

THE TEXAS PLAY

A triptych. Three plays: the school, the court, and the country that is left.

by Mr. "Gangster"

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PLAY ONE: WELCOME TO TEXAS PLAY TWO: THE STATE OF TEXAS V. WITT PLAY THREE: LIBERTY AND FAITH

One company carries all three. The girl, the nurse, the boy, the two parents, the lawyer, and the bully recur play to play. The audience holds every thread the characters never can. Read in order: the reveals only work in order.

STAGING MAP (PRODUCTION)

Six areas. Three across, two deep.

	STAGE LEFT	CENTER	STAGE RIGHT
REAR	RL	RC	RR
FRONT	FL	FC	FR

FR, front right. The classroom. The anchor. Pre-set before the house opens. Wit's empty desk is there from the first second, the cracked phone dark on it. The classroom is never struck. It holds all night, and every other location assembles in the light around it, so Wit's desk haunts the edge of the court, the home, and the hospital. The machine is one set.

FL, front left. The couch. Stays on stage the entire show. Two pools of phone light, four feet of cushion, the home. The audience that learned this couch in Play One watches it the whole time, waiting for the four feet to be crossed.

RR, rear right. The quick-transition zone. Painted backdrops swap here: hospital, day labor, courthouse, cafeteria. All rear-right scenes pull their action downstage to center front to play; the backdrop only sets the where. Fast changes ride a track or fly.

RC, mid stage. Slide-out units. The gurney slides out for the ER. The Honda slides out for the car scenes.

The Honda lives in front of the day-labor backdrop and stays there. The Witt family literally lives at work to survive. Leave the car parked at the day-labor place as a standing image. They do not commute to poverty. They are parked in it.

The Door. Freestanding. The spine object of the set. Through Plays One and Two it is Mercy's door, the two inches she leaves open, and it lights when someone reaches through it for someone who cannot quite be reached. Felicity comes through it for the stairwell

call to the Chief, so that call is a passage through the door, not a phone in a void. At the end, Liberty comes through the door and summons her father. After the Hope and Wit scene that follows, the door is gone. Liberty has come through. Mercy's struggle and pain, carried through Hope, gave birth to Liberty, and the door is the passage she came through. Strike it only then, and only once, and let the strike read.

WELCOME TO TEXAS

A play in three acts.

Adapted from "The American School." Running time roughly two and a half to three hours across the three plays, with two intermissions, one after the first play and one after the second.

CHARACTERS

THE TEACHER, 53. The only voice that speaks in the open, and the only eyes in the building that follow a person instead of a screen. He is also the man the Nurse meets, once, in an emergency room.

THE GIRL, 16. Third row. Quick, hidden, ashamed of the hiding. The first play withholds her name until its last line; from the second play on she is HOPE.

THE NURSE, 43. The Girl's mother. A level face held over a year of going unheld. The first play withholds her name until the close of its second act; after that she is MERCY.

WIT. Timothy Witt, 16. The smartest kid in any room he is ever in. For most of the work he is an empty desk and a cracked phone, never a body. When he finally appears, he faces away, so that anyone in the house could be him.

FELICITY LOGAN, late 20s. The public defender. Black, armored in tailoring she cannot afford, because she walks into rooms full of people paid to underestimate her. With the Teacher, one of the only two people the blue light never touches.

CARIDAD WITT. Wit's mother. Spanish for Charity. Cleans the floors of the hospital whose bill put her family in a car.

THOMAS WITT. Wit's father. Slow, deliberate English. His Spanish he keeps for love.

THE BOY. The lawyer's son, in a red hat. The one who builds the cruelty and runs it through the feed.

THE STATE'S ATTORNEY, the machine's pleasant voice. THE COURT, the judge. THE CHIEF, the chief public defender. THE INVESTIGATOR, part-time. THE GRIEF COUNSELOR, an outsider with a lanyard.

LIBERTY. The daughter of Hope and Wit. Five years old, on the Fourth of July.

THE CLASS. An ensemble in blue, mostly still, who come alive on a single cue to be cruel. May include the audience.

Casting: every role may be played by a woman except WIT, THOMAS WITT, THE TEACHER, and THE BOY (red hat). THE STATE'S ATTORNEY and THE COURT are voices only, never seen.

STAGING

The glass. Everyone in these plays lives inside a screen. The students hold tablets; the mother and daughter hold phones; the lawyers, the parents, the State's attorney, and the judge are all lit and held by the same cold blue, because it is all the same glass, and it is the only light on them. Two people are never behind it: the Teacher, ever, and in the second play, Felicity Logan. The blue holds over the entire work and breaks exactly once, late in the third play, when a phone in the first girl's hand lights with the boy's name and she says it to the house, it's Wit, y'all. That is when the glass finally goes. The screens keep a kind of time, too: watch the characters check them, and let the small impatience of waiting on a reply that does not come measure how much they have handed the glass and how little it hands back.

The Teacher's sightlines. Only the Teacher looks at people. Everyone else looks at the glass. He is the one set of eyes that follows a human being across a room, and the only one who can see the whole chain of who is failing to look at whom. No one ever looks back at him the way he looks at them. Stage the gaze for him, and for no one else.

The voice. The Teacher speaks to the house in the first person, plainly, the one mind here still living in the open. The Girl and the Nurse speak to the house about themselves in the second person, you did this, you felt that, because the glass taught them to watch their own lives from outside. Wit does not speak and is not spoken to. He is an empty desk, until the very end.

The names. No one in the first play is named in the body. The naming is the event. The Girl says the boy's name first, just Wit, with a sixteen-year-old's whole wonder in it; the Teacher gives the rest, Timothy Witt, in the Curriculum. The Nurse names herself at the close of the second act, your name is Mercy. The Girl names herself in the last line, your name is Hope, the same way her mother did, in the second person, still inside the glass, because she saw the whole thing and got out of none of it. Witness is not escape. No program, poster, or lighting cue may give these names away before the play does.

Wit's phone. A cracked government phone, dark, on the empty desk. It lights three times and no more: once when the Girl looks for him, once when the room turns cruel, and once it refuses to light at all, at the very end, the name moving off the dead screen and into the living kid. After the play, at the curtain call, outside the count, it wakes once more and speaks. See the end.

Mercy's door. A doorway stands in the set from the start, unlit. It is the Nurse's door, and through the first play it is always open, the two inches she leaves her daughter's. Like the phone, it lights three times across the work. The first is during her opening monologue, when she steps through it to look up the words tattooed on a stranger's arm, as the emergency-room gurney is struck behind her. Keep the door and

the phone answering each other all night: two things that only light when someone is reaching through them for someone who cannot quite be reached.

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE: TEACHER

(Pre-show: the house already in the blue glow of a room full of tablets. A low hum, the way a server farm is quiet. The empty desk is already there, the cracked phone dark on it, before anyone has arrived.)

(THE TEACHER stands at the board, back to the house, a stub of yellow chalk in his hand. He has stopped writing. He turns. He looks at the rows of blue faces, and for one long moment he sees the whole machine at once.)

THE TEACHER. The room is quiet the way a server farm is quiet.

Twenty-nine of them. Each one lit blue from below. Each one alone inside a piece of glass that has studied them more closely than any adult in this building ever will. The content arrives in pulses. Eleven seconds at a stretch. Every clip sorted and timed by a machine that already knows which one holds this exact child one breath longer. A thumb moves. A number climbs somewhere. A heart. A streak. For a quarter second the child feels seen. Then it resets, and the wanting starts over, and it will start over every quarter second for the rest of that child's life, and nothing in this building is going to interrupt it.

THE TEACHER. They are not learning. They are complying. Log in. Open the module. Check the box that says you understood. The box measures the click, not the understanding. Understanding was never the metric. The metric was the point.

(He steps toward them, into the spill of their blue.)

THE TEACHER. I write it down at night. In the one corner of my life this building cannot reach. I post the pieces to a server in a country that is not this one, and I let the archive hold them, and the whole time I write I know the truth of it. This room is being manufactured into a population that will never read a word of what I write. I write it anyway. The alternative is to stop being a mind, and I settled that a long time ago.

(He looks out across them. Three points in the dark. He finds them one at a time.)

THE TEACHER. There are people in this room I can follow all the way to the end. The girl in the third row.

(A warm light finds THE GIRL, in the blue, her tablet under her chin.)

THE TEACHER. The mother who is not in the room.

(A second light, off to the side, on an empty space. No one is there.)

THE TEACHER. And the boy who is no longer in it at all.

(The light finds the empty desk. The cracked phone. The jacket. It stays. He does not cross to it. He never will.)

THE TEACHER. I can follow all three. That is the whole curse of the chalk in my hand.

(Now he sets the chalk down.)

(Blackout on him. The blue remains.)

SCENE TWO: THE STUDENT

(THE GIRL rises out of the rows into her own pool of warm light. She still holds the tablet. She speaks to the house, about herself. She starts bright. Chipper, quick, lit up, a kid who loves her mother without a single complication. This is the warmest she will ever be in the play. Play it all the way up, because the whole scene is the drop, and the room has to feel how high she started.)

THE GIRL. You started out wanting to know everything.

Your mother is a nurse. She worked nights and still read to you, pointed at the letters until they turned into words and the words turned into the names of things. You asked why the sky went the colors it went, and she told you, or the two of you looked it up at the table, and for a while the looking up was a thing two people did.

Then you went to the building. The first thing it taught you was the line. Where to stand in it. How to raise a hand and be told to put it down, because it was not the time for the thing you wanted to know. You learned a question is a delay, a delay is a disruption, and a disruption goes in a file. So you stopped asking out loud. That was the first thing they sorted out of you and you barely felt it go.

(She glances at the tablet, then cannot look away from it for a moment.)

THE GIRL. *(the brightness gone out of her now, lower, wary)* Then the phone got you. It got your mother too. You watched her come home from twelve hours of keeping strangers alive and vanish into the same glass you vanished into. The two of you on one couch in two separate countries. By eleven you were fluent in it and bored of everything that was not it.

(She turns her head, for the first time, to the empty desk. As she does, WIT'S CRACKED PHONE LIGHTS UP. A small dead-blue glow on the empty desk. The first time. It is not him. It is a screen, answering in his place.)

(And here the level drops off her for the only time in Act One. She says his name the way you say a name you have not let yourself say out loud, soft, a little stunned, all the wonder she has left pooling in two syllables. It is the same look she will give a photograph on a couch in Act Two. Hold them as the same look.)

THE GIRL. And then there was Wit.

(She holds the look. The phone holds its light.)

THE GIRL. He was the only one who ever said it like a name and not a verdict. He made you laugh in a building that had trained the laugh out of you. He was quicker than you, and you were the quickest kid you knew, and there was a relief in it you had never felt. The relief of finally meeting someone who got there first and turned around to wait for you.

One afternoon the teacher got going on where a word came from, lit up, chalk flying, and he put something on the board that came out sideways. An accident. A phrase that meant something filthy if you were sixteen and tilted your head, and he did not notice, because he never noticed, he was too far inside the idea to see the room. Wit caught it first. Of course he did. He always got there first. He just turned his head a few degrees and found you, already knowing you would be there, and the look on his face handed you the whole joke intact, and the two of you sat shaking, silent, four desks apart, while a man who could not see either of you explained the beautiful thing he loved to a room that was not listening.

For the length of that swallowed laugh you were not alone in the building.

(The phone's light dies. She does not see it go.)

THE GIRL. And to everyone else, Wit was trash. He carried a cracked, government-issued phone, the cheap kind, and the rich kids had a name for it and for him. The one who said it most wore the red hat to school like a uniform. They did not just say it to his face. They built it. They ran him through the feed, memed his clothes and his phone and the building he slept behind. The cruelty was content. The content performed. The numbers climbed. You watched the same machine that grades you reward the cruelest kids in the building in real time, with applause, by design.

(A beat. The hardest part.)

THE GIRL. So you hid. You liked the brightest, funniest person in that building, and in the halls you kept your face as blank as your mother keeps hers, because you had the math exactly. To be seen liking him was to be next. So you did not stand near him. You let him be alone in the open while you stayed safe in the crowd, and you told yourself it was survival, and it was, and it tore you apart anyway. Every day. The small daily cowardice of pretending not to know the one person worth knowing.

And then they took him. There was no scene where you stood up. There was a boy who was there, and then was processed, and then was gone. And it turned out you had helped. By saying nothing. By keeping your face level. By being exactly the kind of safe the machine makes of children.

(The warmth leaves her face. The level comes down over it like a shutter.)

THE GIRL. So you sit in the third row, sixteen, certain you have already seen the shape of the whole thing. That certainty is the building's finest work.

(She sinks back into the blue. The shutter stays. End of Act One.)

ACT TWO: PARENT

SCENE THREE: THE ER

(An emergency bay assembles in light. A NURSE at work, brisk, level. THE TEACHER enters. The Nurse will never know who he is. He moves like a man whose body has been quietly betraying him for years and who finds the betrayal funnier than frightening. Sleeve up: five words of Latin on the inside of the forearm, an hourglass beneath. He lowers himself onto the edge of the bed, favoring the right leg.)

(The first time in the play that two people speak to each other. The form changes. They are in dialogue. Watch the glass between them. Watch it hold.)

THE TEACHER. Before you scan anything. Right calf, deep vein. I've thrown them before and I'll throw them again, and the machine that runs this place is going to order the wrong study, with enormous confidence, in about ninety seconds.

THE NURSE. You a doctor?

THE TEACHER. Worse. A regular. I know my own labs better than your residents know theirs, which is less of a brag than it sounds. It's just a thing that happens to a man whose own blood keeps trying to kill him. You get close.

(She reads the leg, not the chart.)

THE NURSE. Right calf.

THE TEACHER. Right calf.

THE NURSE. Tight. Shining.

THE TEACHER. I did say.

THE NURSE. You did.

THE TEACHER. Nobody likes the man who's right. It's my one dependable talent and it has never once gotten me a second date.

(She almost smiles. Not yet. She checks the screen. Her face does something.)

THE NURSE. They've ordered the wrong study.

THE TEACHER. *(opening his hands, gentle)* And there it is. I'd have bet the house. If I had one.

(No self-pity in it. She clocks that too, the whole shape of him read off in a glance and not remarked on. He sees her not remark on it.)

THE TEACHER. *(the first real look)* Huh.

THE NURSE. What.

THE TEACHER. Everyone in here either can't look at me or can't stop. You just looked. Like a person, not a verdict.

THE NURSE. I look at everybody. It's how I keep score.

THE TEACHER. And how am I scoring.

THE NURSE. *(beat)* Better than your chart.

THE TEACHER. The chart undersells me. The chart has never once bought me a drink.

(There it is. She catches it. He catches her catching it. An inch of air, a bed rail, and twenty years of armor each.)

THE NURSE. I don't think the chart's permitted to.

THE TEACHER. No. Strictly outpatient, the chart. *(dry)* Shame. It's about the only thing in my life with a steady income and no opinions.

(She laughs. A real one. It gets out before she can level it. The face she has worn since residency cracks straight down the middle, and for one second she is just a tired woman laughing with a sharp stranger, because he reached her, and nothing reaches her, and it has been a year.)

THE TEACHER. *(quiet, pleased, a little undone)* There she is.

(Without quite deciding to, she reaches to steady the bed rail by his hand. Her hand and his sit a breath apart on the cold metal. Neither closes the gap. The divide is right there, the width of two fingers, and it holds. She takes her hand back first.)

(The laugh fades. The fade is its own small loss.)

THE NURSE. You want the genuinely stupid part.

THE TEACHER. Always.

THE NURSE. The clot won't get you. You'll beat the clot. The bill's going to get you.

THE TEACHER. *(delighted she got there first)* A man outruns his own blood for thirty years and dies of the postage. *(beat)* I knew I liked you. You skipped to the back of the book.

(A silence. The pull. The thing neither of them will do anything about, because he is being discharged into the dark and she is going back into hers, and they are both already behind their own glass, and the worst part is each of them can tell the other one is too.)

THE NURSE. *(nodding at the forearm)* What's it say.

THE TEACHER. *(pulls the sleeve down, slow, not hiding, just finished showing)* It says I should have known better. *(beat)* In Latin. So it reads like advice instead of an apology.

(He stands, with effort. The paperwork is already moving around them. The machine is putting him back out the door.)

THE TEACHER. Well. Nurse. Thank you for the look, and the laugh. Best two tests anyone's run on me all year, and you didn't bill me for either.

(At the edge of the light he stops. He almost says the other thing. The divide holds. He doesn't.)

THE TEACHER. Prepare for war.

(Gone.)

SCENE FOUR: THE NURSE

(THE NURSE is left alone in the fading bay. She takes out her phone, types in the half of the Latin she caught, reads it. Then she steps forward, out of the ER, into her own pool of light, and speaks to the house, about herself, in the second person. The man is gone but he is all over this.)

THE NURSE. *(reading, the old way, the v's sounded as w's: "see wees PAH-kem, PAH-rah BEL-loom")* Si vis pacem, para bellum. *(beat)* If you want peace, prepare for war.

(She lowers the phone.)

THE NURSE. You think about him for days. You never learn his name.

You are a nurse. Forty-three. You raise her alone, which means the only grown-up in the house is you. You hold things. That is the whole shape of your life and you did not choose it, it accreted. You hold the patient whose pressure is dropping. You hold the family in the doorway of the trauma bay, your face level the entire time, because a level face is the last mercy you have left to give by the end of a shift.

(As she turns to the other doorway, a soft light finds the Door at the edge of the set, open the couple of inches it always stands. It holds there through the rest of the scene.)

THE NURSE. And every time you stand in a doorway holding strangers through the worst hour of their lives, some quiet room of you goes to a different doorway. The frame in your own kitchen where you have penciled her height since she could stand. A line and a date. A line and a date. That doorway is the thing you reach for when this one fills up with grief. It is how you have stayed a person, and it is the whole reason that, whatever else comes, you will not let her become a nurse. You will carry this so she never has to.

The money is a low hum at the edge of hearing. On paper you are fine. House, car, the squared-off yard, the whole set of things that are supposed to mean a person made it. And still, at the bottom of every month, the arithmetic leaves a residue. A sense that you are running and the floor is running the other way. You did everything they told you at eighteen. You only have the feeling, at the bottom of the month, that you have been had, and no face to put on whoever had you.

(She glances at the phone again, the Latin.)

THE NURSE. And then a sick stranger with no insurance and a soldier's tattoo and a clock already running made you laugh for the first time in a year, and walked out of your building with a live clot in his leg, and you cannot keep it, and you do not even know what it was. No feed served you that man. No algorithm scored the match. It was the realest thing that happened to you in a year and it was an accident and it is already gone.

That is the hour the holding stops working. Three in the morning. The hour you want, with an embarrassing animal simplicity, for one body on the other side of the bed whose only job is to hold you back for once. What is left instead is a screen of faces you thumb past in the dark, and it does not pretend to be love. At least it is honest.

(She puts the phone away. The longing goes back under the level.)

THE NURSE. A sick stranger gave you a truer thing by accident than the screen has managed on purpose in a year. And you cannot keep it. And you go home.

(She crosses to her door, the one always open two inches. It lights for the first time as she steps through it, gone a moment to look up the five words of Latin she could not stop seeing, while behind her the emergency-room gurney is struck and wheeled into the dark. Lights shift. We are home.)

SCENE FIVE: THE COUCH

(Light shift. THE NURSE and THE GIRL carry the couch downstage themselves, into the center of the light, closer to the house than anything else in the play, and set it down. The Nurse's door stands at the edge of the set, open, dark for now. Then the couch as it will always be: two pools of phone-light, one at each end, a body in each. THE NURSE at one end, THE GIRL at the other. Between them, four feet of cushion and the blue of two screens lighting two faces from below, the same blue as the classroom, because it is the same glass. They do not look at each other. This is the only scene in the play where these two share the stage. They are mother and daughter. Watch them fail to find out.)

(For a long moment, nothing. Two thumbs moving. The hum.)

THE NURSE. *(not looking up)* You eat?

THE GIRL. *(not looking up)* Mm.

THE NURSE. Eat what.

THE GIRL. Stuff.

(That is the whole conversation. It dies. The thumbs resume. And then, underneath, the interior voices begin: the things neither of them will ever say out loud, each invisible to the other, each spoken to the house in the second person.)

THE NURSE. She is four feet away and you cannot reach her. You tell yourself it is the age. Only the age. Every kid goes inside the glass at sixteen and comes back out, you tell yourself that, and the colder part of you that you do not let speak knows it is not the age. It is the glass. The same glass in your own hand. You cannot set it down either. You are doing the exact thing to her that is being done to her, on the same couch, at the same hour, and you cannot stop, and you are her mother.

(THE GIRL's thumb stops. She is looking at something. Her face does the smallest thing, then more than the smallest thing. She is stunned by it, gone somewhere. Her hand goes slack and the phone slides down into her lap, screen up, still lit, so that for the first time the thing on it is not private. A cracked-phone photo of a boy. THE NURSE, four feet away, can see it.)

THE GIRL. There is a photo somebody never took down. The feed keeps it, because the feed keeps everything that ever performed. Him. The cracked phone in his hand. The caption the red hat kid wrote. Forty laughing faces under it. You look at it more than you would ever

admit. It is the only place he still moves. You keep him in the one machine that helped kill him, because it is the only machine that kept anything.

(THE NURSE glances over. Sees her daughter undone by something, and sees the screen in her lap.)

THE NURSE. You want to ask her what she is looking at. You can see it from here, a cute, scruffy boy with a cracked phone in his hand, and your girl looking at him like the bottom fell out of her. You do not know him. You will never know who he was, or that a colleague three floors down spent a year writing him into the dark, or that the man who made you laugh tonight taught him fourth period. You only know your kid is hurting over a boy on a screen, and you want it so badly your hand starts to move. You want to slide four feet across this couch and put your arm around your own child and ask her one true question and have her answer it.

(THE NURSE's hand moves, an inch, toward the middle of the couch. The same hand that stopped a breath from a stranger's on a bed rail.)

THE GIRL. *(she feels the look; the phone comes back up; the face goes hard and blank, the exact level her mother wears, learned off her without a word)* If she asks, you will say nothing. You have the math. Tears get you noticed and noticed gets you next. You learned it watching what they did to him. So you will keep your face level, the way she keeps hers, and you will hand her the same nothing she hands you, because you are her daughter and it is the one thing she taught you without meaning to.

(THE NURSE's hand stops in the middle of the couch. THE GIRL does not look up. The four feet hold. THE NURSE takes her hand back. It is a worse retreat than the ER, because this one she will make every night, and this one is her kid.)

THE NURSE. *(out loud, quietly, the smallest possible offering)* I'm gonna head up. I'll leave my door open.

THE GIRL. *(beat)* Couple inches.

THE NURSE. Couple inches.

(THE NURSE rises. She does not go straight off. She does the rounds, the way she has done them every night of this child's life, and the interior runs while her hands do the small, unglamorous liturgy of a mother.)

THE NURSE. You check the dead bolt. You always check the dead bolt. You leave the hall light on, because at three she was afraid of the dark hall and you simply never stopped. And you go to her door and you leave it open the two inches she has wanted since she was small enough to call you through the gap, back when two inches of open door was the whole technology of keeping a scared kid safe. It is the one habit neither of you has let the years take. She is sixteen now, behind the glass, four feet of salt water, and you still leave it open two inches, because it is the last open channel you have, and you would saw your own arm off before you closed it.

(She crosses to the door at the edge of the set. It takes the light now, open the couple of inches it always stands, and holds. She lingers there. The night feeds, the fevers, the height marks on the jamb, the

shifts picked up to keep the lights on, every year of it is in how long she stands there.)

THE NURSE. You want her out of this so badly it scares you. Whatever this is, the thing you can feel and cannot name. You will carry anything so she does not have to. You decided that the day they put her in your arms and you have not unsaid it once. The loneliness is the only thing you guard, because if she saw it she would carry it, and you have spent her whole life making sure she never carries you. So you keep the face level in her doorway too. It is the hardest level face you do all day.

(Beat. She names herself, in the second person, because she has narrated herself the whole way here and the self finally arrives at a name.)

THE NURSE. Your name is Mercy.

(The light on her cuts. She is gone, up to a bed she will lie awake in, certain she handed her daughter a quiet, ordinary goodnight.)

(A single light finds THE GIRL, alone at the end of the couch. The performance is over. There is no one left to be level for. The cracked-phone boy is still lit in her hand, and she looks at him, and the thing she has held behind her face since the day they took him finally comes.)

(It does not come as tears first. It comes as rage. The fists ball. The level face, the one she just relearned off her mother, breaks into fury, and she drives it into the cushions, silent, because even now, even alone, noise gets you noticed and she will not be heard up the stairs through the two inches her mother left open.)

(And as she swings, the room answers. Not her room. The other one. Across the stage, the classroom that has sat dark all act begins to wake. A light finds THE BOY first, the red hat, in his blue, thumbing his screen, not looking up, because for him the cruelty was never effort. It was ambient. A thing he did with a thumb. Then a second screen lights. A face, laughing. Then a third. The light begins to jump, screen to screen, face to face, the way a thing moves through a feed, faster, under a rising wash of laughter and the small bright pings of numbers climbing, the building applauding its cruelest in real time, by design.)

(Between the laughing room and the raging girl, the empty desk stays dark. The feed is howling at someone who is not there. It never noticed he left.)

(She swings harder, beating the machine into a couch cushion while the machine laughs and cannot hear her. The cruelty gets the volume and the applause. The grief gets muffled into upholstery.)

(The laughter peaks. The whole classroom lit and howling, screens strobing one to the next, THE BOY at the source of it. The girl in full silent fury on the couch. The dark desk between them.)

(SNAP. All of it cuts at once. The laughter stops dead. The classroom is gone. Only the girl, one light, alone again, the cushion under her fists, the cracked-phone boy still glowing in her hand. The machine vanished and left her holding what it did. And only now, with no one to hear and nothing to perform for, the tears, into the cushion, into her own fists, without a sound.)

(Blackout. End of Act Two.)

ACT THREE

SCENE SIX: CURRICULUM

(THE TEACHER at the board, where he has been. He does not cross to the desk. A single light finds the empty desk: the cracked phone, the jacket. The class is back in its blue. He speaks to the house.)

THE TEACHER. I can see what she cannot. That is the whole curse of the chalk in my hand.

(He looks at the lit desk.)

THE TEACHER. His name was Timothy Witt. The roster said Timothy. The kids who mattered to him said Wit. Brightest mind to come through my room in a decade, and he did not always sleep in a car. His father carried an insurance card once. A deduction on a pay stub. A place inside the ninety-two percent this country calls covered. Then one Tuesday in grade school the boy fell off the monkey bars and broke his arm. Inside eighteen months the family was living in a Honda in a parking lot.

(Beat.)

THE TEACHER. In this country a routine childhood injury and a card that turns out not to cover it are a sufficient cause of homelessness. I wrote that one down. I called him Timmy and let you assume Timmy was a figure of speech. He was a kid in my fourth period.

(He sets the chalk in the tray.)

THE TEACHER. And then the school did the rest. There was another boy.

(A hard light snaps onto THE BOY in the rows: the red hat, the lawyer's son, the leader of them. He does not look up. He never has to. At the very same instant, on the empty desk across the room, WIT'S PHONE LIGHTS UP, the second time. The predator and the empty seat, lit together, held in the same beat: the one who did it, and the chair where the one it was done to used to sit.)

THE TEACHER. The son of a lawyer, the kind whose name is on the side of a building, whose calls get returned by people who return almost no calls. That boy decided the homeless kid was sport. He ran it for a year. In the halls. And through the feed.

(The bullying beat. From the blue rows the class erupts. Not a head lifts. Not a word of any lesson. But this they still have, alive and ugly, hurled at the empty lit desk and its glowing dead phone.)

THE CLASS. *(overlapping, remembered rather than happening)*
Obama phone loser. Obama phone loser. Obama phone loser.

(As fast as it came, it dies. The blue closes back over them. The light on THE BOY snaps off with the chant. The phone's light goes out. The desk stays lit. No one is in it. No one has been in it for a year. The

cruelty outlived the boy and never noticed he was gone.)

(A light finds THE GIRL. She is crying. She is also, with everything she has, trying not to be seen crying, dragging her own face back toward level, because to be caught caring about him was always how you got next. THE TEACHER sees her. He is the only one who can.)

THE TEACHER. *(quieter)* When it finally became an incident, when the cornered kid did the thing cornered kids do, there was a father on one side. A firm. A foursome. The cell numbers of people who matter. On the other side, a child whose entire estate was a backpack. One phone call decided which boy was a victim and which was a defendant. Wit took the charge. The lawyer's son took the rest of his unblemished life.

(He looks from the lit desk to THE GIRL and back. The chain of sight only he can see.)

THE TEACHER. She had everything he did not. A mother who stayed. A roof that held. A voice that read to her until the letters meant something. He had a brilliance she will never touch and a life that would have flattened a grown adult. By the logic you are all sold, she should have been the one who was saved, and he should have been the warning. But the machine did not save her. It hollowed her slower, by degrees. And it did not fail him. It ejected him. The home a child walks in from does not decide whether the machine takes them. It only sets the manner of the taking. The slow emptying. Or the fast disappearance. The childhood is the setting on the dial. The machine is the constant.

(THE GIRL wins the fight with her face. The tears are gone. The level is back. That is the worst thing in the scene, and THE TEACHER is the only one who clocks it.)

THE TEACHER. I am not standing outside this pointing at it. I am in it. I am its most lucid inmate, the man who can describe the cell down to the rivet and still cannot find the door. I write at night and post it where the archive holds it. Not because anyone here can read it yet. Because the alternative is to stand at this board and perform the lie with the rest of them.

(The light holds on the empty desk a beat too long. Then it goes. The blue remains.)

SCENE SEVEN: FINALS

(THE TEACHER picks up the chalk. He turns to the board. Behind him, a room of children who have not once looked up from the glass. He writes. Large. We read it as it appears.)

(On the board: WELCOME TO TEXAS! HOWDY Y'ALL, NOW ALL Y'ALL, AND Y'ALL'S TOO, Y'ALLS 'ERE?)

(He underlines it. Twice.)

THE TEACHER. Every machine in this building would mark it wrong. The spell-checker buries every word in red. The standardized test has no bubble for it. And it is a more complete grammar than the King's English has fielded in three hundred years.

Standard English threw away its second person plural around 1700. Buried the difference between the one and the many under a single flat you and never built it back. This sentence rebuilds it and then some. Howdy carries the ghost of the dead plural. Y'all is the patch the people built from scratch. All y'all is the every last one of you, nobody left standing outside the door. Five precise moves in the second person, every one a thing the prestige standard cannot say, all of it hollered across a feed store lot by a man this test would have failed.

(He steps back from it. The one fully lit object in a room of glass.)

THE TEACHER. It is the one thing in this room that is not hollow.

(And then something happens that is not in his plan. A head comes up off the glass. Not the girl. THE BOY, the lawyer's son, the red hat. He looks at the board. Because correcting people is the only relationship to language he was ever taught, he reaches for his tablet.)

THE BOY. That's wrong. That's not even a sentence.

(THE TEACHER does not flinch. He has waited his whole career for a kid to look up, and he will take the one he gets.)

THE TEACHER. This is the finest English sentence written in over three hundred years.

(He looks straight at the boy with every advantage and a father who fixes things. And he says the three words he has built an entire secret body of work around.)

THE TEACHER. Prove me wrong.

(THE BOY reaches for the tablet. Thumbs at it. Looks up. Thumbs again. There is nothing there. No branch on the diagram. No rule to cite. Nothing in the correct version that can lay a finger on a grammar more complete than itself. A small panic crosses his face. The panic of a kid who has never once been the one who did not know. THE TEACHER lets him sit in it. It is the only justice he has the means to deliver. It is for a boy who is gone. It is nowhere near enough, and he does it anyway.)

(And in the third row, a second head comes up. THE GIRL.)

(She reads it. A long moment. She gets it. Not all of it. Enough. Enough to see that the thing they called wrong her whole life is doing something the correct version cannot, that the ignorant sentence is the smart one, that the joke has been on the building the entire time, and the building does not know, and the man with the chalk does. She does not say a word of it to the room. Her face never moves. She says it where she says everything, on the inside, to no one, the only place she has ever been safe.)

THE GIRL. There it is. The thing they marked wrong your whole life, up on the board, smarter than every one of them, and they cannot even see it.

(She turns her head, the last time, to the empty desk.)

THE GIRL. And you helped them do it to him. That is the part you get now. You did the exact thing the building does. You looked at the truest person in the room and you called him wrong, to your own face,

so you would be safe. They needed a phone call to sort him out. You only needed a level face and four feet of distance. Same result.

(WAIT for the phone. It does not light. The third time, and it refuses. He is not in the phone anymore. He is in her now. The screen stays dark for the rest of the play.)

THE GIRL. And it bought you nothing. You sold the one real thing for a seat, and you knew where the seat was going. The safe ones and the marked ones get off at the same stop. You sold him for a door that opens onto the same wall.

(She looks back at the board. She does not light up. That kid is gone, sorted out with the wonder on the day they took him.)

THE GIRL. So you don't get to light up. You did the sorting yourself, the day you decided being right was more dangerous than being quiet.

(One eyebrow goes up. The corner of her mouth follows it. A smirk. A sneer with the safety off. It is not hope. It is harder than hope and maybe worth more.)

THE GIRL. But you are going to keep his name. Not because it helps. Because you are the last place it lives, and it is the only thing left in you they never got their hands on. The part that knows exactly what you did.

(She is the last place his name lives. You just watched the dead screen hand him over to her.)

THE TEACHER. *(to the room, the house, the all y'all)* This was the whole final exam. Y'all looked up, y'all got it, and all y'all are not going to forget that all y'all's got it. That is the lesson. That is the one they were always afraid to teach.

(The blue of the tablets begins to go out, row by row, child by child, until the only light left in the building is the sentence on the board, and the girl.)

(He sets the chalk in the tray and says nothing more. THE GIRL is alone in the last of the blue, the dead phone dark on the desk beside the lit sentence. And she names herself, the exact way her mother did, in the second person, from the outside, because she got everything except the way out.)

THE GIRL. Your name is Hope.

(Beat.)

THE GIRL. Hope is the only one who still has Hope.

(A hand we do not see takes the last light. Dark. The hum stops. In a country that is not this one, an archive holds the record of a thing nobody in the room could read yet.)

(End of play.)

CURTAIN CALL

(The play has ended. The lights come back for the bow and the full company assembles across the stage, every actor present and themselves now. Every actor except one. The empty desk is still downstage. The cracked phone is still dark on it.)

(Then the screens light. All of them, the same blue as the feed, coming up at once behind the bowing cast. And on the empty desk, Wit's phone wakes with them and answers itself, on speakerphone, flat and automated and loud enough to fill the whole house.)

RECORDING. You have a call from a correctional facility. This is a call from... *(here the automation splices in a real human voice, a young man's, just two words, his own)* Timothy Witt. *(the machine resumes)* Press one to accept the call.

(Nobody presses one. The company stands there. The audience sits there. The boy who was never once on this stage is on the line, alive, and has been the whole time.)

RECORDING. Press one to accept the call.

(Do not hang it up. Let it keep asking. Hold the desk and the phone last, the call still open and unaccepted, while the house lights come up and the audience collects its coats and walks out on him, the same way the country has the whole time. Let the light go only when the room is empty and the line is still asking.)

Posted to a server in a country that is not this one. Circulate freely. Erased by morning.

THE STATE OF TEXAS V. WITT

Act Two of the Texas play. The second play.

Follows "Welcome to Texas." Same world, the next rung down: the building hands the boy to the courthouse, and we watch the machine that Act One only described.

THE SPINE

Act One told you Wit took the charge and the lawyer's son took the rest of his unblemished life, and that one phone call decided which was which. This act is that phone call, slowed down, with the palms it greased on the way through.

It is the criminal justice system as a sorting machine. A schoolyard fistfight, one punch, a blackened eye. A box cutter the kid carries to stock shelves at night so his family can sleep in a motel instead of a Honda. The cop finds the box cutter, and a fistfight becomes a deadly weapon in a school zone, and the bail becomes a number a homeless family will never see, and the wait begins, and the wait is the weapon. Fast to cage, slow to try. They can stretch the trial for a year while the kid loses everything he had left, and when he has lost it all they offer him a plea as the fastest way back to his family, and he signs. Not because he did it. Because the wait already convicted him.

The dread is structural. Everyone who saw Act One already knows Witt takes the charge. The act is not what happens. It is watching it happen anyway, gate by gate, and watching one young lawyer figure out, too late, exactly how the trap is sprung, taught to her by the one man in the building who is not a lawyer and has read more of the law than she has, because it is eating his student alive.

And this is where the two plays become one. The girl who sat out the bullying in the first play is the witness the defense needs in the second. The boy who pleads about a girl named Hope from a monitored phone is pleading about the same girl whose mother the lawyer is about to call for permission. And the only person alive who can connect the boy in the cage to the girl who keeps his name is that mother, who once saw a photograph glowing on a couch and never knew what she was looking at. The audience holds the thread the entire cast cannot. The interweave is the engine, and the ending is the moment one character finally catches up to what the audience has known since the first play's curtain.

SCENE ONE: ARRAIGNMENT AND BAIL

(The seal of the State of Texas. A bench. THE JUDGE works a morning docket the way a man works a treadmill. THE STATE'S ATTORNEY, comfortable. FELICITY LOGAN enters with a stack of files that does not end. She is the only I in this play, and she is fast, dry, and very tired, the tired of someone good at a job built to make being good at it pointless.)

LOGAN. *(to the house)* They give me seven minutes a case. Laugh. Everybody laughs once, then they sit in the back of my courtroom for one morning and they stop.

Ninety-four of every hundred cases in this country never see a jury. They plead. That is not a statistic. That is the design. A trial is the thing the system threatens you with so you will agree never to have one. We do not run a justice system. We run an intake valve, and the valve has a quota, and the quota does not care what you did. It cares how fast you sign.

(She pulls the top file. The clerk's voice, or the Judge.)

THE JUDGE. The State of Texas versus Timothy Witt.

THE STATE'S ATTORNEY. Aggravated assault, and unlawful possession of a deadly weapon in a weapon-free school zone.

(LOGAN, to the house, while the machine grinds behind her.)

LOGAN. Here is the case the State just read into the record. A fight. One punch. A sixteen-year-old put a kid named Henderson on the ground with a black eye, after fourteen months of that kid running him through the dirt. A fistfight. Now here is the deadly weapon. A box cutter, in the front pocket of his backpack, next to his name tag, because from ten at night to six in the morning this kid stocks shelves for eleven dollars an hour, and he has been doing it to move his mother and father out of the car they have been living in and into a motel by the week. He never took it out of the bag. He did not know it mattered. But a box cutter on school property is not a work tool in the

cop's report. It is a deadly weapon. And a deadly weapon turns a schoolyard fight into a violent felony, and a violent felony turns a kid with a job into a number with a bail.

THE STATE'S ATTORNEY. Your Honor, the State asks for two hundred fifty thousand. The defendant brought a weapon onto a school campus. He has no fixed address. He is a danger to the student body and a flight risk.

LOGAN. *(in the room now, fast)* No fixed address because the family is unhoused, Your Honor, which the State knows, because the State's own witness is the officer who knows where they park. The box cutter is work equipment, never brandished, not a finger laid on it during the incident. The boy has no record. The "flight risk" is a teenager with a night job and two parents in a motel he is paying for. Release on personal bond.

THE JUDGE. *(not unkind, just done)* Bail is set at two hundred fifty thousand. Next.

(LOGAN does not flinch. She has heard this a thousand times. The number lands on a family that will never see a tenth of it, which means the boy does not go home, which means the wait starts now. And she says the next thing on muscle memory, the thing her office trained into her, the thing this entire play is about.)

LOGAN. My client enters a plea of not guilty. We waive time, and we move for all discovery, Your Honor.

THE JUDGE. So noted. Next.

(And that is it. That is the whole hearing. Forty seconds. She is already reaching for the next file. She does not hear what she just said. Neither does the audience, yet. Hold the three words. We come back for them.)

(A flat recorded voice fills the house.)

RECORDING. You have a call from a correctional facility. This is a call from... *(the splice, a young man's own voice, scared)* Timothy Witt. *(the machine)* This call is recorded and monitored. Press one to accept.

(LOGAN presses one.)

WIT. *(voice only, young, careful)* Did I get out? My mom said there was court today.

LOGAN. *(she does not lie to him)* There was court. Bail came back at two hundred fifty thousand. I'm sorry, Timothy. You're not getting out today.

WIT. *(a silence; then, smaller)* On a fight.

LOGAN. On a fight and a box cutter.

WIT. It was for the boxes. At the store. I told the officer it was for the...

RECORDING. One minute remaining.

WIT. *(faster, the clock in his voice)* There's a teacher. He saw all of it, the whole year. He wrote it down. He kept records. Get him, he'll tell you, he'll tell you it was never me that...

(The line expires. Not hung up. Expired.)

LOGAN. *(to the house, quiet)* There is always a teacher. Hold that too. We are going to need him, and then we are going to watch what this building does to him.

(Lights down.)

SCENE TWO: THE WITNESS

(A windowless attorney room. A metal table. THE TEACHER already seated, the same man, the chalk gone, a worn folder squared in front of him. LOGAN enters fast with a stack of files that does not end, drops them, and does the thing she does on reflex with everyone she is about to need. She hands him a card.)

LOGAN. Felicity Logan. Public defender's office. I've got your student.

(THE TEACHER takes the card. Reads it. Does not hand it back. He looks at the name longer than a name takes to read, because he is the one set of eyes in any room that follows a person instead of a screen, and he reads her the way he reads everyone, all the way down.)

THE TEACHER. Felicity Logan. *(beat)* The old Texas Logans?

(A beat. Something crosses her face, a thing she keeps behind the tailoring. She nods. Once.)

THE TEACHER. *(quiet)* Thought so.

(She does not follow it. She has a card to play and a witness to prep and no intention of being the one who gets seen first. She sits. Armor back up.)

LOGAN. I'll keep it simple. I ask what you saw, you tell the court what you saw. You stay in your lane. You don't editorialize, you don't say the word machine, you don't give the prosecutor anything to object to. You taught both boys, you kept a record, that's the whole job. Can you do that.

THE TEACHER. I can. *(beat)* It won't matter.

LOGAN. *(clicks the pen, does not look up)* Everybody's a lawyer.

THE TEACHER. No. You're the lawyer. I'm the one who spent fourteen months watching this thing close around my best student, reading everything I could get my hands on, trying to pry one finger loose. *(beat)* I couldn't. Not one finger. *(beat)* You waived time this morning. At the arraignment.

LOGAN. *(now she looks up)* How do you know what I did at the arraignment.

THE TEACHER. Because it's what the office trains you to say. Three words. You said it the way you sign your name. *(quiet)* Do you know what you gave away.

LOGAN. I bought us room. To investigate, to file, to mount a...

THE TEACHER. You gave them a year. *(simple)* That's the whole case. A fistfight and a work tool, they cannot win that on the merits and they know it, so they don't try it on the merits. They wait. They stretch it a year, and in that year the job is gone, the motel is gone, and some morning in month eight a man in a good suit slides a plea across the table as the fastest way back to whatever's left of the family, and the kid signs. Not because he did it. Because the wait already convicted him. *(beat)* The waiver isn't a delay. It's the verdict, entered early, with your signature on it.

(LOGAN stops clicking the pen. She is a fast study, and she has just heard something true from the wrong side of the table, and it has annoyed her exactly because it is true.)

LOGAN. You did not learn that in a teacher's lounge.

THE TEACHER. Vermont versus Brillon. When the delay comes from a public defender's office too starved to do the work, the Court charges that delay to the State, not the kid. *(beat)* Barker versus Wingo. A speedy trial is the one right you forfeit by staying quiet. You have to stand up and claim it, out loud, on the record, or you can almost never prove later that they took it. *(beat)* You want to know how I know what you gave away. You waived the one thing in this case worth anything, in forty seconds, on reflex, because your office trained the reflex into you so deep it comes out before the thought does. *(leans in, not unkind)* That reflex is the violation. Your own hands are the State's exhibit.

LOGAN. *(low)* Why do you know all this.

THE TEACHER. Because nobody with a bar card was going to learn it for him. *(beat)* Same reason I write everything down. The record is the only place the truth is allowed to live. You should know that, counselor. You are the one who is supposed to be keeping it. *(beat)* Un-waive. Put the boy on the record, in his own mouth, demanding his trial, fast, today. Make them try a case they built to never try. It is the one move. It is free. And you gave it away before your coffee.

(He squares the folder. Stands. At the door he stops, and for one second the case is not on the table, and they are just two people who think too fast for the rooms they're stuck in, and it would be very easy, and it is completely impossible, and they both know which one wins.)

THE TEACHER. You're good at this. That's why it's eating you. The ones who aren't good don't notice the waiver. *(beat)* Get him to say it on the record, counselor. I'll do my part on the stand, for whatever ninety seconds they let me.

(He's gone, the card still in his hand, pocketed without a word. LOGAN sits alone with a legal pad full of names she's going to pull tonight, and a feeling she's going to have to do something about and won't.)

SCENE THREE: THE RECORD

(Night. LOGAN at a desk, a single lamp, a laptop, the files. She pulls the cases. As she reads, his voice comes back, not as a flashback scene, just the voice, in the dark, the way a thing somebody said

keeps saying itself after they've left.)

THE TEACHER. *(voice only, over her)* The waiver isn't a delay. It's the verdict, entered early, with your signature on it.

(She reads. Brillon. The screen lights her face the same blue as everything in the last play.)

THE TEACHER. *(voice only)* That reflex of yours is the systemic breakdown. Your own hands are the State's exhibit.

(She pulls Meshell. She reads that there is no clock in Texas, that the assertion is the entire game, that she gave it away in forty seconds. She takes off the glasses. Presses the heels of her hands to her eyes. The brilliant young lawyer in the thousand-dollar armor, learning her own law at midnight from a high school teacher's homework.)

THE TEACHER. *(voice only)* You're good at this. That's why it's eating you.

LOGAN. *(to the house, quiet, the armor off for one beat)* I have been a lawyer for three years. I have waived time maybe four hundred times. I have never once been asked whether the person whose time I was waiving wanted me to. *(beat)* A man who teaches tenth-grade English just handed me the United States Reports and showed me I have been doing the State's filing for it, for free, four hundred times, with a smile, in good shoes. *(she puts the glasses back on)* Tomorrow I un-waive. I put the boy on the record. I make them try it. *(beat)* And I already know how this ends, because I saw the first play too. But you do the right thing anyway. You do it for the record. The record is the only place the truth gets to live.

(Lamp out.)

SCENE FOUR: THE HEARING (the pivot)

(The courtroom, fuller. THE JUDGE. THE STATE'S ATTORNEY, comfortable. THE SCHOOL COP, in uniform, holding the report that has already become the official version of events. In the gallery, lawyered and silent, THE BOY in the red hat. On a screen or a speaker, patched in from the facility, WIT, a voice. On the stand, sworn, the one piece of evidence the system did not generate itself: THE TEACHER, the same man, the folder on his knee.)

LOGAN. *(to the house, fast, before it starts)* Here is the only good hand I will hold all year. A teacher with fourteen months of documentation, dated, specific. In a fair room it ends the case. Watch how long it lasts.

LOGAN. *(to the Teacher)* You taught both boys. Fourth period.

THE TEACHER. I did.

LOGAN. And you kept a record of what happened between them. Over what period.

THE TEACHER. Fourteen months. Dated. Every incident I witnessed and several reported to me, logged the same day.

LOGAN. Tell the court what you saw.

THE TEACHER. *(steady, the man who can describe the cell down to the rivet)* I saw a campaign. Not a fight. A campaign, run by one boy against another for over a year, in the halls and through the feed, with an audience that rewarded it. The boy on this call did not start it. He ended it, once, badly, after fourteen months of...

THE STATE'S ATTORNEY. Objection. Your Honor, may we approach.

(Not a gavel. A recess. THE JUDGE waves them up, then calls it.)

THE JUDGE. We'll take ten minutes.

(Lights drop on the courtroom. A single light finds, off to the side, a phone. THE STATE'S ATTORNEY makes a call. We hear only this end. Friendly. Unhurried. The voice of a man who has made this call before.)

THE STATE'S ATTORNEY. *(into the phone)* Hey. It's the Witt thing, the teacher's up, he's got a folder. ... Right. Figured you'd want to know before it's in the record, because once it's in the record it's a problem for the district too, not just us. ... The other boy. The Henderson kid. ... Yeah, that family. ... Sure. I'll let you make the call to her, that's cleaner. Appreciate it.

(He hangs up. No record of that exists anywhere. That is the point of the phone.)

LOGAN. *(to the house)* I do not get that call. I will never get that call. There is no version of my afternoon where the right phone rings for my kid. The deals don't travel on paper. They travel on a wire that leaves nothing behind, and the first time you understand that is the first time you understand the job.

(Lights back up. A VOICE ON THE DISTRICT'S PHONE, patched to the bench. THE JUDGE listens, nods.)

THE VOICE ON THE DISTRICT'S PHONE. *(crisp, reasonable, lethal)* Your Honor, the district's position is that this witness is testifying to disciplinary matters involving a minor who is not a party to this case, from protected student records he was not authorized to remove from the building. We'd ask that the testimony regarding the other student be stricken and the records excluded.

THE JUDGE. *(a man doing paperwork)* That's well taken. The testimony as to the conduct of the non-party student is stricken. Records excluded. Let's move on.

(THE TEACHER is still in the chair. He has just been deleted in real time. He looks at LOGAN. He looks at the voice on the speaker. He looks, last, at THE BOY in the gallery, who has not moved, who never had to.)

THE TEACHER. *(quiet, worse than an outburst)* I wrote it down so it would exist. You can strike it from the record. You cannot strike it from having happened.

THE JUDGE. Mr...

THE TEACHER. It happened. For fourteen months. Striking it just means the room agrees to pretend, the same way the building agreed to pretend, the same way the country...

THE JUDGE. That's enough. Step down.

(He steps down. The truth was told. It lasted ninety seconds and a phone call took it out of the record. On the speaker, the kid, who heard all of it.)

WIT. *(voice only)* Did they hear him? Did the judge hear what he said?

(No one answers the speaker. They have moved on. The clock on his line is running and no one in the room is even looking at it. But LOGAN is. She has Meshell in her bag and a teacher's voice in her head, and she does the one thing that is left, the free thing, the thing she gave away yesterday and is taking back now.)

LOGAN. Your Honor, before we adjourn. My client wishes to address the court. *(to the speaker)* Timothy. Say it. The way we went over. Your own words, on the record.

WIT. *(voice only, scared, young, but he says it)* I don't waive time. I want my trial. I want it fast. I didn't say it was okay to wait, nobody asked me, and I don't... I don't waive my time. I want my trial.

(A beat. For one second the kid is an I, on the record, asserting the one right that is worth anything in a state with no clock. LOGAN closes her eyes. It is the correct move. It is the move the teacher taught her. It is, finally, lawyering.)

LOGAN. *(to the house)* And it is the right thing, and I did it, and I want you to remember in about twenty minutes that I did it. Because the State doesn't have to beat that. The State just has to wait. They wait, the motel runs out, his father can't make rent on a room, and a kid who just demanded his speedy trial will sign away everything to get back to a family that no longer has a door. I took back the one thing I gave away. It was the right thing. Watch it not be enough.

RECORDING. One minute remaining.

WIT. *(voice only)* Did I say it right? Did it count?

LOGAN. *(she will not lie to him)* You said it perfect, Timothy.

WIT. Does that mean I get to come home?

(LOGAN does not answer. She cannot. The line answers for her.)

RECORDING. Thank you for using the service. Goodbye.

(The line expires on the question. Lights down.)

SCENE FIVE: THE CHIEF

(LOGAN, alone in a stairwell, somewhere she went to take this where nobody would watch her take it. The phone is already ringing when the light finds her. She knows who it is. She lets the house hear both ends, because this is the call that is supposed to be on her side, and mostly is not.)

THE CHIEF. *(on the phone, tired, hard)* You un-waived time. On the Witt kid. Stood up in open court and un-waived time and put a juvenile on the record demanding a speedy trial.

LOGAN. I did.

THE CHIEF. How many open felonies are you carrying right now.

LOGAN. A hundred and ninety.

THE CHIEF. A hundred and ninety. And you just bought one of them a trial date this office cannot staff. We don't have the investigators. We don't have the hours. We don't have you for the three weeks a real trial eats, times a hundred and eighty-nine other people in cells waiting for the same you. You waive time, you plead it down, the kid does a few months, everybody moves. That is the job. That has always been the job.

LOGAN. *(to the house)* And there it is, the whole thing, in my own boss's mouth. The man who runs the defense of the poor in this county, telling me the defense of the poor is a conveyor belt and my sin was stepping in front of it.

LOGAN. *(into the phone)* It is a fistfight. One punch. The deadly weapon is a box cutter he stocks shelves with so his parents don't sleep in the car. The case is air. The only thing the State has is the wait, and I took the wait away from them.

THE CHIEF. You took it away from us. The wait is the only thing keeping this office's head above water and you know it.

LOGAN. I know it. A man explained it to me yesterday better than law school did. We're starved five to twenty to one against the DA, so we process instead of fight, and the processing is the constitutional violation, and his name is Brillon and he's the Supreme Court. *(beat)* I'm not asking you to fix the office. I'm asking for three weeks and one investigator on one case, because this one I can win.

THE CHIEF. *(a silence)* Win how.

LOGAN. *(fast, the thing she stayed up writing)* They struck my teacher. Grounds were he testified about a non-party student, off protected district records, not his to share. Fine. Hold them to it. The school cop is a district employee. His report describes the same incident, names the same non-party kid, characterizes who started what, off the same district records. If the teacher can't testify about that boy, neither can the cop. Goose and gander. The conduct of that kid is in for everybody or out for everybody. If it's out, the State's whole case goes with it, because their whole case is the cop's report calling my client the aggressor. If it's in, my fourteen months of bullying come back. They do not get to pick.

THE CHIEF. *(grudging)* That's not nothing.

LOGAN. It's better than not nothing. Those buried records show a fourteen-month campaign against my client. That is exculpatory. Provocation, self-defense, all of it. Which makes it Brady. The State doesn't get to bury exculpatory evidence, they have to hand it to me. And they didn't bury it by accident.

THE CHIEF. Meaning.

LOGAN. *(the card)* During the recess, before the district lawyer ever appeared, the prosecutor stepped into the hall and made a call. I watched him make it. I caught the end of it. Friendly, unhurried, and he says, I'll let you make the call to her, that's cleaner. Ninety seconds later the district is on the line getting my witness struck. They got on an unrecorded phone and arranged to pull exculpatory evidence out of

a kid's felony. I can't prove the call yet. But I can move on the timing, demand the district's communications, and make them deny it under oath, in writing, bar cards on the table.

(A long silence on the line. When THE CHIEF speaks again, something has changed. Not warmed. Sharpened.)

THE CHIEF. You're telling me a DA's office and a school district got on an unrecorded line and conspired to suppress Brady material on a homeless sixteen-year-old.

LOGAN. I'm telling you I heard one end of it.

THE CHIEF. *(another silence)* That's not one case anymore.

LOGAN. No. It's a pattern, if it's anything. And a pattern is the only thing an office like ours ever gets to swing at and connect.

THE CHIEF. *(reluctant, an ember)* Three weeks. One investigator, part time, you split him with the Reyes trial. Write the motion. *(beat)* And Logan. If you put coordination in a filing and you cannot back it, they will end you, and I will not be able to stop them.

LOGAN. I heard it.

THE CHIEF. *(tired again, human)* I took this job for cases like this one. Twenty years ago. I still recognize it when it walks in. I just stopped being able to afford it. *(beat)* Don't make me sorry I remembered.

(He's gone. LOGAN stands in the stairwell with the first thing resembling a chance in the whole case, clawed out of a man who runs a triage unit and once wanted to run a law firm.)

LOGAN. *(to the house)* That is the closest thing to a yes this building gives. A man who used to be me, reluctantly handing the version of him that isn't tired yet three weeks and half an investigator. And notice what flipped him. Not the kid's innocence. They cannot afford his innocence. The State's corruption. That, they will spend money on. *(beat)* I'll take it. You take what there is.

(Lights down.)

SCENE SIX: THE HONDA

(Four in the afternoon. A Honda parked outside a day-labor office in a strip mall, three dead storefronts and one that cashes checks. THE FATHER, Thomas Witt, asleep upright in the driver's seat, a man who has been awake since before dawn for work that did not come. THE MOTHER, Caridad Rosa Witt, in the passenger seat, awake, because someone has to be. The car is not transportation. The car is the house. A cheap cell phone buzzes in her hand.)

(The recording, small and tinny out of the little speaker, the same machine as every other call, smaller here, in a hot car.)

RECORDING. You have a call from a correctional facility. This is a call from... *(the splice, the scared young voice)* Timothy Witt. *(the machine)* This call is recorded and monitored. Charges may apply. Press one to accept.

(CARIDAD presses one before the machine finishes. She always presses one before it finishes.)

CARIDAD. ¿Mijo? Mijo, is that you?

WIT. *(voice only, young)* It's me, Ma.

CARIDAD. *(a breath she has held all day going out of her)* Ay, gracias a Dios. ¿Cómo estás, are you eating, are they feeding you, are you warm at night, are you...

WIT. I'm okay, Ma. I'm okay.

(THOMAS stirs at the sound of his son coming out of the speaker. He does not open his eyes. He just turns his head toward the voice.)

CARIDAD. *(to the house, second person, the math running under all of it)* You do not tell him what the phone costs. You will never tell him. But you know it to the penny. The first minute, and every minute after, comes off the card, and the card is the gas, and the gas is the deliveries, and the deliveries are the room at the Sandman by the week. Every minute of your son's voice is a mile you will not get to drive to earn the roof you are keeping for the day he comes home to it. You run that arithmetic with your whole body while you say gracias a Dios, and you press one before the machine finishes every single time, because what kind of mother counts the minutes on her own child.

CARIDAD. *(into the phone, gentle, careful)* Mijo, listen to me, mi amor. The phone, it is very much money, okay? Every minute. And we need the gas for the trabajo, for the deliveries, para el motel. So we talk fast, sí? We talk fast and we say everything. No te preocupes. But we talk fast.

WIT. *(a beat; the kid hears exactly what she is not saying)* Okay, Ma. Okay. Then I gotta tell you something before it cuts off. There's somebody. There's Hope.

CARIDAD. *(not understanding, reaching for the only meaning the word has in her language)* Sí, mijo, sí, hay esperanza, there is always hope, you cannot lose it, the lawyer she is fighting for you, no pierdas la esperanza, mi amor...

WIT. No. Ma. Listen. Hope. That's her name. There's a girl. Her name is Hope.

CARIDAD. *(still half inside the other meaning)* ...¿Qué? ¿Una qué?

WIT. *(pleading now, fast, the clock in his voice)* A girl, Ma. From school. She is the smartest person I ever met and she laughed at something I said and nobody laughs at what I say, and I never told her anything, I never told her, and now I'm in here and I don't even know if anybody told her where I went, and I need you to understand, she's the one good thing, she's the only...

(And THOMAS opens his eyes. He has heard it. The man who answers everything in slow, complete English and saves his own language for the people he loves hears his locked-up son trying to spend a paid minute on a girl, and his face does something it has not done in months.)

THOMAS. Caridad. *(quiet)* It's a girl. He's talking about a girl. Hope is a girl.

CARIDAD. *(it lands; her whole face opens)* ...Ay. Ay, mijo. Mijo. A girl.

WIT. *(young, mortified, desperate)* Don't make it a thing, Ma.

(THOMAS leans toward the speaker. He is not a man of many words and he is about to prove it, everything he has for his son arriving in the language he keeps for love, with the clock running out.)

RECORDING. One minute remaining.

THOMAS. *(and for the first time he does not reach for English)* Mijo. Óyeme. Sin palabras. *(beat)* Echar bala, mijo. You hear me? Echar bala.

WIT. *(voice only, small)* I don't know how, Pa. From in here. I don't know how.

THOMAS. Sin palabras, mijo. Echar

RECORDING. Thank you. Goodbye.

(The line dies on the father's blessing. Half a word of it got through. THOMAS sits with the dead phone in his hand. CARIDAD puts her hand over his.)

CARIDAD. *(to the house, second person, quiet)* You will not get the rest of that sentence back. The machine took it the way it takes everything. By the minute. On a schedule. For a fee. Your husband told your son to fight for a girl, sin palabras, take the shot, and the company that owns the phone hung up on the word. *(beat)* And you sit in the front seat of the house you are keeping for a boy who is in a cage for taking a swing, and you think, that is the whole country, right there. They put my son away for echar bala. Then they sold us back the sound of his own father telling him to do it again. And cut it off before he could finish. And charged us for the part that got through.

(THOMAS has not let go of the dead phone. CARIDAD has not let go of his hand. Across the lot, the day-labor office turns its sign to CLOSED.)

THOMAS. *(to himself, the careful English back, because the Spanish is only for his son)* He has a girl. *(beat)* Sixteen, in a county cell, and he found a girl who laughs at what he says. *(beat)* They didn't get all of him, Caridad. My boy is still in there. He's still in there.

(Lights down on the Honda. The sign says CLOSED. The phone is dark.)

SCENE SEVEN: THE PERMISSION

(LOGAN, between things, a corridor, the phone to her ear. We hear her end, and the INVESTIGATOR tinny on the other side. Fast. This is all that's left of a scene that used to take ten minutes.)

THE INVESTIGATOR. *(voice)* Teacher was right. The Henderson kid in the red cap didn't join the pile-on. He started it. Every thread traces back to his account. He's the source.

LOGAN. Of course he is.

THE INVESTIGATOR. *(voice)* One more thing. Fourteen months, the whole class group, everybody touched it. Everybody but one. One girl. Never liked it, never shared it, never said a word. Watched all of it, sat all of it out.

LOGAN. One clean witness.

THE INVESTIGATOR. *(voice)* She's a minor, so it's the parent first. Mother's the contact. Single parent. A nurse.

(LOGAN lowers the phone.)

LOGAN. *(to the house)* Get me the mother. We ask the mother for the daughter. *(beat)* I do not know, saying that, that I have just gone looking for the one person in this whole story who already knows how it ends. One person in this city can connect the boy in my cage to the girl who never piled on, and she is a nurse on a double, and I am about to walk into her ten-minute break and have no idea what I am about to do to her.

(Alt staging: render the investigator's three beats as texts that light on LOGAN's phone, read aloud or projected, if you want the call faster and colder.)

(Lights shift. A hospital break room, the ten minutes a nurse on a double can give a stranger. MERCY, the level face, the armor. LOGAN with a folder. The card stays in her pocket this time. This is not that kind of room.)

LOGAN. Ma'am, thank you, I'll be fast, I know you're on the clock. I represent a young man charged out of an incident at your daughter's school. I am not here about your daughter. She is not in any trouble, I want that clear first. She is a possible witness. From what we can see, she may be the one person in that building who watched what was done to my client for over a year and never took part. That makes what she saw worth more than anybody's. I need your permission to ask her.

MERCY. *(level, careful, a mother's first move is the wall)* What was done to your client.

LOGAN. A campaign. Bullying, if the word still means anything. He's sixteen. He fought back one time and the State turned it into a felony.

(LOGAN opens the folder, and to make the case a person instead of a file, she sets down a photograph. WIT. The cracked-phone boy.)

LOGAN. This is him. Timothy.

(MERCY looks at the photograph. And the level face, the one she has worn since residency, the one she handed her daughter without meaning to, comes apart at the seam.)

MERCY. *(to the house, second person, very quiet)* You know that face. You have seen that face. A cute, scruffy boy with a cracked phone, lit up in your daughter's hand on a couch four feet and a whole sealed world away, while she looked at him like the bottom had fallen out of her and you told yourself it was the age. You did not know his name then. You know it now. A lawyer just laid it on a break room table. Timothy. *(beat)* That is Hope's boy. The one she cries over without a sound so it will not carry up the stairs. The one thing your daughter

ever let herself want, and they have him in a cage, and no one in this room knows your girl is the reason this case has a heart. No one but you.

LOGAN. *(reading the change, not understanding it)* Ma'am? You all right? Do you know him?

MERCY. *(she does not hand it to a stranger, not yet)* ...He's somebody's boy.

LOGAN. He is. He's got a mother and a father in a car holding a motel room for the day he comes home. And a girl he won't stop talking about, though we don't have a name and it doesn't matter to the case.

(It lands on MERCY like a second blow. The girl he won't stop talking about. She knows the girl. She leaves her door open two inches every night.)

MERCY. *(quiet)* You have my permission.

LOGAN. Thank you. I'll send someone trained for kids, gentle, you can be in the room the whole...

MERCY. No. *(beat)* I'll talk to her first. Tonight. Before anyone with a folder does. She should hear it from me. *(beat)* She should hear all of it from me.

(LOGAN does not understand what she has set in motion. She nods, grateful, and goes. MERCY stands alone with a photograph she was never supposed to recognize.)

MERCY. *(to the house)* You spent sixteen years keeping the hard things away from her. You do not get to keep this one. You are going to walk into that apartment and cross four feet you have never once managed to cross, and say a boy's name out loud, a boy who is not dead, who is in a cage, whom your daughter loves, and a stranger needs your girl to be brave in a way you never were, and the only person who can ask her that is you. *(beat)* God help you. Tonight you have to be her mother out loud.

(Lights down.)

SCENE EIGHT: THE CROSSING

(Home. Night. The couch, exactly as it was in the first play: two pools of phone-light, four feet of cushion, the same blue. HOPE at one end, in the blue, the cracked-phone boy somewhere in her hand. MERCY in the doorway. The folder left at work. Nothing in her hands now, which is the whole point.)

(She does not sit at her end. The audience that saw the first play knows this couch. They know her hand once stopped dead in the middle of it and came back empty. They are watching to see if it happens again.)

MERCY. *(to the house, second person, the last time)* Four feet. You have measured it every night for two years and never crossed it. The glass in her hand, the glass in yours, the salt water between. You told yourself it was the age. You know now it was never the age. *(beat)* And tonight you know his name, and you know she has been carrying him alone behind a level face you put on her, and a lawyer needs her to

stand up in a way the whole world trained her out of, and not one piece of that can be handed across four feet. It has to be carried. By a body. The whole way over.

(And MERCY crosses. She walks the four feet she could not cross with her hand. She sits down on the same cushion, no distance left, and for the first time in the play, in either play, there is no glass between two people who love each other. HOPE looks up, startled, because her mother has never once come this far.)

MERCY. *(out loud, no narration left, just a mother, the level gone)* Baby. *(beat)* I know about the boy. *(beat)* I know about Timothy.

(HOPE's face. The level face she relearned off her mother, breaking, the way it broke alone into the cushions once where no one could see. Except now someone sees. Now her mother is on the cushion, the four feet crossed, eyes open, watching, staying.)

HOPE. *(barely)* ...Mom?

MERCY. I'm here. *(beat)* Tell me about him. Tell me all of it. We have got all night, and I am not going anywhere, and the phone can ring.

(HOPE breaks. Not silently this time. Into her mother, who is finally close enough to catch it. MERCY holds her daughter the way she holds the dying and the families in the doorway, except this one is hers, and she is allowed, and she crossed the glass to do it.)

(And here is the cruelty and the grace in the same light. A mother finally reached her child. And it changed nothing about where the boy is. He is still in the cage. The verdict is still coming. The wait is still the weapon. Mercy crossed four feet she could not cross for two years, and it is the most either of them has ever won, and it will not move the State of Texas one inch. Both true. Hold them both.)

(HOPE, into her mother's shoulder, the first brave thing she has done in two plays.)

HOPE. I'll talk to the lawyer. I'll tell them everything I saw. *(beat)* I should have done it a long time ago.

MERCY. *(holding her)* I know, baby. *(beat)* So should I.

(The two phones, abandoned on the cushions, go dark on their own, unwatched, for the first time in either play. Only the lamp left. A mother and a daughter, one cushion, no glass between them, and a boy in a cell ninety miles away whose name just got said out loud in a house that loves him, by people who cannot save him, which is the only kind of love this country has left them the room to give.)

(Lights down.)

SCENE NINE: THE PLEA

(Juvenile court. A lower ceiling than the building this case spent a year threatening to move him to. LOGAN. THE STATE'S ATTORNEY. On the speaker, patched from the detention facility, WIT, a voice. LOGAN has won, and she is about to find out what winning is.)

LOGAN. *(to the house)* I won the motion. I want that on the record, because in about a minute I am going to feel like I lost. The cop's testimony is suppressed. The goose-and-gander held. And with the cop's report gone, the deadly weapon goes. The box cutter goes. And with the deadly weapon gone, so does the State's whole case for certifying a sixteen-year-old as an adult. *(beat)* They wanted him in the grown building, where a felony is a felony forever and no judge alive can ever bury it. I kept him out. He stays a child in the eyes of this one court, the only court left with the discretion to hand him his life back someday. *(beat)* That is what I won. Now watch what it costs.

THE STATE'S ATTORNEY. *(easy, unbothered, he loses the certification and does not blink, because the machine has a second setting)* Then the State proceeds here. On the adjudication. Felony-grade delinquent conduct. *(beat)* We'll recommend probation. Two years. He can go home to his parents today.

LOGAN. *(to the house)* And there it is. They cannot make him an adult anymore, so they make him a delinquent instead, a felony adjudication gift-wrapped and handed over today, today being the one currency this family has none of. *(beat)* I can still fight the adjudication. I think I can win it. But winning it takes a trial, and a trial takes a date, and the date is months out, and the months are the weapon, and the weapon has already done its work on the car in the parking lot.

(To the speaker.)

LOGAN. Timothy. Here is where we are. I beat the part that would have made you an adult, and that matters more than you can feel right now, I swear to you it does. What's left is a juvenile felony and two years probation, and you walk out to your folks today. Or we fight it, and I think we win, and you sit in here until we do, and that could be spring.

WIT. *(voice only, tired in a way a sixteen-year-old should not be)* My mom and dad are in the car again. The motel's gone.

LOGAN. I know.

WIT. If I fight it and we win in the spring, are they still gonna be in the car in the spring.

LOGAN. *(she will not lie to him)* ...Probably. Maybe worse.

WIT. And if I sign today I come home.

LOGAN. To a car. But yeah. Today.

(A silence on the line. The kid does the only math the State left him.)

WIT. *(quiet)* Then I sign. *(beat)* What is it. What do I sign.

LOGAN. *(to the house)* A felony adjudication. He signs a felony, the juvenile kind, not because anyone proved one but because the wait proved cheaper to end than to outlast, because in the winter of a year his parents were living in a Honda he took the door that opened today over the one that opened in the spring. *(beat)* And here is the thing I cannot make a sixteen-year-old feel on a patched line with a clock running. This kind seals. Two years clean, no new trouble, and someday he stands in front of a judge and has this whole year struck out of the record of his life like it never touched him. The adult one I

kept him from never seals. It just follows, forever. *(beat)* I won the motion. Put it on the record. It will not feel like anything for a long time, and it is the only reason this boy gets to have a someday at all.

WIT. *(voice only, small)* Miss Logan. Did I do okay.

LOGAN. You did everything right, Timothy. *(beat)* So did I. *(beat)* Sign by the X. And when you're clear, you come find me, and we get it sealed, and you go be whatever you were always going to be.

(Lights down. End of Act Two.)

LIBERTY AND FAITH

Act Three of the Texas play. The third play.

Follows "Welcome to Texas" and "The State of Texas." The aftermath. The school made the file, the court executed it, and this is the country the survivors have to keep living in afterward. This is Act One of the third play.

THE SPINE

Everything the first two plays set in motion comes due here, and none of it comes due as justice.

The clot the emergency room discharged in the second play, because the man had no insurance and the building wanted him gone, throws a pulmonary embolism and kills him. He is the teacher. He is the man who made the nurse laugh. He is the same man, and he dies with that same nurse at his side, working the code, the system's own discharge finishing the one mind that diagnosed it correctly and asked it to act.

The motion gets won. The cop's testimony is suppressed, the goose-and-gander holds. And it does not matter, because the State's attorney refiles the bare assault, drops the weapon, and the boy, after a wait that has eaten his family alive, signs for a felony and two years of probation, because the fastest way home was always the plea. The wait already convicted him. Winning was never the same as escape. That has been the law of this whole work since the first play, and it is still the law.

And the family is consumed. The Witts lose even the motel. They live in the car and run DoorDash to eat. Caridad takes a near-nothing job cleaning floors at the hospital, and it is the same hospital whose bill put them in the street, and Thomas, who cannot square it, takes the one thing it offers him, a parking garage to sleep in while his wife mops the place that bankrupted them.

It ends on two mothers in a cafeteria line. They do not know each other. They will share a table. One is the nurse who crossed the glass to her daughter. One is the cleaner whose son her daughter loves. The same boy sits invisibly between them, and the name that would tear the world open passes right across the table and lands on no one, because one mother calls him Wit and the other has only ever called

him mijo, and the kind, exhausted woman with the mop does not have enough English to catch a nickname, and would have no reason to. The truest connection in the room stays just outside the frame. That is the bent lens this whole work is named after, and here it does its cruelest, gentlest work: two strangers who are family give each other the only mercy left in the building, and never find out why it fit.

ACT ONE

PROLOGUE: THE ARCHIVE

(Dark. No body. Just a voice, recorded, the teacher's, the way it would read off a server in a country that is not this one. The I of the whole work, speaking for the last time, already past tense.)

THE TEACHER. *(voice only, from the archive)* I wrote everything down so it would exist somewhere the building could not reach. I told you I was writing for a reader who could not read me yet. A reader after the wall. *(beat)* I did not think the wall would be mine. I thought I had more time, the way everyone with a clot they cannot afford to treat thinks they have more time. *(beat)* What is left of me is here, on a server, in a country that is not this one. Read it or don't. The people I loved are about to find out what happens to a country after the last person who could explain it stops being able to. *(beat)* Watch the women. I never could see them clearly enough while I was alive. Maybe you can.

(Silence. The archive goes quiet. It does not speak again for a long time.)

SCENE ONE: THE CODE

(A trauma bay. Alarms. A body on the table, a man, mid-fifties. MERCY, in it, hands moving, the level face on, doing the work. We do not see his face clearly. We see, on the forearm, as a sleeve is cut away, five words in plain Latin and an hourglass.)

MERCY. *(in the work, flat, professional)* Saturating. He's throwing emboli. Get me... *(and then she sees the arm; the work does not stop, but something behind her eyes does)*

(To the house, second person, even now, even here, because the work never lets her stop.)

MERCY. You know that arm. You looked those words up in a supply closet a year ago and carried them around like a stone. Si vis pacem, para bellum. The funny one. The one with no insurance and the clot in his leg and the joke about the postage, the one who made you laugh once, the only once, and walked out of your building with the thing still in him because the building wanted him gone. *(beat)* And here is the thing he had. The clot you both knew was there. It went to his lung the way you knew it would, the way he knew it would, the way the doctor who sent him home with the wrong study did not bother to

know. He told you the bill would be the thing that finished him. He was wrong. It was the discharge. It was being sent home. It was the building, the same building, this one, the one signing your check.

(The alarms change pitch. The work gets faster, then slower, then stops.)

MERCY. *(flat, to the room)* Time of death.

(She says a number. She does not say a name, because she still does not have one. She stands over the man who took the one piece of her in a year, and she does not know who he is, and she straightens the sheet the way she straightens every sheet, and her hands do not shake, because she has been not shaking for twenty years, and that is the worst part, that even now the level face holds, because she made it that strong on purpose so it would never come off in front of anyone, and now it will not come off even for this.)

(Lights down.)

SCENE TWO: HOPE

(Home. HOPE comes in wrecked, the kind of wrecked a kid does not bother to hide because it is too big. MERCY, still in scrubs, just off the shift where she lost him.)

HOPE. Mr. G died. *(beat)* My teacher. The English one. The one I told you about, the one who put the sentence on the board, the one who was helping Wit. *(her voice goes)* He died today. They said it was sudden. They said a blood clot.

(MERCY goes very still.)

MERCY. *(carefully)* What did he look like, baby. Your Mr. G.

HOPE. *(not understanding the question, answering it anyway)* I don't know. Older. Tired. Funny. He had a tattoo, the kids all knew about it, this Latin thing on his arm, he said it meant if you want peace get ready for a war...

(And MERCY sits down. The way you sit down when the floor moves.)

MERCY. *(to the house, second person)* The man you laughed with in the emergency room a year ago is your daughter's favorite teacher. The man whose clot you watched kill him this afternoon is the man who put the sentence on the board your daughter cannot stop quoting. The stranger who took a piece of your heart and the teacher who was fighting for the boy your daughter loves are one man, and you have now lost him twice, once when they discharged him and once when he died on your table, and you never once knew his name. *(beat)* And here is the thing that puts you on the floor. He is the reason you found your way back to her. His student is the case. The case is the lawyer. The lawyer is the knock on your door. The knock is the night you finally crossed four feet of couch. A dying man you met by accident, who made you laugh for ten seconds, reached through a whole machine without ever knowing your name and put your own child back in your arms. *(beat)* And you cannot thank him. He is in your morgue. You will sign the chart.

HOPE. Mom? *(beat)* Did you know him?

MERCY. *(the second lie she has told her daughter, and the kindest) ...*
No, baby. *(beat, and then the truth, sideways)* But I think he knew us.

(She pulls Hope in. Two of them on the couch, no glass, the way they learned to be at the end of the last play. Outside this apartment, in a car in a parking lot, two other parents are learning a different lesson about the same machine.)

(Lights down.)

SCENE THREE: THE GARAGE

(A hospital parking garage, a level reserved for nothing, where a Honda sits in the dark with two seats reclined. THOMAS in the driver's seat, awake now, always awake at night, a man who works DoorDash until the app stops paying and then sits. CARIDAD in scrubs that are not a nurse's scrubs, the gray of contract cleaning, getting ready for a shift.)

THOMAS. *(slow English, looking at the concrete ceiling that is their roof tonight)* You know what this building is. You know what it did to us.

CARIDAD. Sí. I know.

THOMAS. The bill from this place is the reason we are in this car. And now you mop its floors for nothing and I sleep in its garage, and it has us both, coming and going, the thing that broke us is the thing keeping the rain off us. *(beat)* I cannot make it make sense, Caridad.

CARIDAD. *(gentle, Spanglish, the kindest realist alive)* No tiene que make sense, mi amor. It is warm. It is dry. They let me clean and they do not ask too much about the car. *(beat)* And mijo comes home soon. To something. We keep something for him to come home to, even if it is this. *(she touches his face)* Échale ganas. We are still his mother and his father. That, this building cannot bill.

(She gathers her things for the shift. THOMAS watches her go toward the elevator that will take her up into the place that ruined them, to clean it on her knees for the privilege of parking in its dark.)

THOMAS. *(to himself, English, the careful sentences)* The strongest person I have ever known is about to go mop the floor of the place that put her son in a cage and her family in a car. And she will do it kindly. She will be kind to every single person she passes. *(beat)* That is either the dumbest thing I have ever seen, or it is the only thing any of us has got left. I genuinely do not know which.

(Lights down.)

SCENE FOUR: THE CAFETERIA

(A hospital cafeteria, mid-afternoon, fluorescent and loud. A line. Trays. MERCY, in nurse's scrubs, a few days past the code, hollow. CARIDAD, in cleaner's gray, on her thirty-minute break, with a coffee she is making last. They reach for the same stack of trays. A small nothing. Two tired women.)

CARIDAD. *(handing her one)* Here. They stick together. You have to take from the side.

MERCY. Thanks.

(The room is full. There is one table with two seats. They arrive at it the way strangers do, with the little apology of needing the same thing.)

CARIDAD. You don't mind? Everything is full.

MERCY. No. Sit. Please.

(They sit. Two mothers, one table, the whole story between them and neither one holding any of it. For a while, nothing. The clatter of the room. Then CARIDAD, who cannot help it, who is built for this, notices the other woman is not eating, is just sitting with the level face, and the level face is failing.)

CARIDAD. *(soft)* You are okay, mija? You look very far away.

MERCY. *(the armor she has worn for twenty years, and it picks now, in a cafeteria, in front of a stranger, to finally give)* I'm sorry. I'm fine. It's been a, it's been a week. *(beat, and it comes anyway)* We lost a patient. I lose patients, it's, that's the job, you don't. But this one. *(she presses the heel of her hand to her eye)* I knew him. A little. From before. A long time ago he made me laugh once and I never even got his name, and then he came in last week and I worked the code and I couldn't, and it turns out, it turns out he was my daughter's teacher. Her favorite teacher. The one she's been quoting all year. *(she is going now, quietly, completely)* And he was helping this boy, this boy my daughter is just, she is in love with him, this boy who got himself in all this trouble, and the teacher was the only one fighting for him, and now he's gone, and my daughter lost him too, and I can't, I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I don't cry, I don't do this...

(And CARIDAD does the thing she is the best in the world at. She puts her hand over the stranger's hand on the table, the way she puts her hand over her husband's in the dark, and she does not say it will be okay, because she is not a liar, she just holds the hand and lets the woman come apart, a cleaner comforting a nurse, the lowest-paid person in the building holding the higher one up, the grace running uphill the way it always does.)

CARIDAD. *(gentle, her English reaching only so far, catching the grief and not the details)* Ay, mija. No, no. You cry. Es bueno. You loved somebody and he is gone, you cry. *(beat)* Your daughter, she has her mother. That is the most lucky thing. A girl who loses somebody and still has her mother to hold her. *(beat)* The boy. The one your daughter loves. I hope somebody is fighting for him still.

MERCY. *(wiping her face, a wet laugh)* God. Listen to me. To a stranger. I don't even, I don't know your name.

CARIDAD. Caridad.

MERCY. Mercy.

CARIDAD. *(warm, a small smile at the name)* Mercy. *(she pats the hand once more)* Es un nombre bonito. A good name for a nurse.

(And here it comes, the thing, the only thing, the name that would end the world if it landed, and MERCY says it the way her daughter says it, the way the teacher said it, the only way she has ever heard it said.)

MERCY. The boy. My daughter calls him Wit. *(a small broken smile)* Like, short for something, I never asked. She just lights up, this kid who never lights up, she says Wit, and the whole, her whole face. *(beat)* I hope he's okay. I really do. Wherever he is. I hope somebody got him home.

(And CARIDAD, who has never once in sixteen years called her son Wit, who calls him Timoteo and mijo and mi vida, who is tired and kind and working on her thirty-minute break in a language that is not her first, hears the small English word Wit float across the table and lands it on no one. It is a nickname for some boy. Some boy her daughter loves. She hopes he is okay too. She means it with her whole heart.)

CARIDAD. *(warm, meaning every word, understanding nothing)* I hope so too, mija. I hope somebody got him home.

(They sit a moment more. MERCY wipes her face. Her tray sits in front of her, untouched, the food gone cold. She has not taken a bite. Across the table CARIDAD has only a coffee, the same one she has nursed the whole break, and MERCY, who notices everything and has spent her whole life noticing, notices.)

MERCY. *(gathering herself, the level face going back on)* I have to get back. *(beat)* Listen. I can't eat this. Haven't been able to in a week, I just carry it around so people leave me be. *(she slides the tray across the table)* Please. Don't let it sit. The chicken's not bad today.

CARIDAD. *(the pride and the hunger fighting in her)* Oh, no, mija, no, I could not...

MERCY. You'd be doing me the kindness. *(beat, and it is the truest thing she has said to anyone in a week)* Please. Let somebody eat.

(CARIDAD looks at the tray. At the woman. A long beat. Then she takes it, because she is hungry, and because the woman needs to give it more than she needs to keep it, and because accepting a mercy is its own kind of mercy.)

CARIDAD. *(quiet)* ...Gracias. *(beat)* You take care of yourself, Mercy. You and your girl.

MERCY. *(a real smile, the second one a stranger has ever pulled out of her)* You too, Caridad.

(MERCY goes, back to the floor she works, lighter by one tray and one stranger, never knowing she just comforted, and fed, the mother of the boy her daughter loves. CARIDAD, alone at the table, bows her head, the smallest grace over a stranger's cold chicken, and eats. A woman named Charity, fed by a woman named Mercy, and not one soul in the building knows the boy breaking one woman's daughter's heart is the other woman's son. The greatest of these. It happened over a cafeteria tray, and no one will ever know it did.)

(Lights down. End of Act One.)

ACT TWO

The court is done. It did its damage and it has no more use for these people, so it leaves the play, and so does the lawyer. We go back to the one room where all of it started, the classroom, because that is where the survivors have to keep showing up. Two scenes. In the first, the girl who has watched herself from behind glass for two plays puts the glass down and speaks. In the second, the boy who has been a clipped voice on a monitored line breaks all the way open and we hear, for the first and only time, the whole person. The war in this act is not with the State. The State already won. The war is the one each of them wages alone, against the glass, to say a true thing out loud while it still costs something.

SCENE ONE: THE CLASSROOM

(Mr. G's room. His desk left the way a dead teacher's desk gets left, untouched, a little shrine nobody decided to make. The sentence is still on the board from the first play, faded now: Welcome to Texas! Howdy y'all, now all y'all, and y'all's too, y'all's 'ere? Near the front, one desk sits stripped and cleaned out, RED HAT BOY's. He is gone. The Henderson campaign nearly went down over what his boy had been running for fourteen months, so the family did what that family does, made it disappear, pulled him out and shipped him to a military academy three states away, a soft landing with a flag on it, while the boy he hunted signs a felony tonight. No bullies left in the room. For the first time, the air is safe enough to tell the truth in. THE GRIEF COUNSELOR, an outsider with a lanyard and a binder, sits on the front edge of the desk, trying to reach a room of teenagers gone flat. HOPE, among them.)

THE GRIEF COUNSELOR. There's no wrong way to feel this. Some of you had Mr. G for years, some just this semester. However much of him you got, whatever you're feeling, it's allowed. *(nothing; the flatness of kids who learned early not to show the soft parts)* Would anyone share something about him? A memory. Anything at all.

(Silence. Then a KID near the back, low.)

A KID. Wit would've had something. *(beat)* Wit always had something to say about Mr. G.

THE GRIEF COUNSELOR. *(kind, completely lost)* Wit? Is that a student here? Is he out today?

(A worse silence, the kind with a whole year folded inside it. She does not know she just stepped on a grave. And HOPE, who has not once spoken about herself in the first person across two plays, who has watched herself from the far side of a glass since the night we met her on a couch, puts her hand flat on the desk and stands, and the grammar changes, and for the first time she is simply, plainly here.)

HOPE. *(first person, present, out loud, the glass gone)* His name is Timothy. We call him Wit. He's not out today. He's in jail. He gets out tomorrow. *(beat)* And he was the smartest one of us. All of us. Y'all know that. *(turning to the room, not cruel, just true)* Y'all have known it since grade school. Fourth grade, when he read the chapter book out loud and the whole class went quiet because he made it sound like something real. We all knew. All y'all knew. Wit was the smartest

person in every room he ever walked into, and that includes this one, and that included Mr. G, and the thing is Mr. G knew it too. He loved it. Wit would catch something Mr. G missed and Mr. G would laugh and say there it is, Wit got there first again. *(her voice going but not stopping)* Mr. G made us laugh every single day. And the smartest, funniest kid in this whole school slept in a car, and we knew that too, and we knew exactly what got done to him for a year, every one of us, and Mr. G was the only grown person in this entire building who ever stood up and said it out loud. *(beat)* Now they're both gone. One of them's dead and one of them's a felon. *(beat)* And we just sat here. We put our heads down and we let it happen.

(And around the room, one by one, the kids put their heads down. Shoulders rolling in. Going small in their seats, every one of them, because she is right and each of them knows the exact shape of their own silence. The y'all reckoning, no teacher required, the sentence on the board grading the room by itself.)

THE GRIEF COUNSELOR. *(stunned, watching a roomful of teenagers fold inward at once, reading the result without any access to the machinery)* I'm sorry. I don't, who is, *(she takes in the bowed heads all around her, the weight landing visibly on every kid)* I don't think I have the context for what just happened in here. *(quiet)* But I can see it. Whatever that was, I can see it on every single one of you.

(HOPE sits back down. She has said the thing she could not say across two plays, in the first person, out loud, to a stranger with a lanyard, a year too late and exactly on time. The glass is on the floor. It changes nothing, and it changes her, and both of those are the whole point.)

(Lights down.)

SCENE TWO: THE CAR

(The Honda. Night. The red glow of the DoorDash app on the dash, the one screen in this whole work that does not burn the same blue as the rest. THOMAS in the driver's seat, CARIDAD in the passenger seat holding the phone that takes the orders. They talk the way you talk at two in the morning waiting for a ping.)

THOMAS. Tomorrow. *(beat)* He comes home tomorrow.

CARIDAD. Home. *(a small broken laugh at the word, a hand at the dashboard, the seats, the whole of it)* We bring him home to this.

THOMAS. We bring him to us. That is home. Wherever the three of us are sitting. That is the only home there ever was.

(The phone rings. Not a delivery. A call. CARIDAD has it to her ear before the second ring.)

CARIDAD. Bueno? *(her whole body lighting)* Mijo. Mijo. *(to Thomas, glowing, urgent)* It's him, es Timoteo. *(into the phone)* You okay? You eat today? Tomorrow we come, sí, we come get you, you tell us where, what time...

WIT. *(voice only, a free line this time, no recording, no timer, but worn down to nothing)* Yeah. Tomorrow, they said morning. *(beat)* I gotta report to probation by five or it's a violation. First day. Is there gas. Can you get me there.

THOMAS. *(taking the phone, his English the better road for the hard parts)* There's gas. We make the gas happen. We get you to probation, you don't violate on day one, not while I'm breathing. *(beat)* You hear me. We've got you.

WIT. Okay. *(beat)* Okay, Dad.

(THOMAS hesitates. There is a thing he has to say, and he does not know what it is about to do.)

THOMAS. Timothy. A woman called the car phone today. From the school, a counselor, going down a list, calling the parents one by one. *(beat)* It was about your teacher. Mr. G. The English one. *(carefully, gently)* Mijo, he passed. Last week. His heart, a clot, something fast. You were still on her list, so she called the number. I did not know whether to wait until you were home.

(Silence on the line. A long one. Then a sound. The careful, clipped, frightened kid who has been a truncated voice this entire story, processed and timed and cut off mid-word, breaks, all at once, and what pours out is not the boy we have been allowed to hear. It is the whole person, and it comes in both his languages, because grief always reaches for the first one.)

WIT. *(voice only, coming apart, the English breaking into Spanish and back)* No. No, no, no. Mr. G? No. *(a wet, gutted sound)* Papá, that's, that's the guy, that's the one I told you about, the one who, ay no, no me digas eso, no ahorita, no like this. *(a breath that does not hold)* He stood up for me. You get it? A whole year, that whole building, nobody said one word, nobody, and Mr. G stood up in a courtroom, en una corte, for me, a kid he had for one period, and he told them to their faces what they did. *(harder)* Era el más inteligente de todos. The smartest. He read everything. He knew the law better than the lawyers, my own lawyer said it, she said he taught her, a high school English teacher taught a lawyer the law, porque lo leyó por mí, because he read all of it for me, porque yo le importaba, because I mattered to him. *(all the way open now, the kid we never got to meet)* And he was funny, Papá, te lo juro, he made the whole class laugh every day, even the days my shoes didn't fit, even those days, and when I got something right he'd look at me and go ahí está, there's Wit, like I was somebody, like I was worth, *(he cannot get to the end of it)* and I'm in here. I'm signing my name to a felony in here and he's gone and I never told him. Nunca le di las gracias. Not once. Ni una sola vez.

(In the car, CARIDAD has both hands over her mouth. THOMAS holds the phone, and the face of a slow strong man does the thing it does when it finally goes. They are listening, for the first time in this entire story, to their son be a whole human being out loud, and it took the worst night of his life to let them hear it.)

THOMAS. *(barely)* He knew, mijo. *(beat)* A man like that. He knew without you saying it.

WIT. *(wrecked, small, the kid back under the man)* I gotta go. The line, they're, I gotta go. *(beat)* Tomorrow. Don't forget me.

CARIDAD. *(seizing the phone, fierce through the tears)* Nunca. Never. Never, mijo. Mañana. Te amamos. Tomorrow.

(The line goes dead. The two of them in the car, the app still pulsing red on the dash with a ping they will not answer tonight, holding a phone that holds nothing now, having finally heard their son's whole heart on the night it broke open. The war he waged was not against the jail. It was against his own closed throat, and he lost it, and losing it is the most of himself he has ever given anyone.)

(Lights hold on the car. Then down. End of Act Two.)

ACT THREE: AN UNLIKELY BURIAL

The third act of the third play and the last of the whole work. Every device set in the first play reaches its charge here. The phone that refused to light, the four feet of couch, the empty desk, the second person, the y'all, the naming of people after the thing they are. The act is structured as a sequence of lit images, much of it without dialogue, the way a memory plays. Wit keeps his back to the house until he has earned a face.

SCENE ONE: THE BURIAL

(Scene only. No dialogue.)

(Graveside. A host of teachers and students. HOPE, with her mother MERCY. LOGAN, in attendance. An American flag draped over the coffin. All of them in anguished tears. A bugler lifts the horn and a recorded speaker hidden inside it plays the twenty-four notes of Taps, the machine sounding even the grief, the honor itself automated like everything else in this country. The flag, the fake bugle, the live tears. Hold it. Let it be unbearable and let it be fake at the same time, because it is both.)

(Fade out.)

SCENE TWO: THE HEIR

(Fade in. WIT, back to the audience, in an Amazon vest, lifting boxes onto a conveyor belt. A voice from offstage, annoyed.)

OFFSTAGE VOICE. Witt. There's some lawyer needs to talk to you.

(WIT waves, more acknowledgment than greeting, still faced away. He stops, bends to tie his work boot, and as he lifts his pant leg an ankle monitor shows on his leg. The spotlight narrows until it pinpoints only the ankle monitor. The whole man reduced to the leash on him.)

(Fade out. Cut back. LOGAN hands WIT his cracked Obama phone. The light on the phone comes alive. The spot slowly tightens until it rests on the phone alone, the object that would not light at the end of the first play now lit in his hand, and fades to black.)

SCENE THREE: THE LETTER

(WIT alone in the Honda. The stage so dim we can make out only that a person is in the car, lit by the blue of a cellphone screen.)

WIT. *(to the screen)* Mr. G. What did you do to my phone.

(Before he passed, the teacher took Wit's phone and loaded it with everything he had ever written. Hundreds of pieces, all of them of an amazing clarity. And a letter, which WIT reads aloud.)

WIT. *(reading)* Wit. You were the smartest kid that ever walked through my classroom door. That is a fact. Your life sucks. I know what that's like. The same place that put you and your family in a car is the same place where, because of the policies, and let's be honest, money means more than your life or your future. I am leaving you as the sole heir to my work. You are the only one who can understand it. You're done with school. You graduate. That's by my measure, not theirs. You are a man now. Make no qualms about it. And go talk to Hope. She likes you, knucklehead. Love, Mr. G.

(Fade out.)

SCENE FOUR: IT'S WIT, Y'ALL

(Light only on HOPE, reading in the second person, sitting on her end of the couch. MERCY on the other end, disheveled, scrolling the feed. A message dings. HOPE's phone lights up. She looks down. She looks at her mother. She looks at the audience, with a sense of amazement and wonder.)

HOPE. *(to the house)* It's Wit, y'all.

(MERCY, snapped out of her depression, looks stunned, then settles into a self-assured smile. HOPE hurriedly types into her phone. When she stops, the lights drop from the couch.)

(Fade out, cut to WIT sitting in the car, the blue cellphone light on his face, smiling.)

(Fade to black.)

SCENE FIVE: MR. WITT

(Classroom. A spotlight opens on the chalkboard. Written there: Howdy Y'all welcome to Texas English 4th Period. Under it: Mr. Witt. And under his name, in parentheses and underlined: NO CELL PHONES OR BALLCAPS ALLOWED.)

(WIT finally makes his appearance, face to the house at last. He has the same job Mr. G had, in the same school, in the same classroom, among the same desks. He always leaves Red Hat Boy's desk empty, and that is where he sets a single red cap, every day. He stands by his own old student desk with the same cracked phone in his hand. He looks at it. He sets it down on the desk. He drapes his old worn-out hoodie over the seat.)

(A young girl runs into the classroom.)

LIBBY. Daddy, Daddy, mommy is waiting.

WIT. *(calming her)* Go back to your mother's classroom, Libby.

(She nods and runs out. WIT sits down in his old student desk and thumbs through Mr. G's works on the phone. He turns to the audience.)

WIT. Mr. G once wrote. *(reading)* We were all born unto this ocean, set adrift, and with but a modicum of an iota of a correct course some of us tie to whomever passes by. Two wandering souls tied to one another until that line breaks. Life itself hasn't the impetus to sever the line. It is the living of life that wears it asunder. How you live is simply the edge of which the line of love rests. Sometimes we find ourselves holding up our end of the line over the edge, while on the other end of the line another carelessly tears at the merest strand.

(He gets up and walks toward the door. HOPE and LIBBY appear just inside it.)

HOPE. Tim, we're gonna be late.

LIBBY. C'mon, Daddy.

(Fade out.)

SCENE SIX: COME AND TAKE IT

(Fade in to a child's birthday party on the Fourth of July. It is LIBERTY WITT's fifth birthday, and HOPE is expecting again. MERCY and CARIDAD are wearing the same color scrubs now. A Democratic donkey piñata hangs from a tree in the background, subtly lit to draw the eye just slightly. The whole party is red, white, and blue.)

(THOMAS, who slept a winter in a parking garage and never once stopped being this child's grandfather, ties a blindfold over LIBERTY's eyes and turns her toward the donkey. HOPE, big with the second baby, calls across the yard to her husband, and the two grammars of this whole long story come out of one girl's mouth in a single breath: the y'all she was born to and the Spanish she married into, broken and joyful and entirely hers.)

HOPE. Tim! ¡Andale, miijo, hurry up, the piñata, all y'all get over here, she's fixin' to swing.

(WIT waves it off, one minute, the phone already in his hand. THOMAS steadies the small blindfolded arm, lines it up at the donkey, and lets her go. LIBERTY swings with everything a five-year-old has. Her abuelo's hands are the only thing guiding her, and he is grinning like a man who never lost a thing in his life.)

THOMAS. *(low, in the language he keeps for love)* Ahí, mija. Dale. Con todo.

(Fade out on the swing, the blindfold, the old man's hands, the donkey still hanging.)

(Then light finds WIT, off to the side, or if the house allows it, off the stage entirely, in the audience. Behind him the family settles into a held tableau around LIBERTY and the cake, warm and still, a photograph waiting to be taken. WIT looks through the cracked phone and turns to a nearby audience member, asking them to take a picture.)

WIT. Hey, y'all. I've got one of these old crappy Obama phones, screen's all cracked, and it's my daughter Libby's birthday.

(If an audience member is brave enough to step into the spotlight and help, that is the whole play landing in one gesture. Laud them at the end and let WIT thank them. If no one does, brighten the lights on the stage, where the cast has LIBBY blow out her birthday cake, then return the light to WIT alone.)

WIT. *(dejected, if no one helped)* Obama Phone Loser, I guess.

(Lights out as WIT goes offstage.)

(Light comes up center stage, to the front. LIBERTY comes to the edge of the stage, a hand over her eyes, looking out for her father. In English, then in Spanish.)

LIBERTY. Daddy, where are you? Mommy is gonna have the baby.
(beat) Papi, dónde estás. Mami va a tener al bebé.

(She looks only briefly, turns, and the light goes out as she exits.)

EPILOGUE: AFTER THE WALL

(An uncomfortable pause. Then the sound of an infant crying.)

(Light finds the gurney. The same gurney the teacher died on, disheveled now with the after of a birth. HOPE lies on it in a hospital gown, a newborn in her arms. Around her: MERCY, CARIDAD, and a small LIBERTY, all three bent over the baby. Same hospital. Same light, only kinder. CARIDAD wears the same color scrubs MERCY wears. And THOMAS is here, at the foot of the gurney. Nobody in this picture is missing.)

(They are admiring FAITH, just born.)

(The light slow-fades to the classroom.)

(WIT at a laptop. THOMAS at his right shoulder, leaning into the screen.)

WIT. Look at this one, Pop. He wrote it years before any of it happened. The car. The school. All of it. He put the whole thing down on a page nobody would read.

THOMAS. *(quiet)* That is us. He is describing us. Before we ever walked into his building.

WIT. Before anybody knew our name.

(THOMAS reads. Whatever is on the screen takes the breath out of him. He straightens slowly, a man looking at his own life set down by a stranger who was already dying when he wrote it.)

THOMAS. *(barely)* Dios mío. He knew.

(Fade to the couch, center stage.)

(HOPE on her end, newborn FAITH over her shoulder on a towel, patting the back of a colicky baby. WIT in the spot that used to be MERCY's. Between them sits LIBERTY, small, listening. WIT has the cracked phone in his hand.)

WIT. This is one I found way down deep in Mr. G's writing. *(reading)* Not that I expected it or even wanted it to happen. It did and now I am wondering what in the world to do with it. Some say you should embrace it. Others try to keep it away at all cost. I could do either. However, honestly I'd really like to get rid of it altogether.

The problem is that you can't get rid of it. It was given to me from an early age. It was given to the reader of this about the same time in life as I. We really can't get along without it. It is our essence, our reason for existence, and our life long companion.

What passes for it or more correctly false impersonates it is pushed into our faces, shoved down our throats, and imbued throughout society. You can't escape it. Since I can't escape. I chose to fight.

I'll fight for it. I've proven this true, time and again. Some people won't fight for it for whatever reason. I wouldn't want to be with that person for long. If it truly fills us out and makes you complete as a person; Why not fight?

What is "it" that of which I speak?

(He asks the last line to LIBERTY, directly. She pauses. Tilts her head. Answers her father.)

LIBERTY. It is Love, Papi. Amor.

HOPE. *(to WIT)* She's even smarter than you, Tim.

(Fade out.)

(Lights up in the classroom. A much older LIBERTY, a teenager now, sits in a desk in her father's high school class, among the other students. WIT teaches at the front. The red cap rests on the one empty desk, where it always rests. Nothing is said.)

(Fade out.)

(Across the stage. The couch only, front left. LIBERTY, now in her middle twenties, sits with a laptop, focused, typing fast. FAITH stands beside her with an anatomical skeleton, naming the bones aloud, to her sister's mounting dismay.)

FAITH. Clavicle. Scapula. Sternum. Twelve pairs of ribs. True, false, and floating.

LIBERTY. *(not looking up)* I am trying to write a brief.

FAITH. Carpals. Metacarpals. Phalanges.

LIBERTY. Faith.

FAITH. *(grinning)* You asked how I study.

LIBERTY. I have never once in my life asked you anything.

FAITH. Femur. Longest bone in the body. You would know that if you had gone into something useful.

LIBERTY. I am going to litigate you.

(In a distant light, while the two young women work and bicker on the couch, MERCY and CARIDAD, both in scrubs, both grey at the edges now, look on at their granddaughters and say nothing. They have

everything they were once most afraid they would never get.)

(Fade out.)

(The hospital. FAITH, full grown, in a full-length white coat. A small ceremony, a few chairs, a podium.)

VOICE. *(over the PA)* This year's Doctor of the Year. Faith Witt, MD.

(Around her, grey now: MERCY and CARIDAD. And LIBERTY, THOMAS, and WIT. The whole line of them on their feet for her. Light holds on the coat, the family, the award.)

(Fade out.)

(LIBERTY and FELICITY LOGAN, both in business suits, stand looking up at the catwalk. A banner unrolls and drops the height of the stage. It reads: LOGAN AND WITT, ATTORNEYS AT LAW.)

LOGAN. *(looking at it, then at LIBERTY)* Your father was the best witness I ever put on a stand. *(beat)* You are going to be better than both of us.

(Fade out.)

(The couch, center stage, and the whole family crammed onto it and around it, on top of one another, far more people than any couch was built to hold. Behind them a banner: LIBERTY WITT FOR PRESIDENT. A television glows off the front edge of the stage. They are watching the returns, loud and happy and entirely together.)

THOMAS. *(on his feet, both arms up)* Presidenta. Mi nieta. President of the United States.

HOPE. Sit down, Papá, you are blocking the screen.

WIT. Forty years ago this country put us in a car.

MERCY. And tonight one of ours runs the whole thing.

FAITH. *(deadpan)* I delivered three babies this morning and my sister still gets the bigger headline.

CARIDAD. *(laughing)* Ay, mija. You saved three lives. She only won an election.

HOPE. Both of you hush. Here it comes.

ANNOUNCER. *(voice, from the television)* And we can now make the call. The projected winner, in a near sweep of the electoral college and with eighty percent of the popular vote. Liberty Witt.

(The room erupts. And then, mid-cheer, every actor freezes exactly where they are. The light on the couch sinks down deep, the family held in a dim tableau, so the eye is pulled off them and away, upstage right, to the classroom that has stood there untouched the entire night.)

(A blue light rises on it. The old light. The surveillance glow of the very first scene, turned at last into something else. It settles on the teacher's desk. The laptop wakes on its own. The screen comes up. And the voice, the dead I of the whole work, speaks for the last time.)

THE TEACHER. *(voice from the laptop)* "Where I have Liberty, y'all

shall be free" is the second best sentence ever fielded, Madam President.

(Lights out.)

THE END