

THE MACHINE

by
Matthew Libby

CONTACT

Michael Finkle, WME
11 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10010
mfinkle@wmeagency.com
212-903-1144

Luke Virkstis, WME
11 Madison Avenue
New York, NY 10010
lvirkstis@wmeagency.com
212-903-1337

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CHARACTERS

(in order of appearance)

MAX, 32. A shark in a sweater. Confident, and preternaturally talented.

LANEY, 57. A great creative mind. Uses morbid humor to mask her grief.

CHELSEA, 58. A fixer. Used to be a hippy.

ROY, 61. A rock star in academia. And knows it.

PLACE

In and around a prestigious, medium-sized university

TIME

Soon

NOTES

A slash (/) indicates where the next speech begins.

In general, pace is brisk and unrelenting. Silences should feel meaningful.

Despite the descriptions I've written, the set can be as detailed or as abstract as necessary.

Byron, the machine, while inanimate, is a character, and its design should reflect that.

“So much has been done, exclaimed the soul of Frankenstein – more, far more, will I achieve; treading in the steps already marked, I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation.”

- *Frankenstein*, Mary Shelley

“Anything you do,
Let it come from you,
Then it will be new...”

- *Sunday in the Park with George*, James Lapine and Stephen Sondheim

ACT ONE

MOMENT: MAX

MAX BARNETT (32) stands before us, presenting at a shareholders meeting.

MAX

The human brain is the most powerful computer on the planet.

And make no mistake. It is a computer.

I know what you're thinking: "What the heck is this guy talking about? My brain is not a Mac or a PC." Hey -- I agree! So what do I mean when I say the human brain is a computer?

Well, I'm saying that it computes! It takes in the world --

(tapping his nose, mouth, and ears as he says:)

-- using the most sophisticated sensors known to man -- swirls that information around in the lump of organic material between our ears, and then leads us...

... To action.

... To creation.

Believe me when I tell you: A computer wrote *Hamlet*. A computer painted the Sistine Chapel. A computer -- well, four -- composed "Hey Jude." All of the scientific literature says the same thing: our biological brains play by the same rules as any electronic computer. There are certain limitations on what they can and can't do. Certain things they're better at than other computers.

But all computers, our brains just as our laptops, have one final flaw -- they die. They die, and for *us* what that means is, all the information within them is lost.

Forever.

Unretrievable.

All the information swirling around that organic computer in our skulls, everything it could've been, everything it could've *created* -- gone.

Does that seem fair?

What if we could know what Emily Dickinson would write when she learned about our ever-increasing lifespans?

What William Shakespeare would have to say about the state of modern romance?

I know *I'm* curious to find these answers.

Artists have to die. But their work doesn't.

And I'm happy to announce to all my shareholders...

...that *this* is the problem Athena will be tackling next.

SCENE ONE

Laney Chamberlain's office in the Department of English. The room is an absolute mess: papers strewn all over the place, multiple dirty coffee cups, etc.

LANEY (57) sits behind her desk. CHELSEA (58) stands on the other side.

The two of them stare at each other, Laney's mouth slightly open.

There's a moment of silence, then...

LANEY

... No!

CHELSEA

Laney.

LANEY

No fucking way!

CHELSEA

I wish I could say I were asking.

Silence.

LANEY

Why me?

CHELSEA

He approached the department / with--

LANEY

Right, yeah, I got it. *Why me?*

CHELSEA

He asked for you. You specifically.

LANEY

Why would he ask for me specifically?

CHELSEA

You'd have to ask him.

LANEY

And you're behind it? The department's behind it?

CHELSEA

(nods)

Tell me why you're not.

LANEY

Because it's impossible! Because it's barbaric. Because my brain can't be put into a computer!

CHELSEA

Well, why don't you give it a shot and we can know for sure.

LANEY

It's plagiarism.

CHELSEA

Plagiarism?

LANEY

Yeah.

CHELSEA

I would call it a miracle of interdisciplinary innovation myself.

LANEY

Oh, *come / on* --

CHELSEA

It could bring great publicity to the department, to the School of Humanities as a whole. It would show we're taking a step into the future.

LANEY

The future!

CHELSEA

Yes.

LANEY

The future where a machine can spit out poetry? *Our* poetry, *our* voices? The future where both of our jobs are obsolete?

CHELSEA

The future where poetry *isn't* obsolete. The future where our work -- our voices -- live on even after we... stop writing.

Beat. Laney looks down. Chelsea sits, comforting...

CHELSEA

Have you made any progress, Lane?

LANEY

Oh, you know. The work's out there somewhere. I'm trying my best to find it. Or waiting for it to find me...

This is clearly a topic that's hard for Laney to talk about, so Chelsea changes the subject. She leans forward and smiles at Laney.

CHELSEA

Remember when I could write five poems every morning before breakfast?

LANEY

(grins)

You'd be up hours before I was.

CHELSEA

Those were the good times. Total complete freedom.

LANEY

Yes, they were...

CHELSEA

What I would give to write five poems before breakfast again...

LANEY

I bet you still could!

CHELSEA

No... that time is dedicated solely to my elliptical, unfortunately.

LANEY

I never could understand how you did it. Back in the day.

CHELSEA

It was probably the coffee. Drank it by the gallon at the time, which means it has absolutely no effect on me these days.

CHELSEA

(chuckling)

Shut up...

Her laugh dies, then -- Chelsea leans in.

CHELSEA

Just sit with Max Barnett, okay? I hear he's charming.

LANEY

Can I ask you something, Chels?

CHELSEA

Shoot.

LANEY

If you're so enamored with this Max Barnett guy, why don't you take part in his insipid project?

CHELSEA

(a sad beat)

Because he didn't ask for me.

LANEY

Tell him I'm not interested. Tell him you'll do it instead.

CHELSEA

It was you or nothing.

LANEY

Why in the world is he so set on me...? Why is he so set on ripping me off?

CHELSEA

I wouldn't call it that. He wants to make sure your work survives.

LANEY

I would sure hope my work survives without the help of some twenty-something *computer geek*.

CHELSEA

Your voice, then.

LANEY

My voice will be fine, thank you very much.

Beat. Chelsea's tone changes.

CHELSEA

Look, I -- you need to do this.

LANEY

... What are you -- no, I don't.

CHELSEA

... I wasn't lying before when I said I wasn't really asking.

LANEY

The hell's that mean?

CHELSEA

Look, you're -- there's a feeling within -- after your student evaluations last semester -- which obviously were not *entirely* your fault -- there's a feeling within the department that this... y'know, this might be good for you.

LANEY

... Good for me?

CHELSEA

Professionally, I mean.

Long silence.

LANEY

Is this / a tenure thing--?

CHELSEA

I don't mean that you -- what?

LANEY

Are you saying that if I don't meet with Max Barnett I'm off tenure track?

CHELSEA

What? No. I'm -- no!

LANEY

It sounds like that's what you're saying.

CHELSEA

Laney, of course not --

LANEY

Then how would this be professionally good for me?

Chelsea considers the best way to approach this...

CHELSEA

Look, I'm not saying *I* feel this way, I'm just relaying the rest of the department's sentiment last time I sat down with the other heads.

LANEY

Which was...?

CHELSEA

That your work ethic is being called into question.

A loaded silence.

LANEY

Oh fuck them.

CHELSEA

Laney, it's not / just --

LANEY

Fuck them! Who was driving that conversation? Roy? I knew Roy's out for me, / but *jesus* --

CHELSEA

Roy? Why do you think Roy's -- it doesn't matter.

LANEY

It does! Who are they to lecture me about work ethic?

CHELSEA

They weren't *lecturing* you, they were saying these things *to me / in confidence* so please just let me --

LANEY

"Work ethic" means nothing to these people.

CHELSEA

Do you want me to tell you what they said? What *they* -- "these people," your *colleagues* -- said? Do you want me to elaborate?

LANEY

I have no idea what the hell they're on about, so go ahead.

CHELSEA

The concern is that you don't care. You're late to every meeting, you don't respond to emails for weeks on end, you're consistently days late on your end-of-term grades. Students complained last semester about missed office hours, classes cut twenty, thirty minutes short, your TA teaching over half the lectures. And you haven't written anything in almost five years. Those are the big things.

Silence.

LANEY

I'm writing something right now. I've / been writing a new volume for a year, you *just* asked me about it.

CHELSEA

Published anything. Published. That's what I meant, sorry. Not even in a magazine.

LANEY

Nothing's been ready -- you know all this!

CHELSEA

I do, because I talk to you. But this is a university and universities like their professors putting things out there so the university can slap its name on those things, and --

LANEY

I'm not going to publish my tier-two poems just because the university wants me to.

CHELSEA

Then publish your tier-one stuff.

LANEY

I will, when it *is* tier-one stuff. And as far as the student complaints go, I don't excuse any of it but you of all people / know what was going on and the department does too, so how dare they?

CHELSEA

I know. I know. Laney, I know. But you have to understand how it looks to them. They didn't know Beth like I did. They didn't know your daughter.

Laney is quiet. She looks down...

LANEY

I can't just bounce back, Chelsea.

CHELSEA

... I know.

LANEY

I keep remembering her. Even just walking home. She's there, all around, always.

(beat)

Sometimes I wish I was with her again. The world has enough sad poets.

CHELSEA

Don't say that.

(beat)

Laney. Don't say that.

A moment of silence... then Laney nods.

CHELSEA

Is it time to go back to counseling? The group...?

LANEY

(shakes her head)

I -- I thought if I started this new collection... I thought if I started writing these poems to her... it'd be better --

CHELSEA

I get it.

LANEY

-- but I still don't even know what to say.

(beat)

Maybe there's nothing to say.

(beat, a joke)

Maybe I should get Max Barnett's computer to figure out what to say.

CHELSEA

(not a joke)

Maybe you should.

Chelsea touches Laney's knee. Laney wipes her eyes.

LANEY

Leave his card. I'll think about it. Taking the meeting that is, nothing more.

Chelsea leaves a card on Laney's desk.

CHELSEA

At the very least, I hope this opens up some channels of inspiration for you, Lane.

LANEY

It'd just be a meeting. I have no plans to sell out my mind.

CHELSEA

... You should see how much he's willing to pay you.

Chelsea goes. Laney sits there. She picks up Max's card.

SCENE TWO

A conference room somewhere in the Department of English. Max has taken over the space. His jacket is on the back of his chair, both a coffee mug and metal water bottle on the table, papers strewn about, etc.

Laney sits uneasily on the other side of the table.

Between them is THE MACHINE -- a state of the art computer with a massive external hard-drive and printer, a weird looking box attached to it by a thick cable, and a neural cap (a mesh web covered in sensors) protruding from that. It's a clunky and ominous set of machinery.

Max is standing behind his chair, leaning on it. He defaults to positions of high status.

MAX

First of all, I gotta say -- big fan.

LANEY

That's nice, thank you.

MAX

Just -- all of it. Huge fan.

LANEY

Okay, right on. Thanks.

MAX

(beat)

I'm a little star-struck, to be honest.

LANEY

Oh, well --

MAX

That's a new feeling for me.

LANEY

Because...

MAX

Well, because --

LANEY

Because people are usually star-struck around you?

MAX

(beat, chuckles)

Well, I wouldn't say that. I just usually don't get star-struck. I suppose what I meant is thank you for meeting with me. You must have a packed schedule, so believe me, this is much appreciated. Athena's really excited about getting Byron off the ground.

LANEY

... Byron?

MAX

Sorry, it's what I'm calling the prototype.

He's talking about the machine. Laney considers this.

LANEY

After Lord Byron, I presume.

MAX

You got it.

LANEY

... A man becomes a machine.

MAX

It's almost too perfect: what with Lord Byron being Ada Lovelace's dad and all. Think about it. The father of poetry shares DNA with the mother of computer science! Artistic hope, technological innovation -- it's all there in the Byron name. What we're hoping is that we can do both Lord Byron and Ada Lovelace justice.

His "pitch" language is not going unnoticed by Laney...

LANEY

Are you usually this involved in your company's projects? Coming down to universities, handling the machinery yourself?

MAX

It's been a while.

LANEY

What brings you back into the fold?

MAX

(shrugs)

I missed working with my hands.

LANEY

See, I was under the impression you tech magnates living in your, uh, *glass castles* didn't even know how to construct the technology you were pushing. That you were the, y'know, vision-men, that you had your army of minions to do the engineering.

MAX

Not me. Spending my days in sleek, soulless conference rooms talking about things I forget five minutes later only gets me going so much.

LANEY

I know the feeling.

MAX

Look, Laney, one of the things I appreciate about you is how real you are with your readers -- so I'm going to be real with you right now. I founded Athena because I truly believe that people don't want the things that shape their future until they have them. And I had a vision for what I wanted to see in the future, things that would bring us joy and meaning, stemming from the kind of research that no one else was doing...! But VCs -- sorry, *venture capitalists* -- are a fickle bunch, and the concessions start early and often. Don't get me wrong, I'm proud of Athena's enhanced search engine and everything we've accomplished. But I wanted to get back to my roots. Cutting edge research. Gazing into the future. So I gave my board an ultimatum, and here I am.

LANEY

Ultimatum?

MAX

Ah, I won't get into it...

LANEY

Okay.

MAX

(beat)

Basically, it was: Let me spend a small portion of last year's profits doing my own project, or I resign.

LANEY

Seems risky.

MAX

I'm valuable to the company. They gave me less than I asked for, but I can slap Athena's name on the project, hire a small team of engineers and researchers, talk it up in the press and at our shareholders meeting.

LANEY

So when you said earlier that Athena was excited about getting it off the ground...

Max gives a knowing smile -- she's seen through his bullshit.

MAX

I'm excited about getting it off the ground. Look, it's a gamble, I know that. But everything that's being done for the first time is. So we'll just have to see how it pays off.

LANEY

Look, Mister Barnett --

MAX

Max, please.

LANEY

Excuse me?

MAX

Call me Max.

LANEY

Okay. Well, look. I just want to make sure you don't get the wrong idea from me. This meeting was insisted upon by my department. I appreciate you coming down here and setting all this up, but I'm not interested in working on this project with you.

MAX

Oh.

LANEY

But since I'm here... I'll be the first to admit that I'm not exactly technically proficient, but... I take it you've found a way to have Byron *understand* my poems, somehow, and will try to make it spit out something that has the same word frequency as my work and so on. But poetry -- my poetry -- is not simply certain words in a certain order. I've been doing this for well over thirty years... trying to learn something new every day... *failing*, a lot. My mind is not a -- a math equation, a problem to be solved. I'm sorry you've wagered your reputation in an ultimatum but if you want my advice, it seems like the right thing to do is to accept that machines can do certain things that humans can't do, and humans can do certain things that machines can't do. And believe me, writing poetry falls squarely into the latter category. That *machine* is not going to work.

She gets up to go...

Max slides a small note of paper across the table.

MAX

Here's a number. It's how much Athena is willing to pay you.

Laney stops. Remembers what Chelsea said. A moment of hesitation.

LANEY

I'm not going to look at that.

MAX

It's tempting.

LANEY

That's why.

MAX

... Alright. Can't say I didn't try.

LANEY

Have a nice day, Mister Barnett.

When she's almost out the door --

MAX

Y'know, if you have a couple minutes, I'd love to keep picking your brain. I blocked out some time here, so...

LANEY

Picking my brain? About what?

MAX

Well, it's not every day I sit across from a writer of your stature! Maybe you can help guide my thinking for the next poet I approach. Maybe we'll just have a nice chat. Two worlds colliding for a brief moment, something like that... I have a particular interest in *expertise*, no matter the field, and -- I don't know. Only if you have time.

Laney considers this. Looks at her watch. Returns to her seat.

LANEY

Okay. I have five minutes.

MAX

Super!

They stare at each other. Neither seems to know what to say.

MAX

Hey! I know what you can help me with.

He rifles through a stack of papers on his desk.

LANEY

Oh. No, Mister Barnett, I really don't --

MAX

Don't worry, this is just a bit of professional opinion. I've been doing so much research the past couple months, pouring over archives of like every major poet you can think of, printing everything I can find... even just, like, the doodles in the margins of notebooks... and before I feed anything into the machine I want make sure I've got everything straight. How well do you know Lord Byron?

LANEY

He's one of my favorites.

MAX

So you could recognize his more obscure work?

LANEY

Most likely... No guarantees. But anything I would recognize could surely be found online --

MAX

Laney, I made kinda lot of money on Athena's search engine. I'd take your opinion over its, every time.

LANEY

(flattered, despite herself)

... Okay.

Max hands her a sheet of paper.

MAX

This is the poem. Someone on my team pulled it from a notebook in the National Archives. No author. A linguistic analysis seems to be pointing to Lord Byron, but I want to make sure.

LANEY

... Alright. I'll do my best.

Laney picks up the paper, reads it.

It takes her a bit of time to do this, maybe thirty seconds.

Max gets up and walks around the room, waiting expectantly.

Finally, Laney puts down the sheet and looks up.

LANEY

Nope, not Byron.

MAX

No? How sure are you?

LANEY

Hundred percent. It's a beautiful little poem but there's no Byron in there. No bad boy streak, no Romantic tendencies. It's not whole-bodied like Byron's work. I can see why a linguistic analysis might lean towards him -- it may be one of his imitators -- but I wouldn't categorize this under him.

MAX

... "Beautiful little poem," huh?

LANEY

Yes, but -- something's missing and...

Something dawns on her. She looks over at Byron, the machine. Max follows her gaze, smiling.

A long moment.

Laney jumps to her feet.

LANEY

Okay, Mister Barnett, we're done here --

MAX

Byron was under the setting of its namesake. I gave it the prompt "love" and it printed that in fifteen seconds.

LANEY

You've made your point, good luck with your math problem --

MAX

Maybe it doesn't read like Lord Byron, but -- you said the poem was beautiful.

LANEY

I didn't --

MAX

You did -- you said "beautiful little poem."

LANEY

No, but I --

MAX

I'm quite certain you did.

LANEY

Stop interrupting me. I did say that, but only because I thought it was a poem written by...

MAX

A human being?

LANEY

Well, yes!

MAX

Wasn't it? If it realistically sounded like a human writer, if all signs pointed to that, if it felt like human emotions, a human voice in your mind, who's to say whether it was or not?

LANEY

Anyone. Because it wasn't written by a human.

MAX

If you never learned that its author was a computer, you would've left this room thinking you had read a "beautiful little poem" by some unknown contemporary of Lord Byron.

LANEY

Well, yes, *because you tricked me*.

MAX

I don't think that's what happened.

LANEY

What do you think happened?

MAX

I think you got your first evidence that I'm onto something, and that's weird. It was weird for me the first time / also --

LANEY

Well, of course it's weird! But not because I think you've resurrected Byron's mind or soul or spirit or anything like that...

(beat, composing herself)

I was poet laureate of this state a while back -- I'm sure you know -- whatever. I went to over eighty elementary schools during my tenure, and led workshops in poetry and self-growth. Go to those schools, watch those eight-year-olds grapple with their emotions and put them down in words, and come out the other side with a smile on their faces, and *then* tell me that the artistic process, artistic voice -- is just a pattern of ones and zeroes.

MAX

That might be true -- but you said yourself the poem is beautiful.

Laney pauses -- she doesn't have a retort for that. She gets back on track.

LANEY

... You want my expertise, Mister Barnett? Lord Byron was a Romantic. He believed that the arts were fundamentally innate to human nature. He would be *appalled* by this.

MAX

But are you impressed?

LANEY

I don't like being lied to, Mister Barnett.

MAX

Are you impressed by the poem you read?

LANEY

... Look, even if I were --

MAX

Here's the reality: Byron is on the path towards success. It's well on its way. It's working. That's a fact. It's working. The question is, how *well* can we make it work?

LANEY

I don't know, I --

MAX

But the other thing is, you were right. It doesn't read like Lord Byron yet. It reads unfinished, incomplete, an early draft.

LANEY

(a concession)

... Like an imitator.

MAX

Exactly! And that's because Lord Byron's dead! Whitman's dead! Shakespeare, Dickinson, Wordsworth -- they're all dead!

LANEY

And?

MAX

Well -- you're not! You're Laney Chamberlain, and you're standing right in front of me! Don't you feel like the world is *lucky* to have your voice?

The sentiment stops Laney in her tracks, as she considers that question for herself.

MAX

If I could sit Lord Byron down and hook him up to the machine so I could see what was going on inside his brain, what I'm missing, I would. I'll never be able to. But that's okay -- because you're here. I'm not trying to rip you off. I want you to *see yourself* in the works Byron creates. That's the whole point.

LANEY

But... why me? Why is it so important that it's me?

Max sits. A long moment of silence, then...

MAX

(simple, not sentimental)

Look, I didn't want to... I'll be honest with you. *Actually* honest this time. My mom got sick when I was twelve. Leukemia. Three years into it, she decided she wanted to end things on her own terms. She gave me an envelope, went off to chemo, and never came back. And inside the envelope were three sheets of paper. Three poems. One called "Saying Goodbye," one called "Growing Old," and the last called "The Future." It took several years before I was okay again, but those poems helped. My mom always knew exactly what I needed to hear, and *your poems* were exactly what I needed at that moment. Your voice, telling me those things, was what I needed. I can't fathom the idea of a person needing to hear something and not having the means to hear it. And that not being a problem... is what I want to give people.

Silence. Laney stands there, digesting this.

LANEY

Wow. I'm so sorry, Max. For your loss. I'm like all writers, I suppose, in that I always feel like I'm shouting into the void...

Laney takes a deep breath. Looks at the machine. Then back at Max.

She walks over to the table, lifts up the piece of paper face down on the table with her salary.

She considers. Then makes a decision.

LANEY

...What exactly would you need me to do?

Max looks up.

A moment of silence.

MOMENT: CHELSEA

Chelsea stands before us, holding a set of note cards which she occasionally refers to.

CHELSEA

Hello.

Many of you know me, but to introduce myself to those who don't -- my name is Chelsea Peterson.

I'll start by thanking you for considering me for this position. Serving as a professor and administrator in the School of Humanities --

-- what's that?

(nervously chuckles at someone in her crowd)

Yes, my husband Roy is indeed sitting right there.

Yes -- Yeah --

That's funny, yes.

(desperate to move on)

Anyway... I'm not here to talk about Roy today. I'm here to talk about *my* vision for how to lead as Dean of the School of Humanities after *he* steps down.

I'm a poet, which means, for much of my early adult life, I made a living -- or tried to -- observing the world, noticing trends, and relying on my instinct to tell the truth about those trends.

I've been in academia for fifteen years now, but I know I've retained the same keen eye. And the trend in academia that interests me most? Simple: It's that, in every case, looking at a problem from multiple points of view, multiple disciplines, will give us a clearer sense of that problem than looking at it from just one.

It's no secret that the amount of diplomas conferred by the School of Humanities has been going down over the past few years. It's no secret that we offer no classes nor degree programs that interact with the School of Engineering, and only a handful with the School of Social and Natural Sciences. What *does* seem to be a secret is that the desire for such classes and programs is one of the three most common items of feedback by graduating seniors -- *it has* to be a secret because this feedback has yet to be addressed.

I believe these problems and others can be solved by simply looking at the problem from another point of view. I am the only current professor in the School of Humanities who has coauthored a paper outside of the School. My collection of poems entitled *Reactor*, published ten years ago, was inspired by my research into nuclear fusion.

And recently, I set up a meeting between Athena CEO Max Barnett and Laney Chamberlain -- former poet laureate, National Book Award winner, and current university faculty -- and am proud to announce that they will be working on a project together. More info on that to come.

(beat)

Simply put: There is no one more qualified to lead the School of Humanities into the future than I am.

SCENE THREE

A coffee shop on campus.

Chelsea sits at a table, sipping a to-go cup and tapping her leg nervously.

ROY (61) comes up behind her, kisses her on the head.

ROY

Hi / honey--

CHELSEA

(jumping)

AH!

(looking up)

Oh my god, / Roy.

ROY

Woah. What, am I not allowed to kiss you now?

CHELSEA

Be in my eye-line first, please.

Roy comes around and sits. Chelsea's leg continues to dance nervously.

ROY

How are you feeling?

CHELSEA

Who cares?! How did I do?

ROY

(deep breath)

Well, honey...

CHELSEA

-- oh no --

ROY

... We loved you.

Chelsea exhales a sigh of relief. She feels a bit weird about him joking in that way, but just hits his arm playfully.

CHELSEA

Jerk. Really?

ROY

You're the easy pick of the on-campus candidates.

Chelsea exhales, finally allowing herself to breathe.

CHELSEA

When does the outside guy interview? The Religious Studies -- Cornell guy.

ROY

He's flying in next week. From what we understand, his big pitch is going to be focusing on facilities, posturing for new buildings, more staff, and so forth.

CHELSEA

(scoffs)

Well, the university isn't going to allocate more funds to the humanities!

ROY

Honey. It's looking good.

Chelsea smiles and goes in for a kiss. Roy meets her halfway.

They share a lovely moment. A long-term couple in a moment of intimacy, before...

Roy gets distracted by a smudge on his tie. He grumbles an expletive as he uses his thumb to rub it out.

Chelsea slowly sinks back into her chair.

When the moment is well and gone...

CHELSEA

What'd they say? The panel.

ROY

Beyond we loved you?

CHELSEA

Specifically.

ROY

That you're right about the School. That they want to move into an interdisciplinary focus. That they can't believe you got Laney Chamberlain to commit to -- anything.

Chelsea chuckles.

ROY

I'm glad she was of some use to you, by the way.

CHELSEA

... What do you mean?

ROY

That it was smart of you to orchestrate that. Create this narrative around her.

CHELSEA

I wasn't *using* her... I was helping her out, and it just so happens that helping her out can help me out.

ROY

Okay...

CHELSEA

I wasn't!

ROY

Honey...

CHELSEA

I wasn't.

ROY

Great, so she knows you mentioned her in your interview, then? Didn't think so.

CHELSEA

It's not like that.

ROY

Why not?

CHELSEA

... Laney doesn't know I *am* interviewing.

ROY

We sent out an email with the list of candidates --

CHELSEA

Laney hardly ever checks her emails, you know that...

ROY

And you haven't told her in person?

CHELSEA

It would start a whole thing and... I don't want to get into it with her.

Roy stares at Chelsea. Chelsea looks at the table.

ROY

Does she still have that fantasy of you two resigning together and eloping to Woodstock?

CHELSEA

Roy, / please--

ROY

Was it Woodstock? Or was it Ojai?

CHELSEA

That was three years ago, Roy, and she was kidding -- what's the matter with you today?

ROY

It's the same old song...

CHELSEA

Please don't be euphemistic. Like the doctor said. Communicate with me clearly.

ROY

Fine. When Laney was failing in her professional career, you got her a job here. Now she's failing in her academic career, and you get her this project with Athena. You're weeks away from being chosen as the Dean of the School of Humanities, but you haven't told her, because you enjoy leading her on that you still care about the same things you did thirty years ago --

CHELSEA

What things are you talking about?

ROY

Well, you're not exactly a beatnik anymore, are you?

CHELSEA

What -- the -- I don't know where to even begin parsing that statement.

ROY

You don't owe Laney anything. You grew apart back then because you started taking life seriously and she didn't, that's all.

CHELSEA

She's still my friend, Roy. She's been my friend way longer than you and I have known each other.

ROY

Sure, some friendship. What has she done for you?

CHELSEA

You know, you're doing nothing to disprove my hypothesis that philosophers are just poets without empathy.

ROY

(sarcastic)

Funny.

CHELSEA

Laney's struggling right now. I know that because I talk to her. Maybe you should too.

ROY

We met two weeks ago about last semesters' evaluations --

CHELSEA

Not in a formal setting. Just -- as colleagues. I don't invite her to dinner anymore --

ROY

-- I never asked you to do that --

CHELSEA

-- I got the message, Roy. You don't have to "hang out" with her. Maybe just stop by her office every now and again, engage her in conversation. She's *grieving*. Maybe that doesn't trouble you, but it troubles me.

ROY

It troubles me.

CHELSEA

(blank stare, disbelieving)

Roy.

ROY

I knew Beth too!

(beat)

After the funeral, Laney asked me for time off. I gave her time off. When she told me she wanted to come back to work, I asked her *to her face* if she was ready to resume her job, and she said yes. Now she's struggling, apparently, but I only hear about it through you. Her *actions*, what I *see*, are her showing up to meetings twenty minutes late and not publishing a damn thing!

(beat)

It's been a year. There's been no sign of a change. I'm sitting in on one more round of tenure review before I step down. The committee listens to me when it comes to people in my School.

CHELSEA

If you want to recommend removing her from tenure track, just do it. I'm sick of having this argument with you.

ROY

I don't want to, honey! My field is *ethics*, I'm not going to pile on the worst year of her life *intentionally*. It's on her! She needs to do something differently, or else I'll have no choice.

CHELSEA

She *is* doing things differently -- she's collaborating with Athena, for Pete's sake!

ROY

How am I supposed to give her credit for that when *you* masterminded the whole thing?

CHELSEA

Well, then what do you want her to do? Laney is an asset to this department -- I know that, you know that. She just needs time to get better.

There's a moment of silence...

ROY

I'm going to ask you something personal. Something I haven't gotten a satisfying answer to the past couple years.

CHELSEA

(looking around)

Can it wait until tonight?

ROY

I'd really appreciate it if you didn't punt my questions down the road again --

CHELSEA

Okay, sorry, I'm sorry. Go ahead.

ROY

Back before we met, when you were living with Laney... If you and Laney Chamberlain were still living together -- still bohemians living paycheck to paycheck in that studio apartment in Brooklyn -- would you be happy?

CHELSEA

I'm not picky about my happiness, Roy.

ROY

So that's a yes.

CHELSEA

It's an "of course."

ROY

You were happy sleeping on a mattress on the floor of that dump, thirty feet away from Laney.

CHELSEA

I was happy sharing an apartment with *my friend*, yes.

ROY

... So then why marry me? If you were so happy.

CHELSEA

(almost crushes her coffee cup, quiet)

I'm not going to tell you again, Roy -- stop asking me that.

ROY

This is what we talked about with Doctor Rosenbaum. I've always been second to Laney Chamberlain. Always.

CHELSEA

No. If you thought that -- if you *really* thought that -- you would've never brought Laney on. When I recommended her.

ROY

I'm supposed to not bring on a former state laureate? Just because we don't get along?

CHELSEA

Oh, so *now* you're going to recommend taking her off tenure track because -- what -- you've had enough?

ROY

I have *cause* now to take her off tenure track -- different from *wanting* to. I just need her to make a good faith effort to show she takes this job seriously.

CHELSEA

How? Give me one thing she could do to satisfy you, right now.

ROY

I -- what do you -- I haven't made a list!

CHELSEA

Then you might have to face the possibility you're being unreasonable.

(beat, quieter)

You used to love her. You used to love her poetry.

ROY

I still do. I wish she'd write more of it.

CHELSEA

(pointed)

It's not the only way you've changed recently.

They hold each other's eyes.

ROY

You really would've been happy -- living with Laney while her poetry was taking off? While she was garnering success everywhere she looked?

CHELSEA

While my poetry... what?

(off his look)

While my poetry was being met with resounding crickets?

Again, off his look, Chelsea stands.

ROY

Chelsea. That's not what I meant.

CHELSEA

You want to know what Laney has ever done for me? To name one thing, she's never made me feel like my life's passion was a failure.

He reaches out his hand. She withdraws hers. She downs the rest of her coffee and collects her stuff.

ROY

I'm starting to collect submissions for the Faculty Quarterly Magazine. If Laney submits a new poem, I'll be able to recommend keeping her on tenure track. She needs to give me *anything*, because this is me doing her a favor.

Chelsea nods. Silence...

CHELSEA

See you at home.

Chelsea exits.

SCENE FOUR

Another day in the conference room.

Byron is set up on the table. There are also two microphones on the table now -- one facing Laney's chair, the other facing Max's -- hooked up to the computer.

Max fixes the neural cap on Laney's head as they talk.

MAX

Think about it this way. Let's use Whitman as an example. Imagine two friends. One is a forger. He forges stuff, then passes off his forgery as the real thing.

LANEY

Yeah, I know what a forger is --

MAX

The other friend is a Whitman expert. As an expert, he's near perfect at detecting when a poem is by Whitman and when it's a fake.

LANEY

Two friends. Got it.

MAX

And now imagine they're playing a zero-sum game, and / they --

LANEY

That's the one where --

MAX

Where they both want to win but only one can. The game is this: the forger reads all of Walt Whitman's poems and tries to write a new one that is *different* but *absolutely indistinguishable* from the style and voice of the poems Whitman actually wrote. Then he mixes that poem in with the other ones -- the real Whitmans -- and hands them all to the expert. Now the expert has the job of figuring out which poem in that stack is the fake. And remember, he's really damn good at this. If the expert can figure out which is the fake, he wins, and the forger knows he has to be better. If the expert chooses the wrong fake, the forger wins.

LANEY

And Byron's both the expert and the forger.

MAX

Exactly. Inside Byron, the forger and the expert play the game until the forger wins. And then Byron prints out that poem, the one that fooled the expert.

LANEY

And if it can fool an expert... it can fool you too.

MAX

That's the idea.

He has finished securing the cap. He sits and pulls open his laptop.

MAX

And the better the forger is at *creation* and the expert at *detection*, the more convincing the result. And that's where you come in. Currently the expert and the forger are simply running probabilistic analyses. They have no *understanding* of Whitman, or Byron, or any other poet, how they think.

LANEY

So you're going to tell Byron how I think.

MAX

When you're in a creative mind-set only, of course. So Byron can improve its forgery.

Laney mulls that over for a second...

LANEY

How can a machine improve its forgery?

MAX

Well -- how did you improve your poetry?

LANEY

Trial and error. Inspiration.

MAX

There you go.

LANEY

But it's not the same.

MAX

Isn't it?

LANEY

(beat, she thinks)

... No.

MAX

Many applications of *machine* learning are based on *human* learning, believe it or not.

LANEY

It's not the same.

MAX

Why not?

LANEY

Because humans aren't machines.

Max gives a smirk and a shrug.

LANEY

Oh, come on, Max, you can't possibly argue with that. When I was first starting out, I went through seventy-five notebooks before anyone published me. I'm not kidding you. *Seventy-five*. Over a thousand poems. By hand. By myself. There was no one telling me what to do. Nothing pulling the strings.

MAX

There was *nothing* pulling the strings?

LANEY

Of course not.

MAX

Nothing.

LANEY

Nothing.

MAX

What was it then? That made you write those poems.

LANEY

What *was* it? It was... just me, my mind, and my pen.

MAX

Interesting...

LANEY

“Interesting.” You know, if my students ever use that word, I automatically deduct them a point.

MAX

It’s that kind of dismissal which makes it my favorite. So many... *possibilities*.

LANEY

What’s “interesting” about me saying I wrote the poems that I wrote? I wrote them on my own.

MAX

Oh, no one’s saying they weren’t on your own. As in, no one’s doubting you’re the author, but... You ever read *Look Homeward, Angel*?

Laney just stares at him.

MAX

Thomas Wolfe’s “Note to the Reader”? “We are the sum of all the moments of our lives”?

LANEY

Assume I’ve read any classic literature that you’ve read.

MAX

Humans aren’t isolated creatures. We don’t exist in a vacuum. We’re influenced by what’s around us -- every minute, every hour, every day. That great poem you wrote in notebook, say, sixty-three -- you know, some poem you wrote in a good mood, about how great you felt or how much you wanted to seize the day or how life’s maybe not so shitty after all -- it was probably inspired by a cup of coffee you just had.

Or a kiss from your partner. Or a great movie. Doesn't matter. The point is, thoughts don't originate from a black void. They don't originate, period.

LANEY

But no one was telling me what to write.

MAX

Nor am I telling Byron what to write. I'm just setting parameters, like your brain has parameters.

LANEY

My brain's biological. What you're doing is mechanical.

MAX

But the *result* is the same. Your thoughts arise from the framework of your own experience, Byron's arise from the same thing. Except in your case, that framework was created by your parents' genes, your soul, God -- whatever you want to call it. In Byron's case, the framework was created by me.

LANEY

So you're God now?

MAX

To Byron, yes, I am God.

Laney lets that sit for a second...

LANEY

(challenging him)

And what does that make me?

MAX

(beat, accepting her challenge)

A prophet, I suppose.

He hits a key and Byron starts beeping.

A slow, rhythmic beep.

Beep... beep... beep...

MAX

Looks like we're in business. I have a few test questions, to make sure the set-up is working, that we're getting readings.

Shoot.
LANEY

Max hits another button. The next part of their exchange is delivered into their respective microphones.

MAX
Recording. October twenty-second, four forty-five PM.
(then, to Laney)
Thank you for sitting with me. What's your name?

LANEY
Laney Chamberlain.

MAX
Sorry -- full name.

LANEY
Elaine Eleanor Chamberlain.

MAX
Age.

LANEY
Fifty-seven.

MAX
Profession.

LANEY
Poet.

MAX
Sorry -- let me clarify. What's the work for which you are currently employed?

Laney shoots Max a look. Max is oblivious.

MAX
What?

LANEY
I'm a professor. I teach at a university.

MAX

Great.

(hits a few buttons)

Let's do some semantic association. I give you a word, you tell me the first thing that comes to mind.

(beat)

Red.

LANEY

... Apple.

MAX

Window.

LANEY

Glass.

MAX

Door.

LANEY

... Closed.

MAX

Hat.

LANEY

Head.

MAX

Tissue.

LANEY

Cold.

MAX

White.

LANEY

Snow.

MAX

Love.

LANEY
 (hesitates)
 Family.

MAX
 Fear.

LANEY
 (starts to say "Death", stops herself, then)
 Spiders.

MAX
 (looks up)
 Math?

LANEY
 Hate it.

MAX
 Bummer, it's our next category. What's five times six?

LANEY
 ... Thirty.

MAX
 Eight times nine.

LANEY
 Seventy-two.

MAX
 What's one-third of ninety-six?

LANEY
 One-third...?

MAX
 Of ninety-six, yes.

LANEY
 (beat, then)
 Thirty-two?

MAX
 If you have three apples and eight people, how do you divide the apples evenly among the people?

LANEY
Make applesauce?

Now Max shoots Laney a look.

LANEY
Um. Cut each apple into eighths and give each person three slices. Or just make applesauce.

MAX
(hitting a few buttons)
Alright. So now I'm going to see if we're getting a reading from the medial temporal lobe. To do that... think of a happy memory.

LANEY
Happy memory...

MAX
Any memory, as long as it's happy.

Laney closes her eyes.

MAX
You got it?

Laney nods.

Max studies the screen.

Gives a frustrated look.

MAX
I'm not getting a clear enough reading. Let's go in the other direction. Okay?

LANEY
Sure...

MAX
It might be a little blunt.

LANEY
As long as the check clears...

MAX
Can you think about your daughter?

Even with the warning, Laney is taken back by the abruptness of that. She starts to speak --

MAX

Just think. Think about her. Don't tell me anything. Just think.

Laney does.

MAX

Close your eyes.

Laney does.

MAX

Put yourself back with her.
(beat)

Remember details.
(beat)

You there?

Laney nods.

Max squints at his monitor. Then beams a large smile.

MAX

(under his breath)

Ah yes, there we go.

He adjusts a cable then looks up.

MAX

(casually)

Alright, we're good. You can open your eyes.

Laney does.

And tears stream down her face.

She wipes her cheeks.

MAX

Oh. Shit. I'm sorry.

LANEY

It's okay.

MAX

I didn't... sorry, maybe that was too... / I --

LANEY

It's okay. You warned me.

(beat)

How did you know about my daughter?

MAX

I... I mean, I found an obituary.

LANEY

... Ah.

MAX

(beat)

Do you... like, want to talk about it?

She gives him a look that barely hides her exasperation at his half-hearted attempt at comfort. She wipes her cheeks again.

LANEY

Nah. I'm good.

There's a very awkward silence.

MAX

Look, I'm not... I know I'm not... y'know, *good* at this kind of thing. I'm not kidding myself.

(beat)

Elizabeth was her name, right?

LANEY

... Beth.

MAX

Beth...

(beat)

Was she a poet too?

LANEY

(shrugs)

I did what I could when she was growing up. But she had decided not to go to college. I actually... don't know what she wanted to be.

MAX

(probing)

Have you written about her? Since her death?

LANEY

(suspicious)

... Is this still part of your tests? Are you recording this?

MAX

Well, yeah. I'd rather have too much data than too little.

LANEY

Huh... That's fine, I suppose. It's just my brainwaves.

MAX

(a small laugh)

Just your brainwaves...

LANEY

I suppose you believe my brainwaves about my daughter tell you everything about my daughter?

MAX

Well, if your neural data is all that's left of you someday... let me put it this way. If I've learned one thing from Silicon Valley, it's that your work... what you create, the *meaning* that what you create takes on, isn't about you.

LANEY

My work isn't about me?

MAX

No. Your poetry isn't about you. In fact, it's about everyone else. The second a product leaves its creator's hands, it says more about the user than it does about the creator. When it comes to art, that's why it's so important that the voices of our masters... their "brainwaves" as you put it... the artists like you who hold up the clearest mirror... why it's so important that those voices survive. And continue holding that mirror back up to us. Byron can do that.

LANEY

But my poetry's mine. My emotions, my experiences, my words. Byron will never have that, no matter how long I'm wearing --

(re: the cap)

-- this thing.

MAX

But if your readers can't tell the difference... is there a difference?

LANEY

I'm not going to let you trivialize this. Every word of every single poem I've ever written is mine. Full-stop.

MAX

Then why would you ever share your work?

LANEY

Because it's my job!

MAX

Oh, so, just for the money.

LANEY

No! Because -- because someone -- anyone -- might read something I've written and say, "*oh, look, I don't feel so alone anymore*"!

MAX

(beat)

... I think we're saying the same thing.

A confused silence.

Max moves on abruptly. He hits a button, turns his mike away from him. Laney does the same.

MAX

Anyway, look, here's what's going to happen. First step is I'm going to record readings from your right prefrontal cortex, which we have evidence is used in idea generation.

LANEY

Idea generation.

MAX

Right. So, here we go --

He puts a piece of paper and a pen in front of Laney.

MAX

-- Write me a poem.

LANEY

Write you a poem.

MAX

You got it.

LANEY

About what?

MAX

If I gave you an idea, it wouldn't really be idea generation.

LANEY

I can't just write you a poem.

MAX

Why not?

LANEY

Because that's not how I write. I never "sit down to write." That's... I don't do that. Write without an impulse. All my writing happens when I'm doing something else -- uncreative -- like, driving to the store or watching TV... laundry... and there's -- an essence grabs me. It's involuntary. Like I said, an impulse. Mysterious.

(beat)

You know, maybe that's the problem with your machine. It can't have impulse. Because once that happens... once I understand that... I write, and it's different and better than anything I could've written just by "sitting down to write."

Max rubs his brow, clearly not understanding what she's getting at.

MAX

So I should leave the room, is that what you're saying?

Laney gives him a wry look. After a moment...

LANEY

Yes. That would be nice.

MAX

Alright. I'll give you ten?

LANEY

Okay.

Max types something into the computer and stands.

MAX

Don't touch Byron if you can. And be careful with the cap.

LANEY

I'll be good.

MAX

Back in ten.

He exits.

Laney sits there.

She taps her pen against the table.

Waits for something to happen.

Byron keeps beeping: *beep... beep... beep...*

A long silence, as Laney sits, cap on her head, trying to let inspiration come...

When...

Byron abruptly -- stops beeping.

Laney looks over at it.

And then -- without warning -- a screech.

Laney jumps.

But then it becomes clear--

Byron is printing something.

Once it's done printing, a silence then...

Beep... beep... beep...

Laney, confused, leans over and picks up Byron's outputted sheet.

She looks at it.

Her eyes widen.

She reads the title...

LANEY

“Beth” ... by Laney Chamberlain.

Long pause...

Laney takes a deep breath, then...

Reads the poem.

In silence. Then, unexpectedly...

The tears are back.

She puts her hand to her mouth. Keeps reading.

The door opens again and Max sticks his head in.

Laney composes herself quickly and stuffs the paper into her purse.

MAX

Everything okay?

LANEY

Yes.

MAX

I thought I heard something.

LANEY

Nope. Nothing.

Max slinks out of the room again.

Laney removes the poem from her pocket, reads it a third time.

LANEY
(hand to her mouth)

Oh my god...

She breaks down, crying her eyes out at this poem written by a computer.

SCENE FIVE

Laney's office.

Roy and Chelsea are there, waiting.

CHELSEA
I'm going to do the talking, okay?

ROY
No, it's better if I do -- it's better coming from her dean.

CHELSEA
I don't want this to devolve into a screaming / match--

ROY
You give me so little credit.

CHELSEA
I'm giving you the exact amount of credit you deserve, after the last dinner / we all had together --

ROY
Jesus, are you gonna bring up that dinner every / single time we talk about Laney?

CHELSEA
(whisper yelling)
I am. Yes, I am. It was my grandmother's china--

Laney comes in, holding the single sheet of paper she had at the end of the last scene. The poem.

Roy and Chelsea stop their bickering cold.

An awkward silence as the three of them stare at each other.

LANEY
... Hello.

Laney.

ROY

Do you have a minute to talk?

CHELSEA

Uh. Sure. Gimme a...

LANEY

Laney goes behind her desk and stuffs the sheet of paper into a drawer. Takes a seat.

What's up?

LANEY

We need to --

ROY

Chelsea holds her hand up to silence Roy, who sighs and stalks to the corner of the room. Laney considers this. She's suspicious now.

Chelsea sits. Casual. Cordial.

How's it going with Max Barnett?

CHELSEA

... Fine.

LANEY

So, is the project working?

CHELSEA

LANEY

Not in the way he wants. It's only spitting out artificial forgeries. He wants his forgeries to be the real deal.

Chelsea chuckles, a little too long.

And have you even read anything the machine has created?

CHELSEA

... One or two things.

LANEY

CHELSEA

And?

LANEY

At a cursory glance... they're impressive. But I'm sure if I spent time with any of them, it'd be a different story.

CHELSEA

How about the machine's "Laney Chamberlain originals"? Have you read any of those?

LANEY

... No, not yet. Can't say I'm in a rush.

CHELSEA

What is he having you do then?

LANEY

Tests. Measuring my brain activity or something. He had me write a poem today while hooked up to the machine.

CHELSEA

(shooting a look at Roy)

You wrote a poem.

LANEY

Nothing notable.

CHELSEA

Well, worst case scenario, you're getting paid.

LANEY

Chels, I appreciate the chit-chat, but can we get to whatever the two of you are here to scold me about? I'd like to get on with my day.

Brief awkward silence.

CHELSEA

Scold you? What do / you --

ROY

(butting in)

We're just talking.

CHELSEA

Roy.

LANEY

Oh, so you're just stopping by? Stopping by to hang out in my office?

ROY

No, I'm here to talk to you as your dean.

LANEY

But you can't do that without Chelsea, obviously.

CHELSEA

Laney --

LANEY

What the hell is going on, guys?

Chelsea and Roy look at each other. Roy defers to her.

Chelsea leans forward, considers, then...

CHELSEA

Look, Laney -- since Beth died... One of my favorite things about you... one of the reasons why you have had such success... was that you had -- *have* -- this uncanny ability to put down into beautiful, poetic words whatever was going on inside your head. And in that... portrait of words... everyone who knew you, who read you... found themselves. Whenever Beth was having trouble, in school, with friends, puberty... you had her write. Bad day? Write a poem about it. Friend drama? Write a poem. Period cramps? Poem. She would do that, and even if she didn't feel better... she would come to -- some -- *self-knowledge*.

(beat)

So, Laney. I give you that same advice. I know you're hurting. But whatever you're feeling? Write it down. Write it down and let us read it. Let us in. That'll be enough.

Laney considers this...

LANEY

Or what?

CHELSEA

Excuse me?

LANEY

Chelsea, if you didn't want me to think there was some agenda here, you shouldn't have brought *him*.

ROY

(starting to get angry)

Okay, you know what, Laney? You can't talk to me / that way --

CHELSEA

Roy, let / me --

ROY

No, she can't talk to me that way, who does she think / she is?

LANEY

You said we need to talk. You're acting all shifty. I've known you for thirty years and you haven't *once* genuinely approached me to just ask how I'm doing. So yes, pardon me for thinking there might be some agenda here.

CHELSEA

(to Roy, a genuine suggestion)

Don't take her so personally.

ROY

Why are you on *her* side?

CHELSEA

What? There are no sides!

ROY

(to Chelsea)

Are you just gonna let people push you around when you're in my spot? When *you're* dean?

CHELSEA

Roy.

And there it is. Laney processes this information.

ROY

Oh. I *forgot* you hadn't told her.

He shrugs. Silence.

LANEY

(to Chelsea)

You're gonna be the next dean? Of the School of Humanities?

CHELSEA

... I'm interviewing for it, yes.

Silence.

LANEY

Good for you.

CHELSEA

... Thank you.

Silence.

LANEY

... “Professionally good for me.”

(beat)

That’s what you said when you insisted I meet with Max Barnett. Professionally good for *me*.

CHELSEA

It’s not like that. Barnett approached us.

LANEY

(completely unconvinced)

Oh. Okay.

CHELSEA

It’s true.

Laney shrugs.

LANEY

... You know... all this talk about my not having published anything recently... you’ve published, what, *three* poems since you got tenure, right, Chelsea? After *Reactor*. You got tenure... and then you gave up.

ROY

Jesus.

CHELSEA

Laney, that’s completely unfair.

LANEY

It’s not your fault. It’s a system, a political game, I know that. And what a university considers a good poet to be is completely at odds with what a good poet actually is. Because poetry isn’t about posturing, about money -- and, you know what, I’ve come to believe it isn’t even about *self*-knowledge.

Because if it were, where were Beth's twenty-two years of self-knowledge when she decided to get behind the wheel of a car with enough alcohol in her system to paralyze a horse?

CHELSEA

(beat)

What happened to Beth... what she did... isn't your / fault--

LANEY

Don't. Please. It's not my point.

(beat)

I'm just surprised that you keep playing the game, Chelsea.

Silence.

CHELSEA

I have things I want to do -- lives I want to touch -- beyond poetry. And if you don't understand that about me by now...

(shrugs)

I don't know what to say.

LANEY

(with an eye towards Roy)

It wasn't always like that.

CHELSEA

Well, times change. People change.

LANEY

(again, aimed at Roy)

People change people.

ROY

I don't have to stand here and take this --

LANEY

How do you expect me to react when you're saying, do what we tell you to do or you're fucked?

ROY

You're not listening to anything we're saying! We're trying to *help* you!

CHELSEA

Please, both of you --

ROY

And what's more, whatever you're insinuating about Chelsea is absurd and you should be ashamed of yourself. If you didn't know she had a passion for higher education all those years, maybe you should consider the possibility that you didn't know her as well as you thought you did.

LANEY

It never came up until she met you.

CHELSEA

Laney!

ROY

Well, excuse her for wanting to make a little money.

LANEY

Oh, so was it the passion for higher education or was it the money?!

CHELSEA

Please! Both of you! We all want the same thing!

LANEY

Oh yeah? And what is it that we all want?

CHELSEA

(finally, for the first time, losing it)

For you to keep your fucking job!

Dead silence.

LANEY

(at Roy)

I fucking knew it.

Chelsea looks between the two of them.

CHELSEA

I... I can't do this. I can't do this anymore.

And she turns and walks out of the room.

Laney and Roy. They stand there and look at each other for a moment.

LANEY

What do you want, Roy?

ROY

So how are you doing, Laney?

LANEY

Stop.

ROY

Stop what?

LANEY

Stop pretending you care about the answer to that question.

ROY

So when I'm just standing here, I have an agenda, and when I try to engage with you, I'm pretending. You know what, Laney, nothing's gonna get better between us if you don't at least take my authenticity at face value.

LANEY

Look, we've agreed we're never going to be all that close, and clearly my job here is on the line. So let's cut the bullshit, okay? What do you want?

ROY

For none of the faculty in this department to get preferential treatment.

LANEY

If you think you're giving me preferential treatment, then that's on you.

ROY

No, what I've been doing is waiting for you to turn it around. If I keep doing that any longer, *then* it's preferential treatment.

LANEY

(beat)

I am trying. I don't know if you realize that, but I am trying.

ROY

We're all trying.

LANEY

I took to heart all of the student evaluations last semester. One bad semester is not a reason to take me off tenure track. You're retiring, what do you care?

ROY

I don't want to have to make that recommendation, Laney. Chelsea would... I don't know what Chelsea would do if I did that. But I need to have *any* justification for keeping you on.

LANEY

Justification...

ROY

Here's my proposal. The Faculty Quarterly is taking submissions. I want a new Laney Chamberlain poem for the issue. I think I could swing that with the committee.

LANEY

(beat)

That won't work. I have nothing to publish.

ROY

I'm sure you have something.

LANEY

No, I don't.

ROY

Well, you better find something to publish because this is the deal.

LANEY

Nothing's ready.

ROY

It doesn't need to be *ready*, it just needs to *be*.

LANEY

I don't publish poems if they're not ready.

ROY

(beat)

You're really gonna sacrifice your career for this.

LANEY

This isn't my career, Roy. My poetry, my body of work -- *that's* my career. And I'm not going to half-ass that.

Roy rubs his brow. Shrugs.

ROY

Okay. If you think that way. I guess this conversation is over.

LANEY

Wait.

LaneY puts her head in her hands. Thinks.

LANEY

Give me a year. I'll have a new collection of poems. In one year.

ROY

A year?

LANEY

That's what I can offer.

ROY

I can't do that.

LANEY

Why not?

ROY

Because a year does nothing for me. I need new work now.

LANEY

(beat, abruptly)

You're such an asshole.

ROY

Hey!

LANEY

You knew how this was going to go when you walked into my office. You know I don't have anything to publish right now, so why even offer that?

ROY

I'm telling you what needs to happen.

LANEY

And I'm giving you another option. So work *with* me.

ROY

Just so you know, Chelsea might be on your side now, but when she has my job next year she's going to help make these decisions. And I guarantee she won't be so sympathetic then.

LANEY

... This is about Chelsea, isn't it?

ROY

Excuse me?

LANEY

I'm not going to stop being close with Chelsea. You're not going to get rid of me again. We're not in our twenties anymore.

ROY

What are you *talking* about? This line of reasoning has never followed. You blame me for "stealing" Chelsea from your life or something back then, but it wasn't really like that and I don't know why you keep / insisting that it was!

LANEY

Here's what I know -- one day, she and I were happy, two friends pursuing their passion and both starting to gain some recognition for it. Then, one day, *you* were around and she *wasn't* happy anymore and she wanted *distance* from me.

ROY

You weren't *both* starting to gain recognition and you know that so stop kidding yourself.

Laney is quiet...

ROY

She was a minor success at best and you just didn't realize how unhappy that made her, especially having to compare herself every day to you.

LANEY

I've never made her feel unsuccessful.

ROY

I didn't say that. But she did feel unsuccessful.

LANEY

She's a great poet. And she still has time. To leave a legacy she's proud of. But she needs to put in the work.

ROY

As hard as it might be for you to accept -- Chelsea is leaving a legacy she's proud of. Putting in the work. Bettering this department -- it's what she wants to do. And if you're really her friend, you'll support her one hundred percent.

LANEY

I do... But if she doesn't keep writing, what's the point?

ROY

I could ask the same question about you.

LANEY

(beat)

I'm presenting you a solution, on a silver platter. If you really need to justify my staying on, here it is. Give me a year. A new collection, in one year.

ROY

How can you guarantee anything? If you're in such writer's block, so stifled creatively, how can you guarantee you will have a collection in a year, when you don't have a single poem ready to go *now*?

LANEY

Because the breakthrough is coming! This is how my process goes -- it ebbs and flows, and this ebb is -- understandably, I would say -- longer than usual. I just need you to be patient and... trust me.

ROY

Be patient and trust you... okay...

(beat)

Here's what I don't understand, Laney, help me understand this: If you hate this job -- the very concept of academia -- so much, why are you fighting this hard to stay? Go back into the world and focus all of your energy on your writing, if you feel so suppressed here. But if you're here, at this university, you're not above what every other faculty member has to do to maintain their status. And thinking otherwise, that's textbook-definition *entitlement*.

That word stings Laney like nothing else Roy has said.

LANEY

Entitlement! You think I... you...

(then)

My child, a child I *loved* and *cared for*, all on my own, for twenty-two years -- that child was the cause of her own fucking death, Roy!

ROY

I know...! It's terrible what happened...

(then, carefully)

But you had the choice of taking a semester off, and you said no...

LANEY

Because I couldn't afford it.

That stops Roy in his tracks. This is news to him.

Laney takes a deep breath.

LANEY

After the funeral... and paying for the damage Beth caused... and with my reading offers drying up... and just... all the shit that's happened the last couple of years... I couldn't afford to not teach for a semester.

(beat)

This job is all I have. Even as it suffocates me, it's all I have left. I've been lost at sea for so long now, I forgot what land looked like. But I see land now, Roy. Today, more than ever. As shocked as I am to say it, Max Barnett is helping me see land. And I am paddling towards it... as fast as I can.

(beat)

So I'm begging you, Roy. Put everything else between us to the side, and grant me this time. Please.

Roy looks at the ground, shakes his head slightly. He looks more genuinely tortured than we've seen him.

A long silence.

Laney wipes tears from her eyes.

He finally looks up.

ROY

I want to help you, Laney. But I have to hold the department to certain standards. I'm sorry...

Laney panics.

LANEY

NO!

The force of her plea surprises even her. Laney cries, then takes a deep breath and composes herself.

LANEY

I have something you can publish...

Roy steps back towards her, surprised.

Laney opens the top drawer of her desk and removes the single sheet of paper she stuffed in there at the beginning of the scene.

LANEY

It's a new poem... I named it after her. It's called "Beth."

She hands him the poem. He reads it.

He's engrossed.

Laney stares at her desk. Roy reads it again.

ROY

... You wrote this?

A long silence.

LANEY

Yes.

It's mine.

END OF ACT ONE.

ACT TWOMOMENT: ROY

Roy sits before us, legs crossed and chin up.

ROY

When did I first meet Laney Chamberlain?

Wow. Well... must have been about thirty years ago.

I was dating her roommate at the time.

They were roommates at the time, I mean. I'm still dating my wife.

(chuckles)

I was a post-doc at N.Y.U. My wife Chelsea had done her master's there and I met her at a party thrown by a mutual professor. We had been going out for a couple weeks and it was going well. I knew her roommate was also a poet, but, y'know, hadn't heard much about her and she hadn't been around the apartment when I was around.

Then, an academic friend of mine recommended to me this new book of poems, called *As Far As The Eye Can See*. Then another. Then another. Suddenly half my academic friends had recommended it to me and several who weren't academics had too. I had never heard of a *poetry collection* getting that reception. So I read it and -- like everyone who read it that year -- was stunned by the honesty, the vulnerability, the... way with words.

So I went to a reading at the New York Public Library. And who do I see there but my girlfriend, Chelsea? I didn't know she was going to be there. Turns out, her roommate's the poet! Elaine Chamberlain, but Chelsea called her Laney...

... You know, I was actually the one who suggested to Laney that she go by her nickname professionally. More colloquial, more personal.

Anyway. Chelsea moved in with me and we later got married but Laney was still very much a part of our lives. We've been close friends ever since, I love her dearly.

Did I know then that Laney would be as successful as she became?

Or that her career would have the longevity that it has had?

Or that she would be up for a second National Book Award after thirty years for this new collection of poems?

You can't predict those kind of things.

I'll just say this. Laney Chamberlain has touched so many aspects of American life with her poetry. She's done freelance, she's done government, she's done academia. But at the end of the day, I'm just thankful she's still writing.

After all these years... and all that she's done... and all that she's been through... the fact that she's still able to wrench our hearts with such clarity and vitality and beauty... it's nothing less than a miracle.

This new collection of poems, "Letters"... it makes me proud to call Laney Chamberlain my friend. And you can print that.

SCENE SIX

A private backstage room at an on-campus auditorium.

Laney paces around the space, doing vocal exercises and stretching her neck.

She holds a copy of her new book: "Letters" by Laney Chamberlain.

Laney is looking better than we've seen her. Happy, healthy, and content.

Knock knock at the door.

LANEY

Yes?

Chelsea pokes her head in.

CHELSEA

Hello stranger.

LANEY

Oh, Chelsea -- come in.

Chelsea comes in and the two share a -- rather strained -- hug.

CHELSEA

Hi you.

LANEY

Hi Chelsea.

CHELSEA

It's been a while.

LANEY

That it has...

CHELSEA

How long do you have? Before you / go on--

LANEY

Your husband was back here and said twenty minutes about five minutes ago.

Chelsea nods. Silence.

CHELSEA

I guess I should say welcome home.

LANEY

Thank you.

CHELSEA

This is your last reading?

LANEY

Of this tour, yes.

CHELSEA

How was the trip?

LANEY

Oh god. Twelve cities in ten days. It was much easier when I was thirty. If I never see the inside of a hotel again it will be too soon.

CHELSEA

... That's too bad.

LANEY

No, it was great. It's why we do what we do, right? I had good audiences. Receptive, present. And that's all that matters.

CHELSEA

Okay. Well. Good to hear.

Silence.

LANEY

How's the new job?

CHELSEA

Oh. Good. Thanks for asking. I'm still settling in. But... very rewarding work sometimes...

(beat)

I hate it.

LANEY

Really?

CHELSEA

No, that's too harsh. I don't hate it. It's what I expected.

LANEY

(not probing any further)

Okay.

Chelsea is confused by Laney's lack of response.

CHELSEA

It's just -- I suppose the toll, of everyone wanting everything from you, all the time -- even after a couple of months, it weighs on you.

LANEY

Ah, well.

CHELSEA

I took the semester off from teaching, because I wanted to just focus on, well, *being dean* -- and that was my mistake, I think. I miss the students, I miss the curriculums I taught... I don't think I'll have a true perspective until next semester. I have two classes lined up.

Laney does not ask which classes Chelsea has lined up.

CHELSEA

I'm doing Intermediate and I'm bringing back my seminar on "Kubla Khan".

LANEY

Great. Students loved that one.

CHELSEA

I have to say, I'm surprised *you're* teaching this semester, with how busy you've been...

LANEY

I'm calling in a lot of favors. It's not so bad.

CHELSEA

No, it's more that all of this with "Letters" happened so fast. I mean, your success here is bringing me *back*... all the way back...

(laughs, then)

I guess I assumed that when you had success like this again, you would leave your teaching position.

LANEY

I'm trying to take things one day at a time.

CHELSEA

Well, that's good. That's good.

(beat)

And how are things otherwise?

LANEY

They're good! They're good. Mainly just been the collection and the tour, but... yes, they're good.

CHELSEA

Good! Good...

LANEY

And you?

CHELSEA

Oh, things are fine. Roy's enjoying emeritus status. And talking you up in the press.

LANEY

He's been very kind.

CHELSEA

I'm glad you two are getting along.

LANEY

Yeah, it's... yeah.

Silence.

Neither knows what to talk about.

CHELSEA

The book... it's beautiful, Laney.

Laney nods, a smile plastered to her face.

CHELSEA

I've known you for thirty-five years... and I feel like I know you better now.

Laney doesn't respond, just continues to nod her head modestly.

CHELSEA

... How did all this happen?

LANEY

What do you mean?

CHELSEA

Well, I just mean... You had *nothing* for this collection ten months ago. And now it's looking like a National Book Award contender, it's / wild--

LANEY

Well, I had that outstanding deal with Schuster, / so--

CHELSEA

But you wrote eighty-five poems / in the spring?

LANEY

As I told you repeatedly last year, I've been working on this for a while, these are revisions / of what--

CHELSEA

Yes, I know, but they weren't ready for so long--

LANEY

And suddenly they were.

CHELSEA

Suddenly.

(beat, still colloquial, casual)

So what happened? What happened to make them ready?

LANEY

What happened? ... I wrote the poems. I wrote "Beth" and the floodgates opened.

CHELSEA

But -- I'm just -- look, I'm not trying to interrogate you, but -- when did you write "Beth"? Because you had nothing for years and then you meet with Roy last October and he leaves saying you've written this amazing poem for the Quarterly. I'm confused by the timeline.

LANEY

(beat)

Why are you here?

CHELSEA

What do you mean why am I here? I'm here to support you.

LANEY

I wrote "Beth" while I was working on all these other poems in the collection. I didn't show it to anyone because I didn't think it was ready. Roy forced me to give him a poem to publish in the Quarterly last year so I gave him "Beth." The reception was so good once it was picked up in the mainstream that I knew I was on the right track with those "Letters" poems and I was able to crank them out over the spring semester. What about that timeline confuses you?

CHELSEA

I'm sorry, I just... knowing you... I find it *very* hard to believe you wouldn't have thought that poem was ready before giving it to Roy.

(beat)

That poem is vintage Laney Chamberlain, it's brilliant. I have no idea why you didn't include it in the final collection, if I'm being honest.

LANEY

I don't talk about decisions like that, / you know that.

CHELSEA

I don't know why you're being so defensive when I'm not accusing you of anything.

LANEY

Thanks for stopping by, Chelsea, but I need to prepare for my reading.

CHELSEA

No.

(then)

Look, I'm sorry about what happened with Max Barnett. The way I... phrased things. But you have to believe me, I had no agenda. I really believed that meeting with him would be the best way for you to secure your job. And it worked! You're still on tenure track. So I don't understand why you're mad at me.

LANEY

I'm not mad.

CHELSEA

Yes, you are.

LANEY

Chelsea, I'm not mad.

CHELSEA

You said it yourself, we've barely talked all year.

LANEY

I've been busy.

CHELSEA

(beat)

God, I forgot how much of a bitch you can be sometimes.

LANEY

At least I don't use my friends for my own personal advancement without their knowledge.

Chelsea throws her hands up into the air.

CHELSEA

You are mad! I wasn't us/ing you--

LANEY

Chelsea, when you were interviewing for the job, for the Dean of the School of Humanities, did you present as evidence -- evidence for your *interdisciplinary acumen* -- did you use as evidence that you orchestrated a meeting between Max Barnett and Laney Chamberlain?

Silence.

CHELSEA

No.

LANEY

Real convincing, Chelsea.

CHELSEA

Okay, I did, but it's not / what it--

LANEY

(conversation over)

Can you give me the room please?

Laney turns away from Chelsea. Chelsea stands there, shell-shocked. Then...

CHELSEA

You know, you could say thank you.

(beat)

For getting you this job. For helping you keep your job. For always being there for you. Once in your life, you could say thank you.

Silence. Laney says nothing. Chelsea leaves.

Laney pulls a set of notecards from her pocket so she can wipe her mind from what just happened.

LANEY

(under her breath, trance-like)

“My daughter Elizabeth wanted to be called ‘Beth’ from an early age. She thought ‘Elizabeth’ was too long of a name and she didn’t want to burden people with having to pronounce all those letters. When I asked her why she wanted to be called ‘Beth’ and not ‘Eliza’ or ‘Lizzie,’ all she said was ‘I like Beth the best.’ When she was sixteen, we--”

Knock knock at the door again.

LANEY

For fuck’s sake. Come in!

Roy charges in.

ROY

Hey, so... we’re only at about quarter capacity... but people will show up. Students always come at the last second. Let’s plan on starting a few minutes late?

LANEY

Sure.

ROY

And then Chelsea just stormed by me in the hall, is everything all right there?

LANEY

Yes, everything’s fine.

ROY

All right. Well, in the interim, you won’t believe who I’ve heard is here, asking around for you.

LANEY

Who?

SCENE SEVEN

Another room in the backstage of the auditorium.

Max and Laney. Max also looks different than we last saw him. More tired, more spent. More desperate. He has a copy of Laney's book tucked under his arm.

They don't hug or shake hands.

MAX

You look well.

LANEY

I feel well. Good to see you, Max.

MAX

You too.

LANEY

And you... you look well too.

MAX

(shrugs)

Haven't been sleeping recently. But thank you.

LANEY

I thought I would never hear from you again. Radio silence after two meetings.

MAX

Things at Athena... escalated.

LANEY

Everything okay?

MAX

Ah, I won't bore you with the details.

(beat)

I never got Byron to work.

LANEY

Oh, Max...

MAX

I mean, it *worked* -- as in, it printed stuff, good stuff, but... never quite good enough.

LANEY

I'm so sorry.

MAX

I got all the data from you that I needed. That wasn't the problem. It was just... on my end, turning the electric impulses in your skull into... anything that made sense. Anything I could quantify. I thought if I knew what was going on... with you... inside your head... that would be all I needed to know. And I feel like I know that now... know *you*... have a pretty good understanding at least... but no matter how much time I spent in front of my computer... I could never get anything... that *captured* what was going on inside your head, but didn't *diminish* it. I think that's Byron's flaw at the end of the day. It diminishes. Like you said, one time... it can never have inspiration... so it has nothing.

(beat)

My demonstration for Athena's board, earlier this year, was a disaster. Total garbage. They forced me to give up the project. And are now weighing whether or not I'm valuable to the company anymore. I'm weighing the same thing, if we're being honest.

LANEY

Well, that's a valuable realization in its own way. Knowing what you want...

Silence. Max's mood shifts.

MAX

And you? Seems like your success keeps rolling on.

LANEY

It's been a great couple of months.

MAX

I wasn't aware you were working on anything during our meetings last year.

LANEY

Well, you know what, Max? I actually wanted to thank you.

MAX

Really?

LANEY

Yeah. Looking back on it, meeting with you forced me to think about my work in a way I don't think I ever had. After Beth died... I think I felt that, no matter how much I wanted to write again, that writing poetry would be a selfish act. Because I've always thought of poetry as a way to connect. To make the world smaller, to feel less alone. It's what I tried to instill in my daughter -- but clearly that didn't work. Because my daughter... because Beth had problems that she never communicated to me. Or anyone else. And then one night she blacks out at a party and gets behind the wheel of a car. She commits suicide.

MAX

(quickly flipping through her book)

I thought you said in the book there was no evidence / that --

LANEY

There isn't. I'll never know what was going on inside her head. *All* I know is that I'll never know. So why should I bother trying to write to her, trying to understand her, my own flesh and blood... when I'll never know her? That couldn't possibly be a way to connect... it would just be me wallowing in my misery. As I said, selfish. So I thought this way, and... my ability to write... shut down.

(beat)

But then after meeting with you... I realized... answers are boring. Because where do you go from there? I shouldn't look for answers, I should look for more questions. And when I realized that, and started being a questioner... it became a lot easier to write again.

MAX

Funny how that happens...

Laney extends her hand.

LANEY

It was good to see you, Max.

There's a weird pause. Laney keeps her hand out, but Max isn't shaking it...

MAX

Before we say goodbye, actually, there is one thing I wanted to talk about.

LANEY

All right... I don't have a *huge* amount of time...

MAX

Small thing, just wanted to see if you had any information about it.

LANEY

Go ahead.

MAX

Did I ever tell you that Byron logs the time and date every time it prints something?

LANEY

(beat)

Oh?

MAX

Yeah. It logs the time and date every time it prints something.

LANEY

(beat)

Okay?

MAX

And puts the time and date in super tiny font on the bottom of the page.

LANEY

Sorry, is that a question?

MAX

Did I tell you that?

LANEY

I don't think you did, but that makes sense.

MAX

Well, I've kept every single thing Byron's ever printed. I keep them in file cabinets in my office. Last week, I was looking back over the poems that it printed during my sessions with you, cross-referencing them against Byron's logs, and... there's one poem I couldn't account for.

LANEY

What do you mean?

MAX

There's one poem that Byron says it printed during our second meeting that isn't in my files.

LANEY

Maybe it just got lost? I remember you had all that paper.

MAX

It's possible. It's possible I lost it. It's just I know there were a couple times I left you in the room by yourself, so I just wanted to see if you remember... you know, if you remember Byron printing anything when I wasn't in the room. And if so... what happened to that poem.

A loaded silence as his accusation becomes clear.

LANEY

As far as I remember, Byron didn't print anything when I was alone in the room with it, no.

MAX

As far as you remember?

LANEY

It was, what, ten months ago? I don't recall specifics...

MAX

It's just... you know, this is kinda weird, that you were alone in the room with it and you can't remember / if it printed something. It would've been very loud.

LANEY

No, no, I get it, and I'm trying to remember, but... no, you're right, I would've remembered if it printed something, so no, it couldn't have, right? Plus, it can't print without being prompted, right? Like, a person needs to put in what the poem should be about.

MAX

That's correct.

LANEY

Yeah, so who would've prompted it?

MAX

You could've. If you were curious.

Laney bursts out laughing.

LANEY

Believe me, even if I were curious, I would have had no idea how to use the machine at all. I'm what you might call "technically illiterate." Plus, I would've had that cap on, so my mobility wasn't / really...

MAX

So you're saying that Byron's log is wrong?

LANEY

Well... it must be, right? It didn't print anything that you haven't accounted for while you were in the room and it certainly didn't print anything while you were out of the room.

MAX

Did I ever tell you that I can go into Byron's memory and reprint any poem it's already written?

LANEY

(beat)

No. You never mentioned that. But that seems like an easy solution to your problem.

MAX

It's harder than it sounds. I never got around to setting up an interface for that -- Byron's still a prototype, after all -- so I have to literally reopen what's currently a closed system -- take apart Byron and hard-wire into its memory. It's a pain in the ass so I wanted to talk to you first.

LANEY

Okay...

MAX

So you don't think I should waste my time? That if I reprint that logged poem, it'll give me an error or just print a blank page?

LANEY

I mean... I don't know about that, I just know what happened when I was alone with it.

MAX

(beat)

You understand my hesitancy here, right?

LANEY

Sure. Sure.

MAX

It's just... Byron doesn't print without being prompted and -- you know, I recorded all of our sessions together, and I matched up the time-code of my recordings against the log and... the machine definitely says it printed while I was out of the room.

LANEY

So...

MAX

So you're the only person who could have had prompted it.

A tense silence.

LANEY

I never touched your machine.

MAX

It's just -- anything that Byron outputs... belongs to me. Technically.

LANEY

(losing it for a second)

That -- what?!

(beat, quickly pulling herself together)

I don't know what you're getting at here, Max, but I have a reading very soon and I need to be in the right frame of mind for that. I think your easiest solution here is to, y'know, hack into Byron's mainframe or whatever it was and reprint the poem if you're so suspicious. But I'm telling you, it's going to be a waste of your time. Nothing printed when I was alone in the room with Byron. Nothing. So, by all means, hack away.

MAX

Interesting that you say that, because I already did.

He pulls a folded-up sheet of paper from his pocket.

Laney freezes.

MAX

Oops. Sorry. Forgot about that earlier. I haven't looked at it yet.

(beat)

So you're saying that when I unfold this, I'm going to see a blank page, or I'm going to see an error message?

LANEY

Yes, of course. I mean, what's going on here? I don't know. I have no clue how your machine works.

MAX

If Byron logs a poem by mistake, then reprinting that poem will either yield an error message or a blank page. So since you said the poem was logged by mistake, you're saying this will be one of those two things when I unfold it.

Laney, realizing she doesn't need to stand here and take this, turns for the door.

Before she can leave, Max unfolds the piece of paper.

MAX

Well. Not blank. And this title looks awfully familiar.

Laney stops. Silence.

MAX

You plagiarized Byron.

Laney wheels back around, furious.

LANEY

First things first. I didn't plagiarize *shit*. Second, that sheet of paper isn't proof of anything, are you crazy? You could've just typed up my poem and printed it out.

MAX

And if I had Byron here, and printed it out again?

LANEY

I don't know! You could've jiggered with it any way you want -- you're the only person who understands how the fucking thing works!

MAX

But why would I do that?

LANEY

Because you're in a bad spot with your company, I don't know! That's all you ever seemed to care about!

MAX

(beat)

You think you have me figured out, don't you.

LANEY

A couple of minutes ago you said that you understand the inside of my head, so spare me the righteous indignation.

MAX

I've analyzed your neural data.

LANEY

That's not me! That's not all I am!

MAX

Isn't it?

LANEY

(sputtering)

No -- what? You're insane. I have to go do my reading. I wrote "Beth" all by myself. Period. End of story.

MAX

I never said the poem was titled "Beth."

Laney stops. *Fuck.*

LANEY

What are you... I don't know what you're talking about.

MAX

(holding up the paper)

I didn't say the title of the poem was "Beth." So how did you know which it was?

Dead silence. They stare at each other.

Laney looks like she's about to say something... then stops herself. Another long silence.

LANEY

Don't tell anyone. Okay? Please.

MAX

So you did take a poem.

LANEY

I did, but --

Max rips the paper in his hands in half. Laney stares at him.

MAX

That was a chicken soup recipe I found online. I haven't reprinted the poem yet.

LANEY

... What?! What is wrong with you?

MAX

The board took Byron's hard drive. So I had to talk to you first.

LANEY

(hard stare)

I'm leaving. You have nothing.

MAX

Well, I do have something, actually, I have cause to sue you.

LANEY

(stops, turns back)

Like hell you do.

MAX

I don't want to head down that road, Laney, I really don't. So listen. Please. I still believe in Byron. But the Athena board has moved on. That was all true, what I said.

LANEY

What about, "I don't know if I'm valuable to my company anymore"?

MAX

It's my company! I'll always be valuable to the company I started. Not the company it's becoming. I want to bring my company back. Cutting edge research. Gazing into the future. And I think there's a way to do that which involves us settling this amicably. So...

LANEY

... What do you want from me?

MAX

Okay, well option one is going out there and telling everyone you didn't write that poem.

LANEY

I'm not going to / do that.

MAX

So then option two is telling my board that you were in on this with me the whole time.

LANEY

... What?

MAX

Yeah. That this was our plan all along. You passing off a Byron poem as your own. See, because the board has made it exceedingly clear that they don't want to see any more presentations of Byron. The only way I'm going to be able to get back in there is if I have a new angle. And when I had the realization last week that there was a discrepancy in Byron's printing logs -- that, y'know, you had plagiarized it --

LANEY

-- I didn't --

MAX

-- I began to see that new angle. Sure, I didn't know until just now which poem was the one you'd stolen, but you're on the tail end of a book tour, and I looked it up, found some videos -- you read the same eight poems at each one, so I assumed it was probably one of those. And I was right, because you always read "Beth" first at these events, meaning that poem's been heard all over the country, and no one -- not a single person -- is aware that you're not the author. Honestly, I couldn't dream of any better proof of concept of Byron's effectiveness. And if you and I went to the board together, saying we couldn't tell anyone, not even them, that that was what we were doing -- we didn't want any kind of leak -- that might work. I can make that work.

LANEY

... So you'd just need me to... be there with you. Say this to your board. And no one else would ever know.

MAX

Well, and we'd also need to split proceeds on the book from here on out.

Long silence.

LANEY

... Excuse me?!

MAX

We could even do a sixty-forty split.

LANEY

(snapping)

Are you nuts?! "Beth" isn't even in the collection!

MAX

I did notice that. Very sly of you, publishing it in a Faculty Quarterly to get it by me.

LANEY

All of the poems in the collection were written -- one hundred percent, one *million* percent -- by me. Eighty-five out of eighty-five poems. You're not getting a cent of my proceeds -- what little of them that they are, how much do you think I've made?!

MAX

The board won't care unless it was a monetary arrangement between you and I. They need to see Byron's a worthwhile project with actual financial ramifications. This needs to be convincing -- the specific amount is less important than the gesture.

LANEY

Well, how's this for an amount? Zero dollars. It's how much I made on that poem "Beth."
It's not in the collection.

MAX

You've said that. But you also told me ten minutes ago that working with me, working with Byron, made it easier to write again. Those eighty-five poems only exist because of Byron.

LANEY

That's not true, I was working on those poems well / before --

MAX

So you're saying that this bestselling book of poems would still exist even if you hadn't prompted my machine and stolen my intellectual property?

LANEY

One: I didn't prompt the machine. I was just sitting there, and it printed.

MAX

That's not possible.

LANEY

Two: *Your intellectual property?* Your intellectual property?!

MAX

I wrote the code, the code is my intellectual property, I own what the code creates.

LANEY

I thought the whole point of the project was that Byron was writing my poetry.

MAX

Artistically, yes. Legally, no.

LANEY

I don't believe this.

MAX

I don't want to be this guy. I'm just telling you what needs to happen. I read that New Yorker profile on you, Laney, I know there's talk about awards. I don't need the whole world to know about this. Just my board. But if you want to keep the money, control the story, and tell the world yourself, I can spin that too.

LANEY

Let me be very clear, Max. I put years of work into this collection. I've earned every second of the reaction its received, and every cent of the money I've earned. Making some statement to your board is one thing, but giving up what I've earned -- what is mine -- is a line in the sand I refuse to cross. You hear me? *I refuse.*

MAX

... You lied, Laney. You lied then, you're lying now. If you want to keep lying, money's going to have to change hands.

LANEY

Who am I lying to? The readers? I would've written those words -- that poem -- if I had found it... them. I identify with every single letter. If that's not telling the truth to a person reading that poem, I don't know what is.

MAX

I'm not going to debate this with you -- your convoluted philosophical justifications for plagiarism don't interest me right now. This is the real world, Laney. *You stole from me.* So you're saying no to options one and two -- fine, there's always option three. I'll be forced to sue you.

(beat)

Correction. *Athena* will be forced to sue you.

Tense silence. The door opens and Roy sticks his head in.

ROY

Laney. It's time, I think.

(to Max)

Hello.

MAX

I'm leaving.

(extends his hand to Roy)

I don't think we've met. Max Barnett.

ROY

(completely star-struck)

Roy Peterson. My office talked to your office once. Huge fan.

MAX

(shoots a look back at Laney, then)

It's always good to see you, Laney.

He goes. Laney stands there, frozen.

ROY

Laney. They're waiting for you.

LANEY

One moment.

He goes.

The lights shift and we are seamlessly in...

MOMENT: LANEY

Laney stands at a podium. She pulls notecards from her pocket.

LANEY

Hello. Hi. Thank you for being here.

I'm very excited to be closing out this book tour at home, so, yes... thank you again for being here.

(beat, looking down at her notecards)

My daughter Elizabeth wanted to be called "Beth" from an early age. She thought "Elizabeth" was too long of a name and she didn't want to burden people with having to pronounce all those letters. When I asked her why she wanted to be called "Beth" and not "Eliza" or "Lizzie," all she said was "I like Beth the best."

When she was sixteen, Beth became curious about her father. One night, over dinner, she told me she would like to meet him. Unfortunately I hadn't seen her father in, well, sixteen and a half years. When I told her I had no idea where he was with no way to find him, she asked me simply for his name. His name, she said, would be enough.

Beth knew that names are symbols. Names are how we bring the vast expanse of a person's being into a neat little package, a representation for the world. Names are assigned in one sense, but in another, we choose what we want to be called. Names are, therefore, the first glimpse we get into a person's inner life.

Which is why, when I wrote this first poem that I'm going to read, a poem not from the collection but the first one I was able to write about my daughter, I titled it with just a name: *her* name, my only child, "Beth"...

Because this poem in particular -- and the book that followed, in general -- is my attempt to go beyond my child's name.

To get to the heart of a person who I knew for her entire life, but never fully understood.

Poetry can do that...

(beat, coughs)

That's what I believe, at least...

(beat, looks down at the poem, then up)

A mentor of mine once told me that poems are prayers. I've come to disagree. I believe that poems are the *answers* to our prayers.

(beat)

This poem was.

(beat, looks down to the poem again)

An answer to a prayer, I mean.

(beat, snapping back into it)

I'm sorry, I'm a bit... flustered.

Anyway... uh, yeah, here we go. Here's my poem... "Beth"...

A very long silence.

Laney puts her notecards away.

LANEY

Um, actually, before I read anything, I want to say something.

I mean... clarify something I just said.

(beat)

That story I just told about Beth wanting to know her father... and me telling her I didn't know where he was...

That was a lie. I lied to her.

Yeah. I lied to my daughter.

I mean, I told her the correct name. Told her the story of how Andrew and I met, how we came to have a daughter -- all of that was true.

But I lied about not knowing where he was. Or how to find him.

I knew exactly where he was.

He was living in Altoona, Pennsylvania. An insurance agent, with another family.

I didn't tell her that. She wanted to meet him and I didn't tell her. Why not? It wasn't about *him*. He knew I had the child and wanted nothing to do with it. Her. Beth.

So why didn't I tell her about her father? What was I so afraid of?

(beat)

I think it was... what I now know to be true. The fear...

...that, at the end of the day, I have nothing to say.

Nothing to teach.

That I was a mediocre parent at best.

That my nose was always in my notebook.

That I am not worthy of what I preach.

That I have nothing -- *nothing*...

...to call my own...

...not even my *fucking* poetry.

A very long silence. Laney stands there, head down.

LANEY

I'm very sorry.
 But I'm going to have to cut this reading short.
 I'll make sure you all get refunds.
 Unless this event was free...
 I'm sorry.

And she heads off stage.

SCENE EIGHT

Laney's backstage room.

Laney charges in, collapses into a chair. Puts her head in her hands, and breathes.

There is a long silence as she sits there, composing herself.

Then, she looks up with a glare of resolution, grabs her purse, and starts collecting her belongings.

After a moment, Roy comes in without knocking.

ROY

The hell was that?

Laney keeps packing up her stuff.

ROY

Laney? What the hell just happened?

LANEY

I didn't write one of the poems.

ROY

What?

LANEY

The one you had me publish in the Faculty Quarterly. "Beth." I didn't write "Beth."

ROY

What do you mean, you didn't / write --

LANEY

Max Barnett's machine wrote it. It was replicating my poetry, it wrote it, and I passed it off as my own.

Roy stands there, dumbfounded.

Laney, done packing, goes to leave.

ROY

Stop -- where are you going?

LANEY

Home.

ROY

No, no, no -- you're not -- no--

Chelsea runs in.

CHELSEA

Laney, are you okay?

LANEY

I'm fine.

ROY

She's a plagiarist.

LANEY

(sharp)
I didn't plagiarize anything.

ROY

What do you call it then?

CHELSEA

(to Roy)
Wait outside, honey.

ROY

I'm not going anywhere, I can't believe this --

Suddenly Laney is up in Roy's face.

LANEY

This only happened because you pressured me to publish in the Quarterly last year, so get off your / high horse --

ROY

Don't put this on me, I didn't ask you / to lie!

CHELSEA

Laney! What happened?!

Laney takes a deep breath.

LANEY

Max had me hooked up to the machine. He left to give me space to write something, so that Byron -- the machine -- could measure my brainwaves, or whatever.

(beat)

I'm sitting there, thinking about writing a poem about Beth, and... suddenly Byron starts printing. It's not supposed to do that, Max said the machine should only output something when someone types into the machine a prompt for the poem -- and I *didn't* prompt it.

(beat)

So I lean over and read the poem... and it has a title and everything... and it's the poem I'd been trying to write for years. The poem that all my other poems were trying to be, but were nowhere close to being. It's like... I had been in the dark and suddenly I saw the light.

(beat)

I never intended to publish it. I just wanted to have it on my shelf... like I would have any other poet that inspires me on my shelf. Because in an instant, I knew how to finish my collection.

(beat)

But then I was told, give me something to publish *now*, or you're fired. There was only one poem on this planet that no one had read and that was written in my voice and was ready to publish... I felt I had no choice.

ROY

Yes, you did. You had a choice. I asked you directly if you wrote it, and you said yes.

LANEY

I was bending the truth... I mean, my brainwaves were pumping into Byron when it printed that poem... the machine was almost an extension of my brain in that moment. An enhancement. I never considered publishing it in the collection because I was hoping Max wouldn't notice.

CHELSEA

Laney, I... I don't know what to say.

LANEY

But Max was just here and he threatened to sue me unless -- *jesus* -- unless I enter some kind of financial partnership with him and with the Athena board -- unless I give him half my proceeds and --

ROY

Well, that's hardly a fortune.

LANEY

It isn't about the amount. His job isn't secure and he thinks if I privately tell his board that the whole thing was his idea and toss money their way to prove it, they won't force him out. He's set on it.

ROY

Jesus.

LANEY

He says the collection only exists because I took inspiration from that poem the machine wrote, which *is not true*. But still, he's going to sue if I don't do what he says.

ROY

Jesus. This is bad.

LANEY

I know.

ROY

Bad for me, bad for you--

LANEY

I know.

ROY

Bad for the *university*.

LANEY

Roy, I know! Thank you! Look, I've decided. I'm going to fight this. Let Athena sue. I'm going to fight. I'll hire a lawyer and take this to court.

ROY

You'll lose.

LANEY

Does that one poem not originating from my hand invalidate the eighty-five poems in the collection? My feelings are valid, my connection to my readers is real --

ROY

Maybe so, but when your opponent is the legal defense team of a multi-billion dollar tech company, I'm gonna go ahead and say *it doesn't matter*.

LANEY

I never signed anything. The machine was reading *my* brainwaves when it wrote the poem. It's more mine than his. Look, there's no precedent for cases like this. I could win this! Those emotions are mine. My daughter is mine. That poem is mine.

And suddenly Chelsea, who's been quiet for a bit, pipes in:

CHELSEA

But you don't believe that, Laney.

Her calm in the middle of the hysteria shuts Laney and Roy up.

They look at her.

CHELSEA

You don't believe that. That this poem is in any way yours.

LANEY

I just told you why / I do.

CHELSEA

But you don't. The Laney Chamberlain I know... definitely does not. You believe that poetry reveals the inner life of the poet.

LANEY

That's the reason why I took the poem in the first place, because I felt like I could've written it, I could've --

CHELSEA

But you didn't. You didn't write it.

(beat)

I'll be honest with you if you're honest with me. When I arranged the initial meeting between you and Max Barnett, I did it because I knew it would play well in my interview for the Dean of Humanities. Alright? There it is. Honesty. Now, are you going to *honestly* tell me that a poem written by a computer is *actually* yours?

LANEY

A computer mimicking *my* brainwaves, / so --

CHELSEA

You're trying so hard to justify this, but... It's a result. It's not the process. It's not worth defending.

LANEY

It fooled the two of you, it fooled all my audiences --

CHELSEA

Ten minutes ago, you couldn't even read it out loud! How are you supposed to defend it in court if you can't read it out loud?

Laney is quiet...

CHELSEA

... But to answer your question, Laney: no, it shouldn't invalidate what you did with the collection.

ROY

But it does. And it will.

LANEY

(to Chelsea)

Wait. What are you suggesting?

CHELSEA

... I think you should pay him.

ROY

You -- what?!

CHELSEA

Make it go away. If he *really* only wants his board to know, make whatever statement he wants you to make, then whip up an NDA for him and his board to sign. Give them the percentage of the proceeds they'll need, and move on.

ROY

Chelsea, honey, I love you, but that's insane.

CHELSEA

(ignoring him)

Who cares about the money, Laney? When did this start being about the money?

ROY

When she decided to be a professional poet, that's when!

CHELSEA

(still ignoring him)

You have eighty-five beautiful poems in that collection. And it doesn't matter how they got here, because the fact is they're here. *Those* are the works that need your protection. Not the one that you didn't work for.

LANEY

I can't throw away my money. I'm not going to.

CHELSEA

You're right. Which is why you can't pour thousands of dollars into fighting a lawsuit that everyone in this room knows that you'd lose. *That* would be throwing away your money, not to mention the *time* that you could spend writing and continuing to craft a legacy that will *matter* to people.

LANEY

No, Chelsea, you don't understand... I *literally* can't throw my money away. I -- financially, things have been tighter than I've told you... and without my university position... and without the pitiful money I've been making off the book... I'll be broke.

CHELSEA

But you'll still have your university position.

Laney and Roy both look up sharply at Chelsea.

ROY

May/be you should think on that, Chelsea.

LANEY

How?

CHELSEA

I have no intention of letting you go for this, Laney.

ROY

(with a thickly condescending laugh)

Chelsea, I know you two are friends, but come on. I can't even begin to list how many Honor Code violations she committed!

CHELSEA

You're not Dean anymore, Roy -- you will make *zero percent* of this decision.

ROY

I advocated hiring you because I knew -- I thought I knew -- your judgment was better than this.

CHELSEA

Not because you believe in me?

ROY

I don't engage in nepotism. Unlike you, apparently.

CHELSEA

I want my faculty to represent the best that each field has to offer. And Laney Chamberlain belongs in that category. End of story.

LANEY

Will you please stop talking about me like I'm not standing right here?

(beat)

I -- I don't know if I deserve this, Chelsea.

CHELSEA

The opinion that you're one of the best in our field isn't ex/actly controversial --

LANEY

No, I don't deserve this. After the way I've been treating you the past couple months. The way I've been treating you for years, really.

CHELSEA

That's not... we're not talking about that now.

LANEY

I'm trying to apolo/gize --

CHELSEA

Both of you... I'm thinking about what's best for the department. For the school, for the university. This isn't personal. Towards either of you.

LANEY

That may be true, but just / let me --

CHELSEA

I don't need your apology right now. Okay? All I need is for you to say yes or no. Are you going to do what I'm proposing or no. Because if you say no... we need to start having another conversation.

Silence as Laney thinks. Very subtly -- she nods.

LANEY

Okay... I'll see you on Monday.

Slowly, Laney leaves the room.

ROY

Well, I can't stand idly by and let this happen.

CHELSEA

You're not going to say anything.

ROY

You're using that tone I hate...

CHELSEA

But you won't.

ROY

I think I will.

CHELSEA

I'm your wife and I say you won't.

ROY

I still have a voice! Just because I'm not on active faculty anymore doesn't mean I'm going to stop upholding the standards of the university.

CHELSEA

I'm telling you -- *asking you* to trust me. Is that not enough?

ROY

No!

(beat, then, quieter)

It's not enough.

This hurts Chelsea.

CHELSEA

Well. In that case. How about the fact that if I know anything about you after three decades of marriage, it's that you care about your reputation more than anything? *Anything*. And you were patient zero for this whole thing.

Maybe no one who read the Quarterly could tell that poem was written by a computer, but they never would've been presented with that opportunity if *you* had been able to. Not only that, but you have spent the last six months being Laney's talking head, so I have a feeling that the people that care would believe you knew about this the whole time.

(beat)

If I hear anything about this getting out, I will hammer that point home so hard that you'll *long* for the days when you could hide away in your cozy emeritus status.

(beat)

So you won't say anything, and I feel pretty confident about that assessment.

ROY

... You're serious.

A sad silence as the reality of their relationship lands on both of them.

CHELSEA

I'm going to pack a bag and move out for a bit.

ROY

To go stay with Laney?

CHELSEA

No. Not with Laney. A hotel.

ROY

(beat)

I don't know what to say.

CHELSEA

Well. That's new.

And Chelsea heads out of the room. Roy stands there.

He sees a stray copy of Laney's book sitting nearby. Goes over and picks it up.

Flips through it.

Reads.

SCENE NINE

A conference room in Athena.

The Athena offices are sleek and bright. A noticeable shift from the university settings we've been in thus far.

Byron is on the table in-between Max and Laney.

Laney is signing a check. Max holds a thick stack of papers.

Laney rips the check from her checkbook.

LANEY

There you are.

She hands him the check. He hands her the papers.

MAX

And the NDAs signed by the members of the board.

LANEY

My lawyer will touch base in a couple months for the next check?

MAX

Sounds like a plan.

As Laney packs up her stuff:

MAX

You know, it's a bummer things went down this way. If you had asked me to publish that poem, I probably would've let you.

Laney shoots him a look.

MAX

We could've *actually* partnered up, that's all I'm saying.

LANEY

I have a feeling that would've landed me in an even worse place than I'm currently in.

MAX

Hey, you got what you wanted, right? It seems that your mojo's back.

LANEY

It's not "mojo." It's being a writer.

MAX

Y'know, I've started to write some poetry myself.

LANEY

(could not be less interested)

Oh yeah?

MAX

Yeah, bought a notebook. Been jotting some stuff down. Once a day, every day.

LANEY

Alright.

MAX

Figured if I'm trying to get into the minds of the world's best poets, I should have some understanding of that creative process myself.

LANEY

That'll take a little more than keeping a poem diary.

MAX

(beat)

Of course, I just / meant--

LANEY

I'm going to leave now, Mister Barnett.

MAX

You know, all of what happened aside, the data I got from our sessions together *was* helpful in ways I can't even articulate. If you want to start making some of that money back...

LANEY

What am I, your friend now?

MAX

It's an offer, and it's on the table.

LANEY

Well, you can kindly remove it from the table. I think I've had enough sticky mesh pads attached to my forehead for one lifetime.

MAX

I do have a final question, though, before you go.

LANEY

What more is there to say?

MAX

Consider this your exit interview from Athena.

A brief silence, then Laney puts down her bag.

MAX

I'm not stupid. I know Byron isn't actually replicating a human brain. It's two neural networks competing to fool each other, it's not even close. But whenever I read the poems it spits out... the good ones... I just go... *woah*, you know?

(beat)

Because if it can do *that*, what else can it do? What if it stops *forging* dead poets' styles and starts *learning* from them to develop its own? And if it becomes a creative entity, independent, what happens when we abstract from the realm of art to... decision making? Problem solving? Medicine, business, military? The algorithm would be smarter than its own code. The machine would transcend its machinery. Imagine what we could do with a rational agent... that has the speed and efficiency of a digital computer *and* the creative capacity of the human brain?

(beat)

I don't know. While Byron is far from perfect, whenever I read something it's printed... I... see the future.

(beat)

So I guess the question here is... why didn't you tell me that you wanted a Byron poem? And especially, why didn't you tell me that the poem Byron printed when you prompted it was that fucking good?

Silence. Laney considers.

LANEY

The collection was a couple of weeks from going to print, and my publishers asked me if I wanted to have a dedication at the front of the book. The whole process had been such a whirlwind, and I considered the collection itself to be a dedication, so I hadn't even considered having a separate one before the epigraph.

(beat)

But then I remembered someone who I could dedicate the collection to. Someone who had, a while before, led me down a path that eventually led to this book. But you had never told me her name.

(beat)

I know I said I was technically illiterate, but you must have thought I was *dumb*. I know how to use the internet.

Did you think I wouldn't come across something if I searched for it? It was easy to figure out that your mom's still alive. You talk about her in interviews all the time. Alive and kicking, still living in Sacramento where you were raised.

Max looks down, unsure what to say.

LANEY

And I was mad. For a bit. I hate being manipulated. But eventually I came to respect it. Your decision to play to my emotions. My ego. You're a good performer, maybe you were an actor in a past life. Maybe you *are* an artist after all. Or maybe you're just human. Because we're all out for ourselves, in the end, and maybe that's the way the world should be... So at first I didn't tell you because I didn't think it was a big deal, but then... it was because -- to be frank -- I didn't think I would be caught... and I felt like you could go fuck yourself.

Long silence.

MAX

For what it's worth, my mother was -- *is* a big fan of yours / so that part wasn't a lie.

LANEY

I don't care. I don't care, Mister Barnett.

MAX

(beat)

I don't know why I just said that, I made that up too...

(beat)

The truth is, when the Byron project started up, the board authorized three names that I could go after. Three names that would look good. To the press, I mean -- if it ever got that far. And you were number one on that list. I didn't know who you were before then. I just knew that... it would look good if I got you. So I did.

LANEY

... "It would look good." That seems to be a theme recently...

MAX

Hey, I'm being honest.

LANEY

No, I know you are. I've had a complicated relationship with honesty these past couple of months.

MAX

I really am sorry that this whole thing... left that feeling in you. The idea that I made someone cynical really burns a hole in my stomach.

LANEY

Oh please, don't give yourself so much credit. Thirty, thirty-five years ago, when I was younger, that feeling I just described was what my poetry was all about.

MAX

What happened? To make that feeling go away.

LANEY

I became a mother, Max.

Laney slings her bag over her shoulder.

LANEY

One last thing. On the subject of honesty... listen to me, because I'm being honest here. I never prompted Byron. To produce that poem. I never touched it.

MAX

I'm sorry, but that's not possible --

LANEY

It is, Max. It is possible. I was sitting there, hooked up to the machine, and Byron, reading my brainwaves, went ahead and printed something. Something better, it appears, than anything it ever printed when *not* in dialogue with a human brain.

Max sits there, digesting this, mental wheels churning...

LANEY

And I say this not to clear the air or to try to convince you of what I know to be true. I say this because... you're so intent on *replicating* creativity -- spontaneous cognition -- in a box. You're so intent on it, that -- it seems to me -- you're missing the seven billion creativity machines walking around you every day.

(beat)

Goodbye, Mister Barnett.

MAX

Goodbye, Professor Chamberlain.

Laney puts her hand gently on top of Byron.

LANEY

Goodbye, Byron.

Her hand lingers there for a long moment. On Byron.
Then, she walks out of the room.

Max is alone with the machine.

He reaches over and picks up the neural cap. Considers it.
Then, slowly, methodically, surgically, places it on his
own head. This takes a while.

When he's done, he leans forward, opens Byron's
interface laptop, hits a button, and...

Byron whirs to life.

SCENE TEN

Chelsea's office in the Department of English.
Significantly larger than Laney's, and far more organized.

Chelsea sits behind her desk. Laney stands on the other
side.

The two of them stare at each other, Chelsea's mouth
slightly open.

There's a moment of silence, then...

CHELSEA

What?!

LANEY

Yup.

Silence.

CHELSEA

You won?!

LANEY

I got the call this morning.

CHELSEA

Laney!

Silence.

LANEY
Yup.

CHELSEA
Laney! That's incredible!

Laney just shrugs.
Chelsea gets up and gives her a hug.

CHELSEA
Laney, it's incredible.

LANEY
It's a piece of metal.

CHELSEA
It's recognition.

Laney shrugs again.

CHELSEA
You got what you wanted -- people connecting to your story, your truth.

LANEY
I don't know...

CHELSEA
It's true.

LANEY
... So why do I feel so fucking empty?

CHELSEA
(beat)
I don't know, you tell me, Lane.

There's a long silence.
Laney hands Chelsea a piece of paper.
Chelsea reads it.
A long silence, then...

...Why?
 CHELSEA

LANEY
 Because I've decided. I've made my decision.

Silence.

CHELSEA
 Laney, I --

LANEY
 I appreciate your offer, I really do... but... this is final. I've already found people to take over my classes for the rest of the semester.

Silence. Chelsea scans the sheet again.

CHELSEA
 There's no reason in here.

LANEY
 Does there have to be?

CHELSEA
 I'd appreciate one.

LANEY
 Maybe there isn't one.

CHELSEA
 Laney--

LANEY
 Maybe I'm just, you know, flowing with the wind.

CHELSEA
Laney!

(beat, quieter)
 I've fought for you. I've done nothing but fight for you. So if you expect me to accept your resignation, you better give me a good reason.

Silence as Laney figures out a way to tell what she's learned.

LANEY

... After Beth died, I thought poetry would save me. And I thought that the reason I couldn't move on was because poetry was failing me. But it was never about the poetry. It was just... me. It's time I start taking care of myself.

CHELSEA

... And what does that look like?

LANEY

Well, I cancelled my second book tour. I'm meeting tomorrow with a therapist that came highly recommended.

(beat)

And I think I need to spend a little time away from you.

Chelsea nods.

This was inevitable, but it hurts.

CHELSEA

Okay.

LANEY

I'm sorry, / Chels.

CHELSEA

I hope that works out for you.

LANEY

Chelsea, I'm trying to --

CHELSEA

Have a nice life, and all that.

LANEY

Please let me apologize.

(beat)

I always thought... that you and I would be by each other's sides forever. I wanted that. For so long. I never considered that our paths would diverge. So when yours did... I didn't respect it. And that was unfair of me. And I sincerely apologize.

CHELSEA

(beat, moved)

Thank you.

LANEY

No, thank *you*. For everything. I'm not cut out for academia, but I'm glad you are.

CHELSEA

I meant what I said. Your leaving will be a loss to the department.

LANEY

Don't worry, I'll let you keep my National Book Award in the glass case. And this new one that's coming, too. I have no use for them.

CHELSEA

We can pay you for them. Officially buy them from you.

LANEY

Eh. Who cares about money.

The two of them share a smile.

CHELSEA

Roy moved out this morning. Going to live with his brother.

LANEY

Chelsea...

CHELSEA

Believe me, it's for the best.

LANEY

How are you feeling?

CHELSEA

Like I need to call my lawyer...

LANEY

No, Chels, seriously. How are you feeling?

CHELSEA

(beat)

I'll be okay. I'm getting dinner with friends tonight. And then a group of us are doing a wine tour in Napa in a couple weeks. I'm keeping myself busy.

LANEY

Good.

CHELSEA

Thank you for asking.

Of course.

LANEY

They stand there, nodding...

LANEY

Well, I guess I'll be going.

CHELSEA

Sure, yeah.

Awkward silence.

Laney opens her arms and the two of them hug. At first the hug is uncomfortable, strained.

But then the two of them relax into each other's arms, and the hug becomes one of history and love and survival.

It communicates everything.

A long silence.

CHELSEA

Go find your truth, Lane.

LANEY

I'll try.

They release each other.

LANEY

Remember... way back... before Beth, when it was just you and me... you used to wake up hours before I did and write five poems before breakfast?

CHELSEA
(with a smile)

Yeah.

LANEY

Did you ever end up finding those?

CHELSEA

I don't even know where I would look.

LANEY

You should find them. They were great.

CHELSEA

They were fine.

LANEY

For the circumstances, they were great.

CHELSEA

That's very sweet. Not true, but very sweet.

LANEY

I'm telling you, The New Yorker would publish them in a heartbeat.

They both laugh.

LANEY

Find them. Find them and take a look. What's the worst that could happen?

Laney exits. Chelsea sits, and is silent for a moment.

She reaches into her desk, pulls out a leather-bound notebook. Worn and weathered. She opens to a blank page. Clicks a pen to life. She sits there, and thinks.

Chelsea remains on stage, working, as we transition into:

MOMENT: MAX

Max Barnett as we first saw him. Shark-mode, at a conference. Next to him, a table, on which sits a bulky object covered by a cloth -- a different build and size than Byron.

A new machine.

MAX

In nineteen-ninety-six, world chess champion Garry Kasparov was challenged by IBM to compete against its state-of-the-art chess-playing computer, Deep Blue, in a six-game match.

Kasparov won.

So IBM licked their wounds, went back to the drawing board, improved Deep Blue's design, and challenged Kasparov again the following year.

This time, Deep Blue won.

It was the first time that a chess-playing computer had defeated a reigning world champion under tournament conditions.

Deep Blue took up rooms, but of course these days most chess applications on your smartphone can compete with grandmasters with a surprising victory rate.

But I'm not here today to debate the relative merits of humans and computers -- in *competition*.

Because Garry Kasparov didn't stop with his defeat. He had an idea. What if humans and computers didn't face off on opposite sides of the chessboard, but instead teamed up?

After all, humans are great at creating nuanced strategies, while computers can cycle through chess configurations a couple million times faster than organic brains can. What would happen if these two strengths... became one? Kasparov called this "Advanced Chess," and found that human-computer teams not only beat every human on their own, *but also any computer on its own.*

(beat)

You see what I'm getting at?

Last year I stood up here and talked about the possibility of the world's first creativity computer. Today, I'm happy to announce that the cutting edge research that went into that project has yielded a breakthrough in computational cognition.

We might not be able to capture the minds of our greatest thinkers who have long passed. But we'll be able to amplify the abilities of our greatest thinkers who are alive today.

He crosses behind the table, grabs the corners of the cloth.

On the other side of the stage, Chelsea continues to stare into space, occasionally marking words down on the paper.

MAX

If the future is a world where humans and computers interact, work together, to solve the world's toughest problems in creative and innovative ways... then the future is now. Just as "Advanced Chess" presented a new way of looking at that game, Athena's "Advanced Cognition" presents a new way to look at the mind.

And it's going to change -- everything.

He whips the sheet off the machine, but before we can see any of it--

His side of the stage goes black.

Now all we can see is Chelsea. She sits there, eyes up, staring into space. Lost in the magical, mysterious process that is human creativity.

Then, she puts her pen to her lips, and the whole stage goes black.

END OF ACT TWO.

END OF PLAY.