

FLU

A Full Length Play in One Act

By Rich Espey

Characters

JOHN WAGNER, 56, a high school English teacher
 BUNNY KABALEVSKY, 18, a high school senior
 TRICIA SCOTT-EDWARDS, 54, John's ex-wife and a famous addiction researcher
 DWAYNE, 36, Bunny's Father, currently incarcerated
 MATT HANDLER, 36, a TV interviewer
 ANATOLY, 42, Russian "views" salesman
 TRISH, 29, Tricia twenty-five years ago
 YOUNG JOHN, 31, John twenty-five years ago
 Voice of TIFFANY, 36, BUNNY's mother
 EMILY DICKINSON, 29, the poet

Casting: Four actors play all the roles:

JOHN
 TRICIA/Voice of TIFFANY
 BUNNY/TRISH/EMILY DICKINSON
 DWAYNE/MATT HANDLER/ANATOLY/YOUNG JOHN

Time

Spring, this year

Place

Mostly Lemmington High School, Lemmington, Indiana, but also other various locales

Synopsis: Depressed by his ex-wife's stunning online fame, English teacher and sometime-poet John Wagner enlists his tech-savvy student Bunny's help to "go viral" himself. John struggles along this journey, meeting disaffected students, a smarmy talk-show host, and Emily Dickinson herself. It all goes horribly wrong until an unexpected gift lights the way.

Rich Espey
 8405 Thornton Road
 Lutherville, MD 21093
 410 - 812 - 4181
richespey@gmail.com
www.richespey.com

FLU

JOHN, mid-50's, slim, attractive, is there. As he speaks, the clicking from a pair of knitting needles gets louder and louder.

JOHN

What makes a poet great? What distinguishes eternal, magnificent poetry from just a bunch of words strung together? Last class I asked you to think of a favorite poem we've read, or even your favorite song lyric...what makes it excellent? Daria? You don't know. Cooper?

We've talked about rhyme, about alliteration, about scansion. Who remembers scansion? "Now IS the WINter OF my DISconTENT" - what is that called? Jason, are you texting? Who are you...no, you are...you ARE!

I SEE that YOU are TEXTing IN my CLASS.
Now STUFF the FREAKin' PHONE back IN your PANTS!

That, Alyce, is an example of scansion - the rhythm of a poetic line, which in the case I just mentioned to Jason was...?

BUNNY

Iambic pentameter.

JOHN

Very good, Bunny. Thank you.

But it's got to be more than just rhyme and scansion and alliteration and assonance and conson-
What, are you eight years old, Ryan? ASSONANCE is not something to laugh at!

JOHN holds up a book.

What is it that makes these poems the "Top 100 Poems of All Time?" Here. Emily Dickinson, number 78. "Success is counted sweetest by those who ne'er succeed." What do you...what's funny? What are you looking at? (*He takes a phone from an audience plant*) America's Top Kitchen Comics...I am so glad you can now stream that whenever you like.

What would get a poem the most "likes" today? Which poet would people binge read and why? Or binge watch, if they were reading poems online? Nina, what do you think...What is that noise? It's really annoying, does anyone else find that annoying? What is it...Bunny, what are you doing?

A bell rings.

Enjoy your lunch. See you tomorrow. Bunny, please see me for a moment.

BUNNY approaches the desk.

What were you doing?

BUNNY

Knitting.

JOHN

It was very...loud.

BUNNY

I'm sorry. I have anxiety.

JOHN

OK....

BUNNY

You can't send me to Principal Skinner because my therapist prescribed knitting. So I'm doing that. Actually, in her email to me she wrote "knotting" but I figured it was a typo because the link to the video she sent showed this lady knitting, but what I'm doing is more like knotting because I SUCK at it!

JOHN

Your therapist emailed you?

BUNNY

It's online therapy on account of my Mom is like...well, anyway, yeah, it's like supposed to help me focus.

JOHN

It was making it hard for me to focus.

BUNNY

I have a note in case you don't believe me.

JOHN

I believe you, it's just that...well, aren't there plastic needles?

BUNNY

Yeah, and actually I am supposed to use plastic needles.

JOHN

Your therapist respects the need for quiet in a classroom.

BUNNY

No, she just doesn't want me to be able to self-harm when my anxiety really rears up. Last week, I started poking. It's kind of like cutting but not. I made bruises in the shape of a daffodil. You can still kind of see // the shape here

JOHN

Well at least you're trying to pay attention, instead of watching videos or texting your Mom.

BUNNY

My mom doesn't text.

JOHN

Good for her.

BUNNY

Well, not reaaally.

JOHN's phone buzzes on his desk. He looks at it and looks shocked.

BUNNY

You can take that if you want to. I'll just knit.

JOHN

No, uh...it can go to voicemail.

BUNNY

No, really, I don't mind.

JOHN

I can get it later.

BUNNY

Who is it?

JOHN

It's ...none of your business.

BUNNY

Is it a girlfriend?

JOHN

No.

BUNNY

A boyfriend?!

No!

JOHN

We're trying to figure you out. People say you're gay. I think you're "ase." Are you "ase?"

BUNNY

Ace?

JOHN

Asexual?

BUNNY

No. Well not by choice. There, it's gone over to voicemail.

JOHN

Listen to it.

BUNNY

I will when you're gone.

JOHN

Listen now.

BUNNY

This is your lunch period.

JOHN

I don't eat lunch. Listen to it.

BUNNY

Later.

JOHN

I think you should listen to it now.

BUNNY

And I think it's time for you to leave!

JOHN

BUNNY gets up to leave, but before she goes...

BUNNY

It's just that you looked all life-stricken when you saw who it was from. I want to make sure everything is OK.

JOHN

I was not “life-stricken”. But that’s very kind of you. Now please go.

BUNNY continues to leave.

What are you knitting?

BUNNY

I’m not sure. It might be a father.

BUNNY is gone.

JOHN listens to his voicemail. We hear TRICIA.

During the voicemail, BUNNY hangs a tiny LED star in the space, but it’s not illuminated yet.

TRICIA’s VOICE

Hey John, it’s Tricia...Trish...Tricia now. Hey, I just wanted to give you a heads-up that I’ll be in town in about two weeks. I’m actually going to be speaking at LHS. I guess you heard about the book, and the FLU thing, and since I used to teach there they invited me back to do an Assembly and some workshops, and my agent thought it would be a great tie-in, et cetera. Anyway, obviously we should get together, but I don’t want it to be awkward, so, I just thought we should talk about how this might go. Give me a call when you can. Hope teaching is going well.

JOHN gets on his computer and searches for information about TRICIA.

JOHN

“Tricia Scott-Edwards...FLU thing.”

JOHN clicks, and we see a scene in which TRICIA, 50’s, stunning, is interviewed by MATT HANDLER, 30’s, slick TV guy.

MATT

(singing) Good Day, USA!

You’re gonna have a great day today!

We’ll cover the angles

The stars and the spangles!

We’re gonna blow you away!!

(speaking) Welcome back to “FLU 100’s!” Our next FLU 100 is Dr. Tricia Scott-Edwards, a neurobiologist who has done groundbreaking addiction research and who is inFLUencing everything we know about the causes and effects of technology addictions. Welcome, Tricia, and congratulations on being a “FLU 100!”

We hear an audience applaud wildly, or maybe an APPLAUSE sign is flashed, and the actual audience applauds.

TRICIA

Oh, Matt, thank you so much. This is really an incredible honor. Can I just say I never thought I would be here?

MATT

You can say it, but I don't believe it, not with what you've accomplished. You now have over Ten. Million. Followers!

Applause!

TRICIA

Unbelievable.

MATT

Tricia, how did you get interested in addiction research? I hope not through personal experience!

TRICIA

Oh, no, Matt! Thankfully my daughters are very responsible gamers, and both very successful at self-regulating their social media time, as am I.

MATT

As am I! NOT! Well, maybe...wife Katie might have something to say about that, ha ha.

TRICIA

It's not a laughing matter, Matt.

MATT

Of course not. Forgive me. Our last FLU 100's were a stand-up and a furry.

TRICIA

I like to think that I achieved that perfect social influencer score // by providing

The AUDIENCE cheers "FLU 100! FLU 100! FLU 100!"

MATT

You can say "FLU 100!" You're one of us now!

TRICIA

Well, I like to think that I became a FLU 100 because I am truly helping needy families fight technology addiction. In my new book, "Keeping Safe: Strategies // for resisting the

MATT

Which, as I look at it, is currently the number two most downloaded of the week. Number TWO? Come on people! Tricia Scott-Edwards is a FLU 100! Her book deserves to be at Number ONE! So let's make it Number ONE! Buy...buy...buy...Buy...BUY...BUY...BUY!!!!

The Audience is cheering "Buy! Buy! Buy!"

TRICIA

Oh, I am so honored. But honestly, if I can help just one kid. You know, Matt, I started out as a high school science teacher, and even though I left teaching after just a few years, my heart has always been there. I love high schoolers.

Lights out quickly on the interview.

JOHN

Bullshit, Trish!

JOHN types into his computer.

Flu dot com. "Do you FLU? Type in your name and location to see your Social Influence score."

JOHN types.

"Calculating Social Influence score." Whatever.

Twelve.

*JOHN slams his laptop shut.
BUNNY is in her room. She is videoing herself for her YouTube stand-up channel. It takes a while for her to get her camera set up, everything in place, hair, make-up, etc. It's kind of weird and awkward. During this, the actor playing MATT/DWAYNE, etc. hangs a tiny LED star in the space, but it's not illuminated yet.*

BUNNY

Hi bunnyloves! It's Episode Fourteen of "My Anxiety." Comedy! Yeah!

Ok, so, as you know, I have anxiety, but I have this therapist, right? And she said I should try to be more laid back. She said, "See if you can try to limit yourself to caring about, like, two things." So I have taken her advice, and the only two things I decided to care about are...every person on Earth and their opinion of me, and the crushing psychological weight of being alive.

Also, I think I might be bipolar. And I have mixed feelings about that. Ba-dum-bum.

My mom is bipolar. And the good part of that is that our bathroom is REALLY clean and we have a LOT of shoes. The bad part is when she throws forks at me. Yeah!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

And when your Mom is bipolar, you learn that miracles really do happen! One night she tells me I'm a worthless piece of shit, but by the next morning, I have magically become a fairy princess!

OK, so that's it for today. If you like my video, be sure to subscribe. If you subscribe I will send you some free swag, like a hand-knitted...scarf-thing. I am starting to knit, and it's shit right now, like this video, but someday I WILL knit something of consequence, something sure to get me an audition on America's Top Knitters, and then you can say you "knew Bunny when". Ok, so BYYYYYEEEEEE! Love you Daddy, all the way in OHIO! (*singing*) WHY OH WHY OH WHY OH - WHY DO YOU HAVE TO BE IN OHIO?

We hear BUNNY's play-off music. She stops the video, fiddles with her computer.

TIFFANY'S VOICE (off)

What are you doing in there?

BUNNY bars the door.

TIFFANY's VOICE (off)

You woke me up! I was finally asleep and you fucking woke me up!!

BUNNY

I'm going to sleep!!!

TIFFANY'S VOICE (off)

You fucking selfish bitch!

BUNNY collapses at her door. Eventually, she finds a piece of paper and a pen and starts writing a letter to someone.

BUNNY

(*singing very softly*) Why oh why oh why oh, why do you have to be in Ohio?

JOHN is in his classroom, talking to his class.

JOHN

When you complete your poem you can enter it in the Carter College Poetry Contest High School Division. I entered one of mine, in the Adult Division, of course. No, Connor, that does not mean it has "Explicit Lyrics." Ten talented adult poets and ten talented high-schoolers get to present their poems at the convention in Dell Creek, Iowa. This year's convention happens to be over Memorial Day weekend, so you wouldn't even have to miss school. Think about what a fun

way that would be to spend your Memorial Day weekend. At a Poetry Convention. You laugh, but the funniest part of that is that there was a time not too long ago when some students at this school, not many, I admit, but some...actually agreed with me.

A bell rings. BUNNY is there, with her knitting, which has grown considerably since yesterday. She shows off her plastic needles.

BUNNY

I stopped by the Dollar Store on the way home yesterday.

JOHN

A good use of two dollars.

BUNNY

Oh, no. There were actually FOUR plastic needles in one pack. So this is only fifty cents.

JOHN

Well, just think of the amount of joy you have spread in the world for a mere fifty cents.

BUNNY

Huh?

JOHN

I appreciate your gesture very much.

BUNNY

I'm sorry I didn't participate in class today.

JOHN

But look how your knitting has grown.

BUNNY

That was mostly last night. I had a lot of anxiety and couldn't sleep.

JOHN

Well, your knitting prospered.

BUNNY

At first I tried writing a letter to my dad in Ohio. That usually tires me out.

JOHN

That's nice that you write him letters. Most kids your age would just text.

BUNNY

I can't text him. He's in prison.

I'm so sorry.

JOHN

That's OK. It was a white-collar crime.

BUNNY

Oh.

JOHN

You're supposed to say "embezzlement?" It's a joke I'm working on for my web series. "My Dad's in prison, but it's OK, because it was a white-collar crime."

BUNNY

"Embezzlement?"

JOHN

No! He dressed up as a priest and robbed a monastery at gunpoint! Ba-dum-bum.

BUNNY

Are you serious?

JOHN

Uh huh. Six to ten. He's only served three. Do you ever have trouble sleeping?

BUNNY

Uh, yes. Last night in fact.

JOHN

How much sleep did you get?

BUNNY

Maybe three hours.

JOHN

Beat ya! NONE!

BUNNY

None?

JOHN

Nada! Zilch! Rien!

BUNNY

Maybe you should go see the nurse.

JOHN

BUNNY

Why did you only get three hours?

JOHN

Why did you get none? Did you really get none?

BUNNY

Why did you get only three? It did not show in class, by the way.

JOHN

Really?

BUNNY

Really! Well, you did miss that Andrew Pearson and Shayla Robinson were texting the ENTIRE TIME, but other than that...

JOHN

I KNEW they were, but I was too tired to fight it.

BUNNY

So why only three hours? Come on, tell me. One insomniac to another.

JOHN

Do you know what "FLU" is?

BUNNY

O.M.G. FLU is my entire LIFE!!! I'm on it like thirty times a day. I'm a 26 which totally sucks!!

JOHN

I am a 12.

BUNNY gasps.

My ex-wife is a "FLU 100." Trish is a perfect social inFLUencer.

BUNNY

That. is my singular. goal. Whilst I am on this planet!!!

JOHN

Perhaps she'll give lessons on how to get to ten million followers when she's here. She's coming here in...less than two weeks to talk about her latest book.

BUNNY

Why this school? 'Cause her ex teaches here? No offense.

JOHN

She also taught here, many years ago. Biology. This is where we met. This is where we fell in love, got married, fell out of love and got divorced. Well, she was gone by the time we got divorced.

BUNNY

So you're not ase. Or is that why you got divorced?

JOHN

The reasons for our divorce were complex. And simple. And obtuse. And sad. But it had nothing to do with "ase".

BUNNY

So what happened?

JOHN

She...NO! What is the point of my telling you?

BUNNY

I'm very interested in how things like this happen.

JOHN

Well then you should ask her when she's here. In fact, after her talk, when she asks for questions, why don't you raise your hand and say, "Dr. Scott-Edwards, // why

BUNNY

Why did you dump a sweet guy like Mr. Wagner?

JOHN

Oh, I would love it if you would.

BUNNY

I will! What's her book about?

JOHN

Preventing technology addiction.

BUNNY

Good luck! This entire school is addicts. As if anyone will be able to tear themselves away from their phone long enough to hear what she has to say.

JOHN

You don't strike me as addicted.

BUNNY

Let's just say...it's affected my family.

JOHN

Tricia apparently has a cure. Which is why she has 10 trillion followers and a perfect FLU score.

BUNNY

You know, I bet you could get your FLU score up really easily.

JOHN

I doubt that.

BUNNY.

It's much easier for old people.

JOHN

Thanks.

BUNNY

I just mean // because you

JOHN

How is anything to do with technology easier for "old" people?

BUNNY

Because you know so many more people. Think of all the students you've taught. You could get, like, ten thousand followers by like next week, I'm sure.

JOHN

No way.

BUNNY

Yes way.

JOHN

How?

BUNNY

Just put yourself out there doing something you like, invite everyone you know to follow you, and see if it hits. Which it probably will.

JOHN

How do I "put it out there?"

BUNNY

It takes like two minutes to set up accounts on any platform, there are like six serious ones, Boom! Done! I could totally get you set up by like, last night.

JOHN

OK. But what do I put out?

BUNNY

What are you an expert at that can entertain others, help others? Me? I'm humorous. I tell jokes.

JOHN

I...I don't know.

BUNNY

Well, you're an expert at...teaching English Literature.

JOHN

No one wants to watch a class on English Literature.

BUNNY

True. So the other thing you have to think about is what's unique about you? So me? I have anxiety, right? Like way more than the average person? So, I find the synergy between what I'm good at (being humorous) and who I am (a HOT MESS OF ANXIETY), and I combine those into stand-up routines about my mental health struggles!

JOHN

And you're a...

BUNNY

A FLU 26. Because I SUCK!

JOHN

I don't think that's probably true.

BUNNY

Have you seen my videos?

JOHN

No.

BUNNY

I'll send you the links.

JOHN

But you just said I could do well because I'm // more matu-

BUNNY

Yeah, you're old.

JOHN

Because I'm more mature, so your 26 is really just a function of your // youth and

BUNNY

I'm a dork, in case you haven't noticed, but there IS a dork market out there which is a little harder to crack because most people with their own channels are dorky and the cool kids only have so many hours in the day to devote online because they actually DO have social lives so their screen time in the dork world is limited and, as I said, there are MANY of us, so breaking through is like trying to find a MAGA hat in a mosque, but I WILL GET THERE!

But you. What is it you're good at? And who are you? Combine those, and you are viral.

JOHN

Just like the flu.

BUNNY

Exactly.

JOHN

I'm good at...at writing poems, I think. And who am I? I'm a teacher.

BUNNY

No good. No one wants to watch a poetry class. No offense. Besides a teacher, who are you?

JOHN

I'm...I'm really just a teacher.

BUNNY

Oh come on! NO one is "just a teacher!"

JOHN

What's wrong with being just a teacher?

BUNNY

Nothing! But that's not ALL you are! Who are you on...July 4th?

JOHN

Uh...I'm a ...burger eater?

BUNNY

NO, no, no. July...12th, then. Who are you when the last year has receded and the new year is still parsecs away?

JOHN

I'm...a trailwalker. A beachsitter. An oceansplasher. A stargazer. A fieldsleeper.

BUNNY

Aha! You're a nature poet.

JOHN

I do like writing nature poetry. I keep entering contests but none of them // ever accept

BUNNY

John Wagner - Nature Poet. You read your poems while people watch beautiful nature scenes of what you're describing. You'll have two million views in a month, promise.

JOHN

Are you serious?

BUNNY

With your base? Oh yeah. And everyone is into the nature right now. Especially the universe. Do you do poems about wormholes?

JOHN

No.

BUNNY

OK, 'cause that would be like FIVE million views. Just saying.

JOHN

I don't even know how to make a video.

BUNNY

You have a phone, so you can make a video.

JOHN

Really?

BUNNY

OMG. So you should let me make the video. Your FLU will fly, trust me.

JOHN

How long will that take?

BUNNY

We can get your online presence up in half an hour, and the video up in another hour. After that, THERE IS ONLY GOD!

JOHN

So could I be "viral" in a week or so?

Ebola in two days.

BUNNY

Why do you think this will work?

JOHN

People totally love to go online to see and hear nature.

BUNNY

They can just go outside.

JOHN

You don't get people, do you?

BUNNY

No Bunny, I do not get people.

JOHN

Come on, let's get your first video shot. What's your best poem?

BUNNY

Um, I guess they're kind of like...children. I can't // rank them.

JOHN

Oh come on! Which one did you enter in the contest you told us about?

BUNNY

"Mount Marcy".

JOHN

Is that appropriate to be saying to me?

BUNNY

It's about a mountain in New York.

JOHN

Do you have a copy here?

BUNNY

I know it by heart.

JOHN

Do it.

BUNNY

BUNNY takes out her phone to start videoing.

JOHN

In my classroom?

BUNNY

Through the magic of editing I shall transport you and the viewer to a land of waterfalls and craggy rockfaces...or whatever's in the poem. Are there waterfalls? I know some awesome waterfall backgrounds.

JOHN

No.

BUNNY

Never mind. I'll figure it out. Go!

JOHN

What about an introduction?

BUNNY

People's attention spans are WEAK! You gotta give 'em meat up front! I will edit all that in later! Now GO!

As JOHN recites his poem while BUNNY takes the video, lights fade on them and we begin to see BUNNY's completed video projected to us. It is soothing and good. During this, actors hang more tiny LED stars in the space, but they're not illuminated yet.

JOHN

I set out to climb Mount Marcy,
the tallest peak in New York,
Which claims to be the greatest
of the fifty United States,
Which, I am often told,
Is the greatest country in the world.
So does that make Mount Marcy
The greatest mountain in the world?
Halfway up, so tired,
unsure that I can summit,
I interview a fern.
And it assures me that it is.
"You don't think I would spend
My brief moment on this planet
On just any old mountain, do you?"
I ask a squirrel I meet

a few feet further on.
 “Definitely the best mountain,
 and I’ve been on quite a few.
 That’s why it’s Mount Marcy for me.”
 I ask a catbird bounding
 Its way across the trail.
 “I have far more choices than that fern or that squirrel.
 Doesn’t my presence speak for itself?”
 Convinced by their collective wisdom,
 Newly energized, I push on,
 Reaching the summit just before dusk,
 Just when there is still enough light
 To look down on all the other mountains.
 But here I stand
 With daylight fading
 And not quite sure
 How I will find my way down
 From this one.

DWAYNE is reading a letter. During this, BUNNY hangs more tiny LED stars in the space, but they’re not illuminated yet.

BUNNY’S VOICE

Dear Dwayne,

Or should I have said “Dear Dad”? What do you prefer? Since I never knew you as “Dad” I guess I should call you Dwayne, but since I don’t know Dwayne, I am in an existential crisis. I learned that term in English class with Mr. Wagner. That’s the class I am doing best in. I have a solid “B”. I am sorry to say I am failing math because the teacher keeps saying that “This class is as easy as 3.14” and I can not help but roll my eyes and that clearly pisses him off and so he is out to get me.

Mom is being weird, as always. Tonight she freaked out because I woke her up making my newest video, which I wish you could see! I have like a couple of million views and I sing a song in honor of you at the end of every episode. Tonight, Mom got mad at me singing to you. Was she weird when you knew her? I figure I am about the same age now as she was when you guys were in high school and had me. Did she freak out and throw shit then? Or is that something that I can look forward to when I turn 30?

I know you tried to make it work with Mom. One night, when she was on her meds, she told me that you turned down a pretty good job in Alaska so you wouldn’t be so far away for six months of the year. She told me she tried to stab you with a carrot peeler for turning down a good job and that she would have been happy if you had gone away for six months and she feels guilty that your time in the hospital was what ultimately led to the situation you are now in.

But what I really want to know is where did you get the priest collar from? Did you already have it? Did you get it on Amazon? Because you can do that. Were you ever a priest and just didn't tell me? Why did you go all the way to Ohio to rob a monastery when there are several of them here? Here's a poem I wrote for you.

Our sun is only one
of a billion trillion stars,
It doesn't have much clout. It's
out of sight for half our lives
Yet try to live without it.

I am handing this in to Mr. Wagner and entering it in a poetry contest. If it wins, I will speak about you in my awards speech, but it probably won't.

I am, as usual, enclosing paper and stamps, because I know those are not always easy to get where you are.

Love,

Bunny.

P.S. I read an article that said your prison was allowing actual in-person visits over Memorial Day weekend, in honor of America and the flag and all. I think maybe Mom would drop me off. I know she's not allowed in, and I can't come in alone, but I'm becoming a good finagler.

DWAYNE shakes the envelope. No stamps.

DWAYNE

No stamps here! There's supposed to be stamps! Goddamit, which one of you fuckers stole my stamps??

*JOHN is watching his video on his computer.
BUNNY is watching with him.*

JOHN

I'm viral!

BUNNY

Not viral. Bacterial, maybe, like that creeping flesh-eating bacteria. Slow, yes, but eventually it kills.

JOHN

I have over a thousand views!

BUNNY

Which is great! But you don't have that many "likes". And how many of those views are by you?

JOHN

A few.

BUNNY

Mm hmmm. Don't be embarrassed. I do it, too. Some nights I'm up half the night reloading my videos just to get my view count up and then I'm like "Why, Bunny? WHY?" Are you like that?

JOHN

I do feel a little silly reloading my page, but it feels very good to see that number go up.

BUNNY

You know, you can just buy views?

JOHN

You can buy views?

BUNNY

From Russians! It costs...well... probably not that much for you. And I figure it's ultimately cheaper than eventually getting treatment for the carpal tunnel caused by hitting the reload button seven thousand times in one night. NOT that I have ever done EITHER of those...more than once...each. And of course you can only "like" yourself once on the same device...which I imagine you discovered?

JOHN

A good number of those views are people other than me!

BUNNY

And you have a lot of encouraging comments as well! Mostly. So video number two. Here we go.

JOHN

Already?

BUNNY

We really should have had these babies stockpiled like missiles in Moscow before starting. Second best poem? Forget I asked that - they are your puppies, get it, just hit me with another. Just not about mountains and ferns and squirrels. Let's stay in nature but leave that biome, K?

JOHN

"Supernova".

BUNNY

Astronomy?

JOHN

Kind of.

BUNNY

Because that will generate A LOT of hits. Do you talk about wormholes?

JOHN

You asked that before.

BUNNY

You should, because people are totally searching wormholes.

JOHN

Really?

BUNNY

Even non-dorks.

JOHN

I just like writing about what I want // to write about

BUNNY

Oh, sure, for now. But I do suggest wormholing as future clickbait, just saying. “Supernova?”
GO!

BUNNY starts taking video. DWAYNE is there, and he hangs a tiny LED star in the space, but it's not illuminated yet.

JOHN

They say we're made of exploded stars.
I'm glad to know that explosions
Do have a happy outcome.
I'd hate to think I lived
in a universe
that suffered so.
It's comforting to me to think that a
so-called catastrophe yielded Einstein,
Aretha Franklin, Thomas Edison,
Mother Theresa, Mandela, Sting, Cher,
Beyonce, and the lady who takes out
my classroom trash whose name I do not know.

BUNNY finishes taking the video.

BUNNY

That was wow.

JOHN

It's just...you know.

BUNNY

There's some cool cosmos stuff I can use as background.

JOHN

When will it be up?

BUNNY

Tomorrow. Unless you were to give me a homework pass, in which case, before midnight.

JOHN

Are you bribing me?

BUNNY

No! Do NOT tell Principal Skinner I said that, please! If you do I will be forced to take my //metal needles and

JOHN

I was kidding! I'm not saying anything to Principal Skinner. Relax.

BUNNY

Spend a minute in my shoes and try to relax.

JOHN

You don't need to...worry about tonight's assignment.

BUNNY

I'll email you the link before I go to bed.

JOHN

I look forward to it.

BUNNY

So I have a great idea.

JOHN

Let me guess. Wormholes in the next poem?

BUNNY

And you should guest on my channel.

JOHN

But you do stand-up.

BUNNY

Truth be told, I'm a little out of ideas right now. Mom's been on her meds for the most part, and she's been kind of weirdly nice and mellow, so until she goes off and has another vacuuming episode or one-ups her "Let's-bake-muffins-for-all-the-homeless-in-Indiana" shindig there's not much chance I'll get any new material anytime soon, and my bunnyloves are expecting a new vid, so I'm thinking "guest", and you should be thinking "exposure", so it's a win-win.

JOHN

I'm not sure that would be such a good idea.

BUNNY

OMG, people do it all the time. And then I can be on yours sometime if you want, et cet, et cet, ...when you bring in student poets...which is a great idea! Good for you, thinking that up!!

JOHN

I just mean it's not appropriate. Student - teacher, et cetera?

BUNNY

We're not gonna make out, you're just gonna read a poem to my subscribers. Really, I have nothing I can find humor in.

JOHN

Maybe you could hide your Mom's meds?

BUNNY

You think THAT's appropriate?

JOHN

I'm only joking.

BUNNY

Actually, it's not a bad idea, but I'm not that desperate, and since it is only a matter of time before the roller coaster that is Tiffany starts that thrill ride again, I should just enjoy this respite, short-lived as it is going to be. Do you have any humorous poems, because that would be a natural tie-in.

JOHN

No.

BUNNY

No, I didn't think you did. The word "wormhole" is funny right off the bat.

There is a knock on the classroom door. TRICIA is there.

John?
TRICIA

Trish!
JOHN

Hey!
TRICIA

Awkward hug.

JOHN
I wasn't sure exactly when you were coming.

TRICIA
I'm early. I'm giving myself a few days break from the book tour before the engagement here. I needed some down time.

BUNNY
Hi.

JOHN
Oh, um, Trish, this is Bunny, a student // of mine

TRICIA
Tricia.

JOHN
Tricia. Sorry, Tricia, yeah.

BUNNY
Oh hey. Are you our Thursday assembly?

TRICIA
I will be speaking at your assembly then, and also speaking to parents and community members.

BUNNY
My mom won't be there.

TRICIA
Maybe your father, then.

He's in prison.

BUNNY

We are live streaming.

TRICIA

Maybe you don't understand prison.

BUNNY

Actually, I've done hundreds of interviews with incarcerated people.

TRICIA

I hear you're a FLU 100.

BUNNY

I am, yes. Do you follow me?

TRICIA

No, I never heard of you until Mr. Wagner told me. I'm a FLU 75, so, you know, watch out!

BUNNY

That's...very impressive.

TRICIA

So we hear the Assembly's about addiction and let me warn you, if it's about drugs we've heard the entire // spiel before

BUNNY

It's not about drugs.

TRICIA

Good, so you will win the Assembly if it's about sex addiction.

BUNNY

I'm sorry, that's not my focus.

TRICIA

Yeah, I can see that. Shopping addiction is a close second. Food, namely savory snacks, is your bronze medal topic.

BUNNY

My focus is screen addiction, with specific focus on gaming addiction and social media.

TRICIA

OK. Well, good luck with that. So, I might be asking you a question after your assembly.

BUNNY

TRICIA

Wonderful. You can ask me now, if you want.

BUNNY

Oh no, I'll wait until just after the assembly.

JOHN

Bunny, I think it's time // for you to go

BUNNY

I can read social cues despite my crippling anxiety. Bye, Mr. Wagner. It was nice meeting you, former Mrs. Wagner.

BUNNY starts to leave.

Oh, and by the way...if everyone's texting in the middle of your assembly?

TRICIA

I know, don't take it personally.

BUNNY

No, you should totally take it personally. Last week when the slam poets came, we were all riveted. When people bore us to death, then we reject them mercilessly.

BUNNY is gone, leaving her knitting.

TRICIA

Have they all grown that hostile?

JOHN

She's one of my favorites.

TRICIA

You have favorites now?

JOHN

Trish -

TRICIA

You always said you loved them all equally. And it's Tricia, please. You know that.

JOHN

An addiction, perhaps. By the way, they all know your talk is on screen addiction and that was Bunny's way of warning you not to chastise Generation Z. But I imagine you are well versed.

TRICIA

To be honest, I'm a little nervous. It's been mostly one-on-one with the worst cases, not roomfuls of kids on the edge.

JOHN

So why screens, gaming?

TRICIA

New territory.

JOHN

I was never into games. But I'm glad you found your niche.

TRICIA

Let's not talk about work.

JOHN

You never were one for drugs, or shopping, or // sex

TRICIA

I just wanted to come by before everything gets crazy later and make sure everything is OK.

JOHN

Why should it get crazy?

TRICIA

I just mean with the publicity and all.

JOHN

Publicity?

TRICIA

My book tour?

JOHN

Oh, you've written a book? Congratulations!

TRICIA

John...

JOHN

OK, so great job, Trish. But why should this be a problem?

TRICIA

Well, it's not just the book, there's the whole FLU thing, of course.

JOHN

Oh. You're sick?

TRICIA

No, // it means that

JOHN

Mrs. Lukemore retired, but her successor is even better, and the infirmary? It's now the "Health Suite", completely remodeled.

TRICIA

FLU 100 means that I // am considered

JOHN

I'm sure they have just what you need // to make you feel

TRICIA

FLU, John! I'm a top social influencer, and that means the media are always looking at every // event I go to

JOHN

Of course I know what it means, Trish...Tricia! I'm just having a little fun. We always used to have fun.

TRICIA

I remember.

JOHN

When we were young and beautiful.

TRICIA

You've...aged well, John.

JOHN

You always did appreciate a nice wine and cheese pairing.

TRICIA

I'm serious. You look...very good.

JOHN

Well, that's very kind. So do you. How's your new husband? I guess he's not new.

TRICIA

And not my husband. Steve was...assholistic. But my two lovely daughters are 15 and 18. And...is it Mary Ann?

JOHN

Yes. Mary Ann died seven years ago.

TRICIA

I'm so sorry. Did you have kids? I // can't remember

JOHN

Thousands! At school. But none of our own.

TRICIA

I'm really sorry. I'm sure there are many // women out there

JOHN

But hey, we both look really, really good! You, especially. But of course, who wouldn't look good if they had ten billion followers?

TRICIA

It's ten million, and I know you're still just having a little fun. At my expense.

JOHN

At what expense? What does it cost a FLU 100? Who knew when we were married that such things would exist? You said there was more for you out there and damn it if you weren't right.

TRICIA

Oh John, I'm sure that you have influenced...dozens of students over the years.

TRICIA's phone rings. She looks.

TRICIA

It's my agent. I need to take...no...no I don't. She can leave me a message. So, how are you?

JOHN stares at TRICIA for a long time as her phone rings, beeps, and otherwise indicates urgency. TRICIA's right hand goes for the phone as her left hand pulls her right hand away.

JOHN

This is killing you, isn't it?

TRICIA

Not at all.

JOHN

You're dying inside.

TRICIA

How's teaching?

JOHN

Listen to your damn message.

TRICIA listens to her message. As she does, BUNNY and DWAYNE each hang a tiny LED star in the space, but they're not illuminated yet.

JOHN

Well?

TRICIA

They want me to do Good Morning Lemmington on Thursday. It's early, before the assembly.

JOHN

I'm sure you've had days like that before and excelled.

TRICIA

I'm serious when I said I don't want to talk about me. How is your life?

JOHN

I...have ten thousand views on my nature poetry channel.

TRICIA

Really?

JOHN

Nothing like your ten trillion views // of course

TRICIA

Ten million followers, not ten // trillion views

JOHN

Right. How many views do you have?

TRICIA

I don't... I don't know.

JOHN

Why not?

TRICIA

I have lots of different kinds of posts and // interviews, and

JOHN

Oh, sure, sure.

TRICIA

A nature poetry channel? What a great idea.

JOHN

Well, maybe.

TRICIA

No, you have always written such beautiful poems. Not just beautiful, but accessible and profound at the same time. I always thought that was such a rare gift.

JOHN

That's what several of the comments have said, yes.

TRICIA

Accessible AND profound. You were always so good about being able to stimulate on the surface and then plunge into the depths.

JOHN

You remember that.

TRICIA

When you look the same, how could I forget?

JOHN

You look good, too, Tricia.

TRICIA

Not the same, though, right?

JOHN

No, but you look...like you became who you wanted to become.

TRICIA

Who did I become?

JOHN

Someone impressive.

TRICIA

And that's how you see me?

JOHN

That's the way it is.

TRICIA

Do you remember our first night on the football field?

JOHN

Of course.

TRICIA

Would you have predicted any of this?

JOHN

That all these years later we'd be here now? Like this? Yes, that's exactly what I thought that night.

TRICIA

Seriously!

JOHN

Well you asked a rhetorical question! And a ridiculous one at that!

TRICIA

So I'm ridiculous.

JOHN

You? A FLU 100? How could you ever be? Me? I'm a Flu...45. What do I know?

TRICIA

I'd like to see your videos. I'm sure they're beautiful. What's your channel?

JOHN

No, I... it's really not...

TRICIA

I really want to see them.

JOHN

OK, so there's only...two...one...soon to be two.

TRICIA

But still...ten thousand views!

JOHN

Uh...well...yeah! But it's not worth // looking at

TRICIA

Well, I'm going to be ten thousand and one and there's nothing you can do to stop me.

No, I suppose not.

JOHN

Keep at it. You'll get there some day.

TRICIA

TRICIA's phone rings/beeps/erupts again.

Look, I think I should get back to my hotel.

JOHN

I look forward to your assembly on Thursday.

TRICIA

I was hoping we could spend a little time together before then. They put me up at the Radisson.

JOHN

OK...

TRICIA

You look good, John. Really, really good.

BUNNY is there.

BUNNY

Sorry! I forgot my knitting!

TRICIA

You have my number, of course?

TRICIA is gone.

BUNNY

Toad.

JOHN

Bunny, be honest with me. Is this whole poetry video idea any good?

BUNNY

I am producing them, aren't I?

JOHN

I mean the content.

BUNNY

I asked you to guest on my channel!

JOHN

You're truly serious about that?

BUNNY

You have as much anxiety as me!

JOHN

Then let's do it. I have a perfect poem. Maybe.

BUNNY

Awesome, John! Tomorrow at lunch?

JOHN

Sure, but I really don't think // you should call me

BUNNY

There's no sin in synergy, John! OK, there is, but...byyyeeee!

BUNNY is gone.

JOHN uses his computer.

JOHN

(typing) How do you buy views online? *(reading)* "buymorereviews.com"

JOHN clicks, reads and types.

Hi. I see you sell views. I would like to buy some for my // poetry channel

ANATOLY, 35, Russian, is there.

ANATOLY

One thousand views, ten dollars. Five thousand views, twenty-eight dollars.

JOHN

Why twenty-eight?

ANATOLY

Is my lucky number. Could be your lucky number as well.

JOHN

How do you generate these views?

ANATOLY

No bots, no bots! Old Chechnyan women with arthritis click on links. Is therapeutic.

JOHN

Hmm...are these women paid fairly?

ANATOLY

One ruble per click. Is very generous. What can I say. Is calling of mine.

JOHN

I'll take...ten thousand.

ANATOLY

Sixty-four dollars.

JOHN

That's more than twice what five thousand costs.

ANATOLY

No bots! Old Chechnyan women, and I pay health insurance for carpal tunnel. Take or leave.

JOHN

How quickly can you get them up?

ANATOLY

Enter credit card, and you will be pleased, dear one.

JOHN

Soon?

ANATOLY

Before ex-wife even gets to her hotel to Google you.

JOHN

How did you // know that?

ANATOLY

Do not forget three numbers on back of card. Yours are 294 if you do not already know.

ANATOLY is gone.

JOHN

Is she even going to Google me?

EMILY DICKINSON, at about 28, is there.

EMILY

“Success is counted sweetest
By those who ne’er succeed
To comprehend a nectar
Requires sorest need.”

JOHN

Emily Dickinson, do you realize that this book says that’s the 78th greatest poem of all time?

EMILY

I always did like it.

JOHN

And it says that you’re the 14th greatest poet of all time, but more than 90 percent of your poems were published after your death. Why did you hide them away in your lifetime?

EMILY

“Not one of all the Purple Host
Who took the Flag today
Can tell the definition
So clear of Victory”

JOHN

Verse Two. Is that a clue? Ha ha, I rhymed. Which is more than you did in Verse Two, using slant rhyme with “today” and “Victory”. Oh my God, I can’t believe I just said that to Emily Dickinson.

EMILY

This was one that I published during my lifetime.

JOHN

So you knew it was good. You knew people would respect you.

EMILY

I published it anonymously, and five years after I first wrote it.

JOHN

Why? Please tell me. Is waiting the key? Do poems ripen in the drawer? Did you think it would taste better with no name attached? I write these poems and I send them out into the world and...and...how do you write the 78th best poem of all time? Please tell me!

EMILY

“As he defeated - dying -
On whose forbidden ear
The distant strains of triumph
Burst agonized and clear!”

JOHN

I don't understand.

EMILY

You'll just have to figure it out.

*EMILY and JOHN are gone.
Earlier. TRICIA is Skyping with DWAYNE in
prison.*

TRICIA

Thank you for agreeing to Skype with me, Dwayne. I've got a hard September deadline for this book.

DWAYNE

I got a hard deadline of, uh, eight years, two months, five days. Max.

TRICIA

I wish I could be there in person. I didn't know prison restricted in-person visits so much.

DWAYNE

Yeah, who knew? If you're free on Memorial Day, do drop in.

TRICIA

So, at its height, how many hours a day were you gaming?

DWAYNE

Twenty-six.

TRICIA

Um...

DWAYNE

I'm serious. I once spent 26 hours a day gaming.

TRICIA

Can you explain that to me?

DWAYNE

Day starts at midnight, right? I'm on Overworld at Midnight, my buddy picks me up around 5 a.m., he's driving his rig out to Denver and he needs someone to keep him awake, so I switch to phone mode, and we pull into Denver around 7 p.m. Eastern, but we crossed two time zones, so it's only 5 p.m. there, and I keep going until 2, 3 in the morning their time. So technically I spent 26 hours on Overworld that day, which sounds even more impressive than 33 hours straight.

Every serious gamer's done 33 hours straight. But I might be the only person in the world who gamed 26 hours in one day! SUUUUCK IT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Sorry. My bad.

TRICIA

And what about the minimum number of hours a day?

DWAYNE

Uh...ten? But those were the days when I slept, too.

TRICIA

At what point did you realize that spending that much time gaming was a problem?

DWAYNE

Hmmm...somewhere between the time when my thumbs went numb and when the abbot pulled out his glock.

TRICIA

Did you see it coming?

DWAYNE

Would you have expected the guy running the monastery to be packing? They make jam, for fuck's sake...excuse me...for Chrissake.

TRICIA

You traveled for several hours to rob that monastery, so you still had some prefrontal cortex activity - planning, thinking about the likelihood of success,

TRICIA's phone rings.

Hold on. (*answering*) Hi...Yeah, I'm Skyping a guy in Ohio....a gaming addict...maybe Thursday?...Cool, can I call you back....Great, bye! (*hangs up*) So sorry. So, you were stopped before you had completely lost your reasoning and perspective.

DWAYNE

Yeah, if you can call an all Slushie diet so I could keep my hands on the console 24/7 having reasoning and perspective.

TRICIA

Well, that does indicate some planning.

DWAYNE

Na-unh. Quickie-mart delivers. They have a presence inside the game. You're three, four hours into an Overworld session and a Quickie-Mart pops up on the screen. You go in, order a Slushie, specify the amount of sugar and caffeine you want, pay in crypto, and they bring it to your door. Your REAL door. Which they can unlock, 'cause you've given them access, and the robot

freakin' brings the Slushie TO YOUR SEAT and puts the freakin' straw IN YOUR MOUTH so you can keep playing.

TRICIA

So, would you say that your social skills (*her phone rings*) had eroded to the point of...excuse me... (*answers phone*) Hey....I don't know...this one is really good. Interesting new stuff with the manufacturers. Can you see if there's anyone at... (*to DWAYNE*) who produces Overworld?

DWAYNE shrugs.

(*to phone*)...whoever produces Overworld and find out about their whole product placement thing they have going on with drone deliveries to people in ESA?...Yeah, if we could get someone willing to leak some internal memos showing that they intend to addict players to the point of being complete zombies that they inject with sugar and caffeine to...No, I have one here, right now...Yeah, he's a complete mess...Cool, let me know. Bye. (*hangs up*) What were we talking about?

DWAYNE

The erosion of social skills.

TRICIA

Yeah, yeah! Were you aware of that when it was going on?

DWAYNE

What's "ESA"?

TRICIA

You heard that?

DWAYNE

For a prison, they got good Wifi.

TRICIA

"ESA" is End Stage Addiction.

DWAYNE

Which means?

TRICIA

The last stages before death by overdose.

DWAYNE

You think I was in "ESA?"

TRICIA

That's what I'm trying to determine from this interview.

DWAYNE

'Cause I'm not dead and I'm not an addict. So I guess no.

TRICIA

You may have been. If you'd been killed in the robbery, which you committed to have enough money to continue your addiction, technically the addiction would have been your cause of death. ESA's are beyond the point of no return.

DWAYNE

I'm not an addict anymore.

TRICIA

OK, so technically, you will always // be an addict

DWAYNE

I haven't touched one of those games since I been in here!

TRICIA

I'm not going to argue this with you.

DWAYNE

Because you're some expert?

TRICIA

I just really want to be able to chart the deterioration of your social skills // so that I

DWAYNE

My social skills are FREAKIN' AWESOME!

TRICIA's phone rings. She answers.

TRICIA

Hey...no, it's going great... yelling? ...no, this is what I signed up for...seriously

DWAYNE

No deterioration even though we're allowed actual visitors one freakin' weekend a year! But the hour a week I get on Skype is A BIG HELP!

DWAYNE

Get off the phone so I can tell you about my SOCIAL SKILLS!

TRICIA

...I can definitely do next Wednesday...now I can't give you more than an hour...look, calendar me and I'll confirm or tweak....K. *(she hangs up)*

DWAYNE

OK, so I might have made some bad choices, gone down a rathole, but you can no longer call me an addict, OK? Because I haven't touched one of those // freakin' games since I been in here.

TRICIA

Because you can't. And even after a period of forced separation addicts can relapse into old patterns and continue down // the path towards

DWAYNE

That is NOT ME!

TRICIA

I can not determine that until I complete my questions. Now I have a hard stop in ten minutes, so if you would please just let me conduct // this interview

DWAYNE

Yeah? I have a hard stop right now.

DWAYNE gets up to leave.

TRICIA

No, please, I'm sorry if you have been offended in any way.

DWAYNE

We are done here.

TRICIA

I need you for my research.

DWAYNE

Sucks for you.

TRICIA

Please, look, I can publish your story. People will learn from you, and be better people because of you. I can give you an extra ten minutes. It's crucial to me that you tell your story so I can understand the kind of addiction you have experienced.

DWAYNE

All you gotta do is take a look in the mirror and have a conversation with yourself. We're done here. *(yelling off)* Hey, Skankface!!! *(to TRICIA)* He loves it when I call him that. Social skills!

DWAYNE gets up to leave.

TRICIA

Please, I need you. The world needs you.

DWAYNE

My daughter's birthday was a week before the heist. I was going pretty hard that day. Alarm on my computer goes off. "Bunny's birthday". And right then, I turn off the game. Pick up the phone. Call my daughter. No answer. Leave a message.

"Hey Bun. Happy Birthday! Kinda glad you didn't pick up because it means you're in school, learning from your teacher, not screwing off like I used to. Anyway, I hope you're having a great day. I want to take you out for a nice dinner or something, and I'll be able to in a week or two, so we should make a plan. No hurry. I know you probably got a lot of friends throwin' you a party and such. But, call me back when you can."

I wait all day for her to call back. She's at school or with her friends, right? I will not miss her call, and I vow I won't get back on Overworld until Bunny calls back. Or her birthday's over.

TRICIA

Did she call back?

DWAYNE

I kept that vow. So you tell me I'm always gonna be an addict.

TRICIA and DWAYNE are gone. JOHN and BUNNY are there. DWAYNE and TRICIA return during this scene to each hang a tiny LED star in the space, but they're not illuminated yet.

BUNNY

Hey bunnyloves! I am here with a totally new and exciting component to My Anxiety. "Special Guest Starzzzz." And today's star is....dum dum dummmmm....John Wagner, better known as...my English teacher!

JOHN

No, I thought we agreed we wouldn't establish that.

BUNNY

Oh. Right. Well I can just edit that out later. Let's just keep going. John Wagner, better known as...Nature Poet Extraordinaire! Hello, John, and welcome to My Anxiety.

JOHN

Uh, thanks, Bunny.

BUNNY

It is OK if I call you "John", isn't it? I mean, because you are so much older than I am, but not because you're like my teacher or anything.

JOHN

That's...that's fine.

BUNNY

Or you could call me “Miss Kabalevsky” and I could call you “Mr. Wagner” and we could be all formal like those people from like a hundred years ago on those British shows about the rich folks and their servants who are like all hot and into in each other but they still call each other “Miss Prosser” and “Mister Smythington” and such. Not that WE are all hot and into each other, I just meant that it’s really weird when people are that formal and such.

JOHN

OK, can you edit out some of that, too?

BUNNY

Sure, absolutely. I’m just nervous. I should probably knit when I’m doing this.

BUNNY resumes her knitting.

So, ...John...what will you be reading for us today?

JOHN

Well, Bunny, I’ll be reading my poem “Wormholes”.

BUNNY

COOOOL!!!! Let’s hear it.

JOHN

The sign ahead says “Wormhole - straight ahead.
Plan your destination NOW!”
Implying that you have a choice
About how far back in time you can go
But you had better know
You had better plan.
Is it to be the day you accidentally insulted your wife’s dress?
The day you proposed?
The day you accepted your job despite your misgivings?
The day you declared a major you have since regretted?
Think about how far back you want to go
How far back you need to go.
How much you want to change.

BUNNY

Wow wow wow! That gives me so much to think about. Did you really do that?

JOHN

Go through a wormhole?

BUNNY

Yeah!

JOHN

No.

BUNNY

Oh.

JOHN

But I do sometimes wish I could go back.

BUNNY

Oh, cool! Me too! Like to the womb. Only not my Mom's womb. I wish I had been in another womb. Is that bad to say? Does anyone else out there not like their Mom? I think I probably like my father, but I don't know him all that much? So how about you? Did you have good womb time?

JOHN

I really think that's // not an appropriate question

BUNNY

"Womb" is such a funny word. Like when a "widdle kid twies to say woom". Which is MAYBE WHERE IT COMES FROM???? OMG, not only are you my English teacher, you are also my HomeWOMB teacher as well! Get it? This is the WOMB for me, et cet, et cet. I feel so safe and warm! And it IS awfully humid as well, here in your WOMB!

JOHN

You can't say anything about our relationship!

BUNNY

Oh...right right right right right. Our deep dark is safe!

JOHN

What are you...there's nothing "deep dark" // going on

BUNNY

That would probably get a TON of views, though. Think about it!! A bit of juicy *SCANDALE!* Oh, John! Oh, Bunny! OH, JOHN! OH, BUNNY! They must nevah, evah, know!!!

BUNNY makes some inappropriate gestures to JOHN, as a joke. A bell rings.

Crap! I have to get to Spanish! OK, but we have enough, so I'll edit this tonight and get it up, K?

JOHN

Uh, OK, but can I see it before you post it? That last bit // was not really

BUNNY

Don't you trust me?

JOHN

Of course I trust you, but // I just

BUNNY

I see how it is, John.

JOHN

No, I do trust you, Bunny, but, see, now calling me "John" on video is not a good // idea

BUNNY

I am doing you a favor here! You said you trusted me, John, now either you trust me or you don't!

JOHN

I do, Bunny, but you can't call me "John"!

BUNNY shuts off the video.

BUNNY

You're making me late for Senora Rosenberg and I haven't done my tarea and I don't know like half the palabras on the quiz!

BUNNY is gone. A second bell rings.

To read the next ten pages of FLU, contact me at rich@richespey.com.

Here's the end:

DWAYNE holds out a letter to us. BUNNY's poem is projected:

*Our sun is only one
of a billion trillion stars,
It doesn't have much clout. It's*

*out of sight for half our lives
Yet try to live without it.*

Yeah, I don't get it either. But she wrote it for me, Ronald. For nothing, piece-o'-shit me..."You're not a piece-o'-shit if someone writes you a poem?" You know, Ronald, that's the nicest thing anyone ever said to me.

So how 'bout you help me write one back?

Oh, and I need a stamp, too.

*DWAYNE is gone.
JOHN is on the phone, leaving a message for
TRICIA.*

JOHN

Hey, it's me. I'm sorry the Assembly got a little rough, but I think we recovered nicely. I'm sure you saw I called a couple or five times yesterday, but I know you had a lot of other stuff going on. I hope the thing with the parents last night went better. Of course it did. So, I'm gonna work on posting some new vids later, but I could come by the Radisson and debrief...and I just want to say that the other night felt like thirty years ago, and I do mean everything felt like thirty years ago. Better, even. OK, gotta get those vids done. Call me when you can. Lov - (*he catches himself*) Love ya. Byyyeee.

*JOHN hangs up. He sets up his phone and starts
filming himself.*

Hey everybody, before I start today's poem I just wanted to remind you that I'll be reading "Mount Marcy" and giving the keynote address at the Carter College Poetry Conference on Memorial Day, and this summer I'll be starting up readings on the coffee shop circuit throughout northwestern Indiana. Details soon, so "like" this video and subscribe down below. OK! Here we go.

*We hear a dismal sound from John's phone. John
shrugs it off.*

"Rebirth"

The burrowing frog
Can live frozen in the mud for years
Staying alive by doing a very slow burn
Waiting patiently for a lucky break,
The right spark at the right time
To jumpstart its froggy soul

BUNNY interrupts. Her knitting is very, very large.

BUNNY
Our lives are over!!!!

JOHN
I'm sorry?

BUNNY
I'm the one who is sorry. Sorry until my dying day, which should be today!

JOHN
What are you talking about?

BUNNY
Look at these comments about the video we made!

*BUNNY thrusts her phone at JOHN.
JOHN reads.*

JOHN
“Lame.” That’s hardly the worst // thing people say on the Internet

BUNNY
Keep reading!

JOHN
“Mr. Wagner is a...creepy perv for being in a video with a student.”

BUNNY
Catastrophe!

JOHN
OK, that’s one opinion, and I told you people would say // uncomplimentary things

BUNNY
Keep reading!!!

JOHN
“Pervy”
“Superpervy”
“Pervilicious”
“They eat each other in the perveteria.” OK, that’s QUITE enough, thanks!

Look, it was me reading a poem on your channel.

BUNNY

I posted the wrong video.

JOHN

What are you talking about?

BUNNY

I accidentally posted the raw footage instead of the edited version. All those weirdnesses? “John”. “Miss Kobalevsky”. References to British costume dramas with incredible yet relevant sexual tension? And the bit about a juicy *SCANDALE*. “Oh John! Oh Bunny!” All online for all my bunnyloves to see. And then some!!!

JOHN

Who some?

BUNNY

YOUR followers, since you are a FLU 56!!

*We again hear the dismal sound from John’s phone.
And we hear it again. And again.*

JOHN

What is that?

BUNNY

I’ve heard it all day long. Twelve times, in fact. Twelve, eleven, ten, nine, eight...

JOHN

Is that the sound of...

BUNNY

FLU deaths.

JOHN

I’ve never heard that before.

BUNNY

Get used to it. I only had to hear it twelve times until I became a FLU ZERO. You, on the other hand, will have to listen to it...

We hear the sound again.

Again. And again.

We hear the sound again.

JOHN

(looking at her phone) But the video has thousands of views. Not bots! No Chechnyans!

BUNNY

Real people disgusted! And FLU crawls the comments. Words like “creepy” and “pervy” are killers!

We hear the sound again.

And again.

JOHN

Pull down the video.

BUNNY

I did. Too late. Too many shares and too many copies.

JOHN

Can you put up the new video?

BUNNY

You still have NO IDEA HOW ANY OF THIS WORKS!!

JOHN

Well, apparently, neither do you!

BUNNY

No. No. I guess I don't have any idea about how any of this works.

JOHN

I'm sorry, I didn't mean that. Look, you are very good at this, and we can recover. I just shot another poem, I can send it to you, you can do your magic, get it up, we'll recover, people will love it.

A bell rings.

BUNNY

And now it's time for class. Which is going to be the most humiliating 70 minutes of my entire humiliating, ridiculous, embarrassing life.

JOHN

I...I will give you this period to work on it.

We hear the FLU Deaths sound again.

BUNNY

Can I go to the Health Suite?

No, Bunny.

JOHN

We hear the FLU Deaths sound again.

BUNNY

You can not stop a girl from going to the nurse if she asks!

JOHN

No, I meant you'll feel better if we get a new video up. Here, let me send it // to you

BUNNY

Are you making me do this instead of class?

We hear the FLU Deaths sound again.

JOHN

I am cancelling class today.

We hear the FLU Deaths sound again.

BUNNY

You're cancelling // class?

JOHN

I have to fix this!

We hear the FLU Deaths sound again.

BUNNY

God, at least put your phone on silent! I am going to the Health Suite!!

BUNNY is gone.

JOHN does silence his phone.

JOHN addresses his class.

JOHN

Good morning. Uh, today, I am...giving you this period to work on...creative free-writing. You may go anywhere on campus and I expect at least five pages in your folders by the end of the period. OK? I'm serious, I will be checking your folders!

As the "class" leaves John looks on his computer.

Jesus! "Hashtag Manhandler"?

“Not only is he a perv, he’s a manhandler, too.”

What the...?

*TRICIA is there being interviewed, remotely, by
MATT HANDLER.*

MATT

Dr. Scott-Edwards, I know it’s painful to talk about. And so serious that I am not going to sing today. There are about, what, a dozen different videos posted of your Assembly program that show a really stark example of what so many professional women face on a daily basis. This has erupted on social media with the hashtag “manhandler”, and I just want your take on how this felt for you.

TRICIA

You know, Matt, I was handling the situation in a way that I felt was right for me, and to be interrupted by a man, no matter how well-intentioned, who tried to take over the situation, you know that’s really painful.

MATT

Let’s take a look.

Flashback. Maybe this is a video?

TRICIA

OR...OR a device-free day! Just one day! Go on a hike, ride // your bike

*We hear a voice shout “Take a hike, Grandma!”,
followed by hysterical laughter and applause.
JOHN is there, taking the stage.*

JOHN

Hey. HEY! This is not how we treat guests at Lemmington High School! We have a guest who has something important to share with us. You have every right to disagree with what she says, but you have absolutely no right to do it in such a disrespectful way. Sit down, raise your hand if you have questions or concerns, and be the mature and responsible students I know you to be. No! DO NOT LEAVE!

MATT

Mmm. That strikes me as the definition of hashtag manhandler. Which, by the way, strikes a little close to home, since my name is Matt Handler, but I hope I never do anything like that.

TRICIA

Matt, I don’t think you ever would.

MATT

Well, Dr. Tricia Scott-Edwards, already a FLU 100 for your work on addiction, just adding to your social influence by standing up so beautifully to a really sad but ultimately teachable example of manhandling... I think maybe you have your next book topic.

TRICIA

Oh, I most definitely do.

*JOHN slams his computer down, MATT is gone.
TRICIA is there in real life.*

TRICIA

I'm heading back. I just wanted to say...

JOHN

I was not trying to "manhandle" you.

TRICIA

I did not intend for this // to happen

JOHN

I was trying to restore order as an authority figure they might respect.

TRICIA

And you interrupted me on stage!

JOHN

They had interrupted plenty already, and Principal Skinner was too out of it or too weak // to do anything

TRICIA

She didn't want to embarrass me // by interfering

JOHN

And now I'm reduced to hashtag infamy.

TRICIA

Hashtag Manhandler never names the man, out of not wanting to promote people for their bad behavior. It's like how they never show the drunks who run out on the field to disrupt sporting events. And I have not and will not mention your name or our relationship when discussing this.

JOHN

My name is bound to be in at least some of the comments in the videos the kids posted.

TRICIA

I honestly don't think my people are that interested in knowing who did that to me.

JOHN

But you had to go on TV // and talk all about

TRICIA

Look, Matt's people called the Radisson, said he wanted me to do a remote, what am I supposed to say? // I didn't even know what

JOHN

How about "No"? Or go on but say, "my ex-husband was trying to defend me, and maybe he's old-fashioned, but we had just spent the night making love like we did when we were 25, and maybe he was feeling like it was thirty years ago so give him a break!"

TRICIA

I did not shoot a video of the Assembly. Nor did I post a video. But twelve people did. I did not make a comment, I did not add a hashtag, but THOUSANDS of people did, and when Matt Handler says "let's trend it out," you go on Matt Handler!

JOHN

And throw me under the bus so you can be "trajecting?"

TRICIA

This is not about you! It's about me becoming a better social influencer through empathizing with women who've had to put up with the same thing.

JOHN

Why do you need to be a better social influencer? You're already a 100! What, do you need to be a 110, a 150? That's not even possible, so why...

TRICIA

I'm sorry you feel you've failed.

JOHN

I think being a laughingstock qualifies as failure.

TRICIA

Nobody knows or cares who you are!

Look, I didn't mean...

JOHN

The next interview you have about this...

TRICIA

What?

JOHN

Will you mention me?

TRICIA

What?

JOHN

Name me. Identify me.

TRICIA

Why would you want that?

BUNNY hangs a tiny LED star in the space, but it's not illuminated yet.

I just really wanted to leave on good terms.

JOHN

You're leaving?

TRICIA

John, I have kids and an unreliable ex-husband!

Did you think...?

JOHN

No. Not for even a second.

TRICIA

I hope you enjoy your poetry convention.

JOHN

If they don't rescind the award.

TRICIA

They're not...but if you think they might, call me. I'll make sure they don't.

*TRICIA is gone.
MATT HANDLER is there in JOHN's fantasy.*

MATT

Welcome to the Carter College Poetry Contest Awards! I am honored to introduce this year's keynote speaker, Mr. John Wagner. John's poem, "Mounting Marcy",

JOHN

Mount Marcy.

MATT

Oh...right. His poem is this year's winner of the prestigious // Carter College

EMILY DICKINSON is there.

EMILY

Stop! Stop!

MATT

What? What's going on?

EMILY whispers something to MATT.

MATT

I'm sorry, he's a what?

EMILY

He's a deviant! A debaucher!

JOHN

That is not true!

EMILY

I have online evidence! An escapade with a pupil!

MATT

Welcome to the 21st Century Miss Dickinson!

EMILY takes out her smartphone and shows MATT a video.

Juicy *SCANDALE!* Well, after seeing that I am only too happy to rescind John Wagner's prize and award it to...Emily Dickinson!

Audience applause. TRICIA is there.

TRICIA

Wait, Matt! I promised John I would help him if you tried to rescind his award! His poems have thousands and thousands of views! And quite a few likes!

MATT

Well, Tricia, since you are a FLU 100, we have to listen to you!

EMILY

His views are corrupt! And you should know!

MATT becomes ANATOLY.

ANATOLY

No bots! No bots! Old Chechnyan women I give money for clicks. Is a win-win!

JOHN

OK, so some of those views I bought, but there were real people, outside of Chechnya, who viewed my poems!

ANATOLY

But not many, really. Maybe...twenty eight.

JOHN

He only said that because it's his // lucky number

EMILY

I must say all this changing around is very unusual.

TRICIA

I promised John I would speak up for him and....

ANATOLY has become MATT and whispers something to TRICIA.

TRICIA

But since our interview about hashtag manhandler is trajecting, I won't be able to do that!

MATT

And I have no choice but to rescind the award. So congratulations to the winner of the Carter College Poetry Contest...Emily Dickinson! You're going on to fame and glory, Emily! One of the Top 100 poets of all time!! And you!!! (*looking at JOHN*) YOU!!! I can't even remember your name, but I do know this:

(*singing*) Today's a bad day for you!
 You're on your way down, woo hoo!!
 You're less influential
 You're less consequential!
 You're losing your potential
 You've been rendered nonessential
 So BooHoo, BooHoo, BooHoooooo.....for you!

*MATT, TRICIA, and EMILY are gone.
 JOHN uses his phone to record a poem. As he recites his poem, we are transported to the football field at night. All the other actors hang tiny LED stars in the space, but they're not illuminated yet.*

JOHN

“The Angst of Not Enoughness”

Three inches north of my navel
 Below where my breastbone ends
 There’s a spot just under the surface.
 It has no name, but should
 Because I feel it all the time.
 Empty.
 I don’t know how to fill it up
 It doesn’t hurt, it aches.
 My stomach, lying to the west,
 I can fill, and I do.
 My bladder, lying to the south,
 I can fill, and I do.
 Lungs on either side get filled
 with thoughtful yoga breath,
 Down south, penis fills with blood
 Now and again, yes, still.
 But that central spot stays aching.
 What do I fill it with?
 Thank-you notes once filled it up
 But they’ve gone out of style
 A passing smile? An “attaboy”?
 A third-rate poem award?
 They fill the spot so fleetingly
 And soon it’s empty ache
 I’m searching for the thing that lasts
 That will, at long last, last.

*BUNNY is there, with an enormous blanket, the
 result of all that knitting.*

JOHN

What are you doing here?

BUNNY

I was worried. I read your last poem.

JOHN

You may be the only one.

BUNNY

It was very “dark and down”. Like...like you should be doing therapeutic knitting or something.

JOHN

How did you find me here? Wait, you knew from our reading Lear to look for the old man on the blasted heath!

BUNNY

No, I GPS'ed your phone. Look, I finished!

Bunny hands him the blanket. The tiny LED stars begin to shine.

JOHN

Congratulations. It's beautiful. You'll be able to enjoy that for years and years.

BUNNY

It's for you.

JOHN

For me?

BUNNY

It's so chilly out here.

JOHN

Oh, for tonight.

BUNNY

Yes, for tonight. But also forever. I knitted it for you. Knitted, not knotted. I got a lot better.

BUNNY puts the blanket around JOHN. She sits by him. Then she puts the blanket around herself as well. The stars are all shining now.

JOHN

Aren't you afraid of being seen with the perv?

BUNNY

You're not a perv, are you?

JOHN shakes his head. BUNNY sits with him.

BUNNY

Would you hold me a little bit?

JOHN

I'm not sure // that's a good

BUNNY

No one on this planet has held me for a very, very, very long time.

JOHN

No one on this planet has held me for a very, very, very long time, either.

BUNNY

What about your ex? Didn't you guys...?

JOHN

How did you know that?

BUNNY

OK, I might have GPS'ed your phone and you were like at the Radisson all night. But I'm totally not stalker!

JOHN

Trish and I...we didn't really "hold" each other. Not in that kind of way.

BUNNY

My Mom went off tonight. Toilet brush spikes are surprisingly sharp.

JOHN

I'm sorry.

BUNNY and JOHN hold each other. It is nice. It is definitely not creepy or pervy. Then Bunny pulls away.

JOHN

Did I...?

BUNNY

No. Thank you. It just made me realize that what I really want is to be able to hold my father. I was all set to go on Memorial Day, but in between toilet brush attacks Mom is like, "Why should I drive all that effin' way for you?" and it's in the middle of nowhere.

JOHN

Memorial Day?

BUNNY

Yeah.

JOHN

I'll drive you there.

BUNNY

But that's your Poetry Convention.

JOHN

No. I'll take you.

BUNNY

But you are the keynote speaker, and you // won the award for

JOHN

The thing I most want to do in the world on Memorial Day is take you to see your father.

BUNNY

Did they take away your award?!

JOHN checks his phone.

JOHN

No. Only in my paranoid fantasy. Look, I'm still there.

JOHN shows BUNNY his phone.

BUNNY

First Prize! Your picture, your bio! "Our Grand Prize Winner John Wagner has had the privilege to teach more than three thousand students during // his thirty year career as

JOHN

Help me fold this.

BUNNY

You have to go that Convention!

JOHN

I'm driving you to Ohio.

BUNNY

It's your award!

JOHN

It's your father.

Help me fold this blanket.

JOHN and BUNNY fold up the blanket.

Would they let you give this to your father?

BUNNY

It's for you.

JOHN

You could knit your next one for me. Give this to him if you want. Please?

JOHN hands BUNNY the blanket.

The stars are shining.

Then DWAYNE is there.

BUNNY and DWAYNE embrace.

JOHN watches.

Joy.

END OF PLAY