

“A masterful adaptation of my book . . .”

—Chris Crutcher



THE SLEDDING HILL

By Chris Crutcher

Adapted for the stage by Jarrett Dapier

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In memory of Ray Hughes



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Characters

Billy Bartholomew—Our narrator, 14 years old. Dead. Remains on stage throughout the play.

Eddie Proffit—14 years old, a boy who recently lost his best friend and dad.

Reverend Sanford Tartar—Founder of Red Brick Church and teacher at Bear Creek High.

Mr. Nate Bartholomew—Billy's father, late 30s/early 40s.

John Proffit—Eddie's father, late 30s/early 40s.

Mrs. Evelyn Proffit—Eddie's mother, mid-30s.

Maxwell West—A member of Red Brick Church, early 40s. Challenger of *Chin Music*.

Montana West—Maxwell West's daughter, 16 years old. Piercings, chains, black clothing, ripped tights, black lipstick, more. Has an intensity and empathic quality that give her real allure. A junior at Bear Creek High.

Mackenzie Georges—President of Youth For Christ (YFC), 17 years old. A senior at Bear Creek High.

Chad Nash—14 years old, a member of YFC.

Mrs. Madison—Bear Creek High principal.

Ms. Ruth Lloyd—Very early 30s. Bear Creek High librarian and teacher of *Really Modern Literature*.

Rollie Mount—Bear Creek sheriff.

Chris Crutcher—Author of *Chin Music*, 60s.

Mr. Northcutt—President of the School Board.

Jeremy Godfrey—Local contractor, member of Red Brick Church

Mrs. Tartar (Momma)—Reverend Tartar's mom.

Elementary School Principal

Teen Chorus—4–6 actors who are 13–18 years old.

A Note on Casting

The Sledding Hill is intended to be performed by an all-teen cast (with the exception of the role of Chris Crutcher who should be played by an adult), or a cast that includes teens and adult actors. Anyone who undertakes this show should make a concerted effort to cast teens in the teen roles or young adult actors in their early twenties who are close to their own teen experience.

A Note on the Teen Chorus

Teen Chorus actors fill out ensemble scenes like Bible study classes, Youth For Christ meetings, Ms. Lloyd's classes, the church service, and the school board meeting. They also take part in the "ghostly siege" in Scene Ten and the "stark raving mad" business that opens Scene Eleven. Their lines, to be divided up by the director, are indicated by "Student" in the script. When a teacher character calls on a Teen Chorus member in any scene, the teacher should substitute the real actor's name for the name included here in the script.

Some Teen Chorus members are members of Youth For Christ, some don't go to church. Some support the book banning, some oppose, and some don't know what they think. Some attend Bible study classes and the basement readings of *Chin Music*. Be specific, but be creative.

In all-teen casts, the members of the Teen Chorus can also double as Rollie Mount, Mrs. Madison, Mrs. Tartar, Mr. Northcutt, and any of the smaller roles, if need be.



The Sledding Hill was originally performed in honor of Banned Books Week, October 2010, at the Evanston Public Library in Evanston, Illinois, by the all-teen cast pictured above. The production was directed by Jarrett Dapier (*top row, far right*), and featured Chris Crutcher (*top row, center*) as himself.

SCENE ONE

(During pre-show we see a large, flat object covered with a white sheet in the center of the stage. Otherwise, the space is basically empty.)

At curtain, music plays as four performers walk slowly from the four corners of the room toward the covered object. A slow procession in dim light. When they reach the sheet, they each lift a corner, keeping it spread between them and they move away toward the back of the house, revealing a table or some sort of flat on the ground, a head peeking out from beneath it (indicated by a Seattle Mariners cap half-pinned under the object). Lights fade to black. In the dark we hear a startlingly loud BANG! and the lights shift abruptly up to a white kind of brightness, house lights on. Billy Bartholomew is standing near the object. He sees us, takes us in. He speaks to us.)

BILLY *(pointing at the body pinned under the object):* That's me.

Well, I mean, it was me. Billy Bartholomew, smartest kid in class, arguably the smartest kid in school. But I'm dead now *(indicating body)*, as you can see.

The good news is: there's no pain. After I kicked over that pile of Sheet-rock on myself in Bear Creek High's auditorium, which, now that I think about it maybe wasn't so smartest-kid-in-the-class of me, I look to a spot right beside me and then suddenly I'm *in* that spot standing and looking *back* at the body of a seriously expired Billy Bartholomew, and I'm thinking, "Daaaang, that was dumb."

When you first die, you don't know you're dead. You know something's way different, but you've been playing the Earthgame for so long and with such intensity, it's hard to realize you've just stepped out of it.

But, the longer you're dead the clearer it becomes what the deal is: that your Earth life, which seemed to last a *long* fourteen years, wasn't even a subatomic *blip* in eternal time.

Being dead is like being truly alive—you can haul yourself around eternity at soul-boggling speeds. Earth scientists consider the speed of light to be the ultimate speed. We travel at the speed of imagination.

(We hear a door open offstage.)

EDDIE *(calling out, looking for Billy):* Billy?

BILLY (to us): Here comes Eddie. (Walks away from body to watch.)

EDDIE (calling out): Billy? BILLY!

(Eddie walks in looking for Billy, sees body, freezes.)

BILLY: That's Eddie Proffit. He was my best friend. We were supposed to go running together to the hot springs the morning I croaked, but when I didn't show he came looking for me. Mine is the second dead body he's discovered in a month. Just a few weeks before this, he found his dad, dead as a doornail, his head nearly taken off his body by an exploding lock ring on a tire he was repairing in the garage he owned. (Sudden explosion sound.)

(On the explosion, Eddie unfreezes. He panics, attempts to free Billy's body from the Sheetrock, dislodges the body enough to turn it, sees Billy's ghastly face, recoils. Crawls animal-like away from the body, sits on floor. He is emitting an ungodly, profound whine. He freezes holding his knees to his chest.)

BILLY (walking toward him): Eddie just went into a dark room in his Earth-game; two important guys in his life dead in one month, and he found them both. (Standing next to Eddie.) It will be awhile before anyone hears another word from Eddie Proffit.

But, I'm getting ahead of myself. If any of what I'm telling's gonna make any sense, I've gotta tell you about the un-mute Eddie. The Eddie who couldn't shut up if he tried.

(Lights crossfade. Transition music. Ensemble creates classroom scene. Billy picks up the Mariners cap and puts it on. He will wear this throughout the show.)

SCENE TWO

(Sunday-school class at Red Brick Church. A group of fifth-graders.)

BILLY *(speaking to us)*: When we were in grade school most kids thought Eddie Proffit was stupid because he asked questions no one else would think of.

(Billy sits next to Eddie and joins the class.)

REV. TARTAR: And Jonah sat miserable, cold and alone in the belly of the whale for three days and nights—

EDDIE *(interrupting)*: What kind of protective rain gear did Jonah have?

(Nervous laughter from class.)

REV. TARTAR: Excuse me?

EDDIE: My dad told me the digestive juices in a human stomach are strong enough to dissolve a jawbreaker like a sugar cube in hot water. A whale's gotta have at least as strong digestive juices as us, right? So he must've had some sort of special rain gear.

BILLY: It's human nature to think if you weren't the person to think of something, it must be dumb. But Eddie knows things.

REV. TARTAR: God was taking care of Jonah. He was showing him mercy, Edward.

EDDIE: Or did God just make the whale's stomach acids not work? That's no fair to the whale. I mean, even if he's gonna spit Jonah up whole in a day or two, there has to be a bunch of other stuff down there he needs to digest. I mean, whales just suck in *everything*: big fish, little fish, plankton, weeds— *(Billy clamps his hand over Eddie's mouth to stop him.)*

REV. TARTAR *(angry, glaring, standing)*: Edward, being a true Christian is about having faith. It's disrespectful to question lessons from the Bible. What you hear in this room is true and I don't want to hear another word.

(Eddie nods. Tartar and class freeze.)

BILLY: That's Reverend Tartar, another major player in this story. Eddie and I have been waiting for the wrath of Tartar our whole lives, with significant trepidation. The Reverend is a fire-and-brimstone, eye-for-an-eye kind of preacher whose idea of discipline is straight out of a Stephen King novel. Not only does he run Red Brick Church, but he's a teacher at the high school, too. He's everywhere.

REV. TARTAR (*scary*): Not. Another. Word.

BILLY: Eddie isn't stupid, it's just that his mind constantly bounces from one thing to the other pretty much however it wants, and long before he's finishing up one thought, he's on to something else. Flash-forward three weeks later.

(*Children in class switch positions in classroom rapidly.*)

REV. TARTAR: And Moses stretched out his hand and the Lord divided the waters of the Red Sea and he made the sea *dry* land so that the children of Israel could—

EDDIE (*interrupting, as before*): Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, wait, I could see how the *fish* could just like swim off to the side and stay where the water is, but what about the crustaceans and stuff that lived on the bottom? It had to take a while for the Israel guys to get across, right? I mean, it's a *sea*, not just like a small lake. Wouldn't the animals that lived on the bottom like dry up or drown in the air?

REV. TARTAR (*his temperature rising*): God takes care of all his creatures, Edward.

EDDIE: Yeah, I know you said that—and I won't even count the chipmunk my mom killed with the car on the way to school Friday—but did he move the animals over so they could still be *under* the water, or did he just make it okay for them to be dry?

REV. TARTAR: Edward—

EDDIE: Oh, he must've moved them over or all the Israel guys would be stepping on them. (*Beat.*) 'Course that would give them a lot better traction.

(*Laughter.*)

REV. TARTAR: THAT'S IT! (*Storming Eddie, furious.*) I'm not going to tolerate this blasphemy in here! Get up! GET UP!!! (*Lifting Eddie roughly out of his seat, he walks Eddie to the front of the class, turns him around, raises his arms up in crucifixion, places books on Eddie's hands, and lifts his arms to keep them straight.*)

REV. TARTAR: Keep 'em straight! (*Bending down very close to Eddie's face.*)
Did your dad put you up to this?

EDDIE: Up to what?

REV. TARTAR: These foolish questions!

EDDIE: I thought you said there was no such thing as a foolish question.

REV. TARTAR: He *is* putting you up to this.

(*Eddie shakes his head vigorously. They freeze.*)

SCENE THREE

(The gas station gets set up at one end of the room. Mr. Proffit enters, gets to work on a car.)

BILLY: Tartar would rather the questions came from Eddie than Mr. Proffit, because Eddie's dad was the smartest gas station owner in five states and the only one in town who challenged Tartar to his face. They used to have weekly arguments at the gas pumps about all sorts of God-related business. Drove Tartar nuts, especially since he couldn't make Mr. Proffit stand with his arms out like he did with Eddie.

(Reverend Tartar unfreezes, and approaches the station where Mr. Proffit is working. Eddie slowly slumps down and watches scene sitting off to the side.)

MR. PROFFIT: It's proven scientific fact, Tartar!

REV. TARTAR: Oh, is it now? Last time I checked it was called the *theory* of evolution.

MR. PROFFIT: I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about you going around telling your classes that the Earth is only 6,000 years old. That man walked with the *dinosaurs*!

REV. TARTAR: Why is it so impossible for you to accept?

MR. PROFFIT: Because it's been *proved* otherwise. Dinosaur fossils have been dated at more than a hundred million years! They found bones in Telluride 148 million years old last week!

REV. TARTAR: And we believe those calculations are mistaken. Genesis 6 tells of a flood that covered the Earth—

MR. PROFFIT *(shaking his head)*: —Fairytale—

REV. TARTAR: —Excuse me—that covered the Earth—

MR. PROFFIT: You're like a reverse Jesus—blinding those who can see just fine.

REV. TARTAR *(getting steamed, walking away)*: 'Bye, John.

MR. PROFFIT (*calling after him*): Maybe you should quit worrying about my boy's IQ and spend more time with *scientific numbers*!

REV. TARTAR (*calling back*): Idolatry! (*Exits.*)

(*Mr. Proffit goes back to work on the car and freezes as Mr. Bartholomew enters, working.*)

BILLY: If people underestimated Mr. Proffit because he ran a garage, it was the same story with my dad. My whole life everyone acted like it was a minor miracle that I got good grades and didn't drool on myself because my dad's the school janitor. It's human nature to define a person by his job, but that's a mistake in the case of our dads. In fifth grade, when my dad discovered Eddie scored a sixty-five on his IQ test he knew it couldn't be right.

(*Addressing Eddie who is still sitting.*)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: What happened, bud?

EDDIE: Nothing! I was answering the questions and then I started seeing what a neat pattern I was making filling in those little ovals.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: So you weren't reading the questions?

EDDIE: I wasn't even keeping it to one answer a row! Did you see my answer sheet? It looks way cool.

BILLY: Eddie was about to get placed in all special-ed all the time, so my dad went to the school principal.

(*Mr. Bartholomew moves across the stage and addresses ensemble member who enters.*)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: He scored a *sixty-five* without reading the questions!

PRINCIPAL: Sorry, Nate. (*Exits. Mr. Bartholomew picks up copy of the test.*)

BILLY: But she was all into protocol and all out of taking advice from the school janitor, so my dad found a copy of the IQ test and had Eddie take it again.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW (*showing him the test*): Look, just answer five questions at a time, bud. We'll take a break to talk or play wall-ball after every

five. *(Throws a ball against the wall and catches it.)* Just five at a time. 'K?
(Eddie gets to work.)

BILLY: Eddie added a hundred points to his score that day. And when my dad showed his dad the second test, they made sure he didn't attend any special-ed classes.

Unfortunately, no one ever knew about the second test. To the good folks of Bear Creek, Idaho, Eddie Proffit was still an idiot.

(John Proffit, Mr. Bartholomew exit.)

SCENE FOUR

(Eddie sprints past Billy, calling back. Billy watches him run.)

EDDIE: Come on, man! What are you doin'? Let's go!

BILLY *(to us)*: We used to run everywhere. I started noticing that when we'd run Eddie could stay on any subject, and the longer we went the more focused he was. We started holding our longest conversations with each other on the move.

(Eddie has lapped back around, falls into step with Billy. They start to jog together and horse around with each other.)

EDDIE: Naaaah, Canada sucks.

BILLY: *What!?! NEVER SAY THAT AGAIN OR YOU WILL FIND YOURSELF IN THE MOST PAINFUL POSITION.*

EDDIE: It's a bunch of hockey goons and maple syrup farmers.

BILLY: So? Where would you be without maple syrup? Where would your waffles be?

EDDIE: Right on my plate, dude. I like my Eggos dry.

BILLY: Ugh, Eggo waffles are disgusting.

EDDIE: You're disgusting!

(He shoves Billy, who attempts to shove him back. Laughing.)

BILLY: Watch out, dude, I'm gonna fall in the ditch!

EDDIE: Sayonara, butt-dust!

(They run in silence.)

BILLY: They make great cheese there, too. Canada.

(Silence.)

EDDIE *(thoughtful, quiet)*: I heard they've got just as many guns as us, but, like, ten times less shooting deaths.

BILLY: Guns don't kill people, Americans do.

EDDIE: Not funny. *(Pause.)* Sometimes I wonder who we know will die from a gun.

BILLY: Probably someone.

EDDIE: Guns are like Pandora's *Box*, dude. Think about it: all that evil that shot out when she opened that thing. Like envy and fear—

BILLY: —greed—

EDDIE *(nodding)*: —They've all got the gun for help. No contest.

(They finish running, stand catching their breath.)

EDDIE: Hope only steps up after the damage is done. Think about it.

(Eddie goes silent, paces around, thinking.)

BILLY: He seemed like a way different kid on those runs. I tried to tell our teacher that if she'd just let him pace the room at an accelerated gait, he'd be the smartest kid in class.

EDDIE *(taking off)*: Ready to go again?

BILLY *(to us)*: She didn't bite.

(Eddie exits, Billy stays.)

SCENE FIVE

(John Proffit working. He sets up to change a tire. Billy's hat should be on the floor by the Sheetrock as before.)

BILLY: The morning Eddie found his dad we were supposed to go running. We weren't sure where, maybe the hot springs, but before we could meet up, Eddie had to deliver some lunch to his dad down at his garage. Proffit's Chevron is the only place in town that fixes truck and heavy-equipment tires and Mr. Proffit's been doing just that twelve hours a day.

(Mr. Proffit begins to replace a busted tire. His actions should be rhythmic, repetitive, precise.)

That day, he forgot to let the air out of one of the tires.

(Huge explosion sound. John Proffit is thrown back, killed instantly.)

(Eddie enters, sees his dad, freezes.)

EDDIE: This *can't* be.

BILLY: That's what Eddie's thinking.

EDDIE: No, no, no, no, no way, *no*.

BILLY: His dad has told him eight jillion times—

MR. PROFFIT *(sitting up)*: You *always* make sure the air pressure is zero before breaking it down. Eddie, are you listening? When it's repaired place it in the wire cage before airing up. Or, if you haven't got a cage, turn it *face down* on the concrete. If the lock ring isn't locked, it might as well be a bomb.

It'll take your head right off your body.

(Mr. Proffit lies back down. Eddie slowly exits garage, disoriented. He meets up with Billy outside.)

BILLY: You alright?

(Eddie nods. They start running.)

BILLY: Hot springs?

EDDIE: Sure.

(After a moment, we hear sirens in the distance.)

BILLY: *(with hat back on)* Dude, sirens. Let's go back and see.

EDDIE: Naw. Mrs. Madden probably just set her hamburgers on fire again.

BILLY *(laughing)*: Yeah.

EDDIE: Let's keep going.

(Eddie exits running. Billy watches him go.)

BILLY *(to us)*: Not a word about what happened. Because Eddie knows it isn't real.

(Blackout. Music.)

SCENE SIX

(In the dark we hear a door open and Eddie calling out “Billy? Billy? BILLY!” We are back at the top of the show. When lights come up, Eddie is frozen staring at Billy’s body, Billy is standing back and watching in same position as at top of the show.)

BILLY *(to us)*: Flash forward three weeks. Another lifeless body waiting for Eddie Proffit.

(Eddie panics as before, attempts to free Billy’s body from the Sheetrock, dislodges the body enough to turn it, strains, pulling, freezes in mid-strain.)

BILLY: Right here. This is the moment I decide to stick around.

(Eddie unfreezes, scrambles back, holds knees to chest as before. Freezes.)

BILLY: I could take right off into the universe, but once I see my friend struggling so hard to get my abandoned body out from under all that weight, my sense of connection to him draws me to stay. I wonder if I can help him deal with what seems to him like a hurricane of calamity in his life.

(Billy approaches Eddie. Stands close to him.)

BILLY: If you could have felt the pounding of his heart . . .

(Eddie unfreezes, sprints out.)

BILLY: So, I hang around a second, universe time.

SCENE SEVEN

(Sound underneath the following two scenes. Eddie running frantically.)

BILLY: Eddie runs for hours, but he can't erase what he's seen. His mind is bouncing like a superball in a racquetball court and one thought scoots across his brain: he'd better tell my dad.

(Eddie sprints out, ensemble enters with flashlights, creates street scene outside of Mr. Bartholomew's place. Night.)

BILLY: By the time he gets to my dad's house, of course, the whole town is humming with the news.

(The sheriff is standing with a shocked Mr. Bartholomew and one or two neighbors. Eddie enters, sees crowd. Reverend Tartar mutters, "Here he is," and they all look up. Eddie tries to flee.)

SHERIFF *(booming)*: EDDIE!

(Eddie stops short.)

BILLY *(to us)*: Rollie Mount, the sheriff.

SHERIFF: Hey, man. You OK?

(Eddie stares.)

SHERIFF *(approaching him the way you would a rabid dog)*: Look, I know you're real messed up right now, but I gotta ask a few questions . . .

(Eddie nods.)

SHERIFF: You were the one found Billy?

(Eddie nods.)

SHERIFF: Under the Sheetrock?

(Eddie nods.)

SHERIFF: Did you try to pull him out?

(Eddie nods.)

SHERIFF: Was he still alive when you were trying to pull him out?

(Bombshell. Eddie opens his mouth to answer, but can't speak. Eddie runs back the way he came, gets cut off by two cops standing there, runs the other way.)

MRS. PROFFIT/MR. BARTHOLOMEW/SHERIFF MOUNT: Eddie! EDDIE!
HANG ON, MAN! EDDIE!!!

(Mrs. Proffit gives chase, tailed by the sheriff. The others disperse. Mr. Bartholomew hangs back, alone on stage.)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW *(calling after them)*: EDDIE!!!

SCENE EIGHT

BILLY: That night, Eddie not only went silent, but slightly deranged with grief.

(Eddie rushes into his bedroom, slams door, begins pacing, searching his room. Mrs. Proffit in the hall outside.)

MRS. PROFFIT: Eddie! Please open the door, Eddie. Eddie? Please don't do this, my boy, please. *(Crying.) My boy, my boy!!!* Don't be alone right now, Eddie! *(Tries door, locked.)* EDDIE!!!

(Eddie paces the room, deranged. He tears apart his desk, then his closet looking for something. He finds it. Duct tape. He wraps the tape around his mouth and around his head, looping several times. He slaps himself. He punches his head to stop the thoughts. He collapses on his bed, heaving through his nostrils, nearly asphyxiated.)

(Lights slowly to black as he lies there.)

SCENE NINE

(Dinner at the Proffits'—Eddie, Mrs. Proffit, and Reverend Tartar.)

BILLY: Flash forward two months.

REV. TARTAR: Getting ready for school, Edward?

(Eddie is silent.)

REV. TARTAR: Going to be a big shift.

(Eddie is silent.)

REV. TARTAR: Time to start with a clean slate, huh? Rejoin the world.

(Eddie is silent.)

BILLY: After the dying it seems to Eddie like it's All Tartar, All the Time. Once high school starts he'll have Tartar as a teacher every day, as a preacher at church on Wednesday and Sunday mornings when he goes with his mom, and Tartar has started coming to his house two or three times a week to help Eddie's mom with her "grieving process."

REV. TARTAR: This selective mute thing is not serving you well.

BILLY: Tartar sits where Eddie's dad once sat. It is not a good way for Eddie to spend dinnertime.

MRS. PROFFIT: I wish you'd talk with the Reverend, Eddie.

(Eddie is silent.)

REV. TARTAR *(impatient)*: Consider what your silence is doing to your mother.

(Eddie is silent.)

BILLY: It would be hard to articulate how much Eddie misses his dad. Before my dad helped him out, it was his own dad who made sure Eddie would not accept the mantle of dumbest kid in our class.

(John Proffit enters.)

MR. PROFFIT *(to Eddie at table)*: When teachers say you have a disorder, they're full of it. Your mind just works differently. You'll be an astronaut while the rest of us are balancing other people's taxes or teaching at Bear Creek High.

(Eddie laughs.)

MR. PROFFIT: Speaking of, let's go catch the stars and coyotes, huh? Evelyn! We'll be out back!

(They walk out back together, John Proffit points to Orion's belt and Eddie looks up, listening. The stars surround them.)

REV. TARTAR: Edward.

(Eddie is still out back with his dad.)

REV. TARTAR: *Edward.*

(Silence. Let this last. Reverend Tartar and Mrs. Proffit exchange glances.)

REV. TARTAR *(his patience exhausted)*: EDWARD!

(The force of Tartar's voice returns Eddie slowly to his seat at the table, John Proffit exits.)

REV. TARTAR: I asked if you knew what this was doing to your mother.

(Eddie looks back to where his dad was, the spot is empty.)

MRS. PROFFIT: Reverend, I'll be okay.

REV. TARTAR: I know you will, Evelyn, but you're losing your boy here, too.

MRS. PROFFIT: It's God's plan.

(Eddie stands suddenly, furious.)

REV. TARTAR: Sit down, Edward.

MRS. PROFFIT: Eddie?

(Eddie walks out of the room and into his bedroom, slams door. Mrs. Proffit puts her head in her hands and Reverend Tartar puts his hand on her shoulder.)

(Lights crossfade, they exit.)

SCENE TEN

BILLY: That night, after Mrs. Proffit and the Reverend go off to church, Eddie begins to feel as though he's under ghostly siege.

(As Eddie lies on his bed, his room begins to alter slightly. The ensemble runs through, creating small noises, shifting furniture, changing the air around Eddie. They whisper, and he becomes progressively more disoriented and terrified.)

BILLY: He's got major heebie-jeebies. All alone in his room, he begins to hear things—the scratching of nails at the window, the rustling of clothes in his closet. He can't shake the feeling of terror crawling up his spine. The lightning outdoors doesn't help any.

(Flash of lightning, thunder. Eddie jumps. He's deranged. He walks over to close the blinds in his window. The lightning flashes and we see a distorted version of Billy's face framed outside Eddie's window. Eddie screams bloody murder. The effect of this sequence should be claustrophobic, surprising, terrifying.)

EDDIE: BILLY?!?!? WHAT THE HELL??? LEAVE ME ALONE, MAN!

BILLY: Now, you gotta know that ghoulish face in the window isn't me, but the product of stress and trauma in Eddie's head. After the face in the window, he starts hearing the shuffling of clothes in his closet and it's all over for him.

(We hear the shuffling of clothes, hangers clattering.)

EDDIE: GO BACK! GO BACK! GO BACK!

(Clap of thunder, Eddie screams, dives into bed, buries his head in the pillows and wraps himself in a cocoon of blankets. Another clap of thunder, and Reverend Tartar stands in the doorway. Watches for a moment.)

REV. TARTAR: Edward?

(Eddie catches his breath sharply.)

REV. TARTAR: Your mother heard shouting.

(Reverend Tartar walks into room, slowly.)

She tells me you've been in some distress. She thought it might be the kind of problem I could be of help with, though it was my idea to come to your room.

(Gentle.) I can see how agitated you are. You know, you might have avoided all this had you accompanied us to church tonight. But of course that's your choice.

Anyway, she says she's heard you roaming the house at night and you're having unsettling dreams. She's heard you whimpering in your sleep.

May I?

(This is not a question. Eddie does not respond. Tartar sits.)

REV. TARTAR: I'm aware many of your friends have been baptized. For some reason you haven't taken the step.

Edward, I believe God is sending you an important message with these terrors you're going through. It may very well be that the heavenly Father is telling you that if you turn your life over to Him, your fears will subside.

In our church you are required to testify before the congregation prior to baptism. I have to say that, until you decided to cease oral communication, you were the most articulate young man of your age I've ever encountered. Along with Billy, of course. With your mother's permission, I went back into your elementary school records and, though your grades suggest otherwise, I believe you were working three to five years ahead of your grade.

(Eddie is listening.)

I think if you put your mind to it, you could testify rather handily. Once you accept the Lord into your life, I guarantee you'll begin to understand.

(Reverend Tartar stands.)

I'll be having dinner here this weekend, thanks to your mother's generosity. I want you to decide by then. I think your life would be much easier. Your mother's would, too. I think you owe her that.

(He exits.)

BILLY: Eddie would love to stop the mounting terror, but to go along with Tartar feels like it would be a betrayal of his dad, and a betrayal of me. He can't stop the thoughts from rushing through his head.

(Eddie lies back; a collection of figures quickly appears around him, speaking very fast.)

SHERIFF: Was he still alive, when you were trying to pull him out?

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Just five questions at a time, bud.

MR. PROFFIT: The Milky Way is an awesome sight, isn't it?

BILLY *(pulling out a Milky Way bar)*: Dude, I love Milky Way.

Sheriff/Mr. Bartholomew/Mr. Proffit/Billy lean in above Eddie's face and repeat their lines simultaneously and repeatedly, then stop at once and exit. In the silence, Eddie drifts off to sleep. Billy remains, watching.)

BILLY: This is my chance.

Here's the deal. I can't interfere. What I *can* do is "bump" Eddie a little from out here in the beyond. You see, there's a microminisecond when his brain is not bouncing—during the slow heartbeat of sleep and when he runs long distances usually—when I can bump him. *(Lifts Eddie's bed at an angle, Eddie slides out, stands disoriented, but not afraid.)* I do it because the one thing that's true out here as it is in the Earthgame is *connection*. Connection is love. Staying connected with Eddie Proffit is as good for me as it is for him, because love is as true on Earth as it is in the farthest reaches of the universe.

So I go for it.

(Eddie turns and sees Billy standing at his bed, which is now a sledding hill.)

BILLY: Okay if I go down with you?

EDDIE: I thought you were dead.

BILLY: I am.

EDDIE: What are you doing here?

BILLY: I'm going sledding, dummy. If you'll let me go down with you.

EDDIE: Didn't you bring your sled?

BILLY: I'm dead, man. Dead kids don't have sleds.

(They push off and go down. Two pairs of actors enter quickly and when they reach the sledding hill walk slowly past the boys holding objects like large tree branches, bushes, and sticks to give the appearance of travel. The final pair pulls a white sheet that they wash over Billy and Eddie to indicate hitting the bottom of the snowy hill. This should be an eerie, strange sight with music.)

BILLY: That was fun. Let's do it again.

EDDIE *(moving backward to his bed, getting in)*: You ever see my dad?

BILLY: No. Want me to look for him?

(Eddie snaps awake, the sledding hill disappears, Billy withdraws into shadows. Eddie is alone. He lies there breathing, sits up. He's losing his mind, isn't he? He walks to the window, looks out. Walks to the bookshelf, picks up the Bible. Sits down, begins to flip through.)

(Fade to black.)

SCENE ELEVEN

(Eddie running. The ensemble runs one-by-one past Eddie, wearing masks that distort their faces. There are loud noises that shake him.)

BILLY: After that night, Eddie thinks he's going stark raving mad. He begins seeing me in window reflections and hearing me rooting around in his closet at night. Now, you gotta know, it's not me doing this to him. My bump in the dream was real, but this horror show stuff? That's all Eddie. But, he doesn't know that, and it makes what Tartar said about God and terrors seem almost sensible. It's why he's adding three evenings to his All Tartar channel for baptism and confirmation classes. He needs this craziness out of his life, and fast.

(Eddie exits. Tartar's teen Bible class is set up by three or four teen chorus members.)

REV. TARTAR *(entering)*: Alright, I trust you all took to your Bibles this week and read Genesis 4—

(Eddie enters.)

BILLY: Mr. Proffit! Nice surprise. *(Pause.)* I take it you've come around to what we discussed the other night?

(Eddie nods.)

REV. TARTAR: Wonderful. Class, you all know Edward Proffit.

(A couple "Hey Eddies" go around.)

REV. TARTAR: Are you going to grace us with words this evening?

(Eddie shakes his head.)

REV. TARTAR: Remember, testifying requires the use of your vocal cords, Edward.

(Eddie nods.)

REV. TARTAR: Alright, you know the rules, I won't bend them. Take a seat.

(Eddie sits.)

REV. TARTAR (*energized by his victory*): Alright, crack open those Bibles! The story of Cain and Abel. If you remember, Cain kills Abel out of jealousy and what does God do?

STUDENT: Puts a mark on Cain.

REV. TARTAR: Correct, Faye. But, what kind of mark?

STUDENT 2: I don't think we said.

REV. TARTAR: We didn't. I'm wondering if anyone knows.

STUDENT 3: Ummmmm . . . was it like a mole or a birthmark?

STUDENT 2: A tattoo?

REV. TARTAR: No, none of those things; (*about tattoo*) it was a more significant mark than that.

STUDENT: Like a mask?

REV. TARTAR: Nope. Remember, this is a mark that must last through the ages.

STUDENT 3: So, what is it?

REV. TARTAR: It's dark skin. African-Americans wear the mark of Cain for us.

BILLY: *WHOA!*

(*Eddie stands up.*)

REV. TARTAR: Edward?

(*Eddie stares him down freaked out, then slowly shakes his head, smiling sadly, and walks out of the room. Ensemble exits classroom.*)

SCENE TWELVE

(Eddie running, furious.)

BILLY *(to us)*: My man is seriously worked up. In his anger, Eddie forgets I'm dead and before he knows it, he's standing in front of my dad's house, ready to unload what's bouncing through his head on me—the real me, not the zombie—and get me into a serious strategy session to bring the reverend down.

(Eddie knocks on Mr. Bartholomew's door. He's red-faced, so angry he's crying.)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW *(opening the door)*: Eddie?

(The memory that Billy is gone floods into him, he realizes what he's done, and stands there staring, breathing heavily.)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: You okay, guy?

(Eddie shakes his head.)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Me either. Wanna come in?

EDDIE *(blurting)*: I miss him so much! I need to talk to him! I need to *talk!* There's no one to talk to now my dad's gone and Billy's gone. *Jesus, everything's so freakin' out of control, and I NEED FOCUS. (Getting really worked up.)* I can't understand what's happening to me and how the world works. I mean how can people just BE there one day and then NOT be there the next, just GONE? I can't handle it! And I feel like I need to just keep shutting up my stupid mouth and keep watching everything so I can figure this out, but I can't do it anymore, I can't keep stopping, I need to NOT STOP.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Did something happen?

EDDIE: Tartar's Bible class! I went, I tried! I *tried* to sit and listen, but I couldn't even last five minutes in there because right away Tartar's telling us about the mark of Cain and I'm thinking, "I can do this, I'll just sit and listen to a story and it will be OK," when what does Tartar up and say? Before my seat is even warm he says, "there are people today who carry the dark mark God put on Cain and those people are African-Americans!" THEIR DARK SKIN IS THE MARK OF CAIN!!!

(Mr. Bartholomew does not move.)

EDDIE: I mean, no wonder my dad always fought with Tartar! If God made Cain *black* because he committed fratricide He must have meant the mark to *embarrass* and *shame* anybody who wore it all down through eternity. Like (*God voice*), “Here’s the deal, Cain, since you offed your brother I’m gonna make everyone down your line of the family eat dooky because of what you did.” Perfectly good and innocent people will live their lives with this mark, making them basically guilty of a murder some guy who lived, like, seven thousand years ago committed. It doesn’t make any sense! And what’s God so mad about anyway? Cain only murdered one person! What about Jeffrey *Dahmer*? That dude killed a whole bunch of people and ATE them. What about him? Where’s his mark?

(Eddie’s shaking his head.)

I bet that’s how white people let themselves have slaves and wouldn’t let blacks sit at lunch counters with them and made them pee in different toilets and bombed their churches and killed their girls! PEOPLE CAN MAKE EXCUSES FOR ANYTHING! IT’S SICK!!!

(He’s finally all ranted out. He stands there catching his breath. Pause.)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Can I assume you’ve resumed oral communication?

(Eddie looks around, realizes he’s still on the front porch.)

EDDIE: Only to you. Please? I’m not ready to talk to anyone else. Only to you, okay?

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Scout’s honor.

(They move inside.)

EDDIE: I mean, I just don’t get how someone who thinks like that can get away with being a teacher.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: There are good teachers and bad teachers, bud.

EDDIE: Yeah, well he’s a bad teacher.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: You won’t get any argument from me. But, you can’t say that out loud around here.

EDDIE: No kidding.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: So, now what?

EDDIE: Well, I'm not going back to that class. I'd rather get pelted in the nuts with skee-balls.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: I don't blame you. Did you tell him that?

EDDIE: No. I just ran. I'm surprised I didn't throw up on my way out.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Hm. (*Silence.*) I went to his church in high school, you know.

EDDIE: Yeah. Wait, I thought you two hated each other.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: We did. But, I mean, I've always *loved* spy stories. So . . . I went to his church and I listened.

EDDIE: I don't know how you could stomach it.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: It was hard, but it actually sorta helped.

(*Pause.*)

EDDIE: Wait, what are you saying?

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: What if you went back?

(*Eddie shakes his head, starts to protest.*)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Hear me out. What if you could pretend you left because you weren't feeling well, go back and just . . . listen. Know your enemy. You might learn something you can use later.

EDDIE: Like what?

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: I don't know, you'd have to go to find out. On the plus side it'd keep everybody off your back, which is key. Look, I don't like it any better than you that no one leaves you alone in this town if you're not a Red Bricker—

EDDIE: —Seriously—

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: —But there it is. It'll shut people up, you're doing what they want, and they can't argue.

EDDIE (*seriously skeptical*): But, I'm a spy.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Right. And if you run across something that seems to need a dad, or a friend, you can run it by me.

(*Looking squarely at Eddie, tears in his eyes.*)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Look, buddy, I know I can't take the place of your dad, and you can't take the place of Billy for me, but I know you're not making such a go of it with your mom, and I miss my boy like crazy. Maybe we can stand in for each other? An alliance.

(*Eddie feels a rush of relief. Nods vigorously.*)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Alright, now get out of here. School tomorrow!

EDDIE (*rolling his eyes*): Yeah, great.

(*Eddie starts to go.*)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Oh, and, Eddie? You want to stay mute as long as you're in those classes. Tartar'll smoke you out in a minute. Seriously. You and I can have a time every day and you can talk all you want then. 'K?

EDDIE (*nodding*): Thanks.

(*Eddie runs off. Lights crossfade.*)

SCENE THIRTEEN

(In the transition, a high school classroom is assembled, and some students take seats at their desks, others mill around. Eddie enters and looks for a seat. Finds one near the back.)

BILLY: If you could somehow harness the power of the relief that Eddie felt that night after finally being able to talk to someone he trusts, you could power the lights at Safeco Field where the Mariners play from here 'til all get out. And Eddie had more relief coming his way the very next morning: his first day of ninth grade at Bear Creek High.

(Ruth Lloyd enters, addresses class.)

MS. LLOYD: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Hope everyone had a good summer and all that. You have signed up for *Really Modern Literature*, where the only requirement is that you read books by authors who are still alive. Can you imagine that? Did you know there were authors who are still alive and some of them aren't white males! *(She makes a shocked face, the class laughs, including Billy.)*

BILLY: Ms. Lloyd is the school librarian. This is her only class she teaches, and she puts everything into it. Eddie and I were going to take it together, and, I guess we still sort of are. I'm definitely coming with him to this class every day.

(Billy sits next to Eddie.)

MS. LLOYD: If you want to read fifteen books by Stephen King, you can read fifteen books by Stephen King, though I wouldn't recommend it because his books are loooong. John Grisham, Jason Reynolds, Kwame Alexander, Brendan Kiely, Rita Williams-Garcia, Toni Morrison, Arundhati Roy, Marjane Satrapi, Jodi Picoult, Chris Crutcher, Laurie Halse Anderson, Suzanne Collins, J.K. Rowling, Tim O'Brien, all of these are fair game, though with Crutcher you'd better hurry because he's old.

There is one book we're going to read together, and because I am old and smart and you are young and . . . well, young. . . I will decide which book that will be. We'll be reading *Chin Music* by Chris Crutcher.

STUDENT *(raising her hand)*: Why did you pick that book? He's like the one author on this list I've never heard of.

MS. LLOYD (*smiling, passing out the books*): I picked it because it has a lot of bad language, and I thought that might get some of you who tend to get your book reports from the backs of cereal boxes to actually read a book cover to cover. Also, the book tackles some issues I think are worth talking about. (*Handing out permission slips.*) I'm passing out permission slips for the book. I'd appreciate it if you'd have your parents sign it and don't say what it is, like you do with report cards. I'm joking. Sort of. For those who don't get the slip signed there will be an alternate book assigned.

STUDENT 2: How do we know you won't give us an alternate book that's boring just to punish us for being offended by a book you like?

MS. LLOYD: You don't know that, Sarah, but, wow, now that you mention it, it sounds like a great idea. Thank you.

(*Groans, chatter from the class.*)

MACKENZIE GEORGES (*raising hand*): Um, I'm seriously wondering if this book is fit to read.

MS. LLOYD: Of course you are, Ms. Georges, and I'm expecting a spirited debate from you.

MACKENZIE: You'll get it.

MS. LLOYD: I want to see if you have what it takes to challenge yourself to stretch this year, Mackenzie.

MACKENZIE: If the will of God be so.

(*Class exits. Lights crossfade.*)

SCENE FOURTEEN

(The sledding hill again.)

BILLY *(to us, walking toward the hill)*: To Eddie, the way Ms. Lloyd talks to her students is like a shot of the purest oxygen. For the first time since the accidents, Eddie sees a tiny refracted glimmer of hope at the end of the tunnel. That night he sleeps deeply and I step right in, easily bumping him in his dreams.

BILLY *(to Eddie)*: So tell me again why you wanted to get baptized?

EDDIE: To make you stop haunting me.

BILLY: I'm not haunting you, dude. What's the matter with you? I'm your best friend.

EDDIE: Oh, yeah? Then who's that I see staring through my bedroom window in the middle of the night, or rooting around in my closet? Or showing up in my dreams to ride a sled in the middle of summer?

BILLY: We gonna go down this hill?

EDDIE: And how come you always meet me here?

BILLY *(shrugging)*: This is where we had some of our best times. Want to meet someplace else?

EDDIE: Naw. You're right. This is a good spot. *(Pause.)* I really miss you, man.

BILLY: I'm right here.

EDDIE: Yeah, but you're not *real*.

BILLY: Don't be so sure . . .

EDDIE: How stupid was it to kick a stack of Sheetrock and then turn your back on it? Why couldn't you've just paid attention?

BILLY: It was a lapse.

EDDIE: That's an understatement.

BILLY: So, about the baptism?

EDDIE: I don't know, I don't know! I'm scared all the time.

BILLY: Are you sure you need to be?

EDDIE: Are you sure I don't?

BILLY: Look I gotta let you figure things out for yourself mostly. But I can tell you that you can get rid of the fear by remembering what you've always known. What you've always known better than any of us.

EDDIE: What does that even mean? Man, you are bugging me.

BILLY: You think that bizarre face you see all the time is me? You think I'd shoot around through eternity looking like that? That face is your fear talking. Come on, let's go!

(They push off down the hill.)

EDDIE: So, then why'd you ask about me getting baptized?

BILLY: Duh! We've been dreading Tartar since fifth grade. Now you're going into his class, into his church, and he's coming to your house? You're running straight into his choke hold, man! Why do you think I asked?

EDDIE: What, you can predict the future?

BILLY: No, doesn't work that way.

EDDIE: So, what then?

(Two ensemble enter with white sheet. They wash the sheet over the heads of Billy and Eddie by the end of Billy's speech. Billy and Eddie slide down to bottom of hill.)

BILLY: Man, you *are* out of it. Look, if you're in the middle of a train tunnel and you hear a loud whistle and see a single light getting bigger and bigger, you wouldn't have much trouble guessing what's up, right?

(Pause, as they stand up. Eddie thinking.)

EDDIE: Got it.

(Lights crossfade.)

SCENE FIFTEEN

(The weekly church board meeting at the Red Brick Church. Reverend Tartar holding court in front of 4–5 Red Brick Church members.)

REV. TARTAR: Ruth Lloyd has assigned a book to her literature class that should raise all our red flags. Mackenzie Georges brought it to my attention after school yesterday and apparently the book has some pretty rough language, and it tackles some issues better left to responsible parents.

Mackenzie went to the author's website and came back with some pretty alarming information, most of which is included in this handout I have for you. *(Passing out the handout.)* Long story short, the author is relatively obscure, has ten books out, no best-sellers, but he's real popular with librarians and some teachers. The real red flags come up in the area of homosexuality—he comes down squarely on the side of legalized gay marriage—and the book in question, according to Mackenzie, has a gay character as one of the central figures; not to mention it's filled with four-letter words, taunts fundamental Christianity, and promotes defiance of authority. As if that wasn't enough, a minor character even gets an abortion.

(Shock from those gathered, heads shaking, muttering.)

MRS. MADISON *(looking over the handout)*: Good Lord, this Crutcher guy sounds like some kind of pervert or something. What *didn't* he put in this book?

MAXWELL WEST: Oh, man, is this for *Really Modern Literature*? I may have signed a permission slip for that book. Montana said it was a routine form for all of Ms. Lloyd's classes.

REV. TARTAR: You might want to take a closer look at what you sign from now on, Max.

MRS. MADISON *(referring to Ms. Lloyd)*: What on Earth was she thinking?

MRS. PROFFIT: So, what's the plan, Reverend?

REV. TARTAR: Well, I can't take on a respected colleague on a curriculum choice—

MRS. MADISON: —Neither can I—

REV. TARTAR: —And I like Ruth Lloyd as a person, however misguided she can be, so we need a concerned parent to bring a formal challenge to the use of the book in general. That would assure a board hearing. Anyone up for it?

MAXWELL WEST (*raising his hand*): With pleasure. I'll do it tomorrow.

REV. TARTAR: Thank you, Maxwell.

(*Lights crossfade.*)

SCENE SIXTEEN

(Ruth Lloyd's classroom the next day. The class enters talking loudly, excitedly. Ms. Lloyd enters, desperately trying to contain her anger.)

MS. LLOYD: Everyone, I need you to pass your copies of *Chin Music* to the front of the room please.

(General outrage, confusion.)

STUDENT: Um, I'm not finished with it yet.

STUDENT 2: Yeah, me either.

MS. LLOYD: You are for now.

STUDENT 3 *(a whine)*: Whaaat? But, the book is awesome!

MS. LLOYD: I'm glad you think so, Karen, but you've got to give it back. Unless any of you has a copy of your own, which, if you do, I advise you to carry it cover facing out to every class and read it on the lawn before school and during breaks. Just don't open it in my class.

MONTANA WEST *(raising hand)*: Uh, does this have anything to do with my dad being here this morning? Was he challenging the book? *Was he?* You better tell me, Ms. Lloyd.

MS. LLOYD: I'm afraid I'm not allowed to divulge that information just yet, Montana.

MONTANA: Well, then, just don't say anything if it's true. I'll ask again: *Is my dad trying to get this book banned?*

(Ms. Lloyd holds Montana's gaze, but remains silent.)

MONTANA *(slams fists on the desk, then stands)*: I KNEW IT! Does anyone in this room have parents willing to adopt me? I pay for my own skin punctures and prefer to live underground in the dark, so an unfinished basement will work just fine. I'll use it to hunker down after I kill my father.

MS. LLOYD: Alright, alright, there's no need to break the law. Though, I feel like doing it myself right now. Folks, I've seen this all before. You know what you're going to hear? You're going to hear that you shouldn't read this book

because of family values and Christian values and morality and our need to get control of the education system. But it's about controlling *you*. That's it. Just you. If you're upset and you want to stop this, you're going to have to do it yourselves. Decide whether you think your mind is strong enough to hear tough stories told in their native tongue—and let the censors know. I'm the one who chose this book, so my voice isn't going to mean much.

Have I got everyone's copy?

(As Eddie is about to place his copy on the stack being passed forward, the class and Ms. Lloyd freeze.)

BILLY: I pop into Eddie's head right then to see if the relief wave he'd been riding for the last two days is crashing down, because I know what Eddie thinks of *Chin Music*. I was right there with him when he tore into it.

So far the story has captivated him. The characters aren't like him, but they're struggling just the same. The gay character wants to be allowed to be what he is, the sixteen-year-old thinking about an abortion is so confused and terrified she doesn't know whether to keep the baby or not and she might even throw the baby out in a Dumpster. If there's a problem Crutcher didn't stick in his book, it's probably because he didn't know about it.

But Eddie's fallen into the story because finding the dead bodies of two people he loved dearly, in the space of a month, has changed his perspective on how bad things can get.

So, when I pop into Eddie's head expecting to find despair, what I find instead makes me cheer. He feels a rush of strength and his mind is bouncing with thoughts like these:

EDDIE (*unfreezes*): No way. No freakin' way. Jesus, my dad would whack me across the back of the head if I let somebody tell me what I can read. *Bite me!*

(We watch Eddie withdraw his book and shove it in his backpack or down his shirt. The class unfreezes as Ms. Lloyd collects the final books.)

MS. LLOYD: I'll get back to you on what will replace *Chin Music* in our curriculum, but you're gonna have to wait a few days.

(Ms. Lloyd carries the stack of books to her desk. Eddie clutches his backpack to his chest. Lights crossfade.)

SCENE SEVENTEEN

(Red Brick Church Bible study.)

BILLY: Eddie is the only human I know who has a gut-level knowledge of how life on Earth is connected to life in the universe. And since life in the universe is all about freedom, his instincts will always be to move toward freedom. He's not going to take this book challenge lying down.

(Eddie enters.)

REV. TARTAR *(surprised)*: Mr. Proffit! I thought we'd lost you.

(Eddie smiles and shakes his head.)

REV. TARTAR: I guess you came to see all you had to lose.

(Eddie nods, looks at the ground in deference.)

REV. TARTAR: Edward, I want you to get used to the idea of speech. No matter how well you do in these classes, I am not going to allow your baptism if you don't testify.

(Eddie smiles again, holding Tartar's stare.)

REV. TARTAR: Suit yourself.

(Turning back to the class as Eddie finds his seat.)

Back to our lesson. Edward, I'm aware you missed the second half of class last time. Am I to assume that you took issue with our explanation of the mark of Cain?

(Eddie shakes his head no.)

That was the point at which you left. Coincidence?

(Eddie nods.)

What you didn't hear is that our belief doesn't make us bigots; the mark of Cain is simply a fact of life. We don't look down on African-Americans, and those who live good lives will be rewarded.

(Eddie nods again like he agrees. Reverend Tartar begins another lesson.)

REV. TARTAR: Everyone open your Bibles to the book of Genesis, chapter 22, verses 1–12: the story of Abraham and Isaac; a story of sacrifice.

(Reading from the Bible.)

“And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, ‘Abraham!’

“And he said, ‘Behold, here I am.’

“And God said, ‘Take now thy son, thine only son, Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains . . .’

(Reverend Tartar stares at Eddie for his reaction during this last part. Eddie has no reaction and stares straight back. Reverend Tartar continues reading the story and talking about it in the background as Billy talks.)

“And Abraham rose up early in the morning . . .”

BILLY: Through sheer force of will, Eddie remains silent. He resolves not to take anything that’s said in this room seriously. But he remembers the “facts” he’s supposed to know for his testimony.

(Reverend Tartar back up to natural volume.)

REV. TARTAR: Why did God test Abraham in this way? Why would He go to such gruesome lengths? Think about that for next week. *(Snapping shut the Bible.)* That concludes our class today. See you all next week. *(The few teens there gather their things and clear the chairs.)* Edward? I’d like you to stay a few minutes, if that’s possible.

(Eddie stays behind after clearing chairs with class.)

REV. TARTAR: Edward, I’d like to push your testimony and baptism forward, if we can. I think, because of all you’ve been through, that you can be a major force in a project we’re taking on at the high school. You’ll know more when you need to, but I’ve asked a couple Youth For Christ members to contact you about it.

I know things have been tough for you, Edward. We’ll get through this. I won’t abandon you.

(Lights crossfade.)

SCENE EIGHTEEN

(Eddie running.)

BILLY: Cross-country practice the next afternoon. The only time I can bump Eddie when he's awake is when he's running. The farther he goes, the deeper he burrows into himself and the calmer he gets. On his third circuit of a three-mile route, the window inside Eddie is wide open.

(Billy is running alongside Eddie.)

EDDIE: Hey.

BILLY: Hey.

EDDIE: Is this really you?

BILLY: Does it matter?

EDDIE *(annoyed)*: Well, you definitely sound like the you from my dream. The one who thinks he's Alex Trebek.

(They run in silence.)

EDDIE: Your dad was right. It was smart to stay in Tartar's class. This book-banning's Tartar's skullduggery for sure.

(They pick up the pace.)

Montana's cool. She's so hacked off about her dad challenging the book. I'd love to be at their house when this all goes down. There's gonna be some real parent-child conflict. She's a beast, man.

(Eddie sprinting to his finish, Billy easily keeps up.)

What are they so afraid of?!? Why do they want to control your head?!?

(Eddie finishes his run, slows to a walk. He's barely winded. Billy withdraws as Chad enters.)

CHAD: Hey, Eddie.

(Eddie nods.)

CHAD: Good run?

(Eddie nods again.)

CHAD: Yeah, me too. I think the team's pretty strong this year, I'm pretty pumped.

(Eddie shrugs. Chad speaks hesitatingly, awkward.)

CHAD: So, I hear you're getting baptized.

(Eddie nods.)

CHAD: Cool. My parents won't let me have friends outside the church, so I'm really glad. I, um, always wanted to be friends with you and Billy, but you guys were always sorta off on your own.

(Eddie shrugs.)

CHAD: Um, so I don't know if you heard, but Youth For Christ is, like, coming out strong against *Chin Music*. I can't really tell if you like the book or not, but . . . I do. And I'm gonna have kind of a tough time, like, going along with them.

(Eddie is listening.)

CHAD: *Chin Music* is the first book I've ever read with . . . with characters who seem like they could be my friends. With characters like me. When Ms. Lloyd told us to pass the book in, I couldn't breathe. It feels like I lost a friend I can't get back or like I've been kicked in the chest or something.

(Eddie nods in agreement. Chad is silent for a moment. Pure terror. This is the hardest thing he's ever done, the biggest leap of faith he'll ever make.)

CHAD: I'm gay, Eddie.

(Eddie, shocked by Chad's admission, finally shrugs, as in "no big deal.")

CHAD *(shaking his head)*: Man, my family. My dad's a decathlon champion, my brother's got a scholarship to play football at Michigan, and I'm a freakin' homo.

(Eddie touches Chad's shoulder, indicating it's OK.)

Anyway, I know they, like, want you to start talking again, but don't tell anybody, okay?

(Eddie zips his lips.)

CHAD *(relieved)*: Thanks, man.

I'm scared all the time. I'm scared people will find out, scared they already know. I'm scared somebody might do something like they did to that kid in Laramie, Wyoming.

(Eddie holds up a fist like he's going to kick ass if anyone touches Chad. Chad grins for a second.)

CHAD *(a big sigh, then)*: Well, I guess I'll see you tomorrow night.

(Chad runs off, Eddie watches him go. Lights crossfade.)

SCENE NINETEEN

(Maintenance workroom in the school basement.)

EDDIE: *Dang*, it feels good to *talk*.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: This is the place to do it. That door's about ten inches thick. The band could be playing the "1812 Overture" in here and not a soul would hear it.

(Eddie hands Mr. Bartholomew a lunch bag.)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Man, this is such a great deal. All I have to do is let you talk and I get a free lunch.

EDDIE: And you don't even have to listen.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: True, but I do.

EDDIE: So, you heard about the book challenge?

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Yeah, *Chin Music*?

EDDIE: Yep.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Tell me this doesn't have the Reverend's fingerprints aaaalllll over it.

EDDIE: I know! He put me on the fast track to salvation, so I sorta feel like he has plans for me.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Whaaaat?

EDDIE: Yeah, I have so many classes to go to with him, when I'm asleep is like the only time he isn't around. It's way uncool.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW (*whistles*): You must have ticked someone off in another life.

EDDIE: Seriously. You were right, though. I'm a total spy at the church.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Pretty cool, isn't it?

EDDIE: Yeah, well, they're getting pretty organized to get this book out of school for good. It's gonna go through a school board hearing, or something. And, you know what? A whole bunch of kids totally loved it. It's got tons of swears in it. But that's not the only reason we like it.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Doesn't hurt, though, does it?

EDDIE: Nope.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: So, did you guys get to finish the story?

EDDIE: I did because I didn't turn my book back in.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Hey, man, you better get used to the idea of that book being gone. They're just on formalities now. Principal Madison is a hard-line Red Bricker and so's most of the school board. If Tartar deems the book unworthy, it's toast.

(They sit in silence.)

EDDIE: I wish you could read it.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: I did.

(Pulls the book out of a desk drawer.)

EDDIE: How'd you get a copy?

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: This little place called Bear Creek Public Library.

EDDIE: Nifty.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Thought I should take a look at it. I figure if Tartar hates it it must be pretty good "literchur."

EDDIE: Did you like it?

MR. BARTHOLOMEW *(nodding)*: I did. *(Pause.)* Tell you what. Get some kids together, the ones who were liking it and let's meet up. Ms. Lloyd doesn't have a chance by herself. It's gonna take a whole bunch of teachers and kids to keep this baby on the shelf. In my day it was *Slaughterhouse Five*. That book doesn't even have a bad guy.

EDDIE: Man, I wish Billy were here.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Remember, bud, you have rights. Just because you're not twenty-one or sixty-one or forty-one doesn't mean you're not an American. You just need to know what rights you have and how to access them. And, as far as Billy is concerned, remember this: we keep those we love alive with the acts we commit in their names.

EDDIE: I'm on it.

(Lights crossfade.)

SCENE TWENTY

(Blast of music—the chorus of Fee’s “Glory to God”—as Youth For Christ members swarm the room. Mackenzie Georges leads the meeting. Eddie sits off to the side, the new kid.)

MACKENZIE: Alright, listen up!

(No one is listening—they’re talking, laughing, and rocking out to the music, which is loud.)

MACKENZIE *(to the sound board op)*: Emma, could you turn it down?!?
(Actor should use the name of the actual sound board op. Music fades down, plays underneath the following.) Alright, Youth For Christers, look, I’ve gone through *Chin Music* with a fine-tooth comb. Chad is passing out lists of all the offensive words and phrases in the book categorized by page number. I didn’t want to ask the rest of you to read through all this garbage—and believe me, it’s garbage, *evil* garbage—so it’s all there.

Reverend Tartar says the decision’s up to the school board now. Look, guys, far more teachers came out *against* cleaning up the curriculum than not, so if we want this book gone we need to rock the next board meeting. But first I have to see if you’re all up for it.

(Everyone cheers in agreement: “Yeah!”; “Gonna be epiiiiic!”)

MACKENZIE: Cool. So, let’s divvy up to be more effective. Monica you can cover a statement against the stance the book takes on legalizing drugs and alcohol. Chad, you do the same for homosexuality and the book’s support for gay marriage. Sorry you get the grossest.

(Eddie looks at Chad, but Chad does not return the look.)

Oh, and Eddie. *(Turning to him.)* First of all, I want to thank you for coming tonight. None of us can tell you how happy we are that you’ve decided to take Jesus as your personal savior.

(Lots of clapping, “Yeah, Eddie!” and “Woot!”—Eddie nods.)

MACKENZIE: And *plus* we have a ton of fun in YFC!

(Everyone cheers, gabs, talks a little.)

MACKENZIE: I think you can be a big factor in winning this challenge. People are gonna listen to you 'cuz of what you've been through this year. So, after your baptism, I want you to give the Youth For Christ speech against *Chin Music* at the board meeting. If you pull it off I could see you holding my position here someday.

(Eddie nods, others clap, one of the girls says, "Uh, after me maybe.")

MACKENZIE: We're counting on you.

(Eddie and Mackenzie hold stares. Eddie grins. Lights crossfade.)

SCENE TWENTY-ONE

(Reverend Tartar, Mackenzie, Maxwell West, and Ms. Lloyd enter and stand.)

BILLY: When I was alive I liked to read stories with good guys and bad guys, but I'm bopping around in and out of the heads and hearts of everyone in this story, and I can't find any real bad guys. *(Referring to Mackenzie.)* Mackenzie believes she's doing this for a greater good, and that connects her, and anyone who agrees with her, with God.

Ms. Lloyd believes just as passionately in the healing power of stories as Tartar believes in the healing power of God.

Maxwell West feels like a failure at raising his daughter. He's driven by a desire, deep down within him, to love her, and he thinks the church gives him the answers on how to do it.

And Reverend Tartar? He's passionate in his belief that if Christian adults don't step up and protect kids, they aren't fulfilling their responsibility to God and mankind and that the world will literally go to hell otherwise. Want to know where that comes from? Just watch:

(Reverend Tartar's mom enters, grabs his wrist and holds a lighter to it. He drops to his knees, becoming 7-year-old Sandy Tartar.)

REV. TARTAR: Please, Momma!

MOMMA: QUIT WHINING.

REV. TARTAR: No, please, please, *PLEASE!*

MOMMA: Pray to Jesus!!!

REV. TARTAR: PLEASE! I won't touch the stove—

MOMMA *(a threat)*: SANDY!

REV. TARTAR: But, Momma, Momma, Momma, how will I sleep?

MOMMA *(grabbing him hard by the hair)*: PRAY!

REV. TARTAR: Please don't burn me!

(She burns him; he screams. She drops to her knees beside him and prays while Sandy cries.)

MOMMA: Dear Jesus, me and my little boy beg your forgiveness and mercy!

(They freeze.)

BILLY: The people in this story all want good things. No one here is all good or evil. Hell, Sandy Tartar has never, in all his years of teaching and preaching, even *approached* leveling the sort of fear and pain on a student that was leveled on him. He's evolving quite nicely, all things considered. Everyone here is mad at one another for what they *believe*. If humans are ever to understand one another, they have to come around to the concept of relativity, that opposites actually hold each other up.

Well, let's see how the climax goes.

(Lights crossfade.)

SCENE TWENTY-TWO

(Furnace room in the school basement, Mr. Bartholomew reading from Chin Music to a group of students. Ms. Lloyd is off to the side, listening.)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: "...look for the ways to get from one to the other of those glorious moments when all the emotional stops are pulled, when you're just so goddam glad to be breathing air—like when I crossed the plate at the end of the game with Nortie, Lion, and Max waiting there for me with arms open wide, having won it all, or at least, awful close.

"But first thing's first. Right now I've got to get dressed and go pick up Bo. Gotta make things right."

The end.

(Closes book. Room remains silent after the ending of the book.)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Well, we did it. We're gonna get in big trouble, but we did it!

(Everyone starts applauding, laughing, making noise.)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Listen, you guys, when the hearing comes around, it's not going to matter what a bunch of adults have to say. Our minds are mostly made up. YFC coming out strong against this thing is gonna be really effective, so if you want to win this thing you're gonna have to counteract them. You gotta do it with your smarts.

CHAD: Uhhh, we're gonna take on Mackenzie with our brain power?!?!?!?

(A bunch of kids laugh.)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Yeah, I know what you're thinking. But you're wrong. There's as much brain power in this room as anywhere in the school. You've been listening too much to your own press.

STUDENT: So, what're we supposed to do?

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Get organized, get a statement drawn up and pick someone to read it. Someone who isn't afraid of Mackenzie Georges in a debate.

MONTANA WEST: I'll do it. Oh, god, wouldn't that be cool? Have my dad get up there and say all his churchy Jesus crap and then I come up right behind him and tell the board they're full of sh—

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: —OKAY, Montana, let's use our imaginations on how that sentence ends.

Anyone have a problem with Montana reading the statement?

(“Nope,” “No,” “Cool,” “Go for it,” “Perfect,” “You go, girl.” Laughter.)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Alright, Montana it is. Only, remember, they're gonna be looking for whatever reason they can to discount what you have to say, so, Montana, whatever you think your father is full of, delete it. You guys are at a decided disadvantage and need to play it straight. No pun intended.

(Lights crossfade.)

SCENE TWENTY-THREE

(Mastodon's "The Wolf is Loose" plays, as Montana and Maxwell enter, circle each other like boxers, and face off.)

BILLY: If you were going to call up the perfect prototype for the daughter Maxwell West did not order, Montana is it. He gave her the perfect little cowgirl's name and he ended up with the lead singer of KORN. But, she's way smart. And also way decent to people like who I used to be. If she saw you sitting alone in the cafeteria she'd come over and plop herself across from you and start talking like you were just as important as Mackenzie Georges or any YFC athletic champ.

But pick a conversation, any conversation, between Montana and Maxwell and you get something like this:

(Music immediately out.)

MAXWELL: You're not going out like that, young lady.

MONTANA: Like what?

MAXWELL: Dressed like the devil himself.

MONTANA: The devil doesn't look like this, Maxwell, the devil wears a red suit and has horns and a pitchfork. I'm dressed more like your standard small-time cult follower or school shooter.

MAXWELL: Don't you be disrespectful with me, young lady. I'm your father, not "Maxwell."

MONTANA: I won't be disrespectful if you won't be disrespectful.

MAXWELL: Yeah? What have you done lately that deserves respect?

MONTANA: Well, let's see. I have a three-point-seven-nine GPA, I made the debate team this year, and I won the Idaho state creative nonfiction contest two years in a row—

MAXWELL *(cutting her off)*: —And you do nothing but embarrass me. You are *not* going out with all those piercings. You look like some . . . *lady of the evening*.

MONTANA: You mean a whore?

MAXWELL: Yes, *I mean a whore.*

MONTANA (*sarcastic as hell*): Really, Maxwell? How much do you think I'd go for?

MAXWELL (*grabbing her by the shoulders, he shoves her toward the stairs, follows her and raises his hand to strike*): You little trollop! You get back to your room this instant!

MONTANA: Go ahead, hit me, Maxwell. Then I'll turn the other cheek and you can hit that one, too.

(He slaps her across the face. They're both shocked. They freeze.)

BILLY: He only hit her once, but Maxwell was so horrified by what he'd done, after that he let her get away with murder. It also drove a pretty deep wedge between them that makes them fight like verbal gladiators. That hearing's gonna be like the last fight in *Creed*.

(Lights crossfade.)

SCENE TWENTY-FOUR

(Eddie writing an email in school library.)

Dear Mr. Crutcher,

My name is Eddie Proffit. I thought I would take a chance and see if you would answer me back, though I'm sure you're way too busy. Our class was assigned to read your really good book, *Chin Music*, and everybody loved it. Well, almost everybody. One of the teachers in our school is a Christian guy who doesn't think there should be bad language in a book and that it's bad to make gay people look good in stories because he thinks it might make people want to be gay. So some people in his church lodged a formal complaint to make us stop reading *Chin Music*. I was wondering if you could maybe write something down to me in an email that I could read at the school board meeting. Maybe the board would wake up if the author said something.

By the way, I live in Bear Creek, Idaho, and my dad and best friend died within three months of each other and I was the first one to find both of them so it hasn't been all that great of a year.

Thanks in advance in case you decide to send me something.

Eddie Proffit

(He clicks send. Lights fade slowly up.)

SCENE TWENTY-FIVE

(Ruth Lloyd enters after Eddie sends email, sees Eddie at computer, says “Hi, Eddie” on her way past him. Eddie packs up and leaves library as Mrs. Madison enters.)

MRS. MADISON: Ruth? Could I speak with you for a moment?

MS. LLOYD: Sure.

MRS. MADISON: Ruth, do you value your job?

MS. LLOYD: Of course. Why would you ask a question like that?

MRS. MADISON: A number of kids in your class have finished *Chin Music*. I told you to collect and keep all the books until the challenge at the school board meeting.

MS. LLOYD: Which I did.

MRS. MADISON: Could I see them?

(Ms. Lloyd gets the books.)

MRS. MADISON: In my outer office today I heard four students discussing the ending of your book. You specifically told me you were less than a third of the way into it.

MS. LLOYD: It's restricted in school, but not in bookstores or libraries or the internet, or anyplace else with a shred of common sense remaining, Margaret.

MRS. MADISON: How many students in the class?

MS. LLOYD: 14.

MRS. MADISON: There are 13 books here.

MS. LLOYD: Eddie Proffit indicated he'd left his at home. I told him to bring it the next day.

MRS. MADISON: And he hasn't?

MS. LLOYD: Not yet. Margaret, do you really think that after all Eddie's been through I'm going to hound him—

MRS. MADISON: No, of course not. Besides, he's one of ours.

MS. LLOYD: *Excuse me?*

MRS. MADISON: Never mind.

MS. LLOYD: No. You said he was one of yours. Did you have something to do with this challenge? Are you trying to influence my curriculum from outside school?

MRS. MADISON: Maxwell West brought the challenge.

MS. LLOYD: *I'm asking if you had something to do with the challenge.*

MRS. MADISON: I did not. I signed the paperwork when West brought it in, but I didn't initiate it.

MS. LLOYD: I see. *(Pause.)* Well, I'll be sure to encourage Eddie to bring his copy back.

MRS. MADISON: I don't understand, Ruth! There are a thousand good books out there.

MS. LLOYD: *And Chin Music is one of them!*

(Pause.)

MRS. MADISON: We agree to disagree.

MS. LLOYD: Do we?

(Lights crossfade.)

SCENE TWENTY-SIX

(Reverend Tartar's classroom.)

EDDIE *(knocking on door)*: Could I speak to you for a moment, sir?

(Reverend Tartar's face registers no surprise that Eddie is talking.)

REV. TARTAR: Of course, Edward. What can I do for you?

EDDIE: I'd like to do my testimony this Sunday if possible.

REV. TARTAR: It's a little short notice—

EDDIE: I know, but if I'm going to talk at the meeting, it's probably best that I talk somewhere else first, to get used to it, don't you think? Plus that'll make me a member of YFC, giving weight to what I have to say.

REV. TARTAR: What I've been saying all along, Edward. I guess you have been listening. You had me worried.

(Pause, thinking.)

REV. TARTAR: I can set it up right before the offering. Actually, they might give more after they hear you talk for the first time. Just a joke.

EDDIE: Thanks. I need to get going if I'm gonna get ready.

REV. TARTAR: Godspeed.

(Lights crossfade.)

SCENE TWENTY-SEVEN

(School basement. Mr. Bartholomew collects his belongings, organizes the space. Eddie enters.)

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Shouldn't you be in class?

EDDIE: I told Ms. Lloyd I had to go to the can. You got a can down here?

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: No, but I got canned.

EDDIE: Ms. Lloyd told us. For the readings?

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Yup.

EDDIE: Jesus, that sucks! Ms. Lloyd's really upset. She's up there ranting like a crazy person. It's scary.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Yeah, well, I hope she lays low and doesn't let a soul know she was at those readings. She's the one who brought the book into school. Her head's probably on the chopping block, too.

EDDIE: What are you going to do?

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: Well, I'm gonna hang back for a while and then see if I can't get my job back.

EDDIE: How?

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: I'm gonna let that codger they brought in to replace me try and figure out this antiquated, jury-rigged heating system and bell system, and work the snow-removal equipment, and see how quickly they come callin'. Guy was staring at the fuse box like it was from NASA.

Or I'll have to look outside of town for work, I don't know. I'll be okay.

EDDIE: Man, this sucks. They're firing a guy from school for *reading* to kids.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW: If they don't fire me, the terrorists win.

(Lights crossfade.)

SCENE TWENTY-EIGHT

(Split scene—preparations at YFC / Mrs. Proffit talks to Eddie at home. Eddie is simultaneously at the YFC meeting and sitting in his bedroom working on his speech.)

MACKENZIE: Alright, so after the formal challenge, Mr. West will get to talk, and then Ms. Lloyd will rebut, and then the floor is open to the public.

MRS. PROFFIT *(slowly entering his room, but remaining in doorway)*: Eddie? Honey?

MACKENZIE: As a group we want to hit the same point again and again, like politicians do.

MRS. PROFFIT: I'm really glad you've decided to open up . . .

MACKENZIE: Use these words as much as you can: "obscene," "disrespectful," "immoral," and "irrelevant."

MRS. PROFFIT: And I'm so relieved you're coming into the church.

MACKENZIE: Make up your own testimony, and work those words in as naturally as you can.

MRS. PROFFIT: It's been a source of great solace to me.

MACKENZIE: In the end, we want them to know we think it's offensive for us to have to read this kind of language in a school assignment—

MRS. PROFFIT: I can truly say that the church saved my life.

MACKENZIE: —that we believe the issues portrayed are un-Christian—

MRS. PROFFIT: I loved your father, I truly did—

MACKENZIE: —and that we shouldn't have to be exposed to homosexuality—

MRS. PROFFIT: —but it was such a struggle fighting his beliefs.

MACKENZIE: —abortion—

MRS. PROFFIT: He was a good man—

MACKENZIE: —and masturbation.

MRS. PROFFIT: —but he was misguided.

EDDIE (*standing up, furious, he is no longer part of the YFC scene*): He didn't die because of his beliefs, Mom! He died because he forgot to let the air out of a truck tire before breaking it down!

MACKENZIE: Let's make sure to spread out in the order of speakers, so we get our message constantly across.

MRS. PROFFIT: Reverend Tartar said—

MACKENZIE: And then our rising star will bring it to a close.

EDDIE: *Can we just let it go, Mom?*

(Eddie rushes out the door past Mrs. Proffit.)

MACKENZIE: This Sunday Eddie's going to testify, but that will only be church members. The school board meeting will be the first time most people hear him speak.

(Applause from YFC. It dies down.)

MRS. PROFFIT (*to an empty room*): I'm looking forward to your testimony.

(Lights crossfade.)

SCENE TWENTY-NINE

(Eddie running. Billy with him.)

EDDIE: Okay, time to get down to the truth. Billy Bartholomew, is this really you?

BILLY: O ye of little faith.

EDDIE: How crazy does this make me?

BILLY: No crazier than you already were.

EDDIE: Why did you come back?

BILLY: We're connected into eternity, dude. Dead or alive. I wanted you to know everything turns out okay, so you don't have to be afraid.

EDDIE: I really don't like you being so confident and everything. That's all backward.

BILLY: Sorry, comes with the territory.

EDDIE: I just ... can't ... figure out exactly why the book thing is so important to me.

BILLY: Want me to tell you?

EDDIE: Uh-huh.

BILLY: Because it's about freedom. It's a story by someone who wants to get his little piece of truth out there. You recognize it, and you feel the connection. And then they try to take it from you. It could be any book, you know. Freedom is a birthright.

EDDIE: Do you know Crutcher?

BILLY: I know what's inside him.

EDDIE: Is he worth fighting for?

BILLY: This isn't about him, Eddie. You know that. Chris Crutchers are a dime a dozen. It's only a little bit about you. It's about freedom with a little "f." I can go back into the heads of the people who created this country,

and what I can tell you is that they wanted the little freedoms, the ones that affected them in the moment. If you don't make your stand here, you'll make it later, you're wired that way, but there will always be people who are afraid, who will try to take your freedom. They'll tell you if you follow them they'll keep you safe.

EDDIE: But I won't be.

BILLY: You got it.

(Running.)

EDDIE: Are you going to stay with me?

BILLY: Not much longer.

(Eddie's shoulders slump.)

BILLY: You won't need me, man. You're way farther along than I am. Look, I won't leave you until it's okay, okay?

EDDIE: Promise?

BILLY: Promise. Your job is to tell the truth. That's everybody's job. Now do your job!

(Lights to black.)

SCENE THIRTY

(Red Brick Church, Sunday service.)

REV. TARTAR *(sermonizing, fiery)*: Ladies and gentlemen, our town is at a crossroads. We are in a fight for the hearts, minds, and souls of our children. Make no mistake about it: we are in a battle; nay, might I say we are at war. It is a righteous war, however, and if we win no one will lose.

I am instituting a draft for Christian soldiers to fight this war. We need each and every one of you.

Basic philosophies are at odds, friends. No clearer lines have been drawn between good and evil. The books of Chris Crutcher and authors like him are written to influence our children, particularly our teens, in a way that is completely unacceptable. It is time for grown-ups with Christian values to stand against words and ideas that poison young minds.

This is our chance not only to talk like Christians, but to walk like Christians. We must keep our eye on the goal and march toward it as Jesus marched toward Calvary. I'm asking each of you to attend that school board meeting tomorrow night to rid Bear Creek High of the blasphemous *Chin Music* and put the board on *notice* that we're watching them and we're going to clean up the curriculum in our schools.

ALL: Amen!

REV. TARTAR: And now I want to welcome a special young man into our church; a boy who has suffered much over the last year, a boy who was struck dumb by loss and grief, but who is now finding the solid ground of his faith. I hope you will all stay to welcome Edward Proffit.

(A hymn, "The Old Rugged Cross," is played on the piano as Eddie walks to the front of the church.)

EDDIE: I'm nervous. It's been a long time since I've said anything.

(He looks at some note cards he has to keep his brain from bouncing.)

Everybody here knows my dad died last year. I don't know if you know this part or not, but my dad and Reverend Tartar didn't see things the same

way. I used to listen to them argue down at my dad's garage, and I'd ask my dad when they were done how anybody was supposed to figure out who was right. My dad said, "Do the numbers, Eddie. Do science and numbers."

So, when I was getting ready to testify I read as much of the Bible as I could understand and I started thinking about the numbers. Like, if you believe in statistics, approximately one person out of every ten is gay. The baptism classes tell you that's a sin. Like, a big one. Leviticus even says if you do what gay people do, you are an abomination. There aren't many things worse than an abomination.

(The congregation is getting uncomfortable.)

Only what if you are gay?

REV. TARTAR: Get on task, Edward.

EDDIE: If you are, it means, according to Leviticus, that "the land will spew you out," which, I'm not sure exactly what that means, but it sounds radical. See, and this is where my dad comes in. Science and math, remember? Ten percent. If being gay were really a sin, that would mean God created one out of every ten people and made it a sin for them to have sex, *for their whole lives*, made them basically subhuman. So I just figure that Leviticus is like Matthew Shepard hanging half-dead on a fence in Laramie, Wyoming: the work of another dumb-ass bigoted guy.

(Outrage from the congregation. Tartar, Maxwell West, and a couple other guys in the congregation stand up and close in on Eddie.)

EDDIE: Guess I better wrap this up. But, man, I've got so much more to say.

(The men pounce on Eddie, who escapes and jumps up on a ledge, out of their reach.)

EDDIE: What would Jesus do? He'd give the book that you are all supposed to help get rid of to people and *read* it to them, because Jesus was a guy who liked to make people feel better and that book makes some people feel better!

I mean, Jesus was a rebel! I bet if he came back no one in this church would even listen to him! He'd be right up here with me, telling you guys that kids can think for themselves.

In fact, I might be Jesus! (*More shock and outrage in the congregation.*) What about that? Maybe I haven't proved myself like Christ did out in the desert for forty days and nights. Maybe one of the things I had to do was get up here and yell at you and tell you that stupid book is okay and WHY DON'T YOU LEAVE US ALONE?!?!?!?

(The piano begins playing loudly as Eddie is finally pulled down from his perch.)

REV. TARTAR: Good Lord, get him to county hospital!

EDDIE (*struggling as they exit*): Yeah, take me there!!! You're all going to feel pretty stupid when my evaluation comes back sane and every single one of you Red Brickers is committed for being a bunch of froth-mouthed, freakshow, paranoid schizophrenics!!!

(They exit. Lights crossfade. Music.)

SCENE THIRTY-ONE

(The school board meeting. House lights on, stage lights hot. We see the meeting being set up. Two tables and one podium with a microphone. An American flag stands near the podium. Mr. Northcutt, the president of the school board, sits at one table with Maxwell West next to him. At the other table is Mrs. Madison with Ms. Lloyd. The two tables face upstage toward the podium. The entire cast, except for Eddie and Montana, should sit in chairs directly in front of and around the audience, with the actor playing Jeremy Godfrey taking an empty seat in the audience. This should all create the effect of the play's audience being part of the meeting, too.)

BILLY *(as the board meeting is being set up)*: The parking lot to the American Legion Hall is full the next evening. People have been arguing in the supermarket and the drugstore. One fistfight broke out in the sawmill parking lot. My friend Eddie Proffit isn't present because he's in the one room at the county hospital reserved for mental-health patients. I guess when you say "I might be Jesus" it's problematic to some people.

MR. NORTHCUTT *(pounding gavel for order, speaking into a mic)*: Alright, we've been here since seven, and it appears we're done with all other business, so the rest of the time will be devoted to the curriculum challenge at Bear Creek High.

As you know, Maxwell West has filed a challenge to the use of the book *Chin Music* by Chris Crutcher in *Really Modern Literature*, an English elective taught by Ruth Lloyd. On the formal challenge Mr. West writes that the book is *(reading)*: "not appropriate due to profanity, promotion of homosexual agenda and lifestyle, depiction of abortion and other graphic issues unsuited for reading by children."

I'm going to turn over the floor to Maxwell first and then after we'll give Ms. Lloyd a chance for rebuttal. After that we'll open it up to the community. Anyone who wants to will have a chance to briefly speak in support or against use of this book in school curriculum, emphasis on briefly. Maxwell?

(Maxwell approaches the microphone at the podium.)

MAXWELL WEST: We are at a moral crossroads in our nation's communities and schools, and as parents and responsible adults it is time to stand our ground. From school shootings to allowing provocative language and

dress, to passing out condoms, to banning God from our school's education, to illegal immigrants flooding our country, and socialism in Washington, we are falling into a dark abyss. It's simply immoral to stand by and do nothing.

The material in *Chin Music* plainly and simply takes our children further into the darkness. It is time to let morality and common sense take over, and it is common sense that tells me it is foolish to allow poison into our children's minds! Thank you.

(Maxwell steps down, Ms. Lloyd approaches.)

MS. LLOYD: When I was a little girl I knew I would be a librarian—not because I wasn't athletic or popular—I was both those things. But because I have never read a book that didn't enrich me. Even a bad book taught me something about storytelling. I simply cannot remember ever having had a bad experience with a book.

Chin Music has gotten wonderful responses from many of the kids who were reading it. There was lively discussion. Kids who don't read were reading or having the book read to them, exactly the response any good teacher would normally die to have.

I don't believe there are good or evil authors. Most tell their stories the best way they can. Stories aren't good or evil either; they're just reflections of one person's perception of the world. One kid might read a story and feel recognized, another kid might read the same story and be offended, or angry, or bored. If those two got together and talked about their reactions to the story, they'd know each other a little better, they'd make a connection. That's what I'm trying to achieve in my classroom.

I sent home a permission slip, was more than willing to let parents and teens who may have been offended read a different book. Not one did, until this challenge. It seems un-American to let a small group of parents tell the school district or other parents what their kids can and cannot read.

(Jeremy Godfrey, a local man, addresses Ms. Lloyd from the audience.)

JEREMY GODFREY: Ms. Lloyd, I don't doubt your dedication to the kids or to books, but you're simply wrong on this one. I can't see how you think it's healthy for our kids to be reading this garbage—and I don't use that word lightly—when there are so many good books out there. Why didn't you choose something less controversial?

MS. LLOYD: Because your kids wouldn't read it.

JEREMY: *You are a teacher.* It's your job to *require* them to read it.

MS. LLOYD: You are offering me a solution that makes kids hate to read. And that is unacceptable to me.

JEREMY: What they read is just as important as *that* they read.

MS. LLOYD: That's absurd. Reading is the gateway to learning.

MRS. PROFFIT (*calling out*): Once we allow evil into our minds, it's impossible to eradicate it!

REV. TARTAR (*also calling out*): This book is filth! Ms. Lloyd, you are either blind or purposefully leading our kids astray. This is a perfect example of why we need to be vigilant about keeping stuff like this out of our schools!

MR. BARTHOLOMEW (*furious*): No, no, no! The board needs to do its *job* and protect intellectual freedom! Book bannings are the real filth, you ignorant—

JEREMY: WHOA, WHOA, WHOA, BILL, THAT'S THE REVEREND YOU'RE TALKING TO!

(General disorder. Some students start taunting the Red Brick Church members and a couple YFC kids talk amongst themselves or make comments back at the taunters. The adults start raising voices at each other. It's not yet ugly, but it's getting there. Mr. Northcutt bangs the gavel loudly.)

MR. NORTHCUTT: Alright, alright!!! Let's keep this civil. Ms. Lloyd, if you're finished . . . ?

(Ms. Lloyd steps down. Someone yells "Pornographer!" at her and the raucous arguing erupts again. Mr. Northcutt bangs his gavel and restores order, finally yelling "ENOUGH" into the mic. During this, Chad Nash has approached the podium. He speaks as the noise dies down.)

CHAD: I'm gay.

(Total silence.)

CHAD: And I'm a member of YFC. I'm so scared right now I can't see straight because, um, I believe in God and I don't want to go to hell . . . but

I don't want to live the rest of my life this scared. There's a character in the book who's gay and when I read about him, I felt better. It was like the first time in my life I ever read about a gay person being brave, except for that guy who helped bring the airplane down before it hit the Capitol. Yeah, did you know about that? (*Shaking his head.*) I read *Chin Music* and felt hope.

(*He gets off the podium and sits down at his seat. Silence.*)

REV. TARTAR (*finally standing, red-faced*): This is exactly my point! The book Ms. Lloyd assigned the class has convinced a student to go gay!

STUDENT: He didn't "go" gay, he IS gay! The book gave him the guts to admit it!

STUDENT 2: Yeah, good for you, Chad!!!

STUDENT 3: I like Chad, but being gay is a sin. This just makes me sad, you guys.

STUDENT 4 (*standing at his/her seat*): I don't really have much to say, but I just wanted to tell you all that *Chin Music* is the only book I've ever finished. That's it.

STUDENT (*boy*): I didn't finish it because it got constipated!

STUDENT 2: That's *confiscated*, you moron!

(*General laughter. Mr. Northcutt bangs his gavel loudly. Mackenzie Georges approaches the podium.*)

MACKENZIE: Hi, my name is Mackenzie Georges, I'm the president of Youth For Christ at Red Brick Church.

(*Some YFC students clap loudly. Mr. Northcutt bangs his gavel.*)

MACKENZIE: Everyone discounts teenagers and thinks we can't be morally mature, but we can be. In an era of declining family values, drugs everywhere, pornography, and constant premarital sex, when teachers are handcuffed from teaching the ways of Jesus, the stakes right now are way too high.

I hear a lot about the separation of church and state and I get it, I do. But, what I don't get is why if there are students who believe being gay is absolutely wrong, like me, or that abortion is the murder of a child and definitely a sin, why it's fair for me to have to read about this stuff like it's

normal in *English* class. Is that education for all or just for the people who agree with Ms. Lloyd? Homosexuality in this book and in several others Chris Crutcher has written is treated as if it's as common as a rash. That makes me very, very uncomfortable and I urge you to remove this book. Bear Creek, Idaho, can go against national trends and be a beacon to the rest of the country and set an example of decency for all. Thank you.

(Healthy applause. The back door bangs open and Eddie Proffit runs in, red-faced and sweaty. He steps up to the mic. Disorder in the room. Everyone is shocked to see him.)

EDDIE: Hey. I'll make this quick because I have a feeling the night nurse at County is going to discover the pillows under my covers aren't me, and be here with a net in a minute.

I read *Chin Music* when I was feeling so alone I could barely breathe. I found friends there. They weren't as good as having my friend Billy, but Billy's gone and my dad's gone, and my friends in the book stood in pretty good. Wanna know why? Because they felt as alone as I did.

Anyway, I decided to do what Reverend Tartar kept telling us to do and I went to Chris Crutcher's website, and guess what I found? Chris Crutcher. And he lives only about a hundred miles from here. And guess what else? His email address is on the website. So I wrote him an email. And guess what else? He came. He's sitting right there. *(Points to Crutcher. Shock in audience.)* So, I'm going to let him talk. Please welcome the author of *Chin Music* and many other good books with bad words—Chris Crutcher.

And, by the way, I know I'm not Jesus.

(Chris Crutcher gets up and makes his way from his seat in the audience up the aisle to the podium. Heated discussion goes on between Reverend Tartar and Maxwell West. Crutcher gets to the mic, but before he can speak, Maxwell West stands.)

MAXWELL WEST: Point of order, Mr. Chairman! Mr. Crutcher is not on our list of speakers. We have spent more than enough time to make a decision, and he clearly has an agenda.

MR. BARTHOLOMEW *(calling out)*: Come on, Max, let the man talk! He drove a hundred miles to get here—you want him to see us as inhospitable? He doesn't have any more of an agenda than you do.

MR. NORTHCUTT (*banging gavel*): Gonna have to go with Maxwell on this one, Nate. He's not on the list.

(Door in the back bangs open, Montana West begins speaking from off-stage. When she enters we see she's wearing a homemade LEVITICUS SUCKS t-shirt. She's obviously put effort into the t-shirt's design.)

MONTANA: Mr. Chairman! Mr. Chairman, Mr. Chairman, I was supposed to deliver the pro-*Chin Music* presentation, but my dad wouldn't let me out of the house until my homework was finished.

(Holding up papers to her dad and slapping them down on the table where he sits.)

All done, Daddy. You can check it later.

MR. NORTHCUTT: Young lady, that shirt is totally inappropriate for these proceedings.

MONTANA: You're right, but my chest wasn't big enough for "Mr. Tartar's Red Brick Church," or "The Bear Creek School Board," so I had to settle for "Leviticus."

MR. NORTHCUTT: I can't allow you to wear it.

MONTANA: If you insist.

(She begins to remove her shirt, she's really going to take it off.)

MAXWELL WEST (*roaring*): NO! DON'T YOU DARE, YOUNG LADY!!!

MONTANA: Jeez, make up your mind.

(Indicating her speech.)

Alright, I'm just going to read this.

(She walks up to the podium and says, "Excuse me" to Chris Crutcher, who stands off to the side.)

MONTANA (*into the mic*): One out of three girls is sexually abused, one out of five boys. Statistics on the physical abuse of boys and girls is hard to pin down, but in a class of 25 kids, you can bet there are several who get it at home. Approximately one in ten humans is gay. Anywhere from twenty

to sixty-five percent of the students in a high-school classroom are sexually active in some way; could be higher. Every class has *at least* one student who's anorexic or bulimic and one who cuts herself. I'm one of those.

(She lets that hang there.)

I cut myself because it's pain I can control instead of pain I can't control. When you try to control what we think, we feel out of control. We think you're cowards when you won't talk to us.

MAXWELL: Montana, I'm asking you to step away from the mic right now.

MONTANA: What are you going to do, Maxwell, hit me!?! *(Pause.)* Those are some of the issues in *Chin Music*. Mr. Tartar, and the rest of you teachers, too: at least three kids in every one of your classes is in trouble. The next time you stand in front of your classroom, give yourself a moment of silence, look around the room, and do the math. Ask yourself if you have the ba—, the courage to talk to us about them. *Talk* to us.

I read the book. I was pushed for time when it was assigned, so I was going to scam it, try to squeeze by with a B. But then you guys tried to censor it, so I read every word. Twice.

It was a pretty good book. I've read better. But what was way cool was that a bunch of kids I like liked it way more than I did. They started talking about it when we were hanging out and saying all the sorts of things teachers always say they want to hear us saying about a book. You have to understand, some of my friends have *never* read a book for school. Ever. And that's all anyone should have to say.

(She looks over at Crutcher, looks at the back of her Chin Music copy and realizes it's him.)

Um, Mr. Crutcher, uh, seems to be, um, standing right here, and, um, Mr. Crutcher if I'd known you were here I wouldn't have said, "I've read better."

(Crutcher smiles.)

MONTANA *(to audience)*: If you don't want to lose us, stop trying to tell us how to think. It makes it almost impossible to respect you.

And I know we don't have a prayer to stop the banning of this book, because I know you are all Red Brickers on the school board. So go ahead.

Take it. We'll find it and read it, and we'll post a list at the town library of every book you ban and read every one.

(Montana starts to walk away, but then goes back.)

MONTANA: Oh, and if you don't let Mr. Crutcher talk, you're nothing but cowards.

(Major applause, especially from the teens, but quite a few adults. Montana sits in a seat next to Eddie while Crutcher walks up to the mic. The room hangs with expectation.)

CHRIS CRUTCHER *(after a moment, speaking to Mr. Northcutt and Maxwell, but pointing at Montana)*: What she said.

(Disorder. Mr. Northcutt bangs his gavel as Billy walks on to address us. Everyone freezes. As Billy talks, all the board members and teens exit slowly from the stage. Only Eddie, Chad, and Montana remain.)

BILLY *(to audience)*: Despite the efforts of Montana and Ms. Lloyd, the board votes unanimously to cleanse the school's library of *Chin Music*, as well as the rest of Chris Crutcher's books. In the subsequent weeks there are empty slots where books by Alice Walker, Lauren Myracle, Stephanie Meyer, J.K. Rowling, and Sherman Alexie's books once stood. Bear Creek is also on a search for a new librarian. The old one didn't work out.

In the weeks after the board meeting, Eddie grew close to Chad and Montana. *(The three move close to one another.)* They loved driving around town together in Chad's truck, talking about comics, science, and God. Even made it up to Spokane a couple times to go book shopping and see some punk shows.

(Chad and Montana exit, giving high-fives or waving goodbye to Eddie, and leaving him alone with Billy.)

As for me and Eddie, well, he kept running his heart out all over town, but we spoke less and less. Fact is, he doesn't need me anymore.

(Billy turns toward Eddie. Eddie and Billy stand staring at each other a moment. Billy removes his hat and places it on Eddie's head.)

BILLY: So, goodbye. Goodbye Eddie Proffit, goodbye Dad, goodbye Ms. Lloyd, goodbye Chris Crutcher. Goodbye Bear Creek, Idaho. I'm off to

explore newly-formed galaxies and black holes and experience the breathtaking power and grace of the universe. I'll bump against all of you soon. *(Nodding to Crutcher, who is sitting in the audience.)* You probably sooner than the others, Chris Crutcher.

(Eddie watches Billy go and is left alone onstage as the galaxy is somehow illuminated above his head and behind him. He turns in the growing darkness to look up at the stars just as he did with his dad earlier in the play. Lights fade to black.)

END OF PLAY

THE SLEDDING HILL

When Eddie's dad and best friend, Billy, die within the space of a month, he elects to go mute to manage his pain. Soon, he begins seeing Billy everywhere—in dreams, while he's running—a fact that magnifies his grief and leads him to question his own sanity. But, with Billy's help, Eddie emerges from the dark room of his grief to confront powerful town censors who would ban a book from his high school English class in the name of morality. Narrated by Billy from beyond the grave, this electric theatrical adaptation of Chris Crutcher's beloved 2005 meta-fictional novel features a cast of passionate teen characters, imaginative staging, and more than one full-throated debate about the value of intellectual freedom and the rights of youth to read what they choose.

Chris Crutcher has written eleven critically acclaimed young adult novels, an autobiography, and two collections of short stories. He draws on his experience as a family therapist and child protection specialist to write honestly about real issues facing teenagers today. For his efforts, nearly every one of his books has been banned in a community somewhere in America. He has won three lifetime achievement awards for the body of his work: the Margaret A. Edwards Award, the ALAN Award, and the NCTE National Intellectual Freedom Award. Five of his books appeared on the American Library Association list of the Best Books For Teens of the Twentieth Century. Chris Crutcher lives in Spokane, Washington.

Jarrett Dapier is the 2016 recipient of the American Library Association John Phillip Immroth Memorial Award for his research into censorship in Chicago Public Schools. As a musician and actor, he has appeared at the Goodman Theater, Lookingglass Theater, and the White House. His stage adaptation of *My Ántonia* by Willa Cather premiered at the Station Theatre in Urbana, Illinois, where he is a company member. He lives in Evanston, Illinois.



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