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**SMOKE AND FIRE** by F.J. Hartland

**Synopsis:** He was bullied in elementary school... and in middle school... and in high school. Now a boy named Hilary is taking matters into his own hands to stop that bullying. Permanently. Blurring the past, the present and the future, six characters struggle with events leading up to a fateful point in time when their lives could converge in tragedy.

**Cast Size:** 4 Females, 2 Males

# **The Brink**

**by Eugenie Carabatsos**

SAMPLE ONLY

## CHARACTERS

Helen: Early 20s, she/her, any race/ethnicity

Charlie: Early 20s, he/him, she/her, they/them, or gender nonconforming, any race/ethnicity

Josh: Early 20s, he/him, any race/ethnicity

Marcus: Early 20s, he/him, white.

## SETTING

Charlie's apartment

## NOTE

Characters should literally “build the memories.” Furniture, props, and even people can be moved around and placed accordingly. There can be instances when furniture and props from memories remain during the present day scenes. In other words, there should be a melting of memories and reality. This should come to a head in the final “taboo” scene, where Josh and Marcus’s presence should be felt, and even acknowledged, when Helen and Charlie are in the present.

Please adjust Charlie’s pronouns to fit the performer.

The Brink was first produced in the Midwinter Madness Festival in New York in 2012. The production was directed by Harry Poster. The cast was as follows:

HELEN	Sabina Friedman-Seitz
CHARLIE	Andrew Wells Ryder
MARCUS	Christopher Davis
JOSH	Jonny Price

SAMPLE ONLY

**This play is dedicated to Nick.**

SAMPLE ONLY

## THE BRINK

*(Charlie and Helen are kissing. They break apart.)*

CHARLIE: I'm sorry.

HELEN: What?

CHARLIE: I should be sorry, right?

HELEN: I'm sorry too. It's okay. This happens to friends all the time.

CHARLIE: It does?

HELEN: I don't know. Does it?

CHARLIE: Maybe. Okay, well should we just pretend this never happened?

HELEN: Should?

CHARLIE: Yes, should?

HELEN: Meaning maybe we shouldn't?

CHARLIE: You're reading into this a little too much.

HELEN: Well should or shouldn't we?

CHARLIE: I don't think it matters whether we should or shouldn't because we won't be able to.

HELEN: Yes, sure we can. Just ignore it. We know how to ignore feelings now. Don't we? Sorry, that was kind of dark wasn't it? It's just... well, you understand. Do you feel as though you've changed?

CHARLIE: Changed?

HELEN: Fundamentally.

CHARLIE: Yes.

HELEN: Me too. Sorry. I didn't mean for it to get so depressing. At least not right away. I've kept it together for a couple weeks now. Then, I see you. I see you for a minute and I just let it go.

CHARLIE: Let what go?

HELEN: The joke. I just feel comfortable being depressed around you.

CHARLIE: You're welcome.

HELEN: Only you would understand that as a compliment.

CHARLIE: But you've had happy moments in the past few months.

HELEN: Sure. Moments. And you?

CHARLIE: Getting your postcards.

HELEN: Oh, good.

CHARLIE: Yes, all of those amazing places you went.

HELEN: Right.

CHARLIE: London, Dublin, Madrid—

HELEN: Prague, Paris, yes, yes, yes.

CHARLIE: I still want to go to Europe.

HELEN: Yes, you should. How's work?

CHARLIE: Fine.

HELEN: Do you like it?

CHARLIE: No.

HELEN: Are you still applying to law school?

CHARLIE: No. Hey, do me a favor. Let's not talk about the future.

HELEN: I'm just trying to make conversation.

CHARLIE: You don't have to do that. Let's just talk.

HELEN: I couldn't really sleep when I was away.

CHARLIE: Did you drink? That usually helps me.

HELEN: But it doesn't stop me from dreaming.

CHARLIE: No that's true. I had that dream again last night.

HELEN: The dream? You have got to stop blaming yourself for what happened, Charlie. I had a new one the other night.

CHARLIE: Oh?

HELEN: I tried to scream but nothing would come out and I couldn't wake myself up, even though I knew it was a dream. I hate that. It's like you're trapped in your own mind and what's worse is—

CHARLIE: You know it.

HELEN: Exactly.

*(Josh and Marcus enter and help Helen and Charlie build the scene. Helen narrates as they get set up. Once the scene is set, Marcus exits.)*

HELEN: It always starts off the same way. We're sitting in Josh's living room, having a drink. We're all chatting, not about anything important. I look at the clock, it's 9:58 and I register the time. I'm not quite sure why, but I do. I'm telling you guys about my impending European vacation and even as I speak, I know something horrible is going to happen.

*(Marcus enters with a gun. As Helen narrates, they act out the scene.)*

HELEN: I know it is going to happen. But I can't warn you. I can't do anything. And all of a sudden, he just starts shooting. He shoots Josh three times and then he turns to you and I beg with him, plead with him not to kill you,

but he does it. He kills you. And the blood just keeps rushing all around me in a pool and it encircles me and I can't keep my eyes off of it and he stares at me. He stares at me, willing the blood to drown me. And then I look up at him. I look into his eyes and he holds the gun straight at my head. Before I can say anything, before I can ever say his name, he quickly turns the gun on himself and shoots. His body collapses to the floor and I am surrounded. Surrounded by all three of you. I cannot move. I am alone. Alone and immersed in blood. Then I don't see any of you anymore. Just red. Red, as I start to drown. Just when I can't gasp from my breath anymore, I wake up.

*(Josh and Marcus exit, leaving Helen and Charlie in the present day.)*

CHARLIE: I'm sorry.

HELEN: You died.

CHARLIE: I'm sorry.

HELEN: You left me alone to drown.

CHARLIE: It wasn't on purpose. Have you tried sleeping pills? They help sometimes.

HELEN: Obviously not that much. You still have that dream.

CHARLIE: Yes.

*(Josh enters and they start to build the scene again. Charlie narrates.)*

CHARLIE: Josh and I are sitting in the living room talking when you come in. You have just finished your neuroscience final and you look exhausted, but pleased. You say something about how you conquered the brain. It's dramatic, but, for some reason, I believe you. You throw down your backpack and plop onto the couch making some kind of exclamation about your exam. Josh goes to the refrigerator and grabs you a beer. You take a sip and then look at me. You're about to say something... I can't figure out what it is but then you're interrupted by a loud banging on the door. I go to answer it and there's Marcus. Something has come over him. At first, I think he's drunk, but it is more like he's possessed. He pushes by me and staggers over to face Josh. You try to grab his hand as he walks by. He lets you, but only for a moment and not for long enough for you to say anything. He then faces Josh and takes out the gun.

“Marcus! Marcus, what are you doing? Marcus, you don't want to do that. Everything is going to be okay. You're going through a hard time, Marcus. You don't want to use that gun. But things will get better. I promise you. They will get better.”

MARCUS: “You don't know that.”

CHARLIE: “Yes. I do. I promise. The end of a relationship is hard. You think about it every day now, but things will get easier. They will get better. There are still good things in life. There are still things that make life worthwhile. You don't want to do this.”

*(The speech isn't working. Marcus points the gun firmly at Josh.)*

CHARLIE: "She's not worth it!"

*(A moment, then, Marcus puts the gun down.)*

CHARLIE: "Good. Good job, buddy. There you go. You're doing the right thing. Everything is fine now."

HELEN: And then you wake up?

*(Marcus and Josh exit.)*

CHARLIE: Yes.

HELEN: At least it's not violent.

CHARLIE: It's worse.

HELEN: You can't keep blaming yourself for what happened. You couldn't have done anything. You were in shock.

CHARLIE: Still. You always want to think that you would be capable of handling a crisis. That you could come out of it—

HELEN: A hero?

CHARLIE: Well, yes.

HELEN: I understand the impulse, Charlie, but the fact is it didn't happen that way and you can't go back and talk him out of it. No matter how many dreams you have.

CHARLIE: And you can't go back in time and die too.

HELEN: I know.

CHARLIE: Is that what you wish? Do you wish he had killed you too?

HELEN: What? No. Not most of the time, anyway.

CHARLIE: Helen—

HELEN: I mean the thought has crossed my mind now and again. But only for a moment. I don't actually wish that. Of course I don't. I know there are things to live for.

CHARLIE: Like?

HELEN: My parents. My work... I want a career. My friends. You. I wouldn't want to leave you in this fucked up situation. It's dangerous here.

CHARLIE: Where?

HELEN: Reality. I wouldn't want to leave you here alone. You could go crazy. Plus, we have a buddy system thing going on.

CHARLIE: What do you mean? Are we bringing each other away from the edge or something?

HELEN: Not exactly. I picture it more like we are on opposite sides of the brink of total madness and despair, facing each other. We both lean

forward, as though we are about to fall, but because we are doing it at the same time, because we are doing it together, we become stuck. We can't both fall through, you see. We hold each other there. There we are hovering over the brink, but never falling. Forever.

CHARLIE: That's oddly comforting.

HELEN: It's a good buddy system.

CHARLIE: I go over it again and again in my head. At work, at home, before I go to sleep. I can't get it out of my head.

HELEN: The event?

CHARLIE: Yes. No. The dream. What I don't understand is that it all happened so slowly. And yet, I still couldn't do anything to stop it.

HELEN: Well there is some scientific explanation for that... if you find science to be a comfort.

CHARLIE: Go on.

HELEN: Basically, you only think the event happened slowly in retrospect. Normally your memories are formed in the hippocampus, but when you are in a dangerous or intense situation the amygdala, which is like the fear center of the brain, anyway... it activates. So you are processing more information per second Your brain is going into overdrive and—

CHARLIE: What's the point?

HELEN: The point is the actual event doesn't seem to take longer when it is happening. It is only in retrospect, only in your memory, that it seems as though time has slowed down. The memory of the event is more detailed, so you think the event itself was long.

CHARLIE: Therefore?

HELEN: You shouldn't worry about it too much because it is only in retrospect that it went by slowly.

CHARLIE: Even if that is true, it doesn't help.

HELEN: No, it doesn't.

CHARLIE: Can we go over it again?

HELEN: Again?

CHARLIE: Yes.

HELEN: We've gone over it so many times. For the police, for the newspapers, for ourselves... almost every day for months.

CHARLIE: When you were gone we didn't go over it.

HELEN: You said you think about it all day every day.

CHARLIE: Yes, but we don't go over it together.

HELEN: Charlie—I don't want to go through it again.

CHARLIE: Please, Helen. The brink, remember?

HELEN: Alright.

*(Josh enters and helps set up the scene. Helen exits.)*

CHARLIE: 9:56. Josh and I are sitting having a few beers and you enter.

HELEN *(re-entering)*: I officially conquered the brain!

JOSH: Congrats! Have a beer!

HELEN: The brain and the greatest authors of all time! I have conquered the brain and Shakespeare and Hemingway and the freaking Waste Land! Four years and millions of pages later, I have conquered the brain and the literary canon!

*(Josh hands her a beer.)*

JOSH: I was just telling Charlie that he's going to hate his new job.

HELEN: You got it?

CHARLIE: It's just paralegal work. Until I go to law school.

HELEN: Well congrats! I knew you were going to get it. And yeah, you're going to hate it.

CHARLIE: Thanks for being so supportive.

HELEN: What happened to becoming a sports writer?

CHARLIE: I don't want to be a sports writer. I have loans.

JOSH: I have loans too, but I'm not going to sell my soul.

CHARLIE: Not all of us want to do the non-profit thing.

JOSH: I decided not to take that job, actually.

HELEN: What, why?

JOSH: I'm going to move to Costa Rica and teach surfing instead.

CHARLIE: \$200,000 later you are moving to Costa Rica and teaching surfing?

HELEN: I think that's great.

CHARLIE (*to Josh*): Are you serious?

JOSH: Oh calm down, it's not forever. Just a few months. My entire life all I've done is work hard to get to the next level. First it was getting into the private boarding school, then it was getting into a good college, then it was doing well in that college so that you could get that perfect job. But the thing is, I went to college, I worked hard, I'm graduating with a degree in business... and I still have no fucking idea what I want to do.

CHARLIE: So your answer is surfing?

JOSH: I like surfing.

CHARLIE: How are you going to pay off your loans teaching surfing?

JOSH: I haven't thought about it too much yet.

CHARLIE: Do you know what your interest rates are going to be?

JOSH: I imagine they are going to be bad.

CHARLIE: Yes. Bad. Very, very bad. Isn't there something else, anything else that you would want to do? Something that would... make money?

JOSH: I'm twenty-two years old. Other than my loans, I don't have any responsibilities.

CHARLIE: You have \$50,000 worth of responsibilities!

JOSH: And I will pay it back! But think about it. I'm twenty-two years old and other than my \$50,000 loan, I have no other responsibilities. When else is that going to happen in life? I want to do something fun.

HELEN: Good for you. That's exactly why I'm spending my summer in Europe.

JOSH: I just need a break from my life.

CHARLIE: From what happened with Meredith?

HELEN: If Josh wants to go to Costa Rica, then it's up to him!

JOSH: Are you just being supportive because you feel bad for me? Because you think I'm lost in the world and I need some time to cleanse or whatever? Because that's not why I'm going and if that's why you're supportive then I don't want your support, Helen.

HELEN: That's not what I meant.

JOSH: I've dealt with it. She got pregnant. She had an abortion. We stopped seeing each other— fucking each other. It wouldn't have been my first choice, but it happened. And everyone should stop worrying about me. If there is anyone we should be worried about, it's Marcus.

HELEN: He didn't show up for our final. I tried to call him afterwards, but I didn't get an answer.

CHARLIE: Things will be better once we graduate and he can go home. He just needs to get out of here.

JOSH: Well if he would have talked to me about it, I would have told him to take some time off.

CHARLIE: Why? So you wouldn't have to hide the fact that you were fucking his girlfriend?

HELEN: Charlie!

JOSH: Are you ever going to stop with that? You don't even like Marcus!

CHARLIE: Doesn't matter. You didn't handle that situation well.

JOSH: I am aware of that. I don't need you and your high and mighty morals up my ass about it. People get tired of hearing you tell them what they are doing wrong, you know. We're all human. We all fuck up. The only reason you're the exception is because you never put yourself out there to do anything. Do you really think you're better than me because of this?

HELEN: He has a moral reflex, Josh. You know that. He can't stop himself.

JOSH: Well it's extremely irritating.

*(Knock at the door. Charlie answers.)*

CHARLIE: Marcus.

HELEN: Marcus! What happened to you today? Did you forget about the final? Marcus? Marcus? Are you okay? Marcus, hey, are you okay?

JOSH: Stop looking at me like that. What are you doing here?

*(Marcus pulls out his gun.)*

JOSH: Holy sh—

*(Helen and Charlie duck down. Josh tries to dive under the table as Marcus shoots him. Helen crawls to Josh.)*

HELEN: Oh my god.

CHARLIE: Helen, what are you doing?

HELEN: Marcus. Marcus. Oh god.

*(Marcus watches as Helen holds Josh. He points the gun at her.)*

CHARLIE *(is he in the past or present? Both)*:  
Stop!

*(Marcus turns the gun on himself and shoots. Blackout. In the dark, Marcus and Josh exit. Lights up on Helen and Charlie. After a moment, they come back to present.)*

CHARLIE: What the hell were you thinking? You just went over to him. You got right in front of a shooter.

HELEN: I was trying to save Josh.

CHARLIE: You could have gotten yourself killed.

HELEN: I had to stop the bleeding.

CHARLIE: You could have died.

HELEN: He could have just as easily turned and shot us dead too.

CHARLIE: You can't be so reckless with your life.

HELEN: I'm not reckless with anything. And you, you could use a little recklessness in your life.

CHARLIE: Oh you think you're Josh now?

HELEN: You do everything by the book. You're not passionate about anything.

CHARLIE: That's not true.

HELEN: You're so focused on doing what you think you need to do, you miss everything.

CHARLIE: What is that supposed to mean?

HELEN: In the four years I've known you, you have never gone out on a date. Not once.

CHARLIE: I don't know how the conversation suddenly switched to my relationship issues all of a sudden. Stop preaching your nonsense to me, Helen. You act all superior when you're really just as paralyzed, just as emotionally crippled, as I am. Stop setting different rules for me than you have for yourself.

HELEN: Okay.

CHARLIE: And you shouldn't have gotten in front of Marcus.

HELEN: Okay.

CHARLIE: You could have died Helen.

HELEN: I'm sorry.

CHARLIE: And don't tell me I don't have passion. I have passion. Just because I don't find the need to broadcast my emotions to the world, doesn't mean I don't feel anything.

HELEN: I know. I'm sorry.

CHARLIE: You, of all people, should know that.

HELEN: Yes, I do. I'm sorry. You must miss him.

CHARLIE: All of the time.

HELEN: He didn't mean what he said to you, Charlie.

CHARLIE: Yes he did.

HELEN: Well, he did, but he loved you. You were his best friend. You guys couldn't be more different. When he first introduced me to you, I was kind of surprised. You weren't his usual buddy.

CHARLIE: What do you mean?

HELEN: Well he was kind of a frat boy, wasn't he? Super social. One of those guys everyone on campus knew.

CHARLIE: Thanks.

HELEN: No, I just mean that you are a lot more reserved.

CHARLIE: I'm aware.

HELEN: I'm just saying I was surprised! Don't take it as an insult. If anything, it's an insult to Josh. I didn't think he would befriend someone so serious and directed. *(Beat.)* I miss Marcus too. Sometimes.

CHARLIE: How could you miss a person like that?

HELEN: I miss how he was when we first met him. I miss the person he could have been.

CHARLIE: He was a killer, Helen. He killed his friend. He could have killed you.

HELEN: Something overcame him. He was grieving; he didn't know how to handle it.

CHARLIE: Plenty of other people grieve; they don't go out and kill people because of it.

HELEN: I know that. But he was sick, Charlie. And we didn't realize how sick he was. We were the closest to him. His family was across the country. We were the ones dealing with him on a daily basis and we had no idea what was going on.

CHARLIE: His girlfriend broke up with him. That's it. She broke up with him. Break ups can be hard, but seriously. It's just a freaking relationship. He was betrayed by Josh. I get it. Josh was his friend and he betrayed him by sleeping with his girlfriend. But that is all that happened. It's not worth killing over. I can never, ever forgive him for what he did.

HELEN: No one is talking about forgiveness, Charlie.

CHARLIE: You are—

HELEN: I'm not! I'm just saying it's more complicated that you make it out to be.

CHARLIE: No, Helen. It isn't. He killed someone. He killed an innocent person. That means he is an evil person. It doesn't get much more evil than that.

HELEN: He was a sick person, Charlie. We should have realized it. I should have realized it, in any case. I spent the most time with him. After Meredith broke up with him and he started to fall into depression, I tried to see him every day until the end of the semester. I mean, it had been months, months after the breakup and I was still trying to see him all the time. Because he was still fading and he was doing worse. He was so angry and never went to class. But then it was the end of the semester; it had been almost six months since she broke up with him. Finals were coming up and you know what? I was tired of it. Tired of hearing him talk about her. About how angry he was. About how much he missed her. Loved her. It was exhausting. And no one else was talking to him about it!

CHARLIE: Are you blaming me for this?

HELEN: I'm just asking why I was the only one who was comforting him throughout this whole thing? You knew just as well as I did that he was falling apart.

CHARLIE: Yes and that's why I stopped trying to be friends with him. He wasn't himself anymore.

HELEN: You can't just abandon people when they're down, Charlie.

CHARLIE: He was gone. He was toxic to be around.

HELEN: He was your friend. You owed him something. Your time. Your freaking shoulder to cry on.

CHARLIE: I gave him my time. I gave him a freaking shoulder to cry on. But I had to stop, because it was unhealthy and exhausting as you said. He couldn't think about anything else. He couldn't do anything else. He wasn't himself anymore.

HELEN: Is that what you're going to do to me?

CHARLIE: What?

HELEN: Are you going to stop being my friend when you think I'm going off the edge?

CHARLIE: Jesus, Helen, shut up. Stop comparing yourself to a murderer!

HELEN: I'm not comparing myself to a murderer, Charlie. He's our friend. He's Marcus!

CHARLIE: Newsflash: Marcus is a murderer!

HELEN: That isn't the only thing that defines him!

CHARLIE: It's the only thing that matters now.  
And don't blame me for this sense of guilt you  
have about Marcus. It wasn't my job to fix  
him and it wasn't yours either. You couldn't  
have stopped him. You said it yourself, he was  
sick.

*(Beat.)*

HELEN: I shouldn't have blamed you. It's not  
your fault my priorities shifted. They shouldn't  
have shifted.

CHARLIE: You were just doing what you thought  
was right at the time.

HELEN: I was being selfish.

CHARLIE: You can't blame yourself for him  
going over the edge, just like I can't blame  
myself for not stopping Marcus as it was  
happening.

HELEN: It's just so fucked up.

CHARLIE: Yes, it is.

HELEN: Just so fucked up. You think you have  
your own plan all laid-out and then, suddenly,  
you realize that someone else had a completely  
different plan for you. A violent plan.

CHARLIE: The loss of control is...

HELEN: Unbearable. It's like you're not in  
charge of your fate anymore. Remember the  
night after, when everyone was over here?

That's kind of how I felt then. As though other people were intruding on us. They were grieving too. I know that. And I know they just wanted to be supportive and help out, but at the time, it felt almost voyeuristic.

CHARLIE: Because they kept asking questions and asking if we were okay.

HELEN: I never realized how stupid that question was, "Are you okay?" Of course I'm not okay, I just witnessed a murder/suicide. It's almost like a reflex... something bad happens, you ask "Are you okay?" the answer is always no. No one is okay. And those that think they are okay are just fooling themselves.

CHARLIE: But we used to ask each other that question all of the time. Remember?

HELEN: Yes, but we meant it differently. It wasn't a reflex, we were asking about each other's state of mind. It wasn't a question at all. It was an assertion. "You are okay." "You are okay and I am okay and we are okay because we are together."

CHARLIE: It was weird, being so intimate.

HELEN: It made sense at the time. You were the only person I wanted to be with. Remember, *(they transition back in time)* the last person had finally left your house. You were sitting on the couch, drinking and I was basically shoving them out the door. I slammed the door, turned around and looked at you. They're gone.

CHARLIE: Finally.

HELEN: Nice of them to come.

CHARLIE: Yes.

HELEN: They were all crying. All of them.

CHARLIE: Yeah I know.

HELEN: I've never seen so many people crying at one time.

CHARLIE: Shocking news.

HELEN: They weren't even there. They weren't even there and they were crying hysterically.

CHARLIE: The idea is horrific enough.

HELEN: But no one would stop crying. It was infuriating. It was so loud.

CHARLIE: We can be quiet now.

HELEN: Yes. Finally.

*(Helen goes to get a drink. She takes her time. They both enjoy the silence but are also disturbed by it.)*

HELEN: Okay you need to talk to me now.

CHARLIE: What?

HELEN: I just want to be sure you're there.