CHARACTER LIST:

**Act one—**

PROFESSOR HAILSHAM: A youngish professor. Competent, but not overly formal. Any race, ethnicity, or gender.

**Act two—**

PAYTON: 20-year-old college student, female. Funny, casually self-assured. POC. Can be played by a woman or non-binary/genderqueer actor.

ASHER: 23-year-old recent college graduate, female (but butch). Shy, mind like a hurricane. Black or brown. Can be played by a woman or non-binary/genderqueer actor.

**Act three--**

DIANE: Late 30s, waitress and law school student, female. Quiet competence and swagger. Any race or ethnicity. Can be played by a woman or non-binary/genderqueer actor.

HUGO: Mid 40s, unemployed, male, German. Arrogant and sad. Can be played by an actor of any race, ethnicity, or gender.

SYLVIA: 42-year-old high-school English teacher and single mother, female. A bit manic and full of starlight. Any race or ethnicity. Can be played by a woman or non-binary/genderqueer actor.

HAILSHAM Side 1

Alright then, everyone. I hope you all had a good weekend, stayed dry, and all that. Let’s see… Your second paper is due a week from today, 5pm. So, probably about time to start thinking about which prompt you want to write on. I’d pick number 3 myself, but, well… I suppose that means you *shouldn’t* do number 3, since I’ll know exactly what paper I’d like to have written for it. But you’re free to choose. *(she chuckles to herself)*

Anyways, today we’ll be discussing the free will problem. *(she pulls out her notes as she talks. She won’t end up consulting them very much throughout)* It’s a thorny one—determinism, compatibilism, moral responsibility— All that good stuff. So please, ask questions if you have them. I’m serious. *(she pauses for a moment, gives the audience a look like, “yeah, I’m serious”).* But no asshole questions. Ask to understand, not to be seen asking a question. And do pay attention.

HAILSHAM Side 2

So, first off, why should we care about free will? Well, primarily because we’d all like to be free agents. We want to have control over our actions, we want to be able to make our own choices. It sounds sexy, right? Ooh, I *chose* to get out of bed, I *chose* to come to lecture instead of running off to the coast. Free will is the ability to, at least sometimes, perform free actions. And, for a lot of people, the notion that we have free will is foundational to morality.

Because everyone tends to agree that a person can’t be morally responsible for an action unless that action is free. Like, say, I’m locked in a room, and my daughter is outside, bleeding to death, yelling for my help. After the fact, you can’t blame me for not helping her, because I wasn’t *free* to do so. I *couldn’t* have done the right thing, so I can’t be expected to. Ought implies can, as they say. So, in a world where people don’t have free will, we also don’t seem to have moral responsibility. Which is troubling. We’d all be able to plead determinism at any given moment, like pleading insanity. “I couldn’t help but cheat on you honey, I was predetermined to do so!” or “I couldn’t help but plagiarize, professor!” On which note, I’ll respond—I can’t help but follow university policy and punish you for your plagiarism.

So, the question becomes, is free action possible?

PAYTON Side 1

So, we have this ritual. Did she tell you, already? Not just the prop thing. But a bathroom trip is like a, a beat in a scene. A pause to breathe, adjust your objectives. We both have brains that run like crazy, and we talk all over each other—okay, well, mostly she talks all over me—so sometimes it’s nice to pause and gather our thoughts. I stopped bringing my phone with me to the bathroom when we were dating. Didn’t need to—there was always so much to be thinking about, my brain buzzing in a thousand directions. It would have been unbearable, if it weren’t so goddamn fun. So, what am I thinking about this time? I guess I’m thinking about moving houses. And how it’s unmoored me from the past, when I’m already adrift in the present and directionless in the future. And how I wanted to talk about it earlier, but she talked right over me. And how I don’t really feel like doing the work to fix that, and that’s how I know it’s over.

*(ASHER returns from the bathroom. She’s taken off her sweater, and she’s wearing a sparkly button-down shirt underneath)*

PAYTON Side 2

It’s like latent heat. When water goes through state changes—from solid to liquid, from liquid to vapor—it needs to take in an extra amount of heat to break the bonds, an extra kick. So, if you graph temperature change vs. heat energy absorbed for water, there’s a little plateau in temperature change right at the boiling point. The water keeps taking in heat, without changing temperature. Then, BOOM, it’s vapor, and it starts heating up again. That extra heat that doesn’t show up as temperature change—it’s called latent heat. And, if how you feel about someone is like states of matter—I’m dating them and I like them a lot, vs. I *love* them—you get right up to the point where you basically *feel* like you love them, but then you need to take in some latent heat before you can change states.

PAYTON Side 3

*(She goes up to a wall, which is a mirror, and slowly raises her hand up to splay her palm on it)* The wall represents home, safety, stability. *(She turns slowly over her shoulder to see an image on the horizon)* And the image represents adventure, risk, challenge. The beloved. And the pull between the two is *almost* equal, but the image pulls a little stronger *(she steps away from the wall, walks slowly towards the image as she talks).* So you go out, have your love story, and then come home. I learned the exercise the summer I was falling in love with Charlotte. And that seemed right—love was an adventure, it was new. But I think good love, sustaining love, is both the image and the wall. And the problem for us—or for me—was that you were an adventure, an impetus for incredible, blossoming growth, but you weren’t safe. Ever since we broke up, though, I have the opposite problem. Nothing challenges me anymore. I feel stagnant, safe. Just seeing you for a few hours tonight has been… refreshing as Hell.

ASHER Side 1

In my head, there’s all these documents. But I lost them. So the office of my brain hired a new guy, whose job is just “find the Payton stuff.” And he’s been digging around in all these backrooms. Until he found this door and discovered there’s not just a cabinet of files missing somewhere, there’s, like, a whole secret department of Payton stuff. I don’t know who’s been funding it—probably embezzling, it doesn’t matter. But the Payton stuff is mostly repetitive, the same useless things you can’t say to your ex written over and over again. So he’s yelling at the secret basement department interns, “give me something I can use!” And this one sheepish intern gives him this document and it just says: Payton is important. Payton is so important. Not for me, and not for the world. Just like a miracle isn’t *for* anyone. It just is. And it’s important as a testament to what the world can create. I live in so much negativity, all the fucking time. I’m in this dismal tunnel. And knowing you’re out there… it’s the light. Not shining for me, just shining.

ASHER Side 2

We both love prop comedy—well, I mean, Payton loves prop comedy and I love… prop comedy too. That’s a funny story, the love thing, actually, if we have a minute… (She looks offstage after PAYTON. She’s set up, out of the objects, a little person on the chair) Okay, you be Payton *(to the prop person).* So we’re sitting in the dining hall, having lunch, back when we were friends *(she pulls up a chair for herself).* And I tell her I had a dream about her last night. She’s eating, and she’s put a slice of cake just on the plate with the other stuff, the sauces are all mixing together, I love that she’s not finicky about stuff like that, like some people are. She asks me about the dream. I tell her I had to write an acrostic poem about her, but, her last-name, Lawler, cuz, you know, dream logic. So, the first L is for laugh, cuz you make me laugh. And the a is for awesome, cuz you’re awesome. The w is for wonderful, cuz you’re wonderful. And the second L is for… and I stop talking, and she keeps eating, and she hasn’t caught on. That the second L is for “I love you”—you know, like when you dream about writing a poem for your *friend* about how you love her? So I say, “and the second L is for… laugh, again.” And she laughs, and she doesn’t catch me.

ASHER Side 3

So, the thing about Conor McGregor is that, I love *him*, because, I know, he’s an asshole, but he reminds me of myself, just a bit. Because, he’s not really an *asshole,* he’s playing a psychological game. And he’s *dedicated* to it. But I hate his fans. It’s all these Irish people, all these American Irish people, who voted for Trump, and just love Conor cuz he’s Irish, and hate Khabib because he’s the wrong type of foreign. I just, like, hate American Irish people? Because they have this memory of being oppressed, I *guess*, when they were immigrants, in like, the 1920s, so they think they can claim a right to it, but they’re also racist? So, it’s like, do you want to be people of color or not? So, I guess I hate them to give them what they want—some oppression.

DIANE Side 1

I wrote Simone this letter. The night before she left, she’s already finished packing all her shit, all the moving plans are in motion, so she heads to bed early. But I can’t sleep. So I’m up for hours, sitting in the bathroom, on the floor, and I’m writing this thing. This big sentimental letter about all that she’s taught me, and what I admire about her, and how I hope we find a way to hold onto each other, maybe even stay together. I finally get to sleep, and we wake up early, like 4am. Cuz her flight’s in the early afternoon, she’s gotta be at JFK by 11, but we want to have a morning together—cuz we fucking love each other, and respect each other, and nobody’s mad, she’s just gotta go her way and I’ve gotta go mine. Our lease is up.

So we go to the lower east side. We walk across the Brooklyn Bridge—which she’s never done, lived here for two years and I’ve been telling her, you’ve gotta walk the bridge, so we do it together that morning. Hand in hand, like nothing’s wrong. Big sweeping suspension bridge, sky’s still dark, and we’re walking towards Brooklyn, with the horizon just starting to brighten behind it. We talk a little, but mostly we’re quiet. We get to Brooklyn Bridge Park, and we sit, and look across the water at Manhattan, and listen to the birds wake up. And she looks beautiful, and sad. And I pull the letter out, I’m ready to give it to her, but… I stop. Cuz it’s just, deafeningly hopeful out. Sun is rising behind us, light spreading towards the Manhattan skyline, and the East river is deep and sloshing and self-satisfied, and she’s chasing her dreams and I’m chasing mine, and what’s a little heartbreak in the face of all that? So I don’t give her the letter. And I don’t give it to her at breakfast, and I don’t give it to her at the airport, and now it’s been almost a year and I haven’t mailed it to her.

DIANE Side 2

Let me tell you something about Sylvia. She *sees* people when she talks to them. Homeless guy on the street asks her for change, and she takes out her wallet, checks it, gives money if she has it, tells him to have a nice day, and means it. Waitstaff serves her, she reads their nametag. And when she brings a friend in here, or a date, and she’s sitting across the table from them, she becomes like a camera lens, focusing the whole room on the other person. She *sees* people. And you *feel* seen when you talk to her.

We met here, God, what was it now, 8 months ago? Back when I’d first started working the late-night shift. Musta been December. It was a quiet night. My exams were coming up—I’m gonna be a lawyer, decided a few years ago it wasn’t too late—so I had flash cards tucked in my apron, and I was flipping through them. Then the bell on the front door rings and she comes in out of the snow, hair all tangled and rebelling against hair ties, breathless, flustered, giddy as Hell, arms full of papers. I come over to the front desk to seat her, and she smiles at me like she knows me—not like she’s forgotten we haven’t met or thinks I’m someone else, she just smiles at me like she knows me. Or wants to know me. And maybe she does that to everyone, but it felt special.

HUGO Side 1

I lost her slowly to start with. Piece by piece, every Sunday night, for months, like clockwork. One minute, we’re talking, and the next, Elena lays down on the bedroom floor—can’t even make it to the bed—and starts having a visible, visceral panic attack, hands crushing down on her eyes, knees and elbows pointing up in submission towards the sky, about to cry if she doesn’t stop herself, about to tumble into the abyss if no one’s watching her. The woman who can make me laugh with one motion of her eyes. The woman whose footsteps up a staircase I can recognize by sound. Felled. I lay down next to her. A few feet away—because I know touch is sensitive. And she hasn’t been clear on what she needs—like I said, one minute we’re talking, and the next, this—so I don’t do anything, I just lay there. I lay there and I find out new things about our ceiling, trace the arc of cracked beige paint, visualize how the dome of the light fixture would shatter if I sent my fist through it.

And in a way, it’s clarifying. Whatever else was going on before that—my anger, the stickiness of my skin against my hair, the weight of deadlines— suddenly disappears. Elena needs me. My wife, who ties my ties for me, and loves American pop music, and knows how to cook only pancakes. She needs me. That’s the priority. That’s the important place to be. And it hurts like being gutted, but at least I can hear her breathing, still breathing, and maybe in a few minutes she’ll ask for my help and I’ll give to her what I can.

HUGE Side 2

I met this couple. Eliza and Edur. Eliza had spent her whole life in England. Lived in a little English town, teaching. No kids, no husband, all the way into her early forties, and she was happy. Happy enough. Then, she did the Camino. And when she arrived in Zubiri, that *week*, Edur had just finished building a farmhouse, and opened up his spare room for pilgrims to stay in. She was his fifth guest, or near that. And they shouldn’t have, because she had to walk so far the next day, but they stayed up all night together.

She said it was the way he rolled a cigarette—steady, like he had all the time in the world. He said it was the way she took her tea—no sugar, no milk, scalding. She stayed an extra day. Then another. She helped him when the donkey gave birth. Stayed one more day. Then she had to move on. Walked the Camino. And when she got to Santiago, she found letters there, a dozen, that he’d written while she’d walked. And when she went back to England, they kept writing to each other. And she knew, she *knew,* the great moment of her life, the miracle was happening, and she couldn’t let it slip by. It was undeniable. So she packed, and she moved to Zubiri. She’d been there 10 years when I met her, they have a son and a farm and a life together. And she couldn’t imagine her life any other way.

SYLVIA Side 1

I tell the doorman I’m going to the party in total shit German, and he grumbles, but probably thinks I’m pretty, because I am, so he buzzes me up. I get up to the party, and the walls are this pastel orange, and the room is ringed by thick tangles of fairy lights, abuzz against the winter darkness. I grab a drink, just one, just to heat up my insides. I’m clutching my coat in one hand, a beer in the other, chatting awkwardly in German with some people. And across the room, I see this asshole lean his whole upper-body out the window. He’s in this button-down shirt, no coat. He’s got one hand on the sill and the other’s reaching up towards the sky, and snow’s soaking through his nice shirt. I’m captivated watching this wonderful idiot about to catch pneumonia or fall to his death. And he leans back in, whips back around, and his eyes land right on me. It’s too late to look away, and fuck it, I’m 22, it’s Y2K, so I stare him down. He winks at me. Like we know each other.

And by the end of the night, we do. His name is Hugo. He goes to university in Berlin. He studies mathematics, but in his free time he writes poetry—in these overstuffed German lines that he recites to me with a lilting pride. He knows a lot about constellations and EU politics. He talks a little too much. And I remember, more than anything—more than the cigarette we shared, my first one, or our midnight kiss and the hasty scramble that followed it, or watching the sunrise from the balcony of his apartment—I remember the way he took me firmly by my shoulders and told me that if I wanted to be a writer, I should goddamn *write*, no excuses, because life is bitter and short and we have to light it up however we can. He made me promise.

He’s going to be so disappointed.

SYLVIA Side 2

You have this presence—and I’m only telling you this because you’re so damn sad over there with your, your wedding ring and your Camino, so don’t get excited. You make me want to… believe in things. You make leaps of faith look like, just, stepping over a puddle. You make me want to walk in the rain without an umbrella. I don’t know. It’s funny to me because, it’s like… you’ve been scouring the world for some kind of external stimulus, or something, to set you right again, when what would have really helped you would have been to meet yourself. Like if you’d just run into yourself in a coffee shop in Prague or something, BOOM, he would have looked at you and seen the good in you and given you the revelation that set you right back on your feet. *You’re* what you need, Hugo, not me, not the top of the Empire state building. You.

(She takes his hand across the table. For… emphasis? But she doesn’t pull away)

Doesn’t mean you’re not an asshole, mind you.

SYLVIA Side 3

Let me tell you about the snow, just for a minute. I’d seen it in movies, obviously. I don’t live under a rock. But in person it’s so… weightless. Insubstantial. You can barely feel a flake kiss your hand before it melts. It’s nothing, dressed up in white. But somehow all this nothing piles up and crushes a city. Like how hours of empty time teaching at a high-school suddenly add up to a life that’s fucking over.