

# PLAY IT STRAIGHT

a new play by

Richard Winters, Kerri Yund, and Gary Wright

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Ensemble: 10

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## ADULTS

**ROSS** - Male. Drama teacher, closer to the end than the beginning of his career. Sardonicly playful, enjoys his students (with one or two notable exceptions), but has a low opinion of the public education system in general.

**BEACHER** - Male or Female. Principal. Not malicious, just stressed. Seeks the path of least resistance, so not always the best person to have in your foxhole - but better than no one.

**HEWITT** - Female. Idealistic new Assistant Principal. Former teacher, in the first week of her first school admin job. Gay, married, liberal California native, fish out of water in a deep red state.

**STERN** - Male. Conservative Christian, Deputy Sheriff. Raising two teenage kids on his own.

## STUDENTS

**JENNY** - Female. Talented actor, devoted to the craft. Strong sense of justice, and a firm believer in the power of art to effect change in the world.

**IVAN** - Male. Class clown, a walking brainstorm, possibly ADD. Takes a lot of guff from his classmates, but lets it roll off his back.

**HOPE** - Female. Deputy Stern's oldest child. Devoted Teaching Assistant for Ross's Advanced Drama class. Gay. Out in Ross's class, but closeted everywhere else.

**GABE** - Non-binary. Out and very frank about it, but still has identity questions. Thoughtful and mature for their age. A good student and a loyal friend.

**CJ** - Male. Hope's younger brother. Hates Ross's Advanced Drama class because he's playing Romeo, and doesn't get along with his Juliet (Jenny).

**MORGAN** - Female. A bit of a hellraiser. Never met a bear she didn't want to poke.

# - ACT ONE -

## THE INCIDENT

*Lights up to reveal ROSS, standing in front of what appear to be 3 dead students.*

**ROSS:** Most important thing about teaching?

*(gestures at the corpses)*

Control the classroom. That's it. If control is lost, nothing else really matters. The new state standards - the district mandates for cross-subject curriculum - the updated guidelines regarding parental engagement which was introduced after the last lawsuit - all the collaborative scaffolding with corresponding rubrics which seamlessly leads each student upwards towards mastery - the constant checking for understanding - the awareness of racial and social sensitivity - the high academic standards. All that turns to crap without control. This-

*(jerks a thumb toward the student corpses)*

This is the ideal. A perfect teaching moment. Everyone's fully engaged, yet completely under control. It won't last.

*(brightens)*

Of course, the class is an exponentially more creative place when a little chaos creeps in! That's when the magic happens! . But "a little chaos" is also the portal to profanity, sexual tension, defiance, and the flaunting of social taboos.

*(whispers)*

And that's where I'm supposed to come in. To maintain constant control, while also being spontaneous and open and caring and entertaining and wise and humble. To be in charge without being in charge. And to do it for 35 years. That's what a great teacher does!

*(beat)*

I am not a great teacher.

*Ross steps out into the house to look back at the dead students.*

**JENNY** lies in state, on a row of rehearsal blocks, eyes closed, hands crossed over her chest.

Downstage of her is **IVAN**, his face gory with blood which has gushed from his mouth.

Nearby lies **HOPE**, a cup in her hand, a dagger and an open binder just downstage of her head.

That's it, just the dead bodies. Nothing else happening, for several seconds.....

**ROSS:** There's no pause here - what's going on?

*(Hope opens her eyes, looks out at Ross)*

Do any of you dead people have the next line?

*(Ivan and Hope shake their heads, but Jenny doesn't move)*

Of course not, that would be weird. What is happening - did we cut the rest of Act Five?

*Hope sits up, flips to the next page in the binder.*

**HOPE:** No, we're at the, umm... Oh, we did cut that part.

**IVAN:** Speaking of cutting, I was thinking-

**ROSS:** Not now, Ivan.

**IVAN:** `Kay.

*Jenny never moves a muscle. For all we know, she might really be dead.*

**HOPE:** *(flips to the next page)* Oh, this is where Gabe comes in.

**ROSS:** *(calls out)* Gabe?

**HOPE:** *(calls out)* Gabe?

**MORGAN** appears at the entrance from backstage.

**MORGAN:** Out back, I think.

**HOPE:** We need 'em onstage.

*Morgan runs backstage, calling "Gabe? You're on!"*

**ROSS:** Ivan, jury's still out on the blood capsule. Seems like there's a lot more blood now - did you do something different?

**IVAN:** Two capsules this time!

**ROSS:** Ah. That explains your diction - but who cares about the words, right?

**IVAN:** Exactly!

*GABE appears at the entrance, looking distressed.*

**ROSS:** Hi Gabe! That entrance is very subtle - almost like you're not even doing it.

**GABE:** I'm sorry.

**ROSS:** Let's keep going. Everyone go back to being dead, please. Be like Jenny - I love how you never break character, Jenny, have I told you that?

*(Jenny's corpse gives a "thumb-up")*

What a pro. From your entrance, Gabe.

*Gabe exits, re-enters in character (sort of).*

**GABE:** Oh God, I'm sorry, what's the... ?

**ROSS:** Just call for line.

**GABE:** Line, please?

**HOPE:** *(prompts him)* "Saint Francis be my speed."

**GABE:** Saint Francis be my speed. Line?

**HOPE:** *(prompt)* "How oft tonight..."

*(Gabe motions for more)*

"How oft tonight have my old feet stumbled at graves?"

**GABE:** How oft tonight have my old feet stumbled at graves.  
Line? Sorry, I need to grab my script.

**ROSS:** I coulda sworn you knew these last week - or did I dream that? Sometimes I have such beautiful dreams...

**GABE:** What page are we on?

**HOPE:** Fifty-three.

**ROSS:** But then I awaken.

*Gabe finds page 53.*

**GABE:** Which line?

**HOPE:** Line 135: "Fear comes upon me..."

**GABE:** Fear comes upon me.  
*(beat)*

Line?

**ROSS:** It's on the page. Right in front of you.

**GABE:** I'm sorry, I lost my place.

**ROSS:** Jeez Gabe, get it together!

**HOPE:** *(gently prompts)* "O much I fear some ill, unlucky thing."

**GABE:** Fear comes upon me. O much I fear-

**LOUDSPEAKER:** **Please excuse the interruption.**

*(NOTE: Loudspeaker announcements are made by the principal's secretary, KIM)*

**The faculty parking lot is for faculty parking only. Any non-faculty vehicles remaining in the faculty parking area after 3:00 p.m. today will be towed.**

**GABE:** *(sighs heavily)* Sorry, what is it?

**HOPE:** "O much I fear some- "

**GABE:** O much I fear some... unlucky...

*(Gabe slumps)*

Sorry, Ross.

**ROSS:** Don't be sorry, just be better. Focus!

*Hope jumps up and hugs Gabe, and Morgan comes in from offstage to offer comfort as well.*

**ROSS:** Let's take it from-

**JENNY:** It's okay, Gabe.

*Even Jenny stands up and hugs Gabe.*

**ROSS:** What's uh... What's going on?

**MORGAN:** It's Gabe's grandma.

**ROSS:** What about her?

*Hope comes all the way downstage to discreetly bring Ross up to speed on Gabe's life.*

**HOPE:** You know the family's moving her into that home next week?

**ROSS:** No, I did not know that.

**HOPE:** Yeah, she doesn't want to go, and she thinks they're all abandoning her, and... you know... it's a lot.

**ROSS:** Oh, Jesus. Okay.

*(Ross comes down out of the audience.)*

Gabe, I'm sorry, I had no idea.

*(puts an arm around Gabe's shoulder)*

I went through the same kind of thing with my Dad. Look, why don't you take a break?

*(points at Hope)*

Jump in there and read Friar Lawrence, will you?

**HOPE:** Sure.

**GABE:** No, I can do it, I'm just-

**HOPE:** It's okay, I got you.

**ROSS:** Thanks, Hope.

*(leading Gabe to a chair)*

Hey, don't worry about this. It's just a play. It's not going anywhere. You just sit here, and breathe. Deep breath. That's it. Keep doing it. Real life can be pretty unforgiving - it's okay to take a minute. It really is. Okay?

*(Gabe nods)*

Alright folks, let's take it from the Friar's entrance - Hope?

**HOPE:** *(on book)* Saint Francis be my speed. How oft tonight  
Have my old feet stumbled at graves? Fear comes  
Upon me. O much I fear some ill, unlucky thing.

*(enters crypt, lifts lantern)*

Romeo!

Romeo! O, pale! Who else? What, Paris too?  
And steep'd in blood?

*(Juliet stirs, wakes)*

Ah, the lady stirs.

**JENNY:** O comfortable friar, where is my Romeo?

*Pause...*

**ROSS:** What is this, Harold Pinter's *Romeo & Juliet* - why is there a pause every thirty seconds?

**HOPE:** Uh, voices offstage!

**MORGAN:** *(backstage)* Ooh, lookie there, a lantern! Methinks they are uppeth to no goodeth!



**HOPE:** I hear some-

**MORGAN:** *(backstage)* To the crypt of the Capulets! Cometh with me, let's get 'em! Come on! Let's go everybody, woohoo!

**ROSS:** Thank you Morgan, that's more than enough!

**HOPE:** I hear some noise. Lady, come, come away.  
Stay not to question, for the watch is coming.  
Come, go, good Juliet, I'll no longer stay.

**JENNY:** Go, get thee hence, for I will not away.

*Exit Friar Lawrence. Only, instead of exiting, Hope immediately returns to the floor as Romeo's dead body, holding the cup, just in time for Jenny to reach for it.*

**JENNY:** What's here? A cup closed in my true love's hand?  
Poison, I see. O, I will kiss thy lips.  
Haply some poison yet doth hang on them,  
To make me die...

*(Jenny fakes a kiss)*

Thy lips are warm!

**IVAN:** Aw man, you didn't do it!

**JENNY:** Shut up.

**IVAN:** She didn't kiss her!

**ROSS:** Ivan...

**IVAN:** Not gonna lie, I'm disappointed!

**HOPE:** You're dead, Ivan - you can't be disappointed.

*Jenny laughs.*

**IVAN:** Fine.

*Ivan goes back to being dead.*

*Everyone freezes except Ross, who breaks the 4th wall to address the audience.*

**ROSS:** Did you see that? How Hope handled that? "You're dead, Ivan - you can't be disappointed."

*(chuckles)*

Best TA I've ever had. Hands down. Let me just say this about TAs, Teaching Assistants. I've had a lot of them. I hate them. Oh, they always start out great. Very gung ho.

**MORGAN:** I can help you Mr. Ross!

**IVAN:** It'll be great, Mr. Ross!

**GABE:** I'll keep you organized, Mr. Ross!

**ROSS:** It's the only time they ever call me Mr. Ross. It's a dead giveaway.

**MORGAN:** Come on, Mr Ross!

**GABE:** Please, Mr. Ross?

**IVAN:** Pretty please Mr. Ross - it'll really help my GPA!

**ROSS:** Pester me till I break. So I take them on, and they're very helpful... for about a week and a half. Then they're sleeping on the couch, chatting on their phones, doing homework for their "real" classes, or, more likely, they're nowhere to be found. Useless. Worse than useless, because not only am I still running everything by myself, I have to also, now, monitor my TA. And they judge me.

**GABE:** Ross, you're so disorganized.

**MORGAN:** The floor's dirty, Ross.

**JENNY:** Ross, why don't you ever have any kleenex?

**ROSS:** Every few years, I make myself a promise: "No more Teaching Assistants." But then, at the end of last year...

**HOPE:** Ross? Can I be your TA next year?

**ROSS:** I thought I would miss Hope as a Drama student because she was a wonderful class leader - raised the bar for everyone - but she's even better as a TA! This rehearsal, perfect example: she's the glue holding it all together. Taking care of everyone, and she never, ever makes it about her. And she's not making anyone laugh - which I appreciate so much! Hope can be funny, believe me. But she reins it in. Why? Because most of these kids have the attention span of fruit flies, and if she goofs off, then everyone else will have permission to goof off, and things'll break down. Next thing you know, fifth period's just about over and we've lost fifteen, twenty minutes of rehearsal time, but hey, that puts me fifteen, twenty minutes closer to retirement and pension, so what do I care? But Hope does care.

*CJ enters, and stands looming over Gabe.*

**ROSS:** Unlike CJ, her challenging little brother.

**CJ:** You're in my chair.

**GABE:** Go away, CJ.

**CJ:** Move.

**GABE:** Leave me alone - I'm not in the mood today.

**CJ:** That's my seat!

**GABE:** Get away from me!

**ROSS:** CJ, you're late.

**CJ:** Not my fault - lunch took forever.

**ROSS:** McDonald's?

**CJ:** *(drinking from a McDonald's cup)* What was your first clue, Sherlock?

**JENNY:** *(sitting up)* Can we get on with it, please?

**ROSS:** Throw that drink away.

**CJ:** No, I paid good money for this.

**ROSS:** Then you got ripped off. Get rid of it, and get up here.

**CJ:** Let Hope do it - she's already on the floor.

**JENNY:** Just get up here, you dick!

**ROSS:** Let's cool down the language.

**HOPE:** *(gently)* Come on CJ. We're so close to the end.

*CJ starts to obey Hope.*

**ROSS:** Throw the drink away.

*While CJ finishes his drink, and throws away the empty cup, Ivan raises his hand.*

**IVAN:** Can I just say? Hope and Jenny as Romeo and Juliet? I'd pay to see it. We could charge double!

**ROSS:** Doubtful.

**CJ:** *(to Hope)* Danger ahead.

**HOPE:** CJ!

**CJ:** Hope!

**ROSS:** *(to CJ)* Is that gum? Get rid of it.

*Hope holds out her hand; CJ spits the gum into it, Hope*

*throws it away.*

**IVAN:** Okay, no girl-on-girl action - but this play really needs a better ending.

**JENNY:** Oh God.

**IVAN:** I mean, the kids are dead, and the grownups are all-  
*(stupid grownup voice)*

"What have we learned? Maybe we should all try to get along."

*(back to normal voice)*

So I was thinking, Hey, what if they don't die?

**CJ:** Yeah!

**JENNY:** *(profoundly unimpressed)* Oh, how original.

**IVAN:** The apothecary screws up and doesn't give him the poison! He gives him, like, shrooms or something.

**JENNY:** Jeez, come on!

**CJ:** Gummies?

**MORGAN:** Yassss, and everyone takes 'em, and we're all trippin' balls for the rest of the show!

**JENNY:** Who's gonna write this?

**IVAN:** Or, no! He does die, but when she kisses him, he comes back to life!

**JENNY:** Can't we just do the play?

**CJ:** Or he gets frostbite on his lips, cuz it's Jenny.

**JENNY:** Or he gets a teeny tiny little boner, cuz it's CJ.

**IVAN:** No listen, Romeo's dead, right? But when she kisses him, he turns into a zombie-

**CJ:** And eats her brain!

**JENNY:** Get away from me, CJ!

**HOPE:** (*gently, to CJ*) Hey, that's enough.

**IVAN:** (*overlapping, no pause*) No, he's still totally in love with her, and it's freaking her out, so she backs away, and he's all-

*Ivan does his best horny zombie. Jenny shakes her head. Everyone else laughs - even Gabe.*

**IVAN:** And we get some music going, and Romeo starts dancing!

**MORGAN:** Zombie-o and Juliet!

**CJ:** (*tries some zombie moves*) Okay, that's funny as shit.

**IVAN:** And then Paris gets up too, and he's dancing! And then Mercutio and Tybalt come in and they're still all bloody, but they're dancing!

**MORGAN:** Dancing zombies!

**ROSS:** Practically writes itself, doesn't it?

*Morgan and CJ become dancing zombies.*

**GABE:** And then the whole cast!

**IVAN:** Hellz yeah, the whole cast! And the audience goes wild, right, right, right?!

*Ross is laughing, which makes Jenny feel betrayed.*

**JENNY:** And then what?

**GABE:** That's it, that's the curtain call!

**IVAN:** Yesssss! Zombie dance, dog! Show's over, everybody's happy! Ross, can we do it?

**ROSS:** *(in disbelief)* Zombies?

**MORGAN:** It is funny.

**JENNY:** Okay, but why?

**IVAN:** Cuz it's funny, hellooo?!

**JENNY:** But what's the point? Why can't we just play it straight?

**GABE:** Too late for me, girl.

**JENNY:** What's wrong with doing the play Shakespeare wrote, the way he wrote it?

**CJ:** Because it's boring and nobody will understand anything we say.

**JENNY:** Not everyone's as dense as you, CJ!

**HOPE:** Hey, now.

**JENNY:** *R & J* is a perfectly good play, as written.  
*(murmurs of agreement & disagreement)*

Why does rehearsal have to grind to a halt every time another stupid idea comes drooling out of Ivan's mouth?

**HOPE:** "Stupid"?

**ROSS:** Did you just say "stupid"?

**CJ:** She did, I heard it.

**IVAN:** *(snaps fingers)* Oh no you didn't.

**MORGAN:** Yup, totally said the "S" word.

**GABE:** Mm-mm-mm. Jenny, Jenny, Jenny.

**ROSS:** Jenny, what have I said about using that word in my class?

**JENNY:** "Ideas aren't stupid - they're just ideas."

**ROSS:** More than that... they're the Big Bang, the start of everything - nothing ever happens without an idea. Your choice to wear those socks today, or that hair clip? Those are ideas! Everything we make, everything we do, every word we say. Everything springs from an idea. From where? That's way above my paygrade, but I do know it's sacred. Ideas are the voice of the Gods, whispering in your ear, "Hey! Let's try this!" Inspiration. Divine guidance. It's anything but stupid. "Stupid" is the mortal enemy. It stops ideas cold. Shuts 'em down. Kills 'em dead. That's not what we're about, is it?

**IVAN:** *(grinning at Jenny)* Nope.

**ROSS:** So, Jenny. Apologize. Sacrifice your ego.

*This has happened before - one of Ross's running gags.*

**IVAN:** *(whispers)* Sacrifice! Sacrifice!

*The entire class takes up the chant, an intense whisper:  
"Sacrifice! Sacrifice!"*

**JENNY:** Do I have to?

**ROSS:** Only if you want an 'A' in Advanced Drama.

**JENNY:** To Ivan?

**ROSS:** And beg Thespis for forgiveness. And the Theatre Gods.

**JENNY:** Oh, jeez.

**ROSS:** That they might show you mercy.



*The chant continues, still at a whisper: "Sacrifice!  
Sacrifice! Sacrifice!"*

**JENNY:** You need help, all of you.

*(chant continues, under)*

Okay! I didn't mean it. The zombie thing would be funny - I just don't want to do it because I have this weird thing about liking Shakespeare, but whatever.

**ROSS:** I did not hear an apology.

**JENNY:** I'm sorry, Ivan! I'm sorry, theatre gods!

**MORGAN:** And Thespis!

**JENNY:** I'm sorry Thespis! I should not have said it was stupid, and I apologize!

*The chant stops.*

**ROSS:** *(to Theatre Gods)* She is but a child, forgive her. Ivan's idea is brilliant, creative, high-larious! But... I happen to agree with Jenny that it would be a far greater achievement to perform the play as written by the Immortal Bard himself.

*(general groans of disappointment)*

Now, let's give R & J a break - and use the rest of the period to knock out some of "The Moment" monologues.

*(more groans, as the students rush to sit down)*

Uh huh, you were hoping I'd forget, weren't you? I forget nothing.

*(evil laugh)*

Nothing!

*During the above, Ivan hurries to the seat Gabe was sitting in earlier, and gets there just ahead of CJ. Their argument is sotto voce, underneath Ross.*

**CJ:** Get out of my seat.

**IVAN:** No, I got here first.

**ROSS:** Who's gonna start us off?

*(no volunteers)*

I love this part.

*(pause again)*

Which kernel pops first?

*(hums Final Jeopardy theme)*

**CJ:** *(pushes Ivan)* Ivan, move!

**IVAN:** No way, get offa me!

**ROSS:** CJ, you lay hands on one more classmate today, you're going to the Office.

**CJ:** Ivan won't get out of my seat.

**ROSS:** You don't have a seat, no one has a-

**CJ:** I always sit here.

**ROSS:** Apparently not.

**CJ:** That's not fair.

**ROSS:** It's absolutely fair. "Not fair" is you coming in late, guzzling a soda, chewing gum, disrespecting everyone here, wasting our time with your relentless bullshit - that's not fair! Now sit down!

**CJ:** Where?

**ROSS:** In a chair!

**CJ:** What chair? They're all-

**ROSS:** Sit on the floor then, I don't care!

**CJ:** Floor's dirty, I'm not sitting on the-

**ROSS:** CJ!

**CJ:** Where am I supposed to sit?

**ROSS:** Why don't you sit on my lap? It's clean. Just find a seat.

**CJ:** Whatever.

**IVAN:** You can sit on my lap, CJ.

**CJ:** *(sotto)* You can sit on this, dickweed.

**ROSS:** Tell you what, as long as you're up, you can do your monologue for us. "The Moment." Come on, let's go.

*As CJ goes up onstage, MR. BEACHER enters, with MS. HEWITT.*

**ROSS:** Uh oh - everybody act normal.

**BEACHER:** I hope we're not disturbing your class?

**ROSS:** No, come on in.

**BEACHER:** Morning everyone. I'd like to introduce Ms. Hewitt, our new Assistant Principal. She's getting the lay of the land - do you mind if we watch for a few minutes?

**ROSS:** Welcome to the asylum, Ms. Hewitt. Okay CJ. Tell us about The Moment that changed everything for you, in thirty to sixty seconds, not counting intro. Give Hope your script - did you bring your script?

*(CJ hands a single sheet of paper to Hope)*

Excellent.

*(to Hope)*

Time him. Mark the errors.

*(to class)*

Let's give CJ our kind attention, please.

**CJ:** I'm CJ Stern, and my monologue is called:

*(looks Ross in the eye)*

"Senile."

*(he looks at his watch for the entire duration)*

I used to get mad at my Drama teacher for giving so many writing assignments. If I wanted to write, I woulda took a writing class. Did I mention all that writing made me mad? I mean really mad. Really really mad. Really really really mad. But then I realized my teacher's old, and senile, and probably doesn't even remember what class he's supposed to be teaching, so I never get mad anymore. Now I just feel sorry for him. Poor Ross. Poor poor Ross. Poor poor poor poor poor poor poor poor poor poor poor poor poor poor pathetic old Ross. The end.

*Class is silent. Everyone watches to see how Ross will handle this. After a pause..*

**ROSS:** Hope?

**HOPE:** Thirty-one seconds. No errors.

**CJ:** Nailed it.

**ROSS:** Thank you, CJ, for once again demonstrating how to do the absolute bare minimum, and still get credit.

**CJ:** You're welcome.

**ROSS:** Who's next?

**CJ:** *(looming over Ivan)* Why don't you go next, Ivan?

**JENNY:** I'll go.

**ROSS:** Okay Jenny.

**JENNY:** *(hands Hope her one-page script)* Hi. My name's Jenny Galloway, and my monologue-

**LOUDSPEAKER:** **Please excuse the interruption. The boy's bathroom in the G building is now closed for the day. Students must use the bathroom in the A building.**

*Groans from all the boys in class..*

**JENNY** *(doesn't skip a beat)* -is called "Shut Up and Listen!" When I first started acting, back in junior high, I thought it was so fun, even though back then, all I was doing was learning the lines, and figuring out how to say them. Usually in front of a mirror. I thought that was all there was to it. But then I got into Ross's cla- Mr. Ross's class - and Mr. Ross likes to say "Acting is like Life - it's best if you mostly just listen." Mr. Ross says even when you're playing a lead role, saying your lines is usually less than half of your performance. Listening is what separates the great ones from everyone else. And that was The Moment that really opened my eyes. And more importantly, my ears. The end.

**ROSS:** Wow, I said that?

**JENNY:** Yes, you did.

**ROSS:** I am so wise - I wonder who I stole it from. Hope, how'd she do?

**HOPE:** Thirty-six seconds. Four errors - but three of them were changing "Ross" to "Mr. Ross" which I'm pretty sure was on purpose.

**ROSS:** Okay, who-

**GABE:** I'll go next.

**ROSS:** Gabe, are you sure? You can wait till next week if you-

**GABE:** I'll go now.

*(hands his script to Hope)*

I know. I know what you're expecting. "It's gotta be a moment of me sitting in front of the bathroom mirror and crying my eyes out because no matter what I do, I will never, ever look the way I want to, or feel the way I want to in my body. But that'd be bullshit, 'cause I look great. So I'm not gonna tell a story of a moment where I "became" queer, but if you're curious: Cupid shot me with a rainbow arrow and I just started voguing.

*(Gabe strikes a pose, maybe does a little dance, sobers)*

But uh, no, no that realization was a uh... quieter one. And I've got a different Moment. You see, last year, I was getting bullied. Maybe not as bad as an after-school special, but bad. My brain started going to some dark places. And my parents - they're amazing, they really are - they showed me some videos from the "It Gets Better!" project. Honestly, it was pretty corny, but it was so sweet. And, yeah, I did start telling myself that when things got dark. It's okay if it's hard right now, because it's gonna get better! It gets better! And I'm an alright person, maybe a good one. Trying to be, anyway. I'm responsible. I get good grades, do extracurriculars, I have a job making pizzas after school. I shower every day, I brush my teeth, wear deodorant - I recycle! I look both ways before I cross the street! But none of that stops the looks I get. You know the ones. Disgust. Fear. The old women in the stores who pull their grandkids closer to them when I pass. The so-called friends who left me because they said they "couldn't follow me where I was going." And remember after that last school shooting, the protestors who had signs saying the shooter was God's punishment to America for "allowing transgenderism." Believe me, America's trying not to allow it! All those...assholes, in Congress and the Supreme Court and, well, the majority of voters in this state, they're trying! And so my Moment where everything changed was last week. I was laying in bed when all of this hit me like a meteor crashed through my roof and I realized that I can "pull myself up by my bootstraps" all I want, and my parents can be so awesome, and they can show me "It Gets Better!" as many times as they want... it doesn't change the fact that actually, it's not getting better. It's getting worse. Right now. I don't know why they hate us so much, but since I understood that, everything about the future feels so... fuzzy and out of reach. And I was thinking that I need to get out. Not out of my body or out of being me - I'm not killing myself, I promise. Killing myself means they win, but I don't know - I need to get out of this state? Out of this country? Out of here. But where can I go? Where do I have to go for it to get better? And when I do find it, my college dreams are probably going out the window with all my hopes of in-state tuition, too. And I have to leave my friends, and my parents, and my grandparents and everyone I love, all because it's a crime to be me. And nothing is going to get better as long as I'm here. And

nothing has felt the same since I realized all of this, in that Moment. The end, I guess. Sorry, I know that was long and -

**ROSS:** Hey, Gabe. Two things. One: you have nothing to be sorry for. You're a remarkable human being, and the world is a better place because you're here. My world is better because you're here. You hear me?

*(Gabe nods)*

Okay. Two: you did go a little over time - Hope, what was the final... ?

**HOPE:** Two minutes, and four seconds.\*

*\*Note: Feel free to adjust these timings to the actors' actual tempo.*

**ROSS:** Any errors?

**HOPE:** It was hard to keep track - they added some things, and left some things out, so...

**ROSS:** Okay. I want to commend you, Gabe and Jenny, both of you, for digging deep, speaking from the heart. That's lovely work. I think we have time for one more.

**IVAN:** I'll go!

**ROSS:** Ivan, come on down! Still gory from rehearsal!

**IVAN:** *(to Beacher and Hewitt)* Don't worry about the blood - it's not mine.

**ROSS:** Give Hope your script.

**IVAN:** Uh, small glitch, I think my Mom threw it out with the trash, but no problemo - I am 100% word perfect. Guaranteed.

**ROSS:** Uh huh.

**IVAN:** Hiya, boys and girls - and Gabe - my name is Ivan Sobcik, and my story is entitled: "The Bloody Zipper!"

*(clears throat)*

Some of you lucky people have seen me with my pants off, so you know that I always wear underwear. But I'm sure the rest of you are thinking, "I feel left out, I've never seen Ivan with his pants off, how do I know he always wears underwear?"

*(undoes his belt buckle)*

I'm glad you asked - I will now prove it to you.

**ROSS:** Ivan, stop. We don't need to see your underwear.

**IVAN:** But it's the visual proof that The Moment changed everything.

**ROSS:** You don't have to prove it. We trust you.

**IVAN:** *(hand over heart)* Aw, thank you.

**MORGAN:** I don't trust him at all - I need to see it.

*Other students voice their needs to see it, or not see it.*

**ROSS:** Try it again, without the visual aid. And hurry, we're running out of time.

**IVAN:** Should I do it really fast? Or just, normal?

**ROSS:** Whichever, as long as it's between thirty and sixty seconds.

**IVAN:** Okay, gotcha. "The Bloody Zipper!" Take Two!

*(takes a deep breath and talks very fast)*

Some of you lucky people have seen me with my pants off, so you know that I always wear underwear. But I'm sure the rest of you are thinking, "I feel left out, I've never seen Ivan with his pants off, how do I know he always wears underwear?" I'm glad you asked - I will now- no, that's cut. Okay, um-um-um-um-um... But there was a time, when I was a naive seventh grader, I heard of a thing called "going commando" and I thought, "That sounds super cool!" So I tried it. And I liked it. Until one day, my alarm didn't go off, and I had to get dressed in a dark bedroom, in a big hurry, so I pull up my pants and yank up my zipper and-



*The bell rings, immediately followed by-*

**LOUDSPEAKER:** Mr. Beacher, to the Administrative Office please, Principal Beacher, please contact the Office.

**BEACHER:** Thank you Mr. Ross. Always interesting to visit your class.

*Beacher exits along with the students. Lots of noise and ad libs about school, Ivan's monologue, each other, and whatever else teens talk about. Laughter and disruption. Hewitt lingers in the Drama room.*

**ROSS:** *(to class, as they leave)* We'll finish this, and hear the rest of them, first thing Monday! Ivan, make sure you have a script by then!

*(nudges Hope)*

Tally up those grades and enter them in the roll book, will you?

*Hope nods, and sits at his desk to do it.*

**HEWITT:** Some of that student writing was very moving!

**ROSS:** Yeah, the little weasels crank out some amazing stuff. Sometimes. Often, actually.

**HEWITT:** Do you have them writing a lot?

**ROSS:** Yeah, all year long. We put up a showcase of their stuff at the end of each semester. Scenes and monologues. It's always the best thing we do. My favorite part is watching Beacher hold his breath the whole time.

**HEWITT:** What do you mean?

**ROSS:** He never knows what the little darlings are gonna say. Drives him crazy. He asks me for the script ahead of time, but I doubt he reads it.

*(grins)*

Kids tell me it's the only creative writing happening in the school.

**HEWITT:** That can't be true, can it?

**ROSS:** Check it out. There's no Creative Writing class in our catalog.

**HEWITT:** There must be some happening in the English Departm-

**ROSS:** Nope. It's all about standardized testing. Teaching to test. Vocab, grammar, punctuation, a lot of essay structure. That's it.

**HEWITT:** That's a shame.

**ROSS:** When English scores are posted in the paper, everybody gets very focused on those numbers. And, we have some new School Board members who are pretty leery of anything that smells like creativity.

**HEWITT:** Mmm. I appreciated what you said to... I think their name is Gabriel? How supportive you were.

**ROSS:** Great kid. He's been through a-  
(*self-correcting*)  
They've been through a lot.

**HEWITT:** Yeah... We were pretty hesitant to move here, but my wife inherited the house she grew up in, a couple miles north of town, and we just couldn't resist the chance to... own a home.

**ROSS:** I get it.

**HEWITT:** I'm still getting used to it. Grew up in Berkeley, so I feel like I'm in a foreign country out here. And Mr. Beacher mentioned his struggles with the Board - sounds like a...

(*briefest pause*)  
...challenging environment.

**ROSS:** That's one way to say it.

**HEWITT:** Feels good in here. Between you and me, this is the first place I've felt comfortable since I moved here.

**ROSS:** *(nods sympathetically)* How are you liking the new house?

**HEWITT:** Love it! Farmstead with land, outbuildings, we have chickens - thinking about getting some goats.

**HOPE:** You'll regret the goats when they eat your shoes.

**HEWITT:** They eat shoes?

**HOPE:** They eat everything, and they stink.

**ROSS:** This is my golden TA, by the way, Hope Stern.

**HOPE:** Hi.

**HEWITT:** Very nice to meet you, Hope.

**ROSS:** We're just going into our weekly meeting, and we have a lot to cover, so...

**HEWITT:** *(smiling)* I'll get out of your hair, for now!

*(begins to exit)*

No Creative Writing? That needs to change.

**ROSS:** Could be your second regret.

**HEWITT:** No, I think it's essential, I really do. We can make a difference.

**HOPE:** It's nice to meet you, Ms. Hewitt!

**HEWITT:** Break legs!

*As Hewitt exits, Hope freezes mid-wave, and Ross breaks the 4th wall again.*

**ROSS:** "We can make a difference." That's adorable. You know what they call the Arts, in schools? "The Dumping Ground." A place to "dump" large numbers of kids, so they can keep class size down in the more important courses, like Basic Freshman Math, and AP Physics. See, for The System, there's no upside to artistic expression. You can't objectively grade it, you can't test it, you can't quantify it in any meaningful way, you can't secure funding with it. Worst of all, you can't control it. They're teenagers, they're appalling! All the time. In every direction. About everything. That's their job. Push the limits. Invent new ways to shock adults. Shock each other. As far as The System is concerned, a teenager's creativity is Pandora's box - just keep the goddamn lid on.

## **THE COMPLAINT**

*The Office. Beacher addresses Ms. Hewitt as he punches in a phone extension.*

**BEACHER:** Need your help with something.

*(into intercom receiver)*

Kim, let them know I'm on my way. Buses all set? Okay, keep me posted.

*(hangs up, turns to Hewitt)*

Here, listen to this.

*He presses buttons on the desk phone.*

**STERN:** *(through voicemail speaker)* Principal Beacher, guess what my son told me this morning? He says - are you ready for this? Are you sitting down? My son says, that yesterday afternoon, one of your teachers invited him to sit on his lap. Does that seem a little weird to you, or is that standard practice at your school? Sure seems weird to me. I don't want to tell you your business, but I'd be very surprised if that's part of the state-approved curriculum. Lap-sitting. Sitting on laps. Unless it's some newfangled teaching technique? Is this what they're teaching all the teachers in Teacher School nowadays? Along with the new math, and the new pronouns and all? I'm just real curious - what do you suppose he was trying to teach my boy? What's the desired educational outcome, here? What exactly is my son being groomed for? Don't bother calling back, I'm gonna swing by the school on my way to work, so we can discuss it in person. Looking forward to meeting with you, Mr. Beacher. This is Deputy Sheriff Stern, by the way. I'll see

you in about a half an hour.

**HEWITT:** Wow.

**BEACHER:** Yeah, he's here. Out in reception. Welcome to your new job. I can't get caught up in this right now - budget meeting at the D.O., already running late.

*(on his way out)*

Just find out who the teacher is, find out who the kid is - get as much info as you can. I'll be back in a couple hours.

*And he's gone, leaving Hewitt to hold the fort, alone.*

**HEWITT:** *(under her breath)* Oh shit. Okay...

*(buzzes out on intercom)*

Uh, Kim, would you send in the police officer, please?

*Deputy Sheriff Stern enters, in uniform.*

**STERN:** No, I prefer to see the principal.

**HEWITT:** I'm sorry, Mr. Beacher is off-site this morning.

*(extends her hand)*

I'm the Assistant Principal. Ms. Hewitt.

**STERN:** Okay.

*(shakes her hand)*

If Number One is on the run, Number Two'll have to do.

**HEWITT:** I- I just listened to your voice mail - do you mind if I ask you a few questions?

**STERN:** I'd love it.

**HEWITT:** Please have a-

*(he's already sitting down)*

-a seat. Can you tell me the name of the teacher, or the name of the class where the incident took place?

**STERN:** Mr. Ross. Advanced Drama.

**HEWITT:** *(makes a note)* And what is your-

**STERN:** You know, it just hit me - that must be what makes it "Advanced"! Sitting on the teacher's lap!

*(as Hewitt struggles to form a reply... )*

No? Excuse my ignorance - I don't know much about the theatre.

**HEWITT:** What is your son's name?

**STERN:** Christian Stern, Junior. No kidding, I want him removed from that class, today. Is that clear?

**HEWITT:** Yes sir, we will make that happen. Did Christian provide you with any further details about the... uh... incident?

**STERN:** Mr. Ross, a full-grown man, asked my son, a 15-year-old boy, to sit on his lap. Is that enough detail, or would you like to know what he was wearing?

**HEWITT:** Did it happen during class, or between classes, or- ?

**STERN:** Would that make a difference ?

**HEWITT:** Well, if it happened in private, that would certainly be a red flag. If it happened during class, there'll be witnesses, but it's also possible that it wasn't as bad as it-

**STERN:** Help me understand this, Ms. Hewitt. If I asked you to sit on my lap right now, in private, that would be a red flag?

*(Hewitt nods)*

But if we went over to the Drama class together, and I asked you to sit on my lap there, in front of everybody - that'd be acceptable?

**HEWITT:** No...

**STERN:** Then what are we talking about, here? I want my son removed from that class, and I insist that Mr. Ross be kept at least a hundred yards away from him at all times.

*(Hewitt makes a note of this request)*

And please remove my daughter as well. Hope Stern.

**HEWITT:** *(makes a note)* Hope... The TA? She's your- ?

**STERN:** That Drama foolishness takes up way too much of her time. Please, get her out.

**HEWITT:** Of course, Hope will-

**LOUDSPEAKER:** Please excuse the interruption - there are still three non-faculty vehicles remaining in the parking lot.

**HEWITT:** Hope will be-

**LOUDSPEAKER:** A blue Ford Focus, a gray Honda Accord, and a green Toyota Tundra. Those vehicles must be moved by 3:00 o'clock this afternoon, or they will be towed.

**HEWITT:** Hope will be removed from the class, as well.

**STERN:** And when are you gonna terminate this pedophile teacher?

**HEWITT:** That's an internal personnel matter - I can't comment.

**STERN:** You're not gonna do anything about this, are you?

**HEWITT:** On the contrary, most of my day will probably be about this.

**STERN:** But you're not gonna take him out of the classroom?

**HEWITT:** Internal personnel matter, to be handled in accordance with district and state guidelines.

**STERN:** And what are those guidelines, exactly? Ignore the problem? Hope it goes away?

**HEWITT:** No sir, we take your concerns very seriously, but Mr. Ross has rights, too. If you're not familiar with the concept of Due Process, you might want to look into it, Deputy.

*Stern smiles coldly, stands up.*

**STERN:** When will Mr. Beacher return?

**HEWITT:** Couple hours.

**STERN:** Nice to meet you, Ms. Hewitt. I look forward to seeing you around town.

*(moves to exit, pauses in doorway)*

By the way, do you happen to remember that homosexual choir teacher at Franklin High School, who was arrested a few years back for having an affair with one of his male students?

**HEWITT:** I... wasn't here at that time - I'm new to the area.

**STERN:** Yeah well, that incident started pretty much exactly the same way: Arts elective. Suggestive comments. Feckless administrators, turning a blind eye. Big, big lawsuit. That kid was seventeen years old. Mine is fifteen. So let me give

you some free legal advice - you and Mr. Beacher, both. Stop saying student safety is your top priority, and start acting like it. Get a sense of urgency.

*(as he exits)*

And you get my kids out of that groomer's class!

## **THE INQUIRY**

*The Jenny, Gabe, Morgan, and Ivan interviews are stylistically compressed into one.*

*Ms. Hewitt takes notes throughout.*

**HEWITT:** First of all, I want you to know that this is a safe space. If any student or faculty member has done anything inappropriate, you can speak out without fear. I'm here to listen to you. Please state your full name and grade, for the record.

**JENNY:** Jennifer Lynn Galloway, senior.

**GABE:** Gabriel Kanellos. I'm a senior.

**MORGAN:** Morgan Bishop, eleventh grade.

**IVAN:** Joseph Ivan Sobcik, alias Ivan the Terrible, alias Crazy Ivan, alias-

**HEWITT:** And your grade?

**IVAN:** Grade A, all the way, every day, bae!

**HEWITT:** Ivan-

**IVAN:** I'm a junior.

**HEWITT:** I'd like to ask you some questions about an incident that occurred yesterday in the 5th period Advanced Drama class.

**JENNY:** Yes ma'am.

**GABE:** Alright.



**MORGAN:** Ask away.

**IVAN:** You were there, weren't you?

**HEWITT:** Yes, briefly, but I want to ask about something that happened earlier in the class. Do you remember Mr. Ross asking Christian Stern to sit on his lap?

**JENNY:** Who?

**GABE:** Christian?

**MORGAN:** CJ?

**IVAN:** That's his name? Christian?

**JENNY:** How ironic.

**HEWITT:** Do you remember Mr. Ross asking CJ to sit on his lap?

**IVAN:** I remember the bell rang, and I didn't get to finish my Bloody Zipper story. You wanna hear how it ends?

**HEWITT:** No, I really don't. Do you remember Mr. Ross asking CJ to sit on his lap?

**JENNY:** Yes. He didn't mean it, obviously.

**GABE:** Sure.

**MORGAN:** That was hilarious.

**IVAN:** Nope. No memory of that, whatsoever.

**JENNY:** He's said a lot worse than that before. He told Ivan to do him right.

**HEWITT:** "Do him right"?

**GABE:** Ivan was doing a bad imitation of him, and he goes, "Ivan, if you're gonna do me, do me right."

**MORGAN:** That... was... hilarious.

**IVAN:** So wrong! I snorted my Monster out my nose.

**JENNY:** And then there was Freegan and Tits.

**HEWITT:** I beg your pardon?

**GABE:** Their names are Teegan and Fritz.

**MORGAN:** He just got 'em mixed up.

**IVAN:** I don't think he did it on purpose.

**JENNY:** Maybe he did.

**GABE:** Maybe he didn't.

**MORGAN:** Who cares?

**HEWITT:** I care.

**IVAN:** It was just Ross being Ross.

**HEWITT:** How often would you say Mr. Ross says or does these inappropriate things in class? Often? Sometimes? Rarely? Never?

**JENNY:** Define "often."

**GABE:** Define "inappropriate."

**MORGAN:** It's Advanced Drama - nothing's inappropriate.

**HEWITT:** Some things are.

**IVAN:** I'm gonna say... Rarely. No! Sometimes! Wait, what are the choices? Sometimes, Often, Rarely...

**HEWITT:** Often. Sometimes. Rarely. Never.

**IVAN:** Right, uh... Wait, what was the question?

**JENNY:** Ross is the best teacher I've ever had. Period. He's smart.

**GABE** He's kind.

**MORGAN:** He's honest.

**IVAN:** He's funny.

**JENNY:** He's an amazing acting coach.

**GABE:** I love his class.

**MORGAN:** Ross is the man!

**IVAN:** In Ross we trust.

**HEWITT:** Okay...

*Time lapse... The 3 students exit, Beacher enters.*

**HEWITT:** I have interviewed 31 students from the fifth period class. The only ones left are Hope and Christian Stern.

**BEACHER:** And Ross.

**HEWITT:** Do you want to sit in on these?

**BEACHER:** Not even a little bit. You handle it. I do need to be here for Ross - buzz me when you bring him in.

**HEWITT:** Okay.

**BEACHER:** And listen, I've known Dave Ross for eight years. Loose cannon, sure, pain in the neck, definitely - but there's

no way he's hitting on students in his Drama class, so let's push back on that narrative. See if you can get-

*(refers to note)*

-“Christian Stern Jr.” to tell you what really happened.

**HEWITT:** Got it.

*Beacher exits, CJ enters.*

**HEWITT:** Have a seat, Christian.

**CJ:** CJ.

**HEWITT:** Okay CJ, I just want to-

**CJ:** Am I in trouble?

**HEWITT:** No, not at all - this is a safe space. You can tell me anything. If anyone has done anything inappropriate, you can speak out. I'm here to listen to you.

**CJ:** Okay.

**HEWITT:** But first, I need to let you know that your father asked us to remove you and your sister from that class. Which we've done.

**CJ:** Hope too?

**HEWITT:** That's right.

**CJ:** No, you should leave Hope in there!

**HEWITT:** I'm afraid that's not your decision - or mine, for that matter.

**CJ:** Whose decision is it?

**HEWITT:** Your father's. This was his request.

**CJ:** No, that's not- There's no reason to take Hope out. I'm sure he meant just me.

**HEWITT:** He was quite clear, he wants you both out of that class. Do you remember Mr. Ross asking you to sit on his lap?

**CJ:** Yeah.

**HEWITT:** Why do you think he did that?

**CJ:** I don't know why Ross does anything.

**HEWITT:** Your father seems to be under the impression that he did it because he's attracted to you.

**CJ:** No, he-

**HEWITT:** Is that what you told your Dad?

**CJ:** No.

**HEWITT:** Are you sure?

**CJ:** Yes.

**HEWITT:** How did Mr. Ross ask you to sit on his lap?

**CJ:** How?

**HEWITT:** What words did he use?

**CJ:** He said, "Why don't you sit on my lap?"

**HEWITT:** Why would he say that?

**CJ:** I can't read his mind - why don't you ask him?

**HEWITT:** I will. But first I'm asking you. What happened in class that led up to this?

**CJ:** Oh I see, you're trying to make it my fault.

**HEWITT:** Not at all - I'm just asking you what happened. Safe space, remember?

**CJ:** Okay, uh, I couldn't sit in my normal seat, because there was someone sitting in it who was not supposed to be there, and Ross wouldn't make 'em move, and he kept telling me to sit down, but there was nowhere else to sit, so I asked him where I'm supposed to sit, and he said, "Why don't you sit on my lap?"

**HEWITT:** CJ, do you think you might be leaving out any details

that would help me to understand exactly what happened?

*Beat.*

**CJ:** No.

**HEWITT:** At the time Mr. Ross said that, did you think he was coming on to you?

**CJ:** No, I thought he was being a jerk.

**HEWITT:** Were you embarrassed?

**CJ:** Yeah, I was!

**HEWITT:** Were you so embarrassed you wanted to get Ross in trouble, so you-

**CJ:** You know what? Maybe Ross should be in trouble! He cusses in class, he takes the Lord's name in vain, he makes us do pagan rituals, he lets people work on inappropriate scenes, he-

**HEWITT:** Pagan rituals?

**CJ:** He makes us pray and sacrifice to the theatre gods. I thought prayer wasn't allowed in school.

**HEWITT:** Good point, CJ.

*(making a note)*

But I'm still struggling to understand how your father became so convinced that Mr. Ross was "making unwanted advances" on you in class, if you didn't-

**CJ:** Hey, my Dad thinks what he wants to think, I can't control that! All's it was, was I didn't sleep good last night, I didn't want to get up, I didn't feel like coming to school 'cause I had a sucky day yesterday, and Dad asked me what happened, and I told him a bunch of stuff, including the "sit on my lap" thing - and that was the only thing that stuck. Probably doesn't even remember the rest of it - but now he's obsessed with Ross trying to get me on his lap. You know, I don't have to, like, "Jedi mind trick" my Dad into thinking teachers are perverts - he already thinks that.

**HEWITT:** Hmm. Okay, thank you, CJ. You can go back to class.

*CJ exits, Hope enters.*

**HEWITT:** Hope.

**HOPE:** Hi Ms. Hewitt.

**HEWITT:** Have a seat. First, I want you to know that this is a safe space. Do you understand?

**HOPE:** Yes.

**HEWITT:** You can tell me anything. I'm here to listen to you. Okay?

*(Hope nods)*

Do you know why I asked you to come in?

**HOPE:** Because my Dad called the school about something Ross said to CJ?

**HEWITT:** "Why don't you sit on my lap?"

**HOPE:** Yeah. Ross. It wasn't... how it sounds. I tried to tell my Dad that, but-

**HEWITT:** I appreciate that, but we do have to take every parental complaint seriously, so... Did you happen to hear CJ tell your father about the incident?

**HOPE:** Yes I did.

**HEWITT:** Did CJ imply that Mr. Ross was "making unwanted advances" on him during class?

**HOPE:** *(thinks about it, grimaces)* I don't think he meant to, but when Dad took it that way, CJ just, kinda, let him run with it. He didn't really try to tell the truth. I tried, but Dad wouldn't listen to me - he was already picking up the phone to call the school.

**HEWITT:** So, you never thought Mr. Ross was, uh-

**HOPE:** Oh gosh, no! Nobody thought that! Ross was just frustrated with CJ, and he was trying to get him to stop being such a-

**HEWITT:** Right, okay. Is that how CJ typically behaves in Mr. Ross's class?

**HOPE:** No, CJ's not- He's just having a bad time. He's playing Romeo, and he's not getting along with Jenny. Juliet. I don't know why - they seemed fine at first, and now they can't stand each other. I wish he liked the class like I do, but I think he's actually glad to be getting out.

**HEWITT:** How'd you know he's getting out?

**HOPE:** I heard my Dad leave the message - you have to do what he says, right?

**HEWITT:** Right, of course. I actually met your Dad this morning.

**HOPE:** Oh, gosh.

**HEWITT:** He came by, we had a chat.

**HOPE:** I'm sorry.

**HEWITT:** It was fine.

**HOPE:** Really?

**HEWITT:** Does that surprise you?

**HOPE:** Well, ever since Mom left, he's been super protective of us, so if he thinks Ross was being inappropriate with CJ, I can picture him being not very nice about it. Was he... not very nice?

*(Hewitt smiles)*

Yeah, he's never really approved of us being in Drama - too time-consuming, too weird, too gay - sorry, that's his opinion, not mine, believe me.

**HEWITT:** Noted, thank you. I'm, ugh...

*(rubs her forehead)*

I'm so sorry to have to tell you this, Hope, but your father requested that we remove you from the Drama class, as well.

**HOPE:** Oh no. You can't! Ross needs me - I'm his TA!

**HEWITT:** I'm aware. Mr. Ross will have to make do without you.

**HOPE:** Why do I have to leave? I don't have a problem with Ross, he's the best teacher I ever-



**HEWITT:** Your father is concerned that the atmosphere in that class is not good for you and CJ.

**HOPE:** It's great for me, it's the best part of my day!

**HEWITT:** *(nods sympathetically)* I'm really sorry. Maybe you can get your Dad to change his mind?

**HOPE:** Maybe you could! You could say dropping out of Drama will hurt my GPA!

**HEWITT:** Well, that's not actually true, Hope. And it's not my place to argue with your father about what's best for his children.

**HOPE:** Ms. Hewitt, that class is the only thing I look forward to - literally the only thing!

**HEWITT:** Well, listen, maybe we can get you into another elective, like-

**HOPE:** No! All my friends are in that class! Ross is my favorite teacher! It's the only... You said his classroom is the only place you feel comfortable since you moved here, remember?

*(Hewitt nods)*

Well, me too. As far as I know, it's the only class I have with other gay kids in it.

*Rapid-fire exchange, with Hope and Hewitt urgently trampling over each other's words.*

**HEWITT:** Sorry?

**HOPE:** It's the only place on campus where it feels safe to just be yourself, you know?

**HEWITT:** *(overlapping)* Hope-

**HOPE:** *(continuing without pause)* I should warn you - you need to be really careful who you come out to!

**HEWITT:** Okay, let's leave it at that.

**HOPE:** *(overlapping)* Ross is cool, obviously, but it's getting weird around here - they didn't used to hate us like they do now, I mean people are starting to-

**HEWITT:** *(overlapping)* Hope, I want to stop you right there.

**HOPE:** What? What's wrong?

**HEWITT:** Nothing. I mean, you haven't done anything wrong.  
*(beat)*

Are you... ? Are you not aware of the district policy that requires us to report to parents, if a student comes out at school?

**HOPE:** *(confident)* What? No, that's not a thing!

**HEWITT:** It is, I'm afraid.

**HOPE:** No, I know the policy - and it sucks - but it's about trans and non-binary and gender non-conforming kids and-

**HEWITT:** No, you're thinking of the state law. The district policy goes... much farther.

**HOPE:** *(real fear setting in)* Ms. Hewitt, don't tell my Dad, please.

**HEWITT:** He doesn't know?

**HOPE:** Oh God, no! Please don't tell him!

**HEWITT:** Why haven't you-

**LOUDSPEAKER:** **Please excuse the interruption. Don't forget! Next week is spirit week! Monday is Twins Day!**

**HOPE:** Ms. Hewitt, I was-

**LOUDSPEAKER:** **Dress like your twin and earn points for your class. Winning class gets an ice cream party.**

**HOPE:** I was joking! I'm not gay - that's just my dumb, problematic sense of humor. So cancel me or whatever, but...

*(Hewitt looks skeptical)*

I make the dumbest jokes, I'm sorry!

*(Hewitt shakes her head)*

Can't you just pretend I didn't say anything?

**HEWITT:** Hope, you don't seem like a dishonest person - but have you noticed you keep asking me to lie for you?

*(Hope stands, paces like a trapped animal)*

Does your brother know?

**HOPE:** Yes, CJ's known for a... a while now. I asked him not to tell Dad.

**HEWITT:** Why? Are you afraid your father will hurt you, physically?

**HOPE:** No, no, no-

**HEWITT:** Are you sure? If you think he might harm you, through violence, or neglect, or-

**HOPE:** No, it's not that - he's not like that.

**HEWITT:** Do you have any reason to think he might throw you out of the house?

**HOPE:** No, I don't think he would do that.

**HEWITT:** You did say he's not very nice, sometimes.

**HOPE:** Nobody's nice all the time!

**HEWITT:** Is he unpredictable?

**HOPE:** No, I know exactly what he'll do.

**HEWITT:** What?

**HOPE:** Our church has this program that's supposed to help gay people stop being gay.

**HEWITT:** Ah.

**HOPE:** Dad's friends with these guys that run it - they call them "Spiritual Advisors."

**HEWITT:** You're talking about conversion therapy.

**HOPE:** I guess. They just call it The Program.

**HEWITT:** Uh huh.

**HOPE:** I can't stand these guys. I don't understand how people don't see through them - they're such obvious phonies!

**HEWITT:** Okay, that changes things - this is good, actually.

**HOPE:** Good, how is it good?

**HEWITT:** *(punches in an intercom extension)* Mr. Beacher? Can you come in here, please? No, I'm talking with Hope Stern - something's come up.

*(to Hope)*

It's gonna be okay.

**HOPE:** Why is Mr. Beacher coming in?

**HEWITT:** Don't worry, we can protect your privacy, and we will. But not by lying. We have to do it the right way, for the right reasons.

**HOPE:** What do you mean?

**HEWITT:** How much do you know about conversion therapy?

**HOPE:** Just, they do it on weeknights in the church basement, and the guys who run it give me the creeps.

*Beacher enters.*

**BEACHER:** What?

**HEWITT:** I can't believe we have to have this conversation, but... Hope just told me she's gay. I informed her of our duty to report - unless of course, she's in an abusive situation. And as it turns out, she is.

**HOPE:** No I'm not!

**HEWITT:** Yes, Hope, you are.

**BEACHER:** She doesn't seem to think so.

**HEWITT:** Her church has a conversion therapy program!

*(Pause... Beacher shrugs: "So?")*

And she's pretty sure, if we tell her father she's gay, he's gonna put her into it.

**BEACHER:** Okay, backing up a bit - Hope, is your Dad violent?

**HOPE:** No.

**BEACHER:** Has he ever hit you, or- ?

**HOPE:** (*looks at Hewitt*) No.

**BEACHER:** Are you afraid he might kick you out of the house, if you- ?

**HOPE:** No - she already asked me this stuff!

**BEACHER:** Alright, no need to raise your voice - I'm just asking questions.

**HEWITT:** You know conversion therapy on minors is illegal in most states, right?

**BEACHER:** Not this one.

**HEWITT:** No, of course not - but it sure as Hell should be! Every major medical and psychiatric authority calls it "torture" and "child abuse," and if a child is in an abusive situation-

**BEACHER:** I'm gonna stop you right there. I don't know anything about conversion therapy, but-

**HEWITT:** I do. My wife went through it when she was in high school. She came out depressed and suicidal. Still gay, mind you, because it doesn't work - but she does have some nice PTSD to show for it.

**BEACHER:** I hear you, Ms. Hewitt. But we-

**HEWITT:** The crooks that run these programs should be in jail - they're just taking money from homophobic morons, and torturing their children!

**BEACHER:** Okay, let's dial it down a little.

**HOPE:** My Dad is not a moron!

**HEWITT:** Sorry, I shouldn't have said that, but come on! Any parent that forces a child to-

**BEACHER:** Hey! You need to cool down. It's not your place to judge parents. District policy is, a student comes out, we report to the parents. Either we follow the policy, or we don't.

**HEWITT:** I say we don't.

**BEACHER:** Well, I'll make a note of that for your file. We do not come between parents and their children. Ever. That's exactly the kind of meddling the School Board is- Look, we can have this conversation later.

*(turns to Hope)*

Hope, I'm informing you that district policy requires us to notify your parents, within 72 hours, that you believe you're gay. We will wait...

*(looks at his watch)*

Until 11:00 a.m. Thursday, to give you a chance to tell them yourself. I recommend that you take advantage of-

*(but Hope is already out the door)*

Hope!

**HEWITT:** Hope!

**LOUDSPEAKER:** Mr. Ross, please report to the Administrative Office, Mr. Ross to the Office, please.

## **THE ULTIMATUM**

*Beacher and Hewitt are seated, as Ross enters.*

**ROSS:** This doesn't look good.

**BEACHER:** Have a seat, Dave. Before we get started, I want you to know this is the part of my job I enjoy least.

**ROSS:** Then let's just skip it and go out for a beer.

**BEACHER:** Ms. Hewitt will be recording this meeting, for the record.

**ROSS:** Recording? What is going on?

*Beacher nods. Hewitt presses "Record" on her phone.*

**BEACHER:** Mr. Ross, this is a formal inquiry regarding-

**ROSS:** "Mr. Ross"? What happened to "Dave"?

*(to Hewitt)*

Wasn't I "Dave" just a second ago?

**BEACHER:** *(cutting motion to Hewitt)* Okay, cut it.

**ROSS:** What's this about?

**HEWITT:** We received a complaint from a parent.

**ROSS:** About me?

**BEACHER:** Let's not have the meeting before we have the meeting. This doesn't have to take long.

*Beacher makes a winding motion, and Hewitt starts recording.*

**ROSS:** So, no beers?

*Off Beacher's pained look, Hewitt stops the recording, and re-starts it.*

**BEACHER:** Mr. Ross, this is a formal inquiry-

**ROSS:** Who's the recording for, by the way?

*Beacher makes a cutting motion - Hewitt stops the recording.*

**BEACHER:** As I said, it's for the record. For whoever might need it, but for starters, a transcript will go in your file. And I'll probably CC the District Office. Okay?

*(He nods to Hewitt, who starts the recording again)*

Mr. Ross, this is a formal inquiry regarding an incident which occurred on April 17th of this year. You may end this inquiry at any time. Do you understand?

**ROSS:** Yesterday?

**BEACHER:** Yes, April 17th was yesterday.

**ROSS:** What happened yesterday?

**BEACHER:** Do you understand that this is a formal inquiry, and that it's being recorded? You understand that?

**ROSS:** Well, now I feel underdressed - should I put on a tie?

*A laugh sputters out of Hewitt, which draws an annoyed glare from Beacher.*

**HEWITT:** Sorry. Did you want me to cut it?

*Beacher decides to press on.*

**BEACHER:** Mr. Ross, I suggest you take this seriously, because the D.O. certainly will. You're here because an incident was reported, and a complaint has been filed against you by a parent of one of your students, Christian Stern.

**ROSS:** CJ?

**BEACHER:** *(louder)* No, Christian Stern.

**HEWITT:** *(quietly)* Uh, Christian Stern prefers to be called CJ.

**BEACHER:** I- okay, thank you. Mr. Ross, do you recall having an interaction yesterday, April 17th, with, uh... CJ?

**ROSS:** You mean Christian Stern?  
*(another laugh sputters out of Hewitt)*

Yeah, I have interactions with him every day. Usually it involves getting him to stay on task, or shut up, or sit down, or stop provoking other students.

**BEACHER:** Do you remember asking CJ Stern to sit on your lap?

**ROSS:** Oh my God, really?

**BEACHER:** Do you?

**ROSS:** *(laughing)* That's why I'm here?

**BEACHER:** Do you remember the incident?

**ROSS:** "The incident." Yeah, I believe my exact words were "Why don't you sit on my lap?"

**BEACHER:** So you did say it?

**ROSS:** I just said I said it.

**BEACHER:** Why would you say that?

**ROSS:** Because he asked me where he should sit.  
*(beat)*

Do you have any interest in the context of this, uh-

**BEACHER:** Unforced error? Yes please, in what context did you



feel it was appropriate for you to ask a student to sit on your lap?

**ROSS:** Oh, please! You don't honestly think I wanted him to sit on my lap, do you?

**BEACHER:** Well... You did ask him.

**ROSS:** Okay, loud and clear for the irony-impaired - it was not a serious invitation! Everyone in class understood that at the time, including CJ. For the record - is this thing on?

*(taps Kim's recording device)*

This is what happened: CJ was pretending he couldn't locate a seat, he seemed determined to create a disturbance, and impervious to my requests and commands to sit. So I tried a different tactic - in the hope that it would embarrass him just enough to make him sit down, shut up, and stop disrupting my class! The end.

**BEACHER:** And the "different tactic" was aski- sarcastically asking him to sit on your lap?

**ROSS:** Correct.

**HEWITT:** Did it work? Did he stop disrupting your class?

**ROSS:** Momentarily.

**BEACHER:** Okay. Thank you for clearing that up, Mr. Ross.

*(he signals Hewitt to stop recording)*

On the subject of classroom management, I'd like to touch on a couple things off the record, before we wrap this up.

**ROSS:** Okay, am I Dave now, or am I still Mr. Ross? I can't keep up.

**BEACHER:** A couple things came to our attention, today.

*(consults notepad)*

We have a report that you sometimes compel your students to pray to pagan gods, and make sacrifices to them?

*Ross tilts his head, baffled.*

**HEWITT:** *(helpfully)* The theatre gods?

**ROSS:** Oh!

*(laughs)*

That's- No, we're not worshiping pagan gods - that's just... teaching schtick. Whenever somebody mocks someone else's idea, they must apologize to Thespis.

*(off Beacher's bewildered look)*

He isn't technically a God. But the kids don't really care. It's just a way to keep all the negative judgments out of the room, otherwise they all start poking holes in each other's-

**BEACHER:** I'm going to recommend that you abandon that practice, and replace it with some other pedagogical method. Preferably one that can't possibly be described as "prayer in school."

**ROSS:** Seriously?

**BEACHER:** Yes! We have people on the School Board who would like to see us institute a daily prayer right after the pledge, and hang the Ten Commandments in the multipurpose room. It comes up every month. We are, of course, resisting that. It does not help our case if-

**ROSS:** Okay, okay, got it, no more Thespis!

**BEACHER:** Thank you. Next item. When we-

**ROSS:** But what about Winter Solstice?

**BEACHER:** What happens at Winter Solstice?

**ROSS:** Well, we like to sacrifice a coupla freshmen to Moloch - but if you think people are gonna be weird about it..

*Hewitt tries desperately to hold in the laugh, but fails.*

**BEACHER:** *(to Hewitt)* Having fun?

*(Hewitt shakes her head, looks contrite)*

When we were in your class yesterday, one of your students spoke at length about the "It Gets Better" campaign, and some other things..

**ROSS:** Yeah.

*Beacher pulls a 7-page printout from a folder, and turns to one of the interior pages.*

**BEACHER:** Why do I have to remind you that HB 1321 prohibits-

*(reading a highlighted quote from the bill)*

-"classroom instruction on sexual orientation or gender

identity”?

**ROSS:** That was not instruction. It was a student giving an oral presentation.

**BEACHER:** The law says “classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties.”

**ROSS:** Again, it was not instruction, and there was no third party - it was a student!

**BEACHER:** That’s a third party!

**ROSS:** I’m pretty sure students are the second party.

**BEACHER:** I’m not gonna get into it with you - I’m telling you what the law says - you can’t assign students to talk about this stuff.

**ROSS:** I didn’t. The assignment was to talk about a Moment that was a turning point in their life - which they did.

**BEACHER:** Clearly, your students need more stringent guidelines from you on what’s acceptable, and what’s-

**ROSS:** No no no, hold on a second! My students write about their lives, and their thoughts and feelings about them. Those are our classroom materials. Saves us a fortune in textbooks, by the way - you’re welcome. I’m not gonna tell a student their life is not “acceptable” just because we have a few tightasses on the School Board who wish they didn’t exist.

**BEACHER:** They? How many students are we talking about?

**ROSS:** Gabe’s pronouns are they/them.

**BEACHER:** Yeah, I caught that - I’m asking you how many gay students you have in your class.

**ROSS:** What is this? What are you doing right now?

**BEACHER:** If you have students in class who identify as members of the LGBTQ community, you are obligated to report that fact to their parents.

**ROSS:** Gabe’s parents already know.

**BEACHER:** Well, today we discovered another gay student of yours whose parents don't know.

**ROSS:** Which student?

**BEACHER:** Hope Stern.

*Pause...*

**ROSS:** Okay, so... ? What now? You're gonna tell her Dad? Is that really gonna happen?

**BEACHER:** Ms. Hewitt will be telling him, later this week. By the way, if you've been concealing that information, you are in violation of district policy. But we can get into that at a later date. Another thing that came up in Hope Stern's interview - she seemed to imply that there are other gay kids in your Advanced Drama class. "Kids" - plural. So I'd like to know, if you know, who they are?

**ROSS:** Wow, did you just ask me to name names?

**BEACHER:** No, I'm asking if you-

**ROSS:** Why don't you come to my class and grill them yourself, Principal McCarthy?

**BEACHER:** That's not what I'm asking.

**ROSS:** "Are you now, or have you ever been, a gay kid?"

**BEACHER:** Maybe save the Drama for your class, okay? I'm not after your kids, I am simply trying to gauge the extent of your violation of district policy.

**ROSS:** *(flips him off)* Try to gauge the extent of this, Jim.

*Pause...*

**BEACHER:** Let's record this next bit, please.

*Hewitt presses "Record."*

**BEACHER:** Mr. Ross, I am informing you that Mr. Stern has requested that his children, CJ Stern and Hope Stern, be removed from your fifth period class. This action has already taken place. As per district policy, you are instructed to have no

contact with either of them. Do you understand?

**ROSS:** Hope's my TA.

**BEACHER:** Not anymore.

**ROSS:** We're in the middle of a project - I need to meet with her at least once, so she can update me on-

**BEACHER:** *(overlapping)* Absolutely not. You are not to talk to her.

**ROSS:** What if she wants to talk to me?

**BEACHER:** Let her know that you have been instructed not to interact with her.

**ROSS:** Just cut her off. Like I don't care. She's been in my class for four years, it's a big part of her life - we talk all the time. We went through the lockdown together, we... And now you're yanking her out, plus you're gonna tell her wingnut father she's gay. Have you even stopped to think for one second, what you're putting this girl through? Or are you too busy covering your own ass?

**BEACHER:** I am telling you to abide by district policy and state law - absolutely no contact. Do you understand?

**ROSS:** Unbelievable.

**BEACHER:** This is serious, Mr. Ross. You can be suspended, or fired, for violating this policy. Do you understand?

**ROSS:** Unbelievable.

**BEACHER:** I need an answer for the record. Do you understand that you're to have no contact with either CJ Stern or Hope Stern?

**ROSS:** Jesus Christ.

*(long pause, then, into the recorder)*

Yeah. I understand.

## - ACT TWO -

### THE FLASHBACK

*Hope sits at Ross's desk with notepad and pen.*

**ROSS:** We're not supposed to be friends with the students. It's considered inappropriate. But Hope had been a fixture in the Drama universe for the past four years - that's hundreds of hours of instruction, and collaboration on about a dozen after-school projects. I had written several heartfelt letters of recommendation for her to include in college application packets. As my TA, she met with me during sixth period once a week - I always looked forward to it.

**HOPE:** Okay, what else?

**ROSS:** Safety lights and glow tape backstage.

**HOPE:** *(makes a note)* Right, okay. And?

**ROSS:** One entire week of rehearsal, with everyone here.

**HOPE:** *(laughs)* What about things that are actually possible?

**ROSS:** But that's so limiting. Let's see...

*(looking around the room)*

Let's hang masking there, and there. Deck needs a fresh coat of paint. Can you help me Monday after school?

**HOPE:** Yeah, I'll get Gabe to come in too. I think we're gonna need new rollers - the ones in the shop are all pretty trashed.

**ROSS:** *(sighs)* Okay, go to True Value, get new rollers and paint trays, and throw the old ones out.

*(rummaging in his desk's file drawer)*

And let's keep them clean this time!

**HOPE:** Don't yell at me, I didn't-

**ROSS:** I'm not yelling at you, I'm yelling at the frickin'... universe.

**HOPE:** "Frickin'?" Okay boomer.

**ROSS:** Hey, you want an A-minus? Keep it up.

*(Hope laughs, as Ross reads from a pink P.O. copy)*

Write this down. One gallon, Diamond Brite, Midnight Black, semigloss, latex paint, product number 22409-1.

**HOPE:** *(writing)* "22409-1." Should that be a separate P.O., or...?

**ROSS:** God no, we'll be waiting till Spring. I'll get you sixty bucks out of petty cash - that'll cover it. If you have enough left over, why don't you repaint the rehearsal cubes too. And maybe the-

*The school alarm bell sounds.*

*Ross and Hope ad-lib throughout this section - it doesn't matter if the audience can hear them or understand them - the action is the important thing.*

*A recorded message blares out of the loudspeakers, calling for initiation of lockdown procedures. As soon as the message ends, the alarm bell goes off again.*

*Ross directs Hope into a hiding place, and-*

*Hurries around the space, locking exterior doors and windows, closing blinds, turning off lights, etc.*

*The alarm bell and the recorded message continue to alternate throughout this sequence. The din is constant.*

*Hope tries to help Ross secure the room, but Ross orders her back into hiding.*

*When he's done everything he can to keep intruders out, Ross joins Hope in - or near - her hiding place.*

*They listen to alarm/announcement/alarm/announcement, etc.*

*Hope receives a text message - Ross tells her to silence her phone.*

*The alarm/announcement cycle abruptly stops.*

*Dead quiet.*

*This is even worse.*

*Hope holds out her phone and begins to speak, but Ross shushes her.*

*Ross tells her to remain in hiding, and he goes to the door to listen...*

*After several seconds, he is startled by:*

**LOUDSPEAKER:** *(Beacher's voice)* **Lockdown is canceled! Remain in your present location, we are now sheltering in place. Repeat, we are sheltering in place.**

**ROSS:** Must've been a false alarm. Jesus, I'm too old for this shit.

*(turns the lights back on)*

You okay?

**HOPE:** *(looking at phone)* Some guy robbed a pharmacy. He never actually set foot on campus, but he came within a block - that's why we went into lockdown. My Dad texted me and CJ.

**ROSS:** *(nods at her phone)* Wow, you got the inside scoop - pretty cool.

*(Hope shrugs)*

That is quite the adrenaline rush. I had forgotten.

**HOPE:** Not your first?

**ROSS:** No, we had one five, six years ago, in the evening, during showcase. Had a full house in here.

**HOPE:** What? Did anyone get hurt?

**ROSS:** No. That was a false alarm, too. Your Dad texted you?

**HOPE:** Yeah. Being a deputy sheriff makes him pretty paranoid.

**ROSS:** Understandable.

**HOPE:** He's always worried about me and CJ.

**ROSS:** Things getting any better? With him?

*(Hope thinks about it, maybe grimaces.)*

You don't have to talk about it, if you-

**HOPE:** I don't know. 'Bout the same. I tried writing about it last year. Wrote a monologue for the showcase. "Dad Jokes."



**ROSS:** "Dad Jokes"? I don't remember that.

**HOPE:** I never used it. It felt... icky. Like a violation of his privacy - I couldn't do it. I'd rather remember him like he used to be, when I was little. This is gonna sound corny, but... I used to have this kids' Bible that my Mom and Dad got me when I was like four years old, with pictures inside and everything. The cover had this painting of Jesus smiling and holding like a lamb in his arms, because of course he is, and there's this group of kids around him. It was cute! Of course it was white Jesus, so I just thought, *that's my Dad*. I mean, I knew it was Jesus, but... Anyway. It's probably 'cause Dad's so good with kids. I have this memory - I must've been five or six years old - and I'm flipping through the pictures in this Bible, sitting on the couch, and Dad is down on the carpet, playing with CJ, who's a toddler. They're playing with Hot Wheels, making them race, and CJ wins every time! Even if he went backwards, he still won. A miracle! And after, like, the fifteenth time, Dad looked up at me, and winked. Like he was letting me in on the secret. And the secret, to me, is that we're in this thing together: me and Dad and CJ.

*(Ross nods solemnly)*

But now? The first sign things were going sideways, was when he got rid of the sports. He had sports on TV, 24/7 when I was little. If there was any kind of ballgame on, he'd watch it. Didn't matter what it was. I caught him awake one time at like, 2 am, watching European soccer - or futbol? - and just screaming at the tv in Dutch, I think? Not that he speaks it at all. Then all of a sudden, he stopped. Like, cold turkey. The players kneeling for the national anthem just pushed all his buttons, you know? So, sports got phased out, politics got phased in, and now it's always on TV, or on the radio in the car. And it's all so mean and stupid - sorry for using the S-word. Sorry, Thespis.

*(Ross waves a hand: "It's okay.")*

I've never been a big sportsball fan myself, but I'd give anything to go back to having that on all the time, instead of the so-called News.

**ROSS:** I hear you.

**HOPE:** And he says horrible things.

**ROSS:** To you?

**HOPE:** No, online.

**ROSS:** Online?

**HOPE:** That's how he unwinds after work. Facebook, Reddit, X, Fourchan, he comments under news articles all the time, about everything. Including, um... queer people.

**ROSS:** Ah. You ever say anything to him?

**HOPE:** No, God! It would just turn into a fight. Which I would lose. I'd rather just... let him think I'm who he thinks I am. Say that five times fast, I dare you.

*Ross tries it. Maybe he succeeds, maybe not - either way, it makes them both laugh.*

**ROSS:** This is all so universal, Hope - I swear I've been through the exact same thing with my Dad.

**HOPE:** With politics?

**ROSS:** Dementia. He's in assisted living now, but before we got him in there, we tried to take care of him at home for about four years. My sister Sarah handled most of it, she moved in with him. I helped out when I could - weekends and holidays, Christmas Break, you know, give her a chance to get away. Even though he was in his own house, Dad always wanted to "go home." He was obsessed with it. "When are we going home?" I would try to tell him he was home, but that just upset him, because the house he was living in, did not match the "Home" in his memory. Sarah set me straight, she said, "Hey dummy, stop arguing with him - you'll never win. Dementia is always right."

**HOPE:** Mmm...

**ROSS:** So, the next time he said he wanted to go home, I said, "Okay, let's go!" and loaded him into the car, and took him for a spin around town, and pulled up in front of the house, and said, "Well, here we are, home sweet home!" And it worked! Made him so happy.

**HOPE:** All you gotta do is tell people exactly what they want to hear - they'll believe you every time.

*(Ross laughs)*

What?

*(Ross keeps laughing)*

What?!

**ROSS:** Just remembering... I haven't thought about this in a long time... Dad's bedtime was around 8:30 or 9:00, and I would stay up and watch TV, and enjoy having a little time to myself, but one night, he'd been down for about twenty minutes, and he called out, "Emily, when are you coming to bed?"

**HOPE:** Emily?

**ROSS:** My Mom - she'd been dead for years - so I said, "I'll be right there, honey. Go to sleep."

**HOPE:** Oh God.

**ROSS:** Mm-hm. About ten minutes later, he comes out of the room, a little miffed, and he says, "It's getting late, Emily, come to bed now." And I said, "I'm sorry, I just want to finish watching my program. Don't wait up for me. I'll be in as soon as this is over." So, he goes back in his room for about half an hour, and I'm thinking, "Oh good, he finally drifted off," but then he comes stomping back out, really pissed, and says, "Are you coming to bed, or not?" And he takes my arm and pulls me up out of the chair, and says, "I know your program is over, I heard the music! Now come to bed!" And I finally go, "Dad, I'm not Emily! Emily's not here! I'm your son, David!" But he's still pulling me towards the bedroom, so I dig in my heels and say, "I am not going in there. I'm not Emily - Dad, look at me! Look at me! I'm not even a woman, I'm a man!" And he lets go of my arm and backs off, and says, "How long have you been keeping that from me?"

*Pause... Hope laughs faintly. Keeps thinking about it.  
Keeps laughing...*

**HOPE:** "How long have you been keeping that from me?"

**LOUDSPEAKER:** **The campus is now secure. Have a great day, Panthers.**

**ROSS:** If you say so.

**HOPE:** We're like the Brave Little Toaster now.

**ROSS:** Sorry - not familiar with that one.

**HOPE:** We just had an adventure together!

*Lighting change, as Ross breaks the 4th wall:*

**ROSS:** And now, no contact. I can be suspended, or fired, for violating this policy. Control. It's not just for the students.

## **THE BACKLASH (I)**

*Ms. Hewitt addresses the Advanced Drama class.*

**HEWITT:** Thank you, Mr. Ross. Now, uh... Hi, everyone. It's come to our attention that there's some concern, and quite a lot of anger - at the idea of your school revealing Hope's, uh, sexual orientation, to her parents.

**GABE:** Ya think?

**HEWITT:** And I'm with you. I'm new here, but I gather this school used to protect the students' privacy. Personally, I think that was a better policy, but, there is a new state law, which went into effect-

**JENNY:** *(overlapping)* Ms. Hewitt, we've read that law.

**GABE:** It says you have to tell parents if their kids come out as transgender at school. In this class, that would just be me.

**MORGAN:** And you have to tell if they're using, like, different bathrooms and locker rooms, and stuff.

**GABE:** Or different pronouns - also me. I hate to ruin your fun, but my parents already know.

**HEWITT:** I understand how you-

**GABE:** I do have some aunts and uncles who don't know - would you like their numbers?

**MORGAN:** The law does not say you have to narc on gay kids.

**HEWITT:** No, I know. The law doesn't quite push it that far. But the district policy does.

**JENNY:** *(yells)* This is such bullshit!

*Pause... Everyone looks at Jenny, at Ross, at Hewitt...*

**HEWITT:** I couldn't agree more, Jenny. It is bullshit.  
(students react to Hewitt's profanity)  
I hate it just as much as you do.

**GABE:** Then why didn't you try to help Hope?

**HEWITT:** I did try.  
(includes Ross)  
We both did - we fought for her!

**JENNY:** Not hard enough.

**HEWITT:** Hey, we're on your side! I tried to make a case for-

**GABE:** (overlapping) Ms. Hewitt, why did Hope come out to you?

**HEWITT:** I'm sorry, what was the question?

**GABE:** (louder and slower) Why... did Hope... come out... to you?

**HEWITT:** I- That was a private conversation between-

**JENNY:** Then why are you here talking to us about it?

**MORGAN:** Yeah, and why are you telling her Dad?

**HEWITT:** Okay, point taken, but-

**GABE:** Actually Ms. Hewitt, that was a trick question - I know exactly why. Because she trusted you. Because you came out first, and she-

**JENNY:** (overlapping) Whaaat?

**GABE:** (continuing, no pause) -was trying to warn you to be careful about doing that around here.

**MORGAN:** You're gay?

**IVAN:** Wait a minute - she's gay too?

**MORGAN:** You gotta be kidding me!

**JENNY:** Oh my God, backstab much?

**GABE:** Exactly!

**MORGAN:** Boo! Booooooo!

*Other students start booing. Wadded-up paper is thrown.*

**IVAN:** What a bitch! And you turn around and-

*Ross bats down a thrown wad of paper.*

**ROSS:** Hey! That's enough of that! And you-

*(points at Ivan)*

I'm not gonna tolerate that in my classroom - Ivan, apologize.

**IVAN:** What? I meant "what a bitch" as in "what a... bummer!" I wasn't calling her a-

**ROSS:** You and I will get into it later - right now, you apologize to her.

**IVAN:** I'm sorry.

**ROSS:** Now look. Ms. Hewitt is doing her best to explain this to you - she's here as a courtesy, to you. The least you can do is show her a little courtesy back, and listen to what she has to say. If she's even willing to stay now?

**HEWITT:** Yes, yes! That's what I'm here for - it's so important to keep the channels of communication open.

**ROSS:** Okay, so, if you have questions for Ms. Hewitt, you will raise your hand, you will wait until I call on you, you will speak one at a time, and you will keep it respectful - or I will shut it down, and there will be consequences. Got it?

*(Ivan raises his hand)*

Ivan?

**IVAN:** Hi, Ms. Hewitt. I really didn't mean to call you the B-word, I was just saying, um-

**ROSS:** Is there a question in here somewhere?

**IVAN:** Yes sir, it's a two-part question. No, a three-part question. Okay, first part: Have you told Hope's Dad yet?

**HEWITT:** That is confidential.

**IVAN:** Oh... Uh, second part: What would a student have to do to get expelled? Like fighting, or... ?

**ROSS:** You mean besides calling the assistant principal names?

**IVAN:** I really am sorry.

**HEWITT:** Fighting. Cheating. Bringing a weapon on campus. Bringing drugs on campus...

**IVAN:** Okay, cool! So, third part: If Hope can do one of those things - like say she just picks out some rando at lunchtime and coldcocks him - then you could expel her, right? And you could just forget the whole thing about ratting her out to her Dad, technically, 'cause she wouldn't be going here anymore...

**HEWITT:** Well-

**IVAN:** (*standing, hand over his heart*) And I volunteer to be the one getting punched.

**JENNY:** Finally, a good idea from this guy.

*Hewitt glances at Ross - he shrugs.*

**HEWITT:** Both the law and the district policy prohibit withholding or concealing any information from parents regarding their child's physical, mental, or emotional health and well-being.

*(some confusion among the students: "Huh?" "What?" etc.)*

In other words, no.

*(Gabe raises a hand)*

The school would not support any scheme that calls for deception of any kind.

**ROSS:** Or assault and battery.

**HEWITT:** Or that.

**ROSS:** Gabe?

**GABE:** Do you have any ideas? How to get around this?

**HEWITT:** Me? I've floated a few ideas, but the problem is-

**JENNY:** I have a question.

*Ross glares at her, raises his hand. She raises her hand.*

**ROSS:** Yes, Jenny?

**JENNY:** Have you told the school board that you're gay?

*Hewitt looks at Ross - Ross stares blankly back at her.*

**HEWITT:** That's- I just started this job, so-

**JENNY:** But you are planning to tell them, right?

**HEWITT:** That has nothing to do with this.

*For the next several lines, until Ross puts a stop to it, the students all talk over each other:*

**JENNY:** Yes it does.

**IVAN:** Totally does!

**JENNY:** So, are you planning to tell them, or are you just gonna pretend you're not gay?

**MORGAN:** We can tell them for you!

**IVAN:** Sure, we'll tell them all!

**MORGAN:** We'll tell all the faculty, too - does Beacher know? He'd probably want to know.

**JENNY:** The Superintendent...

**GABE:** What is happening?

**MORGAN:** *(to Gabe)* We're helping Ms. Hewitt come out!

*(to Hewitt)*

You're welcome!

**JENNY:** I'll tell all my friends to tell all their friends!

**IVAN:** Yeah it'll be a party!

**MORGAN:** Your *lesbiana*!

**JENNY:** And the parents, gotta tell the parents - parents have a right to know!

**IVAN:** Yeah, I hope you're not concealing your gayness from the



parents, Ms. Hewitt - that's a big no-no!

**JENNY:** The parents have a right to know!

**MORGAN:** *(a chant)* Hey hey hey! Guess who's gay!

*Ivan joins in, then Jenny: "Hey hey hey! Guess who's gay! Hey hey hey! Guess who's gay!" (maybe get the audience to join in too).*

**ROSS:** Alright, knock it off! QUIET!

*Silence...*

**GABE:** Not cool, you guys. Not cool at all.

**ROSS:** *(to Hewitt)* Sorry about that.

**GABE:** Ms. Hewitt, can I say something, please?

**HEWITT:** I think I've heard enough.

**GABE:** I don't blame you for feeling that way, I'm sorry that just happened - in this class, of all places - I can't believe you guys! What the Hell? Coming out is a private, personal thing, it's nobody else's business. That was really shitty, what you just did to Ms. Hewitt. You should all know better.

*(shoots a look at Hewitt)*

And ma'am, I know you know better.

*This hits Hewitt hard, right in the gut, but she owns it.*

**HEWITT:** Yeah.

*Lights change, Ross breaks the 4th wall:*

**ROSS:** Sometimes it's a bit of a free-for-all. Students. Teachers. Administrators. Parents. Politicians. All vying for authority. Using schools as pawns on the political chessboard. Charter schools. Prayer on the 50 yard line. Equity. Diversity. Inclusion. New Laws. New board members. New policies. Layers of Regulations. How tax money is allocated. Number of educational minutes in a school year. Access to bathrooms. Dress codes. Safety drills. Union dues. Classes offered. Which books? Which movies? What language?

Christmas Break or Winter Break? I could go on. And on and on and on... Who's in control here? You tell me.

## THE BACKLASH (II)

*Ivan and Morgan are in the hot seats, as Ross enters.*

**ROSS:** Ivan, I was just thinking about you - how would you like to be promoted to Romeo?

*(Ivan hesitates)*

I know it's a lot of lines, and you'd have to learn more swordfights, but-

**IVAN:** And kissing.

**ROSS:** Is that a problem?

**IVAN:** Enh, I don't see it. Besides, I've finally got the blood capsules worked out, and-

**ROSS:** Well Romeo takes poison. So now you'll get to figure that out.

**IVAN:** But, kissing Jenny? Killing and dying - for Jenny? C'mon Ross, I don't think I'm that good an actor.

*Beacher enters, carrying a bulging manila envelope.*

**BEACHER:** Have a seat, please.

**ROSS:** Gotta say, I haven't spent this much time in the Office since I refused to recite the pledge in eleventh grade.

**BEACHER:** Just sit.

**ROSS:** Okay.

*(sits next to Ivan)*

Feels like we're in trouble - are we in trouble?

*Ivan nods.*

**BEACHER:** Did you put them up to this?

**ROSS:** Up to what?

**BEACHER:** *(nods at Ivan)* He says you offered extra credit for it!

**ROSS:** I don't know what we're talking about.

*Beacher up-ends the manila envelope, and 25-30 notes spill out onto his desk. They are written on a variety of stock, i.e. lined notebook paper, sticky notes, ragged bits of scratch paper, maybe even a greeting card or two...*

*Beacher paws through them, finds the one he's looking for.*

**BEACHER:** *(reads it aloud)* "Dear Mr. Beecher...  
I cannot live this lie anymore.  
I am gay. Every day. In every way.  
Sincerely,  
Joseph Ivan Sobcik  
P.S. Please don't tell my Dad."

*Ross fails to stifle a snort of laughter.*

**ROSS:** I most certainly did not offer extra credit for that.

Ivan, have you been fibbing again?

*(Ivan shakes his head)*

Are you fibbing now?

*(Ivan nods)*

May I see that, please?

*(Beacher hands over the note - Ross scans it)*

Mm-hm. Mr. Beacher spells his name "B-e-a," not "B-e-e." Other than that, though...

**BEACHER:** You think this is funny?

**ROSS:** Hard to say. Are they all the same little poem, or is there some individuality?

**BEACHER:** They're all different.

**ROSS:** Nice. That does sound funny.

**BEACHER:** Mostly coming out as gay. Or... other things.

*(points at Morgan)*

This one wants to know if the Nurse is allowed to give her hormone blockers, and keep it on the down low.

**ROSS:** *(chuckles)* Morgan. How many of these have you got?

**BEACHER:** I don't know - how many students do you have in your Advanced Drama class?

**ROSS:** Not quite as many as I had yesterday.

**IVAN:** Um, Mr. Beacher? I'm pretty sure it's gonna be a lot more than just Advanced Drama kids.

*(sheepishly)*

I made it a TikTok challenge, so...

**ROSS:** *(laughs)* Oooh! Extra-extra credit for community engagem-

**BEACHER:** You delete that video!

**IVAN:** No way! It's just starting to blow up!

**BEACHER:** Delete it!

**IVAN:** I don't even know all these people! Like half the Track team's doing it - a couple people in the French Club did it in French!

**MORGAN:** *(high fives Ivan)* That's awesome!

**IVAN:** I know!

**BEACHER:** Take it down! Right here, right now, you take that video down!

**IVAN:** No way - it's mine, it's free speech. It's my, uhm...

**MORGAN:** Intellectual property.

**IVAN:** Hellz yeah, that's my IP, Mr. B!

**MORGAN:** Wanna see mine?

**BEACHER:** Your what?

**MORGAN:** My video.

**IVAN:** TikTok challenge, boss! There's a video to go with every one of these notes - some of 'em are pretty funny. Morgan's is freakin' hilarious.

*(proffers his phone to Beacher)*

Check it out!

*Beacher holds up a hand - "No thanks."*

**BEACHER:** What is the "challenge," specifically?

**MORGAN:** Film yourself reading your note out loud, then shove it in the principal's box. Or, wherever.

**BEACHER:** Why "the principal"? Why in God's name does it have to be "the principal"?

**IVAN:** Doesn't have to be, I guess. Could be a teacher, or-

**BEACHER:** Okay you two, here's what's gonna happen in the next sixty seconds - you're both gonna remove your "IP" from the internet, or you can both go home and explain to your parents that you've been expelled!

**IVAN:** *(bummed)* Aw man, seriously?

**BEACHER:** Your choice. What's it gonna be?

**IVAN:** I've never had one take off like this!

**MORGAN:** Leave it up. He can't expel us for this.

**IVAN:** He can't?

**BEACHER:** Try me.

**MORGAN:** Okay.

*(grins, leans forward)*

Do it. Please. Expel me. I can't wait to see what Mom does.

*Ross leans in toward Beacher.*

**ROSS:** *(sotto)* Eileen Bishop. Is his mother.

*Beacher does not want to mess with Eileen Bishop.*

**MORGAN:** Deleting these isn't gonna do anything anyway - you've still got all those other ones out there.

**IVAN:** Exactly!

**MORGAN:** People are gonna keep making 'em.

**BEACHER:** Get out of here, both of you. Out of my sight!

**ROSS:** See you at rehearsal - start looking at those Romeo lines!

*Ivan and Morgan exit, as-*

*Hewitt enters, carrying some newly-printed half-sheet forms, and another fistful of notes.*

**HEWITT:** They're still coming in.

*She sets them on Beacher's desk, as-*

*Ross watches a video on his phone.*

**BEACHER:** *(buzzes out on intercom)* Kim, I told you to stop letting them put these things in my box!

**HEWITT:** *(overlapping)* She did - your box is filled. They're coming in and leaving them at Reception, now. Counselors are

getting them, too.

**ROSS:** I believe this is what they mean by going viral.

**BEACHER:** Wipe the smirk off your face. Do you have any idea what this is gonna do to work flow around here?

**ROSS:** Of course I do - so do they. That's why they did it.

*(watching another video on his phone, chuckling)*

And you're punching in the wrong direction, Jim. What you should do, is take all these notes and dump them out on a table at the next School Board meeting. Make them watch the videos. Show them the magic of student creativity. I'm quite impressed by it, myself - they're having a little "I am Spartacus" moment.

*The bell rings. End of the school day.*

**BEACHER:** *(jabs a finger at Ross)* No goddammit, this is what you're gonna do. You're-

**LOUDSPEAKER:** **Don't forget! Next week is Spirit week. Dress up and win the ice cream party for your class!**

**BEACHER:** You're gonna-

**LOUDSPEAKER:** **The buses for today's game against the Westside Patriots leave at 2:45.**

**BEACHER:** *(to Ross)* You're gonna take all these notes, and-

**LOUDSPEAKER:** **From the front parking lot.**

**BEACHER:** *(to Ross)* You're gonna go find every single one of these students within 72 hours. And make them all sign this retraction form.

**ROSS:** *(glancing over the form)* Me?

**BEACHER:** Yes, you. You think it's so funny - you fix it. I'm not gonna lose another day to this crap. Not having it.

**ROSS:** What if... ?

**BEACHER:** What if... what?

*Ross lays the forms back on Beacher's desk.*

**ROSS:** I'm gonna need to talk to the union rep before I take any action on this.

**BEACHER:** It's not a union matter, this is-

**ROSS:** What if some of these confessions are sincere, did you think of that?

**HEWITT:** Good point.

**ROSS:** What if just one of them is? And we coerce the kid into retracting?

**HEWITT:** Under pain of suspension - that's not a good look.

**BEACHER:** (to Hewitt) Whose side are you on?

**ROSS:** (to Beacher) Whose side are you on, Jim?

*Intercom buzzes - Beacher snatches it up.*

**BEACHER:** What? Right.

*(hangs up)*

Deputy Stern's on Line Three. Hope's not answering her phone. He wants to know if we know where she is.

*(looking from Hewitt to Ross)*

Do we?

**ROSS:** Don't look at me, I'm cut off.

**BEACHER:** (to Hewitt) Do you know anything?

**HEWITT:** She didn't show up in study hall for fifth period. I haven't laid eyes on her since you talked to her this morning.



**BEACHER:** Since we talked to her.

**HEWITT:** She may have left campus.

**BEACHER:** Great. Just great. You'll have to tell him, now.

**HEWITT:** Tell him what?

**BEACHER:** Everything. She ran out of the office upset, because the school is about to report that she's gay.

**HEWITT:** We told Hope we'd wait until Thursday.

**BEACHER:** Oh, use your head! We can't! How do you think it's gonna play if we withhold this information, now? Anything we try to hide from this man is gonna bite us in the ass! You pick up Line Three right now, and tell him!

**HEWITT:** I need the 72 hours. I want to meet with Hope, and talk with her about maybe coming out on her own.

**BEACHER:** That's her counselor's job.

**HEWITT:** I think I should do it.

**BEACHER:** He's still holding. Line three.  
(*Hewitt doesn't move*)

Tell. Him.

**HEWITT:** I'm not gonna do that.

**BEACHER:** Excuse me?

**HEWITT:** I'm not outing Hope to her father.

**BEACHER:** Are you kidding me?

**HEWITT:** No sir. No I'm not.

**BEACHER:** (*furious*) Then I'll do it!

**HEWITT:** I really think we should wait.

**BEACHER:** You know what I think? I think I can't have an AP who's only willing to do part of her job. Now get out of my office, both of you!

*(picks up phone as Ross & Hewitt exit)*

Mr. Stern? Hello, this is Jim Beacher, the principal, I'm-

**LOUDSPEAKER:** **The faculty parking lot is for faculty vehicles only.**

**BEACHER:** I'm sorry to-

**LOUDSPEAKER:** **All non-faculty vehicles remaining in the lot after 3:00 p.m. will be towed.**

**BEACHER:** Sorry about that, we have a-

**LOUDSPEAKER:** **This is your final warning.**

**BEACHER:** *(into phone)* I'm so sorry to keep you waiting, we've done some checking, and- No, not right this minute, but I do have some information which- Yes sir, I understand, I assure you I feel exactly the same way - student safety is our top priority here. That, and total transparency. Absolutely. I uh... I have something to tell you about Hope.

*Lighting change - keys jingle in classroom door...*

## **THE BACKLASH (III)**

Jenny, Ivan, and Morgan are filming a TikTok.

**JENNY:** *(holding a letter in her hand)* O happy dagger, here is thy sheath.

*(puts letter in envelope).*

My gayness doth o'erwhelm me. The Truth will out! I thus proclaim for all to hear, methinks I am attracted to those of mine own gendered reflection! Oh woe is me. Oh woe is thee. Tell not my parents, I pray you, for they would not approve.

*Jenny falls dead.*

**IVAN:** You nailed it! Oh My God.

**MORGAN:** We're at 327. A kid from Central just posted one. He's got a secret service guy guarding him.

**JENNY:** Let me see.

**IVAN:** Oh my God, six more! Seven! This is amazing!

**MORGAN:** I sent it to my cousin. She's a junior at Franklin. She's in some Drama weirdo group chat. 350. Holy shit.

**JENNY:** Let me see mine.

*Ross enters.*

**ROSS:** I know I locked this door - how do you people keep getting in?

**JENNY:** It was open.

**MORGAN:** Ross. You gotta see Jenny's.

**IVAN:** We're all gonna be TikTok famous, yo!

**MORGAN:** It's blowing up!

**IVAN:** You should've seen Beacher when Ross told him about Morgan's Mom!

**ROSS:** Jenny, I have a brand new Romeo for you.

*He pushes Ivan forward.*

**JENNY:** *(skeptical)* Ivan? I have a much better idea - no offense.

**IVAN:** Oh, none taken.

**JENNY:** I think it's gotta be a girl.

**MORGAN:** I love that!

**IVAN:** I suggested this yesterday!

**ROSS:** You want to do a gay *Romeo and Juliet*?

**JENNY:** I mean, we kinda have to - don't you think?

**MORGAN:** Yeah!

**ROSS:** No. We don't "have to" do anything.

**JENNY:** Then what is the point of... of all this? Of us? if we don't "comfort the afflicted, and

**ALL:** "--afflict the comfortable"?

**JENNY:** Or, don't you really believe in that?

**ROSS:** So, who plays Romeo?

**JENNY:** Hope!

**IVAN:** Yesss!

**MORGAN:** I love it!

**ROSS:** Nooo!

**JENNY:** Yes, Ross! She's the logical-

**IVAN:** This is exactly what I said yesterday - y'all need to start listening to me!

**ROSS:** Hope can't be in the show - she's not in this class!

**JENNY:** Kids like Hope are not the problem! The parents are the problem, and the schools, and the- !

**MORGAN:** Yeah, the boomers all need to back off!

**IVAN:** Sacrifice their egos! Sacrifice. Sacrifice.

*Others take up the chant: "Sacrifice, sacrifice..."*

**ROSS:** Not now!

**MORGAN:** The kids just need a little space to figure things out, you know?

**ROSS:** Sure, but that's pretty much the point of *Romeo and Juliet* anyway. As written. By Shakespeare. Without any gay characters.

**IVAN:** I thought you said Benvolio was gay?

**ROSS:** Well maybe, but-

**MORGAN:** And Mercutio's a queen in the movie.

**ROSS:** Okay fruit flies, listen up. You have any idea the amount of shit that will fly if we put up a gay *Romeo and Juliet*? There is going to be a response, and it will not be pleasant. We're talking letters, emails, phone calls, picket lines, threats. Not necessarily empty threats, either - people are worked up about this stuff.

**IVAN:** 361.

**MORGAN:** Ka-ching!

**JENNY:** It's worth the risk! We've gotta-

**ROSS:** No! You don't know what you're talking about. This isn't some stupid TikTok game. I will get fired if I-

*Jenny, Ivan, and Morgan have big verbal reactions to the word Stupid, as Hope and Gabe enter from backstage. Hope has been crying.*

**HOPE:** I don't want to be in it.

**JENNY:** C'mon Hope, it's-

**HOPE:** No! This is your idea, not mine. You think you're helping, but you're just- I have zero interest in acting in a play right now.

**ROSS:** What are you doing here?

**HOPE:** I've got nowhere else to go.

**ROSS:** Well, you can't be in here.

**GABE:** Jeez, Ross.

**HOPE:** I need to talk to you.

**ROSS:** I can't!

**HOPE:** I just need a minute.

**ROSS:** No! You're gonna get me fired.

**HOPE:** Please.

**ROSS:** Jesus Christ!

*(long pause)*

Give us a minute.

*(all head for the door)*

If you see anybody heading this way, I need to know. You understand? Anybody. Got it? Go. Go.

*All exit, except Ross & Hope.*

**HOPE:** I have something of yours.

*(removing a key and fob from her keyring)*

When you lost your key, back in October? I actually did find it. I lied. Sorry, I just... I just needed to be in here. This room is the only place where I feel like a real person. Your Drama class. The only place I don't have to pretend I'm someone

else. Ironically. I'm gonna miss it so much. I'm gonna miss you, Ross.

**ROSS:** I'll miss you too.

*(very awkward moment of not knowing what to do)*

You better get going.

*(Hope begins to leave - stops.)*

Hope, I can't have you in here.

**HOPE:** I need your help.

**ROSS:** I don't know what I can do.

**HOPE:** We need gas money.

**ROSS:** We?

**HOPE:** Gabe is gonna drive me to my aunt's house in Cincinnati.

**ROSS:** Cincinnati - what are you talking about?

**HOPE:** I'm gonna hide out there till I turn eighteen.

**ROSS:** Don't tell me that!

**HOPE:** You just asked!

**ROSS:** You're running away? I have to tell your Dad - don't you know that? I'm required by law to-

*Hope screams - Ross recoils in shock - Gabe and Jenny peek in the door.*

**HOPE:** I am so sick of hearing what "The Law" requires you people to do to me!

**ROSS:** *(overlapping)* All right. Take it easy. Easy. I got you.

**HOPE:** *(to Gabe & Jenny)* It's okay, we're just talking.

**GABE:** Know exactly how you feel, though.

*She waves them away - Gabe closes the door.*

**ROSS:** What makes you think your aunt will help you?

**HOPE:** She just has to.

**ROSS:** That's your plan?

**HOPE:** Ten weeks - that's all I need. Then I'm legally an adult. But I can't stay here, under his control, if this stupid school is gonna tell him I'm-

**ROSS:** They've already told him.

**HOPE:** What?

**ROSS:** Yeah.

**HOPE:** What!?! They said they'd wait till Thursday!

**ROSS:** You didn't go home after school, your Dad called. Beacher panicked. Told him everything.

**HOPE:** No, God! Ross, there's a hundred and eighty-six dollars in the petty cash box - Gabe will pay you back after next-

**ROSS:** No! I'm not financing your running away.

**HOPE:** Really? You're not gonna lift a finger?

**ROSS:** This is not about me. You need to-

*Morgan and Jenny appear at the door.*

**MORGAN:** Your Dad's here.

**JENNY:** *(entering with Ivan)* With CJ.

*Gabe pushes into the classroom.*



**GABE:** Let's go. Come on. You can slip out through the dressing room.

**ROSS:** Hold it. What are you doing?

**HOPE:** I'm not here!

**ROSS:** Hope! Stop! Listen to me. Don't hide! C'mon. I'm here. Gabe's here. You have friends here. Just tell him - it's time!

**GABE:** Not your call, Ross!

**HOPE:** I can't do that.

**ROSS:** Yes you can. You can. We're here for you. Just talk to him, tell him the truth, you can do it.

*Hope nods, and bravely faces the door... for two seconds.*

**HOPE:** No, fuck this!

*She flees to the dressing room.*

**ROSS:** Hope!

*Ross follows her off.*

**JENNY:** Pretend we're rehearsing!

**GABE:** What?

**JENNY:** Crypt scene, go!

**IVAN:** Pretend we're pretending - I like it.

*Jenny lies dead, as at the top of the play. Ivan lies dead on the floor, as Gabe prepares to enter.*

**JENNY:** O comfortable friar, where is my Romeo?

**GABE:** Oh, we're starting there? Okay..  
(gets into character)

I hear some noise. Lady come, come away.

*Stern enters, looking at his phone. CJ is with him.*

**GABE:** Stay not to question, for the watch is coming.  
Come go, good Juliet, I'll no longer stay.

**STERN:** (looks up from his phone screen) Hope?

**JENNY:** Go, get thee hence, for I will not away.

*Stern walks past Jenny and Gabe, glances up into the audience seats, looks around the room.*

**JENNY:** Uh, we're trying to rehearse here, do you mind?

**STERN:** Hope, where are you?

**GABE:** Excuse me, can we help you?

*Stern looks Gabe up and down.*

**STERN:** What the hell are you supposed to be?

**GABE:** I'm Gabe.

**STERN:** Where's Hope?

**MORGAN:** Hope who?

**IVAN:** Haven't seen her.

**JENNY:** She's not allowed to be in here anymore, for some stupid reason none of us really underst-

**STERN:** (shouts) WHERE IS MY DAUGHTER?  
(his shout freezes everyone for a moment)  
I know she's in here, I tracked her phone.

*Stern hits a speed dial number on his phone - Hope's phone rings, off.*

**CJ:** Backstage.

*CJ heads backstage.*

**JENNY:** You're not supposed to be in here, CJ.

**CJ:** Whatever - neither is Hope.

**GABE:** What are you, his flying monkey?

**CJ:** *(sotto)* Fuck off.

*(from off stage)*

She's back here, Dad!

*Ross appears from backstage - CJ backs up.*

**ROSS:** Mr. Stern?

**STERN:** You.

**ROSS:** I'm Mr. Ross.

**STERN:** Uh-huh. I thought I made it clear I don't want you anywhere near my children.

**ROSS:** *(points at CJ)* Then what's he doing in here?

**STERN:** You want to ask him to sit on your lap again, teacher? Go ahead. See what happens.

*(Morgan begins to film Stern with her phone)*

Hope, get out here!

*(to Morgan)*

Hey, you don't want to do that, kid.

**MORGAN:** I think I do.

**STERN:** Put the phone away.

**ROSS:** Morgan, would you-

*Jenny starts filming too.*

**JENNY:** It's not against the law to film cops.

**STERN:** I am not here as law enforcement - I'm here as a father.

**GABE:** *(starts filming)* Wrong costume, dude.

**STERN:** Turn it off.

*Ivan starts filming too.*

**ROSS:** You need to leave my classroom.

**STERN:** I'm not going anywhere without my daughter. And you kids are making a big mistake. This is a two-party state, you know what that means? You're all in violation of the wire-tapping ordinance.

**MORGAN:** *(fake cough)* \*Bullshit!\*

**ROSS:** Morgan!

**STERN:** If you continue to film me without my consent, I will confiscate your phones-

**IVAN:** I thought you weren't here as a cop?

**STERN:** *(no pause)* And your parents will be subject to fines, and possible jail time! Is that what you want?

**JENNY:** He's lying - they lie all the time.

**MORGAN:** Yup.

**GABE:** You just make shit up as you go, don't you?

**JENNY:** They all do.

**MORGAN:** All cops are bastards.

**STERN:** Is that what you teach them?

**ROSS:** I think they're going on instinct.

*Gabe moves in closer, filming with his phone.*

**GABE:** I've never understood why we're not allowed to lie to you, but you can lie to us all you want?

**STERN:** Get that out of my face, you fruitcake!

*Stern knocks the phone flying from Gabe's hand, which brings an "Ow!" from Gabe, and a chorus of protest and disapproval from the students.*

**ROSS:** Whoa, whoa whoa! You don't get to do that in here! You need to leave, Mr. Stern! Right now!

*(buzzes out on intercom)*

Kim, it's Ross, I need help in the Drama room. I've got a situation with an angry parent in a room full of students!

**STERN:** *(to Ross)* You tell these little punks to put their phones down!

**ROSS:** I tell 'em every day.

**STERN:** Hope!

*Hope enters, and stands center stage.*

**HOPE:** Hi, I'm Hope Stern, and I will be presenting an original monologue called "Dad Jokes."

**IVAN:** "Dad Jokes"?

**STERN:** What's going on?

**HOPE:** *(reads from a creased, time-worn sheet of paper)* My Dad has many wonderful qualities, and I love him very much. I've-

**LOUDSPEAKER:** Security to Room PA-2. Security to Room PA-2.

**HOPE:** I've always looked up to him - a lot of people do. He's a Sergeant in the Jackson County Sheriff's Department, he's won the Medal of Honor, and multiple Lifesaving Awards, and Letters of Commendation. Plus, I think he deserves another medal just for being a single Dad - keeping my brother and me fed, clothed, sheltered, and in school for the past six years. That's a tough job. We wouldn't be here without him. So, I hate to seem ungrateful, but Dad, seriously... We need to talk about the jokes.

**STERN:** What are you doing right now?

**HOPE:** Counting down the Top Ten Dad Jokes - About Me And My Friends - On The Interwebs: Number Ten: "Hey, if you can't pray the gay away - there's always electroshock!"

*(baffled silence)*

Ba-dum-bum!

*(more silence - and even more baffled)*

Well, it's a countdown, so they get funnier as we go.

**STERN:** What are you doing?

**HOPE:** Number Nine: "If you're confused about- "

**STERN:** I don't make jokes about you!

**HOPE:** I know you're not aiming at me, Dad - but you keep hitting me anyway. Number Nine: "If you're confused about- "

**STERN:** No, that's enough! I don't care what they're trying to "teach" you here - you are not some... sick deviant. You're my daughter!

**GABE:** Ah man, you're so close to getting it!

**STERN:** Somebody get this circus freak away from me, or I swear to God-

**HOPE:** Come on Dad, don't you wonder why you had to hear it from the school? Instead of from me? Aren't you even curious? This is why. Number Nine: "If you're confused about your gender, check your birth certificate."

**STERN:** Stop it, now!

*He moves toward Hope, but she evades him, keeping Ross's desk between them...*

**HOPE:** "If you're still confused, check your pants."

**STERN:** Hope-

**HOPE:** "If you're still confused, you must be a Democrat!"

**IVAN:** *(laughs)* That's a good one, actually.

**HOPE:** Didn't even need a rimshot. I'm confused about a lot of things Dad, but I'm definitely gay - not confused about that.

**CJ:** Thank God! I thought you'd never fuckin' tell him!

**STERN:** You are not gay, you're just-

**CJ:** She's here, she's queer, get used to it Dad, jeez!

**STERN:** You want to watch your tone. Both of you.

*(CJ backs down - Hope doesn't)*

We will finish this conversation at home.

**HOPE:** I'd rather finish it here - I feel safer. Number Eight: "Sure, I'd love to bomb Iran- "

**STERN:** No, we're getting out of here!

*Stern lunges and grabs Hope's arm-*

**HOPE:** Ow!

**STERN:** Right now, let's go!

*-and drags her toward the door, but-*

**ROSS:** *(roars)* HEY!

*Ross places himself protectively between Hope and her father.*

**STERN:** Hey, what? What are you gonna do? Who the Hell do you people think you are?

*(violently shoves Ross - knocks him off balance)*

She's not your kid!

*Ross collects himself, and defiantly steps back up into Stern's face.*

**ROSS:** No, she's my student! And I'm her teacher! And what you are, right now, is an out-of-control parent, wearing a goddamn sidearm on campus without authorization - and threatening a whole classroom full of other peoples' kids! Does that sound like conduct becoming a decorated peace officer? I think not, sir! And I don't care who you are, or whose father you are - I will stand between any physical threat, and any one of my students! Including the fruitcakes and circus freaks! Especially them!

**GABE:** Fuck yeah, Ross!

*The students cheer and applaud.*

**STERN:** We're going!

*Stern reaches for Hope, but stops short of grabbing her arm. Ushers her out without touching her.*

**IVAN:** Wait a second, wait a second!

*(Stern stops, everyone looks at Ivan)*

I wanna hear the rest of the Dad Jokes!

**STERN:** Let's go.



**HOPE:** "Sure, I'd love to bomb Iran flat, but we gotta leave 'em a few tall buildings - to throw all their fags off of!"

*Big vocal reaction from the students, as-*

*Hewitt enters, out of breath.*

**HEWITT:** Okay, what's going on?

**HOPE:** Number Seven: "Why can't the alphabet people- "

**STERN:** That's it! Stop!

*(to Hewitt)*

You. You told me you were gonna take my kids out of this class!

**HEWITT:** We did take them out of-

**STERN:** You assured me this man would not be allowed within a hundred yards of my children!

**HEWITT:** Mr. Stern, we-

**STERN:** I am gonna own this school!

*(jabs an angry finger at Ross)*

And I'll have your head on a plate, teacher, you can count on it! You are done tearing families apart, you hear me? You're done!

*Stern drags Hope out, with CJ close behind.*

**GABE:** Hey, Ross is not the one tearing your family apart!

*(follows them out the door)*

But sure, blame it on the teacher, blame it on the school!

**ROSS:** *(overlapping)* Gabe, come back in here! Let 'em go!

**GABE:** *(overlapping, off)* Blame it on everyone but yourself, you giant flaming asshole!

**ROSS:** Gabe!

*The students flock to Ross, offering strong opinions on what just happened, and what should happen next, showing each other their phone footage, etc.*

**ROSS:** Okay, everybody calm down, please, calm down! QUIET!

**HEWITT:** What were the Stern children doing in here?

**ROSS:** Where the Hell is Security?

**HEWITT:** They're all in the faculty parking lot - big fight between the tow truck driver and one of the assistant baseball coaches, I think.

**ROSS:** Jesus...

*The day catches up with Ross. He slumps at his desk and relinquishes control - as the students crowd around, asking questions, expressing passionate opinions, comparing phone footage... Chaos reigns for 10-12 seconds, until-*

**GABE:** *(re-entering)* She has got to get away from that man!

**IVAN:** We should call Child Protective Services on him!

**MORGAN:** Ross, he full-on pushed you! That's assault, right?  
*(showing her phone)*  
He smacked Gabe, too! Lookit!

**JENNY:** You should totally press charges!

*Beacher enters.*

**BEACHER:** What was Deputy Stern doing in here?

**HEWITT:** He thinks we never pulled his kids out of-

**BEACHER:** *(quiets her with a gesture)* Dave, why was he in here?

**ROSS:** We had an incident - Jesus, I'm still shaking. I- They got most of it on their phones.

*Students crowd around Beacher, showing their phone screens, ad-libbing about what just happened, starting with:*

**JENNY:** He tracked Hope's phone here and came in to get her!

*And ending with:*

**IVAN:** He said he wants Ross's head on a plate!

**BEACHER:** Okay, okay! Thank you! Quiet down, please! Would you all just wait outside for a minute? Please, everybody outside. Outside. Thank you.

*(students move toward the exit)*

You too, come on. Don't go anywhere, I'll be with you in just a minute. Thanks, everybody. Thank you.

**HEWITT:** I'll take them over to Admin and get their statements.

**BEACHER:** No. I'll do it.

**HEWITT:** I can get them to send their phone footage to-

**BEACHER:** Ms. Hewitt, you should go home.

**HEWITT:** I'm happy to stay and-

**BEACHER:** I said, go home. I will handle this. But I want to see you in my office tomorrow at 7:00 a.m.

*(to Ross)*

You okay?

*(Ross nods)*

Head on a plate, huh? Geez, Dave, I hope I don't have to give it to him. What were you thinking, letting his kids in here?

**ROSS:** Just Hope, and it wasn't my idea - she just showed up. She'd been crying. She was desperate - I told you she would be! I tried to make her leave, but I admit, I was not as forceful as I could have been, I'm sorry, I-

*(exploding)*

No I'm not! Goddammit, I'm not sorry for trying to be a human

being! Some days it's just about impossible around here!

**BEACHER:** *(putting his arm on Ross's shoulder)* Okay, take it easy. I hear you, believe me. I do. Let's just get through the day. I'll tell you one thing, I did not have "I'm sure glad the kids have these phones" on my bingo card.

*(Ross laughs faintly)*

Alright, you take a few minutes, and then I'm gonna need your incident report.

*(smiling)*

You remember where my office is?

**ROSS:** *(tight smile)* Yeah, I think I can find it. Thanks, Jim.

**BEACHER:** You sure you're okay?

**ROSS:** I just need a minute. Please. And would you ask Gabe to come back in? I need a quick word with them, while I'm thinking of it.

**BEACHER:** You got it.

**HEWITT:** Mr. Beacher, I want to-

**BEACHER:** 7:00 a.m. Bring your keys.

*Exit Beacher.*

**HEWITT:** Well, it's been nice working with you - for two whole days.

**ROSS:** Yeah. Sorry. For what it's worth, I think we need more of you around here, not less.

**HEWITT:** More of me?

*Gabe enters.*

**ROSS:** More people who believe we make a difference.

*(offers his hand - they shake)*

It's inspiring.

*Gabe politely holds the door for Hewitt's exit.*

**GABE:** See you tomorrow, Ms. Hewitt.

*She smiles sadly, maybe puts a hand on Gabe's shoulder, exits, leaving Ross & Gabe alone.*

**ROSS:** Okay, Gabe. You still up for it?

**GABE:** What?

**ROSS:** Cincinnati.

**GABE:** Yes! Oh my God yes, a thousand percent!

*Ross pulls the cash box out of his desk, opens it, and hands all the cash over to Gabe.*

**ROSS:** Listen - this, what I'm doing right now?

*(hands Gabe the money)*

This'll get me fired. If anyone finds out. Maybe a little jail time, too. You understand? You can't tell anyone. Ever. No parents, no passing mention in your diary - and absolutely no one in this class.

**GABE:** What about Hope?

*Lights begin to close in on Ross, as he breaks the 4th wall one last time.*

**ROSS:** What about Hope?

*(beat)*

Here's what I know: Gabe waited until Deputy Stern went to work the next morning, picked up Hope, drove her to Cincinnati, and was back in school by Monday.

*(beat)*

Here's what else I know: Ms. Hewitt walked out of Jim Beacher's office, and immediately began making a difference... in the lives of her goats. She's also suing Jim and the District, for breach of contract, discrimination, and the violation of the District's

72-hour reporting mandate. On the bright side, her keys are now jiggling in the pocket of our new Assistant Principal: a rule-following ex-Marine with a big smile, big energy, and shitty people skills. Jim loves him.

*(beat)*

The rest of April dragged by with no word from Hope. May came and went without a peep. The gay *Romeo and Juliet* never happened. Straight *Romeo and Juliet* never happened, either. Instead, my kids ended up closing out the school year with another evening of original work. Ivan's Bloody Zipper stole the show.

*(beat)*

I call them "my kids." We all do - teachers, coaches, counselors... We're not delusional - we know we're not really their parents. But there's something about this job. You can't do it if you don't care. You have to care. Just not too much. Wouldn't want to lose control, would we?

*(beat)*

Here's what I don't know: Don't know if Hope is still in Ohio. Don't know if her Dad tracked her down, and dragged her back home. Don't know if she got her diploma. I don't know... how that story ends.

*(forces himself to move on)*

So it goes. The System keeps grinding on. Three months after the seniors graduate, a new crop of freshmen rolls in. I get to know them. They get to know me. And then, just like that, they're gone! It's the damndest thing, how quickly and completely "my kids" disappear from my life.

*(beat)*

Except, every once in a while, when I'm walking through the market, or at a ballgame, or out grabbing a bite to eat...

**IVAN:** Ross!

*All of the students file past Ross, touching him, and softly repeating his name.*

**JENNY:** Ross!

**ROSS:** No one else calls me that.

**GABE:** Ross!

**ROSS:** Not exactly formal, not exactly familiar.

**CJ:** Ross!

**ROSS:** Just my name.

**MORGAN:** Ross!

**ROSS:** My title, I guess.

*Hope is last.*

**HOPE:** Ross.

**ROSS:** Gets to me every time. Anyway..

*(holds up the key Hope returned to him, as lights shift)*

Welcome to Advanced Drama. This is your class. You. You are the classroom materials. Your ideas. Your words. Your bodies and voices. Your histories and hopes and fears. And everything that makes you unique.

*(twirls the key on his finger)*

This class will be about all of that stuff. So strap in and get ready. Tomorrow, you'll begin sharing your story. Okay?

*(bell rings - end of the period)*

Get outta here! See you tomorrow! Be on time, and for God's sake, just sit in any available chair! It's better for everyone!

**- THE END -**