

# With a Shrug

an Upstate Story

by

Nicholas Priore

## WITH A SHRUG

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## WITH A SHRUG

*In loving memory of Salvatore Fortunado Priore, my Uncle Salvy...a real-life, larger-than-life character in his own beautiful story.*

*"For those who didn't know him, no words are sufficient...and for those who did, no words are necessary."*

*-Alexandra Priore Quigley*

## WITH A SHRUG

### Characters:

SHELLEY, F, early 40s, resentful counselor and aspiring writer.

CHRIS, M/F, 15, extremely eccentric in a very matter of fact manner.

TOM, M, 40s, Chris' father, a military man, tough as hell.

RICHARD, M, 69, Shelley's father, former professor and hermit with early dementia.

### Note:

The character of Chris, though written as a teenage boy, may be played by any young actor who identifies as male, female or non-binary, with pronouns and such adjusted accordingly if necessary...as long as they can identify with the character.

### Setting:

A run-down neighborhood in Utica, New York.

### Music:

Selections from David Moore and Bing and Ruth (rights permitting).

## WITH A SHRUG

With a Shrug was developed at The Actors Studio in Manhattan, NY.

With a Shrug was originally produced as a one-act (Scene 1) for John Chatterton's Mid-Winter Madness Festival in 2011 at Roy Arias Studios in Manhattan, NY with the following team...

Director:

Robert Haufrecht

Cast:

SHELLEY...Gina Bonati

CHRIS...David Holmes

With a Shrug was produced as a one-act (Scene 1) for the 2011 Gallery Players Black Box Festival in Brooklyn, NY with the following team...

Director:

Robert Haufrecht

Cast:

SHELLEY...Suzy Kimball

CHRIS...Hannah Timmons

## WITH A SHRUG

With a Shrug was produced as a one-act (Scene 1) on Theatre Row for the 2011 Samuel French OOB Short Play Festival in Manhattan, NY with the following team...

Director:

Robert Haufrecht

Cast:

SHELLEY...Gina Bonati

CHRIS...David Holmes

Stage Manager:

Sarah Jones Jenkins

Promotional Services:

Samuella Becker

Producer:

Pamela Scott / Aching Dogs Theatre

## WITH A SHRUG

With a Shrug was originally produced as a full-length in 2014 by Players of Utica in Utica, NY with the following team...

Director:

Nicholas Priore

Cast:

SHELLEY...Danielle (Piazza) Priore

CHRIS...Raymond Corrado Knutsen

RICHARD...Richard Enders -RIP

TOM...Ryan LoMedico

Lights:

Sarah Bord

Sound:

Meika Scott

Crew:

Deborah Martin

Weapons Master:

Jeff Hartz -RIP

Stage Manager:

Bob Kaplan

## WITH A SHRUG

With a Shrug was produced as a full-length for the 2014 FringeNYC Festival in Manhattan, NY with the following team...

Director:

Robert Haufrecht

Cast:

SHELLEY...Julie Hays

CHRIS...Devin Doyle

RICHARD...Bob Adrian

TOM...Walter Michael DeForest

Stage Manager:

Kasey Anne Burgess

Producer:

Nicholas Priore / A Priori Project

Each production featured the music of David Moore and Bing and Ruth.

Special thanks to my dearly departed friend and mentor, Edward Allan Baker...

And thank you, as always, to NSP...



WITH A SHRUG

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ACT 1  
SCENE 1

*“What Arms are These for You” by David Moore plays as lights come up on a messy living room that hasn’t been lived in for a little while. Things are missing, having either been stolen or packed away in the many boxes scattered about...but there is still plenty of clutter. The only furniture left is an old couch with a sheet over it and a coffee table with a crystal angel on it. Just off the living room is a front entranceway with stairs leading to the second floor and a door leading outside. The main door is open and the screen door is closed. SHELLEY enters from upstairs with a black garbage bag over her shoulder. She is exhausted. She drops it on the floor by the bottom of the steps, pulls open the screen door, props it ajar with the garbage bag, and goes back upstairs. CHRIS appears behind the screen door, and then pokes his head in. He enters quietly, stepping over the bag in the doorway, and starts looking around. He begins looking through the boxes, taking things out and moving things. He grows more and more nervous as he is unable to find what he’s looking for. After a bit, Shelley comes back down the steps with another full garbage bag over her shoulder. She drops it at the bottom of the steps, catches her breath, and then notices Chris standing in the living room. Music stops abruptly at the sound of her voice.*

**SHELLEY.** HEY!

**CHRIS.** Oh...

**SHELLEY.** You fuckin fuckin kids!

**CHRIS.** The door was open. (*Shelley runs to one of the many boxes, rummages nervously, and then produces a cane.*)

**SHELLEY.** Door’s open, the owner’s dead, let’s take all his shit!

**CHRIS.** No...I...

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**SHELLEY.** You're too late, ya know, the rest'a the neighborhood already cleaned him out, I'm just packin up what's left.

**CHRIS.** I wasn't robbing him, he always told me to come right in...

**SHELLEY.** Bullshit...How come you were lookin through his stuff?

**CHRIS.** I was tryin to find somethin...

**SHELLEY.** What?

**CHRIS.** Well...it's a funny sort of thing...

**SHELLEY.** Bet I won't laugh...

**CHRIS.** I let him borrow something right before he died, and...I wasn't really sure how to go about getting it back...

**SHELLEY.** (*Sill holding up the cane.*) Oh...

**CHRIS.** ...it's a family heirloom, otherwise, ya know...

**SHELLEY.** No, no, it's fine...

**CHRIS.** It seems a little geisha...or no, I mean *gauche*...

**SHELLEY.** Please, let's...not be awkward (*Notices she is still holding the cane up and lowers it.*)...if there's somethin here that belongs to you, then you should have it back. (*Puts the cane away.*) I'm sorry about the cane, it's just these kids around here...

**CHRIS.** They don't have much.

**SHELLEY.** (*Overlapping*) Why the hell my father stuck around this neighborhood, I'll never understand it. You should have seen this block before you were born, when I lived in this house, my God, it was gorgeous around here. You see what happens?

**CHRIS.** I still like it.

**SHELLEY.** Oh, I'm...I didn't mean to...

**CHRIS.** No, it's fine, my father says the same thing, but...I don't know though, I sort of enjoy the ruins.

**SHELLEY.** You been livin here a long time?

**CHRIS.** All my life...just a few doors up.

**SHELLEY.** I'm Shelley by the way.

**CHRIS.** It's nice to finally meet you...

**SHELLEY.** Sorry again for (*Beat.*)...Finally? Like what, you know about me?

**CHRIS.** I was aware of a daughter named Shelley...

**SHELLEY.** Huh...

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**CHRIS.** ...and you seem to fit the description.

**SHELLEY.** ...so you and my father were...familiar?

**CHRIS.** Yea, I think we were friends even.

**SHELLEY.** You think so?

**CHRIS.** We never said so, but that's what it seemed like...sort of.

**SHELLEY.** Hmm...

**CHRIS.** Best friends, I might even say (*Beat.*)...yeah, we might have been best friends, in fact.

**SHELLEY.** And did you know my father became a recluse after he retired?

**CHRIS.** Never really saw him out of the house, I know that.

**SHELLEY.** Did you know that he never let anyone *in* the house?

**CHRIS.** Except for me.

**SHELLEY.** (*Suddenly bitter.*) Not even his own (*Deep breath.*)...and you would just walk right in?

**CHRIS.** He got mad when I knocked...it made him think a stranger was at the door.

**SHELLEY.** Unreal.

**CHRIS.** He seemed awfully bored here all by himself, and...I know how that feels, so...we kept each other company.

**SHELLEY.** (*Through a false smile.*) How very nice. (*As the conversation continues, Chris' attention is somewhat divided between engaging with Shelley and discreetly scanning the environment.*)

**CHRIS.** So how's the writing?

**SHELLEY.** What writing?

**CHRIS.** Your writing. The writing that you do, how's it going?

**SHELLEY.** So you guys did talk about me...

**CHRIS.** We talked about whatever came up, and you came up quite a bit.

**SHELLEY.** Hmm...

**CHRIS.** He said you're a counselor but you're tryin to be a writer.

**SHELLEY.** No, I *am* a writer...all it takes to be a writer is to write, he never understood that.

**CHRIS.** Oh...

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**SHELLEY.** He was so small-minded, his whole...antiquated idea of literature. Who's he to say what qualifies?

**CHRIS.** Wasn't he a professor of literature?

**SHELLEY.** Exactly, what the hell does he know? (*Derogatorily.*) Were you a *student*?

**CHRIS.** No...well not at the university...

**SHELLEY.** What am I sayin, you're so young...I swear, my sense of time lately, it all bleeds together.

**CHRIS.** ...but he taught me quite a bit.

**SHELLEY.** I'll bet he did.

**CHRIS.** (*Beat.*) Were you ever...

**SHELLEY.** Yep...the son of a bitch failed me, you believe it? My own father, I transferred out'a state the next semester and switched majors.

**CHRIS.** But you kept on writing...

**SHELLEY.** Well yea...seems more and more like a waste of time, but I'll never stop...thing is, I won't ever know if I'm any good.

**CHRIS.** You're more than good.

**SHELLEY.** What?

**CHRIS.** I love your work...do you have any more?

**SHELLEY.** How have (*Beat.*)...You read my stories?

**CHRIS.** Your father showed me a few.

**SHELLEY.** Which ones?

**CHRIS.** My favorite one was the boy in the wall.

**SHELLEY.** You really like those?

**CHRIS.** They were very beautiful.

**SHELLEY.** You weren't...deeply disturbed?

**CHRIS.** Was I supposed to be?

**SHELLEY.** Most people are when they read my work.

**CHRIS.** Oh...well I don't know much about literature, so...

**SHELLEY.** No...don't do that...your reaction is perfectly valid...and quite validating, thank you. (*Laughs a bit.*) My father always thought I was sick in the head.

**CHRIS.** He knew I'd like it.

**SHELLEY.** So what does that say about you?

**CHRIS.** He said, I think you'll really appreciate this...and I did.

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**SHELLEY.** Huh...

**CHRIS.** He knew there was something there, he just...

**SHELLEY.** Needed someone to point it out.

**CHRIS.** There's nothing wrong with that.

**SHELLEY.** Yeah, well...

**CHRIS.** (*Abruptly.*) He was a very nice man, you know.

**SHELLEY.** (*Beat.*) How come you're saying that?

**CHRIS.** I don't...it just seems like...

**SHELLEY.** What...does it seem like, hm?

**CHRIS.** Just that...you might not know him that way, and I wanted to say it.

**SHELLEY.** You think you know him better than me?

**CHRIS.** Differently maybe...

**SHELLEY.** Differently...

**CHRIS.** People don't always see what's there and it takes an outside perspective to...

**SHELLEY.** Let me tell you somethin, I know exactly how nice my father was to strangers...

**CHRIS.** I'm not a stranger...

**SHELLEY.** See you don't need to be nice to the people who love you no matter what, that's how it works...you didn't know that? You can shit all over those people and they'll always be there, but make sure you smile at strangers and acquaintances...

**CHRIS.** We ate soup together!

**SHELLEY.** (*Beat.*) I'm sorry, you said soup?

**CHRIS.** Every day after school, I came right off the bus, he would help me with homework and then we ate soup. Campbell's Chicken Noodle on Monday and Wednesday, Tomato on Tuesday and Thursday and Italian Wedding on Friday to celebrate the weekend, because that meant we had all Saturday and Sunday to hang out before another school week started. I was here every day since the third grade, he never ate soup alone, so please...do not call me a stranger...or an acquaintance.

**SHELLEY.** I was only making the point...

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**CHRIS.** He was nice to me...not very many people are nice to me and I appreciated it. (*Beat.*) Doesn't sound like much, just to be nice, but...some people have a hard time with that.

**SHELLEY.** Like me?

**CHRIS.** No. People just think I'm strange.

**SHELLEY.** Why?

**CHRIS.** I don't always know how to act...or what to say...or what's appropriate I guess, in a given scenario. My father calls me a weirdo...says we're anti-socialist.

**SHELLEY.** Well that's something else, but...you seem polite to *me*.

**CHRIS.** I'm very polite, but that only goes so far...things aren't so obvious to me as they are to other people.

**SHELLEY.** Well you seem pretty smart *too*.

**CHRIS.** I am smart...I just don't get certain things for some reason.

**SHELLEY.** Like what?

**CHRIS.** I don't know...one thing I *am* very aware of is how very unaware I am.

**SHELLEY.** That's funny.

**CHRIS.** Not really...sometimes I don't think I belong here, like there's another place for me, except I know there isn't.

**SHELLEY.** You never know, right?

**CHRIS.** Do you think I'm strange?

**SHELLEY.** So what if you are, it's arbitrary like everything else, who cares?

**CHRIS.** Your father never called me strange...he never called me a robot or an alien or a weirdo...he always just called me Joe.

**SHELLEY.** Oh, I never got your name, it's Joe...

**CHRIS.** No, my name is Chris, but he said I look like a Joe, so that's what he called me.

**SHELLEY.** Oh (*Beat.*)...well, Chris...

**CHRIS.** Joe.

**SHELLEY.** Sorry?

**CHRIS.** I like the way it sounded, so I go by Joe now.

**SHELLEY.** (*Beat.*) Okay...Joe...I'm sorry we had to meet under these horribly awkward circumstances...

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**CHRIS.** It doesn't seem so bad now.

**SHELLEY.** No, I guess it doesn't...you seem like a very nice young man.

**CHRIS.** Thank you.

**SHELLEY.** (*Deep breath.*) How about we go ahead and find that...uhm...

**CHRIS.** I can just look for it...I see you're very busy...

**SHELLEY.** Yeah, but it makes more work for me if you unpack all the boxes...

**CHRIS.** I won't make a mess, I promise...and I'll be quiet too.

**SHELLEY.** (*Sighs.*) How about you help me pack this stuff up, and while we're doin that, we can keep an eye out.

**CHRIS.** So we're helping each other.

**SHELLEY.** That's right.

**CHRIS.** Alright then, let's do that.

**SHELLEY.** Okay, first thing is separating the junk from the garbage. It's all junk but not all of it's garbage.

**CHRIS.** How will I know if it's garbage?

**SHELLEY.** A lot of it is, but if you're not sure, just ask. (*They start packing things away, some in boxes and some in trash bags. Chris will periodically hold an object up to Shelley with a shrug and she will point to either a box or a trash bag, where he will proceed to place that object.*) Maybe they did me a favor, these neighborhood kids, clearin out some of that stuff...if it's worth somethin to them and it's out'a my way, I say let em have it.

**CHRIS.** They don't have much.

**SHELLEY.** (*Picking up some random object or other.*) I mean look at this (*Tossing that object into a box.*)...for someone who never went anywhere, my father sure accumulated a lot'a shit.

**CHRIS.** He did become a bit of a collector...

**SHELLEY.** You could call it that.

**CHRIS.** ...never threw very much away.

**SHELLEY.** Oh sure he did...plenty.

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**CHRIS.** Nothing special. (*Upset by this, Shelley continues her task with an agitated energy, throwing things aggressively into boxes and bags. Chris carries on, oblivious to her shift in behavior.*)

**SHELLEY.** (*Snatches the crystal angel off of the coffee table.*) Oddly enough, they left this behind.

**CHRIS.** He loved his crystal angel.

**SHELLEY.** I hate it. (*Drops it carelessly into a box, where it can be heard breaking.*) There, now she's not so perfect. (*Chris looks in the box and takes out the broken pieces, putting them in a trash bag.*)

**CHRIS.** (*After a bit, still searching.*) I wasn't sure when to come by...it's a funny sort of thing...I didn't want to come too soon of course, but I didn't want to wait too long either.

**SHELLEY.** Well hopefully it's not already packed away or stolen.

**CHRIS.** I'll be in so much trouble...it's been in the family for so long.

**SHELLEY.** You shouldn't loan out things like that.

**CHRIS.** My father will destroy me if he finds out.

**SHELLEY.** I'm sure he won't destroy you.

**CHRIS.** I'm fairly certain he will.

**SHELLEY.** Things are still just things, even when they can't be replaced...you must be more important to him than some old...

**CHRIS.** My father got it when his dad died and I get it when he dies...

**SHELLEY.** Wait, wait...what are we lookin for again?

**CHRIS.** Oh...

**SHELLEY.** Did you even say what it was?

**CHRIS.** I'm fairly certain I did...

**SHELLEY.** I don't think so.

**CHRIS.** No? (*Shelley shakes her head "no".*) Oh...how absent minded of me.

**SHELLEY.** What about me? Here I am *searchin* (*Laughs.*)...I swear my mind these days.

**CHRIS.** You look very overwhelmed.

**SHELLEY.** Oh do I, yeah?

**CHRIS.** I mean you seem overwhelmed...not to say you look any kind of way physically...just all wound up.

**SHELLEY.** You're funny, so what are we lookin for then?



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**CHRIS.** It's an old German Luger.

**SHELLEY.** (*Beat.*) A wha—a Luger?

**CHRIS.** Supposedly belonged to a Nazi Officer before my grandfather got the better of him.

**SHELLEY.** You mean a gun?

**CHRIS.** It's not just any gun, it's a collector's item.

**SHELLEY.** You mean THE gun?

**CHRIS.** Well, for the Germans in World War Two, yes, it was THE gun...or pistol rather...I'm no enthusiast like my father...

**SHELLEY.** (*Cuts him off on "enthusiast".*) Is it the gun...that my father used to kill himself?

**CHRIS.** Oh (*Beat.*)...have you seen it?

**SHELLEY.** Is this a joke?

**CHRIS.** Joke? Wouldn't that be sort of insensitive?

**SHELLEY.** (*Beat.*) You lent him the gun?

**CHRIS.** Yes, pistol.

**SHELLEY.** How come you did that?

**CHRIS.** Because he asked to borrow it.

**SHELLEY.** Did he say what it was for?

**CHRIS.** No.

**SHELLEY.** Did you ask?

**CHRIS.** No.

**SHELLEY.** Why not?

**CHRIS.** He would have told me if he wanted me to know.

**SHELLEY.** Well what'd you think he wanted it for?

**CHRIS.** I've never been very intuitive...

**SHELLEY.** Really...

**CHRIS.** Not at all (*Beat.*)...I was fairly certain, though.

**SHELLEY.** You...of what?

**CHRIS.** He never said so, but I had a funny feeling what it was for, he was very depressed.

**SHELLEY.** Then how come you gave it to him?

**CHRIS.** I let him borrow it because he needed it, but now I need it back. My grandfather left it to my father and my father will leave it to me, but for now it's still his and I need to return it before he knows it's gone.

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**SHELLEY.** I think you better leave.

**CHRIS.** I can't go home without it.

**SHELLEY.** You should go, I think.

**CHRIS.** Do you know where it is? (*Examining Shelley's blank stare.*)

Hold on, do you know where it is? (*Beat.*) If you do, please tell me.

**SHELLEY.** The police took it.

**CHRIS.** They would have returned it by now...

**SHELLEY.** And why would I take it back?

**CHRIS.** It's very valuable.

**SHELLEY.** Get out.

**CHRIS.** Do you want me to get punished? Is that what you want for me?

**SHELLEY.** I want you out of this house before...

**CHRIS.** You know where it is, now please go get it for me, I don't read people very well, but you definitely have my gun, I can tell.

**SHELLEY.** (*Beat.*) Let me go check.

**CHRIS.** Thank you. (*Shelley goes upstairs for a bit. Chris seems relieved until she comes back down with the gun drawn.*)

**SHELLEY.** Is this it?

**CHRIS.** Yes.

**SHELLEY.** You sure this is the one?

**CHRIS.** That's my gun.

**SHELLEY.** Okay then.

**CHRIS.** Are you handing it to me or pointing it at me?

**SHELLEY.** Which does it look like?

**CHRIS.** It seems more like you're pointing it at me.

**SHELLEY.** Mmm, and why might I do that?

**CHRIS.** I was just about to ask.

**SHELLEY.** Because you are responsible...

**CHRIS.** Tell my father that.

**SHELLEY.** You are responsible for what happened here! That's why I'm pointing your gun at you!

**CHRIS.** Soooo...

**SHELLEY.** How come you gave him this gun?

**CHRIS.** I told you, it wasn't a gift, I need it back right now!

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**SHELLEY.** How come you let him borrow it?!

**CHRIS.** Because he didn't have one.

**SHELLEY.** Stop that!

**CHRIS.** What?

**SHELLEY.** That's not what I'm asking!

**CHRIS.** (*With a shrug.*) Then I don't understand the question, I'm sorry.

**SHELLEY.** (*Deep breath.*) How come...you let...my father...kill himself?

**CHRIS.** It was never up to me.

**SHELLEY.** I thought he was your friend.

**CHRIS.** He was, otherwise I wouldn't have let him borrow something so valuable. (*The gun trembles in Shelley's hand for a few moments until she takes another deep breath to calm herself a bit.*)

**SHELLEY.** Did you consider...for one single moment that maybe...maybe he wasn't really asking for a gun?

**CHRIS.** (*Thinks about it.*) Nope, no he was definitely asking for a gun, I'm sure of it.

**SHELLEY.** NO! You ignorant little fuck, he was reaching out to the one pathetic friend he had left, he was asking you for help.

**CHRIS.** If he asked me for help, I would have helped him. He asked me for a gun, so I brought him one. I don't read between the lines and he knew that. He should have said exactly what he needed. If he wanted help, then how come he couldn't just ask for it?

**SHELLEY.** Are you really that numb?

**CHRIS.** (*With a shrug.*) I don't know what I am...I just want my gun back before I get in trouble.

**SHELLEY.** Oh, you're already in trouble.

**CHRIS.** Probably.

**SHELLEY.** (*Beat.*) I think you might have been right.

**CHRIS.** About what?

**SHELLEY.** Maybe you don't belong here...among the people. You need to go somewhere else, I think.

**CHRIS.** There is no other place.

**SHELLEY.** Whether there is or isn't, you can't stay here.

**CHRIS.** Well I'm not leaving without my gun.

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**SHELLEY.** *(Beat.)* Do you know why I kept it?

**CHRIS.** How would I know that?

**SHELLEY.** Seemed like a pretty morbid thing to do, even for me, and I was sick at the very sight of it...but something told me to hold on to this gun...wasn't sure why, but for some reason I felt compelled to keep it around...maybe so I could follow in my father's footsteps and use it on myself...crossed my mind a few times or more...but see, that's too easy. My father hated violence...despised weapons of any kind, especially firearms, so I knew it couldn't belong to him...and on some level, I must have known that you were out there somewhere, whoever you were...and someday you'd come back lookin for this...unique little relic *(Cocks the gun and tightens her grip.)*...and on that day, I'd be ready and waiting with it.

**CHRIS.** *(Reaching for the gun.)* That was very considerate of you.

**SHELLEY.** *(Stepping back.)* Do you understand what's happening right now?

**CHRIS.** *(Beat.)* Yes, I think I do...you are trying to steal my gun...that's it, right? You want to rob me of my gun at gunpoint, but I won't allow it.

**SHELLEY.** *(Beat.)* You're not afraid...

**CHRIS.** Of you?

**SHELLEY.** No...of...of the situation.

**CHRIS.** I'm afraid of what might happen when I get home.

**SHELLEY.** And what if you don't make it back home?

**CHRIS.** It's just up the block.

**SHELLEY.** You fuckin fuckin wise ass!

**CHRIS.** I don't mean to be.

**SHELLEY.** I don't care...you have one last chance to walk out that door.

**CHRIS.** Not without my...*(Shelley fires the gun at the floor near Chris' feet. He jumps back. Shelley shakes off her hand, which is in pain from the vibration of the shot, like the lingering sting of holding a baseball bat that makes contact with the ball in the wrong way on a cold day.)* Whoa...hey, don't do that! *(He catches his breath a bit.)* Those bullets are hard to come by, that was an awful waste. *(Shelley regains her grip*

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*on the gun, but it starts to tremble again in her hand as she starts to cry.)*

**SHELLEY.** Why won't you just leave?

**CHRIS.** Your father promised me I would have it back when he was done with it and now he's done.

**SHELLEY.** SHUT UP! The more things you say, the harder it is not to shoot you.

**CHRIS.** It would be much easier not to shoot me if you handed me the gun. You couldn't really do it without the gun.

**SHELLEY.** How come you're not afraid?

**CHRIS.** You're not my father.

**SHELLEY.** That's all you're afraid of?

**CHRIS.** You don't know him.

**SHELLEY.** You'd rather die here than go back without his gun?

**CHRIS.** I can't leave without it.

**SHELLEY.** You have...no respect for human life whatsoever...not for my father's, not even your own, do you?

**CHRIS.** How can you respect human life, what does that even mean? I respect people...not the lives they live, I respect the person...and I respected your father enough to honor his wishes.

**SHELLEY.** You should have done something...

**CHRIS.** I did.

**SHELLEY.** Then you should have done nothing! *Nothing* would have been better than what you did!

**CHRIS.** You think I wanted to lose my best friend? It wasn't my life, it was his, and he was done with it. When someone's done, they're finished, and he was over it. I have nobody now, you think I'm glad about it?

**SHELLEY.** I haven't seen him in...twenty some-odd years!

**CHRIS.** All my years have been odd.

**SHELLEY.** We were about to reconcile, he was turning seventy this year...that's a milestone birthday and I planned on surprising him.

**CHRIS.** He would have hated that.

**SHELLEY.** STOP IT! (*Beat.*) You could have stopped him, you were the only one to do it...

WITH A SHRUG

**CHRIS.** His mind was made up...

**SHELLEY.** It doesn't matter, you *try*...

**CHRIS.** ...and he was losin it too.

**SHELLEY.** (*Overlapping.*)...and—and you (*Beat.*)...He what?

**CHRIS.** He had just about lost his mind...life as he knew it was already over.

**SHELLEY.** How do you know that?

**CHRIS.** (*Beat.*) He always said I look like a Joe, so that's what he called me...I never realized though, he didn't mean just any Joe. (*Shelley looks closely at Chris.*) Turns out it's a specific Joe that I reminded him of...

**SHELLEY.** (*Sudden recognition.*) Oh God...

**CHRIS.** ...except one day he thought I really was that person.

**SHELLEY.** But...how could you tell? If that's what he always called you anyway?

**CHRIS.** I couldn't tell at first...went right over my head like so many things...but as the conversation went on (*Beat.*)...it was the way he said it that time and the look on his face...I could see that he wasn't really lookin at me, it was someone else he saw. I wasn't sure whether to go along with it or not...lookin back now, I sort of wish I had, because once he realized (*Beat.*)...well anyway, that's when he asked me for the gun.

**SHELLEY.** (*Lowering the gun.*) You look just like him.

**CHRIS.** Who?

**SHELLEY.** I didn't see it right away, but...

**CHRIS.** Who was Joe, he wouldn't say who that was?

**SHELLEY.** (*Trying to contain her tears.*) Joey was my little brother...he was just about your age.

**CHRIS.** What happened to him?

**SHELLEY.** Same as my father.

**CHRIS.** Oh...same way?

**SHELLEY.** Why does that matter?

**CHRIS.** Sorry.

**SHELLEY.** (*Beat.*) He uhh...hung himself from the tree out back.

**CHRIS.** *Oh*...long time ago?

**SHELLEY.** That's when my dad quit teaching and locked himself away.

WITH A SHRUG

**CHRIS.** Is that the reason why?

**SHELLEY.** What?

**CHRIS.** Is that the reason why he quit teaching and...

**SHELLEY.** Was that not already clear?

**CHRIS.** Sorry...I told you things aren't so obvious to me.

**SHELLEY.** (*Laughs a sad laugh.*) That must be nice.

**CHRIS.** What?

**SHELLEY.** Taking everything at face value...ugliness lies beneath the surface of most things.

**CHRIS.** I know that...even though I can't always see it, I can still sense it...and that's even worse, havin a sense of ugliness and not bein able to place it...better off seein it face to face than feelin it creepin up on me.

**SHELLEY.** I don't know, you seem to be able to shrug it all off...I sort of wish I was more like you.

**CHRIS.** No you don't.

**SHELLEY.** Life must be a lot less to handle.

**CHRIS.** It's very boring.

**SHELLEY.** I'll take boredom over suffering, you wanna trade?

**CHRIS.** At least that's something...something is always better than nothing.

**SHELLEY.** I'm not so sure.

**CHRIS.** I'm so bored sometimes, I can't even stand it.

**SHELLEY.** So do something.

**CHRIS.** Like what?

**SHELLEY.** Anything.

**CHRIS.** What for?

**SHELLEY.** Because you're able to, you won't be forever.

**CHRIS.** I suppose...

**SHELLEY.** Better than nothin, right?

**CHRIS.** Right.

**SHELLEY.** Be careful though, ya know, because boredom begets restlessness, and that can lead to recklessness, and next thing you know...

**CHRIS.** Can I have the gun now?

**SHELLEY.** Relax.

WITH A SHRUG

**CHRIS.** I just...really need it.

**SHELLEY.** What for?

**CHRIS.** I already told you that a number of times.

**SHELLEY.** I just wanna be sure you're not planning any reckless behavior...

**CHRIS.** I'm bringing it home for my father.

**SHELLEY.** That's all?

**CHRIS.** He hasn't said anything, but I think he knows it's gone. He only takes it out to polish and he polishes it once a week and it's been gone for a few weeks already, so he must know by now. He knows I know that he knows I know that he knows and he wants me to worry more'n more while he takes his time figurin out what to do about it.

**SHELLEY.** At least you're not paranoid.

**CHRIS.** Yes I am (*Beat.*)...that's why I ran away first.

**SHELLEY.** You ran away?

**CHRIS.** Just until I get the gun back.

**SHELLEY.** When?

**CHRIS.** Whenever you decide to hand it over.

**SHELLEY.** No, when did you run away?

**CHRIS.** Oh, about a week ago.

**SHELLEY.** And you...what, you've just been wandering around, or...

**CHRIS.** Mostly reading...and *rereading*. Better to stay put when you're hidin out, I've been around back all week.

**SHELLEY.** You...you're living in the back yard?

**CHRIS.** In the treehouse, it's surprisingly cozy up there. (*Shelley walks offstage to look out at the backyard through the kitchen window. She reenters soon after.*)

**SHELLEY.** Since when is there a treehouse back there?

**CHRIS.** Your father and I built it a few summers ago.

**SHELLEY.** Huh...Joey was always after him to put a clubhouse up in that tree.

**CHRIS.** Oh.

**SHELLEY.** I've been avoiding goin back there...planned on havin it cut down as soon as possible.

**CHRIS.** Please don't.



WITH A SHRUG

**SHELLEY.** So you've been stayin up there all week?

**CHRIS.** I don't make any noise...

**SHELLEY.** (*Beat.*) Ya know what...I feel sorry for your father.

**CHRIS.** Then please hand over the gun, I'm sure he's worried sick about it.

**SHELLEY.** You need to get home right now.

**CHRIS.** But...

**SHELLEY.** Just go home.

**CHRIS.** That gun means more to him than anything, and that means anyone.

**SHELLEY.** Send him on down, I'll explain everything and then he'll get his gun.

**CHRIS.** You can't just do that.

**SHELLEY.** Why not?

**CHRIS.** He's a very unsavory man.

**SHELLEY.** I'll see for myself.

**CHRIS.** He's a military man, like my grandfather.

**SHELLEY.** So what? My dad was an academic.

**CHRIS.** Please!

**SHELLEY.** Don't worry, I'll let him know what a stand-up guy you are.

**CHRIS.** He doesn't care.

**SHELLEY.** Or maybe someone needs to point it out for him, right?

**CHRIS.** That doesn't apply here.

**SHELLEY.** Why not? Just let me...

**CHRIS.** You can't make me go back there without it, I won't (*Planting his feet.*)...I'll just stay down here forever if that's how you like it.

(*Silence.*)

**SHELLEY.** You have to go home at some point.

**CHRIS.** No I don't...I don't like it there without her in the house.

**SHELLEY.** Who?

**CHRIS.** My mother hasn't been with us for a while.

**SHELLEY.** Oh, I'm so sorry...when did she pass?

**CHRIS.** (*Resents the notion.*) She's not dead. (*Beat.*) She needs constant care...I could do it, but my dad won't have her in the house like that.

**SHELLEY.** Can you visit where she is?

WITH A SHRUG

**CHRIS.** It's too far, I don't drive and he won't take me...

**SHELLEY.** He must not want you to see her that way.

**CHRIS.** I tried walking one time, it took all day to get there...and then she didn't even look at me...just stared up at the ceiling, like that's all there was to do. She looked so...bored...just lying there, I cannot even imagine how boring that must be.

**SHELLEY.** Maybe she doesn't realize it, though...

**CHRIS.** What?

**SHELLEY.** How boring it is...maybe she doesn't even know the difference.

**CHRIS.** Well I do...it's bad enough I have to live my own boring life, now I gotta think about hers too.

**SHELLEY.** (*With a sigh.*) Bein bored isn't always so bad, ya know.

**CHRIS.** Yes it is, it's the worst thing in the world.

**SHELLEY.** No, it's really not, I was bored too at your age, and...

**CHRIS.** Are you trying to relate to me?

**SHELLEY.** Yeah...I guess...

**CHRIS.** You might as well stop it, you won't be able to.

**SHELLEY.** How do you know?

**CHRIS.** I just know.

**SHELLEY.** My mother went away too, ya know.

**CHRIS.** Yes, I do already know that.

**SHELLEY.** Oh...right, my father must've mentioned...

**CHRIS.** Was she as...unpleasant as he said?

**SHELLEY.** Is that how he put it?

**CHRIS.** No...he called her a miserable bitch.

**SHELLEY.** (*Laughs.*) Actually, I can barely remember that far back...but I guess if I'm anything like her, then...

**CHRIS.** Can we stop now?!

**SHELLEY.** (*Beat.*) Is this conversation boring you?

**CHRIS.** A little...we're not alike, you and I.

**SHELLEY.** You sure about that?

**CHRIS.** You said you wish you were like me...you shouldn't say things like that.

**SHELLEY.** Why not?

WITH A SHRUG

**CHRIS.** Because you really don't want to be like me, I can assure you.

**SHELLEY.** Maybe I do...

**CHRIS.** You told me I don't belong here...among the people, you said it yourself...

**SHELLEY.** No, you said that.

**CHRIS.** You agreed with me.

**SHELLEY.** I was upset, and understandably so...shit, I'm not so sure I belong here either, but here I am...

**CHRIS.** Stop that...you're not like me, you've never been like me, and you certainly do not want to be like me, that is final! Period. The end.

*(Silence. Shelley is taken aback by this, as her father used to say that.)*

**SHELLEY.** I need to ask you a question.

**CHRIS.** Then will you hand me the gun?

**SHELLEY.** It depends.

**CHRIS.** On what does it depend?

**SHELLEY.** You and my father...you didn't have some sort of...pact or anything..?

**CHRIS.** What sort of pact?

**SHELLEY.** You know...

**CHRIS.** What?

**SHELLEY.** ...because if you did, I give you permission to break it, just let it go, alright? He's gone now, you don't owe him anything, just get out'a here.

**CHRIS.** I'm not understanding this very well, but I can't go without my gun.

**SHELLEY.** I'm just sayin, if there *was* a pact of some kind...

**CHRIS.** What kind?

**SHELLEY.** ...just forget about it...okay?

**CHRIS.** Why are you still withholding my gun?

**SHELLEY.** I'm sorry, I cannot...assist you...in that way, I won't do it.

*(Silence. Chris lifts the sheet on the couch, revealing a substantial blood stain on the upholstery. He stares at the blood for a few moments, then averts his eyes and drops the sheet.)*

**CHRIS.** There was so much blood...I didn't think there would be that much blood...

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**SHELLEY.** What?

**CHRIS.** ...and his face, that was the worst part, how it went from *(Beat)*...there was sadness in his eyes right before, but at least that was something, some sign of life...then it was gone, and there was just...nothing...dead eyes staring at nothing. I figured it wouldn't bother me too much, the macabre of it all...especially after reading all your stories...but even the most gruesome tale couldn't prepare me for what I saw...I never knew it would be so...ugly.

**SHELLEY.** You were here...

**CHRIS.** He told me to leave, but I wouldn't let him die all by himself...I said, "If I leave, I'm taking the gun with me." *(Beat.)* He had no idea, but...I planned on taking my turn right after him...then when I saw all the blood...and his face...

**SHELLEY.** So you just...

**CHRIS.** I had to leave the gun, otherwise it looks like a murder...

**SHELLEY.** The police suspected there might have been someone else in the house.

**CHRIS.** An old man should not have to meet such a violent end.

**SHELLEY.** Neither should a young man.

**CHRIS.** I just...could not make a mess of myself like that...it was too grotesque, I couldn't do it.

**SHELLEY.** *(Beat.)* And...you still feel that way...or have you built up the nerve by now?

**CHRIS.** *(With a sense of dread.)* The nerve? You want to know about my nerves? I haven't been able to sleep all week, I've never been so tired of my life...

**SHELLEY.** You mean *in* your life...

**CHRIS.** ...I just want to go lie down in my own bed...it's the only place in my house where I feel somewhat safe, but I can't get there without running into him and *(Trembling.)*...Please...if I walk in now without the gun...I'm not sure what'll happen at this point...so if you won't help me, then you might as well just shoot me and get it over with. *(Silence. With a sigh and a shrug, Shelley removes the magazine from the gun, struggling with it at first, and then hands the gun over to Chris, putting the magazine in her back pocket.)*

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**SHELLEY.** There...don't be stupid.

**CHRIS.** Uhm...those bullets are pretty rare and very old.

**SHELLEY.** Yea, well too bad.

**CHRIS.** *(Beat.)* Can I ask *you* a question now? *(Beat.)* How come you care about what happens?

**SHELLEY.** *(Beat.)* Because I like you...and I can't stand to hear one more bit of bad news. You're a beautiful boy...and irreplaceable...

**CHRIS.** Thank you.

**SHELLEY.** ...so please...no more bad news. *(Beat.)* Listen...I had planned on sellin the house, but...well I won't get shit for it around here, lovely as it is, the neighborhood has seen better days.

**CHRIS.** So have I...

**SHELLEY.** Me too.

**CHRIS.** ...but I still like it.

**SHELLEY.** I know you do...and I was thinkin I might just move in here instead...is that a bit too morbid?

**CHRIS.** How so?

**SHELLEY.** And it's not like I got shit goin on elsewhere...nothing worthwhile anyway.

**CHRIS.** Nothin special?

**SHELLEY.** Not really.

**CHRIS.** You won't mind the neighborhood?

**SHELLEY.** Doesn't seem so bad now.

**CHRIS.** I told you.

**SHELLEY.** Yep...I've decided to try and enjoy the ruins *(Beat.)*...and I was hopin you might come hang out with me from time to time...

**CHRIS.** Oh...well I...

**SHELLEY.** ...any time you like, in fact...just walk on down...

**CHRIS.** Really?

**SHELLEY.** Yea...just give a little heads up so I can have the soup ready...that way you'll walk in, it's already hot on the stove.

**CHRIS.** Mmm...do you have any more stories to show me?

**SHELLEY.** Yes I do...and I'll even write a new one just for you.

*(Beat.)* How's that sound? *(Chris struggles for a moment and then hugs her abruptly. She thinks at first that he is reaching for the magazine in*

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*her back pocket, so she pulls her hands back to guard it...but is then taken aback when she realizes it's a hug.) Oh...(She reciprocates, wrapping her arms around him.)*

**CHRIS.** *(Releases after a bit.)* Sorry...

**SHELLEY.** No, hey, that was nice...thank you.

**CHRIS.** So you're my friend now?

**SHELLEY.** Best friend, I might even say.

**CHRIS.** Okay *(Beat.)*...and friends trust one another, right?

**SHELLEY.** They look out for one another—

**CHRIS.** Okay, but they trust each other too, right? *(Silence. With great hesitation, Shelley produces the magazine from her back pocket.)*

**SHELLEY.** You need to listen to me very carefully...he's gone now...you don't owe him anything.

**CHRIS.** I know that.

**SHELLEY.** You've got a new friend now...and I do trust you *(Handing him the magazine.)*...so here *(Not yet releasing his hand.)*...but if I hear anything *(Beat.)*...just don't let me hear anything, alright? *(She lets go.)*

**CHRIS.** Thank you.

**SHELLEY.** So what's tomorrow, Monday, that's chicken noodle, right? *(Chris struggles once again.)*

**CHRIS.** I'm goin home now.

**SHELLEY.** See ya tomorrow, right?

**CHRIS.** I should really get back, I've been gone too long already.

**SHELLEY.** Wait *(Beat)*...Just promise me you'll bring that right to your father.

**CHRIS.** *(Admiring the gun.)* Okay.

**SHELLEY.** Say you promise! Something is still better than nothing, now I need to know that gun's not for you...promise me it goes right to him.

**CHRIS.** I told you *(Loading the magazine.)*...it's for both of us, remember? First him, then me. *(Silence.)* I'm very sorry for your loss. *(Chris leaves before Shelley can speak. She starts to go after him, but then thinks better of it, considering he has a loaded weapon.)*

**SHELLEY.** *(With a shrug.)* Same to you, Joe...

## WITH A SHRUG

### SCENE 2

*“A Shout Whose Echo Came Back as a Song” by Bing and Ruth plays as Chris sits in the treehouse, thumbing through the pages of a journal...the music softens a bit when he settles on a page and starts to read aloud.*

**CHRIS.** From Here. *(Beat.)* I can see from here...tears falling from tired eyes. I can see and hear...silence broken with gentle cries. I can feel from here...the warmth upon my freezing skin when touched by his falling tear. I can see from here. Wishing I could numb his pain...I can see from here. I’ll never know that love again, that I am leaving here. I’m sorry, Father, please don’t hate me. Don’t shake me, Father, you cannot wake me. Don’t worry, Father, don’t you fear...I will always be near...I can see from here...*(The song continues to play gently into the next scene.)*

### SCENE 3

*Music fades. RICHARD and Chris sit at the kitchen table eating soup...Richard eats quietly while Chris slurps noisily. Richard's cane is leaning against the table beside him.*

**RICHARD.** Good soup.

**CHRIS.** Yea...

**RICHARD.** Too hot?

**CHRIS.** Nope.

**RICHARD.** Too cold?

**CHRIS.** Just right.

**RICHARD.** Good. *(As they continue their meal, Chris' slurping grows louder.)* Why must you always slurp your soup like that?

**CHRIS.** Tastes better that way.

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**RICHARD.** That's impossible.

**CHRIS.** Try it...

**RICHARD.** Absolutely not...

**CHRIS.** Then you'll never know. *(They both return to their soup...after a bit, Richard stops and watches Chris slurp his soup for a moment, considers it for another moment, and then tries it himself...attempting to slurp at the same time as Chris so as not to be heard...but Chris hears him.)* Hey, I heard that...

**RICHARD.** No...I mean, what?

**CHRIS.** I'm not very observant, but I believe I just caught you slurping, sir.

**RICHARD.** I believe you are mistaken, sir.

**CHRIS.** No, no, you tried to synchronize your slurping with mine so I wouldn't hear...

**RICHARD.** Alright, fine.

**CHRIS.** Good isn't it?

**RICHARD.** It's the same, I told you.

**CHRIS.** Maybe for you...it makes all the difference for me. Sometimes the sound of food is even better than the taste...like celery...doesn't even taste that good, but I love the sound it makes when you take a bite...only if it's fresh and crispy though, not all old and bendy. What other foods are like that? Celery and soup for sure...not celery *in* soup though, because then it's all soft and...

**RICHARD.** Okay...so it's not that it tastes better that way, you just enjoy it more.

**CHRIS.** Oh...isn't that the same thing?

**RICHARD.** *(Beat.)* I suppose. *(They both return to their soup for a bit.)* So how was school?

**CHRIS.** *(With a shrug.)* I don't know...

**RICHARD.** What do they have you reading these days?

**CHRIS.** Nothing.

**RICHARD.** You're not reading anything in school?

**CHRIS.** Nothing good...I like the other ones better.

**RICHARD.** Which ones?

**CHRIS.** Those stories you gave me.



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**RICHARD.** When?

**CHRIS.** Last week...

**RICHARD.** *(Beat.)* Oh...oh, yes...

**CHRIS.** I read them all...do you have any more?

**RICHARD.** *(Beat.)* So you really like those?

**CHRIS.** They were very beautiful.

**RICHARD.** Huh.

**CHRIS.** Do you have any more?

**RICHARD.** I don't know, I...I'll have to look *(Beat.)*...maybe take another look at them myself.

**CHRIS.** You really should.

**RICHARD.** I had a feeling you might find the merit...I must have overlooked it.

**CHRIS.** You should call her and tell her how much I...

**RICHARD.** No...no I can't do that.

**CHRIS.** But then you could ask if she has any more...

**RICHARD.** I'm not calling her, you can stop suggesting it.

**CHRIS.** Why not?

**RICHARD.** Can we just eat soup? *(They return to their soup for a bit.)*  
How's your mother doing?

**CHRIS.** I don't know...same I guess...doctor says she won't ever get any better.

**RICHARD.** I'm very sorry for that...your mother was by far my best and brightest student.

**CHRIS.** Really, she was that smart?

**RICHARD.** Oh, absolutely...and never satisfied either, that was the best part, she was never content with the extent of her knowledge...always hungry to learn more, always absorbing. *(Beat.)*  
What a waste of a wonderful mind that was.

**CHRIS.** Huh...it's a funny sort of thing...how someone can be that smart...and...then one bad fall and it's all gone...everything she ever knew.

**RICHARD.** Life can be horribly blunt.

**CHRIS.** I just wish she could be home with us...my dad says she's better off in a facility, but I think he just doesn't want to be

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bothered...I'm not very perceptive but that's what it seems like to me...the way he talks about her, like she's dead already...

**RICHARD.** We can only handle our own world in our own way...especially in matters of the...unimaginable.

**CHRIS.** Well...she's not gone, she's still a part of this world and she belongs at home. I don't like bein in that house without her there. Why can't I just do it? I'd take real good care if she was home...

**RICHARD.** That's too much for a young man to handle.

**CHRIS.** At least she'd be home and I wouldn't be so bored all the time.

**RICHARD.** You have school...your mother would want you to concentrate on school instead.

**CHRIS.** Don't do that. *(Beat.)* You shouldn't speak for her...she can't speak for herself, so you shouldn't assume what she'd say.

**RICHARD.** You're right...I'm sorry. *(They both return to their soup for a bit.)* So how was school?

**CHRIS.** You already asked me that...

**RICHARD.** *(Beat.)* Did I get an answer?

**CHRIS.** I don't know...

**RICHARD.** Well...what did you learn today?

**CHRIS.** *(With a shrug.)* Nothing...

**RICHARD.** Now that's a lie.

**CHRIS.** No it's not.

**RICHARD.** Well how much homework do we have?

**CHRIS.** I didn't get any.

**RICHARD.** Again? You haven't had homework all week...

**CHRIS.** So? That's a good thing...

**RICHARD.** *(Beat.)* When's the last time you went to school?

**CHRIS.** *(With a shrug.)* I don't know...

**RICHARD.** Stop saying that.

**CHRIS.** I don't like it there...nobody likes me.

**RICHARD.** How do you know if you won't talk to anyone?

**CHRIS.** I can tell by the way they look at me...

**RICHARD.** That's quite an assumption from someone who claims not to be very observant.

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**CHRIS.** Certain things are quite clear to me.

**RICHARD.** That's not fair, you don't know what they're thinking.

**CHRIS.** I don't care what they think.

**RICHARD.** If they look at you funny, it's because they don't understand you, that's all...maybe if you tried talking to someone...

**CHRIS.** I don't want to.

**RICHARD.** Well...

**CHRIS.** What about you? You don't talk to anyone.

**RICHARD.** Not anymore, I used to address a full lecture hall...

**CHRIS.** Not the same as a conversation.

**RICHARD.** ...and I'm an old man now.

**CHRIS.** So what?

**RICHARD.** You may be an old soul, but you're still young...you don't want to start isolating yourself this early, it won't be a good thing for you.

**CHRIS.** Works for you, it works for me.

**RICHARD.** It takes a toll of its own...the least of which is, you start to deteriorate.

**CHRIS.** You do?

**RICHARD.** Can't you tell?

**CHRIS.** Not really.

**RICHARD.** Well I can...but at least I have a life under my belt already...what have you got? You got an old fart on his last leg who makes you soup after school.

**CHRIS.** What else do I need?

**RICHARD.** You're a young man, go meet people, let the world in first before you go and shut it out...let it wear you down a little, the way it *should*...then when you're my age, you can go crawl in a hole or under a rock if you like, but not until then...stop wasting so much time, you don't know how much is left...

**CHRIS.** I suppose...

**RICHARD.** Okay...now how much school have you missed?

**CHRIS.** (*Beat.*) About a week.

**RICHARD.** And no one notified your father?

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**CHRIS.** He rarely answers the phone...never any good news...not sure he cares anyway.

**RICHARD.** *(With a shrug.)* Well...we'll have a lot of catching up to do...and what have you been doing all week?

**CHRIS.** Nothing.

**RICHARD.** Stop saying that.

**CHRIS.** Just hidin out in the tree house.

**RICHARD.** You've been out back all week?

**CHRIS.** Only during the day...then I come around front at three O'clock.

**RICHARD.** That's very deceptive.

**CHRIS.** I've been reading though...I finished all the stories you gave me.

**RICHARD.** Forget about the stories, you have a week's worth of homework hanging over your head now!

**CHRIS.** I love those stories.

**RICHARD.** Call one of your classmates and ask them what you missed, we'll get started right now.

**CHRIS.** I don't know anyone...

**RICHARD.** There must be someone you can call.

**CHRIS.** I'll talk to the teacher tomorrow.

**RICHARD.** Nonsense, it's a perfect chance to reach out...

**CHRIS.** I don't want to.

**RICHARD.** But...

**CHRIS.** Can we just eat soup? *(They return to their soup for a bit.)* I sure wish you had more stories to show me...

**RICHARD.** What stories?

**CHRIS.** The ones you showed me...and those are from when she was younger, I'm sure they've only gotten better...you should really call and ask, I bet she has so many more...

**RICHARD.** Who?

**CHRIS.** Shelley...we already said this, I know you don't want to, but...well hey, I'll tell you what...you give her a call about the stories, and I'll call someone from class about homework...deal? *(Richard looks closely at Chris.)*

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**RICHARD.** Wait...*(Chris looks closely back at him.)*

**CHRIS.** Are you alright?

**RICHARD.** Has she been showing you her stories?

**CHRIS.** What?

**RICHARD.** Did she show you one of her stories? Answer me honestly...

**CHRIS.** No...

**RICHARD.** Don't lie for her like that...

**CHRIS.** I'm not.

**RICHARD.** ...tell me the truth!

**CHRIS.** I am...what are you talking about?

**RICHARD.** What in the world am I going to do with that girl...I'm at an absolute loss, Joe, you know that? *(Beat.)* She was so well behaved as a little girl...now don't you go ending up like her...you're a good boy, ya hear me?

**CHRIS.** Yes.

**RICHARD.** You better stay that way, you got it?

**CHRIS.** Got it.

**RICHARD.** Good.

**CHRIS.** She's a great writer, though.

**RICHARD.** So she did show you!

**CHRIS.** Uhm...

**RICHARD.** She's sick in the head is what she is...I told her never to let you see those lousy stories...you don't need that kind of influence, worry instead about your studies.

**CHRIS.** I don't...

**RICHARD.** Speaking of which, tell me about school today.

**CHRIS.** *(Beat.)* Why do you keep asking me about school?

**RICHARD.** Because that's my job.

**CHRIS.** I already told you...

**RICHARD.** Told me what?

**CHRIS.** I haven't been to school...

**RICHARD.** Since when!?

**CHRIS.** I spent the week out back.

WITH A SHRUG

**RICHARD.** What did I just say about being a good boy and staying that way? You're telling me you haven't been to school in a week?

**CHRIS.** Yes, I already said, I was in the treehouse.

**RICHARD.** *(Beat.)* Treehouse?

**CHRIS.** Yes...

**RICHARD.** Now how many times do I have to say we are not going to build a treehouse? It's too dangerous and I'm tired enough as it is.

**CHRIS.** But...

**RICHARD.** There will be no buts about it...and your timing is absurd, why you would ask me for something like that after missing a whole week of class is beyond me...as if I would ever reward your bad behavior, with a treehouse no less? Now you're certainly not getting one, that is final! Period. The end.

**CHRIS.** *(Beat.)* But we already built it...how could you forget, it's beautiful? *(Richard looks closely at Chris, then grabs his cane and stands with a grunt, looking out the window at the backyard.)*

**RICHARD.** Since when is there a treehouse back there?

**CHRIS.** Summer before last...don't you remember? *(Beat.)* I fell out of the tree, and while you were checking my knee, you said "that's exactly why this wasn't a good idea..." *(Richard looks closely at Chris, and then sits back down with a deep breath of realization, leaning his cane against the table.)*...but then the next day we got right back to work.

**RICHARD.** Right...yes, of course...

**CHRIS.** You remember now?

**RICHARD.** If I remember correctly, you were out of commission the next day and I did all the work.

**CHRIS.** *(Laughs.)* That's right, I was the foreman that time, see I knew you remembered...that was fun.....wasn't it?

**RICHARD.** Huh? Uh-huh...yes. *(He goes for another spoonful and then stops.)* What do you suppose is worse, Joe...losing it all at once, the way your mother did, to never see it coming or going...or to watch it all fade away slowly? Everything you know.

**CHRIS.** I'm not sure...not sure what you mean.

**RICHARD.** *(Beat.)* Never mind.

**CHRIS.** I'm sorry.

WITH A SHRUG

**RICHARD.** Don't be...finish your soup. (*Chris tastes a spoonful of soup.*)

**CHRIS.** It's cold. (*Richard tastes a spoonful of soup.*)

**RICHARD.** Mine too (*Beat.*)...I need you to do something, Joe...

**CHRIS.** Sure, you want me to heat em back up for us?

**RICHARD.** No, no...I'm finished...I need a favor from you...

**CHRIS.** (*With a shrug.*) Okay...anything.

**RICHARD.** I haven't said what it is...

**CHRIS.** Doesn't matter.

**RICHARD.** (*Laughs a sad laugh.*) You're a good boy...and I'm really glad you're here.

**CHRIS.** (*With a shrug.*) Oh...same here. ("*Alphabet Sunrise (slow)*") by David Moore plays into intermission like a requiem.)

**END OF ACT 1**

***THE PLAY IS NOT OVER!! TO FIND OUT HOW IT ENDS –  
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WITH A SHRUG