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# Three Damn Letters

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Three Damn Letters

A play by  
Katherine Ammon

| CHARACTER NAME | BRIEF DESCRIPTION               | AGE       | GENDER |
|----------------|---------------------------------|-----------|--------|
| MICHELLE       | The Patient with ALS            | Late 40s  | Female |
| DAVID          | Her Husband                     | Early 50s | Male   |
| MICHAEL        | Her Son                         | Mid 20s   | Male   |
| RICHARD        | Her Father                      | Early 70s | Male   |
| LUCY           | Her Certified Nursing Assistant | Late 30s  | Female |

SCENE ONE.

DAVID, MICHAEL, and RICHARD sit around the kitchen table looking at the chair where MICHELLE should be sitting, in front of her birthday cake. MICHELLE instead is standing DOWNSTAGE, facing the AUDIENCE. An ALSFRS-R chart is to the side, opened to 48.

DAVID, MICHAEL, AND RICHARD

(Singing.)

Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you! Happy birthday, Dear Michelle...

The scene pauses while MICHELLE addresses the audience.

MICHELLE

I had just turned 47 when the nerves in my body began to die. Of course, I didn't know what was happening at the time. My left arm just felt weaker than normal.

DAVID, MICHAEL, AND RICHARD

Happy birthday to you!

MICHELLE rejoins the scene and blows out the candles.

MICHAEL

Did you make a wish, Mom?

MICHELLE

(Joking.)

Oh shoot, can we relight the candles? I forgot.

MICHAEL

I don't think it works that way.

RICHARD

Michael's right, the rules are rules.

MICHELLE

Better luck next year. Besides, I don't need to wish for anything, I got my three favorite guys right here.

DAVID

Three hungry guys. Let's cut the cake already.

DAVID reaches for the knife, and MICHELLE slaps his hand away. She picks up the knife instead.

MICHELLE

Make that my two favorite guys and my husband. Just for that, I'm serving you last.

RICHARD

The birthday girl is gonna cut her own cake? That doesn't seem right.

MICHELLE

Dad, you've got arthritis in your hands; David somehow always ends up with the biggest piece when he cuts it; and Michael, I love you, sweetie, but you make a mess every time.

MICHAEL

That is hurtful but fair.

DAVID

(To MICHELLE.)

To each according to his needs.

MICHELLE

So you tell me. Well, my need is for that icing flower. I hope no one had their hearts set on it.

She cuts a piece of cake for herself.

RICHARD

The birthday girl gets first pick.

MICHELLE starts cutting a piece for MICHAEL.

MICHELLE

(To RICHARD.)

You know, you and Mom gave me a name besides "the birthday girl."

RICHARD

Any other day of the year, you are Michelle. But today, you are the birthday girl.

MICHELLE

Can I at least be the birthday woman? I'm almost 50. I don't think "girl" applies any more.

She starts cutting RICHARD's piece.

RICHARD

I don't care how old you are, you will always be my baby girl. I bet you still call Michael your little boy!

MICHAEL

But I'm not a little boy. I'm married, and I have a full-time job-

DAVID

I don't know if job is the right word. I mean, anthropology is so...

MICHAEL

I work in an office just like you, and get a monthly salary just like you. If that's not a job, I guess we'll both have to notify the IRS.

MICHELLE

We are not rehashing this at my birthday party.

(To DAVID.)

Here, eat your cake.

MICHELLE passes a plate to DAVID with her left hand. Right before the plate reaches him, MICHELLE drops it on to the table.

MICHELLE

Oh, I am such a klutz. I'm sorry.

DAVID

(Joking.)

Hey, no need to dump my cake, I was gonna drop the subject.

MICHELLE

You can think of it as karmic punishment for bringing it up in the first place.

She serves him a new piece and then gets up from the table. MICHELLE moves downstage to address the AUDIENCE, while the kitchen area dims.

MICHELLE

Some families show their love through, I don't know, snuggles and hugs, but that's never been us. That was a pretty good night for us, actually! My boys rarely come together all at once if they can avoid it - like any good American family. Richard, my dad, has been on his own for about twenty years (my mom died young), and Michael, my son, lives a short drive away with his wife Jess. We saw a lot more of each other once I got diagnosed.

My name is Michelle, and I have amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as ALS. If you have no idea what that is, you're not alone. But we'll get to that. My 47th birthday was the first sign of trouble, a weakness in my arm that didn't go away. My general practitioner had no clue what was going on; neither did I.

SCENE TWO.

Stagehands flip the ALSFRS-R chart to 46. MICHELLE looks perfectly healthy. She is talking to her GENERAL PRACTITIONER (played by MICHAEL).

MICHAEL

So the blood tests came back fine then. No nutritional deficiencies or hormonal imbalances?

MICHELLE

Yeah, seems to be the one time I'd rather have a test come back with bad news.

MICHAEL

I'd keep up with a multivitamin just in case. You're still having weakness in that left arm?

MICHELLE

Yeah. I know I'm probably overreacting, but...

MICHAEL

No, it's important to bring something like this up. A month of muscle weakness is concerning, whether it's psychological or physical.

MICHELLE

Do you think it's psychological?

MICHAEL

It would be unusual, but it is a possibility. I want to eliminate some of the more pressing options first. I'm going to write you a prescription for a CT scan. We'll be able to look at your arms, spine, and brain to see what's going on.

MICHELLE

What do you think is wrong with me?

MICHAEL

With only one symptom, it's hard to know. Could be a bone spur in your spinal cord.

MICHELLE

Yikes.

MICHAEL

They can be painful, but they're treatable. Very common as people age. Nothing to worry about.

Brown-out. The ALSFRS-R chart is flipped to 45.

MICHELLE

What do you mean they didn't find anything?

MICHAEL

I'm sorry. The scan was clean. No bone spurs, no problems with your vertebrae, there was no mass or blood in your brain...

MICHELLE

Well, what's left?

MICHAEL

I'll write you a referral to a neurologist. If you make an appointment now, they should be able to see you in a couple months.

MICHELLE

A couple months? What am I supposed to do until then?

MICHAEL

Stick with your multivitamin, do some light exercises with your arm. I know it is frustrating, but these diagnoses can take time.

MICHELLE

But my arm... What are you going to tell that neurologist I have?

MICHAEL

We're going to call it "idiopathic neuropathy" for now.

MICHELLE

"Idiopathic" -- What does that mean?

MICHAEL

It means we don't know.

Brown-out. The ALSFRS-R is flipped to 43. MICHAEL exits, and RICHARD (as the NEUROLOGIST) enters.

MICHELLE

Listen, Doc, it's been eight months, and no one can tell me what is going on; meanwhile, my arm is getting weaker and weaker.

RICHARD

(Flipping through her charts.)

Yes, well, I am sorry to hear that. Any other changes?

MICHELLE

Oh, besides me losing functional use of my left arm? No, I'm peachy keen.

RICHARD

If there is any change in your condition, I need to know.

MICHELLE

Well, there is one other thing. This is gonna sound stupid, but you asked. Sometimes my arm gets really twitchy? I don't know how else to describe it. My arm isn't moving around, just the muscle is...

RICHARD

Twitchy.

MICHELLE

Yeah.

RICHARD

Oh.

MICHELLE

Oh, what?

RICHARD

I'm going to write you a prescription for an electromyography test.

MICHELLE

What, why? What does twitching mean?

RICHARD

We just need to see how your muscles react to electrical stimuli. It will take a few months to get this scheduled. In the meantime, I would get a second opinion from a neuromuscular specialist. Get all your labs redone.

MICHELLE

Why? What do you think I have?

RICHARD

Likely some form of neuropathy.

MICHELLE

Yeah, my GP already said that, and he didn't get all bug-eyed when he was talking to me. What do you think I have?

RICHARD

We'll be able to tell once we do the EMG. There's no need to worry you. It's incredibly unlikely, given your age and background--

MICHELLE

Doctor. What do you think I have?

RICHARD

Have you heard of ALS?

Blackout.

## SCENE THREE

STAGEHANDS flip the ALSFRS-R chart to 41.  
MICHELLE looks at it, and stops the stagehands.

MICHELLE

No. No, I don't want to show my diagnosis.

(Gesturing to the AUDIENCE.)

They get the point. They know I have ALS. I literally just said it. Can we come back to this one? They don't even know me yet.

The STAGEHANDS flip the ALSFRS-R chart to 40.

MICHELLE

Thank you.

(To AUDIENCE.)

I'll give you the short and sweet version of my illness. ALS is a terminal disease during which all the parts of my body slowly forget how to move, including, eventually, my lungs. The question is not if I'll die, it's when.

(Points to ALSFRS-R chart.)

That is my timer of sorts, an ALSFRS-R chart. Of course, because the medical profession came up with it, it has a needlessly complicated acronym and explanation. Basically, a patient with ALS can die at any number on the chart, but your life and your chances of keeping it get a lot worse the further down it goes.

MICHELLE reenters the kitchen to join her son MICHAEL. She can move her left arm with effort but struggles with fine motor tasks; in general, her movement is starting to slow. MICHAEL is struggling to cut an onion.

MICHELLE

Are you sure you wanna make me dinner? I think even my hands are still more steady than yours.

MICHAEL

(Sarcastic.)

Ha, ha. Is it so wrong that a son would want to do something nice for his mother on her birthday?

MICHELLE

(To AUDIENCE.)

Surprised? It took almost a whole year for me to get diagnosed. So, here we are again. The big four-eight. Don't worry, you won't have to listen to the boys sing twice.

(To MICHAEL.)

Ordering pizza is also nice, you know.

MICHAEL

Hey, I am twenty-six years old, it's about time I learn how to cook something. Even if it is spaghetti. With Prego.

MICHELLE

Your father's twice that, and he doesn't seem too motivated to change. Maybe you can try the new cuisine with Jessica, I'm sure she'd love it!

RICHARD enters and ruffles MICHAEL's hair.

RICHARD

Hey, Mikey how's it going? Smells great in here!

MICHAEL does not like this nickname.

MICHELLE

Nothing's on the stove yet, Dad.

MICHAEL

If Mom would quiet down, we might be moving faster.

RICHARD

Impossible. She takes after her mother.

MICHAEL

(To MICHELLE.)

You should be more thankful; I might be cooking your food for the next however many years. Dad certainly can't; I don't know about Grandpa...

RICHARD

I make a mean frank 'n beans.

MICHAEL

(To MICHELLE.)

You want frank 'n beans for the next ten years?

MICHELLE

Ten years? I like the optimism!

MICHAEL

What? Why? What did the neurologist say?

RICHARD

Oh, we don't need to talk about this right now. Not on the birthday girl's big day!

MICHELLE

More like... two to four.

RICHARD

Michelle, I said we don't need to talk about this right now.

MICHAEL

That short? You've already done one year... Stephen Hawking has lived for over 50 years with the disease.

MICHELLE

Yeah, well, Stephen Hawking has achieved a lot of goals I haven't.

MICHAEL

But they told him he was only going to live another 2 years, too.

RICHARD

Let's just focus on the cooking, alright? I'm starving!

MICHELLE

You would have to ask the doctor for more of the details. But Hawking's a special case. He has a different mutation than I have.

The three stand in silence for awhile. RICHARD tries to restart the conversation.

RICHARD

Say, is that Prego? Great choice. Your grandmother used Prego in all her spaghetti, and I told her it was the best damn spaghetti in the U.S.!

MICHELLE

Dad, why don't you go watch TV? There's probably some game going on tonight, right?

RICHARD

(Begrudgingly interested in the game.)

Packers vs Bears...

MICHELLE

There, you love Aaron Rodgers. Possibly more than me. Go watch your second child toss the pigskin, or whatever.

RICHARD grumbles but exits to the living room.

MICHAEL

(Still focused on their conversation.)

You're too young to have the disease.

MICHELLE

Are you still on about this? I'm a little young for ALS, but not in-my-20s young. Your grandma was young too.

MICHAEL

Yeah, but she had a heart attack, not some random disease from the back of a medical textbook.

MICHELLE

I'm just telling you what the neurologist said. I could live longer, but I don't wanna get anyone's hopes up. And hurry up on dinner, "Mikey", it's getting late.

MICHAEL

Yeah, yeah, I got it, I... Oh, crap.

MICHAEL cut his hand with a knife.

MICHELLE

Don't worry, happens to the best of us. Go run it under cold water. How deep does it look?

MICHAEL

(Wincing.)

Not too bad...

MICHELLE

Okay, you get it rinsed? Now, come here. We're gonna hold it until the bleeding gets a little lighter.

She grabs a paper towel and holds it over the cut.

MICHAEL

Mom, I'm an adult, I don't need you to literally hold my hand.

MICHELLE

Hey, we all need help, whether we want it or not. Let's go get this bandaged up. We'll get back to dinner in a sec.

#### SCENE FOUR

The stagehands flip the ALSFRS-R chart to 39.

MICHELLE's right foot now "drops" occasionally when she walks, and the grip on her left arm is weak. She is in a bathroom stall at the grocery store, while RICHARD is still shopping. LUCY plays a WOMAN in the bathroom, in the stall next to MICHELLE. MICHELLE flushes the toilet and stands up. She struggles trying to button her jeans shut; her left arm does not have the strength to pull the button hole across. She tries a few more times before realizing she needs help.

MICHELLE

(To AUDIENCE.)

I'm sorry you have to see this.

The WOMAN (LUCY) flushes her toilet.

MICHELLE

Excuse me, Miss, could you help me?

LUCY

Sure.

The WOMAN passes a wad of toilet paper to MICHELLE's stall.

MICHELLE

Oh, no, I mean, could you come in here for a second? I can't seem to button my pants.

The WOMAN, disturbed, leaves the bathroom.

MICHELLE

Miss? Hello?

(beat.)

You didn't even wash your hands!

MICHELLE grabs her cell out of her purse and calls RICHARD, who stops his shopping to answer his flip phone.

RICHARD

This is Richard.

MICHELLE

Hey, Dad, it's me.

RICHARD

Michelle. Are you still in the lady's room?

MICHELLE

Yeah, could you... could you come over and help me? I can't button my pants.

RICHARD

Uh-huh.

MICHELLE

And I don't wanna walk around Trader Joe's with my pants undone. It'd be one thing if it was Wal-Mart, but--

RICHARD

I'm on my way.

MICHELLE

Do you need directions?

RICHARD

I know where the restroom is.

He does not. After some searching, RICHARD locates it.  
He opens the door.

RICHARD

Mickie, are you in here?

MICHELLE

Over here.

She opens the door, and RICHARD enters the stall.  
MICHELLE leans back against the wall. RICHARD  
fumbles with the button.

MICHELLE

Here, you gotta...

RICHARD

Get your hands out of the way.

MICHELLE

Okay, just...

RICHARD

I don't know why you girls nowadays have to buy pants so tight. There.

MICHELLE

Can you zip them, please?

He does so, and they exit the stall.

RICHARD

We are buying you some Velcro pants next time.

MICHELLE

That's not a bad idea! Did you find the honey while I was gone?

RICHARD

Hey, wash your hands.

MICHELLE

Okay, so we still need honey ...

MICHELLE exits the bathroom with her father, then talks to the AUDIENCE as she approaches DAVID in her next scene.

MICHELLE

Velcro is very hip with the ALS crowd. Once this sucker-  
(Gesturing to her left arm.)  
-started to go, we pretty much had to get Velcro everything.

#### SCENE FIVE

The ALSFRS-R chart is still at 39. The couple is in a shoe store. MICHELLE is trying on a new pair of shoes.

DAVID

How do they feel?

MICHELLE

Physically, surprisingly comfortable. I like the cushions. But mentally... they're Velcro shoes, David.

DAVID

Exactly. They'll be easier to take on and off.

MICHELLE

I haven't worn Velcro in over 40 years.

DAVID

They'll make you look younger!

MICHELLE

(To AUDIENCE.)

He always knows the right thing to say.

(To DAVID.)

I've always thought my golden years were in preschool. You get an hour set aside for nap-time, no one judges you if you eat the Play-Doh...

DAVID

Do you want to try on another pair, or are you ready to go?

MICHELLE

I guess they fit well...

DAVID

Alright, let's buy them and go.

MICHELLE

Before we go... How 'bout I try on those stilettos?

DAVID

Michelle, you never wore a pair of shoes like that even when you could.

MICHELLE

I know, but now that I can't wear them, I kinda want the stripper heels.

DAVID

(Against his better judgement.)

We can try them on. But we are not buying them!

MICHELLE

Yes!

She grabs a box and swaps the Velcro pair out for the gaudy stilettos.

DAVID

Wow, those are something.

MICHELLE

Help me stand up in them.

DAVID

If you break an ankle in these, so help me...

MICHELLE

If I break an ankle, we can sue the store for a settlement. Come on, please?

DAVID helps MICHELLE up, supporting her right side, where her foot is weaker.

DAVID

You wanna go to the mirror?

MICHELLE nods. They move together to the mirror, and she takes in the image.

DAVID

Michelle?

MICHELLE

(Laughing.)

Wow, these are tacky.

DAVID

See? You aren't missing out on anything. Although I think you pull them off.

MICHELLE

Sure you do. Let me stand in these just a moment longer. This might be one of the last time I ever wear heels!

(To AUDIENCE.)

Now that I think about it, this was the last time I wore heels.

(Shifting uncomfortably. To DAVID.)

I'm suddenly remembering why I don't wear these.

DAVID

Mmhm. We were never very trendy

MICHELLE

And now is no time to start. Okay, Velcro it is. Let's get me back to the chair before I hurt one of us.

(On the way back.)

At least we have the ultimate excuse to dress comfortably now.

DAVID

Oh, definitely. You could probably get away with wearing pajamas to the Sunday service.

MICHELLE

Pastor Stephen would have a cow.

DAVID

But he would never criticize a sick woman.

MICHELLE

It's the ultimate guilt-trip.

(After packing up the shoes.)

Okay, genius mastermind, I'll have to hear more of your evil plans on the ride back. If I'm stuck with a terrible disease, we might as well milk it for all its worth.

DAVID

That's the spirit.

They exit with their shoes.

## SCENE SIX

The STAGEHANDS flip the ALSFRS-R chart to 38.  
DAVID is helping RICHARD move his belongings into the house. MICHAEL and MICHELLE are on the couch, playing Scrabble.

MICHELLE

(Setting her tiles on the table.)

Here, put these three over DIAL.

MICHAEL

"SUNDIAL." Okay, that's not even creative.

MICHELLE

Not my fault you left a double point space open.

MICHAEL writes down the score and looks at the board.

MICHAEL

I don't think I can make any more moves.

MICHELLE

Tsk tsk. Shoulda practiced against Jessica.

MICHAEL

Yeah, she'd love that.

MICHELLE

Every second you're out there working, I'm sitting here thinking of words.

DAVID (OFF STAGE)

Keep bragging, and he won't play with you anymore.

MICHELLE

And leave his poor old mother without any entertainment?

MICHAEL rolls his eyes as he resets the board.

MICHAEL

Speaking of Jess...

MICHELLE

She's pregnant?

MICHAEL

No, mom. She's been looking into some medicine.

DAVID

(Warning.)

Michael...

MICHAEL

(Setting the first word down.)

"WHEEZE." 31 points with the double letter. She told me about B12, methylcobalamin.

Behind MICHAEL, RICHARD looks at DAVID, who shakes his head in frustration.

MICHELLE

Uh-huh. Spell "JOKE." 30 points.

MICHAEL

You take these high-dose injections, and it slows muscle loss.

MICHELLE

Well, that's helpful.

DAVID

Michael, if the doctor hasn't mentioned it...

MICHELLE

Waiting on that word.

DAVID

Michelle, this is a little more important than Scrabble.

MICHELLE

Fine.

(To AUDIENCE.)

I was getting tired of being up here anyway.

As she exits, MICHELLE spots a STAGEHAND adjusting a piece of scenery.

MICHELLE

Hey, you guys know I'm sick, right? Can I get a few more breaks? Lucy has been backstage for God knows how long.

DAVID

Michelle, I never said you had to leave, I just said maybe this isn't the time for board games.

MICHAEL

I think you should be here to talk about your treatment, Mom.

MICHELLE

I talk about it with my neurologist plenty. Besides, sounds like you boys have it handled without me.

She exits.

RICHARD

Worse than her mother, God rest her. More stubborn than a bull

MICHAEL

Dad, the doctor's not gonna mention B12. It's still being tested for ALS.

DAVID

Then let's not test it on your mother.

MICHAEL

Jess is a doctor, Dad.

DAVID

A homeopathic doctor.

MICHAEL

Naturopathic. She went to medical school. Look, it's a little expensive, but I think it's worth it.

DAVID

How much?

MICHAEL

\$200 a month.

DAVID

\$200 a month for some sugar water?

MICHAEL

Dad, it's not sugar-

DAVID

If she needs to be taking anything, it's riluzole. The only FDA-approved treatment.

MICHAEL

Because the FDA is so reliable. Did you even look at the side effects? One of them is "difficulty moving." It can make her worse!

DAVID

Michael, we are the parents, you are the child. We are not discussing this with you.

MICHAEL

You won't give Mom "sugar water", but you'll give her poison? And how much does that cost?

DAVID

That isn't your business.

MICHAEL

How much?

DAVID

\$300 a month. But it's covered by our insurance.

MICHAEL

Do you hear yourself right now?

DAVID

We have to make certain decisions, and some of them are not easy. The fact of the matter is, your mother is going to die, whether we spend a thousand dollars on her or a million.

MICHAEL

But if it gives her more time...

DAVID

There are some costs we have to keep in mind beyond medicine. Funerals are very expensive these days.

MICHAEL

You'd refuse Mom treatment so she can have a nice funeral?

DAVID

Do not twist my words on me. That is not what I said.

MICHAEL

No, what you said is who cares when she dies, as long as her casket is top of the line.

DAVID

Michael, we are not taking healthcare advice from some anthropologist and his hippie wife!

RICHARD stops moving his belongings and finally joins the conversation, while MICHAEL is speechless.

RICHARD

Knock it off! If money is such an issue, I'll pay.

DAVID

Richard, don't listen to him, that's not what I-

RICHARD

No. Money will not be the thing that keeps me from spending more time with my daughter.

SCENE SEVEN

MICHELLE reenters and looks at the AUDIENCE.

MICHELLE

Looks like that last scene was a barrel of laughs. Glad the boys had it handled. Alright, what's next?

The STAGEHANDS flip the ALSFRS-R chart to 37. MICHELLE has visible walking difficulties, but she is not yet using a cane. Her left arm is almost entirely paralyzed. She is browsing a home improvement store with MICHAEL, who is supporting her when needed.

MICHELLE

I am so glad you took me here. I have been telling your father we need a new lawn mower for months, but since I don't drive much nowadays, I have to wait for him to agree with me.

MICHAEL

That sounds like Dad. He won't spend money on a thing if he can avoid it. I've used that piece of junk, it won't start half the time.

MICHELLE

I'm not surprised; it's almost as old as you. I can't remember the last time you went with me to the store voluntarily.

MICHAEL

It was this or watch another rerun of The Great British Bake-off. I can't take it anymore.

MICHELLE

Hey, I thought you were learning something! I was thinking you could start making desserts; I wouldn't mind a nice meringue.

MICHAEL

Like you ever made a meringue. Whatever that is.

MICHELLE

What happened to my sweet little Michael? I remember when I brought you here all those years ago, when you were just five years-old, and David was at work, and all I had to do was buy a new screwdriver...

MICHAEL

I think last time you told the story, it was a sledgehammer.

MICHELLE

Yeah, well, screwdriver, sledgehammer... Some sort of mixed-drink-sounding tool.

MICHAEL

Next time you'll be telling me you went to Home Depot for a car bomb.

MICHELLE

Is it too much to let your sick old mother remember better days?

(To AUDIENCE.)

I don't care if he's heard it twenty times. You all haven't.

MICHAEL browses the lawn mowers as MICHELLE talks.

MICHELLE

They had this big display of bricks, stacked up like they were a Mayan pyramid. Don't you go saying it looked like an igloo or something last time, 'cause I remember that pyramid. It was incredible. You don't see displays like that anymore. You have to sacrifice some personality for people's safety, I guess.

I was looking at the different screwdrivers or sledgehammers or car bombs or whatever they were, and I had told you to stay right beside me, but I should have known better. Child leashes weren't as common in the 90s, or I would have bought a dozen. Anyway, by the time I had picked out a tool, I realized you were gone. My Michael was climbing the pyramid like he was Edmund Hillary scaling Mount Everest!

I was already running over to stop you when your little hand slipped on a brick. I am telling you, there was a new world record set for the twenty-yard dash that day when I saw those bricks start to fall. I snatched you back just in time, as dozens of bricks came crashing down. One dragged across the front of your face, right down your cute little button nose.

MICHAEL

And all the moms of my kindergarten class looked at you funny ever since.

MICHELLE

Yeah, like they haven't made a mistake before. Bunch of stuck-up prisses.

MICHAEL

I've seen my school picture, Mom. It looked pretty bad.

MICHELLE

Oh my God, you cried for a week. Your dad was mad that we had to send the grandparents a picture of your busted-up face for the Christmas card. But you know, once we were sure you didn't suffer any brain damage or anything, it was fine.

MICHAEL

What's an adventure without a little mortal fear, right?

MICHELLE

Exactly. It's a great family story that I will repeat until the day I die. (Beat; when she realizes what she said.) So, any luck on those mowers?

MICHAEL

Your yard's not that big, so it's no problem for me to push around a mower like this every couple of weeks.

MICHELLE

What about something David could use? You don't need to come by our house all the time. You have to take care of your and Jessica's house, too.

MICHAEL

I don't think Jess minds me helping my parents out every now and then.

MICHELLE

Michael, you're at our house almost every day.

MICHAEL

That's not even a little bit true! It's twice a week, tops. Besides, Jess is an adult, she understands our situation.

MICHELLE

You don't have to worry so much anymore - We're going to hire a home nurse to come by for a few hours every day. Between her, David, and Grandpa, we should have all the chores covered. You can spend more time at your home.

MICHAEL

So, I can only come by to see my mother if I'm mowing the lawn? Do you not want to see me?

MICHELLE

Of course I want to see you. But I want you to have a life outside of our house.

MICHAEL

Can you stop talking like you're this great burden on the family? I will be the one to decide what I do with my time. Not you. Not Jess. Me.

(After an awkward silence.)

But um, if Dad is gonna be mowing the lawn more, he might like one of these riding lawn mowers.

MICHELLE

Oh my God, he would kill us if we came home with one of those tractors. But he complains about his back so much, it'd serve him right! Here, help me up onto the seat, it looks comfortable.

MICHAEL does so.

MICHAEL

How does it feel?

MICHELLE

Oh, very comfy. Perfect for a grumpy 50 year-old's back. Totally worth the \$2000 price tag.

MICHAEL

Can you imagine him driving that thing on your lawn? He'd go forward five feet and then he'd be done.

MICHELLE

The neighbors would hate us even more than they do already. Come on, switch with me. You need to see what it's like up here.

MICHAEL

Alright, take my hand.

MICHELLE

I can get down on my own, thank you very much. Now, when you get in the chair, I want you to imagine the great expanse of our twenty square foot lawn sprawled out befo--

MICHELLE cries out as she falls and hits the ground hard. The light on her fades immediately as DAVID runs on from the opposite side of the stage. They are arguing in the hospital waiting room.

DAVID

What did you do?!

MICHAEL

We were on a shopping trip to Home Depot, when--

DAVID

Why on Earth were you at Home Depot? I asked you to watch your mother while I was at work, and you took her on a field trip? All you had to do was watch TV with her.

MICHAEL

She's been tired of being cooped up in the house all day. She said you needed a new lawn mower, and I thought it was a good reason to get out of the house.

DAVID

A new lawn mower! How on earth did she hurt herself shopping for a lawn mower?

MICHAEL

We were checking out the riding lawn mowers and she fell getting off of one.

DAVID

Now that is just stupid. Why would you let her up on one in the first place? It's not like we have a farm.

MICHAEL

We were just messing around.

DAVID

Look, next time you two are bored, go bake a cake. Don't drag your crippled mother to a store with heavy machinery. And especially don't let her climb around on it!

MICHAEL

Don't call her crippled.

DAVID

She is crippled. She's getting weaker every day, and you just made it ten times worse by breaking her leg.

MICHAEL

She didn't break her leg.

DAVID

I will reserve my judgement until we get an X-Ray. You are going to be the one to explain to your grandfather how you took another month of walking away from his daughter.

MICHAEL

Dad, we don't even know how bad it is yet. Please calm down.

DAVID

Don't you tell me to calm down. We don't know if she'll ever heal back from this. All because you two goofballs wanted to play House at the store. So help me God, if that is the last time she walks...

MICHAEL

I'm sorry, I made a mistake.

DAVID

A mistake that's going to add even more stress to our family and even more money to our medical bills. A mistake that had your mother in tears. We'll have to hire that nurse even earlier than we thought because of this. I sure as hell hope you're sorry.

Black out.

## SCENE EIGHT

Late afternoon. RICHARD and MICHELLE sit in the living room. MICHELLE has her right foot propped up on a pillow and a cane nearby. A knock is heard at the door; RICHARD exits the living room to open it.

MICHELLE

(To AUDIENCE.)

Finally, some more women in here.

RICHARD comes back with LUCY, a young woman carrying an equipment bag.

RICHARD

And this is the lady of the hour, my daughter Michelle. Careful with her, she might look a little under the weather, but she's a firecracker.

LUCY

Hi, Michelle, it's great to meet you. I'm Lucy, your new certified nursing assistant.

MICHELLE

Is that right? Thought you might be a door-to-door salesman with that bag there.

LUCY

You can never be too prepared.

RICHARD

Well-spoken. Like an Eagle Scout, except more... womanly.

LUCY

I would hope so, sir.

(To MICHELLE.)

Your husband told me you had a bit of a fall a few weeks back. How's that sprain healing up?

MICHELLE

Oh, it's pretty much fine now. I could be running around and jumping, if it weren't for the whole ALS thing.

RICHARD

No jumping.

LUCY

Yes, we probably ought to keep that to a minimum.

RICHARD

I'm glad someone reasonable will be watching over her. I'm going to watch the game in the other room; let you gals get to know each other. Lucy, we'll talk later.

MICHELLE

Blow Aaron a kiss for me!

RICHARD

Yeah, yeah.

He exits.

LUCY

He sounds more like the patients I usually have.

MICHELLE

Overprotective and old-fashioned?

LUCY

(Nodding “yes.”)

Oh, I would never say anything like that about my patients. Have you had any exercise today?

MICHELLE

No, my boys have me sitting here 24/7. Especially after the spraining incident.

LUCY

Well, we’re going to get you up and moving. Let me check your foot first.

(Sliding off MICHELLE’s slipper.)

Oh, that’s not bad at all. Can you flex your ankle for me?

MICHELLE does so.

MICHELLE

You should have seen it the day of. Swelled up like a grapefruit, worse than when I was pregnant with Michael.

LUCY

I bet. Okay, you can put your shoe back on. Let’s flex the other foot... Great. Ready to do some laps around the coffee table?

MICHELLE

Just call me Usain Bolt.

LUCY helps MICHELLE up and slowly starts walking her.

LUCY

Alright, Mrs. Bolt. If you get tired or need to take a break at any time, let me know. This won't do you any good if we overwork your muscles. Let's run through the checklist while we go... Have you taken your medications for the morning? Riluzole and B12?

MICHELLE

Yep, down the hatch every morning.

LUCY

That's a good combo, if you can afford it. Riluzole has a decent history in the scientific literature, and B12's been helpful for a ton of neuron diseases.

MICHELLE

My husband and son will be glad to hear that. My boys deal more with the nitty-gritty of ALS; I just worry about having it. Don't wanna spend the last years of my life doing paperwork.

LUCY

That's good of them to do that for you. Some of my patients don't have a good support system; it can be so overwhelming for them. So, medicine: check. Do you have any dinner plans for tonight?

MICHELLE

Are you asking me on a date? We have some leftover spaghetti that my son brought by a couple days ago.

LUCY

A couple days ago? Oh no, if your pantry is stocked, I can make you something tonight. If not, I'll run to the store and pick up some groceries.

MICHELLE

(Hesitant.)

Listen, I know that's all part of the job description, but... phew, can we take a break?

They sit back down on the couch as MICHELLE catches her breath.

MICHELLE

My family is not really the health-food type. Even Michael - He married a vegetarian, but he'll eat burgers over here. So if that's gonna be a conflict-of-interest for you, as my nurse...

LUCY

Oh, Michelle, no. Allow me to introduce you to the ALS recipe book: Everything is fortified with heavy cream or butter. The goal is to keep your weight up, not down. When you have to transition to a liquid diet, it's a lot of milkshakes.

MICHELLE

That's beautiful. Thank you for coming into my life.

LUCY

All part of the job. How are you feeling, are you sore anywhere? Some patients can benefit from massage therapy.

MICHELLE

Oh sure, "some patients can benefit from massage therapy" - You don't have to cover it up with your nurse-talk. This is clearly a front to romance me. You should give David some pointers.

LUCY

Of course. If the massaging makes you uncomfortable, we can skip it for now.

MICHELLE

No, my left arm is a little sore actually.

LUCY

And suddenly the sarcasm vanishes! You can be honest with me, you know. One of the benefits of patient-confidentiality.

LUCY moves MICHELLE's paralyzed arm through its basic range-of-motion and massages her arm and hand.

MICHELLE

Thank you. This is nice. My family forgets that even if I can't move the arm, I can still feel what happens to it.

LUCY

Do they forget that often?

MICHELLE

No. Well, I don't know. It's not what they do, it's what they don't do. No more hand-holding, except when they have to. It gets ignored, like a block of wood hanging off of me. Feels that way sometimes.

LUCY

When I come in tomorrow morning to get you ready for the day, we could paint your nails. You can't ignore a pretty manicure.

MICHELLE

You've never been married, have you, Lucy? You could give me a buzz-cut, and my boys wouldn't notice.

LUCY

You don't have to do it for them.

After a moment, MICHELLE stands up and approaches the AUDIENCE.

MICHELLE

(To AUDIENCE.)

I would only try a clear nail polish the first day. When that started to chip, I tried some light pinks, and when those got old, reds. Michael noticed my new habit about halfway through the pinks; David, sometime in the reds. I don't think Dad noticed 'til I tried a lilac color. His vision's going bad though, so it's hard to blame the guy.

#### SCENE NINE

The stagehands flip the ALSFRS-R chart to 36. MICHELLE has traded her ankle brace for a medical-grade cane. Her and DAVID's church service just let out. Various CHURCHGOERS (played by RICHARD and LUCY) are milling around in the foyer, along with PASTOR STEPHEN (played by MICHAEL). MICHELLE is in pajamas and Velcro shoes.

DAVID

I can't believe you finally did it. A whole church service in pajamas.

MICHELLE

Not even my good pajamas.

(To AUDIENCE.)

Sorry if you were looking forward to a lingerie scene.

DAVID

No, definitely not the good pajamas. But were you comfortable?

MICHELLE

Oh, yeah. Maybe too comfortable. I think I fell asleep for a moment.

DAVID

(Hushed.)

You don't need pajamas to fall asleep during one of Pastor Stephen's sermons.

MICHELLE, snickering, knocks DAVID in the arm as  
PASTOR STEPHEN approaches.

MICHAEL

David.

(Eying MICHELLE's pajamas.)

Michelle. Glad to see you two this morning. It's been a few weeks.

DAVID

Transportation was a little difficult after Michelle sprained her ankle, but now that she's all healed up...

MICHELLE

We're glad to be back at church.

MICHAEL

(Referring to the ALS.)

You know, it's times like these when we must turn to God's judgement.

DAVID

Yes, of course, Pastor.

MICHAEL

We must trust in His plan, even though we cannot understand it ourselves.

MICHELLE

And it can be hard to understand sometimes.

LUCY

(As a CHURCHGOER, interrupting  
MICHAEL to save MICHELLE.)

Hey, David, Michelle. Great to see you guys make it this morning. And your ankle's better!

MICHAEL

Keep that in mind.

PASTOR STEPHEN pats MICHELLE on the shoulder  
and excuses himself to chat with a MALE  
CHURCHGOER.

MICHELLE

Thank you. Seriously.

LUCY

Sometimes he just doesn't know when to close that mouth of his. How have you two  
been?

MICHELLE

Well, life goes on. We can't just drop everything for a few years.

LUCY

Very true. You know, some of the other women and I were talking, and we want you to  
know that you can ask us for help anytime. It would be a pleasure to drop off a casserole  
for supper every now and again, or pick up some groceries for you, maybe pull some  
weeds...

MICHELLE

Oh, that's not necessary.

DAVID

(At the same time.)

We would love that.

MICHELLE and DAVID exchange looks.

DAVID

(To MICHELLE.)

Honey, that's a very kind offer from the ladies.

(To LUCY.)

And your casseroles are delicious!

MICHELLE

(To AUDIENCE.)

He only calls me Honey when something's wrong.

(To DAVID.)

It is a nice offer, *Honey*, but we don't need that much help.

LUCY

It's no problem at all, Michelle. You are not a burden to us. Our church is family.

There is an awkward stand-off between DAVID and MICHELLE. DAVID breaks the silence.

DAVID

Thank you again for the offer. We'll get back to you on that one.

LUCY

Okay. You two have a blessed week. I'll keep you in my prayers.

MICHELLE

Thank you.

The FEMALE CHURCHGOER leaves.

MICHELLE

What the heck? We can't just accept all the charity thrown our way! Lucy's already cooking most of our meals. Besides, if we eat those casseroles every week, we'll gain a hundred pounds.

DAVID

First of all, Lucy said you need to gain weight. And she's not cooking all of our meals. We need all the help we can get, especially help that's free-of-charge.

MICHELLE

We don't need that help. We're doing fine as it is.

DAVID

Michelle, you're not the one looking at our finances. We are not that fine.

MICHELLE

What does that mean? Why would you not mention something like that to me?

DAVID

You have enough on your plate. I didn't want to worry you. Can we not talk about this in the middle of church?

MICHELLE

Now's as good as ever. What is going on? I thought between us, Dad, and the insurance, we had it covered.

DAVID

(Frustrated.)

Well, the most recent issue is that the insurance only wants to cover Lucy's work for 35 hours a week. With all the time I've taken off work, it's hard to pay for her extra hours.

MICHELLE

But Dad said...

DAVID

Richard says a lot. You're his only child, he can't think rationally. He has been draining his retirement funds for us. For you.

MICHELLE

Well, don't let him! He can talk all he wants, but you have the final say.

DAVID

If we don't take his money, we have to take out a second mortgage on the house. You have to think about the long-term with these things.

MICHELLE

I don't want to think about the long-term.

DAVID

I know you don't. But we don't have a choice.

Blackout.

SCENE TEN

When the lights come up, all actors are ready for the next scene, except for MICHELLE. She stops a STAGEHAND.

MICHELLE

I'm sorry, can you pull out a chair for me? My leg has just been... I need a break.

The STAGEHAND sets a chair behind her. She sits down and looks at the ALSFRS-R chart, which is still at 36.

MICHELLE

That darn chart keeps moving downwards, whether I pay attention or not. Like an hourglass trickling away. It's been a little over a year since I was diagnosed, two years since the start. The neurologist gave me two to four.

It's not the dying that gets me; it's the timing of it. My mom was 49 when she died, and my birthday is right around the corner. I don't know if Michael or David has realized that, but I know my dad has. I was barely an adult when Mom died, a little younger than Michael is now. Before her heart attack, I asked her for all the advice - Dad was around, but he did better focusing on his work. I think he was a civil engineer, maybe? Something for the government. Kept him busy, had good benefits, put food on the table - the only things you cared about back then. We didn't have a lot in common.

But she died in her sleep, all of a sudden, like when you turn on a light bulb and the filament bursts. She was fine and then she was gone. Then it was just me and Richard. He was there when I bought my wedding dress, he was there when I gave birth to my son. He's here now.

MICHELLE joins RICHARD in the NEUROLOGIST's examining room, where she is given the ALSFRS-R questionnaire by a RESIDENT (played by LUCY). MICHELLE's walking has gotten worse in this scene, she heavily relies on the cane. MICHELLE shares one last thought while the scene is still frozen.

MICHELLE

The doctor says I might die in my sleep too.

The scene unfreezes.

LUCY

So how are you with stairs?

MICHELLE

Not great.

LUCY

Could you be more specific? Can you walk up them by yourself; do you have someone help you?

MICHELLE

Um, I would say...

RICHARD

She's doing fine, Doc. Handles stairs like a champ. Maybe a slow champ.

MICHELLE

I don't know, I try to avoid stairs. I guess I usually use my cane?

LUCY scribbles down an answer on her clipboard.

RICHARD

Don't sell yourself short, honey. She gets tired every now and again, but who doesn't?

LUCY erases her previous answer and writes down a new one.

MICHELLE

Eh, I would say I use the cane most times, especially if there's no ramp available.

LUCY

Alright, let me tally this up... Has your neurologist talked to you about some of the decisions you might have to make down the road, regarding your will, do-not-resuscitate codes, that sort of thing?

MICHELLE

(To AUDIENCE.)

Wow, they sure covered brutal honesty at her medical school.

(To LUCY.)

Yeah, he's covered it. My home nurse is walking us through the process.

LUCY

I would definitely take care of that as soon as possible. If you put it off and your speech goes, it can be very frustrating to explain what you want. 34.

The ALSFRS-R chart is flipped to 34. MICHELLE looks up at it and back to the RESIDENT.

MICHELLE

What?

LUCY

Your ALSFRS-R score is a 34.

RICHARD

That can't be right.

MICHELLE

That's two points in three months.

LUCY

Yes, sometimes we see little bumps in the road like these. Your neurologist can explain it to you in more detail.

MICHELLE

Bumps in the road? Let me see that chart, what did you mark me down on?

(She grabs it with her good hand.)

Walking AND stairs? You can't drop me down for both at the same time.

RICHARD

If she can't walk well, how is she going to go up the stairs? This test is redundant.

MICHELLE

Can I change my answer for the stairs one? I really don't ask David for help that often.

LUCY

Now, just to let you know, we consider a score of 30 or lower to be a sign of severe functional impairment. With the rate of your decline, that might happen in... maybe six months?

MICHELLE

I'd tack on a bit extra time, because I'm not really a 34. I'm more like a 34-and-a-half.

LUCY

The ALSFRS-R does not have half-points. You can discuss the chart more with your neurologist-

RICHARD

What kind of scientific measurement doesn't have half points? You geniuses count out pi to a million digits, but you can't give my daughter a half point?

LUCY

Sir, this isn't an exam, this is just a tool we use to-

RICHARD

To make my daughter feel like shit. You're what, a student, right? Mickie, don't listen to this woman, she's not a real doctor.

MICHELLE

Dad, she's just trying to do her a job.

LUCY

I am not a medical student; I am a resident. I graduated. I have a medical degree.

RICHARD

Yeah, from some dollar store in Tijuana!

MICHELLE looks at the AUDIENCE as if to say,  
"What does that even mean?"

RICHARD

Go ahead, fill out the paperwork on your fancy clipboard. We'll discuss it with our neurologist, who has already finished his training.

LUCY

Of course, sir.

Blackout.

#### SCENE ELEVEN

DAVID, MICHAEL, and RICHARD sing a "Happy Birthday" song for MICHELLE as the lights slowly come back up. MICHELLE staggers onstage with DAVID, using both him and her cane for support. Her walking is even worse now that she's drunk. DAVID has also had a few drinks. They are on the sidewalk outside a bar, waiting for their ride.

MICHELLE

Thank you for taking me out tonight. I feel normal for once.

DAVID

How else are we supposed to celebrate your 49th? Eat dinner with Richard and Michael? We see them enough as it is.

MICHELLE

I just... I love you, you know? You've been so good to me, especially after I came home crying about the whole 34 points thing. It takes a good man to get his grown wife Chicken McNuggets when she's sad, and I think that was really nice of you, and also, you're hot. Just beautiful.

DAVID

I love you too, Michelle.

RICHARD, as a POLICE OFFICER, approaches them.

RICHARD

Ma'am, have you been drinking this evening?

MICHELLE

Wha? No, sir, no, definitely not.

RICHARD

Are you aware that public intoxication is a misdemeanor?

MICHELLE

Of course I know it's a dismenearor.

DAVID

Look, we're waiting on our Uber, we'll be leaving soon.

RICHARD

Mmhm. Ma'am, I'm gonna have to ask you to walk in a straight line for me.

MICHELLE

Oh shit.

RICHARD

Excuse me?

DAVID

Michelle, zip it! I'm sorry, officer. You can't ask my wife to do that.

RICHARD

I think I can.

DAVID

Not because she could be drunk. Because she's sick. You ever hear of ALS? Ice bucket challenge, Stephen Hawking? That's what she's got.

RICHARD

Really now.

MICHELLE

Really! Sometimes I slur my words, I need this cane to walk, not just to look like Dr. House, although he is great, very handsome.

DAVID

Oh my gosh, Michelle, please stop talking. I swear to you, sir, it's the truth. She's had the disease for a couple years now, and this has been one of the only nights we've had to ourselves, without our kid, her dad, or her nurse.

RICHARD

If she's so sick, how is she able to drink?

MICHELLE

It's not my liver that's dying!

DAVID

Hypothetically, if she wanted to drink - and I'm not saying that she has or has not drunk alcohol on this evening - it would not affect her medications or illness. At least, a splurge every once in awhile is okay. If you need proof, I can call her neurologist's home phone.

RICHARD

I'm sorry, Mister..?

DAVID

You can call me David.

RICHARD

I'm sorry about your wife's diagnosis, David, but that doesn't change the law and it doesn't change my job. If she can't walk, there are other tests. I doubt ALS affects her ability to sing the alphabet backwards. She seems pretty chatty anyway.

DAVID

You're telling me. Look, our Uber's on the way. I'm sorry if we caused any problems, but we'll be gone soon.

The OFFICER does not respond.

DAVID

What, do you have a quota to fill or something? Can't you just write us down for a warning? I've heard those can count.

Silence. While MICHELLE is distracted, DAVID quietly speaks to the OFFICER.

DAVID

Listen, it's not the mark on her record that matters, it's the fine. We don't have the money for that right now. We just had to take out another mortgage on the house, and we still don't have a lot of cash hanging around. I know we could've thought about that before going out on the town, but my wife, Michelle, just got some pretty terrible news from the doctor, right before her birthday. And oh yeah, how old is she turning? The same age her mother was when she died. Michelle hasn't said a thing about it, but I know it's bothering her. How could it not? I wanted to do something nice for her birthday, but it is so hard to think of a special date that's cheap and doesn't require the use of an arm or a leg. I guess we could have watched another movie on Netflix. But my wife has spent so much of the past two years watching things happen and so little time actually being able to do anything. I... wow, I'm sorry, I certainly don't need to dump this on a police officer who's just trying to do his job.

RICHARD

(Calling to MICHELLE.)

Excuse, ma'am. Michelle? I need to see your driver's license.

DAVID sighs and waits with MICHELLE while her ID is processed. After a short wait, the OFFICER comes back.

RICHARD

Michelle, you're lucky I'm feeling generous today. I'm going to let you off with a warning. But if we catch either of you stirring up trouble again, things might not work out so nicely. Have a good night and a safe trip home.

The OFFICER nods to DAVID and exits.

MICHELLE

What, we don't get in trouble? Just like that? Yes, happy birthday to me!

Blackout.

SCENE TWELVE.

The STAGEHANDS flip the ALSFRS-R chart to 30. MICHELLE's right leg can move but can no longer be used for walking, so she needs her cane at all times. MICHELLE sits in front of a mirror as LUCY does her hair and makeup in the early morning.

LUCY

(Pulling MICHELLE's hair back.)

How does this look?

MICHELLE

(Pleased.)

Youthful. Can I ask you a question? I've heard a lot of stories about us dying folks making it a little longer than you'd think, to make it to some major life event. Like a parent lives until their kid's wedding, or a student makes it to the senior prom. Have you heard about that?

LUCY

(Applying a light coat of foundation to MICHELLE's face.)

I've not just heard about it, I've seen it happen. This one woman was completely bedridden, no longer eating food, sleeping most of the day away. She barely talked, but the one thing she would say to me was, "Anthony." One of her grandchildren was expecting, and she wanted to see her great-grandson. She loved her family so much. We thought she wouldn't make it. The due date was still a month away, and she was in such bad shape. I had to live at the house 24/7 at that point. But every morning, I'd give her fluids, adjust her position in bed, and ask her how her day was. She would say, "Anthony." And every night, I'd clean her up and wish her good night, and she would say, "Anthony." They brought the baby to her room, let her hold her first great-grandchild. Turned out Anthony was actually an Antonia. It had been so long since she smiled, but she bared the most beautiful grin for her great-granddaughter. The woman died a few days later, but she died happy.

MICHELLE

And you think she made it that far because she believed she could? Because she wanted to?

LUCY

Absolutely. You want lipstick?

MICHELLE

Yes, there should be a brighter pink in my makeup bag, think it's called Seductress?

LUCY

Aren't you saucy?

MICHELLE

I wish! I promise I'll shut up while you apply the lipstick, but I have to say: Your story about the grandmother... It was lovely, but it doesn't seem possible.

LUCY

(Applying lipstick.)

Michelle, you're religious. You know that miracles happen. But even if you weren't, I'd say the same thing. The power of belief cannot be underestimated. It can do incredible things. There's evidence of that in medical journals as well as religious texts. Why are you so curious about this all of a sudden? Do you have a goal in mind?

MICHELLE

I know it's stupid, but I'd really like to make it to my 50th birthday. Do what my mom didn't get the chance to do.

LUCY

That's not stupid; it's lovely.

MICHELLE

It's your job to say that.

LUCY

No, it's my job to help you. I think you have set an excellent goal, and I will do everything I can to help you achieve it.

(Finished with her makeup.)

There, how does this look? We've got all morning to go back and fix things.

MICHELLE

Wow. It's been awhile since I could do this. Maybe you've got a higher calling as a makeup artist.

LUCY

And miss out on all the sponge baths? No way.

MICHELLE

I'm sure they're a real treat.

LUCY

I live for them. If we're all done here, I can start getting breakfast ready.

MICHELLE

That would be great. Could we have pancakes?

LUCY

Sure thing. Do you need help getting up?

MICHELLE

No, I can do it.

LUCY

Alright. Take your time. If you need me, just shout.

MICHELLE

Yes, ma'am. And Lucy? Thank you, I feel really beautiful.

LUCY

You're welcome. I'll dress you up even nicer for your 50th.

Blackout.

SCENE THIRTEEN.

The STAGEHANDS flip the ALSFRS-R chart to 28. MICHELLE gets fatigued easier and occasionally has to catch her breath. In the living room, MICHELLE is resting on the couch while RICHARD sits in front of a laundry basket.

MICHELLE

So, I'm not blaming you for my shrunken shirts, but I am saying that you are a suspect, given that you are the one who handles all the laundry these days.

RICHARD

Maybe you gained weight.

MICHELLE

And that would mean Lucy has been doing her job, thank you.

RICHARD

I have been doing my laundry on my own for twenty years. I don't think I'm the one making mistakes.

MICHELLE rolls her eyes at the AUDIENCE.

MICHELLE

I'm sorry for accusing you, but since we're already here, you might as well show me your process.

RICHARD

(Sorting the laundry as he goes.)

Take out all the jeans, and put them in one pile.

MICHELLE

So far, so good.

RICHARD

I know. Then the underwear goes in its own pile, and the shirts in theirs, separating the lights and darks. I feel like a child explaining this. I am your father, you know.

MICHELLE

That's the problem. Okay, pretend you're loading the washer, what do you do?

RICHARD

I would take a stack, maybe these shirts here, put them in, add the detergent, set the timer for ninety minutes and put the temperature to hot.

MICHELLE

Ohmigod, Dad.

RICHARD

What?

MICHELLE

You nuked our shirts. I didn't even know the timer could go to ninety minutes! Do you do that for all the clothing?

RICHARD

How else am I supposed to kill the germs?

MICHELLE

You're not just killing the germs, you're killing the clothes. It is a good thing I don't wear lace these days.

RICHARD

Don't be lewd, Michelle.

MICHELLE

I would never. If it makes you feel better, you can wash the whites on hot. But only for 30 minutes.

RICHARD

That's disgusting.

MICHELLE

Our water bill is what's disgusting. Probably. I haven't checked. Go take the shirts!

RICHARD

You could remember to use your please and thank you's once in awhile.

MICHELLE

I feel like they mean less when I can't do the laundry even if I wanted to. (beat.) You're right, that sounds rude. I'm sorry. Will you please wash the shirts?

RICHARD

Yes, I will.

MICHELLE

Thank you.

RICHARD exits. MICHELLE chuckles to herself and waits for him to come back. As she waits, she gets a tickle in her throat and tries to clear it. No luck. She coughs a few times. No luck. She takes a breath of air that is loud and wheezy, and suddenly, she can barely get a wisp of air. She is choking on her own saliva and cannot scream for help. She tries to hit the table for noise to call back RICHARD, but it is not loud enough. She barely pushes a hardcover book off a side table, and when it clatters to the ground, RICHARD hears.

RICHARD (OFF)

Mickie?

(Running back onstage.)

Michelle! Okay, we've been through this with Lucy. Do you need the Heimlich?

(MICHELLE shakes her head no.)

Do you need an assisted cough?

("No.")

Water?

("Yes.")

I'll be right back.

RICHARD exits to the kitchen and runs back after a few painful seconds with a glass of water. He cradles MICHELLE as he pours the water a few drops at a time into her mouth.

RICHARD

There, there, come on...

MICHELLE holds up her right arm to signal him to stop. She takes a heavy breath, her upper body still held by RICHARD.

RICHARD

Are we okay?

MICHELLE does not respond, but instead lies there breathing.

RICHARD

Michelle?

MICHELLE

(Breaking down.)

I don't wanna die, Daddy.

RICHARD

(Holding his crying daughter.)

Hey, shhh, sweetheart. Everything's going to be fine.

MICHELLE

It was so scary. God, I don't want to choke to death. All I could think about was Mom.

RICHARD

I know, I know, Mickie. It's okay, you're safe now. Dad's here.

He kisses the top of her head and rubs her back.

RICHARD

Let's take a break from the chores for a bit, okay?

MICHELLE nods.

RICHARD

Okay.

He holds her. Black out.

SCENE FOURTEEN.

The STAGEHANDS flip the ALSFRS-R chart back to 41 and start setting up the next scene.

MICHELLE

(To STAGEHANDS.)

Really? You're gonna make me go through my diagnosis after all that? I was kind of hoping you forgot about it. More than a few people in the audience did. (Beat.) Not even a little smile? Just gonna walk past me without even looking?

RICHARD as the NEUROLOGIST stands in his examination room, facing the AUDIENCE.

MICHELLE is pulled by a STAGEHAND to sit with DAVID at dinner.

MICHELLE

Oh, you're gonna grab me now. Fine I'll do, the scene.

RICHARD

(As DOCTOR.)

You've been through quite a number of tests over the past year, but after the electromyography, we finally have an answer. Michelle, I am sorry to tell you that you have Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, also known as ALS. This disease is terminal. There is no cure.

MICHELLE

(To DAVID. Trying to hide her heartbreak.)

So the test came back. I um... I didn't do so good. Guess I shoulda studied harder.

DAVID

Oh God. God help us. I thought--

RICHARD

(Interrupting.)

Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis is also called Lou Gehrig's disease, after the famed baseball player that had it. You might also know it as the disease Stephen Hawking has. Or Steve Gleason. Mao Zedong was also diagnosed with ALS.

DAVID

I thought mostly men got the disease. You had such a low chance of having it.

RICHARD

While men have a 50% higher probability of developing ALS, it is not uncommon in women. We'll be tracking your disease's progression using a scale called the ALS Functional Rating Scale, Revised. We call it the ALSFRS-R. Right now, you're at a 41.

MICHELLE

I know. It sucks. They have this number system, 0-48. 48 being completely fine, 0 being... real bad. I'm already at a 41.

DAVID

So what does that mean? Is it a countdown? You... you die when it goes to 0?

## MICHELLE AND RICHARD

It's complicated.

## MICHELLE

(Lying.)

But the neurologist didn't go into details.

## DAVID

Well, you ought to know the details. This is your life. Do you even know what will happen to you as the number goes down?

## RICHARD

The motor neurons in your body are dying. Your left arm, the point of onset, will likely deteriorate first. The motor neurons will continue to die throughout your body, one limb at a time. If we follow the right course of treatment, we can prolong this process, so you can retain as much of your movement as possible.

The ALS will keep moving until it reaches your face and lungs. Most patients pass due to respiratory failure or pneumonia caused by aspiration of food or saliva. Often, patients will asphyxiate in their sleep, a painless process. We will do our best to keep you comfortable.

## MICHELLE

He told me, but I wasn't listening. You know those doctors, they drone on and on; it's hard to pay attention.

## DAVID

Michelle, this isn't a joke. We need to know as much as we can about this disease. We need to fight back. We need to keep you with us for as long as possible.

## RICHARD

The progression of symptoms varies from patient to patient and month to month. The average lifespan after onset is two to four years, but depending on a multitude of factors, a patient might live for ten more years or only a few months.

## MICHELLE

I know it's not a joke. But it's our reality now. We can't mope for the next however many years. We have to be strong, for my dad, for Michael...

## DAVID

(Sighing.)

Oh, how are we going to tell the family? Our friends?

MICHELLE

Let's take it one step at a time. Okay? I don't want to think too far ahead.

DAVID

(Not pushing the issue for now.)

Okay. (Beat.) Michael's gonna come around the house even more often now. Your dad might move in too - you know how pushy he is with his "help."

MICHELLE

Well, hey, bright side: Our nest won't be so empty any more.

DAVID

Mmhm. I think I preferred the peace and quiet.

MICHELLE

You say that like I'm peaceful and quiet. You done eating? I'm gonna get dinner cleaned up.

DAVID

Do you need any help?

MICHELLE

No, I think I can still handle a few dishes.

DAVID

Okay. Listen, we're going to get through this together. We're a team, you and me.

MICHELLE

In sickness and in health.

DAVID kisses her forehead and leaves. MICHELLE stays seated at the table, and, when she's sure DAVID is out of earshot, cries. She weakly punches the table with her left arm in her frustration. After a moment, she sighs and collects herself, wiping the tears from her eyes. MICHELLE stands up and slowly pushes her chair in. She grabs the plates with her good hand and takes them to the sink.

Black out.

## SCENE FIFTEEN

The STAGEHANDS flip the ALSFRS-R chart to 26. When the lights come up, we see a STAGEHAND pushing MICHELLE into a wheelchair. Her movements are now primarily limited to her upper body and right arm.

MICHELLE

Wow, you guys just do not quit, do you?

It's late at night in the master bedroom, only DAVID and MICHELLE are awake. MICHELLE is watching the TV while DAVID is hunched over insurance paperwork.

MICHELLE

Hey, you're missing the big reveal.

DAVID

Sorry, gotta get these forms filled out. Tell me what's happening?

MICHELLE

Can do. Okay, they're busting down the door, and - it was the son! The son the whole time!

DAVID

(Still working.)

Killed his own parents... God, can you imagine?

MICHELLE

We're gonna have to change the locks if Michael starts acting funny.

DAVID

Ah, he and Jess are such do-gooders. Besides, we don't have any money for them to take. They'd be better off getting your dad.

MICHELLE

I'll let them know. Is the insurance still not working out?

DAVID

It's covering some, but not enough. They don't want to up Lucy's hours to 55 a week.

MICHELLE

I don't think Lucy wants to up her hours to 55 a week. The not-walking dead are kind of boring.

(After DAVID doesn't laugh.)

Sorry. I know that's a lot of your day-to-day work.

DAVID

(For the hundredth time.)

Don't be sorry. It's not your fault.

MICHELLE

I know.

DAVID

Hey, it's about 11. Ready for bed?

MICHELLE

I guess.

DAVID puts away his laptop and walks towards MICHELLE, getting ready to hoist her into bed. She interrupts him.

MICHELLE

David, have you noticed you don't touch me anymore?

DAVID

(Joking.)

I'm about to touch you right now, if you'd cooperate.

MICHELLE

That's not what I mean.

DAVID

(Still trying to help MICHELLE out of her wheelchair.)

Then what do you mean?

MICHELLE

(Pulling out of his grasp.)

Stop.

DAVID

Michelle, I help you into bed, I help you out of the bed; I put you in your wheelchair, I take you out of your wheelchair. I don't know how much more touching I can do.

MICHELLE

That's different. You don't want to do those things.

DAVID

What? What does that even mean? Of course I want to help you.

MICHELLE

Then touch me like you want to touch me. Like you want me.

DAVID

You're being ridiculous.

MICHELLE

Then touch me. Touch me, David. Hug me, kiss me.

DAVID hesitates.

MICHELLE

You don't want to.

DAVID

Michelle -

MICHELLE

I can still feel, you know. I can't move, but I can feel.

DAVID

Michelle, you're my wife -

MICHELLE

Am I? Because I feel like your invalid.

DAVID

Stop this.

MICHELLE

You make love to your wife. You don't fuck an invalid.

DAVID

Don't say that about yourself.

MICHELLE

Do you know how disgusting I feel, every day? I feel like I am soaked constantly in my own shit and spit and urine. I am not a woman anymore. I am a child. A child with no freedom, a child who has to ask permission for everything. And I am so sick of it.

DAVID

Enough. Stop talking like this.

MICHELLE

Then touch me!

DAVID

No! You're going to bed.

DAVID picks up MICHELLE and places her into bed, as she thrashes her head and arm against him.

MICHELLE

Get off me! Let go of me, you bastard! I don't want to go to bed. I want to talk to you.

DAVID

(Leaving the room.)

Well, I don't want to talk. I need some air.

MICHELLE

Oh, real great thing to say to the woman who is going to suffocate to death!

DAVID exits. The STAGEHANDS are already starting to set up the next scene. One picks MICHELLE up out of the bed, places her back in the wheelchair.

MICHELLE

Let me guess, you're not talking either?

The STAGEHAND rolls her offstage. Blackout.

## SCENE SIXTEEN.

The STAGEHANDS flip the ALSFRS-R chart to 24.  
DAVID and RICHARD sit in the living room. DAVID is taking notes on a clipboard.

RICHARD

We should probably spruce the place up a bit. It's a little dreary. Maybe balloons, flowers?

DAVID

Yeah, that'd be cheery. She likes flowers.

MICHAEL enters the house.

RICHARD

And then, uh... oh, what else does a birthday have? Those little cone hats?

DAVID

Party hats? Those sound... tacky.

RICHARD

You said we should make it festive! Party hats are very festive; they're in all those birthday party pictures online.

DAVID

Yeah, did you check the age of the people wearing those hats? They aren't exactly in the double-digits yet.

RICHARD

Of course I saw their ages; I'm not blind!

MICHAEL enters the house as RICHARD is talking.

MICHAEL

Hey, Dad, Grandpa. What's going on?

DAVID

Well, look who it is. How have you been? It's been so long I hardly recognize you!

MICHAEL

It hasn't been that long. I've been busy with work.

DAVID

Mmhm. Your mother misses you.

MICHAEL

I know, I told you I've been trying to -

RICHARD

I'm happy to see you here, Mikey! We could use your perspective. We're planning a birthday party for Michelle.

MICHAEL

I guess it is coming up. She's gonna be thrilled.

DAVID

Yes, it is a special day for her, so we all need to be here to support her.

He eyes MICHAEL.

MICHAEL

Of course. What sort of notes have you taken?

DAVID

We just struck "party hats" off the list of ideas.

RICHARD

Hey, we have not decided yet. Michael, what do you think, hats or no hats?

MICHAEL spots LUCY entering from the kitchen, on her way to MICHELLE's room.

MICHAEL

Ooh, yikes, I think Lucy might know that answer better than me.

LUCY

The answer to what?

DAVID

Michelle's 50th birthday is coming up in a few months, and we are trying to plan her a party. We're still sorting out some of our ideas.

RICHARD

What are your opinions on party hats? David thinks they're "tacky."

LUCY

For Michelle, I think she'd love them. They're kind of goofy, like her.

RICHARD

(Offended.)

Goofy?

LUCY

But um... Why are you worrying about party hats right now? Her birthday is still three, four months away.

RICHARD

We're a family of planners, Lucy. Always looking ahead.

MICHAEL

Three months isn't that far away. Is there some reason we shouldn't be planning?

LUCY

She choked again on her meal last night. I thinned the milkshake a little, but that lowers her caloric intake. She's lost a lot of weight. I'm worried about her.

MICHAEL

What does that mean? You think Mom's going to die in a few months?

DAVID

Wait a minute, Lucy, you told her she could make it to her 50th.

LUCY

I told her she *could* make it, not that she would make it. I know that sounds like a lie but -

RICHARD

Oh, it definitely does. Ever since Labor Day, all she's talked about is birthday-this, birthday-that. If you thought she might not make it, why would you tell her she could?

LUCY

Because I don't know whether she will or won't! I'm not qualified enough to say that. I told her I would help her make it to her 50th, and every scrap of hope pushes her one step closer to that.

DAVID

But now if she doesn't make it, she'll be devastated.

LUCY

I didn't know what else to say to her. I'm sorry. But since you're all here, there's something else I need to talk to you about. I don't think it's safe for her to stay in your bed any more. She needs a hospital bed.

DAVID

You're kidding me. She's gonna hate that.

LUCY

I know. But with a bed like that, we can put up the railings so she can't fall and injure herself. The height is adjustable, which means we can lower her risk of choking at night.

DAVID

There's no space for that in our bedroom.

LUCY

I think a good space for it might be out here. She spends a lot of time here during the day anyway; we won't have to worry about transferring her from her bed to her chair and back again. That's another risk lowered.

DAVID

But we've shared that room since we got married. I would hate to change that now, so late...

RICHARD

David, you've been nagging me left and right to be more rational, but now you're the one getting sentimental? It's just another room. A room isn't worth her health.

DAVID

I don't know...

MICHAEL

Grandpa's right. We need to do whatever we can to keep Mom alive.

DAVID

So you can make up all the time you've skipped out on her?

LUCY

I just wanted to bring it up, so you could start thinking about it. We'll talk more later; I have to get Michelle dressed. There's breakfast in the oven; you should hear the timer go off when they're ready.

She exits.

MICHAEL

Can you stop guilt-tripping me in front of everyone?

DAVID

I'm only stating the facts. Right, Richard?

RICHARD

Oh, I wouldn't want to get into the middle of things. But you have stopped coming by as often.

MICHAEL

It's different for me. I have my own house and family. You two live here. I'm trying to balance everything, but it's hard.

DAVID

It wasn't so difficult when she could still go on adventures with you.

MICHAEL

Dad, don't... (beat.) I just don't like seeing her like this.

Blackout.

## SCENE SEVENTEEN

The STAGEHANDS flip the ALSFRS-R chart to 22.  
MICHELLE is functionally paralyzed in all of her limbs.  
She is in her wheelchair in the living room reading a book.  
RICHARD sits nearby, reading the newspaper.

MICHELLE

Page.

RICHARD flips the page of her book.

MICHELLE

Thank you.

RICHARD

Save your strength, Mickie; you don't gotta thank me. I can flip a book page every now and again.

They continue reading.

MICHELLE

(To AUDIENCE.)

I keep reading to comfort my dad. He doesn't like it when I just stare off into space, thinking. Creeps him out. So I sit here and think about some of the things I miss, like, oh, I don't know, sprinting through the burning-hot sand on a beach? I sit here, and I think about that, and when I feel like enough time has passed, I ask him to turn the page.

It's funny though. With a disease like ALS, one that takes so damn long, you forget about it. It's the little moments that I notice it; when I want to reach up and scratch my nose or tap my foot when I'm bored. I'm not paralyzed in my dreams, you know? So if you're like me and you hate thinking about the future anyway, you forget there's an end-date. Why stress about something that you can't control? I'd rather just let it go. Let it surprise me. But then that disease takes one more thing, and like a screaming child, it steals your attention. You try to focus on your day-to-day, but all you can hear are those grating cries.

I guess what I'm trying to say is, I really miss solid foods. Man, I could go for a thick slab of prime rib right now.

(To RICHARD.)

Page.

RICHARD flips the page. After a few more moments, DAVID and MICHAEL enter from the kitchen.

MICHAEL

Hey, Mom, how are you?

MICHELLE

Doin' fine, sweetheart. A little hungry.

DAVID

Honey, Lucy and Michael and I were talking, and -

MICHELLE

(To AUDIENCE.)

Here he goes with “Honey” again.

DAVID

We think maybe we should set up a bed for you out here, in the living room.

MICHELLE

What? No.

MICHAEL

I know it sounds bad, but Lucy was saying how if we put a hospital bed here, you wouldn't have to worry about being transferred back and forth from the wheelchair as often. And you could stay where the family does!

MICHELLE

A hospital bed, are you kidding me? No, absolutely not.

RICHARD

That sounds like it might be safer.

DAVID

It is, she'd be much less likely to fall and hurt yourself.

MICHELLE

(To AUDIENCE.)

“She”? I'm still here!

(To DAVID.)

No, that bed is my last thing.

DAVID

What do you mean, “last thing”?

MICHELLE

It's my privacy, my personal space.

RICHARD

Mickie, don't you think your safety is more important?

MICHELLE

Don't Mickie me. David, please. That has been our bedroom for almost thirty years. We've kissed and fought and made love in there. That's our space.

RICHARD groans.

DAVID

Your father's right.

MICHELLE

I don't care. I am not losing this thing too.

DAVID

I know you don't want to do this, but sometimes the thing you need is not the thing you want.

MICHAEL

Mom, please, it's for the best.

MICHELLE

(To MICHAEL.)

Did your father put you up to this? You're normally on my side.

RICHARD

No one's on anyone's side. Don't be so childish about this.

MICHELLE

"Don't be so--"? Ugh! How can I not be childish, when I need someone's help to do everything? I cannot feed myself, I cannot dress myself, I cannot clean myself, I can't even have five minutes in the bathroom to myself. And now you're kicking me out of my bed?

(To DAVID.)

You would kick me out of our bed? Do you not want me in there anymore? Am I too painful a reminder? Does my ventilator keep you up at night? Tell me. I wish you would tell me. I wish you would be honest with me. I wish you would think of me as your wife, and not three damn letters .

RICHARD

Don't be dramatic, Michelle.

DAVID

Of course we don't think of you that way.

MICHAEL

We're doing this for you.

The STAGEHANDS roll a hospital bed into the living room.

MICHELLE

(To STAGEHANDS.)

No, what are you doing? Stop! I said I didn't want this. Stop treating me like I'm too sick to think for myself.

The STAGEHANDS prep the bed, inclining the head of it and plumping the pillows. One STAGEHAND lifts her out of her wheelchair and places her into the bed.

MICHELLE

Put me down! I said no! I am not my disease. I am not ALS!

A STAGEHAND places her book in her lap, opening it to a page.

MICHELLE

(Running out of breath.)

I am not ALS! I am not ALS! I am not ALS. I am not ALS...

MICHELLE weakly thumps her head against the backboard in vain. Eventually, she settles and stares at her book. After a moment, she says:

MICHELLE

Page.

Blackout. In the darkness, DAVID, MICHAEL, and RICHARD somberly sing "Happy Birthday." As they sing, MICHELLE shouts out.

MICHELLE

Are you kidding me? What, the play is over? I lose my bed and I die and that's it? No, that's not how this goes. Bring the lights back up!

The lights come back on. The STAGEHANDS are starting to clear the scenery. MICHELLE, newly invigorated, gets out of bed to stop them.

MICHELLE

I don't know why you're putting everything up. We're not done.

She grabs a STAGEHAND by the shoulders.

MICHELLE

Listen to me. I know you hear me. We're not done. Go put streamers up or something; we're having a party.

The STAGEHAND exits and returns with decorations.  
Another STAGEHAND puts party hats on the boys.

MICHELLE

Invite Lucy. She needs to be here for my 50th birthday party.

LUCY is brought onstage and posed by a  
STAGEHAND. She also gets a party hat.

MICHELLE

Beautiful. This is how it should be. Why do we have to end every story of terminal illness with the death scene? It's not a surprise, and it's not the pinnacle of my life - I would hope not, at least.

When you're watching someone fall apart from their illness, it is so easy to say, "Give up." You've thought it: "I would never want to live with that disease." Well, a lot of folks do, and they are thankful for every damn second of their life. The loss of my movement has been worse than I could have imagined. I wouldn't wish it on any one. It tore at my muscles, my mind, my family.

But I am still so lucky. Fifty years worth of lucky, at least. My mom, she doesn't get a play. People don't listen to her story. There's no end, no closure. At the very least, I get that. And I am not throwing away my ending on some depressing Happy Birthday dirge. I mean, seriously? You think my dad is the best choice to sing us home for the night?

Even if these guys were an award-winning musical trio, I still wouldn't end my story that way, not at my death. Because I am not ALS. I am Michelle: mother, daughter, wife, and badass. I fought to be here today. I fought every day.

It's true that I am going to die eventually, maybe sooner than I would have hoped. But I am not leaving this world alone. I have my boys to guide me to the other side, and I know there will be at least one incredible woman waiting for me when I finally get there. Until then, let's have one hell of a party.

MICHELLE settles back into her wheelchair. The scene unfreezes.

DAVID, MICHAEL, RICHARD, AND  
LUCY

(Singing the last line cheerfully.)

Happy birthday to you!

Blackout. End of show.