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## Spring Awakening: A Midwest Children's Tragedy

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SPRING AWAKENING:  
A MIDWEST CHILDREN'S TRAGEDY

LENA NIGHSWANDER

HONORS PROJECT

Submitted to the Honors College  
at Bowling Green State University in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for graduation with

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SPRING AWAKENING:  
A MIDWEST CHILDREN'S TRAGEDY

BY LENA NIGHSWANDER

Translated by Lena Nighswander

Adapted from Frank Wedekind's  
"Frühlingserwachen"

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

For Anne, Zo, and Lydia, without whom this play would not exist.

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In loving memory of Jane Fishpaw.

Mom and Dad, don't read this.

## PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTE

When I sat down to figure out my Honors Project, I could have never in a million years predicted that it would take the form of a play. Over the course of the past four years, I have been gaining a lot of skill and experience in the genre of academic writing, having even gotten a publication under my belt, but found I had never actually tried my hand at playwriting aside from the occasional page of dialogue here or there for in-class exercises. It seems almost perfect, in a way, that the project that my college experience will culminate in is an adaptation of a play that has more or less shaped my language journey, brought me some of the dearest and most beloved people in my life, and dominated my thoughts for the past eight years.

My language journey in specific has been one that has taken me on a rather meandering path. Being a heritage German speaker, as my family hails from Bern, Switzerland, but not taking formal German classes until I was in 8th grade, the language began in a place that felt both unassuming and indifferent. German was German, same as it ever was. However, Wedekind's original text of *Frühlingserwachen* was the first text that ever got me excited about German outside of a school setting. It opened the doors to what German could be to me, beyond the particulars of conjugations and adjective endings. German became art. It became politics, and history, and literature, and all-consuming.

The original play was highly controversial upon its initial release due to the themes it covered, particularly themes of sexual exploration and suicide coupled with a cutting critique of the German school system. It is, to some degree, retained that same controversy with adaptations, like Duncan Sheik and Steven Sater's 2005 musical, *Spring Awakening*, or Anya Reiss' 2014 contemporary play of the same name. The title has come to carry a sort of heaviness of controversy and discomfort, becoming synonymous with the "horny German teenage sex play."

Now, the original text is set in what Wedekind describes only as "provincial Germany," a time and place left intentionally vague so as to demonstrate a sort of cyclical quality of the storytelling that became a major tenant of my own adaptation. This is a story that transcends borders and temporality entirely; just as there were girls just like Wendla who also fell pregnant at age 14 in rural, 1800s Germany, there are girls today who will fall victim to the same breaches of consent and trafficking as the Wendla who comes to life within the walls of my own text.

This transcendence is a major contributing factor toward the decision I made to move my play's setting both forward in time and over in place, finding its roots in Toledo, Ohio — a city

in which I find my own roots, and a uniquely challenging location for art. This change in setting also serves to bring Wedekind's original text — though fragmented and adapted within my words — to an American audience. In the same vein of cyclicity as the play boasts in theming, there is a natural fit regarding its subject matter. These issues of sexuality, suicidal ideation, parenthood, gender trouble, and trafficking are also aptly applicable to life in the American Midwest, just as the original text was applicable to life in “provincial Germany.” Wedekind's words continue to prove transcendental today.

Several adaptations of the text already exist, with the two most notable having already come up in this letter, but I sought to create something that stands independently from the work that already exists. As someone with both a very deep-seated adoration of the original text, as well as someone who happens to be a scholar of both German and English and has not done a lot of creative translation work, I figured this was the perfect opportunity to work on this sorely underused skill. The finished product is an adaptation of the original text but in order for adaptation to occur, there must exist a source from which it is being adapted – this, in my case, was my own translation of the text.

This retention of aspects from Wedekind's original text allowed me to lean into aspects of the story I feel have been largely neglected by other adaptations, especially concerning the inclusion of characters like The Masked Man or Robert, who do not appear in any contemporary transformative works built from this play to my knowledge. With this, as well, I chose to remain loyal to a few different aspects of the play that I felt important; one thing I refused to compromise on — which, admittedly, likely does not matter much in the long run, but did provoke an urgent sense of importance as I constructed the frameworks for this text — was Wedekind's utilization of a three-act structure for the original play. This, again, is not something I have encountered while consuming other transformative works based on Wedekind's text, so I felt a sense of duty in upholding thematic and structural choices made at the time of the source text's inception.

Playwriting is a very malleable medium that requires a lot of new considerations I previously did not need to account for, such as balancing the genre conventions and thinking for the stage. There were — and still are — several scenes that are still floating around in my head, but I'm not quite sure where they fit into the text or how to put them to paper, let alone bring them to the stage. There are also, as I have found, a lot of limitations to theatre as a medium, as

opposed to film or narrative writing, so it limited some of the aspects I could have included and forced me to reframe the way I was thinking about the text.

However, there is only so much that can be learned from a book, no matter how many how-to's you read about adaptation of playwriting. The process of assembling a play, especially a full-length piece, took me out of my comfort zone and I was put into a position where I could not be self-reliant in my work; this was especially troubling as I am, and have always been, prideful to a likely fault in my self-sufficiency regarding writing. With this project, though, I found that there were many things I just did not know, but I did know several people who have a lot more experience in theatrical matters than myself that could help. As a result of this project, I became a lot more comfortable asking for feedback on my work, seeking out help from peers when needed, and showing my work to others. By its conclusion, I have finally been able to embrace creative writing as an art meant to be shared and celebrated with others, rather than a file to sit collecting dust inside my computer.

There is a considerable amount of freedom that comes with adaptation, and I was able to really make the text my own in its completion. At its core, I consider this play to be a love letter to Wedekind's work and to the city to which I owe so much. My text may feature modern elements, themes, and topics, but there are still hallmarks that make it a quintessentially "Wedekindian" text — it serves to embrace discomfort and revel in controversy, as it is only from here that growth and progress are made.

My task to the reader is to view this piece as something that is living and breathing, and to embrace the cyclicity of the story. Too often in conversations about *Spring Awakening* do we feel the compulsion to lean away from the future and shield the characters from the inevitability of tragedy and wrongdoing, when so much of the story's core is about confronting the impending disaster and navigating the fallout.

There are people like Moritz in every country, every city, every school, just as there are girls like Wendla or Ilse and boys like Hanschen and Ernst in the very same places. Honor them by recognizing the signs, and learning those hard lessons needed to divert the storm. Take care of each other.

From the very bottom of my heart, thank you for reading.

## CHARACTER LIST

### WENDLA BERGMANN

A freshly 15-year-old freshman in high school, sheltered by her mother but developing a pervasive curiosity about what is forbidden. Inherently innocent and tender-hearted. Fawnlike.

### MRS. BERGMANN

Wendla's overprotective mother, mid-40s, who wants to shelter her daughter from the world for as long as she can. Neurotic and would likely be affected by Munchausen's if Wendla did not push back at her overreach.

### MELCHIOR GABOR

15-year-old know-it-all student athlete with narcissistic tendencies. Recently read *The Communist Manifesto* and decided he is now an anarchist. Blissfully unaware of his own contradictions.

### MORITZ STIEFEL

15-year-old straight-D student, burdened by his own deep neuroses. Clearly suffering from severe depression and panic disorder, but not receiving the help he desperately needs. Sympathizes with the feminine on a level that suggests gender trouble.

### HANSCHEN RILOW

The sole "out" queer kid at the high school, as far as the group knows. 15-years-old and convinced he's figured out the way the world works. Opinionated and confident to a near-destructive level. Participates in theatre.

### ERNST ROBEL

15-year-old farmer's son, who is deeply religious and troubled by his same-sex desire. Has recently begun a fling with Hanschen and is paralyzed by the anxiety of someone - especially his family - finding out. The middle-child of 5.

#### OTTO LÄMMERMEIER

15-year-old Navy brat, desperate to get girls to pay attention to him. Would likely be considered to be an "incel," and needs to spend less time on the computer and more time outside touching grass. Doubles as Officer 2.

#### GEORG ZIRSCHNITZ

15-year-old piano prodigy, who is more interested in his teacher than the keys. Raised Jewish and likely has the only healthy family dynamic in the group. Crude and embarrassingly candid, but never truly mean-spirited. Doubles as Officer 1 and the Masked Man.

#### THEA RILOW

Hanschen's 14-year-old sister, equipped with a sharp tongue and an even sharper wit. Headstrong feminist. Included because she is Hanschen's sister and carries an undercurrent of anxious attachment to the group because of it. Plays the oboe in the band.

#### MARTHA BESSEL

15-year-old mixed race girl, forced to navigate the physical and sexual abuse she faces at her father's hands. Has dreams of leaving Toledo for Chicago and escaping her family. Held back from self-expression, and timid as a result.

#### MARIANNA "ANNA" WHEELAN

15 year old friend to Wendla, who uses a wheelchair due to a car accident she was in at 13. Fiercely independent and acts perhaps a bit too old for her age, she is also friends with Bobby and hangs out with him regularly.

#### ROBERT "BOBBY" MALER

17-year-old dishwasher at the diner, a junior at the same high school. Reeks of weed and while he doesn't deal himself, he certainly knows a guy who does. Got his job at the diner through his brother, Elijah, and has gained favor with Schmidt.

## SCHMIDT

Middle-aged owner of the diner, and a very sketchy-looking character. If he was not at the diner, he would be a used car salesman in another life. Has a very unsettling aura about him. Physically very large and intimidating.

## FANNY GABOR

Melchior's mother, who is warmly supportive of him and his friends - almost to a fault. Well-liked middle school teacher from the same district and trusted by all students who have had her in class. Genuinely wants the best for everyone, but deluded by the idea the world functions perfectly

## ILSE NEUMANN

16-year-old gender-nonconforming artist, who transferred to an art school a year prior after a nude photo scandal. Has a keen eye for naturalism and realism, which shows in her paintings of the river. Unapologetically Ilse.

## MR. STIEFEL

Moritz's strict, ex-military dad, who has no time or mindfulness for the abstract.

## MRS. STIEFEL

Moritz's mother, less strict than her father but not in opposition to his parenting.

## Setting

Toledo, Ohio.

ACT 1

SCENE 1

*WENDLA and her mother, MRS. BERGMANN, stand in their living room. MRS. BERGMANN is holding a dress in her hands; the dress is out-of-style and garish. Neither seem happy to be there, and WENDLA's arms are crossed childishly across her chest.*

WENDLA:

Out of all the dresses at the store, you picked this?

MRS. BERGMANN:

What's wrong with this?

WENDLA:

Oh my god, It's ugly! I'm going to look like an old lady.

MRS. BERGMANN:

Wendla, no you will not. I think it's cute! It's a cute dress – you're almost 14 now; you can't just wear the same summer dresses you've been wearing. They're getting—

WENDLA:

(accusatory) Getting what?

MRS. BERGMANN:

You're getting, you know... taller. (A beat.) More developed.

WENDLA:

What's the problem with that? I like my dresses. I think they look cute.

MRS. BERGMANN:

That's not what I'm saying, Wendy, you know— There's a lot of bad people in the world.

WENDLA:

(embarrassed) Mom.

MRS. BERGMANN:

You're at an age where men are going to start to look at you. There's a lot of creeps out there, and you don't want to give them anything to look at.

WENDLA:

They're not going to look at me, Mom. All my friends dress the same as me.

MRS. BERGMANN:

Well, you're not all your friends. Please just try the dress on.

WENDLA:

(frustrated) I'll try it on next year.

MRS. BERGMANN:

Next year? Wendla, try the dress on.

WENDLA:

I said next year.

MRS. BERGMANN:

(growing frustrated) I just need to know if this fits so I can exchange it if it doesn't. I'm not waiting until next year for you to decide whether or not you want to try it on.

WENDLA:

If I'm even here next year.

(A beat.)

MRS. BERGMANN:

(taken aback) If you're even here next year? What's that supposed to mean?

WENDLA:

(haughty) Whatever. I need to do homework for tomorrow.

MRS. BERGMANN:

You said— fine. Go do your homework.

## SCENE 2

*Sunday evening. MELCHIOR, OTTO, MORITZ, GEORG, ERNST, and ROBERT are gathered around a bonfire. A few of the boys have schoolwork sprawled out on their laps, huddled together and talking feverishly. Moritz rests his hands in his hands, clearly on the outskirts of the conversation and uninterested.*

MELCHIOR:

This is so fucking stupid.

*Melchior stands up in a huff, throwing his notebook  
on the ground decisively.*

MORITZ:

Where are you going?

MELCHIOR:

On a walk.

ERNST:

It's dark out.

MELCHIOR:

So?

OTTO:

Did you finish the work?

MELCHIOR:

Are you joking? No.

OTTO:

It's due in the mor--

MELCHIOR:

I don't care. I literally don't care.

ERNST:

How much do you have left?

MELCHIOR:

Like 4 questions. Whatever, I can just do it before class in the morning.

ERNST:

You can't go yet!

MELCHIOR:

Why not?

ERNST:

We aren't done yet! And you got the highest grade on the last one, so you need to help us.

MELCHIOR:

Sounds like it's not my problem. I'm going for a walk.

*Melchior turns to leave, intending to go walk  
around in the woods.*

GEORG:

Dude, seriously, please just help us with the rest of the section, then we can take a break and you can go walk or whatever.

HANSCHEN:

We don't need him anyway, he's just being dra--

OTTO:

I'll tell you about how I hooked up with Marianna Wheelan if you help us!

(This gets Melchior's attention and he turns around.)

MELCHIOR:

You hooked up with Marianna Wheelan? When?

OTTO:

(smarmy) Help us with the study guide and I'll tell you.

MELCHIOR:

You're so full of shit. You're such a liar.

(Despite this, he does come back to the circle and sit back down in his lawn chair.)

OTTO:

I can literally prove it, dude.

MELCHIOR:

(to Ernst) You just need to divide by the coefficient here and you should be able to get the answer.

HANSCHEN:

Wait, no, how can you prove it?

OTTO:

Bro, she literally sent pics. I'll show you.

HANSCHEN:

No, don't show anyone. That's really fucked up.

OTTO:

Says who? Not like she's going to know.

MELCHIOR:

No, I want to see.

MORITZ:

Pictures of what?

(The boys all look at Moritz, equal parts amused and confused.)

OTTO:

Nudes, bro.

MORITZ:

(horrified) What? Why would she send you those?

(The boys all start laughing at him.)

MELCHIOR:

Because it's hot, dude.

OTTO:

You want to get the sneak peek before you smash, you know?

MORITZ:

But-- I don't-- Oh my god? Did she mean to send them?

OTTO:

(incredulous) Did she mean to send them? Are you serious? Dude, I sent her a dick pic and she sent me these back. It's like... equivalent exchange, or whatever.

MORITZ:

So you just... all of you guys do this? What?

ERNST:

I've never--

MELCHIOR:

Yes, altar boy, everyone knows you've never.

(to Moritz) I can't believe you've never seen anyone's nudes before, dude.

MORITZ:

Well, I never--

OTTO:

You're such a fucking loser, dude. I bet you don't even know what pussy is.

MORITZ:

Shut up! Oh my god, shut up!

HANSCHEN:

Lay off of him, Jesus Christ.

MELCHIOR:

(leaning over to hang off of Moritz) Well, it all starts when a mommy and a daddy love each other very much...

MORITZ:

(extremely embarrassed) Fuck off! Oh my god, just leave me alone.

OTTO:

(leaning in) And then they have SEX! So hard! They fuck each other!

MORITZ:

(covering his face) Oh my god, just stop talking.

ERNST:

(visibly uncomfortable) You know, I think... I think I can actually just finish this tomorrow morning before school.

*Ernst stands up and Hanschen stands to join him. They start to gather their things as the boys continue to tease Moritz with increasingly crude remarks; the remarks are up to the actors. They wave their goodbyes and leave.*

MELCHIOR:

You know, if you're curious, we can watch porn at my house sometime. Nothing wrong with a little bro on bro education.

*Moritz goes silent and seems to think about the offer, then vehemently shakes his head.*

MORITZ:

No, oh my god, what is wrong with you? Can we just do the study guide? Seriously, if I fail this test, my dad is going to kick my ass!

*The stage lights fade until nothing but the glow of the bonfire remains.*

*The boys can be heard starting to get back to their algebra homework as their voices fade further and further away, disappearing with the light.*

SCENE 3

*WENDLA, THEA, MARTHA, and ANNA are at Franklin Park Mall together, and they have stopped to sit down at a table to talk together.*

THEA:

(mid-conversation) And the bodice has this lace on it and the rest of the dress is satin...

MARTHA:

That sounds so pretty. I haven't decided what I'm going to wear to the formal yet, or who I'm going to go with for that matter...

ANNA:

Otto asked me last week.

(The girls gasp at the revelation.)

WENDLA:

Oh my gosh, Anna, that's amazing! Congratulations! How did he ask you?

ANNA:

(blushing) Oh... it wasn't anything special, really.

THEA:

Wasn't anything special? Anna!

ANNA:

He just... asked me, you know. We were hanging out already and he asked if I wanted to go.

(Thea hmpfs and crosses her arms, leaning back in her seat.)

THEA:

(petulant) I didn't even know you guys were hanging out. If a boy asked me to the formal and he wanted me to say yes, then he would make me a poster! With orchids and chrysanthemums! And the poster better be clever too!

WENDLA:

Oh, I don't know... I think it's embarrassing when people make those huge proposals in public like that. I would be so embarrassed if someone did that to me.

THEA:

Even if it was Melchior Gabor?

WENDLA:

(blushing now) I mean...

THEA:

I bet he would make the most clever poster, and he would take his time with it...

MARTHA:

Yeah, as if. He barely even takes his time on his school work.

THEA:

(practically with hearts in her eyes): But he's good at it anyway! He's good at everything...

(Martha rolls her eyes, and the girls are giggling.)

MARTHA:

I'm gonna be honest, I really just don't think he's all that.

THEA:

Yeah, whatever, I bet you have a crush on Georg.

(The girls laugh even harder.)

MARTHA:

(revolted) Oh my god, no, never. That's disgusting.

WENDLA:

Aw, come on, that's so mean. He's really nice...

THEA:

He's obsessed with his piano teacher. He made an Instagram page about her, Wendy, it's so creepy. He finds pictures of her on Facebook and posts them.

MARTHA:

That's him?

ANNA:

That poor woman.

THEA:

Well, if it isn't Melchi or Georg, then who do you have a crush on, Martha?

MARTHA:

(shy) Well... I think Moritz Stiefel is really nice?

THEA AND ANNA (simultaneously):

Moritz Stiefel?

(They can hardly contain their laughter. Wendla seems uncomfortable.)

MARTHA:

He's nice! He's really sweet. We were partners in science class and--

THEA:

He's so stupid! Martha, when Herr Fliegentod asked him "Wo wohnst du?" in German class, he just said "Ja, ich wohne."

WENDLA:

That's not so bad! You've said worse!

THEA:

No, I haven't! I have a 97% in German!

MARTHA:

Okay, so what if he can't speak German? That doesn't mean he's not nice.

ANNA:

He's a nervous wreck! Otto told me he didn't even know what nudes are...

(The laughter erupts once again.)

THEA:

Oh my god!!

MARTHA:

Okay, I-

ANNA:

I can't believe you have a crush on Moritz Stiefel!

WENDLA:

I think you should ask him. To the formal.

MARTHA:

Me? Ask him?

THEA:

Well, it's not like he's going to man up and do it himself.

MARTHA:

I don't know... if he says no, that's so embarrassing. I'll seriously kill myself.

ANNA:

Oh my god, shut up, why would he say no? It's not like he has any other prospects.

THEA:

Besides, you'd probably be doing him a favor. Since no one else likes him.

WENDLA:

(quickly) Hey! That's really mean.

THEA:

It's true!

MARTHA:

I like him!

WENDLA:

So do I!

THEA:

Okay, sure, but he's no Melchior Gabor.

MARTHA:

Not everyone wants a Melchior Gabor, Thea.

ANNA:

I seriously couldn't do it. Just having first period with him is enough, he just talks and talks and talks and talks to hear himself talk.

THEA:

He's really smart!

ANNA:

He's practically just jerking himself off in front of everyone about how smart he thinks he is.

WENDLA:

(abruptly) I don't know how I should do my hair for the formal.

ANNA:

I think you should curl it.

MARTHA:

I don't know either. I just feel like everything I try to do with it looks bad.

THEA:

You could try putting in a braid? It could be pretty.

MARTHA:

(huffy) It's always in a braid. I'm so tired of wearing my hair in braids. I just wish I could cut it all off.

WENDLA:

All of it?!

ANNA:

Yeah!! Buzzcut!!

MARTHA:

No, but at least a trim.

WENDLA:

So why don't you? I bet you'd feel so much better if you just trimmed it a little.

MARTHA:

My parents would be so mad at me.

THEA:

For cutting your hair? Why would they care about that?

MARTHA:

It's just like- I don't know. They're really controlling.

WENDLA:

I could cut it for you! My mom lets me trim my own hair, since I don't like going to the salon very much.

MARTHA:

(sharply) No! No. My parents would beat my ass.

ANNA:

Come on, it can't be that mad. You should live a little. Rebel!

MARTHA:

No, like, they would seriously beat me.

WENDLA:

I get it. My mom's mad at me all the time too.

ANNA:

My dad literally grounded me for a month because I had a C in pre-algebra last year.  
Parents can be so stupid.

MARTHA:

That's- yeah.

WENDLA:

Well, if we can't cut it, I'm sure there's something else we can do that would make you  
look great!

ANNA:

Yeah! Maybe we can watch a Youtube tutorial for updos or something, and we can try  
putting flowers in it or something, if you want!

THEA:

Or we can even look at wigs online!

MARTHA:

(defeated) Sure.

*The lights cut to black.*

SCENE 4

*Melchior is at his job at the diner, a dingy and run-down family joint off of Reynolds Road - the type of place you drive by, but never see anyone go into. He is elbow-deep in the dishes, and the night is crawling by slowly. It's an hour to close and Melchior could not be more aware of it, lamenting in the misery with his coworker, BOBBY.*

MELCHIOR:

I have a fucking exam in the morning, and I just want to go home.

BOBBY:

What are you going to do, study for it?

MELCHIOR:

No, but it's better than being here.

BOBBY:

Oh, c'mon, it's not that bad. Besides, you've got me here to keep you company.

(Melchior huffs and indelicately sets a stack of plates on the counter.)

MELCHIOR:

My knight in shining armor. Don't know what I'd do without you.

BOBBY:

What's a kid like you doing in a place like this anyway?

MELCHIOR:

Weed money.

BOBBY:

My man.

MELCHIOR:

Doubt if it's worth it at this point, though, honestly.

BOBBY:

What do you mean?

MELCHIOR:

It's just like- Working these 10 hour shifts on my feet, and Schmidt's such a fucking creep. He just sits at home and watches us on the cameras, as if he doesn't have a wife and kids to pay attention to. Would rather watch some teenage boys clean dishes on his couch. Barely even get any customers either.

BOBBY:

I mean, would you rather be busting ass waiting tables instead? It's not so bad.

MELCHIOR:

Maybe I'd like it more if we were getting paid 10-hour-shift type of money, but we aren't. We should, like, unionize or something.

(Bobby laughs out loud at the idea.)

BOBBY:

Unionize? Who are you, César Chavez?

MELCHIOR:

Who?

BOBBY:

Bro-

MELCHIOR:

The point is that the work belongs to the workers. I'm not getting shit in return other than a couple hundred cash under the table every few weeks, and Schmidt just gets pissed if you try to talk about wages anyway. He's just a capitalist crone trying to make a few bucks off the backs on underpaid labor.

*Bobby goes silent and goes about his tasks, pointedly ignoring Melchior as he dries the dishes. Melchior is brash and thoughtless with his actions, clearly frustrated by the task and the situation at hand.*

BOBBY:

Do you know what we do here?

MELCHIOR:

Do I know what we do here? What do you mean? Clean dishes maybe one person eats off of twice a week? Sweep the floors? Fucking- I don't know, mop? Unload stupid fucking deliveries of who knows what off the truck for-

*Enter SCHMIDT. The man, large and intimidating, comes into the kitchen as the two are talking and they both noticeably fall silent at his presence. He is*

*carrying a bag - a messenger, portfolio-style kind of deal - and sets it on the counter.*

SCHMIDT:

I thought I could catch you on your way out.

BOBBY:

Hi, sir.

(Schmidt brushes Bobby off, attention fixated squarely on Melchior alone.)

SCHMIDT:

You go to school around here, right?

MELCHIOR:

Yeah, why?

SCHMIDT:

You know anyone looking for work right now? We need a hostess, since the last girl left.

MELCHIOR:

(contemplatively) Well, I think my buddy Moritz might-

SCHMIDT:

A girl. Hostess's gotta be a girl, otherwise we don't get the business. People want to be served by some pretty young thing, not a teenage guy. Just don't bring in the same kinda tips; you want to get paid more, don't you?

MELCHIOR:

Yes, sir.

SCHMIDT:

Think about it, alright? Send 'em my way if you can find anyone who might be interested.

(Melchior nods, but seems hesitant.)

SCHMIDT:

I can't stay, but Bobby: can you run this bag over to Zungenschlag's after you drive the deposit to the bank? I'd do it myself, but, you know, the wife, kids, gotta get home.

BOBBY:

'Course, sir.

SCHMIDT:

Make sure you lock everything up real good tonight, you hear? I'll see you tomorrow.

*Schmidt exits, and Bobby seems to deflate. The intimidation Schmidt brings is evident.*

MELCHIOR:

Who's Zungenschlag, anyway?

BOBBY:

Some supplier for-

(He hesitates a moment.)

It's not that important. Just boring business shit.

MELCHIOR:

Ah.

(He glances at the clock.)

If you want to leave early to go run the deposit and that delivery, then I can just lock up by myself. It's alright.

BOBBY:

(tentatively) Thanks, dude. I'll get you back.

(Melchior waves his hand dismissively.)

MELCHIOR:

See you tomorrow, Bobby.

BOBBY:

Yeah, man. Thanks again.

*Bobby gathers the bag and adjusts it on his shoulder, seeming to weigh to contents, and leaves the kitchen. Melchior stands alone, with closing drawing closer and closer. He wipes down the counter, glancing at the clock again, and finishes the rest of his tidying.*

*Exhausted and still agitated, he double-checks his surroundings to makes sure everything is ready for opening and flicks the lights off, leaving the restaurant in silence.*

SCENE 5

*Moritz is freaking the fuck out. Midterms are approaching quickly, and he is failing all of his classes with the exception of English. Frantic, he is trying to find a way to hide this from his parents, but coming up with nothing.*

*He paces his bedroom, papers strewn all over the desk and the floor, absolutely panicked.*

MORITZ:

If I can just bring up two grades by midterms, then maybe- if I just-

(He lets out a neurotic little yell.)

Fuck! FUCK!

*Moritz is pacing around the room once again, trying to straighten up the mess he has made but ultimately making it worse. Wordlessly, MRS. STIEFEL and MR. STIEFEL enter the room and sit down at his desk chair and on his bed, respectively. They stare straight ahead, frozen in place, dreamt up in a fit of anxious rumination.*

What am I supposed to my parents? I can't just be like, hey mom, I'm failing all of my classes right now, except for English, aren't you proud of me? Hey dad, your useless, fucking stupid idiot of a son can't even do the bare minimum of turning his work in to get a grade. Is this what you wanted? Aren't you so fucking proud?

*He picks up a book from his desk and throws it on the ground.*

All you've ever asked me to do is do okay in school. Just keep my room clean and do okay in school, and I can't even fucking do either of those things. I can't do anything to please you and this is just another nail in the coffin. Mom, I didn't study for the test like I promised you, because I was too busy fucking crying about how big the universe is, and how small and insignificant I am within it.

Dad, I didn't do the extra credit because waking up in the morning takes up half of my energy for the day, and I don't have it in me to do anything other than the bare fucking minimum. Does that make you proud? Are you proud of me yet?

*Face in his hands, Moritz collapses to his knees and audibly sobs. It's both a release and a defeat.*

I don't know what to do. I just want you to be proud of me. I'm tired of having to lie to make you proud.

*Mr. and Mrs. Stiefel stand up and their judgemental gaze lingers on Moritz, crumpled on the ground in tears, long enough to burn. Silently, they shake their heads and exit the room.*

*Stage goes black.*

SCENE 6

*Melchior and Wendla are at the Toledo Public Library, both searching for books individually. They are mere aisles apart, experiencing their own journeys, but their paths collide as they meet. Melchior is holding a book, Wendla is not.*

WENDLA:

Melchior! I didn't think I would run into you here.

MELCHIOR:

At... the public library?

WENDLA:

I mean, yeah! I don't expect to run into, well, anyone really, ever.

MELCHIOR:

Yeah, I was just coming to check out a book.

WENDLA:

What book? Can I see?

*Apprehensive, Melchior jerks the book back toward his body and away from Wendla's prying hands. The audience can clearly see a scantily-clad woman on the cover, and get the gist of the book's contents.*

MELCHIOR:

Oh, it's- Don't worry about it, it's just something... for school. Boring.

WENDLA:

(pouting) Oh, okay. I just wanted to see what the Melchior Gabor is reading lately.  
You're so smart, you know?

MELCHIOR:

Thanks, Wendla. What are you doing here? You seem... aimless.

WENDLA:

Well, my mom's, like, freaking out right now. She's been so nosy lately, and I just want to get out of the house so she stops being all up in my business all the time. So I come here.

(She gestures to the stacks.)

It's quiet, and I usually can just sit and work on homework or scroll my feeds for a while before I go home.

MELCHIOR:

I'm sorry, Wendy, that sucks. It's hard when you don't have any privacy.

(Wendla hums in agreement. Her posture is a bit awkward, and she seems caught in a tug-of-war between getting closer to him and backing away.)

Say... I might actually have a way to help.

WENDLA:

What's that?

MELCHIOR:

My job's looking for someone to be a hostess. You could totally do that -- make a little money and get out of the house.

WENDLA:

Oh god, I don't know. Where do you work?

MELCHIOR:

Do you know that little diner off of Reynolds?

WENDLA:

I think so. I've always thought it looks kind of... sketch.

MELCHIOR:

No, it's cool, I swear. No one ever comes in and we just stand around most of the day. Plus, you'd be serving, so you'd probably be able to just sit and do homework or something when the boss isn't in.

WENDLA:

I'll think about it. I didn't even know you worked, Melchi! You're so busy, with school and track and everything. I don't know how you even find the time for it all.

MELCHIOR:

Well, I probably wouldn't if I didn't have to.

(He laughs uncomfortably.)

WENDLA:

(concerned) What do you mean?

MELCHIOR:

Ever since my dad left, money's been kind of tight. It makes me feel really bad watching my mom work as hard as she does by herself, so I picked up a job to help her out. It's not like I'm making bank, but every little bit helps. I try to help where I can.

*Wendla seems to go destitute at this, thoughts going dark again. She reaches an arm out to rub his shoulder and as much as he doesn't want the pity, he can't deny the attention.*

WENDLA:

Oh, Melchior, I'm really sorry. I didn't even realize, that was so insensitive of me, I'm s-

MELCHIOR:

No, don't worry about it. It's not like you made my dad leave; it's really not a big deal.

WENDLA:

I'd just feel so bad taking the job to get away from these stupid little problems with my mom at home, when you have to work to literally support your family. I'm sure there's someone else who could use the job more than me.

MELCHIOR:

Don't even worry about that. If it's bothering you, it's bothering you. You're just as important, Wendla; your feelings matter, too. Listen, I'll chat with my boss and say you're interested. Come in for the interview and see how you feel. If you still feel weird about it, then you don't have to take it. No sweat.

WENDLA:

You're a really good friend, Melchior. I really appreciate it.

(She glances at her phone and startles, realizing the time.)

I should probably get going. My mom is going to start to worry if I'm not home soon. It was really nice to see you!

MELCHIOR:

You too, Wendy.

*Wendla departs, as does Melchior.*

*The lights fade, with the exception of one single light remaining to illuminate Wendla. She is contemplative as she mulls over the idea of working at the diner to herself, along with everything Melchior had just told her.*

*Despite the promise of the situation, she seems downtrodden and exits the stage, visibly dejected.*

ACT 2

SCENE 1

*Enter Moritz. His clothing is disheveled and he himself is noticeably worse for wear. He is standing outside of Melchior's house, clearly anxious about going in. Backpack slung over his shoulder, he holds a messy pile of papers in his hands.*

*Deep breath in, and out. He knocks on the door.*

FANNY GABOR:

Moritz, hello!

MORITZ:

Hi, Mrs. Gabor.

FANNY GABOR:

Oh, dear, please- you can call me Fanny, if you'd like. Why don't you come on inside?

(She ushers Moritz inside with an air of protectiveness.)

Honey, did you sleep alright last night? You look exhausted.

MORITZ:

(nervous) I- I guess I could have slept better? I'm really stressed out about this test, that's why- I'm studying with Melchior today, because I'm f- because I'm really nervous about it.

FANNY GABOR:

Oh, I'm sure you're going to do just fine. Melchior didn't-

MORITZ:

(abrupt and awkward) Is he here? He's- he said he'd be ready now, so I figured... I just left my house, and walked here, and I- if he's not ready, I can-

FANNY GABOR:

Calm down, honey, you're okay.

(She calls out for Melchior.)

Melchi! Moritz is here.

*Melchior enters the room, movements sure and confident like that of a smug cat.*

MELCHIOR:

Hey, Moritz. You could have texted me to let me know you were here.

MORITZ:

I'm sorry, I was walking here and it- it totally just slipped my mind, I'm sorry. If you were in the middle of something.

MELCHIOR:

No biggie. We can go to my room to study.

MORITZ:

Okay, that- that sounds good, yeah.

*The two boys begin to depart, and Fanny grabs Melchior by the arm as she passes. Moritz continues to Melchior's bedroom, unaware.*

FANNY GABOR:

Is he doing okay?

MELCHIOR:

What do you mean?

FANNY GABOR:

He looks really...

(She makes a vague gesture with her hand.)

Tired.

MELCHIOR:

I'm sure he's fine, Mom. Don't worry about it.

FANNY GABOR:

Okay. Just... take care of him, okay, Melchi? Be a friend to him.

MELCHIOR:

(dismissively) Okay, mom. Love you.

FANNY GABOR:

Love you too.

*Melchior continues to his room, leaving Fanny standing by herself center-stage. She is contemplative, pulling her phone out and holding it in her hand. She swipes to unlock, opening her contacts, and stares at the screen for a moment; her finger hovers above the call button.*

*She shakes her head.*

FANNY GABOR:

It's fine. I'm sure it's fine.

*She shoves her phone back into her pocket and leaves the stage.*

## SCENE 2

*The scene changes and we find ourselves now in Melchior's bedroom. The set should be the same, minus the introduction of a bed, upon which Melchior and Moritz sit among notebooks, textbooks, and their laptops.*

MORITZ:

If I can just figure out how to do the questions from the study guide, then I can- hopefully I'll do fine on the test. It was just like the study guide last time but I didn't do it.

MELCHIOR:

Why didn't you do it last time?

MORITZ:

Are you kidding? I had four pages due about *The Crucible* the next day and Mrs. Grossenbustenthaler's history project about the fucking fertile crescent was due that week. I didn't have time, and you didn't even do it either.

MELCHIOR:

Yeah, well, I'm good at math, so.

MORITZ:

And I'm not, so let's just work on the study guide, please.

*The boys get to work on the study guide; Melchior is unbothered, while Moritz seems panicky. They work in relative silence for a few moments.*

I don't even know what the fucking quadratic formula is.

MELCHIOR:

Here, I'll write it down.

(Melchior writes out the quadratic formula on Moritz's paper, mumbling to himself through it as he does.)

Okay, look, so you've got this formula, right? It's  $x$  equals the opposite of  $b$ , plus or minus radical  $b$  squared, minus four  $a$   $c$ , all over  $2 a$   $c$ .

MORITZ:

(completely lost) What?

MELCHIOR:

The formula. That I just wrote down. That's what it says.

MORITZ:

How does it say that?

MELCHIOR:

It's- Have you been paying attention at all?

MORITZ:

I'm trying! I'm trying. Explain it again, slower this time.

MELCHIOR:

(patient, but annoyed) So, the formula. Look at it with me. You have  $x$  equals the opposite of  $b$ , so what you have for  $b$  but the opposite of that. Make it negative. Then plus or minus the square root - that's the radical - of  $b$  squared minus 4 times  $a$  and  $c$  multiplied together. Then, you take all of that, throw it into parenthesis, and divide it by 2 times  $a$  and  $c$ .

Does that make sense?

MORITZ:

(thinking) Yeah, I... I think so. Do I just plug this in there then?

MELCHIOR:

Let's find the values together. They're right here, look. And you've got a polynomial, where the coefficient of each subsequent part of the polynomial is respectively  $a$ ,  $b$ , and  $c$ . And then you just plug those coefficients into the quadratic formula.

Moritz is quiet as he plugs the numbers into his calculator.

MORITZ:

I got  $z=x$ . Is that right?

MELCHIOR:

(puzzled) How the fuck did you get  $z=x$ ?  $Z$  isn't even a variable here. The answer is a number.

MORITZ:

(studying his paper) Ohh, I see. I mistook my 2 for a  $z$ . I got 2 as my answer.  $X = 2$ .

MELCHIOR:

That literally still isn't right. The answer is  $x = 17$ .

MORITZ:

(throws his book onto the bed) Goddammit, dude, I fucking hate math.

MELCHIOR:

Dude, relax. Let's just take a break.

MORITZ:

I- fine. Not too long, though, Melchi, I really need to get this done. I can't fail this test. If I fail this test, I'm going to have an F in the class, and if I have an F in the class, then I'm going to have 4 F's and if I just have 3, then it's not as bad, and-

MELCHIOR:

Dude, seriously, just relax. It's fine. We'll finish it.

Hey, do you remember what we talked about at the bonfire?

MORITZ:

What do you mean, like-

MELCHIOR:

Did you still want to watch porn with me?

MORITZ:

Oh my god, I don't want to- shut up! Don't say it like that.

MELCHIOR:

I mean... I have a laptop.

MORITZ:

You're making it sound like this was my idea when it wasn't!

MELCHIOR:

Bro, it's fine. There's literally nothing wrong with it.

MORITZ:

(a little vulnerable) I've never... watched anything like this before.

MELCHIOR:

Oh, are you scared of the big bad porn monster?

MORITZ:

Oh my god, shut UP, Melchior, seriously.

MELCHIOR:

Here, I'll show you my favorite video.

*Melchior starts typing and clicking away on his laptop and Moritz sits mortified, rubbing his face with his hands.*

Look.

*Melchior then turns the screen toward Moritz.*

*The video begins and, while the audience cannot see anything on Melchior's screen, they can hear obscene sounds from the video - moaning, slapping, gross things of the sort. Melchior has no reaction at all, watching the screen blankly, while Moritz's jaw drops, looking absolutely horrified.*

*Melchior looks over at Moritz expectantly.*

So? What do you think?

MORITZ:

This is-

MORITZ:

Disgusting!

MELCHIOR:

Awesome?

MELCHIOR:

Dude, what?

MORITZ:

This is really fucking gross, Melchior. Turn it off.

MELCHIOR:

No, dude, we're not even at the good part.

MORITZ:

Melchior, I'm serious, turn it off. I don't want to watch any more of it, turn it off now.

MELCHIOR:

What is wrong with you? It's just porn.

MORITZ:

(upset) Melchior! Seriously!

*Melchior obliges and pauses the video, casting his laptop aside.*

MELCHIOR:

Jesus, dude. I didn't know you were such a pussy.

MORITZ:

I'm not a pussy! It just- It seems really degrading to women.

MELCHIOR:

(a guffawed laugh) What? Bro, they choose to make porn. It's on them if they get degraded. They signed up for it.

MORITZ:

I don't know! It just feels... it feels dirty.

MELCHIOR:

Dude, it's just porn. It's not a huge deal. I, like... I don't think I'd want to be the girl, but it's not a huge thing. It's just how it is.

(Moritz falls silent for a beat.)

MORITZ:

I don't know. Let's just work on the math study guide.

*They begrudgingly go back to their study guides, a feeling of awkwardness hanging heavy in the air.*

*End scene.*

### SCENE 3

*Hanschen and Ernst are at the Toledo Zoo – they are looking at the elephants. There are people mulling around, looking at the same exhibit, but they never stay; their presence is transient and impermanent. The boys stay stationary, together, grouped toward the middle of the scene. As the audience, we cannot see the elephants, but we know they are there.*

ERNST:

It just hasn't been the same since Lucas died.

HANSCHEN:

I remember when he was born. My parents took Thea and I to come see him when they were first opening up the elephant exhibit to guests. I don't really remember, though.

ERNST:

I only went to the zoo once when I was a kid. I mean, we went in 5th grade, but that was a school trip. My dad only took me once.

HANSCHEN:

I guess we went a lot. Thea liked to see the monkeys. It makes me sad when the animals die, though.

ERNST:

I guess it sucks. Lucas was only 9. When they get viruses like that, it's hard to help - especially when you don't know where it came from or what there even is to do about it.

HANSCHEN:

I'm sure they could have sent him somewhere else for treatment, though. Or brought someone who knows more about elephant diseases in to help. It's systemic, I think - when animals die like that.

*Ernst is quiet for a moment, like he has something on the tip of his tongue but does not want to let it out. He crosses his arms.*

ERNST:

I just hope his zookeepers were with him when he passed. It must be more peaceful that way, when you're surrounded by the ones who love you most. Knowing they did what they could to save you.

*Hanschen is quiet, unsure of how to respond, but he puts an arm around Ernst's waist anyway.*

HANSCHEN:

I'm sure they were. They wouldn't let him die alone if they knew it was coming.

ERNST:

That's just the thing. You never know when it's coming, especially when it's something as aggressive as what Lucas had.

HANSCHEN:

I'm sure they took good care of him, then.

(Ernst is quiet again, then a thought seems to jump out of him before he had the sense to try and push it down.)

ERNST:

Do you know what happens when an elephant dies in a zoo?

(Hanschen looks at him, puzzled.)

HANSCHEN:

What do you mean?

ERNST:

Since they're so big, it's hard to take care of them when they die like you would a smaller animal. They get so heavy when they die - just deadweight. You can't lift them up to move them, no matter how many people you get to help.

HANSCHEN:

How do they bury them, then?

ERNST:

Well, that's- that's it, isn't it? When an elephant dies at the zoo, they make the head zookeeper saw it to pieces so they can move it somewhere else to bury it.

HANSCHEN:

They- With a saw?

ERNST:

A chainsaw, I think.

HANSCHEN:

That's cruel.

ERNST:

I don't know.

HANSCHEN:

I could never do that. Especially if- How could they make the head zookeeper do that? I can't imagine taking care of an animal its entire life and having to just hack it to pieces like a fucking butcher, then not even get to lay it to rest inside the zoo. Just ship its dismembered parts off somewhere else to get dumped in a hole or whatever.

(Ernst goes quiet again. It's a pregnant silence.)

ERNST:

Sometimes the hardest choices to make are the ones that are most necessary, I think. It's no different than the farm - I've had to slaughter calves I raised from the bottle. It's just the way it works, and you get used to it. I don't think there's anyone who could butcher an animal with as much love and tenderness than the person who gave it that same love and tenderness in life.

We can't bury every cow, or sheep, or chicken that dies on our farm on the property. And it- sometimes it feels really cruel to bury the cows that get sick or the chickens that get picked apart by the foxes in the same place it happened. I think burying Lucas in the same place he got sick would be cruel.

Elephants don't come from Toledo, Ohio. They're not meant to be buried here, either.

*The boys move on from the elephant exhibit,  
holding hands as they go.*

*Lighting cuts to black.*

#### SCENE 4

*Wendla is in the kitchen with her mother, who is  
fretting over dinner. Wendla sits at the table,  
working on some sort of assignment, while her  
mother tends to the pot on the stove and the array of  
different other responsibilities on the counter.*

*Mrs. Bergmann, satisfied with the contents of the  
pot for now, begins to aggressively cut up the  
vegetables on the cutting board.*

MRS. BERGMANN:

It just seems to me like girls your age these days have no respect for themselves, or their bodies. You know, when I was your age, we never did the things you girls are doing today. There was no Snapchat, no Twitter, no Tiktok, nothing.

(She ceases her dicing for a moment, then brings the knife down hard onto a carrot. Wendla jumps, but ultimately does not look up.)

It seems like every week there's something new I'm hearing about, with some girl getting naked pictures leaked and then crying that it wasn't her fault - as if she wasn't the one to send them, Wendy. When I was your age, we never did anything like that. We used to have respect, and we knew our place.

WENDLA:

But if they get leaked, that means the person who sent them is the one who posted them. Not the girl who sent it. The boy is the one in the wrong.

MRS. BERGMANN:

She should have never sent them in the first place if she didn't want anyone to see them, Wendla. How could she possibly expect anything different to happen?

*She picks up the cutting board and uses the knife to push all of the vegetables into the pot, with perhaps a little more force than what is necessary. Exasperated, she wipes her hands on a towel and turns around to face Wendla.*

You know, that's what happened with your friend, Ilse.

(Wendla perks up immediately, clear that this is new information for her.)

WENDLA:

What do you mean?

MRS. BERGMANN:

She got caught sending pictures to a teacher, and she had to leave the school. Her parents tried to say that he was the one who should be fired, since he asked for the pictures, but she still sent them to him. She probably wanted to get a better grade.

WENDLA:

She- No, she would never do that? I knew she left, but I thought- I thought she just transferred to Toledo School for the Arts? Mom, she would never do something like that.

MRS. BERGMANN:

You must not know her as well as you thought. I always knew she was the type. She was never a good friend for you, Wendy.

WENDLA:

(growing upset) What's the big deal if she did? He's an adult! If she was flirting with him, it's his job to say no! She's a minor, mama, she doesn't know any better! He probably- He probably pressured her to do it.

MRS. BERGMANN:

Wendla, it's a disgusting thing to do.

WENDLA:

He- This teacher, did he even get fired?

MRS. BERGMANN:

He chose to go to a new district. The poor man... Wendla, she could have ruined his entire career.

WENDLA:

He could have ruined her entire life!

*Wendla stands up abruptly, slamming her chair into the table. Mrs. Bergmann is taken aback, not expecting an outburst like this from Wendla.*

Besides, even if she did- even if it wasn't to him- it's just a body, mama! It's just a body, and she can do what she wants. He's a creep for wanting anything to do with a minor! She was a student!

MRS. BERGMANN:

Wendla, how can you defend her if you just found out this happened right now? I heard about it from Martha's mother when it was happening.

WENDLA:

Because she's my friend, and I know she would never do anything like that unless he was making her do it!

MRS. BERGMANN:

You know how girls these days like to feel mature. Especially girls like Ilse, whose dads never paid enough attention to them, so they start acting like- they start to act like sluts, Wendla. Don't you think she was asking for it?

WENDLA:

(shocked) Mama! She's just a kid!

MRS. BERGMANN:

She knew better than to try to come onto a teacher like that, Wendla. Don't act stupid.

WENDLA:

I- Mama, he's an adult! He should be held responsible for his actions! She's just- How can you even say that? He was her teacher!

MRS. BERGMANN:

Wendla- Wendla, stop crying. You know-

WENDLA:

No, I don't know! And neither do you! You never understand what I'm trying to say, and you always want to take the adults' sides just because they're adults! You don't get it! You

think you do, but you don't understand anything beyond what you read on Facebook. I'm going to Anna's.

(She storms toward the door.)

MRS. BERGMANN:

Wendla.

WENDLA:

I don't want to talk to you.

MRS. BERGMANN:

If you leave this house, you're grounded.

(Wendla shrieks in frustration.)

WENDLA:

You never fucking get it!

*Wendla turns on her heel and storms to her room instead, making a point to slam the door as hard as she possibly can. Mrs. Bergmann stands alone in the kitchen, the scene having gone deadly quiet after the door slammed.*

*She sets the towel down on the counter and returns to the stove, sighing hard as she stirs its contents once again.*

## SCENE 5

*Wendla and Melchior are alone in the gym after school – Melchior is getting ready for track practice, and Wendla has come to keep him company as she postpones her walk home to face her mom again; Wendla has just started her job as a hostess.*

MELCHIOR:

How're you liking the diner so far?

WENDLA:

Oh, you know. I'm still just getting used to it.

MELCHIOR:

Bobby giving you a hard time?

(She laughs.)

WENDLA:

No! No, Bobby's really nice so far. He gave me a ride home the other day. My mom was really mad, though.

MELCHIOR:

Mad? Why would she be mad?

WENDLA:

Ugh, because she doesn't know him. She thinks all boys are just, like, uncontrollable sex perverts or something like that.

MELCHIOR:

I didn't know there were non-sex perverts.

(She smacks his shoulder lightheartedly.)

WENDLA:

Oh, shut up! You know what I mean.

MELCHIOR:

He was nice though, right?

WENDLA:

What do you mean? Bobby?

MELCHIOR:

He wasn't like... trying to put the moves on you or anything, was he?

WENDLA:

Melchi, I- No! No, he's gay.

MELCHIOR:

He is?

WENDLA:

Yeah, he was dating Max von Trenk, I think. Before he died.

MELCHIOR:

Oh shit, I remember that. Brain cancer, right?

WENDLA:

It was really sad. My mom knows Max's mom, so we went to the funeral.

MELCHIOR:

I'm sorry, Wendy. I didn't know you knew him.

WENDLA:

Yeah, it's--

(She's getting lost in her thoughts again.)

It's okay! Don't worry about it. Do you work tonight?

MELCHIOR:

(huffy) When do I not work? I'm there 6 to close.

WENDLA:

I'm working 4-7, so I'll see you! I hope Schmidt doesn't come in, though.

MELCHIOR:

Schmidt? Why?

WENDLA:

I just think he's creepy. He weirds me out.

*Melchior's reaction is the same as Bobby's earlier: distant, and unwilling to criticize Schmidt. It's clear he has mentally stepped back, as though avoiding some invisible boundary.*

MELCHIOR:

(teasing) Maybe he just thinks you're cute.

(Wendla recoils at the idea.)

WENDLA:

Ew, no, that's gross. Stop!

*Melchior begins to do a very exaggerated Schmidt impression. He's loud, sleazy, and overbearing.*

MELCHIOR:

(as Schmidt) Aw, c'mon Wendy. Give ol' Schmidt some sugar, baby, c'mon!

WENDLA:

Melchior, seriously, stop.

MELCHIOR:

(as Schmidt) C'mon, sugar tits, just a little. Pay 'ol Schmidtty a visit -- you owe me!

WENDLA:

Melchi, stop--

*Melchior approaches Wendla, majorly invading her personal space. She backs up, annoyed, but he continues to pursue her as the Schmidt character.*

*Any playfulness of the moment dies immediately as Melchior gropes Wendla's chest and she freezes like a deer in the headlights. Melchior knows immediately he has fucked up, and he retracts his hand. Awkwardly, he tries to laugh it off.*

MELCHIOR:

I'm sorry, that was- That was bad of me, I'm sorry.

(Wendla stares at him in horror.)

Wendy, seriously, I'm sorry. I didn't mean-

WENDLA:

(panicked) Don't ever fucking touch me again!

*She clammers away from Melchior and bolts off stage. He calls out for her, but she is already long gone.*

#### SCENE 5

*Midterms are here and Moritz has realized that his grades have slipped again, meaning that he now must face his parents – he chooses to not bring it up, resulting in an altercation with his father.*

MR: STIEFEL:

(infuriated) Moritz Stiefel!

MORITZ:

Yeah?

MR: STIEFEL:

Get your ass in here right now.

*Moritz scurries into the room, like a lamb lead to the slaughter.*

Can you explain this?

(He holds up Moritz's report card.)

MORITZ:

Dad, I swear I- I worked really hard to get my grades back up this semester, and I had them up but- but they slipped again, because I've been so-

MR: STIEFEL:

Been so what, Moritz? What could possibly be so bad in your life that you're coming to me with all F's minus one class?

MORITZ:

My mental health has just been so bad, and I-

MR: STIEFEL:

Your mental health? Jesus fucking Christ, Moritz, this again. Your mother and I ask nothing of you except you keep your grades up and your room clean, and this is how you repay us. We don't make you get a job, we don't make you get your learner's permit like all of your friends, we don't even ask you to do any fucking chores, and you can't even keep your grades up?

MORITZ:

Dad, please, I swear. I'm trying, I'm trying so hard, but I can't- I just can't help it. It's like every time I try to study, my brain is going a million miles an hour, and I can't focus, and I get to the test, and everything I knew just disappears.

MR: STIEFEL:

I don't know what to do at this point, Moritz. I don't. Nothing ever helps, and you don't want to do the work.

MORITZ:

I do want to do the work!

*Moritz's mother enters the room.*

MRS. STIEFEL

What is going on?

MR: STIEFEL:

Look.

(He thrusts the report card out to her, and she takes it in her hand.)

MRS. STIEFEL

Moritz, is this real?

MORITZ:

(in tears) Mom, I swear, I swear I've tried- Melchior has even been helping me, I've been working so hard to get them back up.

MRS. STIEFEL

Well, he's not doing a very good job, is he?

MORITZ:

I pulled them up, but they went back down. I promise, I seriously promise, I-

MRS. STIEFEL

How could you let it get to this point, Moritz?

MORITZ:

(hysterical) It's my stupid fucking brain, there's something not right. There's something not right with me, there's-

MRS. STIEFEL

What, so do you want to see a shrink? What do you want me to do, then?

MORITZ:

No, I-

MRS. STIEFEL

You always have an answer to everything. Always an excuse.

MORITZ:

You don't fucking get it!

MR: STIEFEL:

Don't you dare speak to your mother like that, you hear me?

MORITZ:

Dad, I-

(Mr. Stiefel strikes Moritz across the face.)

MR: STIEFEL:

Not another word from you. I don't know how we raised such a disrespectful, pompous kid.

MORITZ:

Why can't you just accept me as I am? You always say put all of your eggs in one basket, but why can't I ever be enough? Why am I never fucking good enough?

MRS. STIEFEL

Moritz.

MORITZ:

No! Leave me alone.

*Moritz flees the scene, leaving Mr. and Mrs. Stiefel alone in the middle of the stage. The door slams hard, and the two parents stand in the fallout of the argument.*

*The lights cut to black.*

#### SCENE 6

*Moritz stands alone, stage left, and Fanny Gabor stands opposite, stage right. The stage is dark, minus one light on each character. The two are both on the phone, but are not facing each other. Moritz is pacing, frantic, and Fanny is standing still.*

FANNY GABOR:

Hello?

MORITZ:

Mrs. Gabor?

FANNY GABOR:

Fanny. Moritz?

MORITZ:

I- I got in a fight with my parents, and I don't know who else to call or where... I don't know what to do.

FANNY GABOR:

(alarmed) A fight? What's going on?

MORITZ:

My parents saw my midterm grades and it turned into this huge fight about how they don't think I'm trying hard enough, and- and-

FANNY GABOR:

And?

MORITZ:

I'm failing all of my classes. Except English.

FANNY GABOR:

Oh, Moritz. Plenty of successful people have failed before, and it never got in the way of their success. You can't learn without failure.

MORITZ:

They think I'm not trying, I'm- You've seen me working with Melchior, you know-

FANNY GABOR:

Moritz, honey, can you breathe with me? Big breath in, okay? Big breath in, then big breath out.

MORITZ:

I don't know what to do. I don't know what to do at this point. Nothing I ever do is good enough, and they're never proud of me for anything.

FANNY GABOR:

Are you safe right now? Where are you?

MORITZ:

I'm walking. I'm walking outside right now.

FANNY GABOR:

Can you please come to my house, so I can see you? I'll come pick you up if you tell me where you are.

MORITZ:

I-

(He hesitates.)

I need to go. I'm sorry.

FANNY GABOR:

Moritz-

*Moritz hangs up the phone abruptly, and the light shining on him goes dark. Fanny stands alone on stage.*

Fuck.

(She stares at her phone for a moment, as though weighing the options. All at once, she jolts into movement to dial 911.)

Hi, I'd- I'd like to request a wellness check. His name is Moritz Stiefel. He lives at 923 Meadowview Lane. He's- he's 14 years old. He's acting very erratic and I'm worried for his safety. I'm- Thank you. Thank you.

SCENE 7

*Moritz is walking in the dark. In his head, he has decided he's going home, but he is taking the long way to get there.*

ILSE

Moritz Stiefel?

(His head jerks up.)

MORITZ:

Ilse? Ilse Neumann?

*Ilse runs toward him, energy bright and enthusiastic in stark contrast to Moritz's panic. She grabs his hand gently, absolutely beaming from the reconnection.*

ILSE

I haven't seen you since I transferred to TSA! Oh my god, how are you?

MORITZ:

I'm- I don't know, same as always. How are you? How's TSA?

ILSE

Oh, Moritz, it's been so wonderful. All of the people there, they're all so artistic and creative and- I even have a friend named Arson, isn't that crazy?

(She doesn't give him time to respond.)

It's better than I could have ever imagined. It's been like a clean slate, a total breath of fresh air. I've been doing all of these abstract expressionist paintings recently, and they've been so amazing for my brain. Seriously, it's like free therapy.

And the parties! Oh my god, Moritz, the parties- over winter break, I got so drunk I fell into a snow drift on the side of the road! I wasn't even wearing a coat or anything, and my friend had to help me out because I couldn't even stand up.

MORITZ:

That sounds really crazy, Ilse.

ILSE

Where are you heading anyway? It's really late.

MORITZ:

Oh, I'm just on a walk. To clear my head. You know how it is.

ILSE

Hey, why don't you come back to my house with me? I can show you my paintings. I even have extra canvases right now, so we could totally paint for a little bit if you wanted to! That's the best way to clear your head.

MORITZ:

I- I should really be heading home. It's late. Like you said.

ILSE

You can't even come for a little bit? It's been so long since we've seen each other. Remember when you, me, Wendla, and Melchior used to play pirates when we were kids? And we'd use that jungle gym at the elementary school as our ship! That thing was a death trap, I wonder if they still have it.

MORITZ:

I don't know, I- I miss those days a lot, Ilse. I wish we could just go back to that.

ILSE

So why don't we? We can play pirates again, Moritz. I can get rum from my parents' liquor cabinet to make it more accurate!

MORITZ:

I'm sorry, Ilse, I need to go home.

ILSE

Can I at least walk with you?

MORITZ:

I need to go.

ILSE

Well... it was good seeing you, Moritz! Text me sometime, okay? We'll play pirates, or make some paintings!

MORITZ:

Okay. I'll see you around.

ILSE

Bye, Moritz!

*Ilse leaves the stage, and Moritz gets to walking again with a single light on him as he does. He opens a door, then a bed is illuminated. He sits on the bed, body language closed off and panicked as he bites his nails.*

MORITZ:

All you had to do was say yes, you fucking idiot. All you had to do was say yes!

*His panic is interrupted by a harsh, loud knock on the door. Without even giving him a chance to open it himself, two police officers burst into the room.*

OFFICER 1:

Hands where I can see them, young man.

MORITZ:

Wh- What's going on?

OFFICER 2:

He said hands where he can see them! Put your hands up!

MORITZ:

What's going on? Why are-

OFFICER 1:

Put your fucking hands up!

(Panicked, Moritz is slow to respond and reaches for his phone, brain having gone full autopilot mode.)

OFFICER 2:

Put your hands up! Hands up right now!

MORITZ:

I'm- I'm-

OFFICER 1:

Get down on the ground!

*Officer 2 approaches Moritz, with the intention of helping him down onto the ground, as instructed. Frightened, Moritz flinches away from the man.*

*Without thinking, Officer 1 fires two shots at Moritz.*

*The scene devolves into chaos, with Mr. and Mrs. Stiefel rushing into the room, yelling and screaming at what they have found. The officers try in vain to keep them away from the body.*

*The act ends with the sound of police sirens growing louder and louder as the stage is engulfed in flashing blue and red lights.*

ACT 3

SCENE 1

*Moritz's funeral – we see the groups, boys and girls, together for the first time, mourning, and the casket is closed. Still, they are physically separated.*

*Center stage stands Mr. Stiefel at a podium, emotional as he holds the paper eulogy he has written for his son. Mrs. Stiefel sits next to him in a chair. In chairs, stage left and stage right respectively, sit the boys together and the girls together.*

*Bobby is present; Mrs. and Mr. Gabor sit together, bookending Melchior, and Mrs. Bergmann sits next to Wendla.*

*Moritz' father gives a speech, condemning law enforcement for the way in which his son's case was handled – both he and Moritz's mother avoid talking about Moritz's mental illness and paint him as the portrait of their beloved son, as though Mr. Stiefel had not just struck the boy*

MR: STIEFEL:

I've never had to give a eulogy before. But standing up here, in front of you all, to say goodbye to my son Moritz is the hardest thing I've ever had to do -- and something I never imagine I would have to.

When Moritz was born, I remember holding him for the first time and thinking, "This can't be real." How could a baby so small, so small and fragile, grow up to carry all of our hopes and dreams? I'll admit: I had never even held a baby before I held Moritz, but as soon as I saw him blink his eyes up at me, trying to perceive the world around him for the first time, I knew all of the doubts I ever had about being a father were for nothing. He was everything I never even knew I wanted.

There's never a good time to become a parent. There's no amount of baby books or parenting blogs that you can read that will prepare you for what it will be like -- but, at some point, you just know. Now, I wasn't always a perfect father, but I tried my best. We both tried as hard as we possibly could.

*In this moment, Fanny is overwhelmed by the guilt of having made the call and gets up to excuse herself, exiting the stage.*

Moritz was a good kid -- a smart boy, who was caring and kind, and loved his friends, and had the entire world ready to open up at his feet. Moritz had a beautiful future ready for him, but he will never get to experience it now because of the impulsive actions of law enforcement officers too giddy to pull a gun on a teenage boy in distress.

There is not reason why an officer should have come into my son's bedroom, gun loaded and ready to fire, to check in on his mental health. My son was not a criminal. My son was just a boy, who was scared and confused and didn't understand what was happening. He never tried to fight them -- he wouldn't, it's not in his nature -- and... my son didn't deserve to die like this.

Moritz did not deserve to die like this.

I may have not been the perfect father. There is no one in this room who can say they have been; there may be no such thing as a "perfect" father at all. I missed the signs. I

acted in anger, and frustration, and out of a lack of knowledge of how to help. And that regret is something I will take with me to my grave. Knowing that had I known better, maybe my son would not have been sent to his so early.

(Mrs. Stiefel is audibly weeping, and Mr. Stiefel wipes at his eyes with a handkerchief.)

It is truly a testament to how special my son was to see so many people here today to lay him to rest. Thank you for loving my son. Thank you, from the bottom of mine and my wife's hearts -- thank you.

Moritz... I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry. I'll see you soon.

*Mr. Stiefel returns to his seat and Mrs. Stiefel weeps into his shoulder. Wendla sits numb and emotionless next to her mother – the boys are lacking the childish giddiness and excitement seen at the bonfire and sit, shoulder to shoulder, alone in the front row.*

*The scene concludes with each character shoveling one shovelful of dirt into Moritz' grave; they each have a short moment at the grave, and the sadness is hanging heavy in the air.*

## SCENE 2

*Hanschen and Ernst are in Hanschen's bedroom, sitting on his bed – Ernst has his head in Hanschen's lap and Hanschen is carding his fingers through Ernst's hair.*

HANSCHEN:

It just feels so empty without him there.

ERNST:

I know.

HANSCHEN:

I just think back to when we were all kids, and we used to play stupid little games on the playground. We'd play pirates, or cowboys, and- I remember there was this one time where he skinned his knee playing kickball at recess, and me and Georg had to help him inside to the nurse's office. It was probably third grade.

ERNST:

I don't even remember that. I remember playing cowboys, though. I never played pirates with you guys, it was always... I don't know. I remember your sister told Moritz he couldn't be a cowboy because he wasn't brave enough, and Wendla argued with her about it.

(A beat.)

I wish I would have said more.

HANSCHEN:

Oh, Ernst. We were just kids, it's not like you kn-

ERNST:

I could have done so much more. I knew he was stressed out, but I just thought-- I just thought it was midterms stress. I didn't know how bad things were.

*Ernst begins to cry.*

HANSCHEN:

Hey. Look at me.

*Hanschen is very affected by this and makes Ernst sit up to look him in the eyes. He takes his hands.*

You didn't know. You're not a mindreader.

ERNST:

I know, but I just-

HANSCHEN:

Just what? You had your own junk going on. You're not responsible for keeping track of everyone else, Ernst. No one knew he was going to... no one knew. No one knew what was going to happen. You can't predict anything like that.

ERNST:

I could have helped him.

HANSCHEN:

And I could run a marathon if I trained hard enough. It doesn't matter. You didn't kill him, Ernst.

ERNST:

But it feels...

HANSCHEN:

I love you. I love you so fucking much it makes me want to explode, did you know that?

(Ernst seems very flustered by this.)

I'm always going to be here for you, Ernst. Whenever you need me.

ERNST:

I love you too. Thank you.

*The two share a kiss.*

I don't want anything to happen to you.

HANSCHEN:

To me?

ERNST:

Yes, you.

HANSCHEN:

Don't worry about me.

ERNST:

You know I'm going to worry about you.

(Hanschen kisses his hand.)

HANSCHEN:

I'm going to be okay. And you... you're going to be okay.

ERNST:

It feels like the end of the world.

HANSCHEN:

You know, the world has ended for me a lot of times, but the sun always rises again in the morning.

### SCENE 3

*The diner. Melchior washes dishes while Wendla sits on the counter next to him to keep him company. They are mid-conversation as the scene begins.*

WENDLA:

And it just seemed fucked up to me that his dad gave that speech, when he's the one who never got Moritz the help he needed. It's not like we didn't know he was depressed.

MELCHIOR:

I mean, whatever. It's his dad. Parents like to believe they're doing their best when all they're really doing is putting problems into boxes so they don't need to deal with them.

What really pissed me off is that assembly they had at school for him. Moritz would have hated that if he knew. Everyone paying attention to him and looking at those corny ass pictures of him on the Powerpoint. Half of the people who spoke straight up didn't even know him.

Grief turns people into monsters. It's all so... opportunistic. People just want to make themselves feel better by pretending to care after the person's already fucking dead.

WENDLA:

People were tweeting about him too.

MELCHIOR:

Yeah, fly high, Moritz. Fucking whatever. He was an atheist anyway.

(He slams a dish down onto the counter. Maybe it breaks. It doesn't matter.)

I was the one who stayed up late studying with him when he was so stressed out he'd throw up. I was the one who talked him down all the times he said he wanted to kill himself. I was always fucking there for him. What the fuck does Becca on Twitter know about Moritz?

We've been friends since we were in diapers. They don't fucking know him like I do. Everyone just wants their pat on the back and the attention they get from saying they knew him, when they were probably lab partners for one class in 7th grade. It's bullshit, Wendy. It's all fucking bullshit.

WENDLA:

I knew him.

MELCHIOR:

(self-righteous and blasé) And it's not like his teachers gave a rat's ass anyway, either. You could tell by looking at him how fucked up he was. "We didn't see this coming," oh, bullshit. No one ever did anything. Everyone just watched him crash and burn. They all just wanted to fucking laugh when he would answer wrong in class, or forget his homework. But everybody wants to be all buddy buddy on Twitter.

WENDLA:

I just don't get it.

MELCHIOR:

People want to do whatever they can to make themselves feel better about the things they did to other people.

(Ironically, he hugs her.)

Suddenly, Schmidt enters the kitchen. He seems sullen and dark, only looking at Melchior and mostly disregards Wendla. He's chewing tobacco very obnoxiously.

SCHMIDT:

(to Wendla) Get off the fucking counter.

(to Melchior) You up to do some lifting?

MELCHIOR:

Some lifting? What needs lifted?

SCHMIDT:

Buddy of mine is coming by to pick up a delivery. I need you to move some shit out the freezer and help him lift it into the truck if he needs it.

MELCHIOR:

(taken aback, but agrees) Heard.

SCHMIDT:

You.

(He points at Wendla.)

What time you out of here?

WENDLA:

(startled) I, uh- I'm just getting ready to leave.

SCHMIDT:

Alright.

WENDLA:

(awkwardly) Well, I- Melchi, I'll text you when I get home. Bye, guys.

### SCENE 5

*Wendla exits the diner and walks into the parking lot. There is a man sitting in the back of a van, Buffalo Bill style, with boxes behind him.*

WENDLA:

Are you here for the delivery?

MASKED MAN

Something like that. Your boss around?

WENDLA:

He actually just got here. He's inside. Should I get him?

MASKED MAN

No need, sweetheart. Say, could you bring one of these boxes in for me?

WENDLA:

Oh, I don't know. Melchior said he'd help lift, I'm really no help-

MASKED MAN

It's not heavy. Just some restaurant supplies. C'mere, look.

(She hesitates, but approaches him.)

WENDLA:

Just these boxes?

MASKED MAN

Yeah, c'mere, I'll give you a hand.

(Wendla approaches the van, finally beside the masked man.)

I really appreciate it, honey.

WENDLA:

Oh, sure, of course.

*As the masked man hands the box toward Wendla,  
he uses it to push her up against the back of the car.*

WENDLA:

What are you doing? Let me go.

(He pushes harder, and she's struggling to get out of the back of the van.)

Seriously, creep, let go of me.

*With a final, strong push, he knocks Wendla down into the back of the van and slams the doors shut, effectively bolting her in.*

*Wendla screams, primal and terrified, as the man rounds the van to get into the driver's seat.*

*A light illuminates Schmidt and Melchior, watching out of the diner window.*

MELCHIOR:

Schmidt, we need to get her! He's taking Wendla!

*Schmidt putting his hand on Melchior's shoulder, tight, and preventing him from leaving the diner or saying anything.*

SCHMIDT:

Don't act so fucking new. You knew what you were getting into from the get-go.

MELCHIOR:

I'll call the cops. I'll-

SCHMIDT:

And what'll they do? Shoot you? Charge you with accessory? After all, you helped with the delivery, Melchior.

MELCHIOR:

I didn't-

SCHMIDT:

Timesheet says otherwise. I've got you on camera.

MELCHIOR:

But I didn't-

SCHMIDT:

(sternly, directly to Melchior's face) If you say a word, I'll make sure they never find a trace of you. If we go down, you're coming with us.

Now, get back to work. Place's not going to close itself.

*Schmidt leaves and Melchior is alone, the sole illuminated figure on stage.*

*He drops to his knees.*

*Lights out.*