Handicapped

By

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CHARACTERS

Nell Underwood, 27, attractive, but not gorgeous

Chuck Fowler, 28, tall, blonde, handsome, a paraplegic

 Vernon Dexter, 27, dark hair, athletic build

PLACE

The action takes place in Chuck’s condominium, in Philadelphia, PA. There are exits to bedrooms on the right and left offstage. The entrance to the living room is downstage right. There is an alcove on the left side for a kitchen. The living room has a loveseat, a lounge chair, and a coffee table. There are pennants designating baseball teams on the walls on stage left and right of the living area. There are short wood cabinets in the back. They have drawers and shelves which hold baseball awards. There is also a statue of the Virgin Mary on one shelf. There are some baseball bats and gloves in the area. The guest bedroom is spare, with a bed, end table with a lamp, and a dresser.

TIME

 The present

SCENE I

The living room in Chuck’s condominium in the center city part of Philadelphia, mid-morning of an early April Saturday

SCENE II

The guest bedroom in the condominium

SCENE III

The living room in the condominium

SCENE I

(NELL is wearing no make-up, dressed in an average length skirt and a loose pullover top. She has a necklace with a crucifix around her neck. She tends to straighten her clothes occasionally in the first and second scenes and run her hand through her hair. She is putting crumpled beer cans and empty pizza boxes in a trash bag and throwing dirty clothes in a laundry basket. The sound of something heavy crashing onto the floor is heard.)

CHUCK (offstage)

Goddamn it!

NELL

Holy Mother Mary, what happened now?

CHUCK

I fell in the bathroom, is what happened.

(NELL drops the trash bag and runs offstage.)

NELL (offstage)

I got you. There you go. That's it. Good. You’re okay now.

(NELL pushes CHUCK into the living room in his wheelchair from the right bedroom area. He is wearing a robe. He rubs his right elbow.)

CHUCK

I think I hurt my pitching arm.

NELL

Let me take a look at you.

(NELL holds his right arm and rotates it slowly. CHUCK winces a bit.)

NELL (Cont’d)

I don't think anything's broken. Doesn't look like you hit your head, thank God.

CHUCK

Thanking God's not going to help.

(CHUCK picks up a baseball from the coffee table, turns it in his hand, and tosses it up and down a bit.)

NELL

See. It’ll be alright.

(NELL goes back to picking up beer cans. She stumbles over a baseball glove.)

NELL

What a dump.

CHUCK

Hey, Bette Davis, catch!

(He tosses the ball. Nell whips around, juggles the ball, and drops it on her foot.)

NELL

Ouch!

CHUCK

Bad hands.

NELL

Prick!

CHUCK

Sorry, not at the moment.

 (Pause.)

NELL

Bette Davis, huh? Watching old flicks again?

CHUCK

Yeah, Turner Classic Movies is like a time machine. I’m glad you’ve got me watching films again. I haven't seen so many since college. I guess now I’m like Jimmy Stewart.

NELL

You mean living life through the rear window?

CHUCK

Well, at least through my TV.

NELL

You know, Edward Albee used that Bette Davis "What a dump" line, too, in a play.

CHUCK

Well, if it's in a book, you would know about it.

NELL

It's in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* You should check out the movie. Better yet, read the play first, and then see the film.

CHUCK

Yes, Ms. Underwood. Always trying to tone up my brain, huh? You always had a beautiful mind.

NELL

Good title for a movie. And, the reference fits, since dealing with you is driving me crazy.

(Pause.)

NELL (Cont'd)

Of course, back in college, you used my mind, and my roommate's body.

CHUCK

That again. Hey, it was like you didn't *want* anyone to see your body, with the way you dressed.

NELL

What was wrong with the way I dressed?

CHUCK

Nothing, if you were modeling the latest in convent cover-ups. No good parts were showing, unless you had Superman's x-ray vision.

 (Pause.)

CHUCK

What was that roommate's name? Mandy, Maggie?

NELL

Missy. Can't even remember her name.

CHUCK

Right, Missy. Anyway, I never said this before, but I *did* think about asking you out back then.

NELL

Yeah, right.

CHUCK

It's true. But, we were doing the tutoring thing, and I felt getting physical would have messed up the friendship we started.

NELL

And, you had plenty of hot girls very willing not to be your friends, right?

CHUCK

That's the number one thing on a guy's mind in college. Okay, not just in college. Stop giving me the evil eye. Hey, that reminds me, I started reading Edgar Allan Poe. You like his stuff, right?

NELL

Changing the subject.

CHUCK

Love those stories. "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Imp of the Perverse." Awesome. Hey, next Halloween we should have a party.

NELL

Making plans for us, are we? You should know better.

CHUCK

You could wear a cardboard coffin around your shoulders. We could put a sign on you that says, "You think premature babies have it rough? Well, I had a premature burial!"

(No response from NELL.)

CHUCK (Cont'd)

And I can wear a raven head. I should have a sign, too. Let’s see, what can it say …

NELL

How about, "Me? Touch my pecker? Nevermore!"

(After a moment’s delay, they both laugh.)

CHUCK

I can tell the guests to buy booze and then to - bill - me.

(They laugh some more.)

CHUCK (Cont'd)

I’m glad you can find something funny.

NELL

You, too.

(Long pause.)

NELL

About time you came out of your bedroom. I woke you up a while ago.

CHUCK

What's the point? I should go back to sleep. In my dreams I can still stand on the mound in my Phillies uniform and wave to the fans.

(Pause.)

CHUCK (Cont’d)

You know, you don't have to do that. That’s why I pay the cleanup lady.

NELL

That’s cleaning lady. She’s not batting number four. Mind is always on the diamond.

CHUCK

Even if the body can’t be. Seriously, Nell, what’s with the spic and spanning?

NELL

The cleaning lady can't keep up with you. Especially all of these beer cans. Can't you at least try to stay sober for a while?

CHUCK

It’s my birthday, so I get to do what I want.

NELL

So, it's like any other day, right? Besides, we're having company, so the place should look somewhat presentable.

CHUCK

What, good old Vern? It's not like he's some VIP. But, I guess he would notice if he sat on my baseball bat.

(NELL gives him a stare before speaking.)

NELL

I need to put things away anyway to keep the area clear so it's safe for you to get around.

CHUCK

Stop playing occupational therapist and work at being a couple.

NELL

We’ve worked overtime at that. So far, it hasn’t paid off.

 (Pause.)

NELL (Cont’d)

Anyway, guess it's hard for me to turn off the OT switch.

CHUCK

I do appreciate you taking care of all the little things. How can a guy who could throw a ball past big-league batters now can't toss out the trash.

NELL

I guess I didn't do my job very well. I was supposed to help you set goals, even small ones, like tidying up. You have to learn to adapt.

CHUCK

Adapt? To this? Better the tree had finished me as well as the car.

NELL

Don’t talk like that! You have to focus on what you can do.

 (Pause.)

NELL (Cont’d)

Did you take your antibiotics? You don’t want that urinary tract infection to rear its ugly head again.

CHUCK

Too bad I have trouble rearing that other head.

 (Pause.)

CHUCK (Cont’d)

You look tired. Still having trouble sleeping?

NELL

Yeah.

CHUCK

The same nightmares?

NELL

Ah huh.

 (Pause.)

CHUCK

I didn't get much sleep last night, either. Bad dreams, too.

NELL

The accident?

CHUCK

Yeah. At least we have something in common.

NELL

Yeah. Right.

(CHUCK comes up close to her, after picking up the ball from the floor, and strokes the outside of her thigh. NELL moves away, puts the laundry and trash in the kitchen, brings in a tray of cheese and crackers and puts it on the coffee table.)

CHUCK

Good, I'm hungry.

NELL

You're always hungry. Hands off until Vern gets here.

CHUCK

Come on, just a little taste. Here, you have some, too. Oh, this sharp cheddar has some bite.

NELL

Stop shoving it in my face. I'm trying to lose some weight.

CHUCK

You look great the way you are. Very attractive.

NELL

Sure. I get that all the time.

CHUCK

You do! You have to look in the mirror and see what I see. So, why don't you forget about the weight, and kiss me, Kate. And, have some cheese.

NELL

Kiss me, Kate? Quoting from Shakespeare?I better not be the shrew, here. But, at least you've been boning up on your literature.

CHUCK

The only boning I’ve been doing. Sorry, but you're a good straight man. I only read the one play. Saw the movie first with Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, so I got interested. Anyway, Willy S. there had some good stuff.

NELL

You make it sound as if he threw a fine curve ball.

CHUCK

I was only able to read a little at a time, though. Good thing there are footnotes.

NELL

You just have to keep at it. I'm proud of you giving it a go.

CHUCK

Reading is becoming more interesting than watching some TV channels. They’re getting on my nerves. To think I actually liked ESPN. Now it’s just a big bore. Seeing constant instant replays of the same catch from every angle. Listening to moronic sports commentators droning on and saying nothing. And who cares about who is getting traded where?

NELL

You do.

CHUCK

Not anymore. And I hate those reality TV shows. You know, the ones with the fake athletes running body-bashing obstacle courses so everyone can laugh at how many skills they *don’t* have. I worry that my life will become as

pathetic as everyone else who just sits there and watches that junk.

NELL

You're going to have to get your thrills from sports the way most of us do – by being a spectator.

 (Pause.)

NELL (Cont'd)

Hey, why don't you spend more time online? You could probably get a lot of followers on Twitter. Or, set up a fan page on Facebook.

CHUCK

Right, so I can tell people that I prefer one percent milk in my cereal to non-fat, and chat about my favorite brand of toilet paper. Or maybe I can write about the proper

technique of transferring my body from the toilet to the wheelchair. You can post photos of when the dismount fails and I slam down on the bathroom floor, the way it happened

just now. A definite YouTube moment. I'd rather belong to the unsocial network.

NELL

Well I'm glad you turned to reading.

CHUCK

Helps me forget about my …

 (pauses)

CHUCK (Cont’d)

predicament. Come on, have some of this cheese.

NELL

I'll have a little if you tell me if you took your meds.

CHUCK

Yes, I did. Now eat this. Good, huh?

NELL

Um. Yum.

CHUCK

You ought to buy some of that creamy Havarti, too. And some sourdough bread. That goes well with the cheese. Do we have any Oreos around for later?

NELL

Yes, I have two bags. And, the peanut M&M's you like. You better watch it with the starch and sugar. It's harder to deal with the calories because you're in the chair a lot. Understand what I'm saying?

CHUCK

I also like Chips Ahoy. We need some more of those.

 (Pause.)

CHUCK (Cont’d)

At least you eat more now than when you first came here. I thought then you were trying for a photo op in Anorexic Monthly.

NELL

I just don't have a big appetite. Anyway, keep taking those meds.

 (Pause.)

CHUCK

You were on the phone for quite a while last evening. Hope you weren’t talking to any moving companies.

NELL

Not yet. A high school friend called. Jenny Townsend. We used to be best buds. She still lives upstate. Said our town seems smaller and smaller to her. She thought it was so great that I was hanging out with a major league baseball star.

CHUCK

Ex-star. Does she know I'm a gimp now?

NELL

Stop that. She knows who you are. She said that she ran into another friend, Hillary Glitzer. She was this stuck-up girl who had all the hot guys chasing her. She and her posse would put down all of the nerds. I was number one on her hit list. Well, she found out about me being your OC, and Jenny said she was totally chartreuse with envy.

CHUCK

So, how does that make you feel?

NELL

Pretty damn good, actually.

(CHUCK moves close to NELL, reaches around her and strokes her behind. NELL backs away.)

NELL

Have you been using lotion to protect your skin?

CHUCK

I like the hands-on approach. Why don't you do it?

(NELL hesitates, then gets the lotion from the table and squeezes some onto one hand. She kneels in front of CHUCK, who is facing sideways on the stage, and starts to rub the lotion onto his legs.)

CHUCK (Cont’d)

You really know how to get cream out of a tube.

NELL

Smooth, Romeo, very smooth.

CHUCK

You're talking about *my* skin, right? If I lift myself up, you can reach my butt. It’s easier if you let go of that crucifix and use both hands. Don’t worry, your priest isn’t here to see.

(NELL stops her rubbing and stands up. CHUCK lowers himself back into the seat.)

CHUCK (Cont’d)

Okay, now, it’s your turn.

(He moves close to NELL, takes the tube from her, grabs her arm, and guides her onto his lap. He squeezes the lotion onto his hand and starts to rub her leg, gradually moving his hand under her skirt.)

CHUCK (Cont’d)

You like that, don’t you. You really want to be a sexy girl.

NELL

I'm not trying to be a sexy girl. Just a girl.

(NELL, her eyes closed, reaches for the crucifix. CHUCK notices, shakes his head, removes his hand from under her skirt, and pushes her off.)

CHUCK

There's no point if you're not going to enjoy it.

NELL

You just don’t get it. I *do* want to enjoy it. My body seems to want to. But, my mind keeps flashing back to that night, him on top of me …

CHUCK

You have to blot out those thoughts. You're here now, with me. I'm sorry my condition is making it more difficult. I do know the only way for us to become really close is to be physical together. That's why this birthday gift is so important.

NELL

I wish you would have asked for an espresso machine.

CHUCK

Come on, be serious. We've already over-talked this subject. It will be good for you to stay and start trying again.

NELL

For me? Or, for you?

CHUCK

For us.

NELL

Is there an "us?"

CHUCK

Of course there is. Do you see any other women around here lately?

NELL

Not lately, but what about later? I don’t think there’s any chance you're going to sign a long-term contract?

CHUCK

We have to get past the tryouts. Quid pro quo, Clarice.

NELL

Why don’t you drown yourself in a nice bottle of Chianti? That seems to be where you’re headed anyway.

 (Pause)

(CHUCK picks up a book from the coffee table.)

CHUCK

What's this? *Leaves of Grass*. Walt Whitman. I haven’t read his poetry, but I drove over his bridge when I went to the Jersey shore. I'm assuming it's not a manual for how to grow weed.

NELL

Only semi-funny. I've been reading his poems again. It's spiritual and sensual. You might like it.

CHUCK

The sensual part sounds good. It isn't that flowery, hug-a-weeping-willow poetry that you need like a gay library card to read, is it?

NELL

Aw, is the big strong baseball man feeling threatened by some beautiful thoughtful words?

(CHUCK puts the book back on the coffee table.)

CHUCK

The only thought-provoking words I used to deal with were from an umpire making a bad call. I don't want to overdo

it and get headaches from all of this reading and thinking. I'm used to being physical.

NELL

You can have an active mind. Time to do more exercising of the gray matter muscle. You can push the limits of the body only so far. But, the mind's potential is limitless. *Catch* my drift? Have I *hit* upon something important?

CHUCK

You do go on. And enough with the baseball metaphors.

 (Pause.)

NELL

When I was young, I used to mentally travel to far off lands with Babar, and later to Narnia reading C. S. Lewis.

CHUCK

Even as a kid I was used to my world being determined by the distances to the foul lines, the space between the bases and from the mound to home plate. I relied on those measurements.

NELL

Well now you can give *yourself* a birthday present, and start to use your mind to think outside the batter’s box. I believe you are capable of walking off the field.

CHUCK

So to speak.

NELL

Yeah, so to speak.

 (Pause.)

CHUCK

Hey, I think I heard my cell ring this morning?

NELL

Your mother called while you were still in bed. She wanted to make sure, again, that you're going home for the party tonight.

CHUCK

I hope you told her I can't wait to see her fellow ex-models and those exercise gurus with their perfect bodies. You know, the traffic is going to be awful on a Saturday, everybody getting an early taste of the warm weather at the shore.

NELL

Come on, at least you'll get back to Ocean City. She said she's sending a limo to pick you up around five o'clock.

CHUCK

And, of course I'm dying to see my dad with those ballplayers he represented. They'll tell me what a great pitcher I *could* have been. "Sure, kid, you only had two seasons, but they were good ones. Hell, you were Rookie of the Year. Most guys don't even make it to The Show." They never say, "The Majors." It's always, "The Show." Christ, they talk like they're living in the movie *Bull Durham*.

NELL

Look, I said I’d go with you tonight. We can split early, go on the boardwalk for a while.

CHUCK

I won't go on the boardwalk, or near the beach. I don't need to be reminded how much I loved running, swimming, hell, just walking there.

NELL

Maybe we can head out to the casinos in AC.

CHUCK

I can't stand being around groups of people anymore. Some just gawked at me when I did those PR gigs for the team, signing baseballs. I heard someone say "Oh, what a shame, such promise." I saw the pity oozing out of their eyes. Others walked past, pretending that they didn't see me, trying to spare me from feeling uncomfortable. They really didn't want to look at me because my horror story might happen to them.

 (Pause.)

CHUCK (Cont’d)

Right after the accident, I got these get-well cards from relatives, as if somehow I was going to miraculously heal myself. One uncle sent me a sympathy card by mistake. Maybe it was the right thing to send, since I feel like so much of me died.

NELL

We'll just go to the party for a short time. Your mother will be pleased.

CHUCK

Her pleasure used to be to show me off as a family trophy. Now that I took away her place in the sports spotlight, she wants to win recognition as the caring mother.

 (Pause.)

CHUCK (Cont’d)

No, it's not her pleasure I'm interested in.

 (Pause.)

CHUCK (Cont’d)

When is Vernon supposed to arrive?

NELL

Soon.

CHUCK

Hey, why don’t you change. How about wearing those clothes I bought you? It will make you feel sexy. Maybe I’ll get stimulated, and this can turn out to be one happy birthday.

NELL

I told you I don't think I can do this anymore, Chuck. It feels forced and weird.

CHUCK

I'm weird; you're weird; even Vern is weird. Sometimes you have to deal with weird by being weird.

NELL

My intimacy problems won’t get better under pressure. Can you get that? Look, I have a female friend who is also an occupational therapist. She lives in Clearwater, and she invited me to visit her. I think I'll see if she knows of any work down there.

CHUCK

Please don’t give up on us yet. Do you really think running away is going to solve your problems? My limitations aren't going to change. *You* must change. Other people have had to deal with their psychological traumas. Now don't give me that nasty look. Isn't it time you broke free, instead of hiding out?

NELL

What do you mean, hiding out?

CHUCK

This occupational therapy thing. You work around disabled people because they're not a threat to you.

NELL

That's not true! I help make their environments safe for them. I came here to do that for you.

CHUCK

Playing it safe is what you've been doing. Look, you said you wanted me, that you thought we could help each other. I've said over and over I know how very difficult it is for you to overcome what that flesh-is-evil religion of yours and that attack in college did to you. But, you've come a long way. You *want* to be sexual now. For us to move forward, you have to *be* sexual.

NELL

I do want to be intimate again. I hoped it would be with you. It just hasn’t worked out the way I thought it might.

CHUCK

Look, I've had to give up almost all of my past life. I'm just trying to carry forward a piece of what I enjoyed before. You promised to seriously consider making a commitment to stay and trying to, you know, loosen up.

NELL

It’s always about your enjoyment and what I have to do. It’s not the same as warming up your pitching arm, you know. Look, I know I must change, but you're asking a lot of me. And you need to change, too.

CHUCK

All this talking is exhausting. If we care about each other you have to give us more time to follow through.

(The doorbell rings.)

NELL

Okay, I’ll put on your sexy little outfit. Happy Halloween.

(NELL shakes her head, hesitates, and then exits to the bedroom on the left.)

CHUCK

Come on in, it's open.

(VERNON enters wearing a Phillies baseball cap, which he tosses onto the loveseat. He carries a shopping bag.)

CHUCK (Cont'd)

Hey there, Mr. Dexter.

VERNON

Hey to you, too, Mr. Fowler.

CHUCK

My friends call me Stretch.

VERNON

Good to know, if any show up.

(CHUCK picks up the baseball and throws it to VERNON.)

CHUCK

Left-handed catch. Pretty good. You may have been a switch-hitter in those good old college days, but I never thought you could be – ambi–dext-rous?

VERNON

Your puns need work, dude.

CHUCK

What's with the bag? You been shopping with the other ladies?

VERNON

I bring gifts. Looks like you're almost wearing your birthday suit, I see. You decided to not get dressed for the occasion?

CHUCK

Why do we even have birthday parties? They just remind us we’re heading toward our obliterations. However, if I am going to receive gifts, I guess they might be worth it.

 (Pause.)

CHUCK (Cont’d)

To celebrate, I bought some really good Scotch. Get us a couple of glasses, will ya'?

VERNON

Don't you think you should lay off that stuff?

CHUCK

Why the hell should I? I can't get into any serious accidents drinking and driving this two-wheeler. You know, Vern, I think sometimes that God did this to me because he wanted to cut me down to size for whiffing all those guys swinging wood at me. That's why he slammed me with that tree. He probably was saying, "Here, try to get past this lumber."

(VERNON gets one glass, opens the bottle, and pours.)

CHUCK

Aren't you having some?

VERNON

Ah, no, my stomach has been feeling a little shaky lately. I'll just get some club soda.

(VERNON goes to the refrigerator in the kitchen area and comes back with his drink.)

CHUCK

We all have to play hurt some time, and I need your support with Nell. So, don't go letting me down today.

(CHUCK strokes VERNON’s arm.)

VERNON

It'll be okay. You know I’m always here for you. Anyway, here's to your health.

CHUCK

Such as it is. Ahhh, good stuff. Refill this tank. Hey, don't spill any in my lap. You drip it, you have to lick it. What's with the shaky hands? Not a nervous Nellie, are you? No, that would be her.

VERNON

Just tired from the flight.

CHUCK

Oh, right. You know you have it backwards. You’re supposed to go south to Florida to get away from the parents for Spring Break. But you went north to visit Ma and Pa Twin Cities instead.

VERNON

It's the college kids who go south to party, not high school teachers.

CHUCK

Your parents still giving you flak about moving east here to the City of Brotherly Love?

VERNON

After five years they're getting used to it. They're happy I'm keeping the Quaker faith for another generation at a Friends' school.

CHUCK

Well forget that friendly persuasion stuff with those kids. Take a bat like this one into the classroom to maintain order.

VERNON

Hey, stop swinging that thing around. You may hit me, and I bruise easily. You going to the party tonight?

CHUCK

And miss the chance to be told that I could have been the next Steve Carlton? Wouldn't want to miss that.

VERNON

Your slider was as good as his. I loved catching them, watching those batters wondering what hit them, because they sure couldn’t hit them. We all knew you would become a big-leaguer.

CHUCK

That bag is pretty filled up. Did you get me an Iron Man suit so I can fly out of here?

VERNON

Uh, well, actually, there are some flowers and candy for Nell.

CHUCK

Aw, did you write a poem, too? You’re such a sweetie, I’m surprised you’re not diabetic.

VERNON

You know you can be a real piece of shit sometimes.

CHUCK

Well, we all have our excremental ways. Okay, okay, I'm sorry. I just want you to stay focused. I need an assist here. You have to help her realize there's no reason to fear the male member. Get her to see that even though it looks like a snake, it can't bite. She trusts you.

VERNON

Did she say that?

CHUCK

Of course, of course. She said she felt safe with you.

VERNON

Safe, huh? Just what a man wants to be. Maybe we should, you know, rethink this strategy. I still feel if you went with a pro who knows how to, uh, deal with your situation, you'll feel like a real man again.

CHUCK

Now just a minute. I feel like a real man. I may be sitting on the bench here, but it doesn't mean I can't still batter up. And, I've always had women who wanted me, and I'm not about to have to pay for it now. No way. Just make sure you're man enough to, you know, present the male side of things.

VERNON

What? What do you mean by that?

CHUCK

It's just that I threw a lot of girls your way in college, and nothing seemed to take. I was thinking maybe you've been with the boys of summer too much. Besides, I never hear you talkin' ‘bout your love life.

VERNON

I'm just waiting for that special -- person.

CHUCK

Well, while you're waiting, help out your special friend here.

(NELL enters, wearing a tight-fitting top, short skirt and

make-up.)

NELL

Hi, Vern.

VERNON

Hi.

NELL

How's things?

VERNON

Not bad.

 (Pause.)

CHUCK

You two have turned small talk into almost no talk. Nell, you look smokin.’ Doesn't she look hot, Vern?

VERNON

Very nice.

CHUCK

Dude, what's with the shyness? You actually have to look at her to offer an observation. There you go. Nice outfit, huh? I had something to say about that.

NELL

Yeah, he buys things off the shopping channel.

VERNON

Huh! And you made fun of me buying stuff.

NELL

These clothes feel strange to me. It's like a skin graft that's being rejected. It's not me.

CHUCK

It is you, the real you, that wants to come out.

NELL

What do you have there, Vern?

VERNON

Flowers and candy for you.

NELL

How nice!

CHUCK

Hey, Godiva chocolates. Nice move. Now all we need is for Nell to get naked, wear a long blonde wig, and steal a horse from the carriage rides around Independence Mall.

NELL

Hold your horses, there, friend.

CHUCK

It's time somebody started to horse around here.

NELL

Easy cowboy.

CHUCK

Don't mention cowboys in Eagles green country. But that's a sport of a different color.

NELL

Have some snacks, Vern.

VERNON

No, thanks. I mean, it looks tasty. I'm just not hungry.

(VERNON rubs his stomach.)

NELL

Are you okay?

VERNON

I'll be alright.

CHUCK

He's fine. His gut is still up in the air from flying. Anyway, did you get me something, Vern?

VERNON

Check this out.

(He tosses a baseball to CHUCK, who looks it over.)

CHUCK

Sweet! It's signed by the 1964 Phillies. The whole team?

VERNON

You bet. I thought you would like it, since you're into that vintage stuff.

NELL

Let me see that. Wow, Johnny Callison's autograph. He hit a home run to win the 1964 All Star Game.

CHUCK

Well, I knew you liked baseball, but I didn't know how much.

NELL

Blame my dad. Being in upstate Pennsylvania, you usually went with either the Yankees or the Phillies. What can I say? He liked Philly better than New York. He was always for the underdog.

CHUCK

Well he definitely didn't go with the best in show. Back in '64, the Phils hadn't even won one World Series.

NELL

1964 looked like the year.

CHUCK

Yeah. There was the Callison home run, and Jim Bunning pitched a perfect game…

NELL

And, they had a six and a half game lead with twelve games left.

CHUCK

And they blew it, and didn't win the pennant.

VERNON

Wow, you two are really into the ancient history.

CHUCK

There was a line in a Woody Allen film I saw recently. It went something like there's nothing sadder than a missed opportunity. I guess the Phils back then could relate to that.

 (Pause.)

NELL

I'll get a plastic case to protect the ball. I think there's one in the back of your closet.

(NELL exits to CHUCK's bedroom.)

VERNON

I have another gift here. I noticed that you don’t have many photos of the good old college days.

CHUCK

Yeah, mother confiscated most of my pictures for her trophy case.

VERNON

I thought I would get in touch with the guys who were on the starting team. They emailed me photos and I pasted them next to our team picture. Sort of a before-and-after, only a couple of them look worse in the after. Mike and Pete put on some poundage in only five years. They wrote some messages and I put them underneath the recent shots.

CHUCK

Let me see. We did have a pretty good bunch there.

VERNON

Yeah, they were awesome.

CHUCK

That Pete. What a third baseman. He got me out of a lot of jams, the way he hugged that foul line. He stole base hits away from those hitters so many times, I should put him in my will. He knew how to calm me down when I got wild, too, telling me some fine lady would reward me after a win.

VERNON

I think Pete was a little too preoccupied with notching female conquests. I think he was a little envious of you in that department.

CHUCK

All I know is I could really count on him on the field. Those guys were good teammates. Not too bright, though.

(NELL enters.)

NELL

Who's not too bright?

CHUCK

These guys.

(CHUCK hands NELL the photograph, but after a quick look,

she doesn’t take it, grasps the baseball, putts it in the case, and places it on a shelf. CHUCK looks at VERNON and shrugs.)

CHUCK (Cont’d)

Me, too, I guess. At least you tried to make me hit the books.

(CHUCK puts the picture down on the coffee table.)

NELL

You're smarter than you want to admit. But, then again, I guess you weren’t bright enough to avoid getting caught cheating.

CHUCK

Yeah it was a good thing that we were such a good draw for the college, and all I had to do was bring up my GPA.

NELL

Too bad the Provost needed a sacrifice, so Vern here had to take the hit. Losing a semester was a setback.

CHUCK

He did it for the good of the team, right Vern?

NELL

You mean for the good of you.

VERNON

He's right, you know. We couldn't lose our star player.

CHUCK

Hey, we had some radical times off the field, too, didn’t we? How about that party at the Hilton when we went to play Penn State at University Park? We were so wasted and totally trashed that room. Didn’t we like toss a TV out the window?

VERNON

I believe it was you that did the tossing. Good thing the coaches hushed that one up.

NELL

You guys were such models of self-control.

CHUCK

Lighten up. We were just unwinding from being so wound up. Everybody put a lot of pressure on us to win, including our fellow students.

VERNON

Chuck, you should get in touch with the guys. Maybe we can have a reunion.

CHUCK

So we can see who has turned into the biggest loser? That's what people want to find out at reunions. No, I'd rather remember how much fun I had with those boys on and off the field. Memories are all you have in the absence of a real life.

VERNON

Well, have you heard from any of the Phillies while I was up north? I thought you were thinking of going to spring training for a bit.

CHUCK

They're big leaguers and don't have time to hang around the cripple. And, I'm not interested in a pity party.

 (Pause.)

NELL

Vern, how's the teaching going?

VERNON

The pay's not great. I’m thinking about applying for a public-school job.

NELL

Sounds like it could be a new adventure for you.

VERNON

I don't know. Definitely a challenge with more at-risk students there. Just not sure what to do.

CHUCK

Oh, boo hoo, such a tough time you're having. Christ, make a list. You know, pro's and con's, pluses and minuses. He was always like this, you know. In college, he couldn't decide what courses to take, what major to choose. I think I was the only pitcher who had to tell his catcher what to throw next. Well, I'm throwing a change-up now, so let's deal with Nell’s problem.

NELL

You are such a pushy bastard, aren't you?

CHUCK

There you go, twirling that damn crucifix again. Is that the problem? Afraid you're going to have the doors to your Catholic God's fortress battered down? What's so precious in there that you're afraid of losing? And, do we have to have that Mother Mary statue of yours spying on us from the shelf?

NELL

Most of those beliefs have given me structure, brought order to my life. They bring me comfort. You were a Catholic, too. Can't you understand what I’m saying?

CHUCK

Yeah, I *was* a Catholic. Order, huh? My high school coach, a great teacher, died of leukemia when he was in his thirties. And, my grandfather, a sweet man who took me to ball games and played catch with me when my father wasn't around, became blind before he could see me make it to professional baseball. Where's the divine order in all of that?

VERNON

He has an argument there, Nell.

NELL

You need the sorrow, the losses in life, to understand and appreciate the good when it comes along. We need the

negative to appreciate the positive and realize the majesty of it all.

VERNON

Maybe she has a point there, Chuck.

CHUCK

Which you obviously do not. Okay, Nell, your negative history should make you appreciate how positive it would be to consummate our relationship. So, I'm going to get dressed, listen to some music on my cell, and do some reading before my joy ride to my parents' house. That should give you two some time to talk, and, Nell, hopefully you’ll decide to stick around. And, maybe, at some point, we’ll get to play ball.

 (Blackout)

SCENE II

(NELL and VERNON are in the guest bedroom. She is sitting on the bed and he is standing, leaning against the dresser.)

VERNON

He hasn't done much with this room, has he?

NELL

No, he keeps all of his stuff in the other rooms. He doesn't see the need to make it comfortable in here. Nobody stays over.

VERNON

I just assumed that you, well, would stay, I mean sometimes, if not here, then …

NELL

In his room?

VERNON

Ah, yeah.

NELL

No. I stayed over when he said he was interested in becoming intimate. I thought if we just hugged and kissed, showed affection without sex, that it would ease me into becoming more romantic. Chuck tried for a while, but he became impatient when I wasn’t ready when he was able to, you know, perform. Anyway, it is difficult for us to stay in the same room. Chuck has trouble sleeping, getting comfortable. And me, well, I still get nightmares. So, it wouldn't work anyway, you know, because we would keep each other up all night. Somehow, sleeping in this room would kinda feel like I was back in the college dorm.

 (Pause.)

VERNON

I know we haven't talked about this before. I didn't want to bring up stuff about your past and Chuck didn't want to talk about how the accident, ah, affected his, ah, ability to, you know. Sorry, I didn't mean to …

NELL

Talking about this is more than awkward, isn't it?

VERNON

Yeah, it is.

 (Pause.)

VERNON (Cont'd)

So, how do you think he’s getting along?

(NELL lets out a quick laugh.)

VERNON (Cont'd)

What? What's funny?

NELL

Nothing. I mean, not funny, really. Sort of just interesting that you asked about him first.

VERNON

Hey, look, I didn't mean anything, you know. I'm not saying you don't count here --

NELL

It's okay, it's okay. I get it. He's the one in the chair.

VERNON

I know it's been difficult for you, too, but I can see that you have been good for him. Being with you has given him something to look forward to. I wasn't giving him that. And, I want you to know how grateful I am for all that you've done. You're not sorry you came here, are you?

NELL

No, I was holed up long enough at my parents' house. It was time for a change. I wanted to see him again. And, you, too.

VERNON

I just want to say thank you again for the emails and texts you sent. And it was nice to hear your voice on the phone

once in a while. I hope the bad stuff didn't strike out all the good times the three of us shared back then.

NELL

Strike out? Baseball creeps into everything with us, doesn't it?

(Pause.)

NELL (Cont'd)

I have to say that the one thing my vacant brain roommate Missy was good for was that she introduced me to Chuck, which also led to you. And, I wouldn't have taken those film classes if it wasn't for you. You made sure I was part of some fun off-the-field by having the three of us watch movies. Although, at the time, Chuck would only watch ones that were about sports.

VERNON

Well, when he wasn’t around it was fun watching other films. I couldn't believe that you hadn't seen *Casablanca* before the two of us saw it together.

NELL

Funny, but I thought about that movie lately. It's weird how it showed the way a guy could make a woman feel threatened and safe like almost at the same time, isn't it?

 (Pause.)

NELL (Cont'd)

I guess I wanted romance like any other girl when I was younger. I don't think I told you that I only had sex once before the, ah, incident. I was sixteen, and so was the boy. He was a bookworm, too. It was like, everybody was doing it, so we better, too, or we would be branded as permanently lame. It was so strange. We didn't know what to touch first. He just wanted to come, which he did almost instantly. Then he was embarrassed, for being a short-timer, got dressed, and ran out. Zero pleasure for me.

 (Pause.)

NELL (Cont'd)

When I was living with my parents after I dropped out of college, I caught up with a few of my high school friends. One night three of us got together for a mini-film festival. We each picked a movie that the others had not seen. I chose *Forget Paris*.

VERNON

Right. The Billy Crystal movie with Debra Winger. A chick flick, but then, I like those kinds of films. That one is sweet, bitter, and then sweet again. Sounds like a fun night.

NELL

You would think. But, one of my buddies is a Hitchcock fan, and picked *Marnie*.

VERNON

Oh, oh.

NELL

Exactly. At one point I jumped off the sofa and ran out of the room. And the others were like, what the hell is wrong with her? They probably were thinking, "What a nut job!" I kept my past out of the hometown, except for telling my parents. I didn't want to soil my innocent childhood memories. So I freaked out when Sean Connery's character basically ravished Tippi Hedren's Marnie, pulling her clothes off and mounting her. I know he was trying to get her to free herself from her frigidity. But really, is that the way to do it?

VERNON

You never gave us any details about the attack. You didn't press charges against anybody. You just left. And you didn’t offer anything about it when we talked, so I avoided the subject. I can only imagine what it was like for you.

NELL

Better you should use your imagination for other things.

(She reaches for the crucifix around her neck.)

VERNON

Old Stretch there doesn't seem to be too happy with your religious leanings. Even though we hung out a good bit, I don't remember you bringing up your Catholic past.

NELL

I guess Chuck’s angry at God, or whatever, for cutting him off at the knees. At least that's how he sees it. I didn’t talk about religious stuff back then because it wasn’t important to me. My family was just your usual show-up-at-church-on-Sunday-and-put-religion-on-the-back-

burner type of household. My mom even liked the occasional dirty joke. I guess I needed some sanctuary after the attack in college, so I reconnected with my religion.

VERNON

Looks like Chuck’s not cutting you much slack.

NELL

He’s been applying the pressure, for sure. Apparently being raped isn't reason enough for him to understand why it's a slow journey to being comfortable with sex. I really wanted to give him, and me, what we want. I wish there was an app for that.

(They both let out short laughs.)

NELL (Cont'd)

I found this necklace in my room when I went back home after I left school. My grandmother gave it to me years ago. Now there was a woman who was old school about sex. My mother said my grandmother once told her that there was a woman who allowed her husband to have his way with her way too much. Grandma said it led to a hysterectomy. Can you believe it?

VERNON

I got to admit, I never heard that one before.

NELL

When she gave me this thing she said with Jesus around my neck it would ward off the perverts. Sort of like what it's supposed to do with vampires, I guess. I should have worn it in college. Then maybe I wouldn't have been turned into

damaged goods. Funny phrase. If you're damaged, how can there be anything good about it.

(VERNON walks over to the bed, sits next to NELL, and squeezes her hand.)

VERNON

Maybe damaged, but not broken.

(NELL gets up and slowly walks around the room, stopping occasionally.)

NELL

God, I wish I could get in a time machine and change what happened*.* Where's H. G. Wells when you need him, right?

 (Pause.)

NELL (Cont'd)

I thought he was an okay guy, smart, funny, cute. He made me feel comfortable. I felt safe with him. We had nice talks. But, it turned out there was nothing nice about him.

 (Pause.)

NELL (Cont'd)

I, ah, let him into my room, but just to talk, you see, maybe to hug and kiss a bit. I guess most people who went to college remember the music at the parties, the complimentary words of a date, or the cheers at sports events. What I still hear are the sounds of my clothes being ripped off by his rough hands. My nights have been ruptured by dreams of those large hands grabbing at me, and then holding me down when I tried to fight him off. His

hands gripped so hard, they stopped the blood from flowing into my fingers. He had cold hands. He stuffed a sock into my mouth so I couldn’t scream. It hurt, oh, it hurt so much when he forced himself on me. That was a while ago, but what keeps haunting me, always appearing out of the shadows of my mind's eye, are the sounds and sights and the pain of that night.

(Pause.)

VERNON

What can I do to help you move away from that night?

NELL

I'm not sure. I had hoped that the lesbian bug would bite me. No such luck. I'm cursed to be straight.

VERNON

Maybe you could help me better understand the problem with Chuck. He hasn't talked to me about his, ah, sexual problem. I searched it online, but it looks like things vary depending on the spinal cord injury. What is the story here, exactly?

NELL

Well, it's sort of complicated. With his type of paralysis, he can get an erection when he's aroused. You know, by fantasies, or pictures. But, it's unpredictable with him. It's also difficult for him to maintain an erection. It doesn’t allow me much time to enter the erotic zone.

 (Pause.)

NELL (Cont'd)

You see, I had been numb when it came to feelings about almost anything for quite a while. Part of my post-traumatic stress disorder. At least that's what the psychologist said.

 (Pause.)

NELL (Cont'd)

Before I came here, my dormant sex drive finally started to arouse itself. So, when you asked about helping Chuck, I was intrigued. I was thrilled when he told me he was attracted to me and wanted to get involved. But, I was hoping, given his limitations, that he would go slowly. I admit that being with Chuck has fired up my hormones. They've started kicking at me, wanting to break loose. Obviously, I was drawn to him in college. I was excited by being around him. I mean, he was beautiful to look at. He was charming during our tutoring sessions.

VERNON

So, why didn't you try to hook up with him when you were his tutor?

NELL

Me? Seriously? I was the queen of the nerdettes. I was a *New Yorker* cartoon next to the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit hotties he could have. No way I could compete. My mother used to look at her plain daughter and say, “when it comes to men, don't expect too much.” I may have been a sports follower, but I was terrible at playing them. I was clumsy as hell. It was like I had no idea how to work my body. I was a physical failure. Other moms would take their daughters shopping for clothes and make-up. My mother took me to bookstores and bought me Thomas Hardy novels. I couldn’t expect romance from Chuck. He was so attractive, right?

VERNON

Sure. And, he was gorgeous on the pitching mound, too. From the tightening of the arm muscles as they began the wind-up, to the quick release of the ball exploding out of his hand, and the graceful follow-through, all the movements flowed together perfectly.

NELL

I guess we were all drawn to him. He was a flesh and bone hero, exciting us as we watched him bring us victory.

VERNON

And now he's lost what he gave us, and we feel sad and defeated that it's gone. I guess that's why I want to give him what he needs now.

NELL

But, what about your needs?

VERNON

Well, being around him in college was exciting for me. He was like a large magnet that brought the rest of his teammates attention, praise.

NELL

Did you receive any affection? I don't mean his girlfriend discards that you took off his hands. Did he throw any love your way?

VERNON

What are you getting at?

NELL

Don't you see him as more than a friend? It's okay. You can talk to me. I mean, you didn't move to Philadelphia to do the Mummers' strut every New Year’s Day.

VERNON

Hey, I can be excited by women. I have been with women.

 (Pause.)

VERNON (Cont'd)

But, with Chuck, it's different, special, kind of electric.

NELL

So, then, aren't I the competition? If Chuck and I cement our relationship, won't that block you out?

VERNON

I know I can't be enough for him. If he knows I did my best to bring him some sort of release from his unhappiness, well, then, maybe I'll be the recipient of his gratitude.

NELL

So, that's your angle here. I, ah, wasn't expecting that. I guess I was secretly hoping you would argue my case with Chuck, let me off the hook.

VERNON

Is that what you want me to do?

NELL

No, I have to deal with my life. I really do want to change, break free of the past. I came here for that reason. I thought if I could win Chuck over, bag the big, handsome sports hero, I could prove my mother was wrong. And, I wanted to use Chuck to help me drive far away from that horrible night, leaving it in the distance.

 (Pause.)

NELL (Cont'd)

You know, I had, ah, well, I guess you'd say a bit of a thing for you in college.

VERNON

Really? I didn't know.

NELL

Come on, when a girl hangs around a guy a lot, there's usually something going on.

VERNON

I just liked our friendship so much, I guess my mind wouldn't go there. The physical thing can mess up relationships sometimes.

NELL

You mean when love isn't there, when it doesn't look like it has a chance of being a keeper?

VERNON

Well, I don't know. I suppose. But, I do want to help you now.

(Pause.)

VERNON (Cont'd)

What do you need back, that the rapist took from your life?

NELL

Power. He took whatever power I had over my body. I felt like a puppet, with him thrust into me, controlling me.

 (Pause.)

NELL (Cont'd)

There is something that Chuck said earlier that has got me thinking. He said I was hiding out in my job. He thinks

it's because of the rape. But, I wanted to be a therapist before that. I think it goes back to not feeling comfortable with my body. So, I wanted to help other people who were handicapped by something that happened to *their* bodies. But, maybe I feel safe around them, since they can't hurt me. I go into their homes, observe them, and sometimes touch them. But, they aren't allowed to touch me. I'm in their lives, but only up to a point, and for a short time. It can feel empty.

VERNON

But, to a degree, you had control over the bodies of your clients, didn't you? You had power there, right?

NELL

What are you getting at?

VERNON

Did you have sexual fantasies about the people you met in your job? Was the thought of having dominance over them exciting to you?

NELL

Most of my clients were old. I didn't think about them – that way.

VERNON

But some weren't, right? What about them?

 (Pause.)

NELL

Yes, there were a couple of younger males. I had some thoughts about them.

VERNON

Did you try to pleasure yourself when you thought about them, knowing that they needed you, and you had the upper hand?

NELL

Yes, alone in the safety of my bedroom, I could feel some excitement.

 (Pause.)

VERNON

And, you came here, and hoped that it might be that way with Chuck, right? You hoped he would be under your control, and it excited you. But, he didn't play the role you wanted.

NELL

No, he didn't.

 (Pause.)

VERNON

Do you get angry when you think about what happened to you in college?

NELL

Yes, when I allow myself to think about it, I'm furious.

VERNON

Then, take out your fury on me. You want control? Control me. Take from me what was taken from you.

 (Pause.)

NELL

Are you saying that you're asking nothing of me?

VERNON

Nothing.

NELL

And, you'll do what I say?

VERNON

Yes

NELL

Why?

VERNON

I'm not sure. Maybe if you are sexually powerful and in control, then you may be able to lose your fear of letting yourself go emotionally. You can shed your inhibitions, be able to get pleasure, and please someone else, on your terms. Maybe I can be your midwife, and help you break free.

NELL

I don't know …

VERNON

You must stop holding back.

NELL

I know I have to …

VERNON

Stop *knowing*, and *do* something about it!

(There is a pause. Nell, who had her back to VERNON, turns around and walks up to him where he sits on the bed. She takes off her necklace with the crucifix and puts it in a pocket.)

NELL

Stand up!

(VERNON jumps up. NELL looks him straight in the eye, and then smacks him hard across the face.)

NELL (Cont'd)

Oh my God! I'm sorry, Vern.

VERNON.

Don't be sorry. It's not me. I'm just any man.

NELL

I won't become what hurt me.

VERNON

Then, just do what you have to do.

 (Pause.)

NELL

Will you let me kiss you when I want to?

VERNON

Yes.

NELL

Then come close, but do not touch me.

(NELL reaches up and grabs VERNON's face, and passionately kisses him.)

NELL (Cont'd)

When I tell you to, will you slowly kiss my throat, my breasts?

VERNON

Yes.

NELL

Now, stroke my leg, from behind the knee and up the thigh.

(NELL wraps a leg around VERNON. He complies.)

NELL

And, you will gently glide your hands over me, when I tell you to touch me. You will massage my entire body. Do I make myself clear?

VERNON

Yes.

NELL

You will not stop until I tell you, yes?

VERNON

Yes.

NELL

You will use your tongue to lick my ears, my throat, and my legs. And only when you have done what I have told you to do, and I am completely satisfied, only then will I even *think* about giving you some pleasure. Do you understand?

VERNON

Yes.

NELL

Say, "I will obey."

VERNON

I will obey.

NELL

Good. Now, be quiet, and strip!

 (Blackout.)

SCENE III

(CHUCK's living room. A few hours have past. CHUCK sits in his wheelchair, tossing a baseball up and down with one hand. He then opens a jar of peanuts and starts eating them. VERNON enters from the left bedroom.)

CHUCK

Christ, it's about time. I listened to a whole Cold Play album, read some Edgar Allan Poe, and fell asleep for a while. How did it go?

(NELL enters from the left bedroom, appearing as she did in Scene I, except she still wears the tight-fitting top.)

NELL

I'm famished. I think I'd like a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

CHUCK

Hungry. Now that's encouraging.

VERNON

I'll get it. Heavy on the peanut butter?

NELL

You bet. And, some milk.

(VERNON goes to the kitchen area. He reenters after he is done while the other two are talking, and hands the sandwich and milk to NELL.)

CHUCK

Something's changed. Wait a minute. I don't see the necklace. Well, this may have gone better than I hoped.

(NELL looks at CHUCK but is quiet.)

CHUCK (Cont'd)

Oh, come on, don't go all Marlee Matlin on me. Nell, did old Vern here convince you to give this birthday a happy ending?

NELL

Jesus, Chuck.

CHUCK

A simple yes or no will do.

NELL

There’s no simple answer here.

CHUCK

It seems pretty straightforward to me. Either you stay and commit yourself to helping us become a couple, or you don’t.

NELL

I needed something from you before I could give you want you wanted.

CHUCK

I’ve been trying to give you something. I've been working at helping you to start to break down your inhibitions.

NELL

Yes, but the key word here is "start." There's no easy fix for what happened to me. I’m still not sure how to go forward.

CHUCK

I think you want to take some thrill rides. You just have to learn to grease those wheels a bit more.

VERNON

She's trying to tell you something, Chuck. I'm not sure how all this is going to work out, but I do know she isn't right for you the way things are.

(Pause. NELL eats some of her sandwich and sips some milk.)

CHUCK

Okay, okay. I guess I got a little too enthusiastic there. I mean I know, realistically, that it’s going to take some time before things can really start popping here.

NELL

Oh, they’ve not only popped, they’ve snapped and crackled, too.

(CHUCK is confused. He looks at NELL and then at VERNON,

who avoids his stare.)

CHUCK

What are you talking about? I don’t understand.

(NELL slowly approaches CHUCK.)

NELL

Vern and I had sex.

(CHUCK just gapes at them for a moment.)

CHUCK

Is this a joke? We spend all of this time together, trying to get to the point where we can be physical. Then, bam! You do it with him? And screw you, Vern! Is this how you help your best friend? Looks like you just wanted to help yourself! What a traitor! Yeah, that’s it. I had all the attention, the women, but now I’m in the chair, so it’s payback time.

(Long pause. CHUCK rubs his face, looks as if he is

contemplating something.)

CHUCK (Cont’d)

So then it went okay? I mean, Nell, you were able to, ah, do the deed, get and give pleasure? Maybe we can turn this negative into a positive, here?

VERNON

Wow, unbelievable.

NELL

You don't understand, Chuck. Today, for the first time *I* had control over a man sexually. *I* had the say over what was to happen between us. Vernon let *me* have that. My wants came first. Today it was up to me whether I would please someone. And I decided to do that because he made no demands of satisfaction. But, you, on the other hand are the demander in chief.

CHUCK

Don't you think what happened to me gives me the right to make some demands?

NELL

Please, Chuck. I need you to hear what I’m saying about what matters to me.

CHUCK

You have no idea what it's like to let go of what comes so easily to you. I not only lost control of my legs, but also of my manhood. Somebody like me, to have that taken away --

NELL

You took it away. You decided to drink and drive.

VERNON

She's right, Chuck. I warned you several times, but you didn't listen to me. You didn't want to see that the odds were against you by being so reckless. I'm starting to think you wanted it to happen.

CHUCK

That's ridiculous.

VERNON

Maybe not consciously, but you helped make it happen. I know you like to believe that God did this to you, but you did this to yourself. Unlike Nell, yours is a

self-inflicted wound. Maybe there was just too much pressure. The pressure from your parents, from your fans --

CHUCK

And who asked all of you to make me a hero, huh? Why did so many people use me to live out what they couldn't do, couldn't have? I just wanted to play ball.

 (Pause.)

CHUCK (Cont'd)

Yeah, there was a lot of pressure. But, it went beyond what happened on the playing field. I had to be a winner at everything, not just the game. I had to always look good, be with the hottest women, be the coolest dude there was. I wasn't allowed to get hurt, or even have a bad game. All of you set the standards, and if I didn't meet them, I failed you.

NELL

Should we feel sorry for you because you were adored? Nobody forced you up onto that throne.

CHUCK

Really? My home was a training ground built for me to climb to that throne.

NELL

And you accepted the position. With the perks, which you enjoyed, came responsibility. Just because you get power doesn't mean you should use it to exploit others.

CHUCK

But, you have the power now, don't you? Because you've realized that I need you. I need you to help me get dressed, get washed, cook …

NELL

You can dress yourself. We adapted the shower for you to wash yourself. There are handrails in the bathroom, and your arms are strong. You can lift yourself. You have a housekeeper to clean up and cook.

CHUCK

I need your companionship.

NELL

You need me to satisfy your sexual needs at the drop of a baseball cap, even though you know what a struggle that is for me.

CHUCK

You're struggling? Every moment of every day is a struggle for me. Getting into bed, getting out of bed, just going

from one room to the next. Forget about trying to deal with the wide world out there. You can come and go easily, but my life has been reduced to this high-rise cave.

 (Pause.)

CHUCK (Cont'd)

I wanted you to be like one of my teammates. They were there for me. I thought you were a team player, but you're not. Not like these guys were. I could count on them.

(CHUCK picks up the picture of the college team that VERNON gave to him and thrusts it into NELL's face.)

NELL

Stop! I don’t want to look at that!

CHUCK

Why? It’s probably the only birthday gift I’m going to get that means something to me.

(NELL grabs the picture, closes her eyes, then drops it onto the floor. She begins to cry.)

CHUCK

What the hell is wrong with you?

(VERNON goes to NELL and holds her shoulders.)

VERNON

Are you okay?

(NELL detaches herself from VERNON, looks away.)

NELL

I thought I could be safe. I wanted to leave it behind.

CHUCK

What's going on?

(NELL turns, picks up the picture, confronts CHUCK.)

NELL

Be like the guys, huh? You mean like that good old boy Pete, here? Your pal, who only cared about the team? Well, here's a news flash for you. He's the guy who raped me. I didn't say anything because I didn't want you and the other players to be part of a scandal. So, who's the team player now?

VERNON

Oh my God.

CHUCK

Jesus. How can this be? I mean, Pete? Of all people. He never would have done something like that. Why are you doing this? Are you making this story up as another excuse to leave me?

VERNON

Chuck, you know that Pete was pretty competitive when it came to being with girls. I heard him say more than once that he thought he could have any woman he wanted. Nell, I didn't even know you were seeing him. Why didn't you tell me about Pete?

NELL

I was embarrassed. I guess I didn't want to be seen as a baseball groupie. Both of you just saw me as a friend, so I I wanted something more. I was around the team a lot.

Pete must have picked up on my -- longings. He was very charming, so I said I would go out with him. I told him to keep anything that was between us quiet. I didn't know that what would happen between us would become -- unspeakable. It happened on the first date. He couldn’t believe I wouldn’t give into him right away. After he attacked me he said he knew I wouldn’t say anything that would hurt the team. Before he left he said he enjoyed nailing Chuck’s tutor.

(NELL begins to sob again.)

CHUCK

Look, I believe you, okay? You should have told me! I would have cracked his nasty head with my Louisville Slugger. I can still do it! Vern, help me get to that overweight bastard. We'll show him.

(CHUCK lunges for the baseball bat sitting on the coffee table. NELL grabs it before he can reach it. CHUCK starts to fall out of the wheelchair, but VERNON catches him before he hits the floor, and helps him back into the chair.)

NELL

Stop! Maybe I wanted that back then, but not now. I don't want more violence in my life.

(NELL throws the baseball bat onto the couch.)

CHUCK

I'm so sorry, Nell. But what I said earlier about moving forward still stands. You can overcome the past.

NELL

Don't you see, Chuck, how my present is so intertwined with your past? I never wanted to see Pete's face again, or

think about him, but how foolish is that? I should have realized that being with you won't allow a clean break from that awful night. Me and you, it was doomed from the start. I just didn't want to believe it.

CHUCK

I'm not him. You can be with me, and it will be alright.

NELL

You needed control over your body as an athlete. But, you want control over mine, too. I'm sorry, but in that way, you are like him.

CHUCK

Damn it, why are you here? Why did you even want to see me again?

NELL

I was attracted to you the very first time you walked into my dorm room, which was of course to pick up my roommate. I was so envious of Missy. So, when she told me you needed an English tutor, I figured that was at least one way to get close to you.

(Pause.)

NELL (Cont'd)

I came here to help you, be near you, and soon after, because I thought we could be romantic. You had been knocked down to my level, and I thought I might have a chance with my dream guy. I guess I was hoping that the playing field had evened out. I didn't have feelings for anyone for so long – not even myself. But, I was starting to want to feel like a complete woman again. I even began to read sexy romances, to try to jump-start my libido.

CHUCK

But that's what it's all about, isn't it? Trying to heal yourself.

NELL

Yes, that's what I thought. But, the mind heals differently than the body. It's more complicated.

(NELL goes to CHUCK and holds his hand.)

NELL (Cont'd)

You asked me why I came here. But why did you want me to come?

CHUCK

I needed help.

NELL

Is that all?

CHUCK

I guess I wanted to see you again.

NELL

I think you wanted to recapture some of the past with someone who adored you then and would do so again.

CHUCK

Damn, how did things get so screwed up?

NELL

I don't know.

(NELL lets go of CHUCK'S hand and walks between him and VERNON.)

NELL (Cont'd)

But, I realize now that your deadline was for both of us.

CHUCK

What? What do you mean?

NELL

You set the date – your birthday. You wanted me to commit to you physically by today. I wanted you to understand what I need. Do you understand what that is?

VERNON

I do. She wants her needs to be addressed first. She doesn't want to be controlled. She wants unselfishness from another person.

(VERNON walks over to NELL and holds her hands.)

VERNON (Cont'd)

Maybe I can give you these things.

CHUCK

What the hell is this? What the hell do you think you're doing?

VERNON

What you can't.

CHUCK

What, you get some, and now you want to throw me out of the picture? What a little bastard. Where's that '64 Phillies baseball? I'm going to bean this guy!

(VERNON lets go of NELL's hands and confronts CHUCK.)

VERNON

Yeah, why not. I've had to catch your heat for as long as I've known you. I took the blame for that cheating stunt

and took your girlfriend rejects off of your hands. But, did you ever show me that you cared?

CHUCK

Cared? You were having a good old time, coming along for the ride that I provided.

NELL

That's not what he means.

(CHUCK turns away, looks uncomfortable.)

CHUCK

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

NELL

Yes you do. You know how he feels about you. And, you use him. You goad him to carry out your wishes. You reward him with your companionship to keep him close, so he will keep serving your needs. It has to stop.

CHUCK

You're not so innocent, here. You used him today, too.

NELL

I know, but he wanted me to use him. I do want to thank you, Vern. It did help, and I am grateful.

VERNON

Then let me continue to help you on your way. I think I can give you what you need.

CHUCK

You don't even know if you want to be with a woman. How do you know what she needs?

VERNON

I know better than you do.

(NELL walks over to VERNON, hugs him, and gives him a quick

kiss.)

NELL

Chuck is right, Vern. You said so yourself earlier. You didn't feel love back in college. Or else, we would have had something going on back then.

VERNON

This is now. We can have something now.

NELL

No, Vern. You still need to find out what you want, what's best for you, maybe away from us.

VERNON

I'm not sure that's the way to go. I'm settled in here.

NELL

It's time not to settle anymore. Right Chuck?

CHUCK

What? What do you want me to say?

NELL

Just give him some good, friendly advice.

CHUCK

My advice is that he should make up his own mind.

NELL

That is good advice, Vern. Do you think you should consider changing jobs, like you said? It might be right for you, even if it means relocating.

(VERNON moves away from NELL, turns away.)

VERNON

You think so?

NELL

I think you should start to live your life, and not his.

 (Pause.)

NELL (Cont’d)

Well, it's up to you. But, you can do it, if that's what you want. You just showed some real balls here, standing up to Chuck, fighting for me. You're tougher than you think.

VERNON

Thanks.

 (Pause.)

VERNON (Cont'd)

Be good, Chuck.

CHUCK

Yeah, whatever.

VERNON

You, too, Nell. We'll still be in touch, right?

NELL

Always.

 (Pause.)

NELL (Cont'd)

But, it’s going to have to be a long-distance thing. Time for me to move on, away from here.

CHUCK

Oh, hell, this is turning into one unhappy birthday.

NELL

I think I've finally come to understand that my problems with men can't be fixed *by* men. That's my job -- I guess it

always has been. It may take quite a while before I find a relationship that has the right amount of give and take.

CHUCK

Just remember, a lot of guys like a woman who gives more than she takes.

VERNON (ignoring CHUCK)

Do you have any place where you'd like to go?

NELL

Actually, I told Chuck I have a friend who is also an occupational therapist. She lives in Clearwater, and maybe she can get me a job there. I'm a little tired of the chilly northeast. Florida sun is sounding awful good to me.

VERNON

That’s great. Maybe I can visit you during the Phillies spring training season.

NELL

Sure. I'd like that.

 (Pause)

VERNON

Well, I guess I should split.

(VERNON picks up a baseball from the coffee table and tosses it to CHUCK, who catches it. CHUCK throws the ball to NELL, who catches it this time. She puts it back on the table. VERNON smiles, picks up his baseball cap, doffs it, and exits. NELL walks over to the statue of the Virgin Mary and touches it.)

CHUCK

Still going to pray to that thing? I'm not so sure she's the one to ask about romantic relationships.

NELL

No, I won't be doing any praying. I have to work on making things better, instead of asking for help. I'll just look on her as a great woman, and not dwell on the virgin part. If I come back to her and my Jesus necklace, I'll be using them because of my beliefs, not as props.

 (Pause.)

NELL (Cont'd)

You know, I said you rushed me into things here, but I'm guilty of bad judgment. Maybe it wasn't fair to expect too much from you right now. We put too much emphasis on our sexual problems. It blotted out the other parts that make up a relationship, stopped them from shining through.

CHUCK

Hey, I still think we can make a good team. Why don't you put that trip to Florida on hold? I can coach you on improving your ball playing skills. You know, work on those hands, your moves. You just need to be more comfortable with your body.

(Pause.)

CHUCK (Cont'd)

Please don't leave. I, I don't know how to deal with all of … this, by myself.

 (Pause.)

NELL

You said earlier that I was hiding out. But, I think the same can be said for you. You know, social networking isn't just about triviality. You could be a hero in a different way, by connecting with alcohol abusers, or people who have spinal cord injuries.

CHUCK

You mean get my Christopher Reeve on. Don't think I can qualify as a man of steel.

NELL

The man of Astro Turf will do.

(Pause.)

CHUCK

Maybe later on, we'll see where we are, and maybe, who knows what will happen?

NELL

Yeah. Who knows?

(NELL goes to the hallway closet, takes out a jacket, picks up the religious statue, moves to the door, her face turned away from CHUCK.)

CHUCK

Won't you at least go to the party with me? Are you going to let me face all those pains-in-the-asses myself?

NELL

You've handled tougher opponents than them before.

 (Pause.)

NELL (Cont'd)

So I understand there's this thing called online dating. Do you know about it?

CHUCK

I may have heard someone mention it.

 (Short pause.)

CHUCK (Cont'd)

I'm not sure anyone would want me the way I am now.

(NELL walks over to CHUCK and gives his shoulder a squeeze.)

NELL

Come on, a big leaguer like you? You're still quite a draw. You'll be able to enjoy being with a woman. It just has to be the right one.

CHUCK

Maybe it's time to take Vern's advice, use a professional. A lot simpler that way. No talk, just action. The tricky part is will I be locked and loaded at the appropriate time.

NELL

You need someone who wants to be around a lot, not a one-nighter. Try to find someone who likes movies. And make sure she loves to read.

(CHUCK picks up the copy of *Leaves of Grass* and offers it to NELL.)

CHUCK

Don't forget this.

NELL

Keep the Walt Whitman. Happy birthday.

CHUCK

Yeah. Happy birthday.

(CHUCK holds up the book and shakes it, as if to say thanks.)

 (Fadeout.)