

WHEN IN DISGRACE (HAPLY I THINK ON THEE)

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PROLOGUE

(From the darkness we start to hear muttering.)

RYAN:

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes . . .

When in disgrace with fortune and . . .

When in disgrace . . . I . . .

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,

I all alone . . . I all alone . . .

This fucking sucks.

(From the darkness, another voice.)

BEN:

Just keep doing it. Come on.

(The lights rise on RYAN, a teenager of low beauty and lower esteem. Seated next to him on an old couch is BEN, another teenager, handsome, strong, and charming. They hold X-Box controllers and are playing a video game. Behind them and above, two figures are revealed in shadow carrying guns. They are the boys' electronic characters in the video game. RYAN is very intent on the game, BEN less so as he sips a coke.)

RYAN:

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,

I all alone beweeep my outcast state

And . . . trouble . . .

BEN:

You should guard the tower.

RYAN:

And trouble- What?

BEN:

I'm gonna snipe you.

RYAN:

I'm going for the rocket launcher.

And trouble deaf heaven with . . .

BEN:

Rocket launcher my ass. You're heading for the pistol. Rocket launcher's on the other end of the map.

RYAN:

Shit. Stop watching my screen.

BEN:

How many times have we played this map, and you still don't know it?

RYAN:

Lay off.

And trouble . . .

BEN:

You've got ten seconds till I snipe you.

RYAN:

Would you lay off? I got this.

BEN:

Fine. Twenty seconds.

RYAN:

God, how the fuck am I supposed to learn this poem if you keep telling me how much I suck.

BEN:

I am teaching you how to not suck at this game, thank you, and when you can recite your poem flawlessly while not sucking at *Halo*, then you'll know that you have it truly memorized.

So practice it. You have ten seconds.

RYAN:

I'm not reciting the poem while you count the seconds until -

BEN:

It's the only way you're gonna learn it. Five seconds.

(BEN'S CHARACTER takes a shot at RYAN'S CHARACTER – like an old gunslinger making a man dance.)

RYAN:

Jesus.

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state
And trouble deaf heaven with . . . shit . . .

BEN:

And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries. Come on.
One and a half seconds.

RYAN:

And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself . . . And look upon my . . . Fuck I don't know.

BEN:

Look upon myself and curse my fate.

(BEN'S CHARACTER guns down RYAN'S CHARACTER.)

GAME VOICE:

Lost the lead. Respawn in 5,4,3,2 . . .

RYAN:

Jesus.

BEN:

Look, we just haven't found the right motivation yet, okay? You'll get this. I'll stay with you all night if I have to.

I'm gonna grab another soda. How about every line you get right, I give you one free shot at me?
Try again. From the top.

(BEN walks off. RYAN alone.)

RYAN:

I was not someone that you would have liked.
I surely was not someone that you would have loved.
I was not smart. I was not funny.
I had no air of poetry about me to woo a woman's heart,
Or wit enough to save my face in times of trouble,
Or gifts of clumsiness to make you think I was a buffoon.
I did not have a face that made a woman tingle
Or attributes that would've impressed another man.
No sirs and ladies. You would not have liked me.
But you would not have hated me either.

Because you would have never look on such as I
For long enough to form such strong opinion.
I was the story that life forgot.
I was nothing.
And yet I was happy.
I had gone undetected by the world,
But some small part of it had noticed I existed.
I was nothing, and yet did not stand alone.
I had Ben. A friend. One small ray of light
Who in any darkness made the world seem bright.
And that was a start.
There was hope enough in that
That someday soon I would become a life detected.
There was life enough for me in hope.

BEN:

I don't hear you practicing, Mr. Vitler.

RYAN:

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries
And look upon myself, and curse my fate . . .

(RYAN's words become drowned out by loud metal music. The scene shifts to . . .)

SCENE 1

(A birthday party. RYAN stands with BEN and CAROLINE, a beautiful tomboy. A crowd of FRIENDS watches.)

BEN:

My friends, I welcome you to the most bitching birthday party we have ever had!

CAROLINE:

Although we hate to pause all of
These revelries, we must insist you hold
For but a sec, and give your focus to the one
Who gives us cause for celebration. Ryan, come.

RYAN:

I cannot, Caroline.

BEN:

No, come and say a word to all your guests.

FRIENDS:

Come on!

RYAN:

No way. They know that speeches aren't for me.
And in the fridge is all the beer and stuff
That they should seek. Let that speak as my thanks.

BEN:

The birthday boy has asked that we announce -

CAROLINE:

Since he's incapable at seventeen
To say so for himself -

FRIENDS:

Boo! Pussy!

BEN:

But we love him -
That we're so grateful that my cousin snuck us alcohol tonight.

(The crowd applauds.)

It's in the fridge for you to take,
So please do drink to Ryan's health.
But do not drink too heartily or else
You may not live to see its consequence. Kevin.
But otherwise, have fun! There's Halo Three!
So come and play me if you dare!

CAROLINE:

No wait! We can't let Ryan off that easily.

RYAN:

No, I'll return to Halo Three.

(CAROLINE physically stops him.)

Oh stop it Caroline! I can't believe
That you guys even got so many people over here!
I'm only seventeen.
That's nothing but another step towards death.
I don't see how that is remarkable.

CAROLINE:

What is remarkable is you.

RYAN:

Fuck no.

CAROLINE:

Then maybe all of us should leave,
And then you can just party on your own!
For one who is so unremarkable
Deserves only an empty house and heart.
It's this you choose?
Don't be a little bitch, dear birthday boy!

BEN:

She's got you there, Mr. Remarkable.
So how about it?

RYAN:

Hi guys. Thanks for coming.
There's . . . um . . . booze and stuff.
Party on.

(Crowd goes wild. Music picks up and the party kicks off again. Several play video games, some dance, others flirt. BEN wanders off.)

CAROLINE:

My friends, it's been a long night for us all,
But there's one task still left to do.
The birthday bitch cannot be left without a gift or two.
What do you say?

RYAN:

(Aside) I had loved Caroline for so long
I could not remember life before I did.
I would have walked on water for her love.

(The FRIENDS pull out presents.)

CAROLINE:

Now Ryan please accept these gifts-

RYAN:

No wait! Where's Ben?

CAROLINE:

Retrieving his gift, I am sure. So open these.

KEVIN:

You know I'm not real good at finding stuff.
I figured if I tried to find a stuff
That you would like, I'd only fuck it up.
So here's a gift certificate instead.
I hope it shows I think you're cool enough
To not deserve a shitty gift and stuff.

KAREN:

I know that you like to play your games
Accompanied to loud ballistic rock.
I told this to the record store salesman,
He's really cute, and so he thought that you
Might like the latest songs from Linkin Park.

CHRIS:

It took me quite some time to figure out
What I should get for you.
But after racking all my brains
While working at the Dairy Queen,
I realized that this should work.

RYAN:

A Star Wars shirt!

CHRIS:

Completes the set?

RYAN:

It does!

My god! I've never had so many gifts!

CAROLINE:

Well close your eyes, dear birthday boy
Because you ain't seen nothing yet.
Now Ryan, you're my nearest, dearest friend.
We've seen a thousand storms blow through our lives
And weathered them together as friends do.
You'll always be a gift to me.
But as your friend I feel I have to say:
That you will never ever get laid once
If you persist remaining so morose.
"I'm just another step towards death."
You sound like such an asshole when you talk like that.

RYAN:

Ow. Bitch.

CAROLINE:

But this is not unfixable.
It's all those metal posters in your room
That fuck your brain and leave you melancholy.
To end the lameness is the only hope.
But now take heart! For I shall decorate
Your ill becoming domicile for you,
So maybe you'll get laid before you're old.
Happy birthday.

(She produces a framed photo collage. BEN returns.)

CHRIS:

Oh wow.

KEVIN:

Shit!

CAROLINE:

It's all of us. Though mainly you and me and Ben.

KEVIN:

I can't believe you have the picture.

CHRIS:

Look at my face!

KAREN:

I can't believe I'm wearing that!

RYAN:

You look so beautiful.

CAROLINE:

In that picture?

No way! I thought you had a funny face in it.

RYAN:

Fuck getting laid. This is the greatest gift.
This is amazing, Caroline. Thank you so much.

CAROLINE:

Ah, whatever. Now give me a hug.

(They hug. It's a bit weird.)

RYAN:

Ah, Ben! You have returned to us again.
Hey, look what Caroline has gotten me!
I'd say that this is proof she loves me, eh?
She said that it would help me to get laid!

BEN:

It certainly is nice.

RYAN:

I say it is!
But I dare say that you will outdo her!
For brothers know each other's hearts the best.
Why, I would not be here today if not for you!

You know this guy once saved my life? It's true.
Some ten years back he pulled me from a lake.
Like *It's a Wonderful Life* and shit.
I couldn't swim – still can't – but Ben,
At only eight years old he was a hero.
Since then he's been my brother by my soul
If not by blood.
So how about it, Ben? What'd you get me?

BEN:

I . . . uh . . . I didn't.

RYAN:

What, nothing? You are such a kidder, Ben.
I know you have a poem you have written,
A painting that you made for me or something else.
Why, didn't you?

BEN:

I really didn't, dude.

CAROLINE:

No, but you got him a card, right?

RYAN:

What, nothing?
You've always gotten something for me Ben.
You're usually the only one who does.
I mean, I never thought that these guys would, but you?
Nothing, huh?

BEN:

I didn't realize this was such a thing.

RYAN:

You're always drawing, writing, doing shit
That could so easily become a gift for me.
You needn't spend a dime to get me something.
Not once in all that doodling did you try?
Where have you been these past ten minutes if
You weren't retrieving what is owed to me?

BEN:

I merely used the restroom and then grabbed
Another coke to drink a toast to you.
Look, buddy, why do you appear so stunned?
Just tell me what great ill I've done to you.

RYAN:

You have done nothing.

BEN:

Fine. Then drop this, k?
You're staring and it's creeping me out.

CAROLINE:

(To the other guests.)
I'm sorry for all this excess testosterone.
Perhaps you could excuse them for a sec?

RYAN:

No, fine. I'll stop. I don't know why I stare.
It's nothing, this, on which I fret.
And yet what is this feeling in my throat?
A vile heat o'ertakes me every time
I do but think the word of "nothing."

BEN:

It's not like I'm the only one who didn't, right?

CAROLINE:

Well actually you are.

BEN:

You're kidding me.

CAROLINE:

Could everyone just wait outside?
Why didn't you just get him something?

BEN:

I guess with Christmas right around the bend,
I didn't think I had to.

RYAN:

You didn't think you had to, Ben?
So obligation suddenly becomes
The driving force between the two of us?
Since when did "have to" take the place of "want to?"
You didn't *want* to is more likely here.

BEN:

Oh quit overreacting, man. Had I but known-

CAROLINE:

So Ben fucked up. That's not worth all of this.

RYAN:

That's all this is about here, Caroline.
For ten years we have been as two halves of
An oyster's shell: Inseparably linked,
For else we lose the pearl between.
As sinews tween the muscles – If one tears
How does the other function? Nothing? Why,
When holy men neglect to offer prayer,
Are they still in good graces with the Lord?
When sailors fail to tie a knot-

BEN:

What? Knots?
Your words are knots and seem to have no end.
Will you just stop! This rage is nothing.

RYAN:

Yes! By nothing. For nothing. From nothing.
If nothing is your show of our great bond,
I doubt what little worth there is in it.

BEN:

But can I not explain?

CAROLINE:

He has been busy with the school's new play,
And with his college applications-

BEN:

No wait. I don't feel obligated here
Because our friendship's gone beyond-

RYAN:

Do not explain, for explanation's nothing more
Than nothing wrapped in clever guises. Go.
And if by chance you seek to make amends,
Then there must be an offering made that may
Give fuel to this love's failing engine.
Until then, go to hell.

BEN:

I'll make this up to you. I promise that.
I'll get you . . . something.
Happy Birthday.

(BEN exits. After a moment, CAROLINE follows. RYAN all alone.)

RYAN:

Where did this venom in me come from?
I never knew the power of nothingness before.

(We see BEN and CAROLINE outside.)

CAROLINE:

Well that sure fucked up pretty terribly.
I can't believe you didn't bring any –

BEN:

Lay off!

I work with you to throw him this great party,
And now I am supposed to feel all guilty?
Just how does that make sense here, Caroline?

(There is a pause. CAROLINE tries to move past him, but BEN stops her. They kiss.)

CAROLINE:

There's too much at stake here, Ben.
If he's doubt how much we love him,
How do you think he'll act when he hears we're together?

(BEN doesn't speak. CAROLINE exits.)

BEN:

I didn't think a friendship strong as ours
Would need a gift to prove its fortitude.
But Ryan's right. And Caroline as well.
I should've wanted to.
I'll paint him a portrait. Something that can
Accompany his gift from Caroline.
It's not too late to make this right.

(BEN exits.)

RYAN:

I did not know if I could soon forget this.
I felt as though a time bomb started ticking in my chest.
But when it would go off, I could not say.

SCENE 2

(High school drama class. Two STUDENTS sit waiting not paying attention. RYAN listens in on their conversation as he studies a book of sonnets.)

STUDENT 1:

Is Ben performing his monologue today?

STUDENT 2:

He is preparing now. I've heard he's trying Shylock out this time.

STUDENT 1:

If anyone can make Shylock not suck,
It's Ben that can accomplish it.
The man can out-act God upon the stage.

(STUDENT 3 enters.)

What's up there, girlfriend?

STUDENT 3:

I got distracted in the hall by the most crazy news:
It seems that Jessie Perkins tried to kill herself last night.

STUDENT 2:

Who?

STUDENT 1:

How interesting that someone so uninteresting
Should finally do something of interest.

STUDENT 2:

How'd she do it?

STUDENT 3:

She lit herself on fire.

STUDENT 2:

What?

(STUDENT 1 laughs.)

STUDENT 1:

She did so little in her life and tried
To end it in a blaze of glory.

STUDENT 3:

Instead she was snuffed out.
Her parents caught her in the act and saved her life.

STUDENT 2:

How pitiful a life.

STUDENT 1:

That's how some people's lives are meant to be.
They leave so little trace of worth behind
That even as a living burst of flame,
They cast no shadow on the world.
They live too far beneath the height of greater men
And thus are always overshadowed.

STUDENT 2:

Don't you feel the least bit sorry for her?

STUDENT 1:

That little bitch? That sophomore? No!
It serves her right to try to get attention through
A stupid act like suicide.

If you ask me, today it's easier to kill yourself than graduate,
And if you cannot ace that course,
You are indeed a failure.
I won't feel sorry for her.

STUDENT 2:

I guess we cannot help who we are.

(STUDENT 1 sees RYAN watching them.)

STUDENT 1:

The fuck you looking at?

STUDENT 2:

Hey here's Ben!

(BEN enters and recites the famous speech from *Merchant of Venice*. RYAN and STUDENTS look on.)

BEN:

He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million;
laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains,
scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends,
heated mine enemies; and what's his reason? I am a Jew.
Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs,
dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with
the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject
to the same diseases, healed by the same means,
warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as
a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed?
if you tickle us, do we not laugh? if you poison
us, do we not die? and if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?
If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. Revenge.
The villainy you teach me, I will execute, and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

(Applause. The DRAMA TEACHER approaches BEN. CAROLINE approaches RYAN.)

DRAMA TEACHER:

Well done, Ben. You are a true artist in the making.
You see here, students. This is how it's done.

STUDENT 1:

What did I tell you? He out-acts God.

Now he is gonna be a tall tree.

RYAN:

(To Caroline.) What did you think?

CAROLINE:

I think that Shakespeare's kinda gay.
It's all outdated crap about retarded teens or ruthless kings.
I find Ben's paintings more immediate.

RYAN:

He paints, he acts, he does it all.

CAROLINE:

You wanna talk?

(She starts massaging him.)

Come on you know want to.

RYAN:

I never noticed till today how talented Ben is.
I sometimes think of him as just a pretty boy,
Who's known no suffering to speak of, not like us.
Yet look how easily he made them swoon
With that so-called "outdated" speech.
I mean just how the fuck did he do that?

CAROLINE:

So that's your big discovery?
You noticed Ben can act? That's deep.

RYAN:

It never struck me what potential he has.
Just think of where he could end up.
I couldn't speak like that.
Had I one tenth of Ben's amazing skill-

CAROLINE:

Good God! So Ben speaks well. Big fucking deal!
What, Ben's skills make you "less than?"
No wonder you are never getting laid.

RYAN:

You haven't had sex either!

(CAROLINE hits RYAN.)

CAROLINE:

And why the hell am I massaging you?
I wasn't gonna talk to you today,
After you went crazy Saturday.

RYAN:

What did I do that deserves your bitchiness?
If Ben had acted like a friend,
And brought me anything-

CAROLINE:

It's your fixation on the nothingness
That keeps you so alone.
When will you open up those eyes
And concentrate on what's important?

RYAN:

Like what?

BEN:

So Ryan, tell me honestly:
What did you think of my performance?
I know that Caroline prefers for me
To stick to modern shit and comedy,
But nothing ventured, nothing gained. Agreed?

(Pause as the boys stare at each other.)

BEN:

Look Ryan, we are cool this morning, right?

RYAN:

It's forgot.

BEN:

I meant it Saturday. About your gift.

Christmas is three weeks from now.
By then I'll have something for you, and it
Will easily surpass your expectations. I swear to that.

RYAN:

I'll put whatever faith I can in this.

CAROLINE:

You always were a shitty liar, Ryan.

RYAN:

Fine. I admit I'm still a little pissed
About the other night.

CAROLINE:

Well then can we-

RYAN:

But! Now I have a way for you to make it up to me.

BEN:

And how can I now do so?

RYAN:

A sad result of all my anger Saturday
Was that, unfocused as I was,
I could not memorize my monologue for this assignment.

BEN:

The sonnet? Well, I have it memorized.
If you get lost, but look to me,
And I will be your second in this fight.

RYAN:

Then you shall ever be my first, good friend.

CAROLINE:

Oh look at all the sappy wit.
You two are gay.

BEN:

You always whine about the way we act.

If you're embarrassed by our company,
What does it say 'bout you to hang with us?

CAROLINE:

That I take pity on you both?

BEN:

Oh right, cuz one so pretty as yourself
Deserves a higher class of friend.

CAROLINE:

Oh no, just less overtly homosexual.

BEN:

This girl's in need of sensitivity training.

(He picks CAROLINE up over his shoulder.)

Good Ryan, give us but a sec.
I have some things to settle with
Our homophobic friend.

(BEN carries CAROLINE aside. RYAN watches this scene and is a bit perplexed.)

TEACHER:

Now Ryan Vitler!

RYAN:

My time has come. Let's hope that, with Ben's help,
This simple task is worth remembering.

(RYAN stands before the class.)

Hello. My name is Ryan Vitler. But
You know already that's my name. And so . . .

(RYAN blanks. BEN and CAROLINE appear in the hallway outside of class.)

BEN:

How was that for showing that I love him?

CAROLINE:

As long as you don't screw it up.

(BEN kisses her and she responds. The two get engrossed in each other.)

RYAN:

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,

STUDENT 3:

At last, he speaks.

RYAN:

I all alone beweeep my outcast state,

And . . . um . . . trouble deaf heaven with, with, with boots and . . .

STUDENT 1:

Ba-da-ba-da-ba-da- that's all folks!

STUDENT 2:

What play is this from?

RYAN:

(Aside.) Oh fucking fuck. It all seems lost!

STUDENT 3:

What is your problem?

RYAN:

(Aside.) I will not fail today without a fight.

And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries

STUDENT 1:

You suck at life!

RYAN:

And look about myself, fuck, what is next?

STUDENT 2:

Is he retarded?

RYAN:

Um . . . About myself and . . . curses on . . . something . . . it's . . .

STUDENT 3:

Get off the stage!

STUDENT 1:

You cannot act!!!

(BEN hears the commotion in the other room.)

BEN:

Wait . . . Oh shit!

(BEN rushes off back towards class.)

STUDENT 3:

Boooo!

STUDENT 2:

Get down! Stop breathing!

RYAN:

(Aside.) I wish I could collect some semblance of myself.
I am of surer stuff. And yet I fail!
Where is my second? Where is Ben?

STUDENT 3:

You suck!

STUDENT 2:

Bring back Ben!

STUDENT 1:

Do Freebird!

DRAMA TEACHER:

I thank you, Mister Vitler. Now I see
That any task, it matters not how small
Or simple-minded it may be to most,
Is far beyond your reckoning.
Regret is all I have for having faith
That you might prove another Ben McCarthy.
For since you two are close, I'd thought perhaps
Some piece of genius might rub off on you.

Return next class to try again.
And be prepared this time.

(DRAMA TEACHER exits. The class bell rings.)

STUDENT 1:

I guess we cannot help who we are.

(STUDENTS exit.)

RYAN:

I'd rather be considered nothing
Than be a fungus at the base of Ben's great tree.
And yet that seems to be the world's view of me.
Dear Caroline forsees that my depressing thoughts
Will lead me to depressing ends.
But if I only get these poor desserts,
How can my faith in anything remain?

(BEN and CAROLINE come running in. RYAN glares at them.)

BEN:

Man, Ryan, I-

RYAN:

Where were you, Ben?
You swore you'd help me if I lost my place.

BEN:

We were talking.

RYAN:

Oh yes that's right! Off spanking Caroline
For being such a bigot! Did she like it?

CAROLINE:

Now that's enough. It's not Ben's fault or mine
If you can't get your work done right.

BEN:

Wait, Caroline.

CAROLINE:

I'm sick of this. Stop blaming us when you fail.

RYAN:

Whatever, I am out of here.

(RYAN exits.)

BEN:

Well that sure fucked up pretty terribly.

(The second bell rings.)

I gotta get to English class.

CAROLINE:

I'll see you after school today?

BEN:

Okay, but I'll be starting on his gift tonight.

And then I have my college applications.

(BEN exits.)

CAROLINE:

Is what I want so difficult to ascertain?

When did maintaining friendships prove so challenging?

Sometimes, I do believe I would better off without these two.

But God have mercy on my soul, I love them both.

Well let them sort their shit out in their own time.

It seems the only way to fix the one is through the other.

(CAROLINE exits.)

SCENE 3

(BEN and RYAN pass each other in the hallway. BEN barely acknowledges RYAN. RYAN walks on until he encounters a MATH TEACHER.)

MATH TEACHER:

And Ryan once again I find your score
To be the lowest in the class.

(TEACHER hands RYAN his test with a big “F” on the front.)

The truth is, Ryan, that unfortunately you
Aren’t fit to stay in Calculus.
I fear the math is far too difficult for such as you.

RYAN:

For such as me? How dare you label me
As though I were a lower breed of man.
I’ve half a mind to tell my parents that-

MATH TEACHER:

I have suggested this to them already
And they already gave consent
To transfer you to the remedial class.
I feel it’s for the best.

RYAN:

Without discussing this with me? Why not?

(MATH TEACHER exits.)

(RYAN pulls out his phone and dials. He is calling BEN, but BEN is busy painting. He gets his voicemail.)

Hey Ben, this school of ours’ a total joke.
Please call me back, I need to talk.

(The scene shifts to BEN’S house. CAROLINE watches BEN paint.)

CAROLINE:

I never thought that watching someone paint

Could be like watching paint dry.

BEN:

That's funny. Keep complaining.
It helps me concentrate.

CAROLINE:

You can't go any faster?

BEN:

I cannot force the work.

CAROLINE:

You could try.

BEN:

This painting's gonna kick ass, Caroline.
But good things always take a long ass time.

CAROLINE:

You sound so adult.
Ok then, how 'bout this:
For every inch that you complete of Ryan's gift,
I'll give you a kiss.

BEN:

You're taking pity on me now?

CAROLINE:

Call it an early Christmas gift.
Let's see: one inch . . . two inches . . .

(She starts kissing his neck.)

BEN:

A girl like you's a gift from God.
I wanna get out of here.
Come on.

CAROLINE:

You gotta work.

BEN:

I need a little break.

CAROLINE:

If you don't work then you're not getting any.

BEN:

If you don't play, then you're not getting any.
And like I said, I cannot force the work.
And Ryan's sure to love it when it's done,
As long as it's by Christmas. So, you in?

(Pause.)

CAROLINE:

Let's go.

(They exit. Shift back to the school and RYAN. SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHER enters.)

SS TEACHER:

I've lost my patience with you, Ryan!
Last month you did progress impressively,
But now that you no longer sit with Ben,
Your scores are lower than before!

(TEACHER hands RYAN another test with an "F" on it.)

Just look! Why, you cannot identify
A mere six states upon the map!

RYAN:

There must be some mistake!
Isn't that Virginia there?

SS TEACHER:

That is Vermont.

RYAN:

So close.

SS TEACHER:

Yet not at all.

You almost had me hoping that you'd grown,
But now it seems quite clear that you're a cheat.

RYAN:

Are you suggesting that – what, Ben and I
Conspired in your class to help me pass?

SS TEACHER:

More likely that you took advantage of your friend.

RYAN:

You can't be serious!
You can't prove that Ben had a part in my higher grade!

(SS TEACHER exits.)

The truth is that Ben fed me hints occasionally,
So his offense's as bad as mine!
But would they punish him? No chance in hell!
These teachers wish to wash their hands of me?
Then maybe I'll be every dirty thing
These cretins think of me.

(He calls BEN again. He get his voicemail.)

Hey Ben, call me back. This shit's ridiculous.

(Scene shifts back to BEN's studio where BEN is kissing CAROLINE goodbye.)

CAROLINE:

Do I really have to leave right now?
We could go see a movie.

BEN:

I have to paint tonight.

CAROLINE:

But you were painting all last night.

BEN:

I didn't get to work last night.
I couldn't seem to concentrate.
I haven't put a single stroke on it in days.
The image now seems lost. I'm all confused.
I don't know what to make of things.
I got a letter from Cal Arts the other day.
I've got a shot at getting in with scholarships.

CAROLINE:

Ben that's fantastic.

BEN:

It suddenly seems I have so many options.

CAROLINE:

I'll never leave this place.

BEN:

Would you consider coming with me?

CAROLINE:

Would you consider staying here?

BEN:

What if I were?

CAROLINE:

You taking pity on me now?

BEN:

Call it an early Christmas gift.

CAROLINE:

Then you'd be throwing your life away.

BEN:

The way I see it, leaving you is equally foolish.
The only plans I have now, Caroline,
The only art that matters to me,
Is right here.

CAROLINE:

You're so gay.

(She kisses him. Scene shifts back to RYAN as an ENGLISH TEACHER enters.)

ENGLISH TEACHER:

My boy, we have a problem.

RYAN:

Problem?

ENGLISH TEACHER:

Yes.

A serious dilemma here.

RYAN:

Pray what?

TEACHER:

Our last assignment where I asked you to
Imagine that you are another man
For twenty four hours and record your actions,
You opted not as other students did
To write of fascinating historical figures,
Or of your dream career, but rather on an assassin.

RYAN:

I do believe the term I used was serial killer.
Assassins kill for money, serial killers just kill.

ENGLISH TEACHER:

Well Ryan, can you make me understand
Why this profession interested you?

RYAN:

Why do these questions constantly persist?
I have no answer, ma'am, except I thought
It might in some small way prove challenging.
We learn all day of evils plaguing Earth.
We've written volumes on Hitler's deeds!
Is it so weird that I might try just once
To understand what drives a man to such?

ENGLISH TEACHER:

I don't see why you need to understand
The joy of "slowly stabbing a man's eye
To watch the juices of his vision flowing like a river down his cheek."

RYAN:

Have any of you teachers heard of the word "imagination?"
Or simile perhaps? What's all the fuss?
Good God, these nagging accusations make me wonder why I don't do ill!

ENGLISH TEACHER:

I have no choice but show this essay to
The principal.

RYAN:

You would not worry 'bout another student so.

ENGLISH TEACHER:

Were that the case or no I cannot say.
But duty urges me to report your words
For safety of your school and fellow man.

RYAN:

But wait! It's just a joke!

ENGLISH TEACHER:

What's funny here? What's humorous about murder?

RYAN:

I don't know. Lots?

(ENGLISH TEACHER exits. RYAN calls BEN again.)

God, Ben, Pick up! If you but heard my day,
You'd think I was the world's most hated bastard son!

(Just voicemail.)

You bitch's bastard, Ben! Well fuck you too.
You trust one man to, in your darkest hour,
Be at your side to pull you towards the light.
Yet when I thought that man was Ben, I paused.

For recently, well where the hell'd he been?
When last did Ben deserve the trust I gave him?
He gave me no reason for my trust in him,
And in such acts he left me lost for breath.
I would not choke again expecting he's my air.
On another would my weight be left to bear.

SCENE 4

(We see KAREN and the COUSIN from Scene One, now a happy couple, giggling and playing. Lights then rise on RYAN sitting alone behind a strip mall, tearing up his failed papers and tests. CAROLINE enters.)

CAROLINE:

So what the fuck's your problem, Ryan?
I hear you may be placed on academic leave.
I told you metal music fucked your brain.

RYAN:

Of all the times you choose to lecture me,
This has to be by far the worst.

CAROLINE:

Who else should lecture you but she that loves you?

RYAN:

Ah, would she used the word more tenderly.

CAROLINE:

This is serious.
Why write about a homicidal maniac?

RYAN:

The question is why not write about it?
These teachers think I'm gonna be a killer anyways.

CAROLINE:

Stop talking like that.
It scared me when they told me.
Can you just talk to me?

(Beat.)

RYAN:

(Aside.) I wanted and needed to trust in her.
Before I did, I had to test her loyalty.
(To CAROLINE.) My troubles drive me to these manic words.
They are the shapings of my current woes.

CAROLINE:

Then let me hear your woes that they may be forgot.

RYAN:

Take care what promises you make.
Some woes are not so easily forgot.
Nor, once revealed, so quickly remedied.

CAROLINE:

But by sharing all that ails, the burden becomes halved.
That's what a true friend does. So do explain.

RYAN:

No, no. If your solution is to split
The burden tween yourself and me, then I
Would rather bear such dark emotions on my own
Than weigh down one so bright from lofty heights.

CAROLINE:

Then fuck you. What, your life's as rough as this?
Remember we are best friends for a reason.
You know the scars I carry in my heart.
Don't act as though I don't know pain.

RYAN:

Apologies. It's been a rough few weeks.

CAROLINE:

I wouldn't know. I haven't talked to you in two weeks!
I haven't been around and that's a dumb mistake.
What's going on?

RYAN:

It's Ben. He's closer than a brother to me,

But recently he's absent from my life.
And due to this retarded laziness
On his part towards our bond, I feel distracted.
That essay came from rage at all these stupid teachers
But more so from my anger with our friend.
Do you know where the fuck he's disappeared to?

CAROLINE:

Well I will answer how I see it: I believe
He has a girlfriend.

RYAN:

He's dating?!
But who the hell would ever go out with him?

CAROLINE:

You think he's unattractive?

RYAN:

Do you?

CAROLINE:

If you ask me, I think there's plenty there to love.

RYAN:

Well that's a fine discovery.

CAROLINE:

Do I detect some jealousy, good Ryan?

RYAN:

No!

And yet there's part of me that hates him more.
But don't you think, despite the fact he's getting laid-

CAROLINE:

I didn't say he's getting laid-

RYAN:

Am I not worthy of some portion of his love?

CAROLINE:

Would you prefer that he was fucking you?
There are a million things I love 'bout you,
And I am positive that these same qualities
Make you Ben's closest friend.
If you had some idea how hard he's worked
On your birthday-

RYAN:

My birthday gift! He's got one week till Christmas
And still there is no sign of this present!
And if he's with this girlfriend now,
When is he supposed to finish it?

CAROLINE:

You know that Jessie tried to kill herself.

RYAN:

What does that matter now?

CAROLINE:

You didn't notice that she wasn't at your party?

RYAN:

No. I didn't want her there.

CAROLINE:

You didn't give a thought that maybe she
Attempted suicide because she felt alone?
You constantly complain about your own neglect,
But you're neglectful too. So quit your bitching.

(Beat.)

RYAN:

I'm glad to know you, Caroline.

CAROLINE:

Whatever.

RYAN:

Sometimes, I feel you know me more precisely than Almighty God.
Can I ask you something?

CAROLINE:

Of course.

RYAN:

We've never talked about this topic before.
We've joked about me getting laid,
But in all seriousness, am I worthy of a woman?

CAROLINE:

Why you fucking bitch!
It's not Ben you're angry at!
You're mad because he's got a girl and you are unrequited!

RYAN:

Maybe. I fear that fate has found it fit
To gift me less amenities than other men,
So I'm a cheaply model for romance.
Love likes not thriftiness, but luxury.

CAROLINE:

Oh what the fuck? A cheaply model?

RYAN:

What qualities do you perceive I have
That would attract the fairer sex?

CAROLINE:

I'm not placating your ego.

RYAN:

Come on, a backrub for your compliments.

(Pause.)

CAROLINE:

You're on.

(RYAN begins to rub CAROLINE's back.)

Let's see. You're one creative essay writer.

RYAN:

That's hardly worth a scratch. You best stroke better.

CAROLINE:

You are a talented manipulator.
I'll bet you'll trick a woman out of her attire one day.

RYAN:

I'll rub to that.
What else?

CAROLINE:

There's something in your eyes that, even when
You're at your moodiest, tells me I am
A special person to you.

RYAN:

Perhaps I'll work this knot out for that revelation.
But come, I want another compliment.

CAROLINE:

Sometimes, I see potential in your eyes
That's greater than I see in Ben.
He may have found a way to tap his strength,
But when you do the same, I think you'll be the greater man.

(RYAN stops rubbing.)

What, do you think I'm lying?

RYAN:

Your bullshit stinks so bad I'd smell it from my house.

CAROLINE:

What will it take to prove you are a special soul?

RYAN:

What will it take? Let's see.

CAROLINE:

Don't be an ass, just answer me!

RYAN:

Why more than these kind words, dear lady.

(She scoffs. She looks at him and sees he's serious.)

(Beat.)

CAROLINE:

Are you suggesting what I think?

RYAN:

I but suggest what you suggest.
You say that you find Ben attractive,
But there's potential in me that exceeds his own.
Can we discover if that's true?

(Pause.)

(They kiss. It escalates.)

CAROLINE:

No, wait. I can't.

RYAN:

No, please. One more, I beg you.
You say I've overlooked what is important.
You're right: I love you.
I want to give you everything-

CAROLINE:

I'm dating Ben. I am the one distracting him.
That's where he's been. God. Fuck. I am so sorry.

(CAROLINE exits. RYAN alone.)

RYAN:

Why this explains too much to truly grasp.
You sly deceiving devil, Ben. . .

SCENE 5

(Angry metal music brings us into an odd cyber-space. RYAN and BEN are playing the video game online. Two SOLDIERS fight in the online world.)

GAME VOICE:

Slayer.

(The game begins.)

BEN:

So . . .

(They play. Silence.)

RYAN:

So . . .

(BEN'S CHARACTER guns down RYAN'S CHARACTER.)

CHORUS 1:

Lost the lead. Respawn in 5, 4, 3, 2 . . .

RYAN:

Dammit.

BEN:

So talk, man.

(Pause.)

RYAN:

Did you know that Montpelier's the capital of Vermont?
Which is not to be confused with Virginia.
And Richmond is Virginia's capital.

BEN:

That's not what I meant.
Just tell me why you kissed my girlfriend.

(BEN'S CHARACTER guns down RYAN'S CHARACTER.)

RYAN:

I think the reason should be plain enough.
You've always known I love her more than anything.
I told you this two summers back,

And therefore see no ill I've done to you.
The only unseen motive here is why
You never told me you felt the same.

BEN:

Well as your friend, I wanted to protect you.
Yes, true, two years ago you told me of
Your love for Caroline.
But what I never told you was my love for her ran just as deep.

RYAN:

For two whole years you've hidden this from me?

BEN:

Yes. So you could have a chance to act
Without a guilty mind.
And yet your indirectness hinted that
You lacked desire.

(BEN'S CHARACTER guns down RYAN'S CHARACTER.)

RYAN:

I had desire, you ass!
I'd every intention to-

BEN:

And still I did not act upon my feelings.
Although I thought your slow approach was lame,
And wasted precious time with Caroline,
I never once articulated my desire for her.
It was Caroline who first professed her love.
She came to me confused, not sure of how
To handle these new feelings that she had.
And only then did I confess my own.
For at such point, can you blame me for taking action?

RYAN:

And so you acted brainlessly
And thoughts of loyalty escaped your mind
As bats from coming day.

BEN:

The contrary.
As I have said, my thoughts were always to
Protect you. We agreed to never flaunt
This thing we had together.

As stressful as it was, I told her that we had to underplay
Our love, deny devotion to each other,
And thus conceal our romance.

RYAN:

And concealed,
You have incited double injury.
For now my blood is ghastly poison from
Malevolent benevolence.

BEN:

Oh my God.
Listen Ryan, your disbelief in my
Intentions, warranted or not, I get.
But don't expect me to apologize
For my attempts to spare you further harm.
All this I've done? I know in time you'll see
I acted only in your interest.
I also understand your interest
In Caroline made you do what you did.
I cannot blame you for that act.

RYAN:

I know you can't.

BEN:

But if we're to reclaim
This wounded friendship, we have to face the truth.
We can't be keeping stupid secrets any more.
So, Ryan, the truth you must accept is this:
Caroline's in love with me.

RYAN:

That's bullshit!

(RYAN'S CHARACTER fires at BEN'S CHARACTER. BEN'S CHARACTER guns down RYAN'S CHARACTER.)

Flaming fucking bullshit, Ben!

BEN:

You don't believe me?

RYAN:

Why she has given doubt enough of that.
Before she gave to me the sweetest fruit
These lips shall ever taste, she begged me then
To understand how much I meant to her.

She claimed to love a thousand things about me, Ben.
She told me I've potential to
Become a better man than you.

BEN:

I don't believe you.

(BEN'S CHARACTER shoots at RYAN'S CHARACTER and misses.)

RYAN:

Do I sense jealousy from you?
Well, surely you must ponder as I do:
If her words were true with you, why not with me?
Or if you're right, and she has lied to me
How can you be so sure she didn't do
The same to you?

BEN:

Because I know her heart.

RYAN:

Aw, do you, Ben? She always turns to me
In matters that concern her family.
She trusts me with her every secret and
I know her every scar as though they were my own.
Does she entrust you with but half of this?

BEN:

She has entrusted me with more than you
Could claim.

RYAN:

Then name it.

BEN:

Her virginity.

RYAN:

What?

BEN:

Last night, she slept with me.
To prove that kissing you was a mistake.
I didn't wish to tell you this, Ryan,
But you forced me to.

RYAN:

Well then. I stand corrected. Caroline's

No longer worth my love, for she's a whore
Who fakes her empathy, when actually
She'd fuck a dog if it just whined enough.
That shallow, self-absorbed bitch! May she rot!

BEN:

Would you just listen to yourself?

(BEN'S CHARACTER guns down RYAN'S CHARACTER.)

I know that you're upset, so I will let that slide.
But speak like that again, and I will slaughter you.
To say that about Caroline?
The Ryan that I knew-

RYAN:

Don't talk about "the Ryan that you knew"
As though I'm nothing but a ghost.

BEN:

I must. Something in you suggests you're dead.
I can't believe you've gotten me this angry.
I don't know who I'm talking to right now:
Are you the boy I saved from drowning, or
Some stranger, cold and mechanistic who
Desires to piss off everyone he loves?

RYAN:

I haven't changed. I'm Ryan Vitler still.
You are the stranger, Ben. Where have you gone?

BEN:

I'm growing up. Or rather I'm attempting to,
Except you drag me down with petty claims
About dishonoring some promise that I never made!
Perhaps you'd benefit from other friends?

RYAN:

I had all the friends I needed, Ben, in you.
Yes, once upon a time, I could not swim;
You rescued me and gave me second life.
But now, you make me drown on driest land.
You swim around me as I flail in class.
You leave me gasping when I need your trust.
Why even video games seem lost behind
A sheet of murky water. But no more.
Now Caroline is my last breath of air.
Her angel lips resuscitated me.

I'll n'er stop treading water till I reach her,
Although you slam a thousand devastating waves
Upon me. I will never give up, until
I have the key to open up her heart.

SCENE 6

(Music. RYAN and BEN pass each other in the hallway, intent on giving each other the cold shoulder. BEN bumps RYAN and keeps on going. RYAN glares after him maliciously. He continues on and returns to his couch.)

(We see two separate worlds swirling around RYAN. PSYCHIATRIST reads a psychiatric evaluation, while CAROLINE and BEN enter in their own space.)

PSYCHIATRIST:

Psychological evaluation of Ryan Thomas Vitler: Following reports of Vitler writing essays on the habits of serial killers, Vitler was brought in for further testing and analysis.

CAROLINE:

You told him we had sex the other night?
Why did you lie to him?

BEN:

The things he said were inconceivable.
I honestly wanted to punch him
And continue on relentlessly
Until I'd shattered every bone within his face.
God, I'm still all shaken.

CAROLINE:

He's going through so much right now with school.
You should've taken pity on him.

BEN:

Is that what you did?

CAROLINE:

Not this again. It wasn't pity, Ben.

BEN:

What was it then?

PSYCHIATRIST:

Previous prescription to Wellbutrin has proven ineffective. Vitler has received admirable marks on intelligence tests, yet teachers have complained repeatedly that he oscillates between extreme apathy and aggressive resistance to his studies. The recent essay on homicide suggests that Vitler is developing further violent tendencies stemming from his depression.

BEN:

I know how much you care for him.
You must have spent, what, weeks on that collage?

CAROLINE:

Ben are you fucking kidding me?
You know why I put so much effort into that.

BEN:

Then why did I not know that you were making it?

CAROLINE:

Stop making this some monstrous thing.
I kissed him, but it's not like I hid it, Ben.

BEN:

But honesty won't cut it if you cannot tell me why.

CAROLINE:

I don't know Ben. I don't know why I kissed him.
What is this tragedy you're making of all this?

PSYCHIATRIST:

Subject was given a new prescription, Effexor. Despite possible risks, the decision was made to see if heavier medication could effectively battle the new symptoms.

BEN:

If you can't tell me why you did it, then
I don't know how to trust you.
I won't know what's a dumb mistake
And what's a real betrayal.

CAROLINE:

I didn't – God! You really think so little of me?

BEN:

I don't know where I'm living anymore.
What planet are we on?

CAROLINE:

It didn't mean what you think it meant.

PSYCHIATRIST:

At this time, Mr. and Mrs. Vitler were advised that if said medication failed, they should not offer their child any further help. Ryan now must either sink or swim.

(PSYCHIATRIST exits.)

CAROLINE:

And I'm not giving up on this.
What do you need?
How can I show you we're ok?

BEN:

It doesn't have to be a lie. What I told Ryan?
I want that to be true for us.

CAROLINE:

You want me to have sex with you?

BEN:

I want to make love with you.

SCENE 7

(RYAN sits with a bottle of prescription drugs next to him. Before him we see BEN and CAROLINE coming together. They kiss, and BEN takes CAROLINE off to make love to her. RYAN is alone.)

RYAN:

I once found life enough in hope, and hoped
That one day I'd become a life the world remembered.
How simple such a promise seemed.
The light of hope was singular in nature.
Somehow its light was bright enough

To cast away the darkest thoughts.
Its glow illuminated worlds not seen
By normal light. Its fire seemed warm enough
To chase the deepest chill from out my heart.
It was power godlier than god himself.
But now I knew that hope burned out, if tended wrong.
Its ashes stayed behind for all eternity
Reminding us of what we'd lost.
And we who'd watched hope pass away
Could hardly go on living, lest one thing
Obsess our every thought: the thought of death.
Because if there was life enough in hope,
There was little worth the constant pain
Existence brought without it.
What was today but one more worthless step towards it?
But if the engines of this world
Did seek my ultimate demise,
Then I would let its gears destroy my soul
And grind my worthless bones to dust.
And as I went, I'd clog up all the parts,
All the components of this great machine,
So that the muck that was my life would ruin all.
Malfunction was my life.
The world loved Ben. What little hope I had left
Was now within his power to decimate.
He was the taller tree and I was in constant darkness.

(RYAN shakes himself off and starts playing video games. He is losing miserably. He is playing against the STUDENTS from Scene 2. Each time they kill him, they throw out a taunt.)

STUDENT 2:

Oop. Better luck next time.

STUDENT 1:

I thought you played this every day?
Where is your game?

STUDENT 3:

Man, playing against you is so much fun.

STUDENT 2:

You don't have to take it easy on us.

STUDENT 1:

Look out behind you, faggot.
Oh shit, you're dead again.
We cannot help who we are born to be.

(RYAN tosses down the controller. He is alone. He takes a pill out of the container and nearly swallows it.)

RYAN:

What's this?
It couldn't be so simple, could it?
After all I have endured,
The endless brooding and increasing weight
Which crushes me each time Ben nears . . .
And all alleviated, righted, if
I down the tree that overshadows me?
It's true Ben once saved my life, and true,
My gratefulness towards him has made me bear
So much of this with steadfast will.
But why is it I suffer? For him? By him, really!
So why endure the suffering?
Or end my own life as some grand moronic answer to my problems?
But cut the tree above and I will be the tallest in the grove.

(He thinks as sucks on the prescription pill like a pen cap.)

And better yet, why bother with a cut
When I can do it far more cunningly:
By poisoning the roots.
A chemical's so simple. And discreet.
I'll only have to slip it in his coke,
And then the sap dries up and down goes all.
It all is righted by one swallow!
Yes! Yes, I'll . . .

(He shifts again.)

What was this that I contemplated? Was I perverse?
Was I what everyone suspected I was?
A freak? A psycho?
I never wanted this to be my course.

Maybe there was a twisted order to the world,
But still I owed a friend a final chance.
And then, if ways of lasting loyalty prevailed,
I would have hope again. And that was a start.
Ben promised me an awesome Christmas gift.
If his promises proved true, then all would be ok.
If not, if he did fail in this,
If this was our end point,
If he and I were shells of what once was,
If all my hope was dead debris and ash,
Then by God, I would have no other choice
Than bring that bastard to his death.

SCENE 8

(Intense arrhythmic music kicks in. The scene sweeps into RYAN's Christmas party. The FRIENDS stand around. BEN and CAROLINE enter. The energy is a bit different. RYAN stands atop his couch.)

RYAN:

My friends and trusted colleagues, welcome all.
I wish you all good tidings,
And hope that your vacations are enjoyable.
For each of you, I have selected presents that
I hope express my dearest love for all of you.
Now you can open these whenever you see fit,
But if you wish to do so now,
Just hold a second, as I've something more to say:
I know I've been a douchebag recently.
Fear not, for this dickheadedness of mine
Shall soon be gone and I shall usher in
A brand new Ryan Vitler.
The likes of whom not one of you have seen,
But one which you all knew I could become.
Ok I'm done. Now party on.

(The party begins. RYAN steps aside. He is constantly glaring at BEN and CAROLINE together.)

A solid easy face was best for this.
Yet how precariously perched I felt,
As though atop a fearful precipice.

I closed my eyes and all I see was a black abyss.
God, every minute waiting felt like an hour.

(RYAN rejoins the party and chats with the FRIENDS as BEN and CAROLINE stand aside.)

BEN:

You know it's nothing but a show, don't you?

CAROLINE:

You promised me you'd keep your cool.
Just stick around a while.
And if it's clear he's gonna be an ass
We'll go ahead and leave the party early. Deal?

BEN:

Deal.

CAROLINE:

Where's the portrait?

BEN:

It's still in my car.

(RYAN crosses to BEN and CAROLINE.)

RYAN:

Ay come and drink my parent's liquor, friends!
Oh sorry Ben, forgot that you don't drink.
So Caroline, would you like some refreshments?
Oh come this way, there's mistletoe.

CAROLINE:

Real funny Ryan. I believe I'm fine.

RYAN:

Fine suit yourself.

BEN:

He's gonna cause a scene.

RYAN:

Ah Kevin, do you like the game I bought

With your last gift certificate?

KEVIN:

Yeah, man.

RYAN:

And you, Chris?

CHRIS:

I am kicking Karen's ass.

RYAN:

He plays too rough with you?

KAREN:

I'm rougher, sir.

CHRIS:

You're full of it. You're going down this game.

RYAN:

I dare say there's a challenge on our hands.
Pull up some chairs and let's all make a bet
Who is the bigger nerd at video games.

CHRIS:

Me!

RYAN:

Do you not find this funny, Ben?

BEN:

It hardly makes for thrilling entertainment, Ryan.

RYAN:

Not thrilling entertainment? Huh. That's funny, Caroline
Once told me something similar 'bout you.
Of course with all the time you've spent
With video games, it's hard to handle real equipment.

(RYAN bounds away for a time. The FRIENDS have a private conversation.)

COUSIN:

Ok there, freak.
Has this kid taken all his pills today?

CHRIS:

He's getting weirder, isn't he?

COUSIN:

You don't think he'll be a trench coat kid, do you?
There was another shooting this past week.
I heard the guy had found a gun inside his grandma's handbag.

KEVIN:

Did he have any reason to do it?

COUSIN:

Does anybody ever have a reason other than they're crazy?

KAREN:

But honey that's not fair.

CHRIS:

Yeah.

COUSIN:

What's fair about murder?
What, just because you are a total freak,
You have the right to kill another person?

KAREN:

What?

COUSIN:

I say, don't blame the grandma or the kids at school.
The guy got picked on cuz he was a loser, plain and simple.
Some people are just losers.
But killing someone doesn't change that fact.

CHRIS:

Then what should we all do about these guys?

(RYAN comes back.)

COUSIN:

Just hope they're wise enough to recognize
The world would be much better off if they just killed themselves
Instead of killing someone else.
At least that Jessie Perkins understood.

RYAN:

Jessie Perkins?
Who dares to speak of Jessie Perkins?
You can't look down on Jessie Perkins.
For she's the only person brave enough
To wear her scars outside her skin,
While we all hide our damage deep within.
Don't speak of Jessie Perkins.

CAROLINE:

Ok, I think you've made your point.

RYAN:

I'm sorry, my dear friends, I'm only drunk.
And in my state I speak with wicked tongue
But mean no harm.
Instead, let's drink to her. And may her scars
Remain a work of art for all the world to see.

(Awkward silence.)

Oh what, will no one drink with me?
Do you all think so highly of yourselves
That you can't raise a glass to toast her beauty?

CAROLINE:

Oh come on, Ryan, drop it.

RYAN:

Ay, mother. Am I making you too jealous
With all this talk of other women?

BEN:

Well Ryan it's certainly been one great night.
But now I fear it's getting rather late.

So Caroline and I are heading home.

RYAN:

Home? Why, are we so close to curfew that
We cannot spare a moment for a toast?
I mean, come on! I've yet to open my presents!

CAROLINE:

We'd love to stay. We really would, Ryan.
Our parents told us that we had to be home
Before its midnight, though.
They're worried bout drunk drivers on the streets.
You know how bitchy my mom gets.

RYAN:

But stay. I won't go on about my hero Jessie,
But please allow me time to open up your gifts.
You see, I'll open Caroline's gift first.

(RYAN opens CAROLINE'S present. He directs this to BEN.)

A winter scarf! Hand knit. Someone loves me.
But after all, you see so much potential in me,
How could you help but love me, Caroline?

(He opens KEVIN'S present.)

And Kevin, as for you – ah look at this!
Another gift certificate to Game Stop!
Much thanks for your reliability.

KEVIN:

Uh, sure . . .

(He opens KAREN'S gift. A CD.)

RYAN:

A new CD is Karen's gift to me.
And what an interesting name, too: Trapt.
Quite overdone though, wouldn't you agree?

KAREN:

Chill out!

RYAN:

But I am sure I'll cherish it. So thanks.

(He opens CHRIS' present.)

A *Star Trek* t-shirt?

CHRIS:

You've earned it.

(RYAN tosses the shirt onto CHRIS'S head.)

Enough with all these glorified acquaintances.
That just leaves you, Ben. Shall we have your gift?
I'm sorry. I forget myself. You haven't yet
Opened the present I gave you. You first.

BEN:

(Aside.) I have to fight this burning in my chest.
I promised Caroline.
But I can't let him have his present now
When he's been such a dick to everyone.
(To RYAN.) Then I will open mine another time.
We'll open both our presents later
When you're a bit more pleasant.

(FRIENDS groan.)

Til then, I must go home to bed.
Now, Caroline, come on -

RYAN:

Be sure to only kiss under the mistletoe.
The rest of us won't like to see you fuck.

CAROLINE:

Stop it Ryan.

RYAN:

Tis fun, my dear. Tis fun.
Sure, save your present for another day –
It is a sketch book for your paintings.
But I demand my present now.

BEN:

You know what? No.
Not until you say you're sorry to everybody here.

RYAN:

You have it finished, then?

BEN:

Just say you're sorry.

RYAN:

The present first. And then I'll see if I
Am feeling penitent today.

BEN:

(Aside.) He's made his choice, and I shall make my own.
(To RYAN.) I don't have anything for you.
I never will have anything for you.

(The action freezes. RYAN turns out to the audience.)

RYAN:

And there was my answer. I was not surprised,
And yet all reason and good sense were gone,
Which made all unsurprising things impossible.
Oh, to have rewind the clock and lived those happy times again.
But no. They would not be.
The cogs inside this clock moved with precision,
To push me ever closer to this precipice.
And knowing this, dared I to take the plunge?
One choice remained. Stop up this putrid bile,
Or simply spill my poisonous contents
On all that thrived about? To stay my ground
And fight the tide that swept against me now,
Or face the dark embrace of the abyss?

Fuck it.

(The action unfreezes. To BEN:)

I once thought you were everything
A guy like me could ever hope to be.
But now I see that you are nothing;
And I no longer vex myself with nothing.
Now get the fuck out of my house.
And I mean all of you – and take your shitty presents with you.

(FRIENDS exits.)

CAROLINE:

You have to try to fix this. Show him what you've made-

BEN:

He has what he deserves.
An empty house and heart. Now stew in that.
Oh yeah, and merry fucking Christmas too.

(BEN exits.)

RYAN:

What Caroline, will you not follow after him?

CAROLINE:

I've held my fears at bay for love of you,
Believing that in time you would mature
And cast aside this melancholy bullshit.
Instead you fester in it.
The love that I once saw within your eyes
Has turned into a darkness.
But Ryan, where does all this hatred end?

RYAN:

You misconstrue my meanings, Caroline.
This hatred which you speak of's in your mind.
The darkness in my eyes th'effect of time.
I am at peace with where the world keeps me.

CAROLINE:

Then why am I so ill at ease tonight?

RYAN:

You really look on me, your friend, with fear
When once you trusted me with everything?
What happened to all that potential you
So recently declared I had?

CAROLINE:

It seems I was mistaken.

RYAN:

Is that a fact? Then find yourself a new best friend.
Why bother with a trenchcoat kid?

CAROLINE:

Because I will not let you injure those you love.
How could I stand and watch you fuck up all
That you and I hold dear?

RYAN:

Stop, Caroline.

CAROLINE:

No! Not until this bile leaves your eyes.

RYAN:

Would you prefer I spat it in your face?
You're vexing me. Goodnight.

CAROLINE:

Don't dare dismiss me like some enemy.
You may spurn Ben, when he came here prepared to make amends-

RYAN:

But I don't care for things I need to mend.
He's gone, but you are still knit close to me.
You are the sweetest springtime rain.
You could refresh in me what's almost tainted.
I have to know, so answer straight: do you love me?

CAROLINE:

You know I do.

RYAN:

Then prove it.

CAROLINE:

How?

RYAN:

Leave Ben and stay with me tonight,
And love me as you have been destined to.

CAROLINE:

I can't.

RYAN:

You must. It is the only way to go from here.
Time marches on. Ben is no more a part of us.

CAROLINE:

He's part of me! You say I'm knit to you?
Then I am surgically attached to Ben.
You cut him and he sheds my blood.
You spew your accusations on him,
And in the process wound us both, and still
You dare believe I'll be your springtime rain?
I never wished you any harm, Ryan,
And I have never wanted anything
Except to see us all at peace again,
But if you touch my boyfriend,
I will not be a fucking springtime rain,
I'll be a tempest in your path that-

(RYAN physically stops up CAROLINE's mouth.)

RYAN:

Don't speak to me of tempests.
In fact you'll never speak for Ben again.
Because, you want to talk of tempests, Caroline?
Well I am one would drown you dead
A thousand times if I but brought my weight to bare.

My anger's only stayed by love.
You will not ever cross me,
Nor will I hear pathetic protests come
From out that tainted mouth of yours,
Unless you stand with me and me alone.
This is your last chance.

CAROLINE:

There's not one needed. I stand with Ben.
I loved you as a friend, Ryan. Get over it.

(CAROLINE exits.)

RYAN:

And so it came to be. A new year dawned
And in the mirror, now I saw what once
Was just that glimpse.
Not long ago, I thought I was the world's victim.
But now I saw that in the great machine
I was but another cog.
I could not help who I was born to be.
If I was meant to be the bastard son,
I'd force this ghastly world to rue the day
It made me from its own decay.
I'd watch and laugh as Ben's insides melted.
His guts would run out of his mouth like oil
And I would light a blaze and gaze in awe
As his entire world was turned to ash
And Caroline and everybody else
Begged me for some reprieve.
The time bomb in my chest had reached its final beat.
So let time march ahead; my time had come.
And it would certainly be memorable.

SCENE 9

(An army of electronic soldiers do battle. Shouts of death. In the end only one will be left standing. Lights slowly rise to reveal BEN playing the game alone. He is a mess – a shell of who he was. His studio is a disaster – trash everywhere. The portrait stands finished behind him – a sad reminder. We hear the voicemail taunts sent to him via the game's messaging system.)

STUDENT 1:

Hey sniper faggot. Why don't you try fighting an opponent face to face, chicken shit.

STUDENT 2:

Oooh look who got the rocket launcher. Pussy. I'll kill you next time.

BEN:

Just try it, you little bitch.

STUDENT 3:

Hey queerbo, you better watch your back. I'll be sniping you next time. Oh and kiss my ass.

BEN:

Kiss my ass, you fucking faggot. If you can't handle a real player, then FUCK OFF!

(CAROLINE enters.)

CAROLINE:

Ben?

Why didn't you pick up your phone?

BEN:

Caroline? What time is it?

CAROLINE:

It's 12:30. Happy New Year.

BEN:

Excuse me?

CAROLINE:

Happy new year? Hello?

The party? I was waiting there? Where were you?

Fuck, look at this place!

BEN:

I'll clean it later.

CAROLINE:

Well, let me help you.

BEN:

Don't bother.

CAROLINE:

Then come on. The party's not yet over.

BEN:

I'm in the middle of a game.

CAROLINE:

I think you've played enough, now give it up!

(BEN doesn't.)

Ben, what has happened to you?

Come on, just talk to me.

BEN:

Oh wait, it's new year's day?

Oh shit, I have to finish all my college applications.

CAROLINE:

But you did them already.

BEN:

I've changed my plans.

I don't want to go to those in-state schools.

I gotta get the fuck out of this place.

CAROLINE:

And what about our plans?

BEN:

Come if you want, but I'm not staying here.

(BEN searches through the trash in his room for some sign of his applications. CAROLINE stares at him.)

CAROLINE:

I never thought I'd fall in love with such a coward.

I thought that you at least could be adult,

But now I see that you and Ryan were so close

Because there's hardly any difference tween you two at all.
I didn't tolerate his shit,
And I'm not wasting one more second with you.
At least Ryan was man enough to show me what is going on inside.

(CAROLINE exits. BEN alone.)

BEN:

You have no fucking clue what's going on inside of me.
You want to know? You want to see what is within me now?
It's rage. You wanna see my rage?
I'll show you. I'll show you what's inside of me!
I'll show you fucking rage!

(He moves towards the portrait, and lifts it over his head as if about to smash it.)

(Instant blackout. In the darkness we hear . . .)

PORN STAR:

Yes! Yes! Oh yes! Keep going!!!

(Lights up on RYAN alone online, watching porn. We see the PORN STAR in ecstasy, but RYAN is unmoved. He looks as disheveled as BEN, but with a disturbing focus. He mutters under his breath . . .)

RYAN:

When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweeep my outcast state . . .

(There is a noise from RYAN's computer. RYAN puts on his headset and clicks a button. The PORN STAR disappears and a SALESMAN takes her place.)

RYAN:

You have it?

SALESMAN:

I do. An ounce of cyanide, just like you asked.
Arrived two days ago.
I know you're planning to electroplate some things,
So I can add some cupric nitrate for a small fee.

RYAN:

I have that stuff already. I need the cyanide alone.

SALESMAN:

All right. Before I send it out today,
You need to give me payment information.

RYAN:

I'm sending it to you right now.

SALESMAN:

Now what the hell is this? Mrs. Nancy Vitler?
You're obviously a man.

RYAN:

It's fine, my mother never checks her bill.

SALESMAN:

You're just a kid, ain't you?
Now listen up, this cyanide ain't shit for messing 'round.
The merest drop of this old crap is strong enough
To kill the toughest man alive.

RYAN:

Don't put much weight in overbearing conscience.
I'm but a simple worker, left with just
One task to do. I wish it done with speed.
Don't let your moralizing cause me to continue starving.
Now are you gonna send it out or not?

SALESMAN:

When evil's in a child's hands,
It has potential for a double wrong.
It kills both justice and his innocence.
At least my papa taught me that.
But what would I know. I am just a merchant.
I deal in property and not the deed.
You'll have it by this afternoon.

RYAN:

See that it's done.

(He signs off. SALESMAN exits.)

It seemed the world for once was on my side.
Why had I fought my destiny this long
When it was so easy just to end this tired tragedy?
I'd have to talk to Ben,
Convince him that I meant to fix our broken friendship.
But how? I made a stupid error when
I got so angry at my party.
How could I trick him back here?

(There is another sound. RYAN puts back on his headset.)

Hello?

(BEN appears.)

BEN:

It's me. I want to talk.

SCENE 10

(Music: Breaking Benjamin's "You Fight Me". BEN enters and joins RYAN. They start playing *Halo III* again. SOLDIERS in the background as usual.)

(Very long pause. Both boys are visibly awkward. An elephant is in the room.)

(Pause continues. They play.)

RYAN:

Happy new year.

(Pause. They play.)

BEN:

You too.

(Pause. They play.)

(Aside) I wish that I could shoot myself right now.
I want to take the soldier in this game

And point his rifle at my head.
I've sat here twenty minutes saying nothing.
I came here for a reason, but my pride
Has gotten in my way and I can't speak.
He still enrages me so much.

(Pause. They play.)

RYAN:

(Aside) This is the most amazing feeling in the world.
I have the will and have the means,
And when I choose, this guy beside me will be dead.
But I'm not ready yet.

BEN:

I didn't know Montpelier's the capital of Vermont.
I always switched Vermont on map tests with New Hampshire.

RYAN:

Is that so?

(Pause. They play.)

BEN:

(Aside) How can I keep on wasting time like this?
Why won't I speak?
I keep on looking for the proper line
To start this conversation, but it never comes.
Just speak, God dammit.

RYAN:

And how are all the college applications.

BEN:

They're fine. Not done, but fine.

RYAN:

I wish you all the best on those.
(Aside) My hands are getting sweaty.
I feel like time is slowing down around me.
If this moment is precisely why I am alive,
Then what am I now waiting for?

(To BEN) How's Caroline? I take it you and she are doing well?

BEN:

I'd rather that we didn't talk of her.

RYAN:

That's fine. She's dead to me already.

(Pause.)

BEN:

I heard about your English essay.
You wrote about you being an assassin?

RYAN:

A serial killer actually.

BEN:

You have a reason why you wrote something so fucked up?

RYAN:

If we can't talk of Caroline,
We certainly can't talk of my suspension yet.
What say you to a drink? A coke?

BEN:

Ok.

GAME VOICE:

Game paused.

(The boys speak in monologue.)

RYAN:

The time has come.

BEN:

Can I so easily forget the things he's done?
The way he treated Caroline?
That can't be fair.
How does a friend become an enemy so quickly?

RYAN:

I move as though inside another's body.
Oh God, what freedom I now feel, as though
I'm not responsible for what is soon to come.
Now this is power that's godlier than God himself.

(RYAN gets up and grabs two cokes. He pulls out a small vial or bottle.)

BEN:

Good God this is madness.

RYAN:

What words or deeds can stop this madness here?
For madness it assuredly must be.
If I were on the outside looking in,
I would be tortured to my very soul
To witness this without a means to act.
And now a voice inside cries, Halt! Enough!
He's Ben. He sits there looking loveable.
But my best friend died weeks ago.
And nature made me fit for just one task.
I must complete it.

(He pours the cyanide in one coke.)

BEN:

How can a man hold in so much emotion?
I feel a decade of life tearing me within.
What am I doing here? This hesitation's killing me!

RYAN:

I wonder what it's like.
To die, and leave all sense behind.
Then what comes next? I long to see it.
I always thought of death as one long memory,
Where every happy moment plays in sequence.
If that is true, I do my most beloved friend a favor.

(He walks back over.)

BEN:

At heart am I a coward or a friend?

This moment now defines me.

RYAN:

And now the moment comes to finish all.

(RYAN hands BEN the coke.)

Here you go.

BEN:

Thanks.

(Pause as BEN almost speaks. He drinks the coke.)

RYAN:

(Aside) Done. How simple this end proves.

No drama grand and horrible.

And yet what was it I expected here?

A bomb exploding in my basement?

Then time's the only factor left, and let it pass.

GAME VOICE:

Returned to game.

(Long pause. The boys play the game. BEN drinks again. He puts down his controller. RYAN watches him.)

BEN:

This does not come too easily for me,

In fact I don't believe I've ever said this in my life, but . . .

I did make you a birthday present, Ryan. It's . . . well, it's a painting. Of us. The largest I have ever made. And . . . I tried to define our relationship in it, you know? To find a way to quantify the last ten years together. But lately, with everything that's going on, I have just wanted to slash it to pieces. And I went to. I had a fucking knife in my hand. And as I looked at the canvas, I thought, "This was us. What we were." But it's not anymore. You know? Something has tainted this so much that I wished to cut myself free as if that would keep the disease from spreading within me. My love for you had become a plague. Somehow this thing I felt was sent from God was rotten and infectious. And I wondered how the fuck we went so wrong. And now you're gone and so is Caroline. We broke up this afternoon. And all I keep thinking about now is how, instead of painting this picture, instead of hiding in my room these past four weeks, I should've been sitting here with you. We should have been slashing things out, even if we both ended up bloody, or worse, consumed. Because that's what I owe you, not some stupid present.

So what I'm saying is, I love you, man. And I am so sorry.

RYAN:

(Aside) Just what the fuck have I done?
There is no great machine at work in this.
I was a fool to think he was my enemy.

BEN:

I don't know if we can rewind the clock, but . . .

(BEN suddenly gasps. RYAN'S CHARACTER guns down BEN'S CHARACTER.)

GAME VOICE:

Respawn in . . . in . . . in . . . in . . .

(The game starts malfunctioning. The sound breaks down.)

RYAN:

But things cannot rewind.
Jesus. What have I done?
Ben! Stay with me!

BEN:

What . . . what is this . . .

(BEN reaches for RYAN and collapses on the couch. At first RYAN recoils, then he summons his courage and goes to friend's side.)

RYAN:

There's something that I need to say too, Ben.
I got it, Ben. I finally got it.
No, Ben, stay with me. Listen to me. Ben!

(BEN convulses. It is too powerful and RYAN is too lost and overwhelmed. The game breaks down around them.)

(BEN dies.)

(RYAN closes BEN's eyes.)

(RYAN addresses the audience.)

RYAN:

When you have looked upon the face of death
Right as it overtakes a life,
You understand so many things.
Hope does not burn out.
It simply hides from sight a while.
I couldn't tell when I looked into Ben's eyes
What awaits when we die,
But if my friend is listening to me now,
I just have one thing left to say:
When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

(RYAN holds his dead friend's hand. The lights slowly fade to black.)

END OF PLAY