

# THE WALL OF REJECTION

*by*

*Julia Edwards*

*scenes of comedy & carnage*

*from the college admissions front*

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

**(10-15+ actors, any gender breakdown)**

**CATALINA**, first-gen

**CHET**, legacy

**JADE**, celeb

**BENJAMIN**, neurodivergent

**ZANE**, woke

**ENSEMBLE ROLES:** STUDENTS, NEWS HEADLINES, COLLEGE PTSD

COUNSELOR, POORLY PAID ASSISTANTS, THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE

COUNSELORS, ASSISTANT, RICH MOM, RICH DAD, GOOD COP, BAD COP, CHET

DAD, CHET MOM, MR. DRAPER, ADMISSIONS OFFICER, TEST ZOMBIES,

PROCTOR, STUDENT AMBASSADOR, CENSOR, NEW COLLEGE PTSD

COUNSELOR

*Character genders can be modified to fit the cast. Culture refs/slang can be updated as needed. Swears can be cut/changed. Scene titles can be projected or announced.*

*Music cues are suggestions—take them or leave them. This is your play now.*

## ACT I

### I. I CAN'T BELIEVE WE'RE SENIORS!

*A school bell rings. Music wails. STUDENTS everywhere across the country (including 5 leads) make a beeline to class weighed down by back-breaking backpacks. There's a nervous excitement in the air. Or is it a soul-crushing dread? Over, we hear a montage of News Headlines (VO or live, by one or more actors) punctuated by documentary-style remarks from stressed seniors.*

#### NEWS HEADLINES

As the new school year begins, the country's seniors are gearing up to get a taste of something they may not be used to: *rejection*. College applications are soaring exponentially, causing acceptance rates to plummet.

#### STUDENT A

How many schools am I applying to? Um...maybe 10? 15? 20?

#### STUDENT B

I'm applying to 30...just to be safe.

## NEWS HEADLINES

The level of competition to get into an elite college now is like *The Hunger Games*—a veritable admissions arms race of haves and have-nots.

## CHET

*(Pretty impressed with self.)* Well, I've got a 5.0 GPA and I'm taking four APs this semester so I'm feeling pretty...“competitive” I guess you could say.

## STUDENT C

I am ranked #1, I'm taking seven APs, and I recently founded a non-profit online tutoring platform that services underserved students from 32 countries.

*The rest of the students stop and stare—if looks could kill.*

## NEWS HEADLINES

But applications aren't the only thing soaring. Tuitions are at record levels.

## CATALINA

Did you say \$80,000? A year? That's over a quarter of a million dollars! Who can actually afford that?

## NEWS HEADLINES

The harsh economics of higher education are prompting some families to wonder: what exactly does a college degree buy you?

## JADE

Listen, if I'm being completely honest—wait, can this be off the record? I don't want my parents to know—'cuz I'm not sure I even want to go to college. I mean, what's the point?

## STUDENT D

Facts. Cuz everything they're learning's gonna be done by AI in twenty years anyway. Except plumbing, baby. Plumbing's where it's at!

## NEWS HEADLINES

A recent poll by the Pew Research Center says teen depression is at an all-time high. Prompting many school officials to question how the college admissions race is contributing to a full-blown mental health crisis.

## BENJAMIN

How do I feel? (*World weary sigh.*) I guess I feel a lot of pressure to be perfect. I mess up one quiz, one test. And that could be the difference between getting in and, you know...total failure.

ZANE

When people ask me how I am, I say, I'm fine. But I'm not. I'm not fine.

*Student A reads the news to eager peers.*

STUDENT A

Guys! The new *US News and World Report* ratings just dropped!

STUDENT B

Who's number one?

STUDENT A

Hold on! It's still loading...god, the Wifi here sucks. It's...it's...Harvard!

STUDENT B

I heard their acceptance rate is like 5 percent.

STUDENT C

I heard it's lower!

STUDENT D

I heard they've got a countdown on the admissions page. You can actually watch the acceptance rate go down.

*School bell rings. Students scatter. While main characters speak one after the other, they do not occupy the same space. They do not know each other...yet.*

CATALINA

Crap. I'm late for college counseling.

CHET

See ya on the senior patio!

JADE

*(Videoing herself.)* Check this out: it's my last first day of high school! (I hope.)

BENJAMIN

I can't believe we're finally seniors!

ZANE

Yup. One more year of hell.

*Students walk, speed, lumber to their respective classes.*

## II. APPLYING FOR COLLEGE CAN BE A LITTLE BIT STRESSFUL

*The new and eager COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR greets her STUDENTS (including CATALINA) at an underfunded high school.*

COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

Hi, everyone! My name is Mrs. Fritz and I'm your new College PTSD Counselor. Because let's face it: applying for college these days can be a little bit stressful. And my number one job is to take care of your mental health. So, let me take the emotional temperature in here...how are y'all feeling about college next year? Are you feeling excited? Anxious? Or...? Anyone want to start us off? Anyone?

*No one is listening—except Catalina who has the good sense to feign indifference.*

COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

Hey, would you mind taking your earbuds out? C'mon you guys, this is your future I'm talking about. This is serious. *(Sigh.)* Anyone want a stress ball?

*All hands go up. The Counselor passes out squishy stress balls which become a source of comedy and mayhem among the students.*



COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

Just give a squeeze if you're feeling stressed, take some deep breaths, and know that there are thousands of colleges out there so—

*A stress ball goes flying by.*

COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

Hey now! The balls aren't for throwing!

*The bell rings; Students jet as Counselor shouts and stress balls go flying everywhere.*

COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

Whoa—is class over already? Please fill out your “brag sheets”! And don't forget to sign up for a one-on-one meeting with me!

*Poorly Paid Assistant walks in with a box of files and plops it on a desk.*

POORLY PAID ASSISTANT

Here are your student files.

COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

Holy cow! *All of these* are mine?

POORLY PAID ASSISTANT

Oh no.

There're more.

A lot more.

*Another Poorly Paid Assistant comes in and deposits another box. And another. The Counselor goes through stacks and stacks of files. There aren't enough minutes in the day to get this job done.*

*As calendar pages turn, the Counselor loses that eager newbie enthusiasm—replaced by gray hair, a dangling cigarette, and a gravelly “I wish I was retired” voice. Catalina enters.*

CATALINA

Hi, Mrs. Fritz.

COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

You want a stress ball? (*Hands one over.*) Just don't squeeze too hard. I hear the stuff inside burns your skin.

CATALINA

Uh...thanks. But I'm actually here for our meeting?

COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

*(Not looking up from her phone.)* Who're you?

CATALINA

Catalina? Chavez?

COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

Okay, Catalina Chavez. You got thirty seconds. It's a commercial break.

CATALINA

Well...I decided... *(Excited but scared to say this out loud.)* I want to apply Early Action to Harvard.

*Counselor bursts out laughing...like for a long time. When she realizes it's not a joke:*

COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

Sorry...I was just thinking about this dancing chihuahua video. It's got this little tutu on and it's— *(Finally regaining composure.)* Did you say you want to apply to Harvard?

CATALINA

Yes. I read they pay 100% of demonstrated need so all I'd need to do is get there and they'd take care of the rest.

COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

You do know that no one from this school has *ever* gone to Harvard, right?

CATALINA

I'll be the first in my family to go to college. I can be first in the school to go to Harvard too. And I actually have an "in." The surgeon who operated on my aunt went there and said she'd put in a good word for me.

COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

That's sweet. I like your...enthusiasm. And I don't want to burst your bubble, Sweetie, but even if you went to an amazing school, the chances of getting into Harvard would be next to nothing. And from here? Hell. We feel lucky if more than 50% of the class walks across the stage at graduation.

CATALINA

So what are you saying? I'm not supposed to want what I want because I was born in the wrong school district? You know what? Thanks for nothing! I'll do it myself. Like everything else!

COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

Hey! Gimmie that back. (*Grabs the stress ball back and squishes it so forcefully, it might just explode.*) K. You want to know the dope on getting into a place like Harvard? It pains me to say it but: you don't have a chance. Not because you're not a great kid. It's

because you don't have the *dineros* to hire a fancy-ass college counselor or have some Ivy League tutor. All you got: is me. And I want the best for you—I really do. But I've got 500 files on my desk and...and...and...you know what? I don't get paid enough for this shit. I QUIT!

*The College PTSD Counselor storms past a bunch of students.*

STUDENT A

Yo. Who was that?

STUDENT B

Dunno.

STUDENT C

The last college counselor.

STUDENT D

In the world?

STUDENT A

Maybe.

## CATALINA

That's just great! Now we're screwed. I'm not saying she was the best counselor. Truth be told, she was pretty terrible. But now? We got no one. *I've* got no one. My parents don't know anything. I mean, they want me to go to college. They work like crazy because they want me to be the first in the family. But when I said I wanted to apply to Harvard, they were like: *you can't move away from us; we need you. You won't do good at a place like that. Those people don't care about people like us.*

And I get why they're afraid. But I'm tired of thinking about *those people* and *us*—like we're made of something different. We're all skin and bones, right?

I love my family. And I don't *want* to leave them. But after Tía Eva's accident last year, something inside me changed. She was in surgery forever; we weren't sure she was going to make it. She had broken ribs, a punctured lung, internal bleeding. I was with my family at the hospital, waiting. And I'm talking *toda la familia*. Every tía, tío and primo in driving distance.

Tía Eva's like a second mother to me; I couldn't imagine life without her. So I just sat by myself, staring at the swinging doors the doctor had disappeared through and prayed like I'd never prayed before that they'd come out and say she was okay. And I was making deals. Like: if she makes it, I'll get all As. I'll never fight with my brothers. I won't talk back to my parents. Finally the doors opened; a doctor came out. I tried to read her face. Did she make it? I sent out one final "I swear I'll be good" to the universe and the next thing I knew, everyone was cheering and jumping up and down and hugging. And *that* was the moment I knew: I was going to medical school; I was going to become a surgeon. I was going to come through those doors one day and say: *she made it.*

But, people take one look at where I'm from and decide what I can and can't do, who I can and can't be. Like: *listen, honey, you don't want to be a doctor. That's too hard for you.* Isn't that why we've got the American Dream? You work hard and get ahead? Well, all I do is work. I work at school, I work at work, I work at home. Cuz I'm not gonna let anything stand between me and my dream. Not this shitty school. Not that burned-out counselor. Not even my family.

So, yeah, I applied to Harvard because...why shouldn't? And guess what? I got an interview. Saved up money for the train. I got friends lying by the hour about where I am. *They* believe in me. I just wish my parents would too.

### III. COUNSELOR UP

*The Cadillac of College Counselors (who gives off a Better Call Saul vibe...if Saul, AKA Jimmy, was a hustling high schooler) and his Assistant are setting up to film; Assistant has video camera (or phone) in hand.*

ASSISTANT

I don't know, Jimmy. I don't think this is such a good idea.

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

I'm telling you...college admissions is where the money's at.

ASSISTANT

But we don't know anything about college. I mean, we're not even out of high school.

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

And what high school do we go to?

ASSISTANT

Harvard High Schoo—

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

Exactly! And if you leave off the "high school" part, we sound pretty dope.



ASSISTANT

Is that...legal?

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

*(Mocking.) Is that legal? You're such a twerp. Do you or don't you go to Harvard?*

ASSISTANT

High School...yeah.

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

There you go! Listen, there's no way we can get caught because most people don't get into the big colleges anyway. So it's not like parents can sue us. The only thing you need to know is: the more you charge, the more people want you. Forget supply and demand; FOMO's where it's at. Now do you want to buy that new console or not?

ASSISTANT

Sure, but...how do we get people to hire two high schoolers?

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

Wix a site, make some charts, film a commercial. And once we get one rich person, they'll introduce us to all their rich friends. Rich people are all about word-of-mouth. Do I look Ivy League enough?

ASSISTANT

*(Handing him a blazer.)* Here...put this on.

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

*(Pulling on the blazer.)* What d'you think?

ASSISTANT

You look like you're wearing my dad's jacket.

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

I've got it!

*He puts on a pair of reading glasses, strokes his chin thoughtfully, and gives off an "Ivy" vibe.*

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

How 'bout now?

ASSISTANT

Actually. You do look smarter. Alright, let's get this over with. ACTION!

*The Assistant starts filming.*

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

Stressed about college apps? Have your eyes set on the school of your dreams? Don't worry...help is just a click away! The Ivy Hive college counseling service has all the tools you need to get you into the most prestigious universities in the world. Why? Because we know things. Like: the guy who used to be the admissions officer at Harvard.

ASSISTANT

*(Coughs while saying:)* High School.

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

He works for us and now he can work for you. *(Holding up some irrelevant chart.)* Look at this chart. Our clients get into the elite of the elite. Oops. That's upside down. *(Chucks the chart.)* Why? Because we went to Harvard.

ASSISTANT

*(Coughs while saying:)* High School.

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

*(To Assistant.)* Would you stop doing that?

ASSISTANT

I just don't want to get arrested.

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

Rich people do crazy stuff all the time and don't get arrested. I mean, hello! Varsity Blues?

ASSISTANT

Wait...didn't some of them go to jail?

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

On me in 3 , 2, 1! *(To camera.)* Want a free consultation? Click or call now!

ASSISTANT

*(Starts talking at lightning speed for the fine print.)* We are not affiliated with Harvard University or any Ivy League schools for that matter and do not guarantee that clients will get accepted by any college, especially Harvard. Prices may cause heartburn, depression, and poverty.

*Their phones start buzzing like crazy; Assistant fields calls.*

ASSISTANT

They're asking when we can meet! They're asking how much we charge! Here's one from Beverly Hills! The Hamptons! Palo Alto!

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

What'd I tell ya? Fake it till you make it!

*The telltale ring of a Zoom call.*

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

Now, be quiet and stay out of the frame. Oh—and ask your mom if she can heat up more of those pizza pockets. (*Answering Zoom.*) Hello Mr. and Mrs. Cluckerberg. Can you hear me?

RICH DAD

(*Mouthing words because he's actually muted.*) Loud and clear.

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

Oops. Looks like you need to un-mute.

RICH DAD

(*Mouthing.*) Sorry about that! (*Un-mutes himself.*) LOUD AND CLEAR!

RICH MOM

Shhh! She'll hear you.

RICH DAD

Look at me. I own a communications platform and I don't even know how to Zoom.

Don't tell anyone.

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

Mum's the word. Well. Thank you for meeting with us at The Ivy Hive. I'm Bryce Washington.

*Assistant looks at Cadillac funny; Cadillac just shrugs.*

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

...and we're excited to start working toward the future with you and your child...?

RICH DAD

Jade.

RICH MOM

Step-daughter.

RICH DAD

She doesn't actually know we're calling. We're just...seeing what our options are.

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

Of course you are! And thank you to The Singers for recommending us. Normally, I do a whole spiel about our range of packages. But since you're friends with The Singers, I trust we can skip to the Ivy Package that includes the A-Z application service for up to twenty schools, including our essay writing bootcamp, summer enrichment programming, and the coveted mock interview with the former head of Harvard—

ASSISTANT

*(Coughs.)* High school.

*Cadillac kicks his friend.*

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

—admissions. I'll just pop our price schedule in the chat.

*Rich Mom gasps with sticker shock.*

RICH DAD

So much for buying that Russian yacht.

THE CADILLAC OF COLLEGE COUNSELORS

We know it's not cheap, but how many times will your pride and joy go to college? Am I right or am I right? Or am I right?

RICH DAD

We'll do whatever it takes.

RICH MOM

Yeah. She *needs* to go to college. It's like: two's company but three's whatever.

RICH DAD

Listen. She's a great kid. Got lots of stream-appeal. She's just not...

RICH MOM

As smart as the other one.

RICH DAD

The other one was a good tester.

FAMOUS MOM

*She* got good grades.

RICH DAD

But Jade's not that into school. She's not dumb, but...she's just not...

RICH MOM

Smart.

RICH DAD

We're worried about her ability to get into the kind of top-tier university that she *should* go to. And we're wondering...

*Jade, who has been overhearing the entire conversation, videos her real-life reaction.*

JADE

Y'all hear that? That's some top-tier parenting shit.



Okay, not gonna lie: my sister's a total brainiac. She was top of her class. APs and honors classes all the way. She's nationally ranked in debate. So, it's no surprise to hear her called "the smart one." Harvard begged her to go there. But all the other stuff... "She's not dumb *BUT*..."

Not that I care what Trophy Wife says. But my dad too?

Whatever. I'm not "into school" and I get the occasional C. Or worse. I swear my English teacher is out to get me. He's circling every other word on my college essay, writing "relevance" in big red letters. And I'm like: HOW IS YOUR ENTIRE PROFESSION RELEVANT?! I mean, hello! Grammarly?

And spoiler alert: I don't even *like* school. So why should I do all this junk to go to some *other school* where I have to take more boring classes that I hate? If I have to take another math class, I'll literally kill myself. If the nerds like it, then yipee for the nerds. And I'm not an idiot; I know math is important for...stuff. But why do I personally have to take it? It's not like they make the nerds take personality classes.

You know, I heard that in England you don't have to take math—except they call it "maths." Isn't that adorbs? So, my new plan is: I'm going to marry some cute British bloke and have British babies and they won't have to suffer like I did.

#LookingForBritishBoyfriend. (But send a pic of you smiling 'cuz you gotta have good teeth.)

I told my dad I'd rather have the money than go to college. I could invest the shit out of that and be CEO of something before I'm twenty. But all he cares about is telling his friends his daughters go to Harvard. Whatever. I told him once I hit a million followers, I'm outta there. So pleeeeeease! Save me from college! Click the follow button!

#### IV. THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE BEST FIT

*Chet, nearing his breaking point, is sitting in a chair, prisoner-style, blinded by a bright light and being questioned by GOOD COP and BAD COP (who is pacing like an angry animal).*

GOOD COP

We just have a few more questions. You holding up?

CHET

Actually I could really go for a sparkling water—

*Good Cop goes to give Chet a water, but Bad Cop grabs it.*

BAD COP

Sparkling water is a crime.

GOOD COP

Help me out here, Sport. I'm looking at your questionnaire and I'm a little confused. Are you looking for a small, mid-sized, or large college?

CHET

Um...I'm not really sure.

GOOD COP

That's okay. Let's try an easier question: would you rather go to school in a big bustling city or would you be happier in a more rural or small town setting?

CHET

I don't know. I guess...either?

BAD COP

Get a load of this guy. What *do* you know? Do you want a liberal arts college?

CHET

I'm actually not positive what that means. But "liberal" sounds fun.

BAD COP

Okay, tough guy, you want to play it that way?

CHET

Huh?

BAD COP

*(To Good Cop.)* Permission to treat as hostile.

CHET

What?

GOOD COP

Be my guest.

BAD COP

*(Becoming increasingly unhinged.)* Listen, “Chet.” We can do this the easy way or the hard way. And full disclosure: part of me’s hoping you say “the hard way.” Now, enough of the hemming and hawing! I need you to tell me the nitty gritty. What do you want to major in?

CHET

Isn’t “undecided” still an option? My college counselor said—

GOOD COP

You’re from Palo Alto, right? One of the (if not *the*) most competitive public schools in the country?

CHET

Yeah.

BAD COP

Then forget what your college counselor said, dummy. She's working for the enemy!

GOOD COP

We're your counselors now. Your parents paid good money for our expertise and we're just trying to help you. But there's not a lot we can do with a college questionnaire that says "IDK" after every question.

BAD COP

Don't get me started about kids with their acronyms these days! Can't even bother to write out "I Don't Know"? *What's your favorite subject in school?* IDK. *What do you want to study in college?* IDK. *What's your dream job?* IDK. Cut the crap, son, and tell it to me straight: Where do you want to go to college?

CHET

I don't know!

BAD COP

Well, IMO IDK if you're getting into any college! And TBH IDC!

GOOD COP

C'mon, kid. Be smart. Do you really want to make minimum wage for the rest of your life?

CHET

No.

BAD COP

You want to max all your plastic just to pay for your exorbitant rent until one sad day, you're trying to purchase your omakase sushi dinner and it's denied because you're so buried in debt that you have to declare bankruptcy?

*Chet shakes his head.*

BAD COP

ANSWER ME!

CHET

Wait. What's the question?

BAD COP

*(Getting ready to fight.)* You want to play dumb? Go ahead, make my day.

## GOOD COP

Listen, remember when you were a little kid and people used to ask: What do you want to be when you grow up? Well...

*Music cue: Twenty-one Pilots' "Stressed Out."*

## BAD COP

*(With music.) WAKE UP! IT'S TIME TO MAKE MONEY!*

*Spot zeroes in on Chet out of time and space as the song warbles through the chorus:  
Wish we could turn back time/ to the good old days/ when mama sang us to sleep/ and  
now we're stressed out...*

## CHET

I wish... I wish... I wish I could stop. Everything. I wish I had time. To think.

All I've been doing is grinding. Every night. For years. Weekends are even worse with debate. All to get to *this moment*. Top of the class. Straight As. 5s on my APs. Varsity lacrosse, water polo, track. I've got a killer resume that I've been working on since I could tie my shoes. Every adult I know is asking: where do you want to go to college?

What do you want to major in? What do you want to do? Trouble is:

I don't know anything

about anything.

I never get to do anything / want to do. So how would I know what I want to do with my life? And part of me's wondering...what would it be like to chuck it all and, I don't know...hike the Appalachian Trail?

But my parents are all:

CHET DAD

We went to Harvard and you'll go to Harvard.

CHET

What about—

CHET MOM

You'll major in business.

CHET

But I don't—

CHET DAD

Listen. No child of mine will waste his time playing hackysack at some second-rate school no one's heard of.

CH ET

I heard Sven is really happy at Bard.



CHET DAD

Do you think we've been paying for tutors and counselors and all the rest of it so that you can "be happy"?

CHET MOM

If you want us to pay for it.

CHET DAD

Harvard is the only option.

CHET MOM

You'll love it.

CHET

Will I? Love it? The last thing I remember *loving* was probably...Legos? I got the Death Star one Christmas. Four thousand pieces of pure bliss. Not that I *needed* a fancy kit. I could sit in a pile of bricks and just build. For hours. Spaceships. Army installations. Castles. I built worlds. When I did Legos, time didn't exist.

I can't remember the last time I felt that...carefree.

Sorry, do I sound like a privileged ass? Maybe I am. No. I *definitely* am. (*Pulls car keys out.*) Got the Beemer to prove it.

But I don't know what to do, man. I don't know who to tell. 'Cuz I know I'm not supposed to complain. I know everyone else has it worse. But. I don't *want* to go to Harvard. And I *definitely* don't want to major in business. I just want some time to figure out...who *I* am.

*And we're back:*

GOOD COP

So, what's it gonna be, buddy?

BAD COP

What do you want to do with your life?

GOOD COP

Do you want to go to Harvard?

BAD COP

Or Harvard?

CHET

I want to go...(looking from expectant Mom to Dad)...to Harvard.

*(Trying it on for size.)* I want to go to Harvard.

*(Don't get in his way.)* I want to go to Harvard.

## V. ESSAY BOOT CAMP

*Students wait, ZANE among them. Student A and B aim to please, while Zane (ripped jeans and combat boots) thinks this is a bullshit waste of time. In a 1950's-style suit and hat, Mr. Draper ambles in reading something and smoking a cigarette. He sits, puts his feet up, and continues to read and smoke.*

### STUDENT A

Actually, I have asthma and smoke really exacerbates—

*Mr. Draper puts his hand up to silence the student, finishes what he's reading, then looks up.*

### MR. DRAPER

Do you have any idea what that was?

*Student B raises their hand.*

### MR. DRAPER

Put your hand down, you try-hard.

*That was how much time you have to impress your reader with your thoughtful, powerful, authentic personal essay. Or not.*

*He tosses his reading material aside.*

MR. DRAPER

You've heard the statistic already...that admissions officers have (on average) less than fifteen minutes to evaluate your *entire* admissions file. Which allots them with just a few minutes to skim the essay that you worked on for weeks (maybe months) to perfect. And that's not all the bad news. There's more...because these poor schmucks are reading 50 crappy essays a day, five days a week, for *months*. So, how do you make *your* essay stand out of the manure pile?

*Student A and B raise their hands eagerly. Zane speaks out of turn.*

ZANE

I'm Zane—they/them—and I bet no one even reads the essays 'cuz the whole bloody capitalist system's rigged.

MR. DRAPER

That's where you're wrong, my anarchist friend.

My name is Mr. Draper. You can call me Mr. Draper. And I'm not some drip in a tweed suit getting paid peanuts at a university. I'm Madison Avenue, baby. I've sold people things they didn't even know they wanted. That's why I make the big bucks. Because I know how to sell. Only difference is: YOU are the product now. By the end of this essay boot camp, we're going to turn your boring, pretentious turd of an essay into something

that will make readers say: we *have* to have this kid at our school. Now, I've got a date in eight hours, so let's get this party started. Give me one word to describe yourself.

STUDENT A

Hardworking.

MR. DRAPER

Boring. Drop and give me 10.

STUDENT A

What?

MR. DRAPER

Did you miss the "boot camp" part of Essay *Boot Camp*? Now, drop and give me 10.

*Students drop and do 10 push-ups when so ordered.*

MR. DRAPER

You.

STUDENT B

Curious?

MR. DRAPER

Fake. Drop and give me 10. Next.

ZANE

I refuse to be reduced to a single—

MR. DRAPER

Drop and give me 10.

ZANE

There's no way I'm—

MR. DRAPER

I don't give two turds if you participate or not. But your parents might. Because this is a no-refunds situation.

*Zane considers bailing, but complies. Sort of.*

MR. DRAPER

Now, let's try this again. Give me one word to describe the bubbling primordial essence of who you *really are*.

*Mr. Draper points at the students and they respond.*

STUDENT A

Disciplined.

STUDENT B

Determined.

ZANE

Disgusted.

MR. DRAPER

Drop and give me ten! You sound like a bunch of suicidal misfits! I wouldn't trust you to bag my groceries and you want the best universities in the world to offer you one of their coveted spots? Again!

STUDENT A

Exhausted.

STUDENT B

Hopeless.

ZANE

Pissed.

MR. DRAPER

That's more like it! Now we're getting somewhere *real*. Hey, can any of you cretins make a martini?

STUDENT A

Not yet, but I can Google it!

STUDENT B

I'll DoorDash what we need!

*Ingredients and glasses magically appear and Student A and B shake up some killer martinis.*

MR. DRAPER

Because this isn't just some superficial essay your checked-out English teacher is going to give you an easy A on. No. This essay is your pumping heart on a piece of paper.

These 650 words determine if you are DOA or if you have a future.

*Mr. Draper takes a sip of his martini.*



MR. DRAPER

That's what I'm talking about! See? You're iGen problem solvers. You observe and you pivot. You are tomorrow's leaders today.

STUDENT A/B

I am?

MR. DRAPER

Problem is: so is everyone else. So what do you need? You need a STORY that lands those qualities. That makes the reader say: I NEED to turn the page. BUT you can't write about your parents' divorce.

STUDENT A

Oh.

MR. DRAPER

Or your mom's cancer.

STUDENT B

Shoot.

MR. DRAPER

Don't write about overcoming your dyslexia.

STUDENT A

But—

MR. DRAPER

Or that mean coach who taught you to push yourself past your limit. Or the thrill of victory, the agony of defeat, overcoming adversity, embracing diversity, if it weren't for my Grandma Mabel I wouldn't have the blah, blah, blah to be the self-congratulatory bore I am today.

STUDENT A

Then what are we supposed to write about?

ZANE

My parents say if a school doesn't want me for who I am, then it's their loss.

MR. DRAPER

Good thinking! Reject things before they reject you. You're never going to be in a relationship.

ZANE

That's not what I'm saying—

MR. DRAPER

And you're in luck! There are a handful of hippie-dippie colleges out there that care more about your bumper stickers than your GPA. Best of luck paying back your quarter-million of student loans working on your permaculture farm. BUT if you want to change the world, think about what you can do with a degree from Harvard—that's my alma mater. *Veritas*, baby. You want to stick it to the capitalist hegemony? That's where you have a seat at the table. The table where the leaders of tomorrow sit. Maybe even a president. (Definitely a president.) Now, they say what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. (That's cliché. Don't use it.) But I *do* want to hear about what made you *YOU*.  
*(Pointing at Zane.) Go!*

ZANE

Well, if you really want to know...I started this theater club for the LGBTQ+—

MR. DRAPER

Too controversial. Dig deeper.

ZANE

The principal wouldn't let me use the bathroom of my choice so I sued the school district for—

MR. DRAPER

Too...political. Get personal.

ZANE

After I got out of rehab...

MR. DRAPER

Not *that* personal. Okay...this one's a tougher nut to crack than I thought. Let's spitball here. How do we sell our gender fluid anarchist to the Ivy League?

STUDENT A

They are...innovative.

STUDENT B

A changemaker.

STUDENT A

They have experienced...obstacles!

STUDENT B

That inspire them to take action!

*Like an old-school ad agency, Mr. Draper and the other students spitball while spot comes up on Zane and Yungblud's "The Funeral" wails: And I hate myself but that's alright/ and I love myself but that's alright...*

## ZANE

This all feels so fake. The world's so fake. And everyone's gonna use ChatGPT to write their essays anyway. So, how do I convince someone to want me in 650 words, when I don't even want me most of the time?

I've got a new name. But the same body. And I still don't know if this is me. Is everyone taking this many pills in the morning just to get through the day?

I know there's nothing wrong with me. But when even the governor in your state says you don't have rights at the school you have to attend? That you basically shouldn't exist? Yeah, it's hard not to take it personally. It was Bathroom-gate that finally broke me. At first, the principal was okay with me using the bathroom in the teacher's lounge. Then the parents got in on it. There was this meeting. Parents were screaming about how if I used this bathroom or that bathroom, they'd pull their kids from the school. Like I wasn't even there. I don't know what they thought...that their kids would catch my pronouns? So, whatever, I just stopped going to the bathroom—ended up with an infection. We appealed to the superintendent, the councilman. That's when I started online school. And that's working out pretty well but.

I was cutting myself.

I was so angry that I just wanted it to STOP. I would never *really* hurt myself. (That's for Mom, she worries.) When I was in the hospital, I realized something. It's not *me* that I hate. It's the people who hate me I can't stand. And I'm planning to spend every day I have on this earth making the world a better place for the questioning kids who come after me. And if I've gotta tear everything down and start again, then that's what I'm

gonna do. From the inside out. Hell, yeah, I want a seat at that table. I'm gonna flip that sucker over and set it on fire. Hear that Harvard? I'm coming for you.

*Zane leaves on a mission.*

MR. DRAPER

Hold up. Where'd the anarchist go?

STUDENT A

I don't know.

STUDENT B

They said something about Harvard, I think.

MR. DRAPER

Oh, good god. I need a martini. *(Notices the drink in his hand and downs it.)*

## VI. WHO'S THE SADIST WHO CREATED THE S.A.T.?

*The Admissions Officer is pushed on stage against their will, still trying to argue their way out of something.*

### ADMISSIONS OFFICER

I won't do it! This is lunacy! I— (*Noticing audience, composes self.*) I'mmmm...happy to announce that for next year's testing cycle...we will be "test optional" again! This means you *may* submit your test scores. Unless...you don't want to submit your scores. We *really* don't care. It's *totally* optional. Because we're reasonable people. And we see that the world is changing. (And there's that school that got sued over testing.) So, even if you *do* self-report your scores, we promise we won't even look at them. Unless we look at them. Because actually we do *encourage* you to test. Because there's just not enough time in the day to read all the applications since we went test optional. I mean, I've got a pile the size of California on my desk right now and even at a measly eight-minutes per applicant, I still won't be able to eat, drink, or sleep for months just to read them all. I'm sorry to be blunt but we need some way to sift out the riff raff. So...it would be helpful if you could submit scores that are really low and then we could cut you without having to read the rest of the application. That would help us out, time-wise. And make our acceptance rate look pretty "dope." That said, you should know that the only people who submit their scores have perfect scores so the average score is perfect. So please submit your perfect score if you think it is an accurate assessment of

your academic potential. Unless you don't. Then don't. Unless you want to. Is that clear?

*The Admissions Officer storms off and we hear offstage:*

ADMISSIONS OFFICER

I quit!

*The News Headlines can be spoken, recorded, projected...*

NEWS HEADLINES

COVID-19 shook up the standardized test world.

In the wake of the pandemic, some schools are remaining test optional.

The University of California is sued over use of SAT and ACT scores, the litigants claiming that standardized testing requirements are biased and unconstitutional.

These tests, they measure wealth more than intelligence.

"I'm more than just a test score" has become the movement's rallying cry.

But as the number of applications rise and a billion-dollar business fights back...

The fate of the standardized tests remains unclear.

*A slew of TEST ZOMBIES enter, all their movements are hauntingly the same. They walk in synchronicity. They take their seats at the same time. They take their pencils out and line them up. All except BENJAMIN, who can't keep in step, almost misses his*



*chair, and drops all his pencils on the ground. The others gawk in horror. He desperately tries to gather the pencils up, but his nerves make it almost comically difficult. Nah, it's mortifying.*

*The PROCTOR marches in and hands out test booklets and bubble sheets. Every "word" out of the Proctor's mouth sounds like the adults in the old Peanuts movies—a garble of nonsense—that everyone appears to understand, except Benjamin.*

PROCTOR

Whawhawhawhawhawha whawhawhawhawhawha  
whawhawhawhawhawha.

*Like clockwork, the Test Zombies grab the tests and bubble sheets, they open them at the same time, they pick up their pencils at the same time, they color in the appropriate circles at the same time, they turn the pages at the same time. All except Benjamin, who looks with horror at the ease with which they seem to be doing everything.*

TEST ZOMBIES

A. B. C. D.  
D. C. B. A.  
D. D. D. D.

*Page flip. Repeat as needed.*

*Benjamin drops his pencils again. The Proctor shushes him. The Zombies glare.*

*The following represents what they are reading, not actually saying out loud.*

ZOMBIE A

“The passage on the whole can best be described as...”

BENJAMIN

Boring?

ZOMBIE B

Porche pays \$25 for 3 yards of chintz and 4 yards of brocade. Ronaldo pays \$11 for 1 yard of chintz and 2 yards of brocade. What is the price of 1 yard of chintz?

BENJAMIN

What the heck is chintz?

ZOMBIE C

If 60 musicians play Mozart’s requiem in 50 minutes, how much time will it take 30 musicians to play it?

BENJAMIN

Wait...what?

*The Zombies continue to color circles and flip pages with confidence and alacrity. Meanwhile, spot on Benjamin who is stuck in his head with his own worst enemy—himself.*

## BENJAMIN

If I could talk to the person who invented the SAT, I guess I'd say...thanks for ruining my life, you racist creep! Fun fact: Carl Brigham, the father of the SAT, wrote a book called *The Study of American Intelligence* in which he warned that the superior "Nordic race" was going to be "diluted" if they kept letting in all those "inferior" immigrants. So, yeah, thanks, Carl! Thanks for reducing today's youth into a bunch of anxiety-ridden test whores...I mean, scores. 'Cuz that's not *who* I am. It's not *all* I am.

Or maybe it is.

Because I'm sitting here, in the most important test of my life. The test that stands between me and the college I've wanted to go to since I knew college existed. Ever since I read about the chair of the neuroscience department and decided that I was going to be his research assistant.

But I'm watching everyone else coloring circles in so fast. Flipping pages so loud. And I'm like: what is wrong with me? Why doesn't my brain work like that? If I don't get a 1600, I might as well get a job busing tables.

I have to reread this passage about boat building in the 1800s over and over. Port and starboard and who-the-frick-cares-board. Where do they find things that are *this*

*sleep-inducing?* I'm reading the words but they aren't sinking in. Like my brain is impermeable. Vocab word!

I start to sweat. My pencil hovers over A. But I second guess myself. Maybe it's B? Third guess: gotta be C! Then, I eye the D. I'm pondering the probability of having three Ds in a row, when it starts moving.

The D starts moving.

I close one eye and try to position my pencil over the circle. But now there are two of them. My vision is doubling. Tripling. Did I forget to take my meds? I feel like I'm playing a drinking game without the drink. Because my brain mixes things up. Letters move, numbers switch. Apparently I'm "disabled." But when all the equations I knew inside out melt into one big mess in my mind, I just feel broken. Stupid. My pencil finally lands in the circle, when the proctor says:

PROCTOR

Whawhawhawhawhawha.

BENJAMIN

Five more minutes? My heart is beating out of my chest. Oh god. I'm so hot. My vision's closing in. I can't breathe right. What is wrong with me?

*Throughout the following, the Test Zombies continue to circle and flip, growing louder and more manic. It might even morph into a chant.*

TEST ZOMBIES

A. B. C. D.

D. C. B. A.

C. C. C. C.

*(Page flip.)*

*Benjamin stands up; he teeters. The Proctor storms up to him.*

PROCTOR

Whawhawhawhawhawha.

BENJAMIN

I need to go to the bathroom. I— I don't feel so good.

*The Zombies circle around, chanting. The Proctor delivers ultimatums at full volume.*

*Benjamin is freaking out.*

BENJAMIN

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

*The chanting and ultimatums crescendo with a ritualistic sacrifice feel. Benjamin finally collapses. Everyone scatters.*

## ACT II

### I. INTERVIEW FROM HELL

*It's the admissions office waiting room of an elite university, think: privilege and pretension. An imposing carved oak door looms in the back. From off, STUDENT AMBASSADOR (who becomes increasingly unhinged throughout) leads in a gaggle of petrified students.*

STUDENT AMBASSADOR

This way! Come on in and take a seat. NO, NOT THERE! Hahaha! Just kidding! You should've seen your face!

*The students are familiar to us: Catalina (wearing something pilfered from her mom's closet), Chet (sporting top-dollar blazer and tie), Benjamin (tugging on ill-fitting khakis and button down), Jade (the high-end fashionista), and Zane (in their usual ripped jeans with Docs).*

STUDENT AMBASSADOR

Everyone comfortable? Great. So...my name is Harper and I'm here to welcome you to—

## CENSOR

*(Overlapping.) BEEEEEEEEEP!* Per court order, all names have been changed to protect identities...and to prevent us from getting sued by the most powerful university in the universe.

## STUDENT AMBASSADOR

Last year? I was sitting where you are. Nervous. Sweating profusely. Actually, I was really nauseous. Until I threw up. Then I felt a little better. That's why I always say: don't eat a whole plate of eggs, sausages, and waffles with whipped cream and strawberries before your college interviews! (Yeah. It looked like a freakin' crime scene.) Anyhoo! I could tell you about all the amazing opportunities that await you here, but you know all that. Just like you know: you probably won't make the cut. Don't feel bad though! Most people don't. Our school's acceptance rate is so low now...it's a fraction! If there were 100 people here? We'd actually have to cut one of them up. Just kidding! *(Laughs uncomfortably, maybe a trace of PTSD...has that actually happened?!)*

Seriously though, numbers don't lie. We have *one remaining spot* in next year's class and *(motioning to imposing oak door in back)* our notorious admissions officer—I mean "illustrious"—is looking forward to hearing why this coveted spot should go to YOU. May the odds be ever in your favor!

*The STUDENT AMBASSADOR bounds out/off. The students all look at each other with new eyes—like: this is the competition. Except Jade who is trying to get just the right selfie.*

BENJAMIN

Did she say there's only one spot left?

CATALINA

Yeah.

BENJAMIN

Oh god.

*Benjamin takes out index cards and starts to cram for the interview; tries to take calming breaths but he's doing it wrong, so it sounds more like he's hyperventilating.*

ZANE

I'm Zane, they/them, and just letting y'all know: if there's a cornucopia of weapons in there, I'm grabbing the crossbow.

*Everyone looks really uncomfortable.*

CHET

What?



ZANE

It was a joke. “May the odds be ever in your favor?” *Hunger Games?* (*Scoffs, putting her feet up.*) Buncha robots.

CHET

(*Scoffs.*) Says the weirdo. I mean, do you really think it’s appropriate to wear *that* to an interview?

ZANE

(*Scoffs.*) Thanks but...not really interested in fashion advice from a jerk jock. What are you being recruited for anyway...wrestling?

CHET

Lacrosse, thank you very much. And I got a 1570 on my SAT. What’d you get?

ZANE

Huh? Well. Actually, I don’t believe in standardized testing.

CHET

Sounds like code for “you *actually* tanked.” What’s your GPA then? Mine’s a 4.0, unweighted. And I’m taking 4APs.

ZANE

My online school doesn't offer APs so...

CHET

SOOOO...I guess we know who WON'T be getting The Spot. *(To others.)* Good news!  
Looks like our chances just bumped up from 20 to 25%.

JADE

*(To Benjamin.)* 'Scuse me.

BENJAMIN

AHHH! *(Flinches, throwing flashcards in the air.)* Oh no! *(Frantically picks up cards and re-orders them.)* Where are the awards? No. Awards should go after community service but before—

CHET

Are you studying for the interview? *(Making fun.)* Make that 33.3%.

BENJAMIN

Wait a minute. *(A card's missing! Accusing Jade.)* Did you take my hobbies?

JADE

As if! Can you like move? The light's better there and I need to stream.

BENJAMIN

*(Spotting the errant card.)* There you are!

*Benjamin gets up to grab the missing index card and Jade steals his spot.*

JADE

Thanks! *(She holds the phone to do a selfie, but something is amiss.)* What. the. hell. I don't have a signal!

CATALINA

*(Checking her phone, worried.)* I don't have one either.

*Everyone checks their phone. Nada. This is unsettling for all—and becomes downright panic-inducing as the scene goes on. They check their phones repeatedly. Need that dopamine hit for reals!*

JADE

*(Desperately tapping her phone.)* This is seriously gonna be a problem, you guys. I told my followers I was gonna live stream my interview. Are there any computer nerds here who can fix this?

BENJAMIN

I could take a gander.

JADE

OMG, you're a lifesaver. But do it quick! I'll probably get called in first and I can't disappoint my followers.

*Benjamin gets out his geek gear and gets to work while Jade readies herself for her closeup.*

ZANE

Your *followers*? Are you a Gucci cult leader or something?

CHET

That's it! I knew you looked familiar!

CATALINA

Wait, what—is she really a cult leader?

CHET

You don't know Jade? She's a huge influencer. (*Off blank looks.*) Her dad owns Feta?

CATALINA

*(Gasps.)* Holy shit. Isn't he one of the richest guys in the world?

JADE

Well...I mean...he's in the top 20 but...he's not like *the* richest or anything.

ZANE

Thanks for coming, everyone! But there's no point in interviewing now.

CHET

Just because her family's loaded doesn't mean she automatically gets in.

ZANE

Everyone knows legacies and loaded people get into places like this. *(Off Chet's look.)*

Oooh! Are you loaded too? Or a legacy? Or a loaded legacy?

CHET

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

ZANE

Look! He's already got that Ivy League "I could buy and sell you" look. Must be a legacy.

CATALINA

What the hell's a legacy?

CHET

Whatever. It means my parents went here. And my grandfather. Okay, there's a portrait of my great grandfather in the dining hall. But nothing's a given.

ZANE

You're right! This one's a toss-up. Will the last spot go to Billionaire Girl or the Tri-legacy?

CHET

What exactly is your problem?

ZANE

There are so many; it's hard to pick most days. But I'm going to go with the crushing wealth disparity in our country that is perpetuated by these overpriced legacy-filled institutions.

CHET

And that's somehow my fault?

ZANE

Yup.

CHET

Why're you even here if you clearly have so much disdain for it?

ZANE

It's time to turn and burn those tables.

CHET

What does that even mean?

CATALINA

Are you saying we don't even have a shot at this? They said they were "need blind."

ZANE

Uh oh, Rich Kids, you might have competition. (*To Catalina.*) How much need are we talking about? Do your parents make under \$60K? Are you first-gen?

CATALINA

Get outta my face! And why're you acting like it's so funny that we're gonna get rejected? Don't you even want to go here?

ZANE

Not really. But that's exactly why I should. It's the people who don't want power who should wield it...to make a difference for people who actually need it.

CATALINA

What do you know about need? I bet those jeans cost more than my mom takes home in a week.

ZANE

These are not— I'm just good thrifter. Whatever. You don't know a thing about me.

CATALINA

Exactly. And I don't wanna. So, shut up.

CHET

Yeah. Literally no one cares what you have to say.

JADE

Hey, Nerd. Did you get the wifi password or not?

ZANE

Pretty sure his name isn't Nerd. Yo, what's your name?



BENJAMIN

What? Oh. I'm Benjamin. And this is the weirdest thing. I hacked the passwords; that was too easy. But there's something (or *someone*) actually blocking the signal in here.

JADE

Are you sure you know what you're doing? That doesn't even make sense.

BENJAMIN

I don't make mistakes...about technology.

ZANE

Maybe they don't want anyone cheating on their interview.

CATALINA

How do you cheat on an interview?

ZANE

People fake photos and get their kids recruited for sports they've never played. Anything is possible.

JADE

Why are you looking at me?

ZANE

I wasn't. Should I?

JADE

Listen, I've got so many followers, they should pay *me* to go here. It'd be like free advertising. Besides, the fencing coach contacted me, not the other way around.

ZANE

You fence?

JADE

Duh.

ZANE

Cool. Me too.

JADE

*(Oh shit.)* Really? Cool!

ZANE

Do you do use foil, épée, or sabre?

JADE

Uh...the...uh...middle one?

ZANE

En garde!

*Zane suddenly takes up a totally fake fencing stance; Jade shrieks. Zane laughs.*

JADE

You know, I may not have one of those sword thingies, but if you wanna fight, then let's do it! Here. *(Offers her phone to someone and starts taking her jewelry off.)* Someone record us. This will get so many likes.

ZANE

I'm not fighting you.

JADE

Too afraid?

ZANE

Yeah, actually...I'm afraid your douchebag dad would probably sue me.

JADE

You want to say that to my face?

ZANE

*(Confused.)* Uh...I just did?

*Jade pushes Zane; Zane pushes back.*

CHET

Hey! Ladies! Let's take it down a notch!

ZANE

Do *not* call me a lady!

JADE

And don't man-splain to me!

CHET

How was that man-splaining? I swear, I can't say anything anymore.

CATALINA

Can everyone just shut up? *(Nervously checking time.)* And what's taking so long?

Shouldn't someone be calling us in? I *have* to be on that four o'clock train.

BENJAMIN

Do you think there could be someone in there already?

*Benjamin listens at the door into the admissions office.*

CATALINA

You hear anything?

*Benjamin shakes his head.*

ZANE

Whoa. I just had a radical idea.

CHET

No one wants to hear it.

ZANE

What if *this* is it?

CATALINA

This is what?

*Zane searches around the room for evidence of cameras.*

JADE

What are you doing?

CHET

Acting weirder than usual.

ZANE

What if *this* is the interview? What if they're watching us right now?

BENJAMIN

With hidden cameras? It's more than possible.

*Benjamin starts gazing around in nooks and crannies to discover cameras.*

JADE

Yeah, maybe they want to spy on us so they can get rid of the really annoying people.

CHET

Wonder who that would be.

*Chet and Jade exchange a look. Just then, a blood-curdling SCREAM from behind the admissions office door.*

JADE

What was that...sound?

CATALINA

You mean what was that *scream*?

BENJAMIN

What are they doing in there? Is that part of the interview?

*Benjamin starts to pace nervously.*

CHET

Chill out. The admissions people just want to get to know us...not torture us with a third degree.

ZANE

The admissions people don't want to "get to know you"; they want to watch you squirm while they fact-check your resume.

JADE

Uh oh. They fact-check those things?

ZANE

Oh yeah. They've seen your feed. They've read your subreddits. Snapchats. They've interviewed your kindergarten teacher. Your ex-es.

CHET

There's no way they do that. Is there?

CATALINA

*(Rattled and pretending not to be.)* I got nothing to hide.

BENJAMIN

Do they talk to other people like...doctors? Can they do that?

ZANE

Haven't you ever heard about the Secret Sauce of their admissions process? I swear. They've got CIA operatives on the payroll. They know it *all*.

BENJAMIN

*(Rocking back and forth.)* Oh no, oh no, oh no. This isn't happening.



CATALINA

Why you picking on him? Can't you tell he's got problems?

ZANE

I'm not picking on anyone. I'm just stating facts. The whole system's—

*Just then a FLEEING STUDENT slams out of the admissions door.*

FLEEING STUDENT

*(Screaming.)* Get out while you can! Bones and Brains lives! *Mortuus sunt vivunt!*

*Fleeing Student makes a secret sign with their arms, then runs out the "front door" (off).*

JADE

Okay...

CATALINA

That...

CHET

Was...

ZANE

Weird.

CATALINA

Did that kid just scream at us in Latin?

CHET

*(Shrug.)* I took French. Anyone know Latin? Is that their motto or something?

ZANE

I'm pretty sure a tri-legacy should know that their motto is "*veritas.*" Truth?

BENJAMIN

I'm...in the Latin club.

CHET

Of course you are.

*Jade punches Chet playfully.*

BENJAMIN

He said...he said: *Mortuus sunt vivunt.*

CATALINA

And that means?

BENJAMIN

Well...*mortuus* means “the dead,” *sunt* means “are” and *vivunt* means...”alive.” The dead...are...alive.

JADE

What...like...like...*zombies*?

BENJAMIN

Yeah! Like zombies! You know what? You can have your spot! Sorry Professor Pascual-Leone, I’ve always dreamed of being your research assistant and figuring out what’s wrong with my brain, but I can’t do this!

*Benjamin grabs his stuff and runs off.*

CHET

Hey! Don’t go! It’s probably just some kind of prank.

CATALINA

Prank? My parents were right. This place is messed up.

*Benjamin trudges back in, more freaked out than ever.*

BENJAMIN

The door...it won't open. They locked us in here.

CHET

There's no way we're locked in. That kid just went out that way. *(To Benjamin.)* C'mon. It's probably jammed. You just need to pump some more iron, buddy.

*Chet goes off with Benjamin. We can hear them try and try and try to open the door.*

CHET

*(From off.)* What the heck! Come on! Damn it!

*Chet and Benjamin return, their faces masked with fear.*

ZANE

How'd the iron pumping go, Sport?

CHET

Yeah, uh...we're definitely locked in here.

CATALINA

And they blocked the signal? This is seriously not cool. If I don't make it back on time, my parents are gonna find out I came here.

ZANE

Now do you believe me? They're probably watching us tear each other apart and making little notes about who will get their precious last spot. It's like *Survivor—Ivy League Island*.

CHET

Ooh! I'd watch that.

JADE

Isn't this kidnapping? If there was a signal, I'd call my dad's lawyers. *(To the people spying on them.)* You hear that? They will bury you with legal fees!

BENJAMIN

*(Waves at possible cameras.)* Can anyone hear me? I don't want the spot! Just let me out! Please!

CHET

It's gonna be fine. Let's just kick back until—

BENJAMIN

It's not. It's really not. I forgot my meds this morning and I'm really not feeling well and and and...I NEED to get out of here!

*Benjamin is freaking out, pacing back and forth.*

CHET

Uh...okay... What is wrong with the nerd?

ZANE

There's nothing "wrong" with *Benjamin*. But I think he might be having a panic attack.

CATALINA

How do you know?

ZANE

I've been there. Like literally *there*—a 72-hour hold in the psych ward. And I swear, I was walking around just like that.

JADE

You've been in the psych ward?

CHET

No surprises there.

ZANE

You know what? Make fun all you want. I deal with my demons.

JADE

Me too.

CHET

You too what? You been in the looney bin too?

JADE

That's not what you flippin' call it. But yeah, I had some dark times. You think it's easy having your whole life all over social media? And your dad testifying in front of Congress? It sucks!

CHET

Yo, can we stop playing Who's Crazier? What do we do for the nerd?

ZANE

His name is BENJAMIN. Let's give him some space. And make him comfortable. (*To Benjamin.*) Hey, Ben. Do you want to sit down?

*Zane helps Benjamin sit. He's there in body but not in spirit. If we're talking fight, flight, freeze...he's FROZEN. Catalina steps in to help.*

CATALINA

I can check his vitals. His pupil responses are okay. But his pulse is faster than I'd like.

ZANE

How do you know how to do that?

CATALINA

Lots of practice. Even our dog is sick of me taking his pulse. I'm hoping to do pre-med.

Nah. To hell with that. I'm *doing* pre-med and after this bullshit, I don't care where I do it.

JADE

He said he didn't take his medication. What do you think he's on?

CATALINA

Should I look in his fanny pack?

JADE

Extreme times call for extreme measures.



*Catalina searches Benjamin's bag which has more than its fair share of D&D dice.*

CATALINA

Why does he have so many dice? Look at this one—it's got...20 sides! Isn't this a slide rule? I didn't think people used these anymore. I don't see any meds though. But if he's having a panic attack, maybe he's on some anti-anxiety thing?

JADE

That's what I'm on. You know, and a gallon of Starbucks a day. So, they basically cancel each other out.

ZANE

Same.

JADE

So, what do we do? How can we help him?

CHET

I wouldn't sweat it. They're gonna realize we're locked in here and come get us out. This isn't some kind of *Survivor* interview. That's not a thing. I'm sure there's a completely logical reason behind all this.

CATALINA

There's a completely logical reason behind a kid running through here screaming in Latin about zombies? What was that thing he said about bones and...what was it?

ZANE

Bones and Brains! Isn't that one of those super elite secret societies?

JADE

Ask the legacy.

CATALINA

Well? Have you ever heard of it?

CHET

I've heard of it. But I thought they disbanded because of that scandal a few years back. Someone died. The school got a lot of bad press.

CATALINA

What kind of secret society are we talking about? I mean...why's he talking about zombies? Are there zombies here?

CHET

Hey, I like *The Last of Us* as much as the next person, but there's actually no such thing as zombies.

JADE

Really? Sometimes I feel dead inside.

ZANE

Facts. High school gives new meaning to *The Walking Dead*. Wait a minute! What if this is it—the zombie apocalypse—and we're living our last moments. Like: what was it all for?

CHET

Oh brother.

CATALINA

I think about stuff like that all the time, like: what if I get hit by a bus, what if I find out I have only a month to live? What will I remember in those last seconds? What will people say when I'm gone?

JADE

I know what they'll say: Jade who? It's like: I'm this famous influencer who has all these followers, and I should be happy, right? But I'm not. Not even close. I feel like I'm just kind of watching myself do things. Like I'm sleepwalking through life, you know? Like I don't even exist until someone "likes" me.

CATALINA

I know what you mean. Sometimes I feel so...adrift. I'm talking: middle of the ocean, no moonlight. Total darkness. Just feeling these currents all around me, about to pull me under. *(To Zane.)* Hey, do you remember how you felt when you had your panic attack?

ZANE

I was scared. And lonely. I mean, I've got friends I tell things. But, for some reason I couldn't tell them about this. I couldn't say the words. Like my mouth was full of sand. And then one day, I snapped. I couldn't get this idea out of my mind: I can't do this anymore. It was going around and around in my head. I can't do this anymore, I can't do this anymore. And all I wanted was someone to tell me I'd be okay. But there was no one. And I felt like...this bomb about to explode.

*Jade grabs Zane's hand.*

JADE

Hey. Better late than never: I think you're going to be more than okay. You seem pretty kickass to me.

CATALINA

You hear that, Benjamin? You're going to be okay.

ZANE

Yeah. We got your back.

JADE

We're all here for you.

*Jade looks to Chet who hasn't spoken up yet—and is decidedly checked out.*

CHET

Hunh? Yeah. There's nothing to worry about, man.

JADE

Hey, I've got a crazy idea. I mean, I know only one of us is gonna get in here and they totes set us up to hate each other. But what if we don't? What if we keep in touch so we can, you know, help each other out. 'Cuz all this crazy crap we're going through right

now—what college you go to, what you got on your SAT—none of it will matter five years from now.

BENJAMIN

I got a perfect score.

JADE

Hunh?

CATALINA

Ben? You okay?

BENJAMIN

Problem was: it wasn't on the SAT. It was on the depression test. So, don't tell me I'm not good at anything! I love it when people are like: Don't be depressed! Be happy! Or better yet: snap out of it! Do you think I like feeling like this? I'm SO tired. All. the. time. I fall asleep in class. I fall asleep in the bathroom. Fell asleep driving once. Luckily, I just hit a mailbox. I can feel these fluids going around in my brain. Crazy chemicals. Messing me up. At first it was just letters moving. My brain—it mixes up the order of things. So, it takes me forever to get things done. Meanwhile, everyone else around me was acing everything. I was up until 3 in the morning just trying to get my homework done. There was no time to sleep. I was doing worse and worse. And...I don't know...I just wanted it all to stop.

ZANE

Hey, um. I don't know if this'll help but my therapist taught me this acronym: H-O-P-E. Hold On, Pain Ends. Because, yeah, when you're down, it can feel like it will never end. But it *a/ways* does. And now, you've got us to help you to the other side.

CATALINA

Yeah, you got us. I'm definitely into staying in touch. Cuz realistically? I don't have anyone I can tell this stuff to. I mean, I got friends but. They don't want the same stuff as me. And my parents? They want me to go to college. Just: not this one. They want me to go down the street. Even the college counselor at my school quit. There's no one I can talk to. So, I just put my head down and work as hard as I can to get to the next thing. But some days...I don't know if I can get there. It's like where "there" is keeps changing. Or: everyone else has the map but me. Meanwhile, my stomach feels so bad most of the time, I'm eating Tums for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Like the stress is just eating me from the inside out.

JADE

This is so messed up. Why are we all feeling this way?

*Everyone nods and "yeahs" —except silent Chet who looks like he's about to explode.*

*They all look at him.*

ZANE

Hey. Are you okay?

CHET

I'm fine! What do you want? Why're you all looking me?

CATALINA

Do you...want to talk?

CHET

About what?

ZANE

Anything, man.

JADE

You can't keep things bottled up forever.

CHET

*(Scoffs.)* What—are you my therapists all of a sudden? What do you want? A sob story?

Sorry. I don't have one. I don't have a doctor. I don't have a diagnosis. I'm not a pill-popper. And don't give me shit for being a legacy because I did everything I was



supposed to do. I did all the sports. I killed it at debate. I got all A's. A B+ was basically illegal in my house. So I've earned this spot fair and square!

*An alarm goes off. Sounds kinda nuclear bomb shelter warning-ish.*

CHET

What the—

ZANE

What did I tell you? This *is* the end!

JADE

*(Filming herself.)* What's going on? Are we being attacked?

CATALINA

*(Ready to fight.)* Is it the zombies?

BENJAMIN

*(Decidedly not ready to fight.)* Is it the Russians?

*Just as suddenly, the alarm stops. We hear the sound of doors unlocking and a voice over.*

ADMISSIONS OFFICER (VO)

Your interview is complete. I repeat, your interview is complete. Results will be uploaded to the portal in a week. Thank you for your interest in *BEEEEEEEEEP*.

## II. THE WALL OF REJECTION

*A wall in a privileged public high school papered with college rejection letters—colorful notes of solidarity scrawled all over them. A large banner above reads THE WALL OF REJECTION, a small, scrawled sign next to it says: IT'S SATIRICAL.*

*A NEW COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR appears (and is speaking to her invisible college counseling class). Students pass by the Wall of Rejection and may or may not add a letter or add comments to the ones already posted.*

NEW COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

I know that some of the kids who EDed or EAed may already know where they're going next fall...

STUDENT A

Yes!

COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

And for those lucky few, senioritis may have already set in.

STUDENT B

Do you know if we have homework in—

STUDENT C

Let me stop you right there. I'm going to college, baby!

NEW COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

Please bear in mind that some of your fellow classmates haven't heard yet and they are trying really hard not to think about the fact that they've been waiting for the most important email of their young lives for days and weeks and months. So be mindful of the anxiety they may be feeling as they wait for those decisions to drop on Ivy Day.

*CHET enters, takes a letter out of his pack, reads it one last time, and posts it to the wall. He walks away, head slumped, his gate heavy. This was the final straw.*

*A gaggle of STUDENTS enters, talking animatedly.*

STUDENT A

Hold up! I got another rejection to add!

STUDENT B

From where?

STUDENT A

*(Taking out a crumpled piece of paper.)* I was rejected from... Drum roll, please!

*They drum roll.*

STUDENT A

Stanford!

STUDENT C

Twinsies! I got rejected from there too!

STUDENT A

“We regret to inform you...”

STUDENT D

That you suck!

STUDENT A

Shut up! I didn't even *want* to go there. I mean, their *team* mascot is a *tree*...like: with ROOTS! And they're supposed to be so smart? That's Dumb 101.

*Student A posts the letter to the wall and the friends write notes on it.*

STUDENT B

They don't deserve you!

STUDENT C

Who wants to be with all those try-hards?

STUDENT D

Yeah!

STUDENT B

You hear Principal Bonk threatening to take our wall down? Said it wasn't good for our mental health.

STUDENT D

Hmmm. Is it *the wall* that isn't good for our mental health? Or the billion-dollar college industry that preys on our sanity? Let me think on that.

STUDENT B

She forced us to put up this sign so people would get it.

STUDENT D

*(Reading the extra signage.)* "It's satirical"? Thanks. That really clears it up.

STUDENT C

I like the wall. Makes me feel less...

STUDENT D

Like you suck?

STUDENT C

Yeah. Or like: we can all suck...together. Uh. I think that came out wrong.

STUDENT A

So...who's got the most?

STUDENT C

Oh! Me, me, me!

STUDENT D

News flash: most rejections is NOT the race you want to win.

STUDENT C

My mom says "you can only go to one college" so it doesn't actually matter how many you get rejected from.

STUDENT D

It does if you get rejected from all the good ones.

STUDENT C

She also said, no one asks you where you started college, only where you graduated from. So I can always transfer.

STUDENT A

Did your mom also tell you that you could live at home forever?

STUDENT B

I'm pretty sure I got rejected from places I didn't even apply!

STUDENT D

Rude!

STUDENT B

Dear Sub-par Student: Just in case you're thinking of applying: DON'T!

STUDENT A

Guys! Check this out! Chet got rejected from Harvard!

STUDENT C

Chet VonThaden?



STUDENT A

How many Chets do you know? Of course Chet VonThaden!

STUDENT B

Chet VonThaden?

STUDENT C

Got rejected?

STUDENT D

From Harvard?

STUDENT B

My mind has been completely blown.

STUDENT C

I've lost faith...in everything.

STUDENT D

How could they reject him? He's...

STUDENT C

SO HOT!

STUDENT A

Seriously! And a 3-time varsity athlete AND debate star AND the vale-frickin-dictorian!

STUDENT B

Dude. If he's not getting into Harvard, there's no hope for the rest of us.

STUDENT A

Give me a Sharpie. (*Writing in big bold letters on Chet's letter:*) THEIR LOSS!

STUDENT C

Yeah! We love you Chet!

STUDENT D

(*Looking out a "window."*) Uh...guys? Why're there so many police cars here?

*A school bell sounds, the PA crackles to life.*

SCHOOL ANNOUNCEMENT (VO)

Please report to your home rooms immediately for a school-wide announcement. I repeat, please report to your home rooms immediately for a school-wide announcement.

STUDENT B

We better not be doing another lockdown.

STUDENT C

I know. I gotta get my Starbucks.

STUDENT D

Facts. I *need* a Vanilla Macchiato.

STUDENT A

*(Looking at phone.)* Oh no. I think it happened again...

STUDENT B

What?

STUDENT C

What is it?

*The deafening sound of a speeding train drowns them out. Sirens follow. And News Headlines. The students scatter.*

NEWS HEADLINES (VO or live)

A terrible tragedy occurred when a local teen was struck by a commuter train.

He was a straight-A student.

“The whole community loved him,” a spokesman said.

Many questions remain about the cause of death.

Some eyewitnesses suggested that the teen may have taken his own life.

*Students enter—in a state of shock. New College PTSD Counselor is there passing out candles and flyers. And giving kids hugs.*

NEW COLLEGE PTSD COUNSELOR

*(Repeat/ad lib lines as needed.)* It's good to see you. I just want to let you know therapists will be on campus all day next week. And there's a 24-hour helpline. We're here to help you get through this.

*Jade, Zane, Catalina, and Benjamin appear, texting/talking on their phones.*

JADE

Did you hear about Chet?

BENJAMIN

I can't believe it.

CATALINA

At the same time...I can't say I'm 100% surprised.

ZANE

I knew there was something going on with him.

BENJAMIN

He looked like he was about to snap. And I should know.

CATALINA

We should have *made* him talk to us.

JADE

I should have checked in on him today.

ZANE

Guys. Stop. This isn't *our* fault. And I'm sorry but...I'm so DONE WITH THIS. I mean. How many kids need to get hurt—or worse—before we admit: this system...it's broken. We can do better. We HAVE to do better. And and and...this story...it doesn't have to end this way!

*A strange noise—like a tape recorder rewinding. Everyone walks backwards the way they came. Time is reversing. They give back the candles and the flyers. They un-hug the Counselor. They exit off. Let's try this again.*

### III. WE REJECT YOUR REJECTION

*Not-so-frazzled STUDENTS speak from the other side...of college admissions.*

STUDENT A

Hey Seniors! Welcome to College Night! We were sitting there last year—just like you are now—

STUDENT B

Squeezing your stress balls!

STUDENT C

Nervous about getting into college and wondering when “the rest of our life” would start. And we just wanted to let y’all know—

STUDENT D

That it sucks to still be in high school!

STUDENT C

Knock it off! We wanted to let you know that: We made it!

STUDENT B

Yo! We in college!

STUDENT A

Actually, I'm taking a year off to hike the Adirondack Trail.

STUDENT B

I'm working while I take a few classes. (Like hell am I spending that much money on college.)

STUDENT C

Whatever way you cut it, life goes on. Even if you don't get into your "Top Choice."

STUDENT D

And you may not believe this but: it actually gets easier.

STUDENT C

My earliest class is 10AM.

STUDENT B

I don't have classes on Fridays.

STUDENT D

I'm never taking another math class...EVER.



STUDENT C

Facts! I'm taking a class called Zombie Movies! I love college!

STUDENT A

If we could give you a piece of advice, it would be to—

STUDENT B

Party more!

STUDENT A

Stop it! (Well, actually, that's true, but—) It would be...don't buy into the stress. There are thousands of colleges out there. So don't believe that a college is better because it doesn't want you. And you don't need a lazy river or a \$50 billion dollar endowment to get a good education.

STUDENT B

Wait. Who's got a lazy river?

STUDENT A

And there are so many more days to figure out what really matters, like:

STUDENT B

Where do I belong?

STUDENT C

What am I here for?

STUDENT D

What does success mean *to me*?

STUDENT A

And maybe...not getting into that dream college will open another door...

STUDENT B

Another future...

STUDENT C

And maybe...

STUDENT D

Just maybe...

STUDENT A

It's a future where you get to be happy...

STUDENT B

And pursue the things that make you feel smart and capable...

STUDENT C

Instead of stressed out...

STUDENT D

And dead inside.

*Benjamin appears; he takes out a letter and reads it.*

BENJAMIN

Dear Impossible to Get into School,

Thank you for your interest in my interest. I received many highly qualified rejections from institutions even better than yours—some of them even have lazy rivers. So, it is with a heavy heart that I must reject your rejection.

*Zane appears and takes over the reading.*

ZANE

Because it has come to my attention that there is something seriously rotten in your ivory towers. And it stinks. But not just for the millions of high school students who act like lab rats trying to jump through your admissions hoops.

CATALINA

It stinks for the people who think they won't even be able to get in the door. Who think they aren't worthy. It even stinks for the people who wouldn't go to your college if you paid them a million dollars. It stinks for *everyone*. Because, HELLO!, an educated populace is actually a good thing for a democracy.

JADE

But all of you smarty pants in your fancy-dance universities care more about precious rankings than anything else.

*Chet appears, takes the paper from Jade and looks at it. Nah. He doesn't need a script. He crumples the paper.*

CHET

*(Deep breath.)* We can't keep talking about kids struggling...and doing nothing. We don't need killer resumes. We need a childhood that doesn't kill us. So, can you please, *please*, figure out a way to stop crushing the life out of us?

JADE

K, seniors! We gotta go!

BENJAMIN

Are we going to a party?

CATALINA

Try not to let the stress get to you cuz the day after high school ends...

JADE

Literally *no one cares what you did there.*

CHET

Let's go! The lazy river closes soon!

*Music blares. School's out. The students jet off—to the lazy river, to the future, to bigger and better things.*

**END OF PLAY**