuming. Both stand around NICK.)

MIKE

Tell her what happened. *(NICK is silent)* I'll say this one more time, tell her what happened.

(NICK is still silent)

LISA

(Concerned) What's going on? *(To MIKE)* Mike? What happened?

MIKE

(Angrily) This *boy* had enough balls to break one of our rules already.

LISA

(LISA puts her hand to her head) Oh boy, what'd he do?

MIKE

He decided to call someone without our permission, but not just anyone, his little brother...

umm... *(To NICK)* what's his name again?

NICK

(Tensely) Sam.

MIKE

(To LISA) Sam, that was it. He decided to call Sam knowing his father didn't want him speakin' to him. His dad called DHS and told them everythin', so I get a call from his social worker about it.

LISA

Oh Lord have mercy.

MIKE

It gets better. The reason he didn't want them speakin' is because Nick here has decided he's gay.

(LISA is stunned, she grips onto the seat she's in front of and slowly sinks into it. Her head in her hands. It is almost as if she's been given news of a loved one dying.)

NICK

(Eyes still averted) I didn't say I was gay. I said I wasn't sure.

MIKE

(Throws hands in the air) Oh have mercy boy! You should know what you like by now!

LISA

(Head still in hands) Mike! *(MIKE stops)* Calm down. Getting worked up won't fix anything. Sit down and let's have a normal discussion. *(Gestures to MIKE to sit in chair opposite her, he sits.*

LISA takes a breath.) Now Nick, why do you think you're gay?

NICK

(Keeps gaze forward) I don't know.

LISA

Nick, how can you not know?

NICK

I just don't.

MIKE

That's a bunch of horseshit.

LISA

(Sharply) Mike! *(He calms down)* Listen Nick, we can't help you if you don't tell us what's wrong. There are ways to get over this.

NICK

(Turns his gaze towards her) What do you mean?

LISA

This, this, umm, *thing* you're dealing with is something lots of people deal with. You just have to be willing to get help. Our church offers services for people with your *condition*. We can set an appointment up for you, I'm sure *(looking towards MIKE)* Brother Andrew could spare the time for this. *(Looks back at NICK and puts her hands on top of his)* That sound good Nick?

NICK

(NICK is silent then slowly pulls his hands out from under hers. He speaks slowly and clearly.)

No ma'am, I don't think so.

LISA

(Pulls away as well) I don't understand.

MIKE

The boy made it clear Lisa, he's made his decision. *(Gets up from table, stands next to NICK and speaks to him)* Do you have any idea what this means?

NICK

(Keeps gaze averted) No sir.

MIKE

This means you're puttin' your life in danger! Statistics show – these are real statistics by the way so the science is there – but statistics show gay people have a lot of problems. You'll most likely get AIDS, become a sex addict, a pedophile, and never have healthy relationships. Is that what you want?

NICK

(Tensely) No sir.

MIKE

Then why don't you want to change?

NICK

It's not that easy. Trust me.

MIKE

Trust you?! You broke our rules and are bein' so stubborn you can't even see the truth when it's in front of you.

LISA

(Rubbing her head) Nick, you need to tell us right now if something else is going on. Were you, umm, were you ever – did someone ever treat you badly? Like a male figure?

NICK

(Disgusted look sprawls across his face) Are you asking if someone, umm, if someone sexually abused me? *(LISA nods her head)* No. No one abused me like that.

LISA

Well you need to help us understand then. Cause this isn't just your life, Nick, this is about your soul. Everything we've ever believed in goes against this and if you don't find a way to fix this, and soon, then it won't be good for you.

MIKE

How do you think Sam would feel knowin' he won't see his brother in Heaven some day? (*NICK is shocked*) Well? Did you ever think about that when you decided this?

NICK

(*Controlling his anger*) Please don't bring my brother into this.

MIKE

This is somethin' you need to think about Nick. It's hard stuff to hear but you need to hear it! And listen!

LISA

(*Getting more anxious*) Is this because of us?

NICK

(*Confused*) With all due respect, ma'am, I barely know any of you. This isn't about you.

LISA

Is it because you want to leave? You don't like it here?!

NICK

I want to go home.

(*Silent*)

LISA

Nick, if there's no way we can change your mind then (*takes a breath*), then yo –

MIKE

You can't stay here.

NICK

(Stunned) What?!

MIKE

This is a small community Nick. If word gets 'round about... your *condition* then people will speak. They'll make fun of Dylan and folks might even think somethin' wrong was goin' on up here.

LISA

So please Nick, think about this long and hard cause if you're gay then you can't be here.

(Silence) Now, are you sure?

NICK

(Looks her straight in the eyes) Yes ma'am. *(LISA sighs and pulls away)*

(LISA looks up at MIKE with tears in her eyes, he nods at her and she goes to the telephone. She dials a number then the phone rings. The sound of the phone is all that's heard for what feels like an eternity, then, someone answers.)

LISA

Hi it's Lisa Mitchell, Nick's foster mom. How are you? – Well I could be better. You see, we've been having some problems with Nick. – In a way, you see, we just spoke to Nick about what happened with his dad earlier and we don't think it's going to work out. – Him staying here is what I mean. He's having homosexual tendencies and that's something we can't have our children around. – Okay. – Okay. – Alright then, sounds good. Bye. *(Hangs up the phone. Turns towards the others)* They'll be here in an hour to pick you up so you should probably go pack. *(NICK stays still)*

MIKE

You heard her. Go pack up. There are trash bags in the cabinet. Grab one and get yer stuff.

NICK

Yes sir. *(Gets up, grabs trash bag, and exits)*

LISA

(Sits down next to MIKE, on the edge of crying) I guess you were right.

MIKE

(Consoling her) I didn't wanna be right. We had no way of knowin' about this.

LISA

(Slowly and thoughtfully) Do you think he'll be alright?

MIKE

I don't know. We can pray about it but I don't know.

LISA

Will *we* ever be alright?

(MIKE is about to say something then NICK walks in. He has a trash bag full of clothes in hand, in the other is his Harry Potter book. MIKE and LISA stare at him.)

MIKE

(Gets up and starts walking away towards his room) Alright, your social worker will be here later. Just wait in here.

NICK

Umm sir?

MIKE

(Stops) Yeah?

NICK

Is it okay if I take a shower? I'm still dirty from earlier.

MIKE

(Looks at NICK) Is that so? *(Pauses, mulling over a thought)* No, there ain't enough time.

NICK

But, my – my social worker will –

MIKE

Will deal with it. Lord knows we've put up with a lot already and your social worker can deal with a couple hours of you stinkin'.

NICK

(Puts head down) Yes sir.

MIKE

(Starts walking off again then stops, looks at NICK) Good luck, Nick.

(NICK nods and MIKE continues walking away. He exits. The thuds of his boots can still be heard, slowly disappearing as he gets farther away until they stop completely. Silence between NICK and LISA. NICK looks at LISA, like he's trying to gather the courage to ask her a question. LISA gets up.)

LISA

Well they'll be here soon to get ya. If you need anything till then I'll be in my room. *(Starts walking away then NICK finally summons the courage to ask her)*

NICK

Umm, I do have a question.

LISA

(Sighs) Yes?

NICK

(Stuttering a little) Am I – I goin – going –

LISA

Take a breath. *(NICK takes a breath)* Now, try again.

NICK

(Pauses for a moment) Am I going home?

LISA

(Gets uncomfortable) I don't know Nick. *(NICK looks defeated. LISA continues walking away then stops. Turns towards NICK.)* I really do hope the best for you. We all do. *(NICK says nothing, does nothing. LISA walks off. Her footsteps can heard fading off into nothing. Silence. NICK sits there waiting for his social worker to arrive. Lost in thought he doesn't notice DYLAN enter.)*

DYLAN

(Uncertainly) Are you okay?

(NICK is startled, looks at DYLAN questioningly. NICK says nothing. DYLAN moves closer, slowly and carefully, like he's easing towards a dangerous animal.)

DYLAN

I'm sorry.

NICK

You heard?

DYLAN

(Anxiously) Yeah.

NICK

Everything?

DYLAN

It's kinda hard not to.

NICK

Okay.

(NICK is obviously full of anger but he contains it. DYLAN stops moving towards him. His stance is far less aggressive than usual. He pities NICK.)

DYLAN

I really am sorry.

NICK

(Sharply) Why? You never wanted me here in the first place. Why do you care now?

DYLAN

(Getting uncomfortable, speaks slowly and carefully) Because you, umm – you... you remind a lot of Ben.

(NICK is taken aback. Doesn't know what to say. DYLAN shifts uncomfortably in the place he's standing)

DYLAN

Good luck, Nick.

(NICK nods and DYLAN slowly walks away. His footsteps fade away until it is silent again.)

NICK sits there for a moment then he tries to read his book. He reads for a minute then puts it

down. He doesn't feel like reading. He is quiet and still, then his demeanor changes. A second ago he was tense, like he was waiting for something to happen, now, he slumps over like he just woke up from a nightmare. His expression is one of melancholy and remembrance. Lights dim with NICK being the center of it all.)

NICK

(To audience) I've told this part a million times but it never gets any easier. I don't think I've felt less like a person than I do now. Holding my trash bag, sitting here in literal chicken shit, waiting for someone to come get me. *(Sarcastically laughs)* Get the metaphor? It's almost as if *I'm* the trash! I know, probably a little too on the nose but it's effective. *(Takes a moment, contemplating something)* I should probably let you know, and I won't do this again, but you should know... that last part... never happened. *(Pauses)* Dylan never came and spoke to me. In fact, I didn't even see him before I left. For all I know his parents told him I was *gone* like his brother was. Maybe that's what my parents told Sam after that call. *(Laughs and gets up from table, walks towards the bookshelf)* All I can do is fill in the gaps. I don't fully remember what happened to Ben, all I know is what I heard in hushed whispers about him. *(Grabs the Bible, starts flipping through the pages.)* Like he was a ghost haunting their every move, every word, every thought. I can't help but wonder if that's what I am now. Just a ghost, except I get to haunt a lot of places. As for the Mitchell's, don't ask me what happened to them because... I never saw them again. Instead, they became my ghosts. Haunting my *every* move. It's okay though, at this point I was used to it. I've gotten used to carrying everything with me. *(Stops flipping through the Bible when he finds a passage.)* "Then I heard a voice from Heaven say, 'Write this: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on.' 'Yes,' says the Spirit, 'they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.'" *(Closes Bible and puts it back)* "For their deeds will follow

them.” *(Is in a daze then the sound of a car pulling up can be heard, NICK stands there he seems to be his timid, younger self again. He’s scared to move but knows he must. He grabs his trash bag and book, takes a breath, and exits. The screen door can be heard opening then closing. Silence as the lights continue dimming, then, the phone starts ringing. Lights continue dimming until it is completely dark, phone continues ringing, echoing throughout until it finally stops. Silence and darkness.)*

End of Act I

Act II

Scene 1

(Lights slowly come on, stage is still fairly dim but it is lit enough to tell there’s a difference in how the stage is set. The setting is fairly homie and spacious whereas the original setting was painterly and confined. There is no kitchen space this time. It is a living room/dining area with the couch near the middle. A folded blanket with a hand-knitted pattern lies on the back of the couch, there seems to be a city on it but it’s hard to tell. The coffee table is in front of the couch, on it is a vase with flowers in it. On one side of the couch is a chair with a tall lamp for reading between them. On the other side of the couch is a small table with the landline phone from earlier on it. The bookshelf is nearby but it’s different. The shelves are filled out more, one row has an entire of Harry Potter books on it. Others have various medical journals about AIDS and psychiatry. The top shelf is empty with only a single box on it. There is also a dining room table nearby, four seats put on each side. This place feels much more inviting than before. The phone

starts ringing. It rings for a long time then the sound of someone picking it up goes off. A female SOCIAL WORKER speaks on the other end. Whereas the first SOCIAL WORKER was nearly emotionless, this SOCIAL WORKER is cheerful and has a bit Southern sass to her. It's almost as if she could be anyone's friend.)

SOCIAL WORKER

Hey Diane, hey Jim, it's Natalie from DHS. Just wanted to let you know... the paperwork is done! So I'm gonna go ahead and pick Nick up from the shelter, he's been in there for so long I don't feel comfortable leavin' him in there much longer. So I'll bring him on down or you can pick him up, either way works for me. I have to say, I have a really good feelin' about this! If anythin' comes up you need help with, let me know! See ya soon! Bye!

(Sound of a car pulling up is heard. Instead of a screen door, it's a regular door heard opening and closing. NICK enters, he's wearing a hoodie with blue jeans. In one hand is his trash bag, the other his book. He looks around then addresses the audience.)

NICK

Summer wasn't the easiest time. After I left the Mitchell's I spent the rest of summer bouncing from place to place. All of them were shelters or group homes. My social worker, quite honestly, didn't care what happened to me. You see, I had nothing against shelters, some of them were actually really nice, in fact, there were a few I didn't want to leave but my social worker said, "these are temporary shelters, you can't stay there, trust me cause I know what I'm doing." Trust him was all he could say. *(Walking over to the bookshelf)* Eventually, they replaced him. He got reassigned to another county and I never saw him again. I was really worried they'd give me an

even worse social worker than him, but I met Natalie. From the moment we met she did nothing but the best for me. She sat me down, asked me all sorts of questions about: “How was I being treated?” “What did I think would be best for me?” and so forth. *(Nostalgic)* That was the first time anyone asked me what I wanted. The only problem was I wasn’t sure what I wanted. The only thing I said was, “I want to go home.” Truth is I didn’t know what that meant anymore. *(Pulls a book from the shelf, it’s Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone and flips through it’s pages, chuckles)* This is one of my favorite parts, you see – *(Sound of door opening, then closing. DIANE walks in with one of his trash bags in hand. She’s wearing a doctor’s jacket from UMMC (United Mississippi Medical Center) a carries a purse in her other hand. She has a hint of a Boston accent that has been watered down of years in the South. NICK is now his younger self again, holding the book. However, something is different about this version of NICK, he’s more detached almost hollow compared to the scared child we saw earlier. DIANE puts the bag down.)*

DIANE

Well, welcome to our humble abode. I see you found the books. What do you think?

NICK

I think it’s really cool.

DIANE

(Smiling) Yeah we thought you might like it. *(Walking closer to NICK)* Natalie told us you were a Harry Potter fan so it seemed like a good idea.

NICK

(Confused) You got all these books... for me?

DIANE

We did have them all but some were too old to be saved. Our kids were *obsessed* with the books so we had to get them every time a new one came out. Eventually I read some cause I wanted to know what the hype was about.

NICK

Did you like them?

DIANE

(Laughs) I loved them! Now I was the one going to the bookstore every time a new one came out.

NICK

So would you get a few copies or something so everyone could read?

DIANE

(Chuckles, sits down) Nope, too expensive to get one for all of us.

NICK

So you'd share?

DIANE

We tried that, but, our kids, Ian and Kate, they'd fight like cats and dogs to read the books! I swear, Jim and I would be breaking up fights on a daily basis over books, of all things!

NICK

So what'd you do?

DIANE

Well, I came up with an idea that would help all of us. We'd do a group reading every night. Jim wasn't a Harry Potter fan so he wouldn't read with us. I'd take a turn reading a few pages, then I'd hand it to either Ian or Kate and they'd pass it along, then the next person would pass it along, and we'd do this for about an hour before we put it away.

NICK

(Longingly) That sounds really nice.

DIANE

It was really nice. We did it for years, up until they left for college that is.

NICK

So you all did this even when they were in high school?

DIANE

Heck, we kept reading it even when they were in college. We'd all have our own copies, do a conference call, and we'd take turns just like before.

NICK

(Confused) Why?

DIANE

Hmm, we wanted to stay close. It's really easy to lose that when you're far away and living your own life.

NICK

(Tears up a little) Yeah, I guess it is.

DIANE

Nick, are you okay?

NICK

Yes ma'am. I'm fine.

DIANE

Okay, well – *(Sound of car pulling up)* That must be Jim, *(NICK gets a little tenser)* he's been looking forward to meeting you.

(Sound of door opening then closing, JIM enters wearing a suit and tie, carries a briefcase. Has hints of a New York accent washed away from years in Mississippi.)

JIM

(Smiling, walks up to wife and kisses her) Hello wife.

DIANE

Why hello husband.

JIM

(Turns his attention to NICK, who is standing very still and stiff. JIM walks over to NICK and extends his hand, smiling) You must be Nick, *(NICK shakes his hand while nodding)* it's really nice to meet you.

NICK

It's nice to meet you too, sir.

JIM

(Taken aback at ow formal NICK is, walks back towards couch. Loosens tie a little, sits down next to DIANE) So, how was the ride over here?

NICK

It was alright, sir.

JIM

Oh, well that's good. I'm happy it was a nice ride.

(Awkward silence. DIANE signals NICK to sit down)

DIANE

Why don't you take a seat Nick? It's been a long day for you.

NICK

(Hesitantly) Actually ma'am, could I go to my room? I'm pretty tired. I think I'd like to take a nap.

DIANE

(Surprised) Oh okay, sure. It's down the hall, last door on the left.

NICK

(Grabs his trash bag) Thank you ma'am.

(NICK starts walking off when JIM notices the other bag)

JIM

(Gets up to grab bag) Oh Nick.

NICK

(Tenses up again) Yes sir?

JIM

(Puzzled) You forgot your other bag.

NICK

(Relieved) Oh, thank you. *(Grabs the bag from JIM and starts walking off)*

JIM

Let us know if you need any help.

NICK

Will do sir.

(NICK exits. JIM stands there confused.)

JIM

Did you notice that?

DIANE

Uh huh, how could I miss it?

JIM

He was so tense. Was he like that earlier?

DIANE

A little bit but he eased up quickly. Give it time. He only just got here.

JIM

I know. *(Pauses)* Do you think we're doing the right thing? It's just been a while since we've fostered and –

(DIANE gets up and eases JIM)

DIANE

Hush, you're doing that thing again where you get insecure and start doubting yourself. Don't do that.

JIM

(Chuckles) You're right. *(They kiss)*

DIANE

Of course I'm right, also, I do think we're doing the right thing.

JIM

Alright, I do too.

DIANE

Good, cause school started two weeks ago and we need to get him enrolled, so if there are any second thoughts, it's too late now.

JIM

(Sensually) "Second thoughts" are the farthest things from my mind. *(Kisses her again)*

However, pizza is all I can think about so how about I go get some for all of us?

DIANE

(Laughs) How did I know you were going to say that?

JIM

You are a mind reader.

DIANE

Apparently I am. Go on. I'll see you later. *(Winks and exits in the direction of her room)*

(JIM feels for his keys and pulls them out. Is about to leave then remembers something. Goes to the bookshelf, opens the box on the top shelf and takes out a pill bottle. He opens it and takes one. Puts it back, looks in the direction of the bedrooms and has a sweet smile. Exits in the direction of his car, door heard opening then closing. Changes in lighting indicate a certain amount of time has passed. It is now the middle of fall, the lighting is warm like fallen leaves.)

Scene 2

(DIANE walks on stage, she has a warm looking sweater with blue jeans. In one hand is a notebook with a pen on it, the other a cup of hot chocolate. She walks over to the couch while looking over the paper. Sits down and slowly sips on the drink while reading. She marks the page and mumbles to herself when NICK comes through the door wearing his backpack and some warm clothes. Sits down in one chair and sighs)

DIANE

Hey Nick, how was school?

NICK

Exhausting.

DIANE

(Puts cup down and stops marking paper) Oh boy, what happened? A and P again?

NICK

Yes ma'am. *(Annoyed)*

DIANE

If you need help studying then you can ask either me or Jim. Anatomy and physiology were some of our favorite classes.

NICK

Will do.

DIANE

(Goes back to her paper then looks back at NICK) How bout that friend of yours? Walker? You're both in the same class, have you thought about doing some study sessions?

NICK

(Rolls his eyes) Are you trying to set me up?

DIANE

I'm just saying, he seems like a nice guy –

NICK

(Nervously laughs) Thanks but I think we're fine the way we are.

DIANE

Okay, just an idea. *(Starts taking sip of her hot chocolate, gets the cup to her mouth)* He's cute too.

NICK

(Changing the subject) By the way, why are you doing home so early? I don't usually see you until after six.

DIANE

A bunch of my patients canceled on me at the last minute. Figured I'd finish up my office work at home.

NICK

Oh, makes sense.

DIANE

Why you ask? Planning a big party?!

NICK

Only the biggest.

DIANE

Tons of alcohol?

NICK

Of course.

DIANE

(Gives thumbs up) You're doing us proud! *(Pause)* Just make sure to invite Walker.

NICK

Diane!

(DIANE laughs, NICK is crimson red but smiling and the sound of the car pulling up can be heard. NICK tenses up, not a lot but little. This isn't missed by DIANE.)

DIANE

You okay Nick?

NICK

Yes ma'am. Why?

DIANE

You tensed up a little when Jim pulled up.

NICK

I did?

DIANE

Yeah, are you sure you're fine?

NICK

Yes ma'am. I'm sorry, I had no idea why I did that.

(JIM walks in dressed in his usual attire for work with a jacket on top of it. Puts his briefcase next to the couch.)

JIM

Hello family, *(walks over to DIANE and kisses her)* hello wife.

DIANE

(Kisses him back) Hi husband.

JIM

(Waves at NICK) Hello Nick.

NICK

(Still tense around him) Hello sir.

JIM

(Walks over to the dining room table and puts jacket on the back of the chair.) How was school today?

NICK

It was alright I guess.

DIANE

Still having trouble with A and P.

JIM

Uh oh, well should we come up with a game-plan? Don't want it getting any worse than it is.

NICK

It's fine, really, I appreciate the offers but I can handle it. Promise.

DIANE

I keep suggesting for him to study with Walker but he doesn't want to do it.

JIM

(Smiling) Oh, are you two a thing now?

NICK

(Crimson red again) No sir.

JIM

Oh, okay then. Well, are you sure you don't help with your work?

NICK

Thank you sir, but I promise, I can handle it.

JIM

(Exasperated) Okay, we trust you.

NICK

(Slightly taken aback) Thank you.

(Silence then a beeper starts going off from offstage.)

JIM

(Confused) What's that?

DIANE

That's your crock-pot Jim. Remember? You started it before you left for work.

JIM

(Realization) That's right! I'll be right back. *(Rushes offstage to see to it)*

DIANE

(Gets up) Well I guess that means we're eating dinner early. *(NICK gets up to go grab plates,*

DIANE stops him) Woah, easy does it.

NICK

(Confused) What's wrong?

DIANE

You've been setting the table *and* washing the dishes every night for the past few months. Let someone else have a turn.

NICK

It's no problem. Really.

DIANE

I know it's not a problem, that's why it's okay for someone else to do it once and a while. Just do some studying and we'll get dinner set. Okay?

NICK

Yes ma'am. Thank you.

DIANE

It's no problem. *(Exits in direction of her husband)*

(NICK sits back down in the chair and pulls some stuff out of his bag. He tries reading over his notes but he's still really tense. His leg bounces up and down like he's anxiously anticipating something. Looks at the phone. Back down at his notes. Back at the phone again, he keeps his gaze on the phone and finally decides to go to it. He crosses to the phone and dials a number. It rings for a minute then someone answers it.)

NICK

Hey, Walker? It's me. – *(Smiles)* I'm doing alright, how bout yourself? – That's good. Umm, sorry for calling like this but I was just wondering if you'd like to hang out sometime? Are you busy tomorrow, we could hang out after school? – *(Smile widens, gets excited)* Great! I mean

(clears throat, tampers down the enthusiasm) Sounds cool, umm, meet at my house? –
Awesome. *(Flirtingly)* I can't wait either. – Okay, see you then. *(Hangs up the phone, has a look on his face that is a strange mixture of happiness and guilt. He hears footsteps as JIM and DIANE start coming back. NICK rushes back to his seat and pretends he's been working. They set the table up. DIANE has the plates while JIM has the food. JIM puts the food down and goes to get his pill from the box.)*

JIM

(As he takes the pill) Okay Nick, ready whenever you are.
(NICK puts his stuff away and goes to the table. All three sit in a triangle from one another. Once all the food is served they pray)

DIANE

Nick, could you say grace this time?
(NICK nods, everyone bows their head and puts their hands together.)

NICK

Thank you Lord for this day and this food. We pray you will watch over all of us as we continue to go out in the world to do your work. For our deeds will follow us and someday they will lead us to you. In your name we pray, amen.

DIANE and JIM

Amen.
(Everyone starts eating)

JIM

That's a lovely prayer Nick, did you get some of it from Revelation?

NICK

Did I? I don't remember.

JIM

It was the last part, about our deeds following us. Sounds really familiar.

DIANE

(Grumpily) Revelation 14:13.

JIM

That's the one.

DIANE

I actually don't like it that much.

JIM

Really? Why?

DIANE

It's not bad scripture, it's just tiring. After my dad died people would tell me that verse all the time. "He was a good man so you know he's in Heaven." Stuff like that and it was annoying, yes, it is comforting to know he's in Heaven but hearing it doesn't take away the pain of losing him. You know what I mean?

JIM

That makes perfect sense. *(Pauses)* He was a good man.

DIANE

(Tearing up a little) He was a very good man.

NICK

(Lost in thought) Do you think that's true? The whole part about how "deeds will follow them"?

JIM

I would say so.

DIANE

Same here. I'd like to think it's true. Like I said, it doesn't take away the pain but it's nice thinking about seeing my dad again someday.

NICK

(Hesitantly) Wou – would bein – would being *gay* be one of those deeds?

(JIM and DIANE are taken aback. They both put their spoons down carefully think about their answer)

DIANE

I wouldn't say so.

NICK

(Somewhat elated) Really?

JIM

Being gay isn't a deed, it's a sexual orientation. I highly doubt God judges based off of whether someone is gay or straight or anything in between.

DIANE

I agree, I don't believe it makes or breaks where you go.

NICK

So, you don't think I'd go... I'd go to... Hell?

JIM

(Quickly) Absolutely not. We don't think that for a second.

DIANE

Did someone say something to you at school?

NICK

No, it's just something I've wondered a lot since... well since I left home – my first foster home.

DIANE

(Starts eating some of her food) Did they tell you anything else?

NICK

A few things.

JIM

Like what?

NICK

Well, they said, umm, I'd most likely get AIDS and... some other stuff. I don't really wanna talk about it.

(Both JIM and DIANE are aghast)

JIM

First off, I think it's safe to say all the stuff they told you was wrong. Second, if you want to know anything about AIDS, just ask Diane, that's her specialty after all.

DIANE

Of course, just come to me Nick whenever you have questions about stuff like this. Come to both of us *(grabs JIM's hand)* okay?

NICK

(Feeling strangely at ease by this) Okay. Will do, ma'am.

DIANE

Good. *(Everyone continues eating)* Also if you want to have the talk then –

JIM

Woah, woah, woah, Diane?!

DIANE

(Confused) What?

JIM

Right now?

DIANE

(Sarcastically) Well I just thought this was the best time – Of course not now! *(JIM is laughing)*

You hurt me on a spiritual level.

JIM

(Taking a bite of his food) Good thing we got married in a church then.

DIANE

(Laughs) Do I need to send you to time out?! *(JIM shakes his head)* Good. You are terrible.

(Looks at NICK who is blushing again) We should have the talk though.

(NICK has a apprehensive look on his face as the lights go out, everything transitions as the table is cleared away and night turns to day. Everyone is gone. NICK and WALKER enter from the door, wearing their backpacks.)

Scene 3

NICK

(Nervously speaking) Welcome to my humble abode. That was something Diane said when we first got here. I always thought it was kinda cheesy but it grew on me eventually. They're both pretty cheesy but cool at the same time. Don't know how that works but it does. *(Nervously laughs, WALKER looks at him and smiles, WALKER continues looking around the room, has a slight Southern accent.)*

WALKER

So this is your house.

NICK

Yeah, *(nervously)* do you like it?

WALKER

(Smiling) Yeah, it's nice. Feels really homie.

NICK

(Looks around as well, almost as if he's realizing it for the first time.) Yeah, it does, doesn't it.

(Looks back at WALKER who's looking at him, WALKER smiles, NICK gets nervous) So,

(walking over to the couch) you have your notes?

WALKER

(Confused) Notes?

NICK

For A and P.

WALKER

Oh yeah! I do. Sorry, I guess I was just confused when you asked me over. Thought it was –

NICK

(Heart beating faster) Was what?

WALKER

(Bites lip) Nothing, not important but yeah, I have my notes. You?

NICK

Right here! *(Pulls notebook out of bag, papers fall out of it, WALKER laughs, NICK starts picking them up, WALKER helps. They reach for one at the same time when their hands touch, NICK pulls away like he was electrocuted. WALKER is concerned.)*

WALKER

Did I hurt you?

NICK

(Trying to brush it off) No, I'm fine. Just a little jumpy I guess. This A and P stuff is getting to me I guess.

WALKER

(Seeing through it) Yeah, A and P can be pretty hardcore. *(Laughs)* Come on man, what's wrong?

NICK

(Sitting on the couch) Sorry, I'm so jumpy. It's just... I haven't really...

WALKER

(Mouthing along with him) You haven't really... what?

NICK

(Anxiously) I haven't really had anyone over before.

WALKER

(Curious) Why not?

NICK

I tend to stay in my shell.

WALKER

(Smiles) Well, I'm happy to be the first person you have over.

(NICK looks at WALKER, pauses, NICK changes the subject)

NICK

So, umm, we should get to that A and P.

WALKER

(Disappointed) Yeah, let's start.

(Both open their books and start looking over their tests.)

NICK

(Glances at WALKER) Umm, what'd you put for number five?

WALKER

(Looking down at book, somewhat downhearted) I put Mandible. You?

NICK

(Sighs) Maxilla.

WALKER

(Looking up, concerned) It's an easy mistake.

NICK

Yeah, an easy mistake I make multiple times.

WALKER

(Searching) Well that's okay, A and P is pretty hard.

NICK

(Sitting up) Not for you, you're a genius in there!

WALKER

(Laughs) Okay, I'm not a genius –

NICK

Yeah, you are.

WALKER

Okay, how am I genius?

NICK

(Uses fingers to count down) You finished the first test in less than 15 minutes, including the essay section, and still made a hundred. –

WALKER

It wasn't challenging.

NICK

(Second finger) Made everyone never want a taco again after your healthy eating presentation. –

WALKER

Only Taco Bell. Their meat isn't real!

NICK

(Third finger) And you know every function of every muscle when we haven't even gotten their yet.

WALKER

(Laughs) And you are using every muscle in your fingers beautifully.

NICK

(Smiling) Face it. You. Are. A. Genius.

WALKER

That's because I *like* science! I just find it fascinating, ya know? The way the human body works, there's nothing else like it.

NICK

(Smiling) It shows.

WALKER

(Laughs again) Okay, well what about you?

NICK

(Smile starts fading) What about me?

WALKER

I see you writing all the time. What do you write about?

NICK

(Retreating) Oh, that's nothing. I'm not very good at it.

WALKER

(Thoughtfully) You do that a lot.

NICK

What? Writing?

WALKER

Doubting yourself. I've never met anyone who doubts themselves as much as you.

NICK

(Getting up, nervously laughs) Well I'm positive I'm not that good at it.

WALKER

(Gets up as well) You do that a lot too.

NICK

(Turning to face him, slightly annoyed) What?

WALKER

Deflecting. You don't like talking about what's wrong. You hold it all in, pretend you're fine, but it's okay to not be fine.

NICK

(Crosses arms) I am fine. I don't need you telling me how I feel.

WALKER

(Puts hands up) Woah, I'm just trying to help.

NICK

(Bites his lip) I don't need help. I'm fine. Thank you though. *(Walks over to other side of the room)*

(WALKER drops his hands in defeat. Walks around for a minute then gets an idea. Gets his phone out and starts playing some upbeat music, starts dancing. NICK turns towards him, confused)

NICK

Umm, what are you doing?

WALKER

(Out of breath) Dancing!

NICK

(Slightly smiling) I see that. Why?

WALKER

You know, one minute you're standing still, the next you have to dance. Helps ease the tension.

Ya know?

NICK

(Laughing a little) Umm, yeah sure.

WALKER

Dance with me.

NICK

(Turning red, stuttering) I... I don't dance.

WALKER

Come on! Just one dance!

NICK

I reall –

WALKER

(Stops dancing, moves close to NICK, holds hands out) Please, just one dance. That's all.

(NICK, scared of what this means, hesitantly puts his hands in WALKER's. WALKER

immediately pulls NICK toward him and they start dancing. The lighting and feel of the stage

takes on a more dreamlike quality than before. NICK feels like he's in a dream he doesn't want to wake up from. At first, NICK is awkward and clumsy, constantly stepping on WALKER's feet.)

NICK

Sorry!

WALKER

You're fine!

NICK

I'm so –

WALKER

Don't say it! Just have fun! It's only you and me Nick.

(At this NICK starts to relax, he starts enjoying the dance. Both young men twirl around and laugh. They are having the time of their lives. Both crash down onto the couch, laughing and the music stops. The dreamlike quality fades away and we are back to normal. Both of them sit up, still laughing yet out of breath)

WALKER

(Catching his breath) You – were pretty good.

NICK

(Catching his breath) Not too – bad yourself.

(WALKER bumps NICK with his shoulder. Leans back on the couch. Notices the notebook. He takes a minute to think about what to say. He doesn't want to upset NICK again.)

WALKER

Hey Nick?

NICK

Yeah?

WALKER

Can I hear one of your stories?

NICK

(Anxiously) Oh, I – I don't know, I mean my stuff –

WALKER

Please? Just one.

NICK

Why do you want to see my writing so badly? I'm telling you I'm not that good.

WALKER

(Smiling) You said the same about dancing.

NICK

(Sighs. Hesitantly grabs the notebook and starts flipping through it.) Here's one. It's just a part of it and I haven't mapped out the rest yet. So it's not –

WALKER

(Places a hand on his leg) Nick... it's okay.

NICK

(Nervous by their closeness, holds his book up and starts reading. They scooch closer together so WALKER can read with him.) “Jacob went to the mirror like he does every morning, except, this time was different. In the glass was someone he recognized but at the same time, didn't. This familiar stranger spoke to him but he couldn't understand what he was saying. Jacob would come back to the mirror every day trying to figure out who this stranger was. No matter what, he could never solve this mystery.” *(Looks at WALKER)* Umm, want to read the next part?

WALKER

Oh, are you sure? *(NICK nods)* Okay. *(Clears throat)* “One day, Jacob went back to the mirror to try one more time. ‘Today’, he said to himself, ‘it has to be today!’ Alas, he was still as lost as ever. Jacob looked in the mirror, the sad figure trying so hard to talk to him. ‘I can’t understand you’, Jacob said, ‘I’m sorry.’ As Jacob started to leave, he felt a wave of pity wash over him. This person was all alone. All it wanted was someone to be with them. Jacob stood in the doorway for what felt like ages. Finally, he turned towards the figure and walked back to them. Jacob sits in front of the mirror and says, ‘I won’t leave you. You aren’t alone, anymore.’”
(Silence, WALKER looks at NICK who has tears in his eyes.)

WALKER

You know, there’s no mirror keeping us apart. *(NICK looks at him)* You can talk to me if you want.

NICK

(Thinking long and hard) I want to believe that, it’s just... I’ve made a lot of mistakes. *(Smiles)*

WALKER

So have I.

NICK

Not like what I’ve done.

WALKER

Like what?

NICK

I hurt someone, a lot. I left him alone and... *(laughs a little)* sorry, I’m being ridiculous.

WALKER

(Grabs his hand) No you're not. It's okay. If you ever need to talk, I'm here for you.

NICK

(Anxiously smiles) Thanks.

(WALKER smiles back, they look at each other for a long time then WALKER leans in for a kiss. NICK is taken aback but doesn't move. He is awkward, scared, happy, excited, all at the same time but doesn't know what to do. The kiss was what a first kiss should be: awkward, tender, and sweet. WALKER leans back and looks worried)

WALKER

Oh no, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have done that. I should've asked you first, instead I jumped the gun and didn't think. I'm so sorry I –

NICK

Walker! *(WALKER stops talking and looks at NICK worryingly, NICK smiles)* It's okay. I'm just...

WALKER

What? What's wrong?

NICK

I guess I just worry about what people will say.

WALKER

Are you worried about the Pearson's?

NICK

A little.

WALKER

(Comfortingly) I've known them for a long time, they don't care, trust me.

NICK

(Unsure) Okay.

WALKER

(Worriedly) How bout us? Are we okay?

NICK

(Smiles a little) Yeah, we're okay.

WALKER

(Breath of relief) Really?

NICK

Really.

WALKER

(Laughs) Good.

(Silence)

NICK

(Slowly and somewhat awkwardly) Umm, is it okay if I kiss you now?

(WALKER smiles and nods. NICK leans in for another kiss. They both kiss again. It is as sweet, awkward, and tender as the first but neither of them hear the door as both DIANE and JIM walk in.)

DIANE

Hey Ni – oh goodness!

JIM

Oh! *(Both boys immediately pull themselves away. Both are horrified they were seen. However, whereas WALKER is more horrified from embarrassment, NICK is experiencing true fear.)* Are we interrupting something?

WALKER

(Anxiously) Umm, no Mr. Pearson. I was just about to leave actually. *(Grabs his bag and packs everything up, turns towards NICK)* I'll see you later Nick. *(NICK, still petrified, barely acknowledges him)* You okay? *(NICK barely nods, unsure of what to do he heads out)*

JIM

Nice seeing you Walker.

WALKER

(Ducking his head) You too sir.

DIANE

Tell your parents we said hi.

WALKER

(As he exits) Yes ma'am.

(WALKER exits.)

Scene 4

JIM

(Disappointed) Nick, what can you say about this?

(NICK sits there, getting more agitated.)

DIANE

We had this talk last night. No bringing boys over without our supervision. I mean Walker is a nice boy and all but we still have rules. Understand?

(NICK, leg starts bouncing up and down, both JIM and DIANE notice)

JIM

Nick what's wrong?

NICK

(Tensely and low) I messed up.

DIANE

Yes you did, but –

NICK

Are you gonna call Natalie?

(Both shocked)

JIM

(Moving closer) Why would we call Natalie?

NICK

I messed up.

DIANE

(Moving to the couch. Sits down next to NICK.) Oh Nick, we wouldn't call Natalie because you messed up. Everybody makes mistakes so – *(tries putting hand NICK's shoulder but he jerks away, gets up and faces them. Fury is pouring from him)*

NICK

So when?! When are my mistakes gonna be too much?!

JIM

Nick, we aren't sending you away.

NICK

(Yelling) That's what they said too!!!

JIM

The Mitchells?

DIANE

We aren't the Mitchells Nick, we won't do that to you.

NICK

I'm not talking about them... I'm talking about my family. *(Starts breaking down but tries to maintain his composure)*

DIANE

(Moves closer) What happened Nick?

NICK

I can't.

JIM

Nick, please, tell us what's wrong so we can help. That's all we want to do.

NICK

I can't trust that! Everyone who has ever said that to me has *lied!* *(Silence, NICK keeps his composure, his walls are starting to calm down)* My dad would call me terrible things. He would say I was useless and pathetic. That, th – that was on his good days too cause, he – he would get really mad sometimes and instead of saying bad things, he'd do them. He – He'd get a belt and hit us with it. If we came home with a C, if we forgot to wash a dish, it didn't matter he would

hurt us! My mom, she'd just... let him do it. She'd come to our room later and say, "I promise I won't let him do that again." She would say that every *fucking* night but it would keep going!

DIANE

(Horried) Nick, I promise we won't do that to you. You never deserved any of that!

NICK

Yes I did.

JIM

What are you saying? No, Nick, you didn't.

NICK

Yes, I did! *(Moving closer to the dining area, grabs a chair to steady himself)* I left him. I left Sam alone with him.

DIANE

You didn't *leave* him Nick, they sent you away.

NICK

I did, I knew what he would do if he found out about me but I didn't care. I knew he'd get rid of me but I was so tired. I was tired of everything he did. Tired of the abuse. Tired of feeling alone. I was tired of all of that. I was so tired I didn't even think about Sam until it was too late. I didn't think about the look on his face when he found out I wasn't coming back. I didn't think about what our dad would do to him! *(Pauses)* So now, this is the perfect punishment for me. I was tired so now I get to stay tired. I get to stay tired of abuse. Tired of being alone. It's all I was ever good for anyway. *(Pauses)* So, go ahead and call Natalie. I'm... *(plops into chair near dining table, steels himself like he did for MIKE and LISA)*

(Everyone is silent, JIM goes to his shelf to get out his medicine bottle. Takes it over to NICK. DIANE follows and stands behind NICK. JIM leans down in front of NICK, showing him the bottle)

JIM

(Looks at the bottle and at NICK) You see this Nick? These are antidepressants, I take one every day because I have to. Otherwise, I won't be able to do anything. Can't be there for my family. Can't go to work. I'm just lost. I used to think depression was my own curse. Something I had to carry around. My own burden and no one else's. *(Puts a hand on NICK's cheek)* You've been carrying your own burden for so long. Sweet boy... let yourself rest. *(NICK starts sobbing a little)* We aren't calling Natalie.

NICK

(Disbelieving) You aren't?!

DIANE

No Nick, we aren't. *(Pauses, thinking of something to say)* Did we ever tell you what we used to call you before you came here?

NICK

(Wiping away his tears) No.

DIANE

Well, we didn't know what your name was. Natalie only told us a few things: it's a boy, he's a teenager, and he's gay. So, until we finally knew your name we'd call you "The Boy". *(NICK laughs a little)* We'd send text messages to each other saying, "Any word on 'The Boy' yet?", "Natalie has more paperwork for 'The Boy'". *(NICK laughs even more)* We drove ourselves

crazy waiting to meet you. Then, when Natalie called me and said, “we’re ready”, I left work so fast I thought I was having another baby (*laughs*). I drove up to the building and I immediately started worrying if we were doing the right thing. All these second thoughts going through my head as I walked into the office and then, when I saw you, so lost and scared, I knew God was telling me this was right. That feels like an eternity ago, because now, you aren’t “The Boy”, you’re Nick, our boy.

(NICK starts sobbing and hugs them both, lights start dimming as things start to quiet down. Everyone gets up and NICK walks to the center of stage. Addresses the audience)

NICK

That... that was the first time I think I ever felt truly cared for. You hear people speak of “unconditional love”, and I’m sure many of you might disagree with me when I say this, but I don’t want that. Instead, I opted for something else. You see, love is something that is never one thing. It requires work to keep alive and well. There are always conditions to love and that is what makes it special. No, I don’t want unconditional love... I want authentic love, something that is real... something I found that day with the Pearsons. (*Pauses for a moment*) I’m sure you’re all wondering what happened after that. Well, I’d be foolish to say it immediately got better after that. Nope, life proved to be one big rollercoaster ride after another, some by my own design by the way. Never underestimate a teenager’s ability to get in to trouble. (*Laughs, starts walking around some*) In case anyone was wondering, me and Walker did get together, still together to this day actually. (*Looks at left hand, an engagement ring on it, holds it audience, speaks nostalgically*) Seven years. That’s how long we’ve been together, he popped the question last week. Needless to say, I’m still riding a high. (*At this point run crew have started milling about in the back reorganizing the set to look more festive, like Christmas is around the corner.*

A suitcase rolls towards NICK. He looks at it knowingly. Opens it and changes back into the black suit) Also needless to say, things are very different today. I no longer travel by trash bag but by luggage for starters. I'm also in my Senior year at New York University. After high school I got accepted into their creative writing program all the way in New York City, Walker also got accepted into NYU to study medicine. He's wanting to be a brain surgeon. We moved in together right out of high school, it was a dream. It also meant being far away from Diane and Jim, but they agreed, this was the chance of a lifetime. I got myself fixed with a publisher to write a series of children's books: *Boy in the Mirror*. Everything is almost perfect, the only thing missing is... *(trails off)*. They did their best, they really did, but no matter I couldn't see Sam. We even tried getting DHS to investigate what our dad was doing but they wouldn't listen. At some point we learned they moved out of state... they didn't leave a contact address. *(NICK has completely changed into his suit, a scarf around his neck, with his suitcase in hand, in the background there is now a Christmas tree, decorations hanging from the bookshelf. DIANE and JIM are milling about now, the run crew long since gone, getting the table set for dinner.)* It's weird to think about where I was just a few years ago. It's weird to think about how I felt so alone and how scared I was of saying "I'm gay". *(Laughs a little, car pulling up can be heard, NICK turns to face DIANE and JIM who are both near the table setting things up. Sound of a door can be heard opening)* Well, *(proudly)* I'm gay. *(Door slams shut and DIANE and JIM look at NICK, DIANE and JIM rush towards NICK)*

DIANE

Why hello stranger! *(Hugging him)*

NICK

(Smiling) Hey Diane.

JIM

(Hugging him as well) Nice to see you Nick!

NICK

Nice to see you too Jim.

DIANE

(Looks behind NICK) Where's Walker?

NICK

Oh he's coming, *(sound of a door opening can be heard, WALKER comes in carrying a big bag in one hand and a suitcase in the other. NICK says the next part like he's trying to get WALKER's attention)* he's trying to prove he's tough and can do things on his own, *(turning towards WALKER)* as usual! *(WALKER sticks his tongue out at NICK)*

DIANE

(Goes to WALKER) Oh boy, need help Walker?

WALKER

(Grunting) No thanks ma'am. Just some Christmas presents. *(Breathing heavy)* Umm, where can I put everything?

DIANE

Under the tree *(watches WALKER struggling, she anxiously goes over to help)*, here, let me get that for you. *(They both unpack the large bag with all the presents in them)*

NICK

(To JIM) I keep telling him *(JIM starts laughing and puts his arm around NICK, leading him to the dining area)* "let me help" and he says, *(imitating WALKER)* "no, it's okay, I got it." *(Phone*

starts ringing, continues ringing) Annoying. (*DIANE, looks at WALKER and at the phone, takes some deep breaths and walks over to the phone while NICK and JIM are speaking*) So when are the Ian and Kate clans getting here? I've been dying to see all the babies running around!

(DIANE has answered the phone.)

WALKER

(Out of breath) See? He does this all the time. *(To NICK)* Can we get married first before having kids?

NICK

Maybe, if I like you.

WALKER

Well maybe I'll just take my ring back.

(Meanwhile, DIANE glances back at NICK, places the phone down and walks over to him.)

NICK

(Smiling) Well mayb – *(DIANE interrupts him)*

DIANE

(A serious look is sprawled across her face) Nick.

NICK

(Concerned) Is everything alright?

DIANE

I think so. *(Smiling)* The phone is for you.

NICK

Who is it?

DIANE

(Uncertain) He said... he said he's Sam.

NICK

(Choking up) Sam?

(DIANE nods. She stands next to JIM and everyone is frozen, they all watch NICK with apprehensive eyes as he slowly makes his way to the telephone. The lights start dimming as he holds the phone in his hand. He takes one deep breath and puts it to his ear.)

NICK

Hello?

(His face lights up as the entire stage goes dark)

End of Act II

The End