Three Damn Letters

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Three Damn Letters

A play by
Katherine Ammon
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHARACTER NAME</th>
<th>BRIEF DESCRIPTION</th>
<th>AGE</th>
<th>GENDER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MICHELLE</td>
<td>The Patient with ALS</td>
<td>Late 40s</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DAVID</td>
<td>Her Husband</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MICHAEL</td>
<td>Her Son</td>
<td>Mid 20s</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RICHARD</td>
<td>Her Father</td>
<td>Early 70s</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LUCY</td>
<td>Her Certified Nursing Assistant</td>
<td>Late 30s</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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.

(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 questions 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.

MICHELINE
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
Mmmh. 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.)
“WHEEZ”E.” 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 before--

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.
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?

Yep, down the hatch every morning.

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.

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.

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?

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

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.

(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.

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 misdemeanor.

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 drank 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 anymore.

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
Mhm. 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 anymore. 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 anyone. 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.