FAITHFALL

A Play

by
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CAST OF CHARACTERS

WHITNEY LONG  A woman looking for answers – in her thirties or early forties.

FATHER MICHAEL  A Catholic priest - in his thirties or early forties.

NOTE: a ‘/’ indicates where the following line is supposed to begin.

TIME
Late spring of 2019.

PLACE
The sanctuary of Saint Anne’s Convent – somewhere in Chicago.
SETTING: Saint Anne’s Convent is a remarkably large facility with a nave (able to fit 150 parishioners), an outdoor garden, a library, a walking labyrinth and housing for over fifty Dominican Sisters of the Order of Saint Dumas. This fully functioning campus is open to the public, although few rarely enter for anything other than mass. The sanctuary, where our play takes place, is modestly ornate. Built in 1903, the stone arches and wood pay homage to the tradition of Roman Basilicas. It is quiet and peaceful in spite of its size. (NOTE: the scenic design can be suggestive/minimalistic – use blocks and benches if necessary.)

AT RISE: FATHER MICHAEL enters and crosses to the middle of the nave. He does not notice a woman sitting in the back pew with her head lowered, and he is so unintentionally quiet that she doesn’t raise her head to see his entrance. He looks to the chancel and altar for a moment then up to the ceiling. After a moment he crosses to the front pew and sits – slowly. For being relatively young, he sits down as if he’s twenty years older than he is; a man with a heavy burden. Moments pass before he takes out his rosary and moves to the kneeler. At this, the woman, WHITNEY, looks up but remains silent. MICHAEL prays with his rosary in hand for several moments – WHITNEY remains motionless. After some time, he finally stands, turns and is frightened by the sight of the woman.

MICHAEL

Oh!
(Whitney jumps up.)
Wow! / Oh, my....

WHITNEY

I’m sorry.

MICHAEL

You really / took me...
I didn’t mean to startle you.

Oh, wow... you...

Are you okay?

Yes. I just—

I didn’t want to interrupt you praying.

That’s okay.

I should have said something.

It’s all right. For a moment I saw—I thought you were somebody / else.

I’m her sister.

Pardon?


You look just like her.

We get that a lot. Or—Got that a lot...

The resemblance is remarkable.

Yeah...
MICHAEL

(he stares for an uncomfortable moment, then...)
I’m so sorry for your loss.

WHITNEY
Thank you. And thank you for the kind things you said during the service.

MICHAEL
It’s easy to say nice things about good people.

WHITNEY
I’m sure... And thank you for taking care of all the arrangements.

MICHAEL
The Sisters did most of the work.

WHITNEY
It was nice, so, please thank them for me.

MICHAEL
Of course.

WHITNEY
I haven’t been to Mass for—a long time. Even longer for a funeral. Catholic funeral—lots of singing.

MICHAEL
Perhaps that’s a good thing. Not having to go to funerals; not being burdened by death.

WHITNEY
...I didn’t say that.

(Michael smiles politely and nods his head, but is somewhat uncomfortable.)

MICHAEL
What can I do for you...?

WHITNEY
Oh, um, my name’s Whitney.

I’m Father Michael.
WHITNEY
I got that from the service, but it’s nice to meet you personally.

MICHAEL
Too bad it’s not under better circumstances.
(She nods in agreement.)
What can I do for you, Whitney?

WHITNEY
They said, when they called, I forget who it was, she said there were some personal effects—for the family—if we wanted...

MICHAEL
Right! Yes, um, photographs mostly. They’re in my office. Give me a minute, I’ll get them for you.

WHITNEY
That’d be great.

(Father Michael exits. Whitney sits for a moment, looking around. She’s restless, and is looking about. She picks up a Bible and stares at it before returning it. The East Wall and altars catch her eye, and she stands, slowly walking toward the chancel, stopping at the altar. She stares up at them.

Michael re-enters carrying a small box.)

MICHAEL
(Handing her the box.)
Here you go.

WHITNEY
(Taking it.)
Thank you.

MICHAEL
Not a problem.

(Whitney holds the box, staring at it – debating whether to open it or not.)

MICHAEL cont’d
You can open it if you want.
WHITNEY

Maybe later.

(Shes stares at it.)

MICHAEL

Something wrong?

WHITNEY

It’s heavy. I mean, it’s not, but, it is.

(Beat.)

I thought it’d be bigger. Like she’d have more... stuff. But it’s... dense.

(Beat.)

This is it?

She didn’t have much.

WHITNEY

Right... Why would she?

MICHAEL

This is upsetting you. I’m sorry.

WHITNEY

This is all she has. All she was. An entire life in one little box.

MICHAEL

I’m sure you have a lot going through your head right now.

WHITNEY

No shit. I—sorry... I’m not purposefully trying to offend you. Really.

MICHAEL

Even if you were, I’m not going to judge you for—I don’t know, processing everything.

WHITNEY

A Catholic Priest not judging someone...?

MICHAEL

We’re reforming.

WHITNEY

I’ve noticed.
MICHAEL
Would you like to talk about this, Whitney? About her?

WHITNEY
No... I don't know... She and I—we didn't speak. For like, a long time. Twelve years.

MICHAEL
Sit, please. We can talk.

WHITNEY
That's okay...
   (She stands, nearly motionless.)
Honestly, I'm not sure how I should be feeling right now.

MICHAEL
There's no proper way to grieve.

WHITNEY
Is that what I'm doing?

MICHAEL
Regardless of the relationship you had with your sister, she was still a part of your life. Her death is a loss we all bear.

WHITNEY
Especially under the circumstances.

...yes...

MICHAEL

WHITNEY
It's bizarre, right? I mean, for a nun to kill herself is...

MICHAEL
It's happened before.

WHITNEY
I looked it up: “Suicidal nuns.” The things we Google, right?

MICHAEL
(beat.)
Would you like to sit? We could talk. Or not, it's up to you.
WHITNEY
I should go. My family’s is waiting.

MICHAEL
Invite them in, they don’t have to wait outside.

WHITNEY
They’re getting pizza. The kids were hungry.

MICHAEL
Nice of your husband to babysit.

WHITNEY
I didn’t say I had a husband.

MICHAEL
I—I just assumed.

WHITNEY
And dads don’t babysit. Dads are dads.

MICHAEL
...Of course. My apologies.
(beat.)
How old are your kids?

WHITNEY
Grace is seven, and William is five.

MICHAEL
I’m sure they’re wonderful.

WHITNEY
They are. Although I have no doubt they’re giving Matt a run for his money right now. Don’t get me wrong, he’s great with them, I got lucky with a really awesome partner who turned out to be a great dad. They’re a handful sometimes.

MICHAEL
Kids are kids.

WHITNEY
Right...

MICHAEL
God bless them.
Yeah... anyway... (Indicating the box) Thanks again.

Certainly.

(She starts walking away down through the nave, but stops and turns around.)

I guess I have a silly question. (tapping the box.) Why did you have this? Why not the Mother Superior or whoever?

No reason really. I offered.

Yeah?

Everyone is very upset. In shock to some degree or another. It just made sense for me to hang on to it. (Whitney raises an eyebrow.) One less thing for them to have to worry about.

Did you look inside?

I helped to gather her things.

Did you... Is there—like...

...a note? (She nods.)...not that we found...

(beat.) She drowned herself.
MICHAEL

Yes.

WHITNEY

You really have to wanna die to drown yourself. It’s not like pills where you just drift off or a gun that’s, like, “blam!”—lights out.

MICHAEL

Whitney—

WHITNEY

The police told me there was only one set of footprints on the shore of the lake. Ya know, hers. One set of footprints... and that she was running. They said the strides of her footprints were so far apart that she had to have been running. She ran to her death. She wanted to die so badly that she ran, ran into the water. She fought to stay under long enough for her lungs filled up. She fought the instinctive urge to breathe so she could die.

(Beat.)
She ran headlong into it.

MICHAEL

There’s no rational reasoning to be found here. Certainly nothing that would give any of us comfort. It’s a tragedy.

WHITNEY

No, that’s Gwen. Running headlong into a situation that she can’t back out of. Hurting anybody and everybody along the way.

MICHAEL

That’s not the person we knew.

WHITNEY

She found God and was transformed. Yeah, I know... a long con.

MICHAEL

Why don’t you have a seat and talk with me?

(She stands firm.)
Please. This has been rough for me, too, and I could use the company.

WHITNEY

I should get to my family.

MICHAEL

They’ll understand.
(Whitney considers his request, then considers leaving, and finally, cautiously steps toward Michael.)

WHITNEY
Okay, but let me text Matt.

MICHAEL
Sure.

(She sets the box down on a pew and pulls out her phone. She shoots off a text, it’s somewhat lengthy, and returns the phone to her purse. She hesitantly sits in the pew and absentmindedly puts her hand on the box. Father Michael waits for her to sit before taking a seat in nearby pew, turning to face her.)

MICHAEL cont’d
Tell me about Gwen.

WHITNEY
Tell me about “Sister Catherine.”

MICHAEL
(Taking a deep breath.)
She was here before I arrived. I’ve only been serving with the Sisters for three years. She worked in the kitchen, mostly; did the shopping and helped with the meal prep and cooking. Helped at the food pantry, too, which is also sort of one of my pet projects. It’s a good way to meet people in need...
(beat.)
She, uh, came here right after taking her vows. She once told me she was lucky to be here because she had family in the area. You, I assume?

WHITNEY
We’re in Wrigleyville.

MICHAEL
That close?

WHITNEY
That close...
(He nods, staring at her.)
What?
MICHAEL

It’s unfortunate you didn’t have an opportunity to reconnect. You two were so close.

WHITNEY

Geographically, you mean.

MICHAEL

...yes.

WHITNEY

Few miles away and worlds apart.

MICHAEL

It’s too bad.

WHITNEY

Shit happens. You were saying...?

MICHAEL

(He nods.)
She took special pride in the kitchen. She was very particular about nutrition, but also cost. Frugal. A coupon hoarder and diligent about good deals. She could haggle impressively well. Yet, would splurge at the Farmer’s Markets. We would go round and around about it, because it’s always more expensive, but she fought me on it. She’d always say something like, “The farmers need our help, too,” or “A couple extra dollars to us keeps the lights on for them.” “We’re doing the Lord’s work.”
(beat.)
She was right, of course.
(He has started to drift off a bit. He smiles.)
She loved the Sunday school classes. She didn’t teach but would pop in and observe or help out. I think she enjoyed playing with the kids – singing the songs and talking to them. Kids are remarkably smart when it comes to faith. She was always laughing in those rooms.

WHITNEY

Sounds like you were close, too.

MICHAEL

She confided in me. I confided in her. We got to know each other pretty well.
(Beat.)
At least I thought I knew her...

WHITNEY

...I’m sorry for your loss, too.
MICHAEL

Thank you...

WHITNEY

Can I ask you something?

MICHAEL

Of course.

WHITNEY

Did she have friends? I mean, let’s be honest, a lot of these nuns are, like...

MICHAEL

Really old...?

(Whitney laughs, and tucks her hair behind her ear.)

WHITNEY

That’s not / really—

MICHAEL

You have the same mannerisms.

WHITNEY

...what?

MICHAEL

She and I would... banter. She’d really get under my skin, but occasionally I’d get her, and she’d get mad or frustrated or defensive, but she’d laugh like that and tuck her hair behind her ear, just like you.

WHITNEY

She didn’t wear a—a habit?

MICHAEL

Not always. Sometimes for mass or other ceremonies. Again, we’re a bit looser than we used to be. And the Sisters have always been more progressive than the Church.

WHITNEY

You spent a lot of time with her.

MICHAEL

(beat.)

We were friends.
WHITNEY
That’s good... I’m glad she had friends.

MICHAEL
Oh, yeah, she got along with everyone—except, maybe Sister Maria, but that’s a whole other thing. You’re right, there’s a bit of an age difference. I think that’s why we got along so well.

You noticed... things...

...not enough....

WHITNEY
But little things. Maybe a lot of little things.

MICHAEL
She was my friend.

WHITNEY
Didn’t you notice? Couldn’t you tell she felt this way? Did anyone?

(He goes to speak, stops, looks about – almost as if he’s composing himself. He looks to the heavens and, after a moment, sighs.)

MICHAEL
I should have. In hindsight, yes. Too little, too late.

(Beat.)
She would get down; sad, I mean. I was concerned about depression. We talked about it once, I told her that there were a lot of people in the Priesthood who deal with all sorts of issues that require extra attention—trauma, addiction... You know, we’re human, too. She blew it off. Well, no she didn’t—she was gracious and thankful for my concern, but she said she was just “feeling a bit down.”

(Beat.)
The past couple of weeks... she was distant. Withdrawn. Friendly and joking, but there was something I couldn’t put my finger on. She was praying a lot. She would always pray to the Mother Mary, but about a week ago, she would go to that alter over there.

(He points.)

WHITNEY
That’s, um...
MICHAEL

Saint Christopher.

WHITNEY

Yeah... Patron saint of travel and children.
(He looks at her with surprise.)
Some things you don't forget.

MATHEW

Looking back, she was, I don't know, searching...? Maybe even...

WHITNEY

Planning...?

MICHAEL

I missed it. I thought she had come out of it. The day before she—she was acting almost normal. You know, back to her regular self, but... almost hyper. Manic, even. Normally, we’d talk, but she was evasive, very casual and... distracted. When she did speak with me she barely made eye contact. When I was sixteen, I was dating this girl who did the same thing right before she dumped me. It felt like that.

WHITNEY

Did you love her?

MICHAEL

Oh, man... I don't know. As much as a sixteen-year-old could, I guess.

WHITNEY

No, I—Gwen. Did you love Gwen?

MICHAEL

Oh...

(beat.)
Well... yes, of course.

WHITNEY

No, I mean... The way you talk about her...

(beat.)
Were you in love with her?

MICHAEL

Oh, no. No, it wasn’t like that.

WHITNEY

Because you talk about her like—
MICHAEL

We were just friends.

(She nods her head, signifying that she’s not going to fight him on the issues. She stares at him.)

WHITNEY

She’s always had those down periods. Even as a kid. Our parents didn’t see it. Or didn’t want to. Or did and just didn’t see the seriousness of it. Who knows...

(Beat.)

She was such a funny kid, you know? Quick and quirky. She would do impressions and would talk to anybody. Always dancing and prancing around. And her giggle... I’d be in a different room and I’d hear her giggling – by herself for no reason. My parents thought for sure she’d be an actress. I thought she was heading for stand-up or, maybe, SNL. Our parents took us to Second City one time, and she was just enthralled by it. I was in high school so she must have been, like, ten or eleven. I’m a few years older. Well, five years actually.

(Beat.)

Was. I was five years older. Guess that clock stops, too.

MICHAEL

“Too”?

WHITNEY

Something our dad always used to say. Whenever somebody died, he said that they stopped the clock. “They stopped the clock on Uncle Ted.” “Gram’s clock stopped last night.” He was always so casual about death. Announcing a death was like reading a headline from the newspaper or something. Like he was talking about the market taking a turn or telling us it was going to rain. He wasn’t wrong; it was just a weird way to tell us that someone we knew, someone we loved, was gone and that we would never see them again. Ever.

(Beat.)

I’m off track... Gwen – funny kid. And sweet. We had our stupid little sibling quarrels, but for the most part we got along great.

(Beat.)

For a while anyway...

(beat.)

We had a brother. Did you know that?

MICHAEL

Yes. Cancer, right?

WHITNEY

Leukemia. Middle kid—three years younger than me. Died when he was four. I
WHITNEY cont’d

don’t even know if Gwenny remembers him—
(Beat.)
Gwenny... been a long time since I called her that...
(She starts to tear up, lowering her head, but she fights off the tears.)
Fuck!
(Realizing.)
Jeeze... Sorry.

You’re forgiven.

MICHAEL

It’s that easy?

WHITNEY

If you’re sincere.

MICHAEL

WHITNEY

Oh, well, I guess I should have come in here years ago. So many things I need you to absolve me of.

I wish it worked like that.

MICHAEL

WHITNEY

Me too...

(Silence.)

MICHAEL

What made you leave the Church?

WHITNEY

My parents.

MICHAEL

Their death?

WHITNEY

You know, I’m at a real disadvantage here. You seem to know a lot about me, and I don’t know anything about you other than you like poor people and enjoy wearing black.
MICHAEL
Also, that I like having the advantage of knowing more about people than they know about me.

WHITNEY
Cute. You're witty, aren't you?
(Her phone dings. She grabs it.)
Sorry.
(She reads the text and shoots a reply.)
Just an update. They're enjoying themselves. Where was I?

MICHAEL
Your parents' death.

WHITNEY
Yes... happy topic... Their death was that final straw, ya know? Not even their actual death, but how people treated it. Car accidents are random, and searching for comfort or some kind of meaning behind it was stupid. I was twenty-five, living on my own, totally independent, but...
(Beat.)
Lots of therapy, ya know? Had to get help to see that I was still just a kid. I didn't have the coping skills to handle something like that and give Gwen what she needed, too. I went to our Parish for help and didn't get what I needed.
(Beat.)
Looking back, ya know, I just needed a hug. I was a child needing somebody to hold me and tell me, "It's going to be okay." Instead all I got was platitudes and pity.

MICHAEL
Faith and hope can be dashed with the loss of a loved one.

WHITNEY
Yeah, crap like that. "God's plan... he works in mysterious ways... they're in Heaven... blahblablablaha." The Priests and Sisters were all great at saying a lot of nothing.
(She smiles, proud of not cursing. He waves for her to continue.)
My parents were "good Catholics." They had faith and tried to make the Church proud. But they were rigid in their thinking. Everything was black and white. Everything was "the Church this" and "the Church that." Which didn't help with Gwen's problems.

MICHAEL
Everybody has problems. She had lost her parents.
WHITNEY
You think I cut ties with my sister because she became a Nun? There’s history. She was a fun kid, but by high school? I was gone—in college. My parents were having a hard time with her. She started lying, staying out all night, partying and doing who knows what else. They didn’t want to do anything about it, and every time I brought it up, they blew it off. “You’re not here,” they’d say, “You can’t say that.” And, of course, “Father Donnelly says it’s a phase.”
(Beat.)
They died, and Gwen just... went off the rails. She was a junior at Loyola. I tried to help, but... there was so much lying. She flunked out. Starting hooking up with a string guys for places to stay until they got sick of her crap and kicked her out. She stayed with me for a while. Stole from me. Was always drunk or high on something. I couldn’t take it anymore. I kicked her out and cut her off.
(Beat.)
Did you know all of that?

MICHAEL
Most of it.

WHITNEY
And...?

MICHAEL
And what?

WHITNEY
That doesn’t shock you?

MICHAEL
Everyone has a story. Some people’s stories have very dark chapters.

WHITNEY
Where’s the fire and brimstone?

MICHAEL
She told me a lot of things in confidence. And it’s not my place to judge. There’s only One who can do that.

WHITNEY
Right...

MICHAEL
Besides, that’s not the person we knew here.
WHITNEY
Well, good, that makes it all okay then. It wasn’t your problem so why should you have to care about it?

MICHAEL
That’s not what I—

WHITNEY
Did you know she got pregnant—a pregnancy that she terminated?
(He hesitates, but says nothing.)
Guess she didn’t let you in on everything.
(beat.)
I paid for it. I drove her there, and held her hand the whole way. That night, she went out and didn’t come back for three days. No phone call. No message telling me where she was or if she was okay. Nothing.

MICHAEL
Whatever her past indiscretions may have been, she atoned for them.

WHITNEY
Except for this last one.

(They go silent.)

MICHAEL
What are you doing here, Whitney? What are your reasons for being here?

WHITNEY
I didn’t have a choice.

MICHAEL
Sure you did. You didn’t have to come.

WHITNEY
To my sister’s funeral?

MICHAEL
So you’re here out of obligation?

WHITNEY
No. I needed to be here.

MICHAEL
So, there is something you need. Inside your heart you are searching for something—closure, solace...?
WHITNEY
Yeah, I guess...

MICHAEL
You’re not here to tear down a person who you used to know?

WHITNEY
I loved my sister.

MICHAEL
But you’re angry.

WHITNEY
You’re not?

MICHAEL
No. Not angry. I’m... sad.

WHITNEY
Welcome to the world of Gwen.

MICHAEL
Please stop that. Stop trying to convince me that the person we knew was just a—a, what... A fake? “A long-con,” as you said?

WHITNEY
I’m not trying to convince you of anything. I’m here to say goodbye, and collect her things.

MICHAEL
We could have mailed that to you. I know you’re conflicted, and sad, and mad, but you have no right to destroy your sister’s memory.

WHITNEY
You didn’t know her the way I did.

MICHAEL
And you didn’t know her the way we did. The way I did.

WHITNEY
And how did you know her? “Biblically”?

MICHAEL
Stop that, or I will ask you to leave.
WHITNEY
You were the one that asked me to stay. I want to leave.

MICHAEL
Then leave.

(Silence—a standoff.)

WHITNEY
You want to believe in a person who didn’t exist.

MICHAEL
And you can’t let go of a person who changed. You want her legacy to be her past, not who she discovered herself to be.

WHITNEY
Who she discovered ended up killing her!

(Silence.)

WHITNEY cont’d
All I have of my sister is who she was. Maybe that’s not fair to her, but it’s all I know.

MICHAEL
Are you the same person you were in high school?

That’s a stupid question.

MICHAEL
Are you the same person you were before you got married? Before you had kids?

WHITNEY
No, and definitely no.

MICHAEL
If you ran into somebody you knew five, ten, twenty years ago and they thought you were the same person, you’d be pretty upset, right?

WHITNEY
Okay, but—

MICHAEL
Mathew seven-two states, “For as you judge, so will you be judged, and the measure with which you measure will be measured out to you.”
WHITNEY

Don’t quote scripture at me.

MICHAEL

Fine, but your judgment will come back onto you.

WHITNEY

You people do nothing but judge. I’m pretty sure Mathew also talks about hypocrisy—something about wood in your eye.

(He’s surprised.)

What? I lived with this stuff for over twenty years, you think it all goes away just because I think it’s crap?

MICHAEL

The scripture actually says, “...remove the wooden beam from your eye first; then you will see clearly to remove the splinter from your brother’s eye.”

WHITNEY

Yeah, that. So... remove the beam...

MICHAEL

I’m not trying to fight you, Whitney.

WHITNEY

Then stop telling me how I’m supposed to be feeling.

MICHAEL

People are capable of change. Remarkable change! Hardships and issues that would break one person can ignite a miraculous transformation in others. Those who embrace that change and alter the way they navigate through the world are amazing humans. Making the choice to better yourself and be in service to others makes you one of God’s chosen people.

WHITNEY

I don’t know the person you’re talking about! I’m trying to understand why my selfish, self-destructive sister found it okay to completely change her life, not tell me—hurting me more—and then ends up devastating the people who embraced her change.

MICHAEL

If you can’t afford the same generosity to your own sister that you’d expect others to give to you, then, maybe, you are the problem.

WHITNEY

You’re out of line.
MICHAEL

I don’t mean to be.

WHITNEY

You act like I don’t know what I’m talking about, but you’re not listening.

MICHAEL

You’re not wrong to feel the way you feel. I only want you to move away from your judgment.

WHITNEY

I’m trying! I’m talking to you, aren’t I?

MICHAEL

Then keep trying!

WHITNEY

She was destructive. To herself. To me. You’re asking me to forget everything that happened?

MICHAEL

Not forget. Just forgive.

WHITNEY

That’s insane.

MICHAEL

Forgiveness is insane? What do you expect to accomplish by hanging on to your anger?

WHITNEY

My anger is justified. I have a right to be angry.

MICHAEL

But not a right to condemn your sister because you can’t let go of your anger.

WHITNEY

So, she doesn’t carry any responsibility?

MICHAEL

She atoned for that.

WHITNEY

Not to me!

(Another silence.)
MICHAEL

You have to forgive her, Whitney.

WHITNEY

Do you forgive her?

MICHAEL

I haven’t stopped praying for her. And I haven’t stopped praying for forgiveness for not having done more. We all shoulder some responsibility. I made the mistake of thinking her faith would carry her through the darkness.

WHITNEY

But have you forgiven her?

MICHAEL

(beat.)
In my mind, yes. It may take some time for my heart to catch up.

WHITNEY

You’re asking me to do something that you can’t even do, and, you definitely don’t have the same baggage as I do.

MICHAEL

You don’t know what baggage I’m carrying. And I also have the comfort of knowing my faith will guide me through this.

WHITNEY

Faith... That’s great, you know, fine, you have faith. But “faith” didn’t save her. Not hers, and not yours!

MICHAEL

That’s not how faith works. Faith isn’t a medication we take when something goes wrong. Faith is not a superhero that will come to our rescue when things go bad. Faith is a way of living—recognizing that regardless of what life throws at us, we will be okay.

WHITNEY

My sister had faith. She killed herself.

MICHAEL

Only God has the answer to that.

WHITNEY

More platitudes...
MICHAEL
What does the medical community say about suicide? Do they have any answers that explain why somebody would take their own life?

WHITNEY
At least they’re trying to figure it out.

MICHAEL
Are they?

WHITNEY
Treatments, methods, therapies that work a little bit. Medications to help with depression and all sorts of stuff.

MICHAEL
But do they have answers?

WHITNEY
They certainly aren’t burdening people with the weight of “sin.”

MICHAEL
When your sister confided in me, I told her she was loved. That God loved her. This order loved her. That she was surrounded by His grace and didn’t need to flog herself with the chains of her past. Does that sound like I was trying to make her feel bad?

WHITNEY
…no…

MICHAEL
I wish that had been enough. I wish I could have taken her pain from her. (beat.) You want answers that I don’t have. Only God has what you’re looking for.

WHITNEY
He and I aren’t really on speaking terms.

MICHAEL
Give it time. Have / faith.

WHITNEY
“Faith”! Right, how did I know…? Faith can’t give me what I need.

MICHAEL
You’re conflating faith with knowledge.
Whitney
And you're using it to cover up bullshit.

Michael
Stop it. That's childish and beneath you. And it's insulting to me, to this Order, and our Lord.

Whitney
There was a person here, somebody you all cared for who was in pain, and you did nothing. You offered her nothing!

We are not to blame!

Whitney
That doesn't mean you did enough.

We did what we could.

Michael
Did you?

Whitney
What should we have done? Please, tell me, because you seem to be the expert. You were obviously very successful in taking care of her yourself.

Fuck you.

Michael
Stop it! You don't have to respect me, or our faith, but you are in our house, and I expect you to at least be courteous in our home!

(Silence. After a moment, Whitney grabs the box and starts down the aisle to exit.)

Wait.

(Stopping.)

Whitney
Why?

I don't want to leave it like this.
(She steps back toward him.)

WHITNEY
That was a mean thing to say. I tried everything to help. She refused counseling, laughed at the suggestion of rehab. Told me to mind my own business even as I was nursing her through withdrawals. She told me to screw myself when I asked her why she sold our mother’s engagement ring to buy drugs. She punched me in the face when I told her I was done helping her, and threw a lamp through my T.V. as she stormed out of my apartment.

(She takes a deep breath.)
I tried. I fought for her—for years. She threw me away. She was all I had, and she didn’t want to fight as hard as I was fighting. She was the one that didn’t want anything to do with me.

(She’s fighting tears.)
So you don’t get to tell me that I failed. I gave up fighting for someone who didn’t care anymore. I stopped fighting because she didn’t care if she won or lost. She didn’t care that all we had was each other.

(Beat.)
I didn’t fail; I surrendered.

(Beat.)
That was mean of you to say that...

(Long silence.)

MICHAEL
My family had a cabin up in Wisconsin. Small, but nice. My grandfather had built it himself and it went to my dad and his brothers when he passed on. One summer we went up there - late spring, or early summer, June, I think – there had be a lot of rain – a lot – and my dad was out there all day filling sandbags and digging trenches because the river was getting higher and higher. The rain kept coming, and finally the water went over everything he had been working on. Washed out the porch and flooded part of the main room. He was so mad. “Your grandfather built the darn thing—” but he didn’t say ‘darn’, “Your grandfather built the darn thing too close to the bleeping river.” But he didn’t say ‘bleeping’. He said, “I should have come up here sooner, and brought some more guys.” I said, “Dad, I could’ve helped you.” He said, “You wouldn’t have done it right.”

WHITNEY
Jeeze...

MICHAEL
Yeah. He apologized later, said he wasn’t mad at me, and that he should have asked for help. He was mad at himself and took it out on me.
Classic dad move.

He was a good man, but he would get pretty irrational when things didn’t go his way. But he was a good dad.

(beat.)
Actually, that’s not true, I don’t know why I said that. He was a bastard. He was bitter and took his frustrations out on us all the time. That was actually a rare moment where he took responsibility and apologized. Probably why I remember it.

(beat.)
It’s funny, after all these years and knowing everything I know I still defend him.

Because you loved him.

Maybe.

Why’re you telling me this?

We often lash out at others when, really, we’re upset with our own actions. ...you hit a nerve. I’ve been wondering what more I could have done, and... my guilt—no, my... my shame... You called me on it, and I hurt you with my defensiveness. That was wrong, and I’m sorry.

(Beat.)
You’re forgiven. Three Hail Mary’s and an act of contrition, please.

Yes, ma’am.

(Silence.)

Sorry you had a shitty dad.

I forgave him a long time ago. But I do wish he didn’t give me his temper. That’s... that’s something I have a harder time dealing with...

...Family.
MICHAEL

Family.

(Long pause.)

WHITNEY
I guess everyone does stupid things for the people they love.

I suppose.

WHITNEY
I loved my sister.

MICHAEL
I know.

WHITNEY
You loved her, too.

MICHAEL
Not like that.

WHITNEY
No... it’s just—it’s nice to know she was loved.

MICHAEL
(Beat.)
I’m being a terrible host. Can I get you something? Some water or something?

WHITNEY
A hard drink would be great? I’m sure a glass of wine is around here somewhere.

MICHAEL
(thinks for a moment)
I’ll do you one better. I’ll be right back.

(He exits. Whitney pulls out her phone and sends her husband another text. She puts her phone away. She stares at the box. She hesitates before slowly taking off the top. She picks through the top layer, pulling out a single photo. She smiles, returns it and pulls out another, then another.

Michael reenters with a bottle and two glasses.)
MICHAEL cont’d
I really don’t think we should drink the communion wine.

WHITNEY
Because drinking the blood of Christ for recreational purposes is a sin?

MICHAEL
No, because it’s not very good wine.

(He pours her a glass and hands it to her.)

WHITNEY
No label?

MICHAEL
No label.

WHITNEY
Should we be drinking in here?

MICHAEL
No. But under the circumstances, I think the good Lord will forgive us. We just won’t make a habit of it.

WHITNEY
Ha… Habit. Nun joke. Speaking of, you’re not afraid the Mother Superior or whoever is gonna come out here and yell at us?

MICHAEL
No, not her. Who do you think I got this from?

WHITNEY
Seriously?

MICHAEL
Who we need to watch out for is Sister Maria. She’s old-school, and, quite frankly, terrifies me.

WHITNEY
Careful, Father. You’re starting to sound human.

MICHAEL
Oh, no, not that.

(Whitney takes a drink. Her face puckers.)
WHITNEY
Holy... What is this?

MICHAEL
Honey Moonshine.

WHITNEY
Moonshine? It's like pure sugar and ethanol.

MICHAEL
Yeah, the Mother Superior makes it.

WHITNEY
You're kidding.

MICHAEL
We all have our hobbies.

WHITNEY
(She takes another drink. Again, the face.)
Wow!

MICHAEL
I know, right?

WHITNEY
Seriously, I can feel the chest hair growing already...
(She drinks, again, grimaces. Beat.)
So, what's your hobby?

MICHAEL
I paint.

WHITNEY
Really?

MICHAEL
Yeah. I'm not very good, but I like it.

WHITNEY
What do you paint? Like landscapes or portraits of Saints.

MICHAEL
No. No people. I can never get the faces to look right. Or the hands. Whenever I
(MORE.)
MICHAEL cont’d
paint a person they always end up looking like they have some botched face-lift and
their hands are these chubby little baby hands with sausage fingers.

(She chuckles, and tucks her hair. He notices, but
doesn’t say anything. She notices him noticing
and gets a little uncomfortable.)

WHITNEY
You didn’t answer the question.

MICHAEL
About what I paint?
(She nods.)
I don’t know… I guess it’s, like, abstract expressionism, but sometimes I think that’s
what bad painters tell themselves so they can’t be criticized. Tell somebody your
work is an abstraction kinda limits the possibilities for criticism, you know?

WHITNEY
Do you like what you paint?

MICHAEL
Like I said, I’m not very good.

WHITNEY
But do you like it?

MICHAEL
Most of the time.
(Silence.)

WHITNEY
There’s a difference between guilt and shame, you know.

MICHAEL
What do you mean?

WHITNEY
You said you felt guilty, and then you corrected yourself by saying “shame.”

MICHAEL
Yes...
WHITNEY
I had a therapist tell me once that guilt is feeling bad about something you’ve done, and shame is thinking you’re a bad person because of what you’ve done.

MICHAEL
That’s insightful.

WHITNEY
Do you really think you’re a bad person because of this?

...no.

WHITNEY
Then, maybe, cut yourself some slack.
(Beat.)
And... I don’t blame you, any of you, for what happened. I shouldn’t have said any of that.

MICHAEL
Thank you, but... you’re not wrong. We had concerns that we didn’t take seriously—or, no, that’s not right... We didn’t know how to take them seriously. We were all... unprepared... ill-equipped...

(They sit, each taking sips of their drinks.)

MICHAEL cont’d
Do you have any hobbies?

WHITNEY
I work full time, and I have two kids.

What do you do?

WHITNEY
I work for the city—public relations.

MICHAEL
PR for the city of Chicago... I don’t envy you.

WHITNEY
Yeah, and I don’t get to do the fun tourism stuff either. It’s all crisis management and press releases on policies, committee meetings—so, so many meetings...
MICHAEL

You don’t enjoy it.

WHITNEY

I love it actually—the pace, the energy. Every day I get to be a part of trying to make the city a little bit better. We fail miserably all the time, but we keep trying. I’m proud of that.

What does your husband do?

WHITNEY

He teaches Creative Writing at Columbia.

MICHAEL

Impressive—Professor of Creative Writing.

WHITNEY

Lecturer actually. He should be on faculty, but... Tenure-track positions are a thing of the past, apparently.

(She smiles.)

He’s a really good writer. I’m biased, but... he is.

He must be pretty smart.

WHITNEY

He’s very smart... He’s wise.

You must have smart kids.

WHITNEY

Most of the time. Matt says we have the dumbest smart-kids in the world. He’s joking, of course.

Of course.

WHITNEY

Well, kinda joking... Kids are just so weird, ya know? Or maybe you don’t...

MICHAEL

I’m around kids a lot. And, I have nieces and a nephew. They’re fun, but, yeah, I know what you mean.
WHITNEY
Gracie reads at a fifth-grade level, but she can never remember to tie her shoes or flush the toilet. She has a wonderful imagination, but it distracts her sometimes. William doesn’t eat anything but chicken nuggets, crackers and candy. He has more candy hidden in his bedroom than we can keep up with and we have no idea where he gets it.

(Beat.)
Reminds me of Gwen...

(Long pause... she drinks, cringes.)

WHITNEY cont’d
I don’t know if I can finish this.

MICHAEL
Probably for the best. I wouldn’t want to have to wheel you out of here.

WHITNEY
Be a heck of a story though.

(They drink.)

MICHAEL
(Pointing to the box.)
You opened it.

WHITNEY
Yeah... curiosity got the best of me.

Anything interesting?

MICHAEL

WHITNEY
This picture right on top. It’s from our trip to Disney World.

(She holds it out.)
Look at this fashion.

MICHAEL
(taking a look at the picture.)
Yeesh... early ‘90s.

WHITNEY
I was so proud of those bangs. The higher the better. It took a whole can of Aqua Net to make that hold.
MICHAEL

I like the fanny-packs.

WHITNEY

Why was neon even a thing?

MICHAEL

It goes well with your Umbro shorts. You were very stylish for the time.

WHITNEY

How was any of this every considered stylish? (She looks at the picture.)

Gwen ate a whole funnel cake before going on Space Mountain. I thought she was going to puke and of course I was sitting right behind her. I was more terrified of that than the ride itself.

MICHAEL

Did she?

WHITNEY

Not on the ride. She walked outside, went straight to a planter and exploded.

MICHAEL

You know over a thousand people vomit at Disney World every year.

WHITNEY

Really?

MICHAEL

According to the Internet.

WHITNEY

Well, then it must be true. (Beat.) A thousand people, that’s it?

MICHAEL

Right? I thought it would have been more, too.

WHITNEY

I’m sure Disney is manipulating that number. Can’t have people puking their guts out in the happiest place on earth.

(She flips through the pictures. She stops, surprised.)
MICHAEL

You okay?

WHITNEY

This...

(Pulling out a picture.)

This is my family. Like recent—we went skiing in Colorado in January.

(He looks at the picture.)

I... I sent this to my aunt.

MICHAEL

Your mom's sister?

WHITNEY

Yeah, she kinda looked after us when my parents died. She lives in Arizona, but she did what she could. I try to send her updates when I can. It'd be a lot easier if she would get on the stupid Facebook bandwagon.

(Beat.)

She—she passed this on to Gwen?

MICHAEL

I guess. I know she and your sister would communicate occasionally.

(Whitney digs through the box, pulling out handwritten letters on stationary, she looks more quickly, grabbing and flipping through items. At the bottom of the box she stops, reaching in and removing a stack of envelopes.)

WHITNEY

These are all addressed to me. At our old place and our new one. She—She was keeping tabs on me? On us?

I don't know the details.

MICHAEL

WHITNEY

You knew these were in here.

MICHAEL

Yes.

WHITNEY

Why didn't you tell me?
(Whitney stares at him, then to the letters. She flips through them, pulling one out at random, looking it over.)

WHITNEY cont’d
Figures she’d be keeping an eye on me. Little jerk...

MICHAEL
I’m sure she just wanted to know you were okay.

WHITNEY
Yeah...
(She has been counting the envelopes)
Twelve envelopes.

MICHAEL
Is that important?

WHITNEY
I don’t know. I mean we didn’t speak for twelve years.

MICHAEL
Coincidence?

WHITNEY
...maybe...
(Again, Whitney stares at him.)
What aren’t you telling me?

MICHAEL
I’m not trying to deceive you, but... I don’t know. I didn’t want to pry.

WHITNEY
I’m sure...
(She looks at the envelope she’s holding and opens it. She takes a deep breath before pulling out its contents. It’s a handwritten letter, which she begins to read.)

WHITNEY cont’d
You wanna hear this?

MICHAEL
If you're willing to share.
WHITNEY
(Grabbing her drink and downing the rest.)
“Dear Whit.”
(She pauses. Takes a breath.)
“Whit...”
(She stops reading.)
I can’t. I won’t read these.
(She thinks for a few moments.)
Why didn’t she just call me? It would have been awkward, and I probably would have been a total bitch, but she—we could have worked through it.
(Beat.)
God damn her.

MICHAEL
Hey!

WHITNEY
I mean it. And I use those words with purpose. She watches me from a far, a safe distance where she doesn’t have to deal with the crap she put me through.

MICHAEL
She wanted to make things right.

WHITNEY
Well she didn’t. In spectacular Gwen fashion, I might add. She knew what needed to be done, and she chose—to do nothing.

MICHAEL
She wrote the letters. She was willing.

WHITNEY
She was a coward. This is a coward’s way of taking responsibility; a coward’s way of escaping accountability.

MICHAEL
She was never able to escape it. It consumed her—the damage from her past.
(Beat.)
And I don’t believe that you want her to be damned for that.

WHITNEY
...no... no, I don’t want that.
(She goes quiet.)
You asked me why I came here.

MICHAEL
Yes.
WHITNEY

That’s why. I need to know...

(beat.)

...Is my sister in hell?

MICHAEL

Is that where you think she belongs?

WHITNEY

Don’t do that! Don’t give that Priestly, vague... whatever. No Catholic bull.

MICHAEL

It’s not bull, Whitney.

WHITNEY

I need a straight answer. I don’t know the rules on this.

MICHAEL

It’s not about the rules. It’s not dogma, or liturgy. It’s belief. It’s what we believe.

WHITNEY

Then tell me. Is she in hell?

MICHAEL

(Beat.)

Short answer: No.

And the long answer?

WHITNEY

(Beat.)

It’s complicated.

MICHAEL

What is it with you people? Why can’t you just give a straight answer?

WHITNEY

Because we don’t have the answers.

WHITNEY

No shit...
MICHAEL

Language...

(Beat.)

I know it’s shocking to admit that we don’t know everything, but we’re human. We don’t know why somebody would do something like this anymore than anybody else. Our beliefs, our faith, guide us through times of uncertainty. We pray for guidance and we seek the wisdom of others to help navigate this stuff, but ultimately, we are the ones that have to endure it.

WHITNEY

Michael... Where is my sister?

(He hesitates, breathes, pauses.)

MICHAEL

The Catechism states that we are responsible for the life God has given to us. God is the Master of life, and we have an obligation to preserve life for the salvation of our soul. We are stewards, not owners, of the life God has entrusted to us. Life is precious—all life.

WHITNEY

Michael—

MICHAEL

I’m getting there... The Lord is the only one who can give life and the only one who should take it. To take a life, to know with full consciousness that you are defying the will of God, to be reckless with His most precious gift, is a sin. And that’s where it gets a little complicated.

WHITNEY

What do you mean?

MICHAEL

It’s that “with full consciousness” part. Suicide desecrates the love of self, and, by extension, the love we are supposed to give to God.

WHITNEY

So, it’s a sin. A mortal sin.

MICHAEL

Yes, but for a sin to cost somebody salvation, there is a certain, I guess, checklist. It must be a grave and serious action, done purposefully and with the knowledge that the action is wrong. With suicide, a person may not truly have full understanding of the gravity of their action. The Catechism also states that the responsibility of one’s actions may be diminished due to a fear of suffering, anguish, torture, or psychological disturbances.
WHITNEY
You’re very knowledgeable about all of this.

MICHAEL
You’re not the first person I’ve had to counsel on this.

WHITNEY
So, you think she’s… You think she’s okay?

I believe she is.

WHITNEY
How can you be so sure?

MICHAEL
Your sister took the vows. She believed in God’s grace. She believed Jesus Christ to be our Lord and Savior. She believed Jesus died on the cross for us all to have the chance to share in His Kingdom. (Beat.) The Catechism also states that we are not to despair over the fate of one’s soul when they take their own life. It says we are to pray for them. But… I believe that she’s in a better place. Free of pain.

WHITNEY
Why do you believe that? And please don’t say it’s because of your faith.

(He thinks about it for a moment.)

MICHAEL
I believe it because I saw her actions, and those actions illustrated kindness, generosity, compassion, and empathy. I cannot believe that someone like that would be condemned to an eternity of despair.

(Whitney sits back in the pew, staring at Michael for a long time. Finally...)

WHITNEY
I don’t know if I can believe you. I want to… I just… I don’t know.

MICHAEL
Whitney, would you pray with me.
WHITNEY

(Beat.)
No. But I'll sit with you.

(Michael reaches into his pocket and removes his rosary. He moves down to the kneeler and bows his head.)

MICHAEL

Dear Lord Jesus,
We pray for our beloved Sister.
Lord, in Your grace You made Gwen, and she is now in Your care.
Lord, despair and desperation overtook our dear Catherine.
Please, Lord, we humbly ask for Your mercy.
Have mercy on her soul, and help us now.
Help to heal our families and guide us through our sorrow.
Heal us from this deep wound.
Help us to move past our sorrow.
(beat.)
Hail Mary, full of grace.
Our Lord is with you.
Blessed are you among women,
and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.
Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.
Amen.

(He continues with a silent prayer before making the sign of the cross over his chest. He returns to sitting on the pew.

They sit in silence for several moments. Finally, Michael turns to Whitney, not to speak, but waiting for her to make the next move.)

WHITNEY

Why'd you become a Priest?

I was called by God.

WHITNEY

So, it was out of responsibility?
MICHAEL
Not entirely. It is a responsibility, but I had the desire to become a Priest.

WHITNEY
You wanted to be a Priest?

MICHAEL
Well, not like, always. You know, as a kid, I wanted to be a cop. Or an Orkin Man.

WHITNEY
Lockin' up criminals and killing bugs.

MICHAEL
What a life, right? As I got older I just... I wanted to make a difference. Help people, not hurt them, like...

Like your dad.

MICHAEL
(Beat.)
Yup. Like I said, I forgave him a long time ago. Still atoning for him, though.

WHITNEY
Becoming a Priest wasn't your only option.

MICHAEL
I didn't think of it as optional. I've heard of others who struggled with their Calling—the weight of it, the commitment, the sacrifices... I didn't experience that. It just felt...natural. Like, I wanted to help, and I could help a lot of people by devoting myself to serving the Lord.

WHITNEY
The Church. You serve an institution.

MICHAEL
(Beat.)
Last week, a young woman came to me. She's in a relationship that, uh... isn't healthy. She was scared to leave—thought he'd come after her. And he did. He showed up screaming and yelling, which was good, because I snuck her out the side door and shove her in a closet. We kept him calm until the cops come and took him away. We asked them to keep him long enough for us to get her things and relocate her to a women's shelter.

(Beat.)
Which institution was I serving by doing all that?
WHITNEY
I’m sure you do good things, but you’re part of an organization that values straight, white, men over all other people. And money, you guys really like your money. A lot of damage has been done by you people.

You’re right.

WHITNEY
But...?

MICHAEL
No, I’m not going to dispute that. It’s not the whole story, and it doesn’t take away from the good that a lot of men and women are doing, but you’re right. The Church is guilty of making some awful decisions. But that’s not why I’m here. I wasn’t called to fix the Church. I was called to help.

WHITNEY
The whole “calling” thing always seemed a bit weird.

MICHAEL
People are called to do things throughout their lives. Why is this any different?

WHITNEY
You don’t think it’s a little presumptuous that God puts His finger on you and you jump to it?

MICHAEL
That’s not what it was for me. It was more like... being pulled. A growing attraction that overwhelmed my whole being. I’m sure you felt something similar with your profession. Or motherhood.

WHITNEY
Umm...

MICHAEL
You know, maternal instinct – or paternal, you know, dads get it, too. A feeling you get about your kid, something doesn’t sit right but you just know—like they’re sick or they’re about to put a fork in an electrical outlet or something.

WHITNEY
Okay, yeah. So?

MICHAEL
Don’t you think that could be God’s voice—our Father speaking to you to watch out for your child.
WHITNEY
Or it’s just paying attention and knowing how your kids behave. Or it’s hundreds of thousands of years of evolutionary practice. Who knows?

MICHAEL
I believe that I was called by God to be a priest.

WHITNEY
That’s way different than a profession though. I studied communications with an emphasis in public relations and sought out a sustainable career. And I actually never wanted to be a mother—when I was younger, anyway. I had to learn about my kids—they’re behaviors. God doesn’t remind me to keep an eye on them.

MICHAEL
You didn’t want kids?

WHITNEY
No, not really. I never saw myself as maternal—that just wasn’t me. I had no desire to be a babysitter, and I never had baby fever or anything. Gwen was the one who loved babies, not me.

MICHAEL
What changed?

WHITNEY
Matt. He changed everything.

MICHAEL
How so?

WHITNEY
One day—we had been dating a couple of months—I looked at him and realized I was in love with him. I had this very loud and decisive thought, “I would have children with this man.”

MICHAEL
That’s nice.

WHITNEY
I immediately broke up with him.

MICHAEL
What?
WHITNEY

It scared the shit out of me!

MICHAEL

Yeah, but—

WHITNEY

It was terrifying! I dumped him, and when I got home I cried for three straight hours. And I realized... I was a really fucked up person!

(Michael stirs uncomfortably at her cursing.)

Sorry... I finally saw all the stuff I had been repressing and avoiding for, like, forever. The idea of kids terrified me, because, on some level, I believed they’d end up dying. That I’d lose them, too. I had a very... disassociated attitude with death. My brother, my parents, other relatives or whoever—death had been around me for so long that I just shut down. It never occurred to me that I was afraid of it. I truly believed it was just something that occurred—like going to the bathroom, it happens and you move on.

(Beat.)

My feelings for Matt sparked something I didn’t even know was there. Something woke up.

(Beat.)

Three days later I went to his place and broke down all over again—told him everything I was feeling. Everything about my parents, my brother, Gwen. He didn’t interject. He didn’t try to offer any advice. He just listened, and then... He gave me the thing I always wanted: he pulled me in, held me, and said, “It’s going to be okay.”

(Beat.)

I started going to therapy. Started learning more about me. Started to grow into myself. Started to valued myself.

(They sit, ruminating.)

THAT'S A WONDERFUL STORY.

MICHAEL

Yeah...

WHITNEY

A GIFT, REALLY.

MICHAEL

Yes.

WHITNEY

I DARE SAY, HE GAVE YOU FAITH.
WHITNEY
Oh, for Pete’s sake... Really? That’s where you’re going with this?

MICHAEL
He told you it was going to be okay, and you trusted that. You believed him, right?

...yes.

WHITNEY
How is that not faith?

MICHAEL
Why are you turning this into religion?

WHITNEY
Just to clarify – you’d be okay with me worshipping the flying spaghetti monster?

MICHAEL
It’d be a start.

WHITNEY
You’re gonna get in trouble for saying that. Kinda goes against the whole, “Our way is the only way” ideology of the Catholic Church.

Right now, my attention is on you.

WHITNEY
Why? Why do you care about me? You don’t even know me.

MICHAEL
You’re one of God’s children.

WHITNEY
That so?

Yes.
That’s the only reason.

Yes.

The only reason?

Yes.

You’re not, maybe, seeing me as a proxy for my sister?

No.

I’m not her.

I know that.

You “save me” and bring me back into the Church then your guilt may be absolved—that didn’t cross your mind?

Not at all.

Seems pretty obvious to me.

You’re deflecting.

And you’re in denial.

It is my responsibility to care for all human life. That is what I’m doing!

I’m not my sister?
MICHAEL
Stop that.

WHITNEY
Saving me won’t save her.

MICHAEL
That’s not what I’m doing!

WHITNEY
Oh, please! You’re so wrapped up in your own self-righteous piety that you don’t even know what to feel.

MICHAEL
Why are you so combative? Weren’t we past this?

WHITNEY
Past what? What have we resolved?

MICHAEL
Why can’t you let go of your anger?

WHITNEY
Why do you expect that I should?

MICHAEL
We’re going in circles!

WHITNEY
Must be frustrating—to have so many questions and your faith not giving you answers.

MICHAEL
We do not presume to have all the answers. We are not God.

WHITNEY
You shield yourself with that.

MICHAEL
Faith should be used as a shield.

WHITNEY
You use it to hide from the stuff that makes you uncomfortable.
MICHAEL
That is not true.

WHITNEY
You’re scared to seek truth for yourself.

MICHAEL
Do not psychoanalyze me.

WHITNEY
I’ve had enough therapy to know when someone isn’t being honest with themselves.

MICHAEL
You think I’m lying?

WHITNEY
I don’t need a shrink to know when someone’s full of shit.

MICHAEL
About what?

WHITNEY
About Gwen. About your feelings for her!

MICHAEL
My feelings don’t matter!

WHITNEY
Your feelings are everything!

MICHAEL
Fine! You want to know how I feel? I’m pissed!

WHITNEY
Why?

MICHAEL
Because this isn’t right—it isn’t fair! God challenges us, but why does He try to break us?!

WHITNEY
Why do you think he’s trying to break you?

MICHAEL
I don’t know.
WHITNEY

Bullshit.

MICHAEL

Stop cursing! For all that’s Holy! Why do you insist on attacking me? You think lashing out is making this better? I’m grieving, too. We lost a member of our—our family. A kind soul, a generous woman who devoted her life to His grace? She wanted nothing, nothing more than to make other people’s life brighter than her own. This beautiful human, who laughed at silly puns and gave a hug to every person she saw and ate too much candy. She—she kept Jolly Ranchers in her pocket. Unwrapped so nobody would hear the wrappers. But the thing was—we could smell them. She always smelled like Jolly Ranchers. She—she...

(He begins to cry.)

I miss her so much.

You loved her.

WHITNEY

...yes...

MICHAEL

You were in love with her.

WHITNEY

...is that what this is...?

(Beat.)

Oh, Dear Lord... I didn’t mean to. I didn’t know.

(Michael doubles over in the pew. Whitney hesitates before going to him and taking him into her arms.)

WHITNEY

It’s okay. It’s going to be okay.

(beat.)

It’s going to be okay...

(He cries. She holds him.

They stay this way for a long time until Michael has composed himself.)

WHITNEY cont’d

You alright?
(He nods to assure her, pauses, and then starts shaking his head, saying ‘no’.)

WHITNEY cont’d

Can I do anything for you?

(He takes a deep breath, sighs...)

MICHAEL

No... There’s nothing anybody can do.

WHITNEY

Michael, I am so, so very sorry. I’m sorry for your loss, and—and for pushing you like that. I shouldn’t have pried it out of you like that.

MICHAEL

... it needed to come out.

(Beat.)

I needed to admit it. To actually say it out loud.

(Beat.)

I needed to believe it, too.

(Beat.)

How did you know? I didn’t—not really. How did you?

WHITNEY

I just knew.

WHITNEY

What now?

MICHAEL

What do you mean?

WHITNEY

You still get to be a Priest, right? They’re not gonna, like, kick you out or something?

MICHAEL

No... I’ll go to confession, ask for forgiveness, and do my acts of contrition. That’ll be the end of it.

WHITNEY

Why would you ask to be forgiven for loving somebody?

MICHAEL

No, I need to be forgiven for my deceit. I deceived myself... God.... You.
WHITNEY
Me?

MICHAEL
I wasn’t honest with you about—about my... feelings for your sister.

WHITNEY
You couldn’t see it.

MICHAEL
I didn’t want to. I denied it—the deceit was in my words, my mind, and my heart.
(Beat.)
I was not being honest, Whitney. I hope you can forgive me.

WHITNEY
Of course, I do, you dummy...

(He smiles and they sit for a while.)

WHITNEY cont’d
You know, I’m pissed, too.

MICHAEL
I’ve noticed.

WHITNEY
I’m not ashamed of my anger. Maybe I don’t—channel it very well sometimes, but being angry doesn’t mean you’re a bad person. I think even Jesus got flipped a table or two.

MICHAEL
Your point?

WHITNEY
Has it occurred to you that it’s okay for you to be angry? You don’t need to feel bad about feeling bad. You should get to feel your feelings without shame or guilt.

(They both drift into their own thoughts as silence envelops them.)

MICHAEL
If you could have anything right now, what would it be?

WHITNEY
That’s a long list...
Humor me.

WHITNEY
World peace. Leaders free of hypocrisy and who actually give a shit about people. I wish everyone could see how their actions affect others. I wish everyone could be just a little bit more compassionate—a little more... kind. And a million dollars for each of my kids’ college tuitions.

Those would be nice.

WHITNEY
Yeah...

MICHAEL
What if your sister were here? What would you do?

WHITNEY
Hmm... you first.

MICHAEL
I’d tell her I was sorry I didn’t help her.

WHITNEY
Michael—

MICHAEL
I would. Maybe that will pass in time—I hope it does—but that’s what I want right now.

WHITNEY
(Pauses.)
Do you believe she’s in heaven?

MICHAEL
...yes...

WHITNEY
So, don’t you think she already knows all that?

MICHAEL
...yes...

(Silence.)
MICHAEL cont’d

So... what about you?

WHITNEY

(She takes a deep breath before answering.)
I want to grab her. I want to shake her. I want to tell her that what she did was stupid!

(Beat.)
And then I want to pull her in close and hold her and tell her that it’s all going to be okay...

(Beat.)
I can’t have that. I can’t—I couldn’t save her...

Do you believe she’s in heaven?

WHITNEY

(Beat.)
I would like to believe that.

But you don’t.

WHITNEY

I don’t know...

(Long pause.)

She loved you.

MICHAEL

WHITNEY

I know. And I know she was sick for a long time. Her... issues were the problem, not her. I get that—at least, intellectually, but... In my heart, I can only feel the hatred and the anger that she threw at me.

MICHAEL

It defies logic to see someone you care for actively destroy who they are—to slowly kill themselves. But those behaviors are not her—we can’t let them be how we define her.

(beat.)
I know for a fact that she loved you. She admired you. She credited you with saving her life.
WHITNEY
Too bad I didn’t come around sooner, huh?
(She thinks for a while.)
Do you think I could have saved her?

MICHAEL
...No...

(Long pause.)

WHITNEY
Do you think she loved you, too?

MICHAEL
I have no idea.

WHITNEY
I hope she did. It would be nice to know that she fell in love with somebody who was a good person.

(Michael looks to her and is overcome, burying his face in his hands. Whitney reaches out and takes one of his hands into hers.

After a long silence, Michael looks to the ceiling and sighs heavily.)

MICHAEL
Oh, man... What am I going to do?

WHITNEY
You’re not alone. You have people here to lean on. And, you know, your faith...

MICHAEL
I suddenly feel very lost.

WHITNEY
A light in the dark... or something...

MICHAEL
“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

WHITNEY
Yeah, that.
MICHAEL

Maybe I should take some time off.

WHITNEY

Is that what you want?

MICHAEL

(He thinks.)
No. I want to be here for everyone. Shepherd can’t abandon his flock.
(Beat.)
What about you?

WHITNEY

I took a few days off, but I’m back to work on Monday. In the meantime, I need to tuck my kids in and curl up on the couch with my husband.

MICHAEL

Tending to your own flock.

WHITNEY

I suppose so... And speaking of... I should get going.

MICHAEL

Of course.

(Whitney stands, placing everything she’s removed from the box back inside of it. She picks it and holds it. She looks around before turning back to Michael.)

WHITNEY

Thank you for your time. Thank you for... for being her friend.

MICHAEL

Thank you for talking with me.

WHITNEY

Sorry for fucking you up.

MICHAEL

I’ll survive.

WHITNEY

Yeah... what other choice do we have?

(She extends her hand as Michael rises, shaking it.)
It's been a pleasure.

Yeah, right...
(Beat.)
Take care of yourself.

You, too.

(He watches her turn to exit. She makes her way down the aisle before stopping and turning back.)

Would you like to come to dinner? At our place, sometime? To meet my family.

I'd like that. And, maybe, you could come to Mass...?

(Beat.)
I'll think about it.

(She moves to exit.)

Whitney?

Yeah?

Peace be with you.

...And with you.

(He exits. She exits. Michael stares at the door as the lights fade to black.)

END OF PLAY.
ABOUT THE PLAY:

The run-time of the play is short by design. For producers of this play, it is highly encouraged that you also host/conduct a structured talk-back/panel with mental-health professionals from your community to discuss the topics of addiction, suicide, grief, and other issues that are touched on in the text. Please allow this play to be a springboard to help people who may be suffering from what the characters are facing.