

THE WEIGHT

A full-length play

by Richard Ehrlich

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SCENE OVERVIEW

MOVEMENT I — ASSUMPTION

Focus: Responsibility settles without discussion

Scene 1 — The Meeting

Location: Facility conference room

Characters: David, Mark, Lisa, Facility Coordinator

The inciting incident. A coordinator explains that David's parents can no longer live independently. She needs a primary contact. David gives his number without hesitation. Mark says "David's good with this kind of thing." Lisa nods. The folder lands in David's hands without discussion. David is the youngest of three siblings, but his emotional stability makes him the obvious choice.

Dramatic Function: Establishes the family dynamic instantly. David accepts responsibility through capability, not choice. His siblings don't ask—they assume. David's strength makes him the natural point person.

Scene 2 — The First Missed Thing

Location: David's kitchen, evening

Characters: David, Anna, Sarah (offstage)

David comes home late from the facility. He's missed Sarah's 13th birthday dinner. The cake is still on the table. Anna confronts him: he rescheduled three dental patients today. Sarah has stopped asking where he is—she just accepts "Dad's probably at the facility."

Dramatic Function: Introduces the domestic cost immediately. Sarah's acceptance is more devastating than anger. The erosion has already begun. This isn't about one missed dinner—it's about the pattern Sarah is learning.

Scene 3 — You're Already There

Location: Car or hallway, morning

Characters: David, Mark, Lisa (on three-way phone call)

A social worker needs an afternoon appointment. Mark only has mornings free. Lisa has a work conference. David agrees to handle it because he's already going to the facility this week anyway. Mark and Lisa thank him. After hanging up, David checks his calendar—three patient appointments this afternoon. He texts his hygienist to reschedule them. He's already heading to the facility.

Dramatic Function: Establishes the logic that will trap David. His availability becomes the reason for more responsibility. His capacity makes it easy for him to absorb the professional cost. The trap closes silently. It's efficient, not cruel.

Scene 4 — The Corridor

Location: Facility hallway

Characters: David, Staff Member

David waits outside his father's room during an anger episode. A staff member tells him: "The ones who take all the calls? Their marriages suffer. I've seen it happen over and over. You can say no sometimes." David asks if that would be better. She doesn't know. David asks her to call someone else if his father gets agitated. "Who would you call?" "His other children." "They're busy." "So are you."

Dramatic Function: An outside observer names the cost. David hears it. He can't act on it. His principle—be present, be available—won't allow it.

Scene 5 — The Signature

Location: Home, after midnight

Characters: David, Anna

David sits alone at the kitchen table with DNR paperwork for both parents. His father can't say what he wants—hasn't spoken in months. His mother gave three different answers in one day. David must decide alone. Anna finds him stuck: "What if I'm wrong?" She asks: "And if you are?" David: "Then I'm wrong." He signs both forms.

Dramatic Function: Shows David's conscientiousness becoming paralysis. These decisions—life and death—fall to him by default. Mark and Lisa trust his judgment. That trust isolates him.

Scene 6 — The Days

Location: Montage across home, dental office, car, facility

Characters: David, Anna, Sarah, Patient, Mark/Lisa (texts), Facility Staff

The phone bombardment scene. Morning: David's phone buzzes at breakfast—facility needs confirmation. He apologizes for the interruption. Dental office: patient in the chair, David's phone won't stop buzzing. He keeps working. Car: multiple texts pile up while driving. Evening: Anna asks "How many today?" David counts: facility called three times, texted twice, Mark called once and texted four times, Lisa texted six times, pharmacy called, coordinator called. Fifteen contacts in one day. Mark's text: "Thanks for sharing David with Mom and Dad." 9pm: facility calls again. David answers.

Dramatic Function: Shows the volume of constant availability. This is how it happens—not dramatically, but relentlessly. The phone becomes a character, always demanding. David's dental practice erodes under the constant interruptions.

MOVEMENT II — NORMALIZATION

Focus: Endurance becomes permission

Scene 7 — Gratitude as Harm

Location: Facility waiting area

Characters: David, Mark

Mark visits briefly. He thanks David sincerely: "I don't know how you do it. Handling all the day-to-day stuff." David: "Someone has to." Mark: "Yeah, but... you make it look easy. Like you've got everything under control." David doesn't correct this. Mark: "It's a relief. Knowing you're on top of it." Mark then mentions he handles all the financial side—the facility costs, bills on auto-pay. When Mark can't make next week's appointment, David offers to handle it. Mark's relief is immediate. Mark leaves. David sits alone.

Dramatic Function: Shows how sincere gratitude functions as permission. Mark's constant thanks and belief that David "makes it look easy" enable Mark's continued absence. David's capacity becomes Mark's reason to stay away. The isolation is in what Mark doesn't see.

Scene 8 — Sarah Observes

Location: Car, after facility visit

Characters: David, Sarah

After visiting her grandparents, Sarah asks: "Why do they always call you?" David: "I'm the primary contact." Sarah: "But why are YOU the primary contact?" David: "Because I can be. Uncle Mark has his work, Aunt Lisa has her family. I have more flexibility." Sarah: "But you have patients. You have us." David: "I can manage both." Sarah: "Can you?" Pause. Sarah: "Uncle Mark is the oldest. Isn't he supposed to take care of things?" David: "Everyone takes care in different ways." Sarah: "He never visits." David: "It's hard for him to see Grandpa like this." Sarah: "It's not hard for you?" David: "It's hard for everyone." Sarah: "But you come anyway." Long pause. Sarah: "Because you can." David doesn't deny this. Silence.

Dramatic Function: Sarah, at 13, sees what David cannot. His capability = his burden. 'But you come anyway. Because you can.' David's silence = agreement. She's learning what strength costs.

Scene 9 — Another Corridor

Location: Facility hallway

Characters: David (alone, Anna texts)

David waits forty minutes for a doctor who's running late. The waiting itself is the scene. Performative, heavy time. Anna texts: "How long?" David: "Not sure. Soon." Then: "I'll try." He keeps waiting. Staff pass. Other families come and go. David remains.

Dramatic Function: Makes the audience feel the weight of availability. Time passing. Always waiting. This is what "being there" actually means.

Scene 10 — Social Normalcy

Location: Facility cafeteria

Characters: David, Mark, Lisa

The siblings attempt family coffee after visiting their parents. They make small talk—Mark's work project, Lisa's son's soccer. David mentions missing most of Sarah's school play—arrived for curtain call. The reason: facility called. It fails. They try to be normal. Mark checks his watch—needs to get home for dinner with his kids. Lisa has carpool duty. They leave. David sits alone with cold coffee.

Dramatic Function: Shows the gap widening. Mark and Lisa's lives continue normally. David's has stopped. They don't see this.

MOVEMENT III — RESISTANCE

Focus: Love pushes back against principle

Scene 11 — What You Won't Say

Location: Kitchen, night

Characters: David, Anna

Anna confronts David. Why won't he let himself hate Mark and Lisa for leaving him with this? David defends them: Mark can't handle watching the decline. Lisa has her family. Anna: "Can't? Or won't?" David: "Can't. Not everyone can do what I can do." Anna: "That's the problem." David: "What is?" Anna: "That you can. So you do. And they don't have to." Silence. David: "Someone has to be there for them." Anna: "I'm not saying stop. I'm saying... you're proud you're the one who can handle it. And that pride won't let you ask for help." David: "I don't need help." Anna: "I know. That's what I'm saying." Long pause. Anna: "You're teaching our children that love looks like disappearance." David: "I'm teaching them that showing up matters." Anna: "What about showing up for us?" David has no good answer: "I'm trying."

Dramatic Function: Anna explicitly names the core dynamic: David's strength is the problem. His capacity enables their distance. 'You can. So you do. And they don't have to.' His pride in being strong enough traps him. This is the play's central revelation stated clearly.

Scene 12 — Sarah Wants Fairness

Location: Kitchen

Characters: Anna, David

Anna sets a boundary: Wednesdays. Home by 8pm. No phone. No leaving. Just here. David promises. Anna reveals: "I told Mark. He laughed. He said 'we'll see how long that lasts.'" David is shocked—not by Mark's doubt, but by his certainty that David will break the promise. Mark has fully normalized David's constant availability.

Dramatic Function: Shows how family has normalized David's availability. They don't expect him to have boundaries. The promise is already a test. Mark's laughter reveals he sees David's reliability as permanent.

Scene 13 — Sarah Wants Anger

Location: Car, night

Characters: David, Sarah

Driving home from facility, Sarah confronts David: Mark posted on social media ("Missing you, Dad") and commenters called him a "good son." Sarah: "That's wrong, right? Why don't you tell people the truth?" David deflects. Sarah: "I think you're choosing them over us." David pulls over. Sarah: "They're dying. We're living. Doesn't that count?" She gets out of the car. Walks the two blocks home.

Dramatic Function: Sarah names the impossible choice. The living should matter more than the dying. But David can't make that choice. His principle won't allow it.

Scene 14 — Waiting

Location: Facility conference room

Characters: David, Lisa (present), Mark (on speakerphone), Staff

David's father's pneumonia has worsened. Decision time: transfer to hospital for aggressive treatment or comfort care at facility? Staff explains what "everything possible" actually means—intubation, trauma, likely failure. David chooses comfort care. Mark and Lisa participate remotely but defer to David's judgment—he's been there more, knows better. David signs the form. He has decided his father will die.

Dramatic Function: The weight of medical decisions made essentially alone. Mark and Lisa's deference is both logical and devastating. David's knowledge from constant presence isolates him in responsibility.

MOVEMENT IV — ISOLATION

Focus: The weight doesn't end

Scene 15 — The Call

Location: Home, evening

Characters: David, Anna (present), Mark (on phone)

Three days after the comfort care decision. The call comes: David's father has died peacefully. David calls Mark. Mark's immediate response: "Tell them not to move him. I need to see him." David processes what's being asked. "How long will it take you to get there?" Mark answers. "Over an hour?" Mark confirms. "I'll wait with him." He hangs up. Anna: "What did he say?" David: "He needs to see him. Needs me to wait until he gets there." Anna: "When's the last time Mark visited?" David: "Thanksgiving. Three months ago." Silence. Anna: "And now he wants to see the body." David: "He needs to say goodbye. He needs that." Anna: "What about what you need?" David: "I've been saying goodbye. Every week for three years." Silence. Anna: "Did he ask how you are?" David doesn't answer. He picks up his phone. "I need to call the facility."

Dramatic Function: Mark's request after months of absence. David sees what's being asked and chooses to do it anyway. 'He needs to say goodbye. He needs that.' David understanding Mark's need. 'I've been saying goodbye every week for three years' = the brutal truth. No resentment, but the isolation is visible.

Scene 16 — Aftermath

Location: Facility hallway

Characters: David, Mark

David has waited over an hour for Mark to arrive. When Mark finally gets there, he apologizes for traffic. Thanks David for waiting, for setting this up. David: "Of course." Mark hesitates. "Have you seen him?" David: "Yeah." Mark: "Does he look... peaceful?" David: "He looks like he's sleeping." Mark goes in. David waits outside. Alone. As always.

Dramatic Function: Mark never asks 'How are YOU?' Mark needs reassurance. David provides it. The isolation is in what's NOT said. David's strength serves Mark's need, and David is left alone in the hallway.

Scene 17 — Immediate Aftermath

Location: Facility waiting area

Characters: David, Mark, Lisa

After viewing the body. Mark and Lisa talk about closure, relief that he's no longer suffering. David: "I watched him disappear. For three years. You saw him a few times a year. It's not the same." Silence. David: "I'm not blaming you. But it's true." Mark and Lisa have no response.

Dramatic Function: David finally states the truth without apologizing. The difference in their experiences of loss. He doesn't back down. It doesn't change anything.

Scene 18 — Alone with Mom

Location: Mother's facility room

Characters: David, Mother

Two weeks after the father's death. Mother asks where David's father is. David tells her he died. She doesn't remember. She accuses David: "You should have done more." Then:

"Are you my son?" She doesn't recognize him. David: "I did everything I could." She forgets the conversation immediately.

Dramatic Function: The cruelty of dementia. Three years of showing up. She doesn't remember. She doesn't recognize him. There is no redemption in presence.

Scene 19 — The Breaking Point

Location: Home, kitchen

Characters: Anna, David

Anna has reached her limit. Lisa said to her: "We're so lucky David's practice is slow right now." Anna: "Your practice isn't slow. It's bleeding patients. They can't rely on you anymore." David says nothing. Anna: "How many patients did you reschedule this week?" David: "Twelve." Anna: "Your practice is eroding, David. Not closed, not slow—eroding. Because you're never fully there." David says nothing. Anna: "Mark kept his career. Lisa kept hers. You're keeping yours. But you're carrying this alone. They're at arm's length. You're not." David: "They do what they can." Anna: "And you do the rest. Because you can." Silence. Anna: "You know what kills me? You're proud of it. You'd do it all again." David, defensive: "What's wrong with doing what's right?" Anna: "Nothing. Until it destroys you." Long silence. Anna: "I can't watch you do this anymore."

Dramatic Function: Anna makes explicit: practice eroding (not closed), David proud of his strength, that pride = his trap. 'You're proud of it. You'd do it all again.' David can't deny this. 'Until it destroys you.' The marriage has reached its breaking point.

Scene 20 — The Inheritance

Location: Kitchen

Characters: David, Sarah

Sarah tells David that Mark visited Grandma and cried, saying he should have come more. Grandma told Mark 'David always came.' Then she forgot who Mark was. Sarah: "She remembered you. Even when she didn't know Uncle Mark." David has no response. Sarah: "I don't want to be like you. I don't want to learn that being there all the time means being alone."

Dramatic Function: The bitter irony. Mother remembered David's presence even as she forgot Mark. But Sarah refuses to inherit David's capacity to care this much. His strength becomes his daughter's warning.

Scene 21 — The Question

Location: Car or home

Characters: David, Sarah

Sarah asks: "Was it worth it? Did Grandpa know you were there?" David: "At the end? No. He didn't recognize me for the last three years." Sarah: "Then why did you keep going?" David: "Because I knew. And I needed to know I did everything I could." Sarah: "Even if it cost us?" David has no answer.

Dramatic Function: David's principle laid bare. He did it for himself—to know he'd done everything. The cost to his family was real. He has no defense.

Scene 22 — Gratitude

Location: After mother's funeral or memorial gathering

Characters: David, Lisa

Lisa tells David they couldn't have done this without him. David: "I know." For the first time, he doesn't soften it. Lisa is shocked. David: "Your gratitude doesn't give me back the time." Lisa has no response. David walks away.

Dramatic Function: David finally rejects the gratitude. It's too late to change anything. But he names it. The thanks that enabled his isolation meant nothing.

Scene 23 — Final Image

Location: Home, kitchen

Characters: David, Anna, Sarah

Wednesday night, 7:45pm. David comes home. On time. Anna looks up, surprised. They sit together for dinner. His phone lights up on the counter—the facility calling. David sees it. He doesn't answer. They sit together. The phone stops ringing. Goes dark. Then lights up again. David looks at it. Looks at Anna. Looks at Sarah. The weight doesn't end. But for this moment, for this one night, he's here. Lights fade on the family at the table, the phone still glowing on the counter.

Dramatic Function: David finally choosing his living family. But it's not triumphant—it's a small, fragile choice. The phone will keep calling. The weight continues. This is not resolution. It's a moment of resistance. The question remains: can he sustain it?