

The Taste of Fire

by

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Cast of Characters

Susan Cusak, 42.

Ethan Nicholson, 17.

David Nicholson, 31, as Ethan remembers him six years ago.

Carla Nicholson, 36.

Larissa Cusak, 17.

Roger Cusak, 43.

Setting: The Cusak and Nicholson homes in Charles and Calvert County,
 Maryland.

Time: 2000.

For Michael L.,
when the student was ready,
the teacher appeared.

THE TASTE OF FIRE

ACT ONE

Scene 1

Setting; A bare stage.

At rise: SUSAN CUSAK, mid-40's, is alone in a pool of light.

SUSAN

There are easier things in this world than being married to a good person. It tends to throw one's own shortcomings into such bold relief

Eleven years, two months and sixteen days ago I put my daughter Eleanor in her crib for the night. She was four and a half months old. I checked her two hours later and she was fine. When I woke up six hours after that, I was surprised and grateful that Eleanor had slept through the night.

Eleanor was our second child. Larissa was six at the time. When Larissa was born I was not the model of radiant motherhood. Frankly, I was petrified and overwhelmed. I was sure I was going to make a mess of everything. How was I supposed to know when to feed her, how to comfort her? When was she crying because she needed a change and when because she had some ghastly childhood disease? I certainly loved her, but I don't think I relaxed for a second during her first three or four years.

With Eleanor I was the Modern Maternity poster mom. I knew how to do it. Larissa was a healthy and well-adjusted child. I could certainly do it again. Everything about Eleanor delighted me. I could watch her discover the world without the fear that ruled every step in Larissa's development.

Roger heard my screaming in the shower. He didn't even stop to wrap himself in a towel. He didn't try to take Eleanor out of my arms. He knew better. He just held us both. If breathing hadn't been involuntary, I'm sure I would have just stopped.

When I barely left our bedroom for months, Roger stood by. He didn't push me or berate me or hector me. He just took up the housekeeping and got Larissa dressed in the morning and off to school, and bathed at night, and into bed. And went off and worked a full day. For over six months he came to a bed where he found ... no welcome. In the last eleven years he has never once thrown anything about that time back in my face. But we have been stalwart Roger and poor fragile Susan ever since.

I realize that what people are saying behind my back is unlikely to be, "Oh poor Susan, stuck with a man who's so naturally thoughtful" or "How does that poor woman put up with all that decency and reasonableness?"

Don't worry, I ask myself, too ... daily ... What is wrong with me that I can resent a decent, competent, generous, loving, modest, authentically good man for each and every one of his sterling attributes?

Lights fade to BLACK.

End of ACT ONE, Scene 1.

THE TASTE OF FIRE

ACT ONE

Scene 2

Setting: A bare stage.

At rise: ETHAN is alone in a spot DR.

ETHAN

The first time I had to go to the hospital I was eleven. He had this bag of pretzel sticks. One night he found one missing and he went off.

DAVID comes into a pool of light U of ETHAN. DAVID will play the scene with an unseen 11 year-old ETHAN, while the current 17 year-old ETHAN delivers both his own narrative and young ETHAN's responses.

DAVID

Who the hell ate one of my goddamn pretzels? Hello?!? I'm not getting an answer. I want an answer ... NOW!

CARLA (joining HIM)

What's the matter?

DAVID

One of my pretzels is missing. (Holding up the bag of pretzels) Did you eat one of these?

CARLA (knowing better than to laugh)

No, David. I haven't touched them.

DAVID

Then one of our two brats has some explaining to do ...

CARLA

Oh, I don't think the kids would bother your pretzels ...

DAVID

Oh no?

CARLA

No, really ...

DAVID

Then who did? Martians?

No ... CARLA

You say it wasn't you ... DAVID

No. CARLA

... or the kids? DAVID

They wouldn't bother something of yours. CARLA

Well who does that leave ... exactly? Pretzel burglars? DAVID

No. CARLA

Is the neighborhood going to hell that quick? Pretzels aren't safe in our kitchens anymore? DAVID

No. CARLA

Is it me then? Am I crazy? DAVID

No. CARLA

There were nine pretzels in this bag last night, there are only eight here now. I want to know what happened to that pretzel. Since you don't know, I want an answer from someone who does. ETHAN!! KERRI!!! DAVID

David, please ... CARLA

What? DAVID (snapping)

CARLA

They need their sleep. For school.

DAVID (pulling back)

Well la di dah di dah di dah di DAH (tight) Who will be up and showered and dressed and outta here before they even wake up?

CARLA

You.

DAVID

And who won't be back until after they've had their dinner?

CARLA

You.

DAVID

And between 6:30 am and 8 pm what will I be doing?

CARLA

Working for us.

DAVID

Goddamn right. Jumping through hoops that get pushed a little higher every day by assholes who can't see ... who won't see ... that there's no blood left in the turnip. I've been squeezed ...I won't be squeezed here, too!! I will not put up with the same shit here!

CARLA

No.

DAVID

Or am I asking too much?

CARLA

No.

DAVID

Is it too much to ask to have a few simple pleasures to call my own in the house I work 10 hours a day in lousy job where nothing I do is appreciated or good enough and that I commute an hour and a half to get to and an hour and a half to get back from? Is it too much to ask the three of you to leave me a lousy bag of pretzels?

CARLA

No.

DAVID

Well it's obviously too much for someone and I'm going to find out who. ETHAN!! KERRI!!! ETHAN!! KERRI!!! LET'S GO!!! NOW!!! GET IN HERE NOW!! DON'T MAKE ME COME FOR YOU!!!!

ETHAN rubs sleep from his eyes.

DAVID

There's one. KERRI!!!!!!

ETHAN

Leave her alone.

DAVID (after a long beat)

What? What did you say?

ETHAN

Leave her alone.

DAVID

"Leave her alone"?

ETHAN

She's four years old. She didn't touch your stupid pretzels. She can't even reach the cabinet.

CARLA

Ethan!

DAVID

So are you going to tell me why you took the pretzel? I don't begrudge you the pretzel, only that you took it without asking.

ETHAN

I didn't.

DAVID

No?

ETHAN

No, sir.

DAVID

Than we have a real problem here. Because if Kerri didn't take the pretzel and you didn't take the pretzel, then you're telling me your mother is a liar.

ETHAN
No, sir.

DAVID
It had to be one of you.

ETHAN
Maybe you counted wrong.

DAVID
WHAT?!?

ETHAN (quivering lip, but forging on)
M-m-m-aybe, maybe you counted wrong.

DAVID
Look mister, I haven't liked your attitude since you came in here. We'll get back to where you think your general lip is coming from, but I want you to know right now that you will not get away with calling me stupid, ever!! (Grabbing ETHAN's pajama top) Is that clear?

ETHAN
Yes, sir. I didn't mean ...

DAVID
What? What didn't you mean, smart guy?

ETHAN
You're not stupid, sir.

DAVID
No? I can't count nine, or maybe eight, pretzels correctly. That sounds pretty stupid to me.

ETHAN
No, sir. Maybe you were tired or in a hurry.

DAVID
Okay, bigshot. You count 'em.

DAVID starts to hand ETHAN the bag of pretzels, as ETHAN reaches for it, DAVID dumps the pretzels on the ground.

DAVID
I said count them. Now.

THEY glare at ONE ANOTHER for a beat, then ETHAN kneels to pick up the pretzels.

DAVID

Wait. That's going to be too easy for a smart guy like you. Count this. (DAVID begins smashing the pretzels with his foot and grinding the crumbs into the floor.) Go ahead. Get started. You aren't getting up 'til you've picked up every last crumb.

ETHAN reaches gingerly to begin picking up pretzel fragments. DAVID stomps on ETHAN's hand, hard and quite deliberately.

CARLA

David!

DAVID

What?

DAVID lifts his foot and stomps again. CARLA gasps and turns away. ETHAN has winced both times and is now absolutely rigid. HE will not let himself cry no matter what, however HE is in such pain that HE can't open his mouth without crying.

DAVID

You ready to tell me what happened to the pretzel yet?

ETHAN doesn't look up.

DAVID

Look at me when I'm talking to you.

ETHAN looks at him.

DAVID

Where's all the swagger now tough guy? Get up.

ETHAN has some difficulty getting up without the use of HIS right hand.

DAVID

Oh for god's sake. Cut out your play-acting.

ETHAN has finally struggled to his feet and turned away from DAVID.

DAVID (grabbing him)

I told you to look at me!

ETHAN struggles to get away. DAVID lets go suddenly and ETHAN begins to tumble backward.

ETHAN

I stumbled back a step or two and over the coffee table. I put my left arm back to catch myself. Anything to protect my poor battered hand. The sound of the bone breaking was unmistakable. It even got his attention. That's a snapshot from the real family album. Me on my back on the floor of the family room, left arm broken, right hand mangled.

CARLA

Oh my god, Ethan ...

DAVID

I didn't do that. Don't pin that on me. I didn't push him.

CARLA

Of course not.

DAVID

He was horsing around and fell.

CARLA

Yes.

Lights down on DAVID and CARLA.

ETHAN

Mom was brilliant at the hospital. Lot's of dithering concern. And guilt about slamming my hand in the car door. The intake nurse gave us few once overs, but that was it. That was always it. Even when what was really going on was as plain as the bruise on my face.

Lights fade to BLACK.

End of ACT ONE, Scene 2.

THE TASTE OF FIRE

ACT ONE

Scene 3

Setting: The CUSAK kitchen. The last Thursday in August.

At rise: Lights up on the empty kitchen. After a moment we hear a cel phone ring. It is a tinny, electronic rendition of *Fur Elise*.

Oh shoot. ...
SUSAN (from off)

Each time the phrase plays through it rises in volume.

Hang on!
SUSAN (still off)

SUSAN enters the kitchen and flips on the overhead light. She glances around the room, spots her handbag on a counter and rushes to open it.

SUSAN

There you are ...(pressing a button and holding the phone to the side of her face) ... Hello. ... Hello? ... Yes it is. ... Do I know you? ... Is this some kind of solicitation? How did you get this number? ... My husband? ... Excuse me, why would he have you call my cel instead of our home number? ... He didn't want to risk having our daughter answer? ... I'm sorry, Mr. Chisholm, was it? Mr. Chisholm, what is this about exactly? ... Excuse me? ... Excuse me? What kind of accident? ... Is Roger all right? ... That's good. What happened? ... He's been ... for ... That's ridiculous! That's just not possible. He would never ... Is this some kind of prank call? Has the celebration gotten just a little out of hand there? ... Listen, whoever you are, I don't think this is amusing at all. ... I'm sure you meant this in some kind of fun, but I don't think Roger will be amused either. So, to keep from having to mention this call to him, I'm going to hang up now before I guess who this might be.

SUSAN presses a button on the cel and sets it down on the counter.

SUSAN

Mike? (Shakes her head) Casey? ... Doesn't matter.

SUSAN opens the refrigerator and pours herself a glass of water from a Brita pitcher. The cel phone rings again.

SUSAN

Oh for god's sake! ... Hello. ... Why shouldn't I? ... Mr. Chisolm ... All right. All right. ... You're serious? ... Where is your office? ... Where did you get your degree? ... All right. (SUSAN sits) I'm sorry, I don't mean to be rude. You have no idea how unlikely ... Can you give me any details? ... I know the area ... Oh my god. ... And they gave him one of those tests? ... Oh my god. ... There was another car? ... Oh no. No. That just can't be. ... Mr Chisolm, are you sure? ... Oh my god. (Susan lowers the phone in shock, then eventually lifts it again.) Yes, I'm still here. I'm sorry. ... It's just ... well, even "shock" doesn't quite do this justice. You're telling me that my husband 1) drove drunk and 2) killed a man. ... Where is he now? ... Can I ... Will he be released in the morning? ... Are you sure? ... Yes, this is his first offense. ... I'm *quite* sure. ... And I really can't see him tonight? ... Of course. ... Is there anything else you need from me right now? ... Mr. Chisolm, I have nothing but questions, but I'm not sure I'm ready to hear any more answers tonight. ... Thank you. ... No, I'm sorry ... Well, I hung up on you. ... No, I really don't think there's anything else tonight. Thank you. ... Thank you. ... I'll try. ... Goodbye.

SUSAN sits, numb, with the cel phone in her lap for several beats.

A clothes dryer buzzes from off. SUSAN glances in its direction. SHE eventually stands, sets the cel phone on the table and walks off slowly in the direction of the dryer.

BLACKOUT.

End ACT ONE, Scene 3.

THE TASTE OF FIRE

ACT ONE

Scene 4

Setting: The Nicholson kitchen. Friday. Nearly 1 am.

At rise: The kitchen is dark except for moonlight spilling in through a window. We see headlights and hear a car pull up.

As we hear the car door open and shut and the car pull away, ETHAN NICHOLSON enters the kitchen in ratty gym shorts and a T-shirt. He flips on an overhead light. HE is exhausted and anxious. It is clear, though, that HE has not been asleep.

CARLA NICHOLSON comes in from the outside. SHE is haggard and worn. SHE has been crying.

CARLA

Oh sweetie ... You didn't have to wait up ...

ETHAN

Yeah. I did.

CARLA seems slightly dazed, unable to acclimate herself despite the familiarity of the surroundings. ETHAN waits, expectantly, but not rushing her.

ETHAN (finally)

I got Kerri to sleep.

CARLA

Good.

ETHAN

Instead of trying to make her go to bed, I let her sit up and watch TV with me. She was out like a light before the eleven o'clock news.

CARLA

That's good.

ETHAN

It was pretty rough ...

CARLA nods.

What's the story? ETHAN

CARLA looks at HIM but can't bring herself to speak.

Mom? ETHAN

I'm glad you and Kerri stayed here. CARLA

The accident was bad? ETHAN

Was he hurt bad? CARLA (nods)

Let's have a seat. ETHAN

I'm fine. CARLA

I need to, please ... ETHAN

Sure. ETHAN

THEY sit at the kitchen table.

So it's bad? ETHAN

What is it? CARLA nods.

CARLA takes ETHAN's hands. ETHAN

Okay, tell me. ETHAN

He was killed in the wreck. CARLA

What? ETHAN

Your father is dead. CARLA

Oh my god. ETHAN

He died instantly. CARLA

That's good. (CARLA shoots him a look) That he didn't suffer ... ETHAN

Yes. CARLA

You were gone quite a while ... ETHAN

I had to, um, I.D. ... him ... um, the body. CARLA

Oh. ETHAN

It was awful. CARLA

I'm sorry. ETHAN

He, um, went through the windshield. CARLA

Wow. ... ETHAN

CARLA

He was a mess. It was awful to see him like that.

ETHAN

Sure. (a beat) This is going to be hard for Kerri.

CARLA

For all of us.

ETHAN

I hope she sleeps through the night.

CARLA (nods)

I'm going to need you to keep watchin' out for her.

ETHAN

No problem.

CARLA

I'm going to need you for a lot, sweetie.

ETHAN (shrugging)

You know I'll do what I can.

CARLA

There's just so much ...

ETHAN

We'll be okay.

CARLA

I have to go tomorrow and arrange a funeral for god's sake!

ETHAN

Did you get his stuff?

CARLA

What do you mean?

ETHAN

His watch. Stuff in his pockets. From the car. What do they call it ... his "effects"?

CARLA

Oh hell. I left the bag in Nancy's car.

ETHAN

That's okay. She can drop it by tomorrow.

CARLA

Why do you ask?

ETHAN

I bet he carried the key to his desk on him.

CARLA

Probably.

ETHAN

If you had the key it would be easier to get to the insurance papers and stuff you're going to need. Maybe I should get a pad. We could at least start a list ...

CARLA

Please, Ethan ...

ETHAN

What?

CARLA

Slow it way down.

ETHAN

Sorry. (After a beat) It's been a long night ...

CARLA

Very.

ETHAN

Can I fix you a sandwich or something?

CARLA

I don't think I could eat.

ETHAN

Something to drink? You want some tea? Coffee? A soda?

CARLA

Is there any iced tea made?

ETHAN

Like we would dare run out?

THEY exchange a long look. ETHAN finally shrugs and begins preparing an iced tea. CARLA, sitting at the table, begins to weep. ETHAN, without comment or change in affect hands her a tissue.

CARLA

Thank you.

As CARLA struggles to regain her composure, ETHAN finishes preparing and presents her iced tea.

CARLA

Thank you.

ETHAN

Who else knows?

CARLA

Well, Nancy was with me.

ETHAN

Right.

CARLA

Now it makes sense that they insisted I didn't come alone.

ETHAN

Right. Did you call anyone from the hospital?

CARLA

No. I couldn't ... I just couldn't. And I needed to tell you first ... (breaking down again) Oh god, Ethan. He was just a mess. It was so awful ...

ETHAN

Come on ... Shhhhh ... You'll wake Kerri ...

CARLA looks away from him and continues weeping quietly.

ETHAN

Since you're going to have trouble talking about this

CARLA looks back at him.

ETHAN

Could Nancy or somebody make some calls for you?

CARLA

That's a good idea. But it can wait 'til morning.

ETHAN

Right. (a beat) Are you sure you're not hungry? Even a little?

CARLA

Maybe a little.

ETHAN

Then you should eat ...

CARLA

I don't know if I could ...

ETHAN

It's gonna be a crazy few days ...

CARLA nods.

ETHAN

Then you gotta keep your strength up.

CARLA

Okay Ethan. (pause) Maybe I should have a little something.

ETHAN (as SHE starts to rise)

I'll get it. You want a sandwich?

CARLA

That'll be fine. Thank you.

ETHAN is meticulous, but rather animated in his sandwich prep. CARLA begins to relax a little as she watches him.

CARLA (suddenly)

Oh my god!

ETHAN

What?

CARLA

I don't even own a black dress.

ETHAN

Someone can pick one up for you ... if you don't have time to go shopping.

CARLA

Good lord! I couldn't go shopping ...

ETHAN

No. I guess not. (a thought makes him laugh to himself)

CARLA

Ethan?

ETHAN

Sorry.

CARLA

What?

ETHAN

It was nothing.

CARLA

What Ethan?

ETHAN

I was just thinking now you can probably go ahead and get something nice ...

CARLA

Ethan, that's awful.

ETHAN

How many times did he say he was probably worth more dead than alive?

CARLA

I guess he never thought we'd actually find out. ... We're both going to burn in hell.

ETHAN

Then you can't say we'll never see him again.

CARLA

Ethan!

ETHAN
Yes ma'am?

CARLA
I have no one to blame but myself, for encouraging you...

As ETHAN smiles and returns to his sandwich prep, CARLA sighs, pulls some brochures from her purse, selects one and begins to read.

ETHAN finishes her sandwich, places it on a plate and sets it on the table in front of CARLA. If he were alone in the room he might be doing a little "happy dance."

CARLA
Thank you. (SHE doesn't touch the sandwich.)

ETHAN
You should eat some of that.

CARLA
I will ...

ETHAN
Like maybe half?

CARLA
I will ...

ETHAN
Before the bread gets stale and the mayo curdles ...

CARLA
Okay, Ethan.

ETHAN
Who's always getting on Kerri about wasting food?

CARLA (taking a bite)
There. Happy now?

ETHAN (nodding)
I am. Yes I am.

CARLA gives him another look, which he returns levelly.

ETHAN

Whatcha got there?

CARLA

One of the nurses gave me some brochures from Mother's Against Drunk Driving.

ETHAN

Oh? ... Oh! He wasn't ... Was he ...

CARLA

The driver who hit him. David was turning onto route 234. They don't think he even saw the other car. The drunk certainly didn't see him. The drunk was speeding and that was that.

ETHAN

Wow.

CARLA

She also gave me a number to call for the local chapter.

ETHAN

And you would need that because ...

CARLA

They have someone called a victim's advocate who may be able to help us out.

ETHAN

Whatever.

CARLA

We're going to need a lot of help, Ethan ...

ETHAN

Like we didn't before?

CARLA

... to get through this. And maybe just to get by. I'm sure there isn't that much insurance .

ETHAN

I'm with you there.

Ethan ... CARLA

Yes ma'am? ETHAN

Your father was killed tonight. CARLA

So I heard. ETHAN

It's going to mean huge changes in our lives. CARLA

I know. ETHAN

They aren't all going to be good. CARLA

Maybe not. ETHAN

Maybe you need some time for it to sink in ... CARLA

I think I'm real clear on what happened and what it means to me. ETHAN

I think if you were, you wouldn't be able to be so flip. CARLA

Tell you what ... ETHAN

Yes? CARLA

I'll do everything I can to help you out. Okay? ETHAN

I know you will. CARLA

ETHAN

And I'm sure seeing him tonight was horrible for you.

CARLA

It was, Ethan.

ETHAN

So I'll try to remember that, even though I wasn't there, and cut you all the slack you need.

CARLA

"Slack"?

ETHAN

But you gotta let me handle my end my way. Okay?

THEY exchange a long, long look.

ETHAN

Okay?

CARLA nods. SHE then looks away and takes another bite of her sandwich.

CARLA

The sandwich is delicious. Thank you. I did need to eat.

ETHAN nods as lights fade to BLACK.

End ACT ONE, scene 4.

THE TASTE OF FIRE

ACT ONE

Scene 5

Setting: The CUSAK kitchen. Friday around 8:30 a.m.

At rise: Lights up on SUSAN alone in the kitchen. A long cold cup of tea and an untouched English Muffin sit on the table in front of her.

LARISSA CUSAK, 17, enters the kitchen without acknowledging her mother. SHE goes to the refrigerator and takes out a can of Diet Mountain Dew, which she opens and sips.

LARISSA begins to leave the kitchen, still without acknowledging SUSAN.

SUSAN

I don't know how you can drink that stuff first thing in the morning.

LARISSA stops, but doesn't respond.

SUSAN

Larissa ... I'm sorry ... please ...

LARISSA (after a long beat)

Since I've been up for almost two hours, I don't think it's still first thing in the morning anymore.

SUSAN

You might as well stay here ...

LARISSA (glancing off)

Think he'll stay in the shower after the hot water runs out? (noticing a full carafe under the coffee maker) Really think he'll need a whole pot?

SUSAN shrugs. Silence reigns.

LARISSA

Well ... I think I finally understand why people smoke.

SUSAN

As I remember it helped.

LARISSA (laughs)

I can **not** picture you with a cigarette.

SUSAN (lightly)

I'm full of dark corners.

LARISSA (not lightly)

We'll keep them to yourself. We've had enough big surprises for today.

SUSAN nods. More silence.

LARISSA

I can't believe you were going to let me just waltz out of here and go to school ...

SUSAN

I ... it was ... I ... I'm sorry. ... That's all I can say. I'm sorry.

LARISSA

WHAT were you thinking?

SUSAN doesn't respond.

LARISSA

What, mom? What?

SUSAN

I guess ... I guess I didn't want to say anything until I was sure of what I was telling you.

LARISSA

It didn't occur to you that I might find it just slightly awkward to be sitting in Calculus and have Melanie or Julianne slip me a note that said something like "sorry about your dad"? It didn't cross your mind that I might find the weird looks in the cafeteria pretty unsettling? You were setting me up to be a freak ... a clueless freak!!

SUSAN

No ...

LARISSA

Oh a great big Yes!! If he hadn't walked in that door, you would have let me go off to school not knowing a thing ...

SUSAN doesn't respond.

LARISSA

Am I right? ... Am I ... Please, give me a handle on some part of this ...

SUSAN

I didn't want saying it out loud ... saying it to you ... made it true.

LARISSA laughs.

SUSAN

That's funny?

LARISSA

I was thinking about the dilemma it would have posed for the Guidance Staff when the whole story came out. They wouldn't have known who to intervene with first him or you!

Silence returns.

SUSAN (rising)

I guess I've stared at this long enough.

SUSAN removes the plate, throws away the English Muffin, rinses the plate and places it in the dishwasher.

While her back is turned, ROGER enters. HE is freshly showered and shaved.

LARISSA

Hey Daddy.

ROGER

Hey sugar.

SUSAN (not turning to face him)

Can I get you a cup of coffee?

ROGER

No, thank you.

SUSAN

Some breakfast ...

ROGER

There was food at the jail this morning.

SUSAN

Did you eat any of it?

ROGER

I don't care for anything now, thank you.

SUSAN (rubbing a counter top)

As I stand here and look at this, I think you may be right Roger ...

ROGER

About what?

SUSAN

Sick as I am of this kitchen, granite may be too high maintenance to be worth the cost. Maybe we should give corian another look ...

ROGER

Remodeling the kitchen may not be our most urgent priority.

SUSAN

Easy for you to say. You don't prepare 350 meals a year here.

ROGER

No.

SUSAN

Maybe something more modest under the circumstances. Some fresh curtains and dishtowels?

LARISSA

Mom!

SUSAN (to Roger)

Are you feeling better?

ROGER

Less grimy.

SUSAN (Finally turning to face him)

You really aren't hurt?

ROGER

No.

SUSAN

Good. I was afraid Mr. Chisolm was lying when he said you weren't hurt.

ROGER

Why?

SUSAN
To keep me from worrying.

ROGER
Was he successful?

SUSAN
When he said they took you to the hospital

ROGER
I don't know why they did. I guess they wanted me to be checked out. I'm fine.

SUSAN
Good.

ROGER
I was fine last night.

SUSAN
I guess ...

ROGER
I was wearing my seat belt.

LARISSA
The other driver wasn't?

ROGER
No. Evidently not.

LARISSA
So that's why ...

ROGER
No.

LARISSA
But if he had been ...

ROGER
That doesn't really matter.

LARISSA
Daddy!

ROGER

If I hadn't been ... speeding ... and hadn't hit him ... he wouldn't be...

SUSAN

You sure you don't want anything? (sitting) Larissa, get your father a cup of coffee, please.

LARISSA

Daddy?

ROGER

Sure, sugar.

SUSAN

What do you think about yellow? I've never really cared for it, but people say it's cheerful. After nine years of blue, blue and blue, we need a change. Do you think yellow might be cheerful?

ROGER

What exactly did Chisolm tell you?

SUSAN

He said you were ...

ROGER

I was.

SUSAN

That's not like you ...

ROGER

But I was ...

SUSAN

You took one of those tests?

ROGER

Point one four.

LARISSA

No way.

SUSAN

Oh my.

ROGER
Yes.

LARISSA
What was that? Hello! Dad? Mom?

SUSAN
I told you what he said ...

LARISSA
Half an hour ago!

ROGER
What do you need to know Larissa?

LARISSA
I don't understand ... how ... why ...

ROGER
I'm not sure I can tell you that.

LARISSA
Then just tell me what happened.

SUSAN
That is not going to help.

LARISSA
And renovating the kitchen will? Jesus.

SUSAN
You know what happened ... How many times does that story bear repeating?

ROGER (after a beat)
Maybe it would help you to hear it from me. So we're all clear. So there are no surprises later.

SUSAN
I guess after last night renovating the kitchen would have a certain "rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic" quality, wouldn't it?

ROGER looks into his lap.

SUSAN
I'm sorry. I haven't found my way to "acceptance" yet ... I'm somewhere between "denial" and "bargaining." Or does "bargaining" require a belief in god?

LARISSA (after a beat)
Daddy, please ...

ROGER
Suddenly I don't know where to begin...

SUSAN
You went out for a drink after work...

ROGER is startled.

SUSAN
Let's try it your way. ... You went out for a drink after work ...

ROGER
With a bunch of people.

SUSAN
Rob and Kwomi and ...

ROGER
And Mike and Greg ... and a whole bunch of people.

SUSAN
To celebrate your promotion.

ROGER
Yes.

SUSAN
And ...

ROGER
Everyone kept buying rounds. And I kept letting them ...

LARISSA looks at HIM expectantly.

ROGER
And then ... (small laugh) ... the funny thing is ...I realized I was getting a little buzzed and I decided I'd better get out before I got really trashed. I was already more buzzed than I should have been, though.

SUSAN
And...

ROGER

And I didn't stop for the light at Hogshead Lane. And I didn't see the Cavalier until it was too late. He was making a legal turn and I didn't see him in time. And I hit him and I killed him.

SUSAN

Is there any particular reason you were going 68 miles an hour on Rte 234?

ROGER doesn't answer.

LARISSA

You knew all this last night?

SUSAN

Well?

ROGER (softly)

Because I had to pee.

SUSAN

Excuse me?

ROGER

BECAUSE I HAD TO PEE. I realized about a quarter of the way home that I should have gone before I left Captain Eddie's. I didn't want to turn around and go back. I figured I'd never get out if I did ...

SUSAN continues looking at him blankly.

ROGER

After another mile or so the pressure really started to build and I panicked. I figured if I just sped up enough I could get home in time. ... and not embarrass myself. Of course my bladder emptied PDQ on impact. So I had to stand around in soaking wet pants, reeking of urine like some disgusting derelict who did this kinda shit regularly while the cops came and the ambulance came...

SUSAN

You ruined our lives because you were in a hurry to get home to use the bathroom?!?!

ROGER

Yeah. I guess you could put it that way.

SUSAN

You couldn't just pull over?!?!

LARISSA

Stop attacking him!

SUSAN (to LARISSA)

Is that what I'm doing? (to Roger) Is that what I'm doing?

LARISSA

In the last ten hours you couldn't tell me any of this, but suddenly you can't stop badgering daddy ... what's that about?

SUSAN

What I am trying to do is maintain some semblance of a grip while I try to absorb all this!

ROGER

I'm sorry, Susan

SUSAN

And now that I know you're not injured ...

ROGER

I know I don't have a right ...

SUSAN

To comfort in your own home? Of course you do. Perhaps I'll be better able to offer comfort after I've gotten some rest.

ROGER

Please ...

SUSAN

As you might imagine, I didn't sleep well last night.

ROGER

No ...

SUSAN

So I hope you'll both excuse me ...

LARISSA

Don't go running off

SUSAN

Why? I'm clearly not doing anyone any good here. (SUSAN exits.)

Silence visits ROGER and LARISSA.

LARISSA

I hate when she does that.

ROGER

I think we have to be fair.

LARISSA

Sticking together has to be better than running off.

ROGER

I'm not sure there is a good way to handle this.

LARISSA

It doesn't have to change anything.

ROGER

Larissa, I killed a man last night. (a beat) That changes everything.

LARISSA

I think I liked it better when you lied to me for me own good.

ROGER

Believe me, If I could bring back that time I would.

LARISSA

And you didn't mean to ...

ROGER

That doesn't make the slightest difference.

LARISSA

Did you really ...

ROGER

Yes. Yes, I did.

LARISSA

Why ...

ROGER

I wasn't thinking. I just wasn't thinking.

LARISSA

I just can't believe ...

ROGER

I wish you didn't have to. But it's not going to help you ... me ... anyone ... to pretend this is anything other than what it is.

LARISSA

I guess.

ROGER

And the cold hard truth is that I have made a real mess of our lives. Yours . Your mother's. I'm sorry.

LARISSA

Don't ...

ROGER

I'm very sorry ...

LARISSA (scared)

Please don't cry ...

ROGER

No. Don't need to subject you to that ...

LARISSA

We'll be fine, Daddy. We will ...

ROGER

I hope so, sugar.

LARISSA

Don't you think we will?

ROGER

Not for a minute.

LARISSA crushes the empty soda can in her hand.

Lights fade to BLACK.

End ACT ONE, scene 5.

THE TASTE OF FIRE

ACT ONE

Scene 6

Setting: The Nicholson kitchen. Sunday around noon.

AT rise: The empty kitchen is filled with bright sunlight. CARLA bursts in from outdoors. She is dressed for church and loaded for bear.

CARLA

Ethan! Ethan!! Goddamnit! Ethan, are you here? You had better be in this house Ethan Nicholson!

Sound of a toilet flushing.

CARLA

Ethan!! Get your sorry tail into this kitchen this minute!

ETHAN saunters coolly into the kitchen.

ETHAN (clearly mimicking a familiar voice)

“Jesus Christ, woman. Can’t a man even take a leak in peace?”

CARLA

That is not funny, young man. That is not even slightly funny.

ETHAN shrugs.

CARLA

I have just about had it with your antics. Had it. This is not the time for you to be showin’ off. And what do you mean just getting up and running out of Pastor Anderson’s like that? Are you trying to embarrass me in every way possible?

ETHAN

Where’s Kerri?

CARLA

Mrs. Anderson is watching her for me ... while I try to get you settled.

ETHAN

Poor kid. It’s not like she did anything wrong.

CARLA smiles despite herself.

CARLA

Well ... I wouldn't have had to leave her with Mrs. Anderson if you hadn't just run out of there without a word ... (noticing how sweaty and disheveled he appears) ... Look at you! You ran the whole way here didn't you?

ETHAN

Well ...duh! ... How else would I have gotten here before you? I didn't hail a freakin' cab.

CARLA

I have had it. HAD IT. With your lip and your attitude. I'm sorry things have affected you this way. But you are going to start behaving in public. I will not have you humiliating me and embarrassing poor Kerri in front of people, is that clear?

ETHAN shrugs.

CARLA

Now why did you bolt out of Reverend Anderson's like that?

ETHAN

I just had to get out.

CARLA

Come on, Ethan ...

ETHAN

Would you be happier if I had told the pompous old fart to kiss my butt.

CARLA

What did that poor man do?

ETHAN

He wouldn't let up. He wouldn't let up. "I should think a young man of your age would be mature enough to want to honor his father's memory." He would not let up. He just wouldn't accept that I am not going to do a reading tomorrow and I am sure as heck not going to give a freakin' eulogy.

CARLA

Are you sure you couldn't just ...

ETHAN

You know flippin' well that none of those people want to hear what I have to say about him. No one wants to hear the truth. You know that better'n anybody. And I'm not going to stand up and lie.

CARLA

You don't have to lie about anything...

ETHAN

Since when?

CARLA

Would it really kill you to read a few lines of scripture? It's what they do now. I liked it better when the family could just sit quietly in the pew. But that's just not the way it's done anymore. Couldn't you just go along?

ETHAN

No.

CARLA

Ethan ... it doesn't have to mean anything...

ETHAN

I don't want people lookin' at me and thinkin' "that poor kid, his daddy's dead ..."

CARLA

I am sorry that you can only focus on the negative.

ETHAN

Oh give it up! We're alone. There's no one here to impress.

CARLA

There are good things to remember.

ETHAN

Are you on drugs? Or is this what they call "mad with grief"? Of course I don't know where the grief would be coming from. But you've sure gone crazy on me.

CARLA (after a beat)

All right, Ethan ...

ETHAN

What?

CARLA

I will tell Reverend Anderson that there is, um, no need for you to participate in the service.

ETHAN

Good. 'Cause I'm not no matter what anyone says.

CARLA

Would you please, please do something for me?

ETHAN

What's that?

CARLA

Can we try to get through tomorrow ... and the rest of today with, um, a minimum of fuss and bother?

ETHAN

Are people going to just leave me alone?

CARLA

Will you show up and stay and be reasonably civil?

ETHAN

As long as no one expects me to pretend to be sorry or sad.

CARLA

But you have to come to the funeral and the graveside. All you have to do is stand quietly with me and Kerri, but I want you there.

ETHAN

I don't see why.

CARLA

Don't be stupid, Ethan. You know how bad it would look.

ETHAN

Tell them I'm overcome with grief. Not prostrate ... um ... oh yeah! Tell everyone who asks that I'm prostrate with grief!

CARLA

Give it a rest, Ethan. (a beat) And give me a break. Please.

ETHAN

All right.

CARLA

So grab a quick shower and throw on a clean shirt so we can rescue Kerri on our way to the viewing.

ETHAN

Can I spit in the casket while no one is looking?

THEIR eyes lock. And hold. And hold. Surprisingly, ETHAN looks away first.

CARLA

That's the last smart-mouthed crack like that I want to hear out of you. You do owe me that respect. We may have had our differences, but my husband is dead. And I am sorry that he's gone.

ETHAN

I don't see why.

CARLA

It means something to Kerri. You may not share it, but you will respect our grief, young man.

ETHAN

You are so completely full of crap. It makes me want to puke.

CARLA

That's enough, Ethan.

ETHAN

Careful. You want things from me. I don't want a thing from you.

CARLA

Ethan, please ...

ETHAN

Lookit, I'll put on a clean shirt. I'll go to all the stuff you're gonna drag me to. I'll keep my mouth shut. But don't you forget for one second what my real feelings are or why they are what they are. Save the sanctimonious crap for the Andersons and all your new buddies from MADD.

CARLA

Can you be ready in ten minutes?

ETHAN

Yes. I can.

CARLA

Okay then.

ETHAN exits. CARLA stands alone in the kitchen, lost in thought as lights fade to BLACK.

End of ACT ONE, scene 6.

THE TASTE OF FIRE

ACT ONE

Scene 7

Setting: The CUSAK kitchen. Monday around 11:30 a.m.

At rise: ROGER is alone at the kitchen table. The cold liquid in the cup that sits untouched in front of him is coffee. ROGER is in shirt and tie. His suit jacket sits on the back of his chair.

SUSAN enters from the outdoors, carrying a small gym bag.

SUSAN

Am I running late ...

ROGER

No. I've been up ... thought I might as well get dressed.

SUSAN

I drove by the high school to make sure Larissa's car was in the lot.

ROGER

And.

SUSAN

I wouldn't be here if it wasn't ...

ROGER

Wouldn't the school have called?

SUSAN

Not 'til this afternoon.

ROGER

We may need to cut her a little slack ...

SUSAN

Or we may need to preserve what little structure remains in her life ...

ROGER (after a beat)

Susan ...

SUSAN
Yes?

ROGER
She made need some time ...

SUSAN
If we wait until this gets easy, she won't get to class again until she's 40.

ROGER
I still think we could show a little understanding that this is difficult for her.

SUSAN
It is, but it will be for a long time to come. We can't let her shut down that whole time. (a beat) Perhaps we have a responsibility to keep her from repeating our mistakes?

ROGER
Is that possible?

SUSAN
We still have to try, don't we?

ROGER (after a beat)
How was your workout?

SUSAN
Not vigorous enough. I think I may sign up for boxing.

ROGER smiles.

SUSAN
No really, I think an hour of punching something two or three times a week might be the best thing I could do for the foreseeable future.

ROGER stops smiling.

SUSAN
Did you call ...

ROGER (nods)
The hammer hasn't fallen yet. They want to hear how the appointment with Chisholm goes. I have to call back later in the week ...

SUSAN
What do you think ...

ROGER
It's not going to be good.

SUSAN
No...

ROGER
My bet is the job is history. They're just not in any rush to tell me.

SUSAN
This ... what happened ... had nothing to do with your job.

ROGER
Federal contractors aren't big on convicted felons supervising multi-million dollar projects.

SUSAN
You're not ...

ROGER
It's likely I will be ...

SUSAN
Let's see what Chisholm says this afternoon.

ROGER
Susan ...

SUSAN
Yes?

ROGER
We have to look at what's really going to happen ...

SUSAN
Do we know what's really going to happen?

ROGER
We have a pretty good idea.

SUSAN
I'm going to wait until I know for sure before I make any plans.

ROGER
Okay ...

SUSAN

I'm not ready to deal in hypotheticals

ROGER

I'm sorry.

SUSAN

I know. You're not the kind of man who could do what you did and not feel regret.

ROGER

No.

SUSAN

Although it's good to hear you say it. Four days ago I would have sworn on Larissa's head that you were not the kind of man who could ever drive drunk. So, really, what do we ever "know"?

ROGER

You can know that what this is doing to you is the very worst part of it.

SUSAN

That would come as cold comfort to Mr. Nicholson's family.

ROGER (after a LONG beat)

I guess it would.

SUSAN (after another LONG beat)

You can see why I don't want Larissa home to join in the fun.

ROGER nods.

SUSAN

We need to fix some kind of course for ourselves before we can begin to guide her through this.

ROGER

And what might that course be? I can say I'm sorry 'til my tongue swells and bursts and it won't mean a thing. It won't change anything. It won't undo... It won't bring back ... And yet, it's all I have. I've never broken something that couldn't be fixed. I've never been responsible for something this heinous before ... but here's this terrible evil thing and it's all mine and there's nothing I can do to ever, ever make it right.

SUSAN

Then we'll just have to see what comes along and deal with things as they come up. (a beat) It's funny ...

ROGER

I doubt it.

SUSAN

I don't understand it. Things don't feel as different as maybe they should. I talked to Mr. Chisholm. I know the sequence of events. I saw David Nicholson's obituary in the paper. I held it in my hands. I see you distraught, so I know something horrible has happened. When you leave the room, I imagine this is some old TV movie, "My Husband, the Stranger." But you're not. You walk back into the room and there you are, you. Just you. No horns. No cloven hooves. And feelings rush by too quickly for me to get a read on them. I don't know. I don't even know what I think I should feel ...

ROGER

What are we going to do?

SUSAN

Not much, Roger. Not much, for now.

ROGER

What?

SUSAN

Get through the rest of the day. Or the rest of the hour. Not think about one second more than seems manageable. There's no place for the long view in our lives right now.

ROGER

And how long can we live like that?

SUSAN

As long as it takes.

ROGER

Are you sure we can?

SUSAN

No. Not at all. But that's the best we've got for now.

ROGER nods as lights fade to BLACK.

End ACT ONE, scene 7.

THE TASTE OF FIRE

ACT ONE

Scene 8

Setting: Six weeks later. Dusk. A wall in front of ETHAN's high school.

At rise: ETHAN in jeans, a t-shirt and his cross country letter jacket leans against the wall. His hair is wet from his post-meet shower. His knapsack and gym bag are at his feet.

LARISSA begins to approach him, pauses, gathers herself and walks up to him.

LARISSA

Hey there.

ETHAN

Hey.

LARISSA

You're Ethan, right?

ETHAN (not displeased)

Yeah.

LARISSA

You're really good. Fast.

ETHAN

Thanks.

LARISSA

Great race.

ETHAN

No, it wasn't.

LARISSA

You won ...

ETHAN

The team didn't.

LARISSA

But you came in first! You finished days before any of the others.

ETHAN

That doesn't mean anything. This is a team event. Besides, I always finish first.

LARISSA

Oh really?

ETHAN

Sorry, that's not as conceited as it sounds.

LARISSA

Not much.

ETHAN

So I'm the best high school cross country runner in Southern Maryland. B. F. ... eh, Big whup! Y'know?

LARISSA

No ...

ETHAN

Look, I have speed and stamina. Luck of the gene pool. Coach says I don't seem to notice pain, so I don't ever give out at the end of a race. Nature and nurture working together. Okay, fine. I can beat everybody around here. But that's not saying much. And I can't let that be good enough. I have to keep getting better than myself and I didn't today.

LARISSA

How's that?

ETHAN

My splits were demented. I held back way too much in the first half, especially the second 2,000 meters. If I hadn't really kicked the whole second half of the race I still wouldn't be in the showers! And I wasn't all that winded in the end.

LARISSA

Isn't that good?

ETHAN

It means I shoulda pushed myself a whole lot harder.

LARISSA

Are you always this intense?

ETHAN

'Else why bother? (a beat) You're not a big cross country fan, are you?

LARISSA

You sure make it sound like fun.

ETHAN

You go to Patuxent?

LARISSA nods.

ETHAN

We all remembered you.

LARISSA (not displeased)

Oh?

ETHAN

Cross country meets don't draw much of a crowd. The guys all noticed you at Patuxent. When you showed up here we all figured you must have liked something you saw, too. We all thought it had to be Matt.

LARISSA

Matt?

ETHAN

The guy who came in third for our team, sixteenth overall. As a runner he's a total baked potato ... but he does okay with girls, y'know?

LARISSA

Does he?

ETHAN

He can talk to them.

LARISSA

You're doin' okay.

ETHAN (not displeased, but flushing crimson)

Oh. Well. And he's a snappy dresser. And he has a car. It's a package a lot of girls seem to buy.

LARISSA

Do you need a lift? I've got my car here.

ETHAN

Thanks. But my mom is already on her way. Maybe some other time? (LARISSA nods)
I'm Ethan. (slaps himself in the head) You know that. ... I don't know...

LARISSA

Larissa.

ETHAN

Pretty name. Larissa.

LARISSA

Thanks. Larissa Cusak.

ETHAN

Oh.

LARISSA

You recognize the name.

ETHAN (shields snapping up)

Yes.

LARISSA

I looked you up ... I found out you ran cross country...

ETHAN

Why?

LARISSA

I wanted to meet you...

ETHAN

And now you've done that. It's been great. See ya.

LARISSA

... to apologize.

ETHAN

You really don't have to...

LARISSA

My father...

ETHAN

I'm sure he didn't mean to...

No, but... LARISSA

It's okay. ETHAN (softly, near tears)

I'm sorry... LARISSA

You don't have to be. ETHAN

It must be hard ... LARISSA

You don't know. ETHAN

I'd like to help ... LARISSA

Please don't ... ETHAN

I'm sorry. It must be awful ... LARISSA

I can't believe it. It doesn't go away. Ever. Not for a second. ETHAN

Oh... LARISSA

How could I think this was about anything else? ETHAN

I didn't mean... LARISSA

It was bad enough before, but now I'm some kinda permanent walking freak show. "The Boy Whose Father Was Killed" ETHAN

No... LARISSA

ETHAN

Oh yes. It's why you're here, isn't it?

LARISSA

Well...

ETHAN

Isn't it?

LARISSA (after a beat)

Yes.

ETHAN

I guess I should be grateful. It took that to make me a babe magnet.

LARISSA

I'm sorry. I thought ... I wanted to do something to help.

ETHAN

As if anything could.

LARISSA

My parents just sit around like lumps. My father's lawyer wouldn't let us come to your father's funeral

ETHAN

That's really just as well ... The MADD harpies would have torn the three of you limb from limb. Or recruited you.

LARISSA

I joined SADD

ETHAN

Oh my god.

LARISSA

It has really helped.

ETHAN

I'll just bet.

LARISSA

To feel like I'm doing something...

ETHAN

Do me a favor and take me off your project list.

LARISSA

It's not like that!

ETHAN

Yes it is. It is exactly like that. A hundred times a day. You don't know and you can't know and you'll never know what this is like for me. And everything you and all the others say and everything you and all the others do to "help" just makes it worse.

LARISSA (shaken)

I'm sorry. I'm sorry for this. For bothering you. Not the other. I'm sorry.

ETHAN

You really want to help me? Spread the word that all I want people to do is leave me alone.

LARISSA

I didn't mean to make anything worse. I'm sorry. (She begins to walk away.)

ETHAN

Please. Wait. I'm sorry...

LARISSA

No! You don't have to be...

ETHAN

I don't have to be an asshole to you, either. You have to be dealing with some stuff, too.

LARISSA nods.

ETHAN

I just thought this would change things. And it hasn't. And it's not fair.

LARISSA

No.

ETHAN

You still wonder why he ... You think you must have done something or should have done something ... You wonder how he could ... You probably do too...

LARISSA

It doesn't make sense ...

ETHAN

They do this shit and get away with it ...

Yes.

LARISSA

ETHAN

And keep getting away with it ... It's like I keep waking up with this mouth full of ash, but I still can't describe the taste of fire. And it sucks. And I can't get even and I can't get anything back.

LARISSA

I really do know how you feel.

ETHAN

Then I'm really sorry.

LARISSA (after a long beat)

I'm going to get going.

ETHAN

Okay.

LARISSA

I really, really wish we could have met some other way.

ETHAN

Oh well.

LARISSA

And I'm not just saying this...

ETHAN

What?

LARISSA

Speaking as a girl....

ETHAN

Yes?

LARISSA

You are tons cuter than Matt.

ETHAN

Come on...

LARISSA

I'm not just saying that...

Thanks.

ETHAN (after a beat)

I'm really going to go now.

LARISSA

'Bye.

ETHAN

LARISSA exits. ETHAN watches her go. When she has clearly gone, HE sits dejectedly on the ground.

Lights fade to BLACK.

End of ACT ONE.

THE TASTE OF FIRE

ACT TWO

Scene 1

Setting: A bare stage.

At rise: CARLA is alone in a spot DR. The sound of applause fades out as she waits to speak.

CARLA

Oh. Thank you. (Glancing about with a bit of a “deer in the headlights” look) Wow. This is hard. (pause) I’m sorry. My name is Carla Nicholson. (pause) I guess Marion told you that already. (pause) My husband David was killed by a drunk driver. He ... the drunk ... walked away. I’m here tonight to talk about what this has done to my family. Which isn’t easy. I hope that by doing this I can help people to see the real effects, the human cost, of this terrible crime. I want to make sure that the legal system won’t let drunk drivers walk away from the consequences of their actions, as well. We need tough laws, yes, but we also need vigilant, aggressive prosecution. I know that nothing that is done to Roger Cusak will bring my husband back, but a real sentence for this real crime will give my family some comfort and will send a message that could keep other Roger Cusaks from getting behind the wheel. If any good can come from this stupid, senseless loss, it will come from preventing other families from losing as my family has lost.

DAVID comes into a pool of light U of CARLA.

DAVID

Who the hell ate one of my goddamn pretzels? Hello?!? I'm not getting an answer. I want an answer ... NOW!

CARLA

I can't say that we were anything special. But you shouldn't have to be someone special to be able to run up to Rose's for a garden hose without putting your life at risk. (pause) We were just an average couple, with good days and bad ...

DAVID

One of my pretzels is missing. (Holding up the bag of pretzels) Did you eat one of these?

CARLA

... struggling to get by, to raise our kids as well as we could. David and I had been married for almost 18 years. We have two children, a little girl, Kerri, who is 11, and Ethan, who is not really a boy anymore, but not quite a man at 17. They miss their father. They need their father. And thanks to a drunk driver, they will never see their father again.

ETHAN comes into a pool of light L of DAVID. HE is glaring at CARLA.

CARLA

This has been a hard thing for all of us, but I think it's been hardest of all for Ethan.

DAVID

There were nine pretzels in this bag last night, there are only eight here now. I want to know what happened to that pretzel. Since you don't know, I want an answer from someone who does. ETHAN!! KERRI!!!

CARLA

And I don't know if I can reach him.

ETHAN (to David)

Leave her alone.

CARLA

I don't know if I have what it takes to help him get through this.

DAVID

What? What did you say?

ETHAN

Leave her alone.

DAVID

"Leave her alone"?

ETHAN

She's four years old. She didn't touch your stupid pretzels. She can't even reach the cabinet.

CARLA

And that worries me. A lot. They are ... were ... are so much alike.

ETHAN turns to CARLA sputtering in amazement.

CARLA

They could both be stubborn. And they both have ... had ... had and have ... trouble expressing their real feelings. David wasn't someone who found it easy to say how much he loved me or the kids. He showed it by hard work and making sure we were provided for. He was our rock, in both the good ways and the bad. And now, so much like his father, Ethan can't seem to come to terms with his pain, his loss ...

Lights change on DAVID and ETHAN. Perhaps they get warmer or brighter, but there is some clear change in the quality of the light.

CARLA

I remember once when I had to take Ethan to the hospital. It upset David so much he couldn't bring himself to go with us. They had been horsing around over a bag of pretzels.

A smiling DAVID tosses the bag of pretzels to a flabbergasted ETHAN who tosses it back like a hot potato.

Go long!!

DAVID (cocking his arm like a football quarterback)

ETHAN steps back in disbelief. DAVID "passes" the bag of pretzels to ETHAN. HE bobbles the bag spilling pretzels.

CARLA

Silly, juvenile horsing around ...

DAVID

You'll never get by the first blocker!

He charges ETHAN, who continues backing away. DAVID runs over the pretzels, crushing them, and stops.

DAVID

Uh-oh. Your mother is gonna have a fit with both of us.

ETHAN has continued backing away, he trips over the unseen coffee table and stumbles backward, cradling the pretzels with his right arm, reaching back with his left to break his fall. We hear the sound of the bone breaking as he hits the ground.

CARLA

Somehow Ethan fell and broke his arm. It was awful for both of them.

DAVID

I didn't do that. Don't pin that on me. I didn't push him.

CARLA

David was overcome with guilt, even though it really wasn't his fault

DAVID kneels above ETHAN and cradles ETHAN in HIS arms.

DAVID

Are you okay, Budddy?

ETHAN

"Buddy"?

DAVID

Shhh ... Shhhh ... You're gonna be fine, buddy. We'll get that arm fixed up.

CARLA

He was so upset he couldn't face going to the hospital with us.

DAVID

Oh god, buddy, I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry ...

CARLA

You know, that may have been the worst night of my life ... up until last August 27th. I was pretty distracted myself and ended up slamming the car door on poor Ethan's good hand in my rush to get him to the hospital.

ETHAN slumps back in defeat, forming a virtual Pieta in David's arms.

CARLA

My husband was a good and caring man. He could be overwhelmed trying to express his feelings. He could clam up and run away from them. It worries me now to see his son shutting down over his death. I know Ethan is withdrawing because he's feeling more than he can bear. I guess I just have to be patient, but it would be a lot easier to handle if David was still here to help me. And that's what this drunk driver did to my family ... robbed my son of his father as he was creating the situation in which Ethan would need this father most.

Lights fade to BLACK, first on CARLA, then on DAVID and ETHAN.

End of ACT TWO, Scene 1.

THE TASTE OF FIRE

ACT TWO

Scene 2

Setting: LARISSA CUSAK's bedroom. Noon. Thanksgiving.

At rise: LARISSA is curled in a fetal ball on her bed.
HER despondent reverie is interrupted by a KNOCK.

Yes? LARISSA

May I come in? SUSAN (from off)

Sure. LARISSA

Ooh. Mind if I flip on the light. SUSAN

Go ahead. LARISSA

SUSAN flips on the light.

Did you stop by to wish me a Happy Thanksgiving? LARISSA

We're due at the Petersons at two. SUSAN

You go right ahead ... LARISSA

We need to leave by 1:15. That gives you just about an hour to get ready. SUSAN

Yeah. Right. LARISSA

This has gone on for too long, Larissa. SUSAN

LARISSA
“This” ? What is “this”?

SUSAN
Your grand sulk.

LARISSA
Why are you bothering me?

SUSAN
Larissa, it’s been almost four months...

LARISSA
The guy who said “time heals everything” was certainly full of shit, wasn’t he?

SUSAN
Larissa!

LARISSA
The more time passes, the harder it gets. As each bright new day dawns, Mr. Nicholson is still dead and I’m not one bit closer to understanding what happened. ... How could he?

SUSAN
I don’t know, sugar. I don’t know ...

LARISSA
Knowing he could ... Knowing he did ... What kind of person could ... He’s not who I thought ... what’s left? I look in the mirror and what do I see? A girl whose father got drunk and killed a man.

SUSAN
That’s not your fault. In any way.

LARISSA
I know that. It’s an immeasurable comfort.

SUSAN
If Melanie’s dad ... If Mr. Corsey had done the same thing would you see Melanie that way?

LARISSA
But he didn’t and daddy did. This isn’t something that works as a hypothetical. This is unimaginable right up until it actually happens.

SUSAN

That's certainly true.

LARISSA

And I think it would change how Melanie sees herself. I think it would change how I see her.

SUSAN

Oh no

LARISSA

How could it not? I think even you and I could agree that it changed everything ...

SUSAN

In some ways ...

LARISSA

Oh please! There are only bad choices here. I can let myself see that my father is a murderer and judge him accordingly. Or I can stand by my father and ignore a horrible crime. What's the good choice? The only question is what kind of lowlife do I want to be. The option of not being a lowlife died with Mr. Nicholson. For all of us.

SUSAN is too shaken to respond.

LARISSA

So you'll excuse me if I leave my little pilgrim costume hanging in the closet and pass on Thanksgiving dinner.

SUSAN

No, I'm afraid I won't.

LARISSA

Mom?

SUSAN

Maybe you're right. Maybe, we have nothing but bad choices ahead of us. Maybe we're screwed left, right and center, sugar.

LARISSA

Mom!!

SUSAN

But none of that matters, really. All we can do is get on with our lives. Not as though nothing has happened ... but because there is just nothing else we can do.

LARISSA

You are such a hypocrite.

SUSAN

I beg your pardon?

LARISSA

You think I don't remember? I wasn't that young. You locked yourself in your room for six months when Eleanor died, but I've got to be trotted out to wave the flag today because you say so?

SUSAN

Oh my god, Larissa ... That's not fair.

LARISSA

You're right about needing to get out. I need to get out of this house. This is the place where it never goes away. Sometimes I can get away from it at school, at the movies, at a game ... here, it's all right in my face all the time.

SUSAN

All I'm asking you to do is get out of the house. Come to the Peterson's. That's out of the house.

LARISSA

I don't want to go anywhere with him.

SUSAN

We are having dinner at the Peterson's. The three of us.

LARISSA

If I am trapped in a car with the two of you for a whole forty-five minutes I will honestly go crazy. I will be a complete drooling loon by the time we get there.

SUSAN (after a beat)

Then I'll bring a roll of paper towels.

LARISSA glares at Susan, but doesn't speak. Susan falters for a minute, looks at her watch, then continues somewhat less certainly.

SUSAN

And you will be downstairs ready to go in forty-five minutes.

LARISSA continues glaring.

SUSAN

Sugar, please ...

LARISSA

Stop calling me that. Don't call me that ever again.

Their eyes meet and hold. This time Susan doesn't falter.

SUSAN

Then I will see you downstairs.

SUSAN exits quickly, closing the door gently behind her.

LARISSA remains frozen as lights fade to BLACK.

End ACT TWO, scene 2.

THE TASTE OF FIRE

ACT TWO

Scene 3.

Setting: The Nicholson kitchen. December.

At rise: ETHAN is sitting at the kitchen table, struggling to write on a pad. Several college applications are spread out before him.

CARLA enters from outdoors. SHE is wearing a worn old parka, but is otherwise fairly well put together.

CARLA

Hi. Sorry I'm so late. We stopped for a bite after the meeting.

ETHAN nods.

CARLA

Everything okay, here?

ETHAN

Yeah.

CARLA

Is Kerri asleep already?

ETHAN

She's in bed, but I wouldn't be surprised if she wasn't asleep.

CARLA

Oh?

ETHAN

She has a big earth science test tomorrow, so she was a little stressed.

CARLA

I'm sure she'll do fine. I don't know how I ended up with two kids who are so good at math and science. It was all beyond me.

ETHAN

I don't remember having as much homework in the fifth grade.

CARLA

You always came right home and did yours. I'm sure she didn't even look at hers until after dinner.

ETHAN

Well ...

CARLA

Well ?

ETHAN

No, she didn't start 'til after dinner.

CARLA

There you go. It always seems like a lot if you keep putting it off. Anything I need to sign for her?

ETHAN

Not today.

CARLA

How about you?

ETHAN

You don't need to sign my homework either.

CARLA

Okay, smart guy.

ETHAN

You'll need to sign these applications once I get them done.

CARLA (unenthusiastically)

Okay.

ETHAN

You wanna read my Villanova essay?

CARLA

I'm sure it's very good.

ETHAN

I hope so. You don't want to read Villanova ... how about NC State or Arkansas ... or good old Virginia Tech? This whole process would be a lot simpler if I didn't have to write so many different essays. I wish admission offices believed in recycling!

CARLA

Can you turn in hand written essays?

ETHAN

No. I'll take them into the computer lab at school, type them in and print them out. ...
What?

CARLA

You're putting so much effort into this ...

ETHAN

That's what it takes.

CARLA

I don't want to see you disappointed ...

ETHAN

You could have a little faith!

CARLA

It's not that. Not you.

ETHAN

Un-hunh.

CARLA

This is so out of the blue ... and I just don't know if we can afford ... I don't see how ...

ETHAN

That's not going to be a problem.

CARLA

Oh yeah?

ETHAN

I'm a really good runner, mom. Really good.

CARLA

I know ...

ETHAN

I really think I can get a scholarship.

CARLA

I hope so.

ETHAN

You don't sound convinced.

CARLA

It's just so ... it's ... it just seems like something that only happens to other people, y'know ...

ETHAN

And I'll always have your enthusiasm to sustain me in my darkest hours.

CARLA

I just don't want you to count on this and then get your heart broken ...

ETHAN

If I have to I'll do it without a scholarship. Once I'm in I can defer my admission for a year - if I have to - and work and save some money.

CARLA

These schools are all expensive ...

ETHAN

See, it's a good thing we're poor. I should qualify for financial aid and loans. (After a beat) We can work on those forms together.

CARLA

Sure, sure ...

ETHAN

The dead father card might even come into play!

CARLA

Ethan!

ETHAN

Sorry. But Mom, I can go to college. This isn't some gooney dream. I got a 1420 on my S.A.T.'s. I have a 3.8 G.P.A. (truly not a boast, something that's still very much a new realization:) I'm smart.

CARLA

I know, honey. I never said you weren't.

ETHAN

Yeah, but I can say it out loud now and not worry that I'm going to get the crap beat outta me. Do you know how great that feels? I'm smart and I'm fast and I don't have to be afraid to say it anymore.

CARLA is at a loss.

ETHAN

And I don't have to be stuck in Waldorf forever!

CARLA

Do you have to go so far? Right away?

ETHAN

I want to go to a school with a decent cross country program. I need to if I want to get any money at all.

CARLA

I'm not saying you have to live at home and go to community college. Okay, no. But what about someplace like St. Mary's? It's a fine school. You wouldn't have to live at home ... you could live in the dorms ... but you'd still only be an hour away.

ETHAN

Mom! St. Mary's doesn't even have a cross country program. It wouldn't make any sense for me to go there ...

CARLA

These are all so far ...

ETHAN

Villanova's less than four hours.

CARLA

I don't know Ethan ...

ETHAN

Well, I have to be accepted before it's an issue.

CARLA

I don't mean to step on your dreams ...

ETHAN

Then don't ...

CARLA

I have to worry ...

ETHAN

No you don't. We don't have to worry, anymore.

CARLA

Ethan ...

ETHAN

Look how scared you were about going back to work ... and how well it's gone.

CARLA

Cashier at the Kroger isn't exactly rocket science ...

ETHAN

And all that other stuff you're doing ... I'll bet you've been out more nights in the last three months than whole time I've been alive.

CARLA

You make it sound like your father getting killed was a good thing.

ETHAN

And ...

CARLA

That's just wrong.

ETHAN

It wouldn't have crossed my mind to apply to college while he was alive. I don't even want to think about what asking him to sign an application or fill out a financial aid form would have started.

CARLA doesn't respond.

ETHAN

Am I wrong?

CARLA doesn't respond.

ETHAN

And I'm not going away for at least another 9 or 10 months, so don't get all gooney about that part tonight.

CARLA

I depend on you for so much ...

ETHAN

You'll do fine.

CARLA

And Kerri will miss you so much ...

ETHAN

Kerri will be thrilled to have a big brother in college and you know it.

CARLA

Maybe ..

ETHAN

And you'll work things out. Because you can in the silence. There hasn't been any yelling in this house since the funeral. It's possible to figure things out for yourself in the quiet.

CARLA

You can go crazy if it gets too quiet.

ETHAN

You're spending too much time with the MADD ladies. It's making you gloomy.

CARLA

No, it's not Ethan. It's really not.

ETHAN

What's their theme song? "I'm just a girl who can't let go ..."

CARLA

That's not funny.

ETHAN

Oh?

CARLA

They're good for me. Those meetings. And the people are good to me.

ETHAN

I wasn't saying you should stop going.

CARLA

When I speak up at a MADD meeting or go talk to a group ... well ... it's the first time in my life that I've had the feeling anyone really wanted to hear what I had to say. They're not just waiting for me to shut up so they can get on with what they were doing.

ETHAN

See ...

CARLA

I'm not smart like you and Kerri ...

ETHAN

That's not true ...

CARLA

Oh yes it is! I wouldn't get 1420 on my S.A.T.'s if I took them twice and they added the scores together.

ETHAN

Mom ...

CARLA

But I'm not as dumb as I've always been made to feel. And I wouldn't know that if it wasn't for the support I get from MADD.

ETHAN

Okay.

CARLA

And drunk driving is a bad thing.

ETHAN

I didn't say it wasn't.

CARLA

What that man did to your father was a terrible, terrible thing.

ETHAN

Yes ...

CARLA

Working with MADD is a good thing to do and a good thing for me.

ETHAN

Like going to college will be for me?

CARLA (after a beat)

I guess.

ETHAN

So you won't try to stop me?

CARLA

You know I'll sign the applications for you.

ETHAN

And fill out the financial aid forms?

CARLA

We'll fill them out together, like you said.

ETHAN
Thanks.

CARLA
But, then there's something else I'd like you to do for me.

ETHAN
What's that?

CARLA
We're having a candlelight vigil on Friday ...

ETHAN
When you say "we" ...

CARLA
It's a MADD rally in Annapolis.

ETHAN
Why don't I stay here and watch Kerri so you can go and stay as long as you'd like ...

CARLA
This is for families. I really want you and Kerri there with me. I want to be there as a family.

ETHAN
His family.

CARLA
My family.

ETHAN
Mom ...

CARLA
Please, sweetie ...

ETHAN (after a beat)
I'm not carrying his picture.

CARLA
Okay.

ETHAN
Or wearing it on a t-shirt.

CARLA

You just have to hold a candle in one hand and Kerri's hand in the other.

ETHAN

And pretend something bad has happened ...

CARLA

Something bad did happen.

ETHAN

You don't really believe that.

CARLA

It was a crime ...

ETHAN

This is gonna feel creepy and hypocritical.

CARLA

It's something I need.

ETHAN

Why?

CARLA

I don't want to have to explain why you're not there.

ETHAN

See, it'll be easy to explain why I'm not there when I'm away at school.

CARLA

Fair enough. But you'll come Friday?

ETHAN

But I don't have to like it?

CARLA

No more than I have to like your going far away for school?

ETHAN nods unhappily as lights fade to BLACK.

End ACT TWO, Scene 3.

THE TASTE OF FIRE

ACT TWO

Scene four.

Setting: LARISSA's bedroom. Mid-December. Around 2 a.m.

At rise: The room is dark. LARISSA opens the door and creeps slowly and deliberately into the room. She turns struggles with several matches, eventually lighting a scented candle.

SHE sits for a moment with her head in her hands. SHE stands and begins to undress with cautious and deliberate movements.

SHE suddenly goes rigid and runs from the room. She can be heard vomiting from a distance.

SUSAN appears in the doorway and comes into the room. SHE sits and waits.

The sound of a toilet flushing is heard. Followed by a tap being turned on and off.

LARISSA returns to the room, wiping her mouth with a tissue. SHE is startled to see SUSAN.

LARISSA

Shit! Oh my god! ... Oh my god! Mom! ... Shit.

SUSAN

You're not feeling well?

LARISSA

No ...

SUSAN

Let me get a better look.

SUSAN rises and turns on a light.

LARISSA

Ow. No. Ow. ... Do we really need that light?

SUSAN
I think we do. Yes.

LARISSA (collapsing on her bed)
Oh god ...

SUSAN
I see you are wearing a watch.

LARISSA
Do we have to make it a game?

SUSAN
Why didn't you call if you knew you were going to be late?

LARISSA shrugs.

SUSAN
Well?

LARISSA
Can we talk about this in the morning?

SUSAN
It is morning. Why have you come in so late?

LARISSA
I lost track of time.

SUSAN
What's going on Larissa?

LARISSA
Mom ... please ...

SUSAN
No. This can't wait. You miss your curfew by two hours, you sneak into the house ... I'm sorry you're not feeling well, but I want answers tonight. This behavior is completely unacceptable.

LARISSA (a mocking sing-song)
"This behavior is completely unacceptable."

SUSAN
You're skating on mighty thin ice.

LARISSA

Well maybe my life is completely unacceptable ...

SUSAN

What?

LARISSA

Just leave me alone.

SUSAN

I don't think so ...

LARISSA

Please ...

SUSAN

No. I want to know what's going on here.

LARISSA

I don't feel well.

SUSAN

You were well enough to stay out after two, you're well enough to tell me why and what you were doing. Where have you been all night?

LARISSA

Out.

SUSAN

Stop it, Larissa.

LARISSA

You don't want to know what's up with me. You really don't ...

SUSAN

Yes, Larissa, I really do.

LARISSA

No, you don't. You want me to follow your example and go around acting like everything is just fine. Like we're some ideal sit-com family. Although wacky dad seems to be pushing the envelope a little, doesn't he?

SUSAN

That tape is getting old, Larissa.

LARISSA

And I guess with a daughter you wouldn't call it "Leave It to Beaver," would you?

SUSAN

No. "Everybody Pities Larissa," would be closer to the mark.

LARISSA

You really want the truth about what's going on with me?

SUSAN

Do you even know that yourself?

LARISSA

Oh yes I do.

SUSAN

Well then ...

LARISSA

I so sick of life right now that I'm starting to think that Eleanor is the one who got off easy.

SUSAN

You don't know.

LARISSA

No, you don't know.

SUSAN

Listen to me, young lady. Listen really carefully. Don't you ever, ever say anything about Eleanor again. Ever.

LARISSA

You don't want it to be true so I shouldn't say it out loud.

SUSAN

It's not true. And it's a horrible thing for you to say.

LARISSA

You're the one who wouldn't go away and just let me sleep.

THEIR eyes meet and hold. Finally, SUSAN turns away, opens the door and shuts out the light as SHE exits without a word.

LARISSA sits, the portrait of misery, for a moment. SHE rises and throws on a t-shirt and sweat pants. SHE lights another candle or two. SHE sits again.

ROGER appears in the doorway and knocks.

What?
LARISSA

May I come in?
ROGER

Dad?
LARISSA

May I come in?
ROGER

Why?
LARISSA

ROGER enters.

I'm sorry to hear you're not feeling well.
ROGER

Nothing a good night's sleep won't fix.
LARISSA

We have to get something squared away first.
ROGER

And this can't wait 'til morning because ...
LARISSA

You have a problem with me, but you keep saying mean, shabby hurtful things to your mother. If you have things to say maybe you should be saying them directly to me, instead of taking swipes at your mother.
ROGER

Oh god ...
LARISSA (collapsing on her bed)

This nonsense didn't start until after ... my accident. So this is something you and I clearly need to address.
ROGER

LARISSA
"Accident"?

ROGER
Are there things you need to say to me?

LARISSA
Not tonight.

ROGER
Right now.

LARISSA
I just want you to leave me alone.

ROGER
I think that's what's gotten us to this point ...

LARISSA
Please ...

ROGER
No. Where were you tonight?

LARISSA
I was out with some people from school.

ROGER
Who ... exactly?

LARISSA
People. You wouldn't know them.

ROGER
What people? Who?

LARISSA
Kyle and Donna. Tiffany, Mark and Zipper.

ROGER
I thought you left here with Melanie and Sharon.

LARISSA
I did.

Why did your plans change?
ROGER

Larissa.
LARISSA doesn't respond.
ROGER

You really don't want to know.
LARISSA

I'll take that risk.
ROGER

We ran into someone at the mall.
LARISSA

Who?
ROGER

Ethan Nicholson.
LARISSA

Oh.
ROGER

LARISSA
We were on line for the movie when I saw him sitting by himself on one of those goofy little benches in front of the StrideRite. He didn't seem to be waiting for anybody. He was just sitting there. He's such a babe, I couldn't believe he was there alone. I went over to say, "hi." Just "hi." I wasn't going to talk about ... anything. Maybe see if he'd join us. Like a person. I just wanted us to be people who could go to a movie together ...

ROGER
How did you know ...

LARISSA
I saw him at a couple of cross country meets.

ROGER waits.

LARISSA
He's kind of a big noise cross country-wise ...

ROGER waits.

LARISSA

I introduced myself after a meet a while back. He blew me off. Pretty firmly.

ROGER

You sought out the Nicholson boy? After what Mr. Chisholm said about contact.

LARISSA

Yeppers. He's your lawyer. Not mine. I'm not interested in his advice.

ROGER

What happened tonight?

LARISSA

I thought, "well okay, we had that moment, but now maybe we can get beyond all that ..."
Turns out we can't.

ROGER waits.

LARISSA

I walked over and said "hey" and he didn't even look up. I said his name and he looked beyond me like I wasn't even there. I started to talk to him ... I don't even know what ... Nothing stuff ... "hey c'mon ..." stuff. He stood up and started to walk away, still totally ignoring me. I started to follow him and he stopped real suddenly, but still didn't look back at me. I went to reach my hand out and he turned and looked at me and said, "Will you please just leave me alone." He didn't raise his voice at all. Or sound sad. He was as cold as could be. Still and cold and each word was like a sharp little needle. And without waiting for me to answer he turned and walked away.

ROGER

Were you surprised? You are the daughter of the man who killed his father.

LARISSA

Yeah, well. I suddenly wasn't in the mood for Reese Witherspoon. I mean, Melanie and Sharon didn't hear a word, but they saw the whole thing. So I went back over to them and told them I needed some time to myself. I told them to go on to the movie and that I'd call here for a ride.

ROGER

That didn't happen.

LARISSA

No. I really needed some time to myself. Tiff and Donna found me sitting at a table in the food court. They said I could go with them and the guys to Polnt Lookout if I wanted. So I did.

ROGER

Are these girls friends of yours? I don't recognize those names.

LARISSA

They are now. I realized I didn't want to be alone. I just didn't want to be around anyone I knew. I wanted new friends ... a new life ...

ROGER

Doesn't Point Lookout close at dark?

LARISSA gives ROGER a "how stupid are you?" look.

ROGER

So you've been drinking? Is that why you were sick ...

LARISSA

Get that man a giant stuffed panda!

ROGER

Were the kids you were with drinking?

LARISSA (giggling)

A lady never drinks alone, right?

ROGER

That is NOT funny.

LARISSA (still giggling)

Not to you. Maybe you should try a little Jaggermeister! OOPS, you already did, didn't you?

ROGER

I assume the boy who drove you down to Point Lookout and back was also drinking?

LARISSA

Yeah.

ROGER

How could you get into a car with a driver who was drinking?

LARISSA

It was too far to walk.

ROGER

What I did doesn't give you the right ...

LARISSA
Doesn't it?

ROGER
No. You don't have the right to put your life at risk so stupidly.

LARISSA
You're going to talk to me about stupid risks?

ROGER
Yes. I am. I don't gain anything by letting you down more.

LARISSA
As if you could?

ROGER
Yes, I could.

LARISSA
As if it could get much worse than getting drunk, hopping in a car and killing a man?

ROGER (after a long beat)
Until I'm convinced that you aren't going to use that self-pity as an excuse for drinking and running around with drinkers and putting yourself at risk, you are totally and completely grounded.

LARISSA
What?

ROGER
Until you can convince me that you can behave responsibly and be truly responsible for yourself, the only time you will leave this house is to go to school and back.

LARISSA
No way. That's not fair!

ROGER
It's the way it's going to be.

LARISSA
This is so bogus!

ROGER

You can call it do as I say not as I do, but I'm going to do whatever I have to do to keep you from making the same mistake. I'm not going to have your blood on my hands, too.

LARISSA

This is exactly what I mean ... you're the only one who's committed a crime, but you're not the only one to end up in prison.

ROGER

As a matter of fact, underage drinking is a crime.

LARISSA

Fine. Can I go out and kill someone to, just to make things completely even?

ROGER

It doesn't have to be like this between us.

LARISSA

So we should somehow pretend it never happened?

ROGER

No. We shouldn't forget that for a minute. And I'll be trying to make amends as long as I live.

LARISSA

How exactly do you make amends for killing a man?

ROGER

I guess I don't know that yet.

LARISSA

I'll feel a lot better when you do figure that out and can explain it to me.

ROGER

Do you really think you can never forgive me?

LARISSA (after a beat)

I don't see how.

ROGER

That's fair. I asked for that.

LARISSA

I've seen how much you hurt his family. I don't think I should ever be happier than his son. I don't think I should forgive you if Ethan can't.

ROGER

Well, you can both be assured I haven't forgiven myself either.

THEIR eyes meet and hold. Finally, LARISSA rolls over. ROGER crosses to the door.

ROGER

Blow out these candles before you fall asleep.

ROGER closes the door behind him. LARISSA sits up as lights fade to BLACK.

End ACT TWO, scene 4.

THE TASTE OF FIRE

ACT TWO

Scene 5.

Setting: The Nicholson kitchen. April. 8 a.m.

At rise: CARLA, in a stylish overcoat, flattering dark suit and sophisticated hairstyle bursts into her kitchen.

CARLA

ETHAN!!! Ethan!! We're going to be late Ethan. Come on! Ethan!! Kerri is in the car already ...

ETHAN saunters in wearing jeans, hi-tops, and a long sleeved thermal undershirt, carrying a knapsack and a gym bag. Doing his best to ignore CARLA, HE begins to prepare himself a bowl of cereal.

CARLA

Ethan!

ETHAN

Yeah?

CARLA

Where is your suit?

ETHAN

In my closet?

CARLA

We have been planning this for months Ethan ...

ETHAN

What?

CARLA

You know you can't come to the dedication dressed like that.

ETHAN

Yeah, I know.

CARLA

Well ...

ETHAN

Good thing I'm not going to the dedication, huh?

CARLA

A lot of people have worked very hard to make this possible. It's the first time a memorial marker has been approved in advance by the County. There will even be commissioners at the dedication.

ETHAN

We're out of milk.

CARLA

What?

ETHAN (holding out carton)

This carton is empty. We're out of milk. (HE drops the carton to the floor.)

CARLA, hesitates for a moment - picking her battle - then bends to pick up the carton of milk.

ETHAN (looking down at her)

Good thing he's dead, hunh? Or there'd really be hell to pay ...

CARLA

Ethan ...

ETHAN

What?

CARLA

This ... bitterness ... isn't doing you any good, either.

ETHAN

Whatever. ... Don't tell me we're out of banana's, too?

CARLA

We don't have time for this.

ETHAN

What kind of mother would deny her growing boy a healthy breakfast?

CARLA

That's not funny.

ETHAN

No. But no milk, no bananas ... I could make a pretty compelling case ...

CARLA

We can drive through McDonald's on the way ...

ETHAN

There's no McDonald's on the way to school.

CARLA

You are coming to the dedication.

ETHAN

Besides, I'm not going to load up on that kind of sodium and fat the day of a meet.

CARLA

You are going to go to the dedication with us.

ETHAN

Oh, no, I'm not.

CARLA

Ethan, stop it. Just stop. Right now. (a beat) You have to come to the dedication ...

ETHAN

What would dear old dad have said? "Are you deaf, woman?" "Am I not speaking English to you?"

CARLA

Ethan ...

ETHAN

I am not going to miss a full day of school and a meet so I can be part of yet another MADD photo op. This grieving family member has an indoor track meet this afternoon that he isn't missing.

CARLA

If you can't come out of respect ...

ETHAN

Oh please ...

CARLA

... can you do it for me and for Kerri?

ETHAN

Kerri doesn't care if I'm there or not. She's only going because she's 11 and doesn't know she has a choice.

CARLA

Well maybe you don't have a choice either.

ETHAN

What's that supposed to mean?

CARLA

You'll go because I say so ...

ETHAN

In your dreams.

CARLA

Look, Ethan ... I know there have been a lot of adjustments these past few months ...

ETHAN

Oh please. Except when you get stupid, they've been the best eight months of my life.

CARLA

Why do you have to make a big drama out of this? We're planting a tree at the site where he was killed. I don't think it's asking too much to ask you to be there.

ETHAN

Nope. You've dragged me to the funeral and the candlelight vigil and the rally. Enough is enough. If I don't put a stop to this you'll be dragging me to Mr. Cusak's trial and then to god knows what else.

CARLA

Look, just because your father is dead doesn't mean you get to live a life with no rules and no responsibilities. I want you at the dedication of the memorial today.

ETHAN

I'm done. My dues are paid in full.

CARLA

That man supported you your whole life, buster.

ETHAN

What?

CARLA

Did you ever have to do without? Were you ever hungry a day in your life? He did the best he could for us and his memory is entitled to respect. So I want you to get your scrawny butt upstairs, get into your suit, and get out to the car in three minutes.

Fuck you. ETHAN (after a long beat)

What? CARLA

ETHAN glares at HER, unblinkingly.

What did you say to me? CARLA

I said, "Fuck you." ETHAN

That's enough of that, Ethan. Enough. CARLA

I don't think so. ETHAN

This nonsense will come to a stop right now. CARLA

Oh yeah. ETHAN

Ethan ... CARLA

ETHAN
Let's see if it will. Fuck you. Nope. It hasn't stopped yet. Fuck you. It's still goin' strong. Fuck you. ... Oh, and fuck the memorial tree and the plaque you keep forgetting to mention ... Fuck his birthday. And fuck Mrs. Tancredi and all your new friends! Fuck all their dead sons and daughters and husbands and second cousins! And most of all ...

Stop it, Ethan. CARLA

ETHAN
... most of all, fuck the whole bunch of you for trying to make some kinda saint out of that asshole just because he's dead! He wasn't and I won't forget and I won't pretend ...

That's enough, Ethan. CARLA

ETHAN

I don't think so. So fuck you. Fuck you for pretending that he was something he wasn't. And really fuck you for trying to make me go along with that lie. You want me to pretend my whole life never happened the way it did, so you can play the poor distraught widow.

CARLA

Shut up, Ethan!

ETHAN

What would be so fucking funny if didn't make me so fucking sick is that people only care about you and listen to you because he's dead. But you love it so much that you don't care what it does to me. You don't give a flying fuck about me and you never did.

CARLA

That is not true ...

ETHAN

He supported you! You never went hungry ... And you never got hit. And that's all that ever mattered to you. So fuck you for thinking you have anything to say about what I do or don't do any more! You can just forget that shit right now and forever more. Got it? (going right up in her face) Fuck you!

CARLA slaps him. HE is very still for a moment, then turns and walks as far away from her as HE can get. HE stops, but doesn't turn back to her.

ETHAN (softly)

What did you just do?

CARLA

Oh my god ...

ETHAN (still softly)

What did you just do?

CARLA

Oh honey, I'm sorry ..

ETHAN

No.

CARLA

I am ... I ...

ETHAN

I don't want to hear that.

Ethan ... I ... CARLA

Answer my question. ETHAN

Ethan? CARLA

Not "I'm sorry." Not all weepy and apologetic. Tell me what you just did. ETHAN

I ... CARLA

What? ETHAN

I ... CARLA

Say it. ETHAN

I can't ... I CARLA

Say the words. ETHAN

No. CARLA

Yes. We're not going to pretend this was something else. We're going to be real clear about what just happened. ETHAN

I am. CARLA

The words. Say the words. What did you just do? ETHAN

Ethan ... CARLA

ETHAN

What did you just do? (touching his face) Here. What did you do? What?

CARLA

I hit you.

ETHAN

Again.

CARLA

Ethan, please ...

ETHAN (sharply)

Just say it.

CARLA

I hit you.

ETHAN

Yes, you did. You hit me.

CARLA

I'm sorry.

ETHAN

Did you enjoy it?

CARLA

No.

ETHAN

Did it feel good?

CARLA

No.

ETHAN

Or where you trying to be both a mother and a father to me? Fill those big shoes?

CARLA

Ethan!

ETHAN

Well, whatever it was, it's not something **you** get to do.

CARLA

No ...

ETHAN

You don't get to hit me, ever. You are the last human being on earth who gets to hit me.

CARLA

I'm sorry.

ETHAN

That couldn't matter less.

CARLA

Ethan, please ...

ETHAN

What you do have to understand is that you will never, ever hit me again.

CARLA

I ... no ... I ... no ... I'd never ...

ETHAN

You have to do better than that. Think about it real hard. Make sure you mean it. Then say it. Say very clearly, "Ethan, I will never hit you again."

CARLA

Ethan, I will never hit you again.

ETHAN

That's right. Because if you do, if you ever, ever hit me again, I will hit you back. (A discovery, not a threat:) And once I started I don't know how I'd ever stop.

THEY hold one another's gaze for a beat or two, then ETHAN turns away. CARLA continues to stare at HIM. HE cannot bring himself to look back.

ETHAN

Um... If you don't get a move on they might go ahead and plant the tree without you.

CARLA

Will you be home for dinner?

ETHAN

It's a home meet, I'll be in between 5:30 & 6.

CARLA (exiting)

I'm gonna go. Kerri's waiting out in the car ...

ETHAN nods, but still cannot bring himself to look at HER. CARLA turns and exits. ETHAN finally raises his head and stares after HER. Lights fade to BLACK.

End ACT TWO, scene 5.

THE TASTE OF FIRE

ACT TWO

Scene 6

Setting; A bare stage.

At rise: SUSAN CUSAK, mid-40's, is alone in a pool of light.

SUSAN

I'm thinking of buying a fur. Not for warmth or for style, but in the hope of being doused with paint in a public place. That sort of direct shaming would be refreshing. Better, certainly, than the quickly averted stares and the hurried brush offs.

They don't know the half of it. (She holds up a baggie of weed.) What am I supposed to do about this? I found it in Larissa desk. And, please, no bullshit about how I shouldn't have been snooping. I've seen I my daughter go through a 180 personality change and acquire a collection of new "friends" straight out of the bad news department at central casting. "Yo." The young man who actually speaks to us greets me with "yo."

I give her credit. She's shrewd enough to keep up her grades ... so we don't have that leverage. So I needed something. I am not going to watch helplessly as she charges headlong down the wrong road. I'm sorry I found exactly what I was looking for ... and now that I have it I don't know what to do with it.

I don't know how to approach her ... effectively. My impulse to smack her hard and have Roger nail boards across her bedroom door is probably not sound.

I don't know what to do about Roger. I haven't told him about this. I don't know what it would do to him. Or how he'd handle it. And to think I worried that we were getting stale and predictable.

Maybe I should role a joint and light up when she comes in from school. I don't know. Maybe the shock would get her attention. I don't know. Maybe I should assert my authority. If I believed I had any. Or maybe I should just break down in hysterics in front of her and tell her how frightened I am. Would that truth set anyone free.

I don't know.

I don't know.

I don't know.

Since I finally seem to have a mantra, maybe I should try meditation.

And maybe it would be easier to look for an answer if I believed one existed.

Lights fade to BLACK.

End of ACT TWO, Scene 6.

THE TASTE OF FIRE

ACT TWO

Scene 7

Setting: Mt. Olivet Cemetery. June.

At rise: Lights rise on ETHAN sitting on the ground with his head in his hands. HE is bathed in moonlight.

ETHAN

While Mom and Kerri and Mrs. Tancredi and the rest of the coven celebrated my graduation, I had my own private party. As soon as it got dark, I slipped out for a run. I came all the way here, to Mt. Olivet. I don't know why. I just let my feet carry me. I ran straight up to him. To the plot. Three down from the second maple.

When I felt the first twinge, I thought, "no I can't." (smiling) Then I thought, "I sure as hell can." I pulled down the waistband of my shorts and pulled it out and took a deep breath and let fly. I peed and peed and peed. I peed all over his grave. It was the best feeling. I never wanted a piss to last forever before. But, all good things must come to an end. So finally, a few last shakes and back in it went.

I had barely taken my hand away when I found myself falling to my knees and howling. Sobbing. It was the weirdest feeling. I had never, ever cried before. I could never let him get to me like that... and I couldn't figure out why now. It sure wasn't regret for what I'd done. It wasn't some kind of soggy epiphany ... It's not like I suddenly realized that I loved him or that he really loved me or some crap about missed opportunities. No, I think when you say it with fractures your real feelings are pretty clear.

Then I realized I was crying because I could. I could. I didn't have to hold it in anymore. Turns out there was a lot to come out. For the longest time I just kept sobbing. I couldn't make myself stop. Then my hand brushed the wet spot on the grass and I started to laugh. I didn't stop crying. I just started laughing too. That bizarre half laughing/half crying went on for a long, long time. It made me so tired I was really sorry I was going to have to run all the way back home.

When I was finally all cried out, I laid on my back and stared up at the vast night sky and felt the cold grass on my legs and arms and let the sudden silence wash over me. And I thought, "shit, this must be what people mean when they talk about peace." I was so perfectly happy that I almost started to cry again. Because I could. And because I could see a future as wide as that sky and not nearly so dark. I got in. I'm going to Villanova in the fall.

Anyway, I stood up finally and looked back at the grave. And it hit me. I'm done with him. I don't have to come back here ever again. I'm going to have a life I couldn't have dreamed of a year ago and I don't need to carry him into it.

See I know exactly what I want my life to be. I don't want to be rich or famous. I don't even want to set an NCAA record or two all that badly. What I really want is a little girl of my own who I can love as much as I love Kerri. And a little boy who will never have be afraid to cry when he's hurt.

And with that thought I started putting one foot in front of the other for the long trip home.

Lights fade to BLACK.

Curtain.

End of ACT TWO.

End of The Taste of Fire.