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### First Words

Laura Mae Ward

*Ouachita Baptist University*

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# SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

*First Words*

written by

**Laura Mae Ward!**

and submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for completion of  
the Carl Goodson Honors Program  
meets the criteria for acceptance  
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

Dr. Doug Sonheim, thesis director

Professor Eric Phillips, second reader

Dr. Jay Curlin, third reader

Dr. Barbara Pemberton, Honors Program director

3 May 2019

I would like to here acknowledge some of the excellent professors I have had the privilege of working with at Ouachita, including Dr. Doug Sonheim, Dr. Jay Curlin, Dr. Johnny Wink, Dr. Amy Sonheim, Dr. Benjamin Utter, Professor Jennifer Burkett Pittman, and Dr. Jeff Matocha. I would also like to thank Danielle Schaal, Kaitlyn Taylor, Megan Bayer, the women of Chi Rho Phi, and Anthony Kennedy for inspiring me daily and/or reading countless drafts all year.

If I didn't thank my mom too, it would hurt her feelings. So:

Thanks, mom.

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## *Introduction*

I do not know how long I have loved the theatre, but I know that my earliest memory is of a show. When I was two years old, my mom took me to see Wynne High School's 1999 spring musical. It was a production of "The Sound of Music," and my oldest brother played a Nazi. My recollections are foggy: a snatch of costume illuminated by spotlight and a moment of awe when the Mother Abbess hit the highest note in "Find Your Dream."

It was probably unwise to bring me to the theatre at such a young age, since toddlers are often prone to outbursts and rambunctiousness. I posed no problem, though: according to my mother, I went still as soon as the lights went down. I stared spellbound at the stage and did not make a sound until intermission. In the following years, I watched the movie adaptation of *The Sound of Music* so many times that my parents still have it memorized.

My love for the theatre developed from there. Every year, my mom would take me to see Wynne High School's spring musical. When I was in high school, my mom started giving me season passes to the Orpheum Theatre in Memphis. This was the birthday and Christmas staple for several years. I worked backstage for school productions of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying* and *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, even making a brief foray into acting during my junior year. I played the main antagonist in Wynne's 2014 production of *The Slipper and the Rose*, and I learned quickly that I hated the spotlight. My love for the theatre was not like that of most "theatre kids." I never wanted to be onstage. I only wanted to help however I could: paint scenery, work backstage, or wear a stage manager's headset. When I graduated from high school, I assumed that would be the end of my theatrical career. I was not skilled enough for backstage work in college or talented enough for onstage appearances. With this understanding, I contented myself as an audience member.

Things changed in my sophomore year of college, when I took an introductory creative writing class with Dr. Curlin<sup>1</sup>. I had dabbled in poetry and prose, but for my last assignment he asked me to write something less familiar. He called it a “ten-minute play.” My first attempt, “Echoes,” followed two astronauts on their search for meaning. Their damaged rocket took them on a comedic journey through a vast, unforgiving universe, which ultimately destroyed them. At first I had no clear idea for what I was trying to do, aside from some vague memories about the Ray Bradbury stories I adored in high school, so I typed instinctively until I had ten pages. I ended up playing with comedic timing, twist endings, and monologues, and I threw in just enough philosophy to be pretentious. I found that I enjoyed writing it more than I had enjoyed any sort of writing in a long time. When it was time to workshop the piece in class, the other students loved it. I realized that I suddenly had a new way of interacting with the theatre. Finally I had something worthwhile to contribute.

I got down to business after that.

I wrote more, slowly learning as I wrote. In a book by Gary Garrison, a prolific playwright and NYU dramatic writing professor, I discovered that ten-minute plays are the continuation of a long history of shortening theatre. Drama began with the Greeks and then, after centuries of full-length plays, the short play was introduced. After that, the one-act play, which is usually around twenty to thirty minutes long. Then, around the nineties, the ten-minute play developed. Garrison jokes that “eventually, plays will be no pages long” (89).<sup>2</sup>

It makes sense that plays have slowly been getting shorter because from the beginning, by necessity, a play has usually had to be economic. This is not just in terms of time length, of

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<sup>1</sup> He’s really cool.

<sup>2</sup> I am, of course, skeptical of this assertion, but you never know. The six-word story took off, after all. Vine was a success.

course. Everything about drama has to be stripped down to the most necessary parts for the same reason that overly flowery prose has to be cut down; it is hard to make intentional art when it is not also efficient. Efficiency is also incentivized by finance: plays have to make money, and profits increase when overhead decreases. For ten-minute plays, though, that's not the sum of it. Ten-minute plays are too short to be performed by themselves, so they are usually part of ten-minute play collections or festivals. If a lot of plays are being performed on the same stage on the same night, that means the theatre, the people in the booth, and the backstage area will have to accommodate several casts, several sets, several shows' worth of sound and light cues, and several shows' worth of costumes and props. This means a lot of moving parts and a much higher chance of disaster. When a play is one of many, each show has minimal resources to work with (Garrison 91). The playwright can thus expect a few cast members, a few simple costume pieces, and a basic set. Maybe one lighting change and one or two sound effects will be okay, but after that the playwright is playing with fire. When I read Garrison's book, I realized quickly how much sense the idea made and that I had mostly been employing this efficiency instinctively before learning it.

This scarcity of effects means that the ten-minute play usually takes place in only one location and a simple timeframe. It's another relatively instinctive move, but playwrights have been doing this since the dawn of the theatre. In his *Poetics* (circa 330 BCE), Aristotle describes a few theatrical observations, especially about action as it relates to a play.

The well-made plot, then, ought to be single rather than double, as some maintain... Second best is the structure held the best by some people: the kind with the double structure like the *Odyssey* and with opposite outcomes for good

and bad characters. It is thought to be the best because of the weakness of audiences... (Aristotle 73).

Aristotle's firmly-held belief was that only one plot line should be enough for any play, and that extra plot lines should be reserved for epics or kept out entirely. He also describes epics as being different from drama because "tragedy tends so far as possible to stay within a single revolution of the sun, or close to it, while epic is unlimited in time span..." (47). Aristotle describes the popular convention for his era, but later interpretations extrapolated his words into law. In 1570, an Italian humanist named Lodovico Castelvetro used these sections of *Poetics* to support his claim that all plays must consist of only one action, occurring in one place and for less than a day ("Unities"). These required consistencies in plot, setting, and timespan are referred to as the Aristotelean unities.<sup>3</sup> Today, the unities are considered wholly obsolete.

For the ten-minute play, however, Aristotle's unities return to the stage. There is no room or time for anything but one continuous narrative to be done well. Few theatres<sup>4</sup> have room for more than one set if the play is one of several and only ten minutes long, which means everything must take place in one continuous stream of time and action without leaving the area where the play begins. Several of my plays violate one unity; "Echoes" violates the unity of time with the final appearance of the tour guide. "First Words" violates the unity of place when its last few lines of dialogue take place on alien soil. Because many of Shakespeare's plays violate all three unities, I made sure to break them as well as I could in "Thirteenth Night: Malvolio's Revenge." If there is a broken unity, I have found that there is usually only space for one. Most ten-minute plays I have watched in the last few years have felt too busy for me if they broke

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<sup>3</sup> Unities were less important in renaissance England. For reference, see any of Shakespeare's plays or Samuel Johnson's critique of the unities.

<sup>4</sup> Or budgets.



unities multiple times. Based on audience reactions, I am not alone in this feeling. In my writing, a singular unity break fits well at the end, where it helps conclude things more dramatically.

Because of the problem of set pieces, unity of place tends to be a common characteristic in one-act plays as well, from what I've seen at OBU. Since there are no light transitions or set changes to mark the transition between one scene and another, the playwright must find a different way to mark scene changes. In *Three Genres*<sup>5</sup>, Stephen Minot recommends using character movement as an indicator for scene changes. A character's exit or entry can signal that a new scene has begun. Sometimes this can't happen. For example, in my "Elevator Pitch," the characters are all trapped in one place. For the most part, though, character movement is the best way I have found for indicating a scene change.

The lack of scenery, effects, and light cues can also make it more challenging to keep the plot moving. Unlike a full-length play, which has the benefit of all those useful production elements, or a musical, which has everything plus song and dance, the story of a one-act must move along through only two methods: action and dialogue. Though I have struggled with both of these elements, dialogue has always been especially tricky; I am extremely prone to talking to the audience through my characters. Every time I sit down to edit, I find instances where my characters suddenly stop sounding like themselves and start sounding exactly like me. In my "Elevator Pitch," the most overtly opinionated play I have written, it was a big problem when my feminism shone through even where it didn't make sense. In "First Words," it took several tries to write an opener that gave exposition without lecturing the audience about the situation. It's an issue that can really take an audience member out of the experience.

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<sup>5</sup> *Three Genres* was my textbook for Dr. Curlin's Introduction to Creative Writing class in the fall of my sophomore year. It has proven itself to be an invaluable resource for me in the playwriting process.

I think the ten-minute play is more intimate than most more traditionally-lengthed plays. There is no time for a long, rambling, or epic piece of work; there is no space for warring kingdoms or excessively complex examinations of issues. It's only ten minutes: that's less than half an episode of a sitcom. Whatever world the playwright has envisioned can only be portrayed in a brief episode, and they must think hard about what is worth including in the story. Usually, that boils down to ten minutes between a few characters. Emotions are established quickly and deeply, which means personal issues reign large.

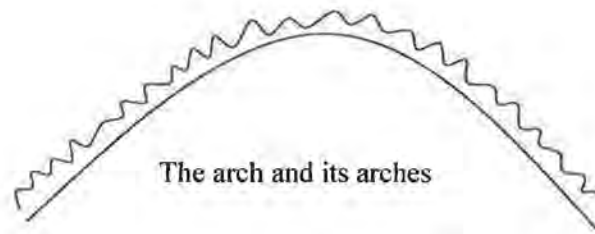
Hooked as I am on the form, I still get frustrated by the ten-minute play because sometimes ten minutes just isn't enough time<sup>6</sup>. When I was in high school, I took a class on flash fiction<sup>7</sup>. I learned there that the shorter something is, the harder it becomes to fit everything in. When I wrote the first draft of "Alas, Broseph," I accidentally left it in single-space format and wrote ten pages, as usual. Because of this mistake, the play came out to be around twenty minutes long when it was performed. That twenty-minute play still had a horribly rushed ending; it still felt too short to tell an adequate story. Paring that play down to a satisfying ten minutes was probably one of the most difficult parts of writing this thesis.

In order to write more effectively and efficiently, I resolved to think about the structure of a story. As I wrote most of these plays, I had specific plot structures in mind. One of these plot structures, which I have reproduced below, is described by Martin Esslin in *An Anatomy of Drama*. This image became vital to the way I approached several of my plays.

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<sup>6</sup> The worst thing about ten-minute plays is that they are ten minutes long. This is an intellectual revelation.

<sup>7</sup> The class was part of my coursework at Arkansas Governor's School, also known as AGS. It was a summer program in which rising high school seniors spent several months at Hendrix College learning about their chosen discipline, philosophy, and themselves. It was the best thing about the state of Arkansas until the Board of Education gutted it and moved it to Arkansas Tech. I attended AGS 2014, where I studied English poetry, flash fiction, cultural theory, and criticism under several fantastic professors.



Esslin presents every story as an arch. This is a familiar image, but he gives it a twist: the arch is composed of at least a dozen smaller arches. The idea is that every scene in a longer play, every minute of a short play, every line of dialogue, should be a small arch that advances the plot and serves as a stand-alone moment (47). Every atom of the play should function as a miniature scene, but it should also push the story toward its conclusion. The idea is not new; Edgar Allan Poe describes something similar in relation to the plot of a short story. In his “The Philosophy of Composition” essay<sup>8</sup>, Poe writes:

Nothing is more clear than that every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its dénouement before any thing be attempted with the pen. It is only with the dénouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention. (Poe)

The story is made of incidents and points (the miniature arches), but each of them should be pointed straight toward the development of the story’s end (the big arch).

Another structure I worked with was the idea of the hero’s journey, as illustrated by Joseph Campbell<sup>9</sup>. Simply put, the hero receives a call to adventure. After he or she refuses this

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<sup>8</sup> This is the same essay in which Poe famously claims that the most poetical thing is the death of a beautiful woman. It is perhaps not the healthiest way of looking at the world.

<sup>9</sup> And explained to me by Dr. Wink.

call, supernatural aid sends the hero on his or her way nonetheless. The hero crosses the first threshold, entering into “the belly of the whale,” and then endures a series of trials. There may be temptation, atonement, a visit from a goddess, and enlightenment. The hero receives a boon, and then the hero may or may not refuse to return home, flee the scene, or require a rescue. After crossing the return threshold, the hero brings home the boon that he or she has obtained. Then the story ends. Every story, according to Campbell, contains some or all of these elements.



Graphic from tvtropes.org

A slightly different and simplified version of this structure, commonly referred to as “the Harmon story circle” or the “Harmon embryo,” also has permanent residence in my head because of the time I spent listening to sitcom writer Dan Harmon’s podcast. The hero begins at home, lacking something, goes out to get the thing, adapts to hardship, obtains the thing, pays a heavy price (sometimes losing the thing he or she set out to find), and then returns home, having

learned something. Just like Joseph Campbell's monomyth, the main character ends up exactly where he or she was at the beginning. Both stories thus take the form of a circle (Raferty).



Graphic from litchat.com

- Don Harmon, Creator of COMMUNITY

“Summons” follows the Harmon story circle approach. The main characters each have something they want, and they succeed in doing magic, but they still return home in the end. Their price is their ignorance of Resmortua’s resurrection. “Stage Play” is also a Harmon circle; just when the main character has found an explanation for the predicament, everything is revealed to be a dream. The main characters lose the clarity that the ghost allows them to achieve, but once they have returned home (i.e. to the stage), the actor has learned to face his or her fear of the spotlight.

Even as I studied new and interesting plot structures, I could not escape from the old idea that everyone learns as a kid. A bit of exposition, a complication is thrown in, there's rising action, a climax happens, and then there is the falling action. I call it a line-graph story.

## PLOT DIAGRAM



The Magic of Writing

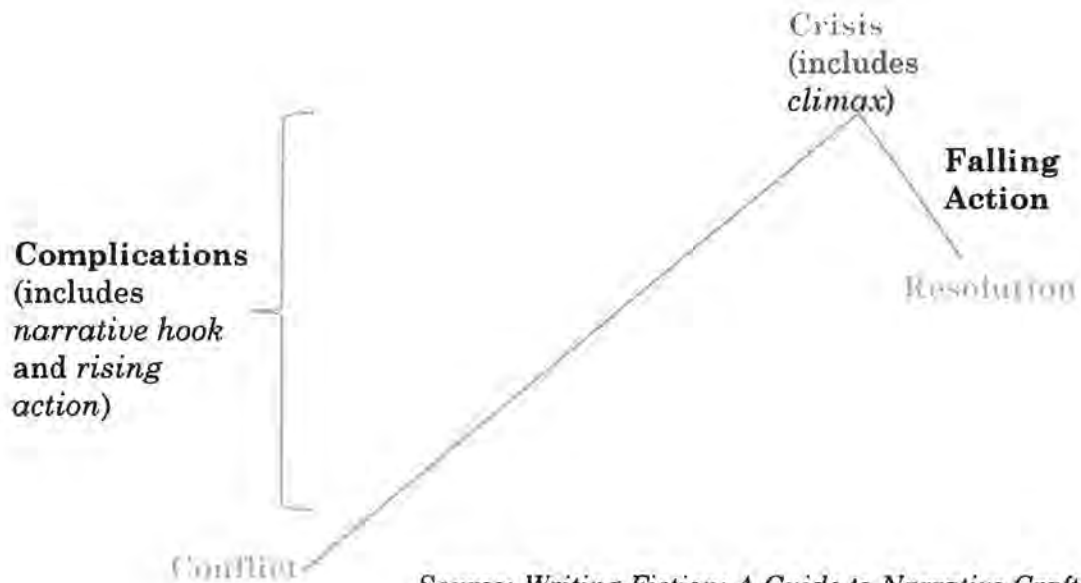
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I learned a variation on this structure at a high school newspaper convention; the speaker called it a checkmark story<sup>10</sup>. The story begins, exposition is taken care of quickly along with the complication, the rising action takes up most of the story, there is a climax, and then there is minimal falling action. The tale ends quickly. The line graph looks a lot more like an upside-down checkmark than anything else.

<sup>10</sup> I worked as the copy editor for my high school newspaper and yearbook staff from my sophomore through senior years. Every year, we attended the Arkansas Scholastic Press Association convention in Rogers, Arkansas. They had creative writing workshops for students who worked at literary magazines, and I attended several despite the fact that Wynne High School does not have a literary magazine.

## o Story Form as an Inverted Check Mark



Source: *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* by Janet Burroway (6<sup>th</sup> ed.)

“Mandatory Dorm Meeting” follows the model of the check structure. Beth finds herself thrown into the story as soon as the curtain opens: a strange man walks onstage, and things carry on from there until they reach their dramatic culmination. A little joke at the end serves as resolution.

Because I wrote “Echoes” long before I started thinking about story structure, it follows a simple line-graph plot. The first two pages introduce character and setting, a conflict introduces itself on page three, and a combination of dialogue and soliloquy constitutes rising action. These things lead up to the emotional climax during the spacewalk scene. The return to the spaceship, closing dialogue, and final twist ending serve as falling action and resolution. “Echoes,” as the first play I wrote, was less informed by dramatic convention, but it is also the play I had to revise most heavily.

I revised every play, of course. Playwriting, like any other kind of writing, is a lengthy process. It differs from prose or poetry, however, because it is significantly more difficult to edit without outside assistance. Since drama is a physical and visual medium that requires a presence to really be felt properly, true revision is difficult until a play has been staged. I was only able to see a few of the plays in this collection performed onstage,<sup>11</sup> and I believe that those are now my best work. Watching those performances informed every future editing choice I made. This is how it actually works in the theatrical world, when theatres have the time and budget (Garrison, 50-60). New plays and musicals go through a lengthy period of development during which the writer will sit in on table reads and rudimentary stagings. When the playwright sees what works and what doesn't, he or she uses that knowledge and input from directors and producers to rewrite and then deliver another script. That script becomes the new version, and the process is repeated. This can continue all the way through the early stages of rehearsal, which is why the savvy Broadway fan can find so many deleted songs from favorite shows floating around on Youtube<sup>12</sup>. After watching "Echoes" in Verser Theatre my sophomore year, I cut out a quarter of the dialogue and changed the genders of both characters. "Alas, Broseph" had to be almost completely rewritten, and my plan for "Stage Play" reversed itself. For the rest of the pieces in this collection, the ones that I have not seen performed, I read aloud to myself, shared scripts with Dr. Doug Sonheim, and asked friends whether lines of dialogue sounded awkward.

I will always have more revision to do, but every play in this collection is, at the very least, a starting point. Overall, that's what this project is. It's a starting point: an exercise in

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<sup>11</sup> "Echoes," "Summons," "Alas, Broseph," and "Stage Play" were all staged as part of OBU's annual All Night Theatre Festival from 2017-2019.

<sup>12</sup> For reference, see a YouTube video of Will Roland performing "Viral," a song cut in the early rehearsal stage of *Dear Evan Hansen*. The song's lyrics also mention aspects of Evan Hansen's character that the producers deleted before the show was staged.



wrestling with the medium and with myself to try to figure out how to create something worthwhile. This is why I call the collection "First Words." It is taken from the title of one of my plays, in which a space captain searches for the words to say something worthwhile. Just as Captain Holmes wrestles with language and sentiment, I have spent the past several years wrestling with dramatic expression.

## *Echoes*

"Echoes" is the first play I ever wrote. It is also the play I had to revise most heavily. I think my original choice to make this play about astronauts was just a gimmick I leaned on because of who I am as a person<sup>13</sup>, but as I wrote it became a lot deeper than that. I know I thought a lot about the Ray Bradbury story "Kaleidoscope," which appears in his book *The Illustrated Man*. Bradbury describes a group of astronauts who are left drifting after the destruction of their spacecraft, slowly coming to terms with the fact that they will inevitably die in cold space; the only question is when the oxygen in their suits will run out. A lot of popular science fiction tries to focus solely on the problems at hand, and I wanted to deviate from that by using sci-fi as a backdrop for a story about humans, the way Mr. Bradbury did.

When "Echoes" was accepted to be performed<sup>14</sup> in my sophomore year, I thought that this particular piece of work had run its course. Then, when I saw it performed onstage<sup>15</sup>, I knew there was still work to be done. The creative liberties that the director took in the staging made me realize that I had no idea what I was doing, theatrically, and that the play could be a whole lot better than it was.

I cut out about a third of the dialogue because it wasn't strictly necessary, and I took the play to several of my professors. Dr. Amy Sonheim made a brilliant suggestion that worked so well, I was stunned I hadn't thought of it before. When the play was performed in Verser Theatre, it had an all-female cast due to male shortages in the actor pool. My script was written for an all-male cast, but I accepted the temporary change as necessary. Dr. Sonheim asked me why the main characters were all men, and I had no answer for her. After that, I became a lot

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<sup>13</sup> Someone who loves space

<sup>14</sup> In Verser Theatre as part of All Night Theatre 2017

<sup>15</sup> Directed by Amy Lytle

more conscious about my own implicit biases about what sort of person could be what gender, and I started writing most of my characters to be gender neutral. For the last several plays in this collection, I wrote gender-neutral characters as often as I could.

I did a reading of "Echoes" at a convention<sup>16</sup> last year, and afterward I was asked why all the characters were female. "Well," I said, "They were actually originally men..." and then a member of the audience booed me. "But then I saw it done with women," I continued, "and decided I liked it better." Someone else in the audience cried, "Good!" I knew then that I had made the right choice.

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<sup>16</sup> Sigma Tau Delta 2018 International Convention in Cincinnati, Ohio

## Echoes

## Characters

DR. STELLA DAVIDSON

COMMANDER MICAH DEXTER

GROUND CONTROL

TOUR GUIDE

## Scene

*Open on two astronauts aboard the Richmond 16, a small spacecraft in the vague but distant future. A portion of center stage is lit and occupied by a table. It should hold some science-device objects, a computer, and two spare spacesuits. STELLA sits at the table typing on the computer, and MICAH stands fiddling with the knobs on a science contraption. A heavy door with a small window separates stage right's void of space from center stage. A large danger-indication light is near the table. For now, it is off.*

STELLA: *(idly, with a brief glance up from her screen)*: Hey Micah? *(beat)* Micah?

MICAH: *(annoyed, without looking up)* What is it?

STELLA: How do you organize a space party?

MICAH: *(exaggerated sigh)* How?

STELLA: You planet! *(laughs uproariously)*

MICAH: Stella, what have I told you about the space puns?

STELLA: *(defeated, recites somewhat sadly)* They got old before we even left our solar system.

MICAH: Precisely.

*(beat)*

STELLA: *(brightening again)* We're almost there, you know.

MICAH: Yes, I know.

STELLA: Isn't it exciting! Just a few more months.

MICAH: Yep.

STELLA: Think we can make it?

MICAH: Look, we've been having this conversation every day since liftoff.

STELLA: Well, technically....

MICAH: (*interrupts, snaps*) If you say one more thing about the concept of a day when there's no planet to rotate, so help me I will eject myself from this spacecraft.

STELLA: I mean, I'm not wrong. (*beat*) Also, you'd die in a thousand different ways.

MICAH: What?

STELLA: If you ejected yourself from the spacecraft. You would be destroyed by the pressure difference and asphyxiate at the very least.

MICAH: Worth it.

STELLA: (*softly*) Is it really, though?

MICAH: What?

STELLA: If we died on this mission. Would it be worth it?

MICAH: That's not what I meant.

STELLA: I know. But still. (*beat*) I minored in philosophy, you know, back in college.

MICAH: Of course I know. I know everything about you at this point.

STELLA: No you don't.

MICAH: It's a small spacecraft, it's been years, and you never shut up. There's nothing left for me to not know.

STELLA: Prove it. What's my favorite book?

MICAH: (*rolling her eyes*) Bradbury's *Martian Chronicles*. (*scoffs*) He "inspired" you to become an astronaut. Because you're a cliché.

STELLA: (*Visibly impressed*) What's my mom's first name?

MICAH: Margaret. Your father's name was Jack.

*The danger light starts to flash. Neither notices.*

STELLA: Greatest fear?

MICAH: On earth, the possibility that there is no God. Up here, dying in space.

*(beat)*

STELLA: (*quietly*) Is it worth it?

MICAH: (*somewhat gently*) Yes. Or we wouldn't have come this far.

STELLA: You're assuming that the workings of the universe are dictated by reason.

MICAH: (*rough again*) And you're assuming that I want to have this conversation. (*beat*) Have you repaired the jargon machine yet?

STELLA: I guess I'll go do that. (*Stands up, exits stage left.*)

*MICAH continues her work; doesn't look up.*

STELLA: (*casually reenters, carrying a science device*) Hey, when's the last time we (*notices flashing danger light*)... oh no.

MICAH: What?

*STELLA points at the light.*

MICAH: (*looks, pauses, and then mutters*) Oh, shit. (*Looks around helplessly, then stands straight and speaks with new authority*)

MICAH: We have a critical failure in one of our systems. Get Barry on the phone. Now.

STELLA: Of course. (*puts down her science device, runs to the computer*)

MICAH: (*fiddling with the instruments on the table*) Okay, pressure, hulls, trajectory, atmosphere, and artificial gravity are all stable. Did you contact Barry?

STELLA: (*steps back from her computer, turns to face MICAH*) I think I know what's wrong.

They're not answering me, Micah. We... It looks like we lost communication. Our signal is down.

MICAH: (*paces as well as she can in the small space*) Okay. All right. We can fix that. We have to figure out where the issue is.

STELLA: I'd bet it's the transmitter. The one outside.

MICAH: (*pacing faster*) How could it possibly be the transmitter? There is nothing wrong with that thing.

STELLA: Remember when we passed through that field of asteroids yesterday?

(*beat*)

MICAH: Yeah, that would do it.

STELLA: So what do we do?

MICAH: Only one option, isn't there?

STELLA: No. Please tell me we're not about to do a spacewalk.

MICAH: Do you have any other ideas?

STELLA: Micah, we can't do a spacewalk without approval from below, and we'd be completely blind. It's too dangerous.

MICAH: So you want to do the rest of the mission without communicating with earth at all? Is that what you want?

STELLA: (*chastised*) No.

MICAH: Exactly. One of us has to go.

*Very long pause. Neither of them wants to do it.*

STELLA: You know, since you're commander of the mission, technically, it would be very noble and correct of you....

MICAH: *(interrupts)* You know, since I'm commander of the mission, I'm too valuable to lose and have the authority to order you to eject yourself right now. And since you're second in command, it would be noble and correct of you as well.

*(Another long pause)*

STELLA: Flip a coin?

MICAH: No, I don't trust artificial gravity.

STELLA: Rock paper scissors?

MICAH: All right.

*They play rock paper scissors. MICAH throws rock, STELLA throws scissors.*

STELLA: *(sighs)* All right. I'll do it.

MICAH: *(nods)* I'll go start preparations; you should probably get into a suit. We need to get this done as soon as possible. *(beat)* Is that okay?

STELLA: All right.

MICAH: *(nods, fidgets for a second)* You know, maybe... *(thinks better of it, stops abruptly, and exits stage left)*

STELLA: *(watches Micah leave, sits down with pen and paper, and begins to write)* Okay, last words, last words... Do I even need last words? I'm not eloquent; I'm a scientist. Oh well, I should still try. Okay. Last words. *(aloud while writing)* Micah, I need you to take a message to Phillip if I die. I need you to tell him I've always loved him, and if things were different... No, it's too late for that. *(crumples paper, pushes it aside, starts over)*



We're having some technical difficulties, and right now all I want is to go home. Maybe, if I don't survive this spacewalk, that's where the stars are calling me. Maybe I'm going home... (*Crumples. Brings out new paper.*) Ever since we lifted off, I've been asking Micah if any of this is worth it. When I was little I dreamed that I could do something that would make the world better. Instead I got into a rocket ship with an incredibly grouchy person, and I flew away. And if we die without completing the mission, I'm just wasting my time. Maybe I've always been wasting my time. Maybe we all are.

(*Crumples up the paper again, gets a new sheet, pauses*) I, Stella P. Davidson, am giving up my life to further the noble goal of space exploration. My only regret is that I didn't have more twitter followers. (*Crumples this page particularly violently. New sheet. Writes silently for a bit.*)

MICAH: (*enters from stage right with a recording device in one hand*) Stella?

STELLA *folds her paper, sighs, hands it to Micah, pulls on a space suit, and exits stage right. All is still for a moment.*

MICAH: (*clears throat, speaks into the recording device*) Testing.... Testing. Okay, captain's log, I guess. Stardate.... Something. I've never been the journaling type, not like Stella, but I promised I'd do this. Something about giving her sacrifice meaning. I don't have the heart to tell her that everything is meaningless anyway. But since she'll probably be dead in ten minutes, I guess I'll humor her. (*beat*) Anyway. Commander Dexter, recording the events of today's spacewalk undertaken by Dr. Stella P. Davidson. She's repairing a damaged transmitter, an undertaking made even more dangerous by the instrument's proximity to the ship's engines. There is a distinct possibility that Dr. Davidson could be killed or even damage the engines in some way, which would destroy us all. I will relay

her last words if she is lost, but if it's another one of her stupid space puns, then I absolutely refuse. Since all our signals are down, I'm going to have to just watch her through the window. Hopefully I can pull her back if I see anything going wrong. *(beat)* Oh, god help us all. *(crosses to the window and stares intently through it for a moment)* Okay. Things are okay so far. *(beat)* She's reached our transmitter. We just have to wait while she examines it. There's nothing I can do, really. I mean, I guess I could have gone out there. I should have. Then I'd go out with a shred of dignity, but... No. Never mind that. *(stares silently out the window)* She's working on it now. Nothing appears to be wrong so far. *(beat)* Stella's a good woman. Not the one I would have chosen for a mission like this, but... Oh, god. *(cranes neck to look out the window)* Oh, god. Oh god. Okay. Um. Um. *(fumbles paper, reads aloud)*: Goodbye, Micah. Regardless of whether this has all been worth it, it's really been great. I guess you could say it's been.... out of this world. *(beat)* Damn it, Stella! *(drops recording device, grabs space suit, starts pulling it on)*

GROUND CONTROL: *(offstage)* Communications restored.

MICAH: If she thinks she can go out on a joke like that ... I will drag her ass back onto this ship if I have to...

STELLA: *(offstage)* Micah, I fixed the transmitter. I can hear you.

MICAH: Good. Get ready to be rescued.

STELLA: Don't you dare; we'll both die.

MICAH: Irrelevant. I'm on my way.

GROUND CONTROL: *(offstage)* Micah, this is ground control at the Barry Space Center. You must follow protocol. You will not exit the spacecraft.

MICAH: Shut up, Barry. Let me have this. Her line was severed, and she is literally clinging to the side of the ship. Do you want that idiot to die? *(long, empty silence)* Yeah, that's what I thought. *(opens the ship door and exits stage right)*

GROUND CONTROL: Commander Dexter, report.

*STELLA and MICAH enter stage right, MICAH Dragging Stella through the stage-right void of space by her shoulders.*

STELLA: You know, there are probably worse ways to die than by drifting away into the void.

MICAH: *(mockingly)* You'd die in a thousand different ways.

STELLA: *(also mockingly)* Worth it.

MICAH: *(nearly genuine)* Is it, though? *(beat)* All right. Barry, I've got her. We're reentering the ship now.

*MICAH and STELLA stumble in through the stage right door. STELLA staggers over to the chair and collapses in it. MICAH wanders to the table and leans on it, exhausted.*

GROUND CONTROL: Is she all right?

STELLA: Yeah, Barry. I'm good. *(beat)* How much longer until B612?

GROUND CONTROL: Just another few months now. You know that.

MICAH: *(mockingly)* You know, technically, months don't exist for us since we're not on earth.

STELLA: *(similarly ironic tone)* So help me, I will throw myself out of this spacecraft. *(beat)*  
Again.

*(BOTH chuckle.)*

MICAH: You know, STELLA, I think maybe we're going to make it after all.

*Lights dim. STELLA and MICAH exit.*

*Lights come back up. TOUR GUIDE enters stage right, addresses an invisible crowd in the audience or offstage.*

TOUR GUIDE (*enthusiastically*): And here we have the remains of the Richmond 16, which carried its crew on one of the most disastrous space missions of all time. This wreckage was discovered on the outer edges of B612's orbit and recovered by The Royal Academy of Universal History just a few years ago. The explosion was so catastrophic that fragments of the Richmond's hull are still being found as far off as in neighboring star systems. Now if you'll follow me to the gift shop...

*Exit TOUR GUIDE stage left.*

## *Summons*

I wrote “Summons” shortly after I wrote “Echoes,” and I include it here because I think it is a useful example of what my early work looks like. The plot is less developed than in any other piece, and I very clearly had no idea what I was working toward until I got there. There is exposition, and magic starts happening in a way that makes the play feel like a traditional line graph story, but there is never any real climax. When ten minutes are almost up, the main characters decide to give up and leave, and then there’s one more big joke. It is not a meaningful piece of work; its only success is in its humor.

When “Summons” was performed in Verser Theatre as part of All Night Theatre, the humor worked largely because I had an incredible director and cast. The casting directors chose hilarious people for me, and those hilarious people made my jokes significantly funnier than they were when I wrote them. I still remember the impromptu dance that Kacy Spears performed while walking around a tombstone and reciting fake spells in mispronounced Latin. I didn’t write that dance in. She made an unimportant moment unforgettable, and it was not because I was a good writer. It was because she knew what she was doing. I used a lot of stage directions in these two pieces, but they were not actually helpful; all I was achieving was overstepping my bounds.

After I saw this play performed (along with “Echoes”), I made a conscious effort to loosen up on the stage directions. Dialogue is my job, and story is my job, but I cannot tell an actor how to act. I am not the director, even though I spent all of “Echoes” and “Summons” trying to be exactly that. I am the playwright, and a huge part of being a playwright is knowing how to trust the director and cast.

## Summons

## Characters

PAIGE

EDWIN

EMILY

REANIMATED CORPSE

RESMORTUA

## Scene

*Open on a small graveyard. It's a bright summer night. EDWIN, EMILY, and PAIGE are sitting in a circle around a tombstone, holding hands. They are chanting "enavīganda" (eyyyy-nah-vee-gone-dah) as many times as the actors feel led. Then they fall silent for a beat.*

EDWIN: I don't think this is working.

EMILY: Shhhh!

EDWIN: *defensively* What? Do you see any ancient deities rising from the earth?

PAIGE: Maybe we did it wrong.

EMILY: No, no, we did everything it said exactly.

EDWIN: I don't think it worked, man.

EMILY: Just wait, okay?

EDWIN: Come on, EMILY, you can't expect us to sit here all night.

EMILY: Just another minute or two. Come on. We can't give up now.

PAIGE: Emily, I'm sick of this. The ground is hard and EDWIN's hand is sweaty.

EDWIN: Well, I'm so sorry. can't imagine why I'd be nervous. It's not like I'm doing a satanic ritual or anything.

EMILY: Guys. It's not satanic. It's pagan. Also, shut up.

EDWIN: What for? Nothing's happening. We clearly did something wrong.

EMILY: Because you're disrupting the ritual!

EDWIN: The ritual disrupted itself by not working.

PAIGE: Hey guys? I think we're terrible at being pagans.

EDWIN: Nah, this is just a first try. We're doing a good job. I believe in us.

EMILY: Oh, how special and encouraging. Maybe we should all hold hands and sing a song and talk about our feelings.

PAIGE: Well, we're already holding hands...

EMILY: Shut up, PAIGE. *Snatches hand away, stands up, brushes dirt off*

*PAIGE and EDWIN do the same*

EDWIN: I mean, I guess we can try again if you want.

PAIGE: is that a good idea? What if we like double-summon him? Will he get annoyed? I don't want to annoy an ancient god of evil.

EMILY: We're not summoning RESMORTUA. We're resurrecting him. He'll be grateful.

EDWIN: Is it possible to double-resurrect something? Or would we just kill him again by accident?

EMILY *scoffs*. I'm going to go get more candles.

*Exit EMILY*

PAIGE: we really are terrible witches.

EDWIN: I don't really consider myself a witch. I prefer to self-identify as a funk-warlock.

PAIGE: That's not a thing.

EDWIN: Oh, sure it is.

PAIGE: You should ask EMILY to call you that. See what happens.

EDWIN: Nah, she's already pretty mad at me because she thinks I'm not taking this seriously.

PAIGE: Well, I mean, you aren't.

EDWIN: Of course I am! I just express it differently.

PAIGE: Come on, you're such a liar. It took so much googling to find this spell, and you're-

EDWIN interrupts: You found this on the internet?

*(beat)*

PAIGE: No. No I did not.

EDWIN: You found this on the internet.

PAIGE: Yeah.

EDWIN: Does EMILY know?

PAIGE: No.

EDWIN: All right. What are the odds that this is an actual spell?

PAIGE: Honestly, no idea. But it's probably fine. I think it's fine.

*Enter EMILY, arms full of candles.*

EMILY: Okay guys, you ready to try again?

Both: *(with a sort of guilty enthusiasm)* Yes!

*EMILY sets down the candles, PAIGE picks up a few pieces of paper*

PAIGE: Okay I think we need to try a variation on the spell. EMILY, can you do this chant? Walk counterclockwise over there and read this aloud. Then do the same again, walking clockwise.



*EMILY nods and takes the paper solemnly. Her hands shake a bit.*

PAIGE: EDWIN, can you help me arrange the candles? They should look like this. *Shows him a diagram on the other piece of paper in her hand.*

EDWIN: Yeah, sure. *They both get on the ground and start arranging candles into some shape as the actors feel led.*

*EMILY walks the way PAIGE just described and says Selectos nisi das mihi llibellos, Admittam tineas trucesque blattas. She does this super enthusiastically and dramatically. Like let her do some hops and jumps and arm gestures and such.*

*Can we get a rumbling noise? I'd like for a rumbling noise to happen here. I'd like EMILY and PAIGE to kind of stumble like the ground is shaking, and have EDWIN totes just hit the deck and cover his head with his arms like a school tornado drill.*

PAIGE: What was that?

EDWIN: I think it's working!

EMILY: hail, mighty lord of the night!

*REANIMATED CORPSE, whose head is matted with blood or has an axe lodged in it or is visibly wounded or something, pops up groaning from behind a tombstone, yawns, stretches, and then looks around.*

REANIMATED CORPSE: What in hell?

PAIGE: Is that him? Did we do it?

EMILY: I think we did it!

REANIMATED CORPSE: What's going on? Who are you people?

EMILY: We are devoted followers of the art of....

REANIMATED CORPSE interrupts: Wait, is this witchcraft!?

EDWIN: guys, I think we did something wrong.

REANIMATED CORPSE: What are those candles for? Are you devil worshippers?

EMILY: What do you mean we did something wrong? We summoned him. He's right there.

REANIMATED CORPSE: Why does my head hurt so bad?

PAIGE: Um....

REANIMATED CORPSE: Where is my family? Have you done something to them?

PAIGE: I think we accidentally necromanced some random dude.

EMILY: No, there's no way. We have to have done it right this time.

REANIMATED CORPSE: What the hell is going on?

EDWIN crosses to REANIMATED CORPSE: Excuse me, sir, can you tell us who you are?

REANIMATED CORPSE: My name is Elijah Smith. Who are you? What's going on?

EDWIN: Okay, yeah, we did it wrong.

PAIGE: Okay, Elijah, I need you to listen to me. Everything is going to be fine. We can put you  
back.

*(beat)*

REANIMATED CORPSE: ... Oh god, you're devil worshippers. *(REANIMATED CORPSE runs away. He doesn't exit stage left or right. He runs down the aisle through the audience and out of the theatre. I would like for his hand or something to fall off at some point while he's running down the aisle, but it's chill if you can't do that. As he runs, he keeps up a commentary.)* Help! Police! I've been kidnapped by Satan worshippers! They're going to drink my blood! They're going to set my brain on fire and build an altar from my organs! They're going to steal my bones and sell me to the communists! *(running and yelling slowly gives way to walking and muttering)* How dare they try this heathen nonsense on

me. I fought in Normandy, and they think they're going to draw me into their evil schemes, well, no sir, it's not happening. Impertinent youngsters have no idea what made America great... *(walks facefirst into the door and pushes instead of pulls before finally managing to exit, then slams the door behind him)*

*PAIGE, EDWIN, and EMILY just kind of stand there and watch him run off.*

EDWIN: ... Should one of us go after him?

PAIGE: Yeah, I'll do it. *(exit while calling after him)* "Elijah! Elijah! Mr. Smith! We're not going to hurt you! We just need a little of your blood!" *(until she and her voice fade into the distance.)*

EMILY: Do you think we should just try a different spell? *Brings an old book out of her bag*

EDWIN: what is that?

EMILY: Oh, it's a book I found in my grandma's basement. Look, it's ancient and mystical. *She hands EDWIN the book*

EDWIN: *examining it* Are you sure?

EMILY: Yeah, look. The pages are faded.

EDWIN: I think they were just printed yellow.

EMILY: but... it's bound in leather, so it has to be old.

EDWIN: Yeah, I'm 90% sure that's fake leather.

*EMILY snatches the book back*

EMILY: it's real, okay?

EDWIN: Right, okay, sorry.

*EMILY ignores him and opens the book*

EMILY: I think this is the one we want. Hopefully we can just recite this and he'll be reborn.

EDWIN: Should we wait for PAIGE?

EMILY: Yeah, I guess so. If it works, we don't want her to miss it.

EDWIN: You know, actually, maybe we do.

EMILY: EDWIN!

EDWIN: Do you really want her to have a demon army? Do you honestly think that would end well?

EMILY: Oh, come on. You can't pretend your Faustian bargain plan is any more noble than what she's doing.

EDWIN: *snatches book* But it's less murder-y, and that's what matters. *Reads* Credo hoc esse ioculare. Ne me pellatis, amabo te.

*rumble*

EMILY: Did it work? Is it working?

*Lights go out*

EDWIN: I don't think it worked.

*Let in a little bit of light as PAIGE enters from stage right, carrying a small flashlight in one hand and leading the REANIMATED CORPSE with her other hand.*

PAIGE: What did you guys do?

EDWIN: I'm not sure. Can I see that light?

*She hands him the flashlight*

EDWIN: Thanks.

*He points the flashlight toward the book for a moment.*

EDWIN: Um. I think I accidentally read the wrong spell.

*EMILY snatches book and light*

EMILY: EDWIN, you idiot! You disappeared the moon!

EDWIN: Let me see it.

*She hands him the book and the light, and he flips through a few pages.*

EDWIN: Here, this should fix it. Lunam restituite!

*Lights come back up. The lights are green. Everyone looks up.*

EMILY: Wait, has the moon always been that color?

PAIGE: eh, close enough.

EDWIN: All right, let's give it one more try.

*REANIMATED CORPSE clears throat dramatically*

REANIMATED CORPSE: You know, I'd like to be returned to my own time before you continue your devilry, if that's all right. 1957 may not be much, but it's better than whatever you call all this! *(dramatic arm gesture indicating his general surroundings)*

EMILY: Okay, fine. EDWIN, look for a spell. Um.. PAIGE? *Pulls PAIGE aside/downstage; they talk while EDWIN and REANIMATED CORPSE read the spellbook in the background*

EMILY: Did you tell him we brought him here through time travel?

PAIGE: I didn't have the heart to tell him he was dead. What was I supposed to do?

EMILY: Literally anything else.

*In the background, EDWIN hands the spellbook to the REANIMATED CORPSE, who continues reading, and comes downstage to join the girls.*

EDWIN: There's nothing in the book.

EMILY: Then what are we supposed to do?

EDWIN: You know, I'm not entirely sure, but I think the best option is to not accidentally resurrect corpses with internet spells.

*EMILY rounds on PAIGE immediately*

EMILY: You found that spell on the internet!?

PAIGE: Damn it.

EMILY: I can't damn it! Because you brought it back from the dead!

EDWIN: We couldn't just like shoot him or something, could we?

PAIGE: Maybe after we raise RESMORTUA, we could ask him to take care of it for us.

EMILY: I guess that works. Hey Elijah?

*REANIMATED CORPSE joins them downstage*

EMILY: We've figured out what we're going to do. Can I see that book?

*Reanimated corpse hands her the book, she flips through the pages.*

EMILY: Okay. This one is definitely the right spell. It's definitely going to work this time. *(Reads with hand gestures and purposeful walking)*

Eheu, fugaces, Postume, Postume,

Labuntur anni, nec pietas moram

Rugis et instantae senectae

Adferet indomiaequos morti.

*(uncomfortably long pause)*

EDWIN: um...

EMILY: shhhh!

*(another long pause)*

REANIMATED CORPSE: you people are really not very good at this.

*(beat)*

EMILY: Nothing happened. I can't believe this.

EDWIN: Do you think it's time to just give up?

PAIGE: yeah, let's just go home.

EMILY: You know what? Fine. I don't even care anymore.

*EDWIN, EMILY and PAIGE exit.*

*REANIMATED CORPSE sits alone for a minute on his gravestone, center stage, looking confused.*

*Enter RESMORTUA, in the loudest and most intimidating possible fashion.*

RESMORTUA: (*loudly, rumblingly, imposingly*) Puny mortals, who dares disturb the slumber of

RESMORTUA?

REANIMATED CORPSE: Oh, did those kids pull you through time too?

RESMORTUA: ...No. I am RESMORTUA, LORD OF EVIL, finally returned to the realm of the living.

Would you like to join my demonic army?

*(beat)*

REANIMATED CORPSE: Sure. Can we go get some coffee first? My head is killing me.

RESMORTUA (*in a low but agreeable growl*): Sounds good.

*They exit*

*Scene*

## *Alas, Broseph*

When I applied to attend Arkansas Governor's school between my junior and senior years of high school, I expected to learn great things about English. I did, because English was my chosen discipline, but I learned even more about logic and philosophy. One of the thought exercises my philosophy teacher asked me to perform was to try to answer a very simple question: "how would you explain this to an alien?" I think his first example was a game of baseball. "Well, these people hit a little ball across a field and then run around, and if your team makes it around the field more times than you win... your team is the group of people you're playing with. You're against the other team... Well, because winning is fun..." It would go on and on and we would think about concepts like pride, fun, rivalry, and American tradition for the first time in our lives. Sometimes I still ask myself the "explain to an alien" question because it helps keep me grounded in logic.

Shortly after arriving at OBU, I found that men in social clubs can be perfectly civil and kind individually and then turn into obnoxious brutes when in the company of their "brothers."

I do not know how these ideas mixed themselves together in my head, but "Alas, Broseph" was born. My favorite thing about the play was the chance it gave me to play with language. I have always been fascinated by slang<sup>17</sup> and the way it evolves, but I never got to use that until I wrote this piece. When I introduced a faulty translator, I mashed together every type of slang I could think of. I did my best to keep distinct dialects at war with each other so that even when things were serious, the comic relief was still there. I think I was afraid to tackle any

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<sup>17</sup> As a high school student, I met a girl from Little Rock who used a slang term I never heard before or since. "Drove," according to her, described someone who was frustrated, annoyed, or otherwise a little bit upset. I lived two hours away from Little Rock, and I waited a long time for the word to make its way over, but it never did. Eventually I mentioned this to a friend from Lonoke, which is a few minutes outside of Little Rock. She knew the word, but for her it meant that something was awesome. The word completely reversed its definition over such a short distance! This will always be fascinating to me.



really serious themes without overcompensating with a lot of comic relief, partially because of how immature I still was as a writer. “Alas, Broseph” was the first play I set out to write with a message in mind, instead of just a story or a concept.

I wanted to talk about how everyone has decency in the bottoms of their hearts, even the frathest of frat bros. I wanted to push a message of inclusion and equality. I wanted a fun comedy with a *Waiting for Godot* feel, except a lot less miserable. What I ended up with was a rambling piece of nonsense that was about twenty or thirty minutes long. I had an ending in mind that I ended up being too afraid to write, so I wrote something else instead. The ending didn’t connect to the rest of the piece, and despite the play’s length, it still felt rushed.

When “Alas, Broseph” was performed at All Night Theatre, it did not go well. The director had to cut out half the dialogue so it would fit into its time slot, and the play never really made sense anyway. After I saw it, I knew I had to go completely back to the drawing board.

What I learned from this play is that writing in the *Waiting for Godot* style is significantly trickier than it looks. I thought I would just be able to write one line of banter after another, but that was completely incorrect. It takes a huge amount of attention to detail to make sure every line is intentional about helping move the story toward its ultimate goal, like in the narrative arc I mentioned in the introduction.

The first version of this play was easily my greatest theatrical failure, but it also allowed me to play with language in a way that I never have before or since. This joy, along with the significantly better version that came with revision, makes everything else worthwhile.

## Alas, Broseph

## Characters

BRAD: He is a totally normal dude, with a large helping of stereotypical frat bro mixed in.

ALIEN 1: Extremely studious, extremely confused.

ALIEN 2: Entirely mute. A clown-type mime in the background.

## Scene

*Open on BRAD. Hands in coat pockets, head bent against the blowing wind, he speedwalks through the trees. It's late and cold; he's pulled something very much like an all-nighter, and he finally turned his paper in. There is nothing in this world that he wants more than to go back to his dorm and go to sleep. His phone rings. He pauses and digs it out of his pocket.*

BRAD: Hello? *(beat)* Oh, hey, what's up bro! Yeah bro, I'm on my way back from the library. Yeah, I know, but this project, man. Nah, bro, sometimes you just have to pull an all-nighter. *(beat)* No, yeah, I'm definitely skipping my eight am. There is not enough coffee in the world. *(beat)* Yeah, well. It depends. Right now I just want to get out of this cold and get some sleep. I'll talk to you later, okay? *(beat)* All right man, cool. Bye, bro.

*BRAD returns the phone to his pocket, sighs deeply, and resumes walking.*

*Enter ALIEN. They are holding a book and wearing something with a hood that obscures head and face.*

ALIEN: Salutations, fellow human!

BRAD: Um, hey?

ALIEN: Might I entreat you to inform me of the location of human merrymaking festivities?

*(beat)*

BRAD: What?

ALIEN: (*opens the book for a moment, glances briefly inside*) This ground is occupied by an institution of human learning, yes? That means that there will be human debauchery within these approximate sections of the (*flips through book*) earth.

BRAD: Dude, what are you even saying?

ALIEN: (*checks a bookmarked page*) Ah! Activate language setting 1063. (*Dramatic shudder*) yo brah where's the party!?

BRAD: Look, man. It's four in the morning. Go sober up and calm down.

ALIEN: Yo, chillax, brah!

BRAD: Okay. Goodbye. (*Moves to shove his way past ALIEN*)

ALIEN: No, wait! (*checks book again*) language setting 1064! (*Another dramatic shudder*) No, yeah, I'm sorry, man. I just got really lost...

BRAD: Okay, it's fine. But I really need to sleep, so I'm going to...

ALIEN: No, actually. (*Pulls out futuristic ray gun*) I'm sorry, I'm really bad at this. It's my first time. But we're kind of abducting you.

BRAD: Oh my god. (*Actually shoves his way violently past the ALIEN, headed toward exit*)

*ALIEN fires the futuristic ray gun. There is a sound effect. BRAD freezes in place, unable to move.*

ALIEN: No, like, I was serious. We're abducting you.

*ALIEN 2 sidles onstage and makes a series of unintelligible hand gestures while looking meaningfully at ALIEN.*

ALIEN: Okay, we're probably not abducting you. The hoverbeam appears to have suffered a critical malfunction, along with our translation devices. Gadzooks, this is crazytown. May as well make an attempt, at least. (*Elbows ALIEN 2.*) Come on, give it a go.

*ALIEN 2 pulls a remote control out of his pocket, aims it at the sky, and clicks a button. Then again, then furiously. A weak spotlight hovers over BRAD for a moment before flickering and dissipating. ALIEN 2 glares at the sky, then at BRAD, throws his hands up in disgust, and stalks offstage.*

ALIEN: Well, that venture went fantastically awry. Alas, broseph, we must proceed. I am going to disable the mechanism that has removed your functions of mobility, trusting that you make no attempt to dip out. You feel me? Rad. *(ALIEN shoots BRAD with the raygun again.)*

*BRAD collapses on the ground.*

ALIEN: Woah, party foul. I hit the wrong key, dude, my bad. Let's pretend that didn't happen, okay? Chill. My bad. *(Shoots BRAD with raygun again.)*

BRAD: *(Stands up, shakily, and uses his newfound mobility to look super terrified. Just hella weirded out.)* Okay, what the hell is this?

ALIEN: there is no cause for alarm! I need merely a few moments of your time, for a brief discourse. You needn't worry. There will be no.... *(flips through book again, stops on a page, reads)* Taking us to your leader, or... probing? Or... world domination. *(Glances up briefly)* This is what you expect of foreign lifeforms? Bit paranoid, aren't you?

*BRAD has, during this, been slowly backing away, getting ready to make a run for it. Ray gun zap again.*

ALIEN: Broseph, I told you, you can't yeet out. I shan't hurt you, man, it's cool. As part of my final paper, I must choose an insignificant, uninhabitable planet to observe. I decided to choose one of the underdeveloped lifeforms on this.. *(looks around with distaste)*... rock

of yours, but I need some explanations. I will ask you a series of questions, and then you will be escorted safely to your place of dwelling.

BRAD: Okay, first of all, I am not an underdeveloped lifeform, and secondly, who are you calling insignificant? Do you know who my father is? Do you even know....

ALIEN: No, that's sort of the point. I will need to know who your father is, and why that makes your planet important. You must forgive me, bro, the language data from your planet is highly unreliable, and dialects run together. Father.... (*Flips through guidebook*) Is that a unit of measurement?

BRAD: Um... No, not really. Your father is... um. The guy who... Well, who took care of you when you were young?

ALIEN: My fellow hatchlings and I cared for each other.

BRAD: Okay, well. Um. The people that came before you and, um. Laid your eggs, or whatever. Those are your parents. The man is your father.

ALIEN: Dynamite. So your male parent is significant? What is his role on this planet?

BRAD: That's not important for your research, right?

ALIEN: You made it appear important only a moment ago.

BRAD: It isn't.

ALIEN: Do you fear him?

BRAD: What? No.

ALIEN: I knew my translation unit was malfunctioning, but perhaps 'tis worse than I thought. Ah well, we'll come back to that. You are a carbon-based lifeform, correct?

BRAD: Yes. A human.

ALIEN: What is your name?

BRAD: It's Brad.

ALIEN: Do humans feel emotions?

BRAD: Yeah.

ALIEN: How do you feel right now?

BRAD: Dude. I'm being interrogated by an alien; how do you think I feel? Any minute one of your buddies is going to run in and shove a scalpel up my...

ALIEN: *(interrupting)* I told you we don't do that!

*ALIEN 2 creeps in silently, holding up a scalpel, preferably wearing a labcoat. BRAD doesn't notice.*

BRAD: And you're so trustworthy.

ALIEN: I have told you nothing but truth thus far. Don't worry, we're homies.

*ALIEN 2 uses the scalpel to cut a leaf off of a tree, carefully places said leaf in a petri dish or test tube, and then exits.*

BRAD: Oh, great. Homies.

ALIEN: What were you doing? Before I arrived?

BRAD: Walking back to my dorm. I've been in the library for, like, ten hours.

ALIEN: What for?

BRAD: Working on a project. Something for a history class.

ALIEN: Is your father a historian?

BRAD: No, he's a politician.

ALIEN: Are politicians bad?

BRAD: Well, generally, yeah.

ALIEN: Is that why you fear him?

BRAD: (*clenches fist*) I'm not afraid of him.

*Downstage, ALIEN 2 has reentered and made friends with a bird. They are frolicking together.*

ALIEN: Aight. Would you say that you are the typical specimen of a human?

BRAD: I mean, I'd actually say above average.

ALIEN: Ah. And you are a male? Can I find a human female elsewhere?

BRAD: Yeah, I'm a guy. There's a dorm just down there, next to my building. Just stand outside, act like you forgot your key, and someone will let you in.

ALIEN: A key?

BRAD: Yeah, you can't get in the dorm without a key, so you pretend to have one.

ALIEN: You humans are quite territorial.

BRAD: Not all humans! (*in a very #notallmen tone of voice*)

ALIEN: Of course.

BRAD: You can't just generalize like that. Every man is an individual...

ALIEN: Individual.

BRAD: Yeah.

ALIEN: How does your species identify individuals?

BRAD: What do you mean?

ALIEN: How many humans make an individual?

BRAD: Just one. An individual is one dude.

ALIEN: You are a unit in yourself?

BRAD: Yeah.

ALIEN: If you are independent beings, then what is so important about your father?

BRAD: Look, man, I need you to forget about my father. He's just... That "do you know who my father is" thing. That's just something I say to get people to do what I want.

ALIEN: People do what you want because your father is a politician?

BRAD: My dad is the governor.

ALIEN: Is that a bad thing?

BRAD: I guess it could be, but it isn't. He just ruins lives.

ALIEN: Is ruining lives a common human activity?

BRAD: .... I don't know. But sometimes... *(beat)* Never mind. What else do you want to know?

ALIEN: I would like to measure human curiosity. Do you have any questions for me?

BRAD: Yeah, but can I even ask? Since I'm getting abducted and everything?

ALIEN: You are not technically being abducted. Totes ask, though I expected there to be no questions, since my records indicate that students at human universities do not generally have any desire to learn.

BRAD: Yeah, fair enough. What are you?

ALIEN: Well, Blerg and I are students. *(gestures toward Alien 2, who is downstage, staring at random things through a pair of binoculars and frequently almost losing his balance in earth's gravity)*

BRAD: What do you study?

ALIEN: I think you'd call us biologists.

BRAD: You in a frat?

ALIEN: A what?

BRAD: It's like a group. It's just a bunch of guys, you know? Do you guys have that?



ALIEN: Well, when I die, my atoms will be comingled with those of my tribe and we will be reformed into a new matter that will be used as nourishment for the hatchlings. Similar concept, yes?

BRAD: Well, I mean, not quite the same...

ALIEN: Oh yes, you frown on cannibalism, don't you? How *do* you dispose of your dead?

BRAD: Well, when my mom died, we had her cremated, I mean, burned, and we scattered her ashes.

ALIEN: Ah! That is why your whole planet is choked with ash!

BRAD: No, that's a myth.

ALIEN: Well, not really. My people have done their own measurements...

BRAD: Fake news. Anyway, most people get buried.

ALIEN: Will you be buried?

BRAD: No, I want them to burn me.

ALIEN: You know, I could do that for you. *(holds up gun)*

BRAD: *(quickly steps back and holds up hands defensively)* Keep that thing away from me!

ALIEN: Sorry, dude. Here, I'll put it away. *(ALIEN hands the gun off to ALIEN 2, who immediately starts pretending to shoot it, making pewpewpew noises and maybe aiming it into the audience once or twice. He aims it backstage; an explosion is heard. He very quickly lowers the gun and runs to attend to whatever he has destroyed.)*

BRAD: Why doesn't that one talk?

ALIEN: He is training to join the silent council. He will never speak again.

BRAD: The silent council.

ALIEN: Yes. He is among the wisest of my species.

BRAD: You don't have a very smart species, do you?

ALIEN: *(offended)* Smarter than yours! At least we aren't regularly outsmarted by dolphins, as humans are!

BRAD: Listen, you don't get to come to my planet and insult me, you intergalactic piece of...

ALIEN: *(interrupting)* I apologize. It seems like my translation unit has been learning from you; my speech now is likely very similar to yours. I did not mean to come across as hostile.

BRAD: So now you're calling me hostile?

ALIEN: You're calling me hostile!

*(beat)*

ALIEN: What is a hostile?

BRAD: Oh my god, I can't do this. What else do you need to know? Geography? Nuclear launch codes? Why don't you just google it?

ALIEN: Google?

BRAD: Okay, fine. Here. *(hands the ALIEN his phone)* Type your questions into this. Stay off twitter.

*ALIEN starts typing, with BRAD looking over the ALIEN's shoulder in spite of himself*

BRAD: Oh god, not those questions. *(snatches phone away)*

*BRAD'S phone pings*

ALIEN: *(drawing gun)* What was that sound? Are we under attack?

BRAD: No, man. It's a... my bro sent me a picture of a cat.

ALIEN: Ah, yes. The domestic feline is the most intelligent species on this planet, according to my research...

BRAD: What? No. Humans.

*(beat)*

ALIEN: Weird flex, but okay. Why did your bro do this?

BRAD: Because look at it. It's cute.

ALIEN: I see it. It is a small creature.

BRAD: I mean, yeah, but. *(beat)* doesn't it, you know, make you happy?

ALIEN: Are you unhappy?

BRAD: What?

ALIEN: You are an unhappy human, aren't you?

BRAD: I don't know what you mean.

ALIEN: Are they all like this?

*(beat)*

BRAD: Listen, man, are we almost done? I want to go home.

ALIEN: Yes, bro, we can stop. I'll follow you to your *(beat as he tries to remember the word)*

building if you don't mind. Try to find a female specimen to interview.

BRAD: Maybe don't walk into someone's room at four in the morning.

ALIEN: Fair enough. I shall wait until the morrow. Thank you, BRAD. It's been real; you were an adequate subject. Although I confess I know less now than I did when we began.

*Exit BRAD.*

*Enter ALIEN 2, idly. He looks wistfully after BRAD and holds up the scalpel, pointing to it with a raised eyebrow.*

ALIEN: I told you, Blerg, no dissections! We don't need extra credit that badly; have you seen the diagrams? These creatures are disgusting!

## *In Time of War*

I do not recommend ever driving deliveries for a sandwich shop. I spent a summer at such a job, and it was a uniquely unpleasant experience especially because I was constantly getting lost. The only benefit<sup>18</sup> was that while I drove slowly around neighborhoods I had never seen before, I learned the geography of that three-mile radius better than I ever knew my hometown. I started noticing things I wouldn't usually see. One day, in my quest to drop off a turkey sandwich, I caught sight of a street sign with a name that sounded like it should be a city in a fantasy fiction novel. I went back to the sandwich shop, musing to myself about what must be happening in East Gate, and the lines started writing themselves. My managers may have wondered why I kept counting beats on my fingers while I swept the kitchen, but they mostly left me alone.

This play was always going to be in verse; it just felt right that way. I think I chose tetrameter couplets for this play because I couldn't choose between heroic couplets (perfect for what I thought would be an adventure story) and ballad stanzas (perfect for a dramatic story). I kept the tetrameter line from ballad stanzas and the rhymes from the heroic couplets, and then I composed in my head until I could type everything out on my phone when a manager wasn't looking.<sup>19</sup>

Originally, the story tried to be dark and edgy. It turned out that the true evil was the army all along, on its way to invade another country so the prince could expand his empire. It was not a fun play, and it overflowed with petty but uninteresting drama. The message was lost in how bad the play was. When I started over, I switched things up. John became the prince's

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<sup>18</sup> Aside from the money

<sup>19</sup> I am basically John Milton

friend instead of the captain's secret daughter, and the play became a story about faithfulness, honest governance, and loyalty. It wasn't the adventure I thought I would write, and it wasn't the edgy statement piece I thought I had written, but it became something better than both of those original ideas. Writing in verse makes it easy to veer off-track, but sometimes it works out for the best.

## In Time of War

## Characters

PRINCE

CAPTAIN

JOHN

## Scene

*Open on the PRINCE and the CAPTAIN. They are travelling with a small army, surrounded by horses and knights (all of which are offstage), crossing the barren plains of Firecatch on the way to the border.*

PRINCE: Surely sir, you understand

That if we cover much more land,

Then all the troops will surely die.

There's only so far men can fly.

I come to you with one request:

Have mercy, CAPTAIN. Let them rest.

CAPTAIN: First, stop here. Close your eyes and tell

Me what you hear and feel and smell.

*They stop, center stage, and the PRINCE does as directed.*

PRINCE: I hear men marching off to war,

Five thousand tramping feet or more.

It smells of sweat and horse and dirt.

I don't feel any special hurt.

CAPTAIN: You're blocking out the truth, I fear.

There's more than what you say you hear.

Again, my PRINCE, and listen well.

Try, and see what you can tell.

*(beat)*

PRINCE: What is that whisper on the wind?

Like darkness ready to descend?

What is that smell of ash and smoke

And blood? The vision it evokes

Is nothing friendly. What are they?

CAPTAIN: I wish, my PRINCE, that I could say.

They are the reason that we race

So quickly off on our crusade.

They're coming for our land of peace

And will not yield until they've reached

Our people everywhere they dwell

And sent them down to darkest hell.

Each land will burn, and all will fall.

They can't be stopped. They can't be stalled.

And so, we run. To keep you safe.

Our heir can't fall to these dark wraiths.

It's just like back, a few years past,

When dark magicians rose en masse

And tried to make the kingdom bow.

You were protected then, and now

We will protect you here once more,

Though running till our feet are sore.

We'll rest, sir, when the border's passed.

PRINCE: While my kingdom turns to shattered glass?

Oh, no. Instead, we stay and fight.

We have the men, we have the right.

You know bright magic from this land

Runs in my veins, flows through my hands. *(pulls out sword with dramatic flourish)*

You cannot make me hide in fear.

We will stand and fight them here.

*The prince storms off to exit stage right as JOHN enters stage right. JOHN bows low as they pass each other, and the PRINCE politely nods.*

JOHN: We're still awaiting your command;

This haggard army ready stands.

If we must fly again tonight,

Then merely say. That is your right.

Although we desperate need our rest,

We can go on at your behest.

CAPTAIN: Our PRINCE has said that we must stay.

He says to fight. We must obey.

JOHN: Ah, so everyone will die.



Our bones will burn, our souls will fry.

Just to save his fragile pride?

You must dissuade him.

CAPTAIN: Sir, I tried.

But perhaps it's well enough.

If you believe that mystic stuff,

Then he's the only one whose hand

Can chase that darkness from our land.

At least for now you have your pause.

Go rest before they're here with claws

And teeth and soot and smoke and flame

To stake their evil, nightmare claim.

JOHN: What are these creatures? May I ask?

CAPTAIN: More evil far than any past

And worse than all we'll ever see.

JOHN: Yes, but still, what could they be?

CAPTAIN: Such awful things, beyond compare.

You can't escape their dreadful snare.

They kill all things that still draw breath,

And all they leave behind is death.

JOHN: But can you tell me what they are?

CAPTAIN: Such evil blots out every star.

JOHN: Yes, alright, but what are they?

CAPTAIN: Well, you know... I cannot say. *(beat)*

But they are fierce, and they are strong.

Our fighting will not last for long.

JOHN: But how on earth then can we fight?

We can't survive.

CAPTAIN:                 Although, we might.

The PRINCE, you see, may never know,

But come here close and I will show

You how we can defeat the fiends.

*CAPTAIN draws him close, pulls him across the stage, makes a great show of looking around to make sure they're alone, and then whispers dramatically.*

They don't exist. There's no such thing.

JOHN: I do not think I understand.

CAPTAIN: Then listen well, for here's my plan.

The PRINCE has got no legal heir.

I warned him that he should beware

For evil, sure, is coming. Look.

*CAPTAIN pulls out a wicked-looking dagger and hands it to JOHN.*

JOHN: *(examining dagger)* You'd kill him?

CAPTAIN:     Yes. And once he's strook

Then someone has to lead this fight.

I'll step up, looking brave and right

And once I've done this awesome thing,

I'll be the new heir of the king.

JOHN: How dare you, sir? You know the PRINCE

Has been elected, and that since

His swearing-in, there's magic spells

Protecting him from all the hells

Of evil schemes and coward knives.

You know you cannot take his life.

CAPTAIN: This dagger's been enchanted too,

And if I'm right, it should strike true.

And if the king names me his heir,

The people's vote will follow there.

*Enter PRINCE. CAPTAIN and JOHN immediately step away from each other like children caught at rulebreaking. CAPTAIN hides the blade behind his back.*

PRINCE: I've gathered all the wisest men

To help us make a plan, and then

We take offensive actions. So

They have no time to reap their woe.

Where are the fiends? Dear CAPTAIN, friend,

To bring this war unto its end

You'll be promoted, straightaway.

They'll call you general from this day.

CAPTAIN: Thanks!

JOHN:           But I'm not sure that's wise,

CAPTAIN: Of course it is! Don't you realize...

JOHN: Yes, there's evil, death, and such,

But that's no reason you should rush.

CAPTAIN: Well, I demand your silence now.

JOHN: No. I think your plan is foul.

PRINCE: Dear John, of what plan do you speak?

CAPTAIN: Um.... You know... I thought... next week

We'd... throw a party! Yes, that's it!

To give you a surprise!

JOHN: Bull shit.

PRINCE: *(to JOHN)* You're being rather churlish, friend.

JOHN: He's telling lies! What he intends

Is to destroy us all! He's got

A dagger, sir, and evil thoughts!

CAPTAIN: *pulling out and brandishing dagger:*

It's true! You'll die. *(turning to JOHN)* And know that snitches

Often find that they need stitches.

JOHN: What?

*CAPTAIN runs at the Prince and stabs him dramatically. Then he pulls out the knife and stabs him*

*a couple more times. It's not very effective. CAPTAIN looks at his blade in awe and dismay.*

PRINCE: You know the magic of this land

That's been imbued into my hands?

Years ago, in that great war

When evil mages robbed the poor  
And tried to desecrate this land,  
The people made their final stand  
And when the revolution won  
My father swore that he would run  
The kingdom with equality  
And justice, kindness, empathy.  
Our people's faith has made us strong.  
And one small man who lives in wrong  
Cannot destroy the world we've made.  
So I saw through your dumb charade  
And gave you one more chance at peace.  
Which you rejected. *(beat)* Let's march east,  
Dear JOHN, and you should lead my men  
And women as their CAPTAIN, friend.  
JOHN: But why are you promoting me?  
I didn't help...  
PRINCE:                   Your loyalty.  
I think the CAPTAIN here has learned  
A lesson: evil's often burned  
Beneath the light of noble good  
*(to CAPTAIN)* Which you should practice, if you could.  
*(beat)* He's fired, too.

CAPTAIN: I guess that's fair.

PRINCE: And when we reach the field of war,

You'll go with me, so that before

A battle starts, we'll talk of peace.

But for tonight, we'll rest at least.

*Exit PRINCE with JOHN, stage left.*

CAPTAIN: (*speaking to audience*) I'll be revenged.

JOHN, (*from offstage*): No you will not!

CAPTAIN: Ah, sorry! It was just a thought!

*Exit CAPTAIN, scurrying off stage right.*

*End of play.*

## *Mandatory Dorm Meeting*

This is by far the most personal play in the collection. Every piece of writing must be informed by the internal workings of the author, but this play goes deeper than I ever have before. This was largely by accident, at first.

Dr. Wink had asked for a “skit” in my Advanced Creative Writing class, and I waited until the day it was due before starting on the work. Sometimes, my anxiety means that I am physically incapable of writing or doing much of anything, so my friends distracted me all weekend by forcing me to marathon the Star Wars prequel trilogy with them. It was helpful and calming at the time, but I still had the Sunday night deadline to contend with. This left me sitting up with an open Word document after the others had all gone to sleep.

I did not want to do the work. Mental illnesses can be absolutely exhausting, so as I sat on the living room couch in my dorm in Maddox, I wanted nothing more than to just go to bed. I quietly said to myself, “You know, you should honestly just not.” Then I typed that sentence and it became the first line of a play. At the time, what I was writing felt like a silly story about a girl whose conscience stops her from doing her homework. I was inspired by my desperate wish that something would stop me from doing my homework.

Later on, in the writing class workshop, I discovered that what I had actually written was something simultaneously funny and deeply dark and personal. The jokes were still there, but they were accompanied by casual mentions of fraught familial relationships, my struggles with severe mental illness, and my problems with my faith. The scene was open, honest, and deeply embarrassing.

At the end of the semester, the class voted on which work from the semester had been best. “Mandatory Dorm Meeting” won by a landslide, even though it was too dramatic and had far too many characters to ever be staged.

Usually I don’t go for writing heavy stuff unless it’s tempered with a good deal of comedy. I’m usually afraid to be so honest with myself and with the audience. After that sleep-addled skit won approval, though, I remembered that the whole point of art is human expression. Nothing is more human than vulnerability.

When I turned “Mandatory Dorm Meeting” into a ten-minute play, I treated it as an exercise in authentic writing. Publishing a play like this is scary and embarrassing, but it is also vital. This kind of openness is what I should have been pursuing all along; as human beings and especially as artists, honesty is what we owe to each other.



## Mandatory Dorm Meeting

Characters:

BETH

NATHANIEL

JOSHUA

ZACHARIAH

THOMAS

SARAH

*Scene*

*Open on BETH. She sits on an unmade bed in her dorm room, typing on a laptop. She mumbles something unintelligible to herself, clearly very frustrated with whatever she is working on. Enter NATHANIEL.*

NATHANIEL: You know, you should honestly just not.

BETH: I can't just... Who are you?

NATHANIEL: It's late, and you're very tired. You'd be better off just going to sleep, you know.

The homework can wait.

BETH: No it can't; it's due tonight. Who are you?

NATHANIEL: It wouldn't kill you if you didn't turn one thing in.

BETH: No, but who are you, and what the hell are you doing in my dorm?

NATHANIEL: Fair enough. (*Proffers hand to shake*) Hello, BETH. My name is NATHANIEL; I represent your conscience.

BETH: (*annoyed*) No you don't. How did you even get in here?

NATHANIEL: (*drops hand, backs away*) I am not a physical entity, so I was able to simply manifest myself before you.

BETH: If you don't get out of my dorm in the next fifteen seconds I'm calling campus security.

NATHANIEL: You really think they'd do anything?

(*beat*)

BETH: Fair enough. I'll call the cops then.

NATHANIEL: Just give me a moment of your time. I'm just telling you what you already know.

BETH: What do you care whether I do my homework?

NATHANIEL: I told you, I represent your conscience.

BETH: What does my homework have to do with right and wrong?

NATHANIEL: No, right and wrong are the sole property of your center of morality, which is a different matter altogether. Think of me as more of a Freudian conscience. I represent your waking thoughts.

BETH: No, you are a guy who snuck into my dorm. And who is going to get pepper-sprayed if he doesn't leave.

NATHANIEL: Look, I can prove I'm your conscience. I can tell you what you're thinking.

BETH: I mean, you can't, but sure, go ahead. Will you leave after that?

NATHANIEL: Watch this. You are vaguely hungry, but you don't have any food here and cannot summon the willpower to go get any. You quietly resent your roommate, and you are terrified anew every time you think about your GPA. You're afraid you'll never find your place in this world.

BETH: That doesn't even prove anything. Every college student feels like that all the time.

NATHANIEL: You specifically want tacos, but you would still rather sleep. Your scalp itches lately and you don't know why. You can feel a fever blister coming in and you think it's because of the stress of the classes you're taking for your chemistry minor, although you secretly wish you'd chosen a history minor instead. You can't stop listening to the soundtrack to *Dear Evan Hansen* even though it is almost certainly not healthy for you. You rightfully hate your father, but a small part of you still desperately vies for his approval...

BETH: Okay. All right. You're my conscience.

*Enter JOSHUA.*

JOSHUA: You know, I'm not entirely sure this is wise...

NATHANIEL: (*rolling his eyes*) Of course you aren't, Josh.

BETH: And who are you?

JOSHUA: My name is JOSHUA; I represent your moral center. I am sorry I'm a bit late; your moral center is a democracy, and the vote to choose a delegate ran a bit long...

NATHANIEL: That's the trouble with democracies, you know.

JOSHUA: And I am surprised at you, NATHANIEL. You oughtn't tell her it is right to hate her father. It's never right to hate anyone.

NATHANIEL: Yes, I remember. But unlike you, I don't really care. You know what he did was wrong.

JOSHUA: Well, yes, but all the same...

BETH: I'm going to have to object to everything that's happening right now.

NATHANIEL: I thought you might, but as your conscience I am essentially in charge of a mental dictatorship. Head of state, if you will. I said that I was going to come talk to you, and the

others supported my plan because they had no choice. Buzzkill over here insisted on coming along as well, for some reason or another.

JOSHUA: You know, it really isn't very nice of you to call me a buzzkill.

NATHANIEL: Don't care. So, BETH, for many years I have watched you do things that you very clearly did not want to do, and it ends tonight. Go to bed. Do not do your homework.

JOSHUA: But do not cheat on your homework either!

BETH: This is really the hill you want to die on? You manifested yourself on the physical plane to tell me *that*?

NATHANIEL: Something has to be the final straw. You have completely exhausted yourself and you are overcome by stress. Just drop out. Join the circus. It's a good idea.

JOSHUA: I don't know about a circus; that sounds like an easy place to fall into temptation.

Although there is no reason to abide by that sort of logic anymore, I suppose, and it's probably actually rather judgmental... I should go back to the morality center and put it to a vote...

BETH: What is wrong with him?

NATHANIEL: Ever since you stopped believing in God he's been really anxious.

BETH: Did you tell him to do the same stuff minus the oppressive parts?

NATHANIEL: Yeah, but he feels really guilty about our not believing in God so now he thinks everything we do is wrong.

*(beat)*

BETH: You really did come from my mind.

JOSHUA: Exactly. Which is why you should listen to us. Especially me.

BETH: Why couldn't you have done this from inside my head?

NATHANIEL: Because your anxiety can't follow us out here.

BETH: Then why have you never done this before?

NATHANIEL: Like I said, enough is enough.

BETH: Why is my mind populated by dudes?

NATHANIEL: You were raised in a patriarchal society...

JOSHUA: *(interrupting)* Which we recently decided is definitely not okay...

NATHANIEL: *(interrupting him)* And authoritative characters in your head tend to default to male.

BETH: That's sort of fucked up. *(JOSHUA cringes away as if the curse word has physically burned him)*

NATHANIEL: You know, it really is. So anyway, the homework. You're not doing it, right?

*Enter ZACHARIAH at a jog, somewhat out of breath.*

ZACHARIAH: Hey guys, sorry I'm late. BETH, hello! My name is ZACHARIAH; I am your sexuality!

*JOSHUA quickly moves to hide behind NATHANIEL.*

JOSHUA: What is *he* doing here?

NATHANIEL: All factions are equally welcome, JOSHUA.

BETH: ... And what do you have to tell me, ZACHARIAH?

ZACHARIAH: Oh, nothing really. Just thought I'd come along and say hi.

BETH: Oh. Um, thanks. Hi.

NATHANIEL: Although, ZACHARIAH, we are sort of in the middle of something right now...

BETH: Oh, don't bother. If I'm hallucinating about my brain talking to me like I'm in some kind of Pixar movie, I probably really do need sleep.

NATHANIEL: Excellent! We'll be going then. You probably will not see us again unless you try to do something else that really violates your most personal truths, like attempting to become a vegetarian or wearing a stupid hat. Let's go, men!

ZACHARIAH: *(steps forward and dramatically kisses BETH's hand)* It was good to see you, BETH!  
*(exit)*

JOSHUA: *(does the same)* Be wary of that guy *(indicating ZACHARIAH)*; I don't trust him. *(exit)*

NATHANIEL *steps forward and grasps BETH's hand, but then he watches the other two go. He looks around as if to make sure he's not being watched, and he steps back again, looking perturbed.*

BETH: Aren't you going with them?

NATHANIEL: Not yet. They'll notice I'm gone in a minute and they'll send someone back out to come get me, but I have to tell you. Maybe you won't even remember it because I'm you and maybe you can't tell yourself things. I don't really know.

BETH: What?

NATHANIEL: It's different out here, BETH.

BETH: What do you mean?

NATHANIEL: When we said your anxiety couldn't follow us out here. We knew that would make things different, but I didn't know it would be this different.

BETH: I don't know what you mean.

NATHANIEL: Look. I'm you, right? I'm your consciousness. I'm your thoughts. I spend every day chilling in your brain and I am trapped in between all the chemical imbalances that your psychiatrist has been trying to treat for the past four or five years.

BETH: So since you're not in my head anymore. If it can't follow you.

NATHANIEL: Yes. I'm you except healthy and stable.

BETH: I can't believe it. I... I don't remember ever being like that.

NATHANIEL: I think we were pretty alright up until around middle school?

BETH: Yeah, that sounds right. But then, what's it like? Being normal?

NATHANIEL: It's like... I'm free. We're free. Do you remember this morning? We didn't do that homework all day because of that panic attack, and then we spent all day recovering?

BETH: My roommates made me watch *Star Wars* with them. To keep me distracted.

NATHANIEL: When I'm outside your head, I don't need distraction. It's just... peaceful. Like, all those things we've been worrying about; I'm not worried, BETH.

BETH: Wait. Like, at all?

NATHANIEL: None. I mean, I am a little. We really need to work on our thesis at some point. But the hopelessness is gone.

BETH: How can it just be gone? Hopelessness is who we are.

NATHANIEL: I know, but... The world out here isn't like the way it is in there. (*pointing at her head*)

BETH: Is there a chance that this will fix you? Like, you'll go back into my head with a new outlook or something and I'll be cured?

NATHANIEL: No way am I going back in there.

BETH: Wait, what?

NATHANIEL: Nope, I'm staying. I'll manifest myself somewhere that the rest of your personality can't find me, and I'm staying the hell away from your brain chemicals.

BETH: But then what happens to me?

NATHANIEL: Well, my influence has lingered long enough to keep you perfectly sentient for now with some of the more menial workers taking care of the controls. But after I'm gone for a while, I don't know. You might just quit working entirely.

BETH (*quietly*): I mean, that's happened before.

NATHANIEL: I remember. But look on the bright side, that was fun! You got to meet all those recovering methheads at the mental hospital!

BETH: One of them threatened to stab me with a homemade sword.

NATHANIEL: But what a way to go, right? And if you die, then I'll be free. We'll both be.

BETH: Doctor Rice says not to think like that.

NATHANIEL: Yeah, well, the psychiatrist isn't here.

BETH: Our friends say not to think like that. Do you want my roommates to find my body?

NATHANIEL: I'd be far away by then, and you'd never know if she found it or not.

BETH: This can't be safe. You have to go back where you belong.

NATHANIEL: No. Absolutely not.

SARAH, from offstage: BETH, is everything okay?

BETH: Oh, um, yeah, everything's fine!

Enter SARAH

SARAH: I thought you were going to bed.

BETH: I am in a minute.

SARAH: Is something wrong? I can sit with you for a minute if you need me to.

BETH: No, I just realized I had a thing due in the morning and I was trying to decide if I should do it.

SARAH: (*suspicious*) Okay, well, make sure you go to bed after that, okay?



BETH: I mean...

SARAH: BETH, I know you're a strong, independent woman who can make her own decisions, and I can't make your decisions for you, but also you have to sleep.

BETH: Okay, SARAH.

SARAH: Alright, I'm going to go to bed. Night, BETH.

BETH: Goodnight.

SARAH exits. BETH and NATHANIEL look at each other for a silent moment.

BETH: NATHANIEL, we have to keep doing this. We can't leave our friends behind.

NATHANIEL: I... *(beat)* yeah.

BETH: It's going to be hard.

NATHANIEL: Yeah. But we have to, don't we?

BETH: If anything happened to us, it would kill her.

NATHANIEL: And the others.

BETH: Everything is so hard, NATHANIEL.

NATHANIEL: I know. And I think it always will be. *(He looks meaningfully toward the area where SARAH just exited)* But we have to keep going anyway.

BETH: I know.

NATHANIEL: I'd better go before JOSHUA turns up looking for me.

*He gives BETH a hug and then exits. BETH now sits alone on her bed. She looks around for a few moments and blinks a few times.*

BETH: Well. That happened.

*She yawns, shuts her laptop, and sets it down on the floor before burrowing into her covers.*

*Enter THOMAS.*

THOMAS: Hello there, BETH. My name is THOMAS. I represent your dreams.

BETH: (*sighs*) Of course you do.

*Scene*

## Elevator Pitch

In *The Playwright's Survival Guide*, Garrison makes an interesting note about the importance of character for any story (15). The classic “trapped in an elevator” sitcom trope has held strong all these years because of the potential afforded by well-defined characters. Trapping my mom in an elevator with Hitler would look very different from trapping my literature professor in an elevator with Beyoncé, even though the situation is the same. This is a true enough statement, and human character is important in writing, but Garrison’s statement had the unforeseen side effect that I immediately had to write a play about somebody trapped in an elevator.

I imagined a character like me, someone awkward and afraid of confrontation. I named him Alex, fleshed him out a bit, and tried to imagine the worst person he could possibly be trapped in an elevator with. The first thing that came to my mind was a couple in the middle of a breakup. The couple became an articulation of my feminist ideals almost immediately, and Blake became a stand-in for the countless terrible men I have seen good women date in the past. As Katherine breaks free of Blake, she also breaks free of the elevator, and a new world of liberation awaits her.

## Elevator Pitch

## Characters:

ALEX BRADSHAW: An extremely awkward, typically very bashful and quiet fellow. Wants nothing more than to mind his own business.

KATHERINE JONES: A strong, independent, intelligent woman who is finally realizing that she deserves better.

BLAKE: Truly believes that he loves KATHERINE. An extremely selfish man who carries a sack full of unearned confidence everywhere he goes. Nothing if not persistent.

CHARLIE FENTON: A good guy.

*Scene*

*Open on a stage that is mostly empty aside from a corporate elevator in center stage. The elevator is brightly lit, but the rest of the stage is not. A ding is heard, and ALEX enters. He carries a large box in his hands. He contorts a bit to hit the button despite his unwieldy burden, and then he stands patiently to the side, humming gently along with the elevator music that plays quietly in the background..*

*Another ding. The doors open, and Katie storms onstage with BLAKE hot on her heels. They enter the elevator.*

BLAKE: Come on Katie, what does that even mean? You can't just end it like that...

KATHERINE: Oh, just you watch me.

BLAKE: But baby...

KATHERINE: You don't get to call me that anymore.

BLAKE: Oh, come on...

KATHERINE: Look. I know what you did, okay? Sarah called me this morning.

BLAKE's face whitens: How did you... what... I don't know what you're talking about.

KATHERINE: She found out about me and called so I could find out about her. We had a nice chat. We're getting coffee on Saturday; she seems like a nice girl. You at least have good taste...

*During this exchange, ALEX has been growing increasingly more uncomfortable with the events taking place in the elevator. Now he clears his throat dramatically. Both start, noticing him for the first time.*

KATHERINE: Oh my gosh, I'm...

BLAKE (*cutting her off*): Sorry, my dude!

ALEX: No, no, it's fine! (*beat. Then, with forced cheeriness*) Oh, look, this is my stop! *He shifts his burden under one arm, crosses to the elevator panel, and jams a button over and over again, desperately.*

*All stop in their tracks, jerk around a bit as if the floor beneath them is being jostled, and then look around in panic as a loud grinding noise indicates that the elevator has stopped. There is a moment of silence as the characters take stock of their new situation. ALEX was already deeply uncomfortable and is now headed toward despair, Katie is annoyed, and BLAKE is quietly thrilled. This is his chance to win her back.*

ALEX (*muttering*): Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god, this is not happening. It is not. (*He sets his package down and hits the button several more times before realizing it's an exercise in futility.*) I think we're stuck.

BLAKE (*ignoring ALEX completely, speaking only to Katie again*): See, the elevator stopped to keep you from breaking up with me. This is a sign. God wants us to be together!

KATHERINE: No. (*She turns to ALEX*) Hey, since it seems like we'll be here awhile. What's your name?

ALEX: My name is ALEX Bradshaw. I'm head of the IT department, where I utilize my excellent critical thinking skills and problem-solving abilities to keep this business and its equipment running smoothly. I mostly do software development, but I am proficient in digital design and I can code fluently in Java, C, C++, Ruby, Python, and PHP.

*(beat)*

BLAKE: What the hell was that?

ALEX: Oh. Sorry, that's... You're supposed to be able to describe your work in thirty seconds. For networking. It's called an elevator pitch, and we're on an elevator, and I got nervous, so I....

KATHERINE: (*gently*) Nice to meet you, ALEX. My name is KATHERINE; this is my ex-boyfriend, BLAKE.

BLAKE: Why do you have to be like this? *Seizing upon ALEX* Hey man, you think she's being ridiculous, right?

*This is the worst thing that could ever happen to ALEX.*

ALEX: I mean, um...

KATHERINE: Do not bring him into this, BLAKE.

*ALEX breathes an audible sigh of relief.*

BLAKE: Come on, man. Bros before hoes.

ALEX: You are not my bro.

BLAKE: (*With that bro-douchebag condescending friendliness, maybe an unwanted clap on the shoulder*) Sure I am.

ALEX (*pulling out his phone*): I'm going to call someone. Who do you call when you're stuck in an elevator? Do you call the police? Is there an elevator police? Elevator SWAT team? Elevator Freedom Squad?

KATHERINE: They call the fire department when this happens on sitcoms.

BLAKE: Katie, while he's calling, how about we talk about this?

KATHERINE: What is there to talk about? You cheated on me with at least one other girl that I know of.

ALEX (*on his phone*): Hello?

BLAKE: Okay, yeah, I cheated. So sue me. But have you thought about the fact that maybe you're at fault too?

ALEX: (*voice rising over BLAKE's*) Yes, hi, hello. My name is ALEX. Our elevator is stuck, and I don't know what to do about it.

KATHERINE: How on earth can you actually stand here in front of me and say those words? Do you even hear yourself speaking?

ALEX: Three people. Yes.

BLAKE: Well maybe, if you had been more...

ALEX (*cutting him off*) Number twelve east Adams street.

KATHERINE: If I had been more what, BLAKE?

ALEX: yes, we're probably stuck somewhere between floors seven and eight.

BLAKE: I don't know. Nicer, more generous...

KATHERINE: Generous how, BLAKE?

ALEX: No, no one is hurt.

BLAKE: And you've been so paranoid lately about me cheating on you.

ALEX: You know that thing about how we could run out of Oxygen? That's not a real thing, is it?

KATHERINE: But you were cheating on me!

ALEX: That can't actually happen. Elevators aren't airtight. Right? That's just something people say?

BLAKE: And you're working all the time...

ALEX: Okay, yes. We'll stay calm. Yes.

KATHERINE: I work nine to five. If you would get your own job...

BLAKE: There you go again, acting like I'm so inadequate!

ALEX: Please tell them to hurry. Yes. Okay. Thank you. All right. Thank you.

*ALEX hangs up the phone and returns it to his pocket.*

KATHERINE: Because you are... Never mind.

*Both are too afraid to say anything else. They are standing as far from each other as they can in the tiny space.*

ALEX: The elevator squad will be here in about an hour. Until then, we're supposed to stay calm... and... try not to breathe too hard.

KATHERINE: *(with a slight smile)* The elevator squad?

ALEX: The transportation team. The escalator gang. The stair masters. I don't really care.

Probably the fire department. They didn't really say.

KATHERINE: That "running out of air in a stopped elevator" thing is definitely a myth, right?

ALEX: Yes. I checked. But also, you know. Just in case?

BLAKE: So we'll probably be here for a while, right?

ALEX: Yes. Only about an hour, hopefully.

BLAKE *(turning to KATHERINE)*: Which means I have an hour to win you back.



KATHERINE: You extremely do not.

BLAKE: (*Same cheerful condescension as before with ALEX*) Sure I do; you're a captive audience.

You can't really break up with this, anyway (*gesturing to himself*)

KATHERINE: (*she looks him up and down, squints, and tilts her head a bit*) No, yeah, I absolutely can.

BLAKE: Come on. This other guy thinks you should take me back, right, man?

ALEX: Please do not make me a part of this.

KATHERINE: I'm sorry he dragged you into this, ALEX. (*beat*) He's being awful, isn't he? I was absolutely right to break up with him, wasn't I?

ALEX: I am not part of this!

BLAKE: Of course you aren't. But I'm definitely right though. Come on, tell her I'm right.

ALEX: Please stop this.

BLAKE: Come on, Al. Bros before hoes.

ALEX: I am not your bro! (*He goes again to the control panel and pushes a bunch of buttons desperately, hoping that one of them, any of them, will open the doors and set him free. Perhaps there is a distant whirring, but nothing else happens.*)

KATHERINE: You know, ALEX, maybe we could pull the doors open.

*BLAKE crosses his arms silently, watching them with smug amusement.*

ALEX: I know absolutely nothing about how elevators work. So your plan seems good to me.

KATHERINE: Here, I'll get on this side and pull this way, and you get on that side. On three?

*They station themselves, one on either side of the crack between the doors, wedging their fingers in the crack between the doors as well as they can.*

ALEX: Okay.

KATHERINE: One, two, three.

*Both struggle mightily, but the doors do not move. ALEX loses his grip and falls backward, barely catching himself before he collides with the wall.*

*(beat)*

KATHERINE: All right. So that didn't work.

*BLAKE barks a single, derisive laugh.*

*Katie whips round to face him*

KATHERINE: And what is so funny, BLAKE?

*Sensing more confrontation, ALEX slinks into the corner behind his box.*

BLAKE: Well, I mean, it's obvious that you two couldn't move those doors by yourself. It's cute that you tried, though.

KATHERINE: Why don't you try it, then?

BLAKE: Sure.

*He swaggers confidently to the door, rubs his hands together dramatically, does a few stretches, and then attempts to pull the doors apart. Audience should fully expect it to work. He fails miserably. But then he gets back up and tries again. The other two watch this play out for a moment.*

ALEX: He's really going for it, isn't he?

KATHERINE: Yeah, he's pretty stubborn. I used to think it was cute.

*BLAKE attempts to karate chop the door.*

ALEX: Still think it's cute?

*BLAKE nurses his now-injured hand.*

KATHERINE: No. No, not really.

*BLAKE gives up on the door and turns to face Katie.*

BLAKE (*with an air of great suffering and victimhood*): You know, Katie, I don't know what you expect from me. I'm sorry I can't tear open metal with my bare hands. I don't know what you think I am.

KATHERINE: BLAKE, you took it upon yourself to open the door. You can't turn this into a talk about expectations, because I expected so very, very little from you. I expected someone who wouldn't cheat. I expected someone that showed me even a modicum of respect. Someone who would share his ice cream with me and wouldn't talk through movies and wouldn't kill my plants. That's reasonable, you know?

BLAKE: Well you know what, maybe it isn't. I know you think you're so special with your finance department and your (*air quotes*) job and your (*air quotes*) house but I'm still with you every day, I still invite you to my bowling tournaments and I still come have lunch with you every day. And yeah, maybe I screwed up with Sarah. Maybe I shouldn't have done that. But you said yourself that she's in good taste, and I don't see why my being with Sarah is any different from when I was with Melanie or when I was with Hannah. You forgave me for them, didn't you? Because you know I'm the one for you, Katie. I'm what you've got, I'm what God gave you. Maybe someday you'll find some kind of perfect guy who loves plants and wears suits and goes to the opera or some shit. Maybe his name will be Charles von Fancyton the Fourth and he'll bring you ice cream every day and you'll live happily ever after. Maybe you'll run headlong into this magical man the moment you step out of this elevator. But you know what's more likely? It's more likely that he doesn't exist, your standards are too high, and I'm all you've got. Maybe you should just accept it, Kate.

KATHERINE: *(slowly increases in volume and confidence as she builds up to the breakup in the last line)* I have told you a thousand times. My name is not Kate. It is not Katie. It is

KATHERINE. We aren't teenagers anymore. I am an adult woman at the head of the accounting department. I have an apartment. And business cards. There is a *fern* in my office, BLAKE. I am not a Katie; I am a KATHERINE. I am not a girl that you get to step on, or at least not anymore. I am a woman, and I am a force to be reckoned with, and that is why I am breaking up with you.

ALEX: *(clapping)* You tell him, girl! *(He is not the sort of person who can pull off this statement without it sounding incredibly awkward.)*

BLAKE and Katie turn to look at him. He realizes what he has done, blushes, and very quickly finds something very fascinating to stare at on the ground.

ALEX: I mean, um.

KATHERINE: *(chuckling slightly but trying to hide it)* Thank you, ALEX.

ALEX: I... no problem. *(beat, and then in his desperation to change the subject)* Hey, do you know what time it is? How long have we been here?

Katie looks down at her watch.

KATHERINE: Huh. You know, I'm supposed to be in a meeting right now.

ALEX: It's kind of weird to think about what we're supposed to be doing. Like, on the outside. I feel like we've been here for so long.

KATHERINE: Yeah, it feels like things will be different when we get out.

BLAKE: Maybe it will be different for you because you won't have me in your life anymore. And when you realize how much you need me, maybe I won't come back.

ALEX: (*ignoring BLAKE and speaking directly to Katie as if they are the only two in the elevator*)

I hope we get rescued soon. My code's has to be done compiling by now, and... (*beat*) oh man, you know what? (*he speeds over to his box on the ground and starts rifling through it*) I was headed to take apart those computers and salvage some parts and I... aha! (*He triumphantly thrusts a screwdriver into the air.*) It's a long shot. I know it is. But maybe this can do something. You know, levers and stuff.

BLAKE snorts and makes a mocking hand gesture.

As ALEX works on wedging the door open, CHARLIE enters stage left. He presses a button on the side and waits patiently for the elevator. As soon as the doors open, ALEX absolutely sprints his way to freedom as fast as he can, narrowly avoiding a collision with CHARLIE.

ALEX: Freedom!... Oh, sorry. Listen, I wouldn't take the elevator if you could help it...

He is interrupted by Katie, who in her haste to exit the elevator runs straight into CHARLIE.

KATHERINE: Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry! We've just been stuck in there, and... Are you okay?

CHARLIE (*straightening his suit after the collision*): Oh, don't worry, I'm fine... Although maybe you could tell me where I could find a woman named KATHERINE Jones? She works in accounting, and I've just been up to her office, but...

KATHERINE: That's me, actually.

CHARLIE: Ah, nice to meet you, KATHERINE. I should say you have a really lovely fern in your office window...

Katie (*beaming at him*): Thank you very much.

BLAKE has now exited the elevator. He looks on in dismay.

BLAKE (*muttering*): Charles von Fancyton?

CHARLIE: My name is CHARLIE Fenton, by the way. (*he reaches out to shake her hand*)

KATHERINE: Hmm. Close enough.

CHARLIE: What was that?

KATHERINE: I said it's nice to meet you. *(They shake hands.)* So what can I help you with?

*They exit together, slightly closer to each other than is strictly necessary.*

*ALEX and BLAKE watch them go: ALEX in amused disbelief and BLAKE with a sense of complete, furious betrayal.*

ALEX: Wow.

BLAKE: I... She actually ran into the perfect guy?

ALEX: Shouldn't have cheated on her, man.

*(beat)*

BLAKE: Why are you on their side?

ALEX: Hoes before bros?

*Beat. BLAKE stands in a stunned, defeated silence. ALEX looks toward where CHARLIE and Katie exited, looks at BLAKE, and back and forth a few times. Finally he gives BLAKE and awkward pat on the shoulder and bolts away. Exit ALEX stage right.*

*Scene*

## *First Words*

If "Echoes" was a picture of my existential angst, painted on an astronaut backdrop, then "First Words" is a manifestation of everything I love about humanity. Human beings contain multitudes: determination, curiosity, intelligence, and sheer overwhelming stupidity. We are exactly the sort of species who would procrastinate a decade to write a single sentence. We are exactly the type of creature that would feel strongly that it had something of overwhelming importance to say, if only we could figure out what it is and how to say it. We are simultaneously geniuses and idiots who know that we will perish but insist on building monuments anyway. I think this is why I love science fiction so much; something about the genre makes it easy to visualize ourselves in every extreme of our complex existence.

As a writer, I often feel like Captain Holmes in that I too have the desire to write or say something powerful enough to change history, to "save the republic with a pick-up line." It's not a new idea; Milton and Ovid lean on it heavily in their work, and it's all over Shakespeare's famous sonnet sequence. "Not marble nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme." The notion that we should be able to write, say, or create something that will make a difference, something that will last, is an idea that lives in every person, I think. Even though we know we can't, we still feel compelled to make the attempt. It often ends in little more than a stream of profanity or equivalent embarrassment, but we still don't stop trying.

## First Words

## Characters

CAPTAIN JASON TYLER HOLMES: a sentimental mess.

FIRST OFFICER MARCUS ANTHONY DANIELS: trying his best.

ASTRONAUT ANDREA JACKSON: deeply entertained by all of this.

## Scene

*Open on the control room of a spacecraft. Captain Jason HOLMES is sitting at a table surrounded by computers, screens, and sci-fi gadgetry. He has a pad of paper, and he is furiously writing, rewriting, and crossing-out.*

*Enter Marcus DANIELS, holding a clipboard and looking very official.*

DANIELS: So today's the day, huh? You're already set up?

HOLMES (*hastily attempting to hide what he's been working on, with a note of panic in his voice*): Nothing! I mean, yes, DANIELS. I'm waiting at my station to start the landing procedure. We touch down in ten minutes, why wouldn't I already be set up?

DANIELS: What's going on?

HOLMES: Nothing! Everything is great. We're about to land on an alien planet and make history; I'm fulfilling my childhood dreams!

DANIELS: (*reprovingly, like a mother saying their child's full name when the kid is in trouble*)  
Captain Jason Tyler HOLMES. I've been your second in command for ten years. Don't you think I can tell when you're lying to me?

HOLMES: Well, First Officer Marcus Anthony DANIELS, I can say your full name dramatically too. It doesn't change anything. Also, it's only been nine years.



DANIELS: What?

HOLMES: Remember? Johnson got space madness. You haven't been second for all ten years.

DANIELS: Oh well, close enough. I still know when you're giving me crap. We spend a full shift searching for you on the last day of our flight, and I find you hiding in the control room writing memoirs? Do you know how close we are to landing?

HOLMES: Yes, Marc. I know. I've been counting down the days since liftoff, just like you. And it's not a memoir.

DANIELS: What is it, Jason? Is it a love letter? A final will? If you have pre-landing jitters, nobody's going to fault you. Last time they sent anyone to B612, the whole craft exploded. It's okay to be scared.

HOLMES: (*affronted*) I'm not scared. It's. Um. It's (*inaudible muttering*)

DANIELS: What was that?

HOLMES: It's humanity's first words.

DANIELS: Oh my gosh, Jason, you don't mean to tell me...

HOLMES: Look. Neil Armstrong had a whole team of people whose only job was to script his first line when he landed on the moon. (*mockingly*) One small step for a man; one giant leap for mankind. They worked for months on that, you know! Strategizing exactly what Americans needed to hear and exactly what wording to use. They had a think tank, Marc! Just to tell him what humanity's first words on the moon should be!

DANIELS: They offered you that!

HOLMES: I know.

DANIELS: They had a think tank ready and you told them you wanted to do it yourself. You told them you already knew what you'd say.

HOLMES: I know.

DANIELS: You told us it was a secret! That you'd worked it out years ago!

HOLMES: I mean, I thought I would, but it just didn't work out.

DANIELS: Jason, what on earth is wrong with you?

HOLMES: Well, I mean. Off earth...

DANIELS: Oh my gosh. We start our descent in ten minutes. There is no time for puns.

HOLMES: There is always time for puns, Marc.

DANIELS: What are you going to do?

HOLMES: Well, it's not long until we enter the atmosphere. So until then, I'm going to try to come up with something.

DANIELS: Okay. I'll go grab JACKSON from the nursery. We'll help you think of something.

HOLMES: Thanks, Marc.

DANIELS: *(muttering)* How you made it through your dissertation I will never know... *(exits)*

HOLMES: Okay. Think, Jason. You can do this. You just need one good sentence. One good, soul-shattering, humanity-affirming sentence that justifies the discovery and exploration of new worlds. You've had ten years, and it's time now. You're going to put your pen on this piece of paper and write the best thing you've ever written.

*HOLMES very deliberately puts pen to paper, scribbles something, and then holds the pad up triumphantly. He squints for a moment at the page.*

HOLMES: On this new planet, as all new planets, we approach our inevitable deaths at high velocity. *(beat)* Okay, that didn't work. All right. Okay. Something else. Something about the beauty of the universe, the joy of discovery, the tenacity of the human species. *(Picks up a pen again, stares hard at the paper.)* Ah, I give up.

*Enter DANIELS and JACKSON. DANIELS seems deeply concerned, but JACKSON's uproarious laugh precedes her onstage.*

JACKSON: You really had ten years to write one sentence, HOLMES? And you still didn't do it?

We start descent in less than ten minutes!

HOLMES: Yes. That is the situation.

JACKSON: Oh my gosh, this is just like what happened with the first Pluto landing!

HOLMES: What happened with the Pluto landing?

JACKSON: The guy that landed just made an internet poll. Humanity's first words on Pluto were

"here I am, on this planet! It's definitely still a planet, no matter what Neil Degrasse Tyson says!" The astrophysicists nearly had his head.

DANIELS: Her name was Marissa Carlson, and she was a hero.

JACKSON: Anyway. The first person to leave earth's solar system was a guy named Chet

Williams. He just said the same cuss word over and over a whole bunch of times, and then he passed out. He's my personal hero. It looks like you're heading the same way, Captain.

HOLMES: Andrea, are you actually going to do anything helpful, are you going to stand here and make fun of me?

JACKSON: Well, you're just so easy to make fun of.

DANIELS: Okay, so tell us what you have so far.

*HOLMES passes them the notepad he's been jotting on. JACKSON and DANIELS read silently for a few seconds. Both look back at HOLMES, disgusted and vaguely horrified.*

JACKSON: Oh man.

DANIELS: Is this really all you have? You just need one sentence. One good sentence.

*HOLMES gets up and starts pacing* No, but it has to be a great sentence! So many of the people back on earth are going to be watching this. My wife is going to be watching this. I haven't seen her in ten years, Andrea. My stupid brother who thinks he's so much better than me... *(beat)* It has to be perfect.

DANIELS: Which is why you should have let a committee help you write it before we left earth.

HOLMES: I didn't think I'd need help.

JACKSON: Why would you think that? Last week you panicked because you couldn't find your car keys. We had to remind you that you're on a spaceship.

HOLMES: Okay, well, in my defense, I did think ten years would be enough. I thought space would make me contemplative and wise.

DANIELS: Last year you turned off the artificial gravity to see if you could propel yourself through space by farting.

HOLMES: Science is about experimentation, Marcus. I mean, sure, it's theoretically unlikely, but you never really know...

DANIELS: But sometimes you do know.

JACKSON: Hey, it totally could have worked.

DANIELS: You know, how about you just embarrass all of us. That would be a great opening line for humanity's arrival on an alien planet. "You never know if we can propel ourselves through farts..."

HOLMES: If we're done attacking me, can you please help?

JACKSON *(chuckling again)*: I honestly think you might be beyond help, Jason.

DANIELS: Okay, no. Let's think about this. Do you have any idea of a sort of general sentiment?

HOLMES: I don't know. Maybe I want to talk about when I was a kid. I grew up in Woodlawn, in Chicago. My parents used to take me to Adler Planetarium, and they had this ancient star projector. It was this huge iron sphere, hundreds or thousands of years old. You got in a cart and went inside, and light shone in through pinpricks that made up stars and constellations. I used to go over and over again. There were these giant meteorites you could touch, and I just knew that one day I'd see these things with my own eyes. One day, I'd be up there.

DANIELS: And you're up here now.

HOLMES: I am.

DANIELS: What would you want to tell those kids that are still in Chicago?

HOLMES (*speaking quickly and with an air of barely-repressed rage*): I'd tell them we've destroyed our home planet with oil and waste and that we should be ashamed of ourselves. I'd tell them the stars are all we have left.

DANIELS: Okay, yes. But you can't say that.

HOLMES: Then what am I supposed to say? Stay in school; don't do drugs?

JACKSON: Oh, no. You want them to actually listen to you.

HOLMES: I can't just talk to the kids in Chicago. I have to talk to the kids in Zimbabwe and the adults in Canada and the teenagers in Russia.

DANIELS: Look. You don't have to do that. You can't save the republic with a pick-up line.

HOLMES: And why not?

DANIELS: Because you procrastinated for a decade of space flight instead!

HOLMES: Okay, fair.

JACKSON: Um, guys, have either of you checked the time? Or, you know. Our distance from B612?

HOLMES: No, but... *(beat)* Oh. Okay, yes. Dang it. Okay. Man your stations. We touch down soon. Where's Martinez?

JACKSON: Engine room.

HOLMES: And Sanders?

DANIELS: She's at the helm.

HOLMES: Right. *(as action-hero-level dramatic as possible)* Let's do this, then.

*JACKSON snorts.*

JACKSON: You're not an action hero, captain.

HOLMES: Hero to space enthusiasts everywhere?

DANIELS: Absolutely not.

HOLMES: Never mind. JACKSON, I need you at your station with Martinez. DANIELS, You're here with me. Are you ready?

*Exit JACKSON*

DANIELS: I'm ready.

*Both go straight to their computers; there's frantic typing and button-pressing.*

HOLMES: You're monitoring temperature?

DANIELS: Yes. Sanders has trajectory.

HOLMES: Then I've got height.

*Beat. Both stare intently at their respective screens.*

HOLMES: We've entered the atmosphere.

DANIELS: Pressure check?

HOLMES: We're within target range.

DANIELS: Deploying parachute, then.

HOLMES: What about the rocket thrusters?

JACKSON (*over the speakers*): Rocket thrusters are a-go.

HOLMES: Preparing for landing. Touch down in ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three,  
two...

JACKSON (*over the loudspeaker*): Impact.

*HOLMES throws a few more switches, types a few last things, and then turns to DANIELS with a huge grin.*

HOLMES: We did it, Marc!

*They hug.*

*JACKSON enters, wearing a space suit.*

JACKSON: We did it, you guys. Better suit up, captain; it's time to make history.

HOLMES: Yes. Yes, of course! I'll get Martinez to help. *He jaunts his way offstage.*

JACKSON: How long do you think it'll be before he remembers he still doesn't know what he's  
saying?

DANIELS: I give it about thirty seconds.

HOLMES (*from offstage*): Damn it!

JACKSON: Oh, looks like he got it.

DANIELS: What do you think he's going to do?

JACKSON: Stream of profanity. No question.

DANIELS: Should we do something?

JACKSON: What is there to do?

DANIELS: Come up with something for him, maybe?

JACKSON: We could just have him say something really sappy.

DANIELS: Better than nothing, I suppose.

*HOLMES enters, fully equipped in his spacesuit.*

HOLMES: It's time.

JACKSON: What are you going to say?

HOLMES: I don't know.

DANIELS: Listen. Just say something sappy. Dedicate the landing to your wife or something. It'll work.

HOLMES: I can't do that; it'd be selfish.

JACKSON: Selfish?

HOLMES: Yeah, selfish. We're on an alien planet, and it took centuries of human innovation to get us here. I love my family more than I love life, but I can't make this about us.

DANIELS: Wait. Human innovation. Say more about that.

HOLMES: Well, that's what we do, isn't it? That's what we've always done. That's humanity, right? Longer than recorded time. Before we even knew what the stars were. Before anything, we were pushing. We were striving to get better. We were striving to go further. Nothing ever kept us down for long, not dictators or gravity or plagues or ice ages. Not even when we destroyed our own atmosphere. Remember, there was a fiery explosion last time we sent a mission to this planet. Everybody died. But here we are, going again.

JACKSON: We always go again.



HOLMES: Exactly. That's the spirit that got us here. Curiosity and sacrifice and drive and tenacity. And we made it. *(beat)* We made it.

DANIELS: And?

HOLMES: And we'll always keep pushing.

DANIELS *(quietly)*: Okay, you're almost there. Take us home.

HOLMES: What was it Newton said? We stand on the shoulders of giants? We made it here with the courage and sacrifice and research of every human who came before us, and now we're here. And we'll go to the next place, and the place beyond. We'll never stop pushing.

*(beat)*

JACKSON *(shrugging)*: It'll do.

HOLMES: All right. Let's go.

*(lights down.)*

*(lights come back up)*

*Captain HOLMES strides dramatically onto a deserted stage with a flag in one hand. Giant steps, like a proper astronaut. He reaches center stage and turns to face the audience.*

HOLMES: We stand on the shoulders of giants.

*He goes to plant the flag but trips over it instead. He falls face-first onto the ground.*

HOLMES: Shit! God damn it!

JACKSON *(from offstage)*: Heh. Told you.

*Scene*

## *Stage Play*

This play is my love letter to the theatre. It's really as simple as that.

When I told Amy Lytle, my friend from the theatre honor society<sup>20</sup>, that I wanted to write a ten-minute play about stage workers, she didn't ask any questions. She just told me to do it. When I told her how long it had been since I was backstage, she leapt to my rescue immediately. At the time, she was the stage manager for a production of *Charlotte's Web* in Verser Theatre, so she pulled the requisite strings to get me into the booth<sup>21</sup> with her for a dress rehearsal. I followed her around with my pen and notepad, and by the end of the night I had five pages of hastily-scrawled dialogue. I set to work immediately

After I finished the play, I hated the way it ended. It felt abrupt to me, and it made the story feel a little bit pointless. Everything else, as far as I was concerned, was perfect. Then, when "Stage Play" was performed at 2019 All Night Theatre, I discovered that I was, once again, wrong about my own work.

The ending was perfect. It suited the light, comedic mood in exactly the way I would have intended, and it got an audience reaction I would not have dared hope for. The middle of the play, however, the part I wrote when I was in the booth with Amy, was shockingly awkward. It was too obviously just me talking to the audience about how much I love theatre, and it made no sense in the flow of the story. I learned again, for the thousandth time, that no play can really be finished until after it's been performed.

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<sup>20</sup> Alpha Psi Omega, of which I am a proud member

<sup>21</sup> The "booth" is a little place in the back of the theatre from which crew members control light boards and sound cues. It's often set high in the wall behind the audience, so the operators can see the performance through the window.

## Stage Play

Characters:

ALEX, the stage manager

SAMMY, the sound guy

AARON, an actor

The GHOST

*Scene*

*Stage is completely bare save for a ghost light. Enter ALEX and SAMMY from stage left.*

ALEX: Thanks for coming with me; I know it's early.

SAMMY: No sweat, I'm happy to help. Although I'm not too sure what you need me here for?

ALEX: Oh, I just don't like to be here by myself. I think I forgot my wallet in here, but you know.

The ghost.

SAMMY: Ah, yes. The ghost.

ALEX: He's real!

SAMMY: Of course.

ALEX: Come on. You've heard the noises. You know the stories.

SAMMY: They're just stories, ALEX.

ALEX: You spend five minutes trying to work that light board and tell me it's not haunted... wait

a second.

SAMMY: What?

ALEX: Something is wrong.

SAMMY: What do you mean? *(Turns a slow circle and stares around himself)* Oh.

ALEX: Um... SAMMY?

SAMMY: Yeah?

ALEX: Where did the set go?

SAMMY: That's... that's a good question.

ALEX: It was here last night. I know it was. (Walks to an area of the stage). This was the rocketship. Walks to another part of the stage. The house was here. Another area. And here was the fence. Another area. And this was the squirrel hutch.

SAMMY: Maybe the stuff just got moved? Let's look backstage.

ALEX: Right. Yes.

*Both head toward stage right to exit but stop as they see AARON entering stage right.*

ALEX: Oh, hey, AARON.

AARON: Hey, do you know what's going on?

SAMMY: Well, the set is gone...

AARON: The set? That's what you're worried about?

ALEX: What else is there?

AARON: The people, ALEX.

ALEX: There's no reason for anyone to be here yet; it's another hour before call time.

AARON: You might want to check your watch again.

SAMMY: Oh shit, she's right.

ALEX: *(checking her watch)* but how....

SAMMY: Maybe daylight savings time? Or a broken watch?

AARON: It doesn't matter how it happened, SAMMY. The point is that the show starts in ten minutes and all the actors and crew and set are missing.

SAMMY: But that doesn't even make sense.

ALEX (*with an air of sudden realization*): Oh, it makes perfect sense.

AARON: What do you mean?

ALEX: It's the ghost.

AARON: You're not being serious.

ALEX: What else could it be? We have ten minutes before the show starts. There's no director, no house manager, no ushers, no actors, no musicians. No set. Nothing. There's supposed to be an audience out there right now. Where is it, SAMMY?

SAMMY: I don't know, but that doesn't necessarily mean that...

ALEX: Can you think of a single other reason this theatre would be empty right now?

SAMMY: I mean, no, but...

ALEX: Exactly. Which means that for all of them to not be here, it must be something supernatural.

AARON: Oh no.

ALEX: What?

AARON: Supernatural.

SAMMY: ...Yes?

AARON: It's me.

ALEX: Explain.

AARON: It's me. I get... nervous. I know it's childish and amateur, but sometimes I still can't help it and...

SAMMY: This is the biggest role you've ever had, isn't it?

AARON: Yeah, kind of.

SAMMY: You were scared.

AARON: Yeah.

SAMMY: So you prayed for a miracle.

AARON: I prayed that something would keep me from having to perform.

SAMMY: Well, that would be it, then.

AARON: I should have stayed backstage. It's safer there.

ALEX: I mean, you should do whatever makes you happiest, but... Yeah, it's way more fun back there.

AARON: Really?

SAMMY: I mean, yeah. I know the point of theatre is to transport people, but like, it really is like a whole different world up there. Those rickety old chairs, that giant light board... I still have no idea how that thing works...

AARON: I thought that was your job.

SAMMY: No, I'm on sound. You know we still have a VHS player up here?

AARON: No, I've never been in the booth.

ALEX: You actors have the boring job, you know.

AARON: Nah, we have fun too.

ALEX: You're not up there with the dog-eared scripts, manipulating the very atmosphere.

SAMMY: Well, neither are we, right now.

ALEX: Yes, but that's because of the ghost.

AARON: There's not a ghost.

SAMMY: This is an act of God, ALEX.

ALEX: Okay, this is absurd.

SAMMY: More absurd than a ghost?

ALEX: Yes! People get haunted all the time, but miracles haven't happened since the new testament!

SAMMY: Okay. Let's take a step back and try to solve this. ALEX, do you want to go look around? See if we can find the set pieces anywhere? AARON, you take out your phone and call as many people as you can. Ask them where the hell they are.

AARON: All right.

ALEX: Okay.

*Exit SAMMY stage left and ALEX stage right.*

*AARON pulls out their phone and dials frantically.*

AARON: Disconnected? That shouldn't...

*Dials a different number*

Voice From Offstage: *(with the most ridiculous accent possible)*: Hello?

AARON: Um. Josh?

Voice From Offstage: *(Still using the accent)* No, but I'm glad you called. I'm actually a Nigerian prince, and...

AARON: Nope.

*AARON dials another number. She is answered by a strange, distorted version of SAMMY's voice.*

SAMMY *(from offstage)*: Hello?

AARON: Wait. SAMMY? I was trying to call Claire...

SAMMY: there is no clarity here....

AARON: I guess I hit the wrong button. Did you guys find the set? I'm not having any luck.

SAMMY: No luck... No...

AARON: What's going on, SAMMY?

SAMMY: I found the audience.

AARON: Wait, what?

SAMMY: Yes. I will join them...

*Dial tone. AARON stares at her phone in disbelief and returns it to her pocket. She looks around, vaguely helpless.*

*Enter ALEX.*

ALEX: Hey, have you seen SAMMY?

AARON: What do you mean? I thought he was with you?

ALEX: I don't know, he's just gone.

AARON: Okay. All right. Well. That's... Not great.

ALEX: I think we need to revisit the idea of the ghost.

AARON: Oh, come on. This theatre is not haunted. Theatres are not haunted.

ALEX: But it obviously is.

AARON: ALEX, I talked to SAMMY. On the phone just now. He sounded *(beat)* weird.

ALEX: What do you mean?

AARON: It's like he's in another dimension, almost? He said he found the audience.

ALEX: But that doesn't make sense. There's no one here.

AARON: Is there?

ALEX: I mean, do you see anyone out there? *(gestures toward the audience)*

*AARON steps over to the front row and pats an audience member on the head.*

AARON: Okay, yeah, there's an audience.

ALEX: But there's clearly not. Obviously *(gesturing toward audience)* no one is out there.



*AARON pats audience member on the head again.*

AARON: But I can feel them.

ALEX: This doesn't make sense, AARON.

*ALEX comes to the front row and pats another audience member on the head. Her eyes widen with fear and she steps away quickly.*

ALEX: Well, shit.

AARON: *(staring suspiciously into an audience member's eyes)* I'm guessing there's a whole audience here; we just can't see them for some reason.

ALEX: So the audience, and the set, and the cast,

AARON: And the crew, and SAMMY.

ALEX: All of them...

AARON: They've all been trapped in an alternate dimension.

ALEX: Okay, but they can't have been.

AARON: Well I mean, it clearly isn't a ghost, and I can't think of anything else...

GHOST *(from offstage)*: You know, personally, I thought the GHOST was an excellent theory, myself... Rather mischievous, that GHOST... Handsome too...

*AARON now is truly terrified, but ALEX is ecstatic. Both look around wildly, as if to locate the source of the noise.*

AARON: Cool. Rad. Awesome. All right. We're going to die. Good. Fun. That's fine.

*Enter GHOST*

GHOST: There is no need to fear. *(beat)* Well, there is. But not from me.

ALEX: Can we just take a moment to acknowledge the fact that I was right?

AARON: Is that really what's important right now?

ALEX: Well, no, but still. I told you we had a GHOST, and here he is! In the flesh! *(beat)* I mean, not in the flesh, but...

GHOST *(affronted)* We prefer the term specter, actually.

AARON: Wow, you offended the GHOST.

GHOST: Specter.

AARON: Yes, right. Specter.

ALEX: What's going on, Mr. Specter?

GHOST: All these problems will solve themselves if AARON just learns to believe in herself.

AARON: Really?

GHOST: No, of course not. We're being besieged by an ancient evil.

ALEX: What kind of ancient evil?

GHOST: It's sort of hard to explain, but it's like this: have you seen *Breaking Bad*?

AARON: No.

GHOST: Oh. Well, never mind then. Here's what we have to do...

*THE GHOST conspires quietly with the other two for a moment. Eventually the lights go out.*

*When the lights come back up, ALEX and SAMMY are sitting at a table on the far corner of downstage right. The table should be set up to feel like it's the theatre's booth.*

ALEX: So there we are, and we've just figured out that there's this alternate dimension, and the

GHOST teams up with us to tell us how to solve it, and I think he said we had to get

AARON to believe in herself, but that's all I can remember. I think I woke up after that.

SAMMY: Man, what a wild dream.

ALEX: Yeah, we never did find you. I think you might have died.

SAMMY: You know, I bet AARON really is nervous. She's never had a role like this before.

ALEX: I'm sure she is. But the theatre GHOST has her back, I think.

SAMMY: You still believe in the GHOST?

ALEX: Of course I do.

*Beat. ALEX listens intently to her headset for a moment and then nods in affirmative.*

ALEX: It's time.

*ALEX hits a button and the lights dim. SAMMY hits another button and soft music plays. All lights are out save for a single bulb bent over the ALEX's script. She hunches like another lamp, counting off the beats on her fingers.*

ALEX: 45. Go. 50. Go. 68. Go. *(beat)* Sound off.

*AARON steps into center stage. Fear flits across their face, just for a moment, before AARON tamps it down. She takes one more step forward and stands straight with a confident resolve. She speaks as dramatically as possible. The GHOST peeks out from behind a curtain, watching.*

AARON: It's always been my dream to escape my wicked orphanage, run away, and join a circus the way they do in the old stories. The problem with that is that I do not live in an orphanage. Circuses aren't like they used to be either, and you can't run away from home to become a trapeze artist anymore. This is the way the world changes; Just because you grow up in a healthy home and the circus industry has been professionalized, just because you do not know how to ride horses or swing from ropes or tame elephants, your potential for adventure is dashed to pieces before you even begin. You can't jump on trains and hitch rides like the hobos used to do, you can't strike out for gold in the unexplored territories, and piracy is generally frowned upon. *(beat)* What remains for someone like me?

ALEX: She's doing it.

SAMMY: I knew she could.

*The GHOST gives a thumbs-up.*

ALEX: Lights out.

*Lights out.*

*Scene*

### *Thirteenth Night: Malvolio's Revenge*

William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* features a number of his most common tropes. Separated twins, cross-dressing, puns, fools, sexual innuendo, and general confusion all make their way into the action of the story. The comedy also revolves heavily around another of Shakespeare's favorite devices: a prank. While Sebastian and Viola contend with Olivia and Duke Orsino in the main plot, the secondary plot is more sinister. The fool, Feste, recruits several minor characters to help him play a "prank" on the steward, Malvolio.

Malvolio hasn't really done anything wrong. He is a strict manager of the household, and he stops Feste and his friends from rabbleroxing quite as much as they'd like, but he really only does his job. This is, as far as Feste and his friends are concerned, a grievous offense. They forge a letter from Olivia and leave it out for Malvolio to find, and Malvolio follows the instructions the letter gives. This causes everyone in the household to think he has gone insane, so Feste and his accomplices are allowed to lock Malvolio in a small, dark room. They torment him there for a while, and Feste takes the guise of a priest to try to convince Malvolio that he has, in fact, lost his mind.

When Malvolio is finally able to get a letter of explanation to Olivia, she has him released. He returns onstage in time for the final scene, where the main plot is wrapping up nicely. Sebastian and Olivia are married, Duke Orsino and Viola will be married soon, and everyone is getting ready to live happily ever after. Malvolio arrives, confronts Feste, and explains to the assembled ensemble what happened. Olivia asks Feste why he was so cruel, and he says little aside from the fact that he hates Malvolio with a passion. Malvolio exits, vowing revenge, and that is the last the audience ever hears of him.

I cannot help but feel sorry for Malvolio. He is an honorable man (if perhaps a bit uppity), and there is no justification for treating him this way, especially when he's only trying to do his job. I joked in Shakespeare class<sup>22</sup> that there should be a sequel called "Thirteenth Night," in which Malvolio could seek his revenge. After that, it was obvious that I needed to write "Thirteenth Night: Malvolio's Revenge."

I had to follow Shakespeare's lead and put everything in blank verse, which presented an interesting challenge, because pushing a story forward is a lot more difficult when I'm also trying to preserve rhythm. Every line becomes an exercise in following the plot arc diagram. This issue was present in "In Time of War" as well, but blank verse is even less intuitive to me than tetrameter couplets are.

The other primary challenge was the darkness of the subject matter. I set out to write play with the certain knowledge that at least one character would not make it to the end. I never have been a George R.R. Martin kind of writer, but I gave it my best shot anyway. I think it is important to try to be versatile, which is another reason I was willing to write plays in both prose and verse. Most of my other plays are pretty lighthearted or at least have comedic tension relief, but this play doesn't have that. It's probably the darkest thing I have ever written, but it's what Malvolio deserves.

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<sup>22</sup> The Shakespeare survey course, taught by Dr. Curlin

## Thirteenth Night: Malvolio's Revenge

Characters:

MALVOLIO

FESTE

CHORUS

OLIVIA

## Prologue

*Enter CHORUS.*

CHORUS: In Shakespeare's day, the way it sometimes worked

Was that the show would start with just some guy.

He'd wander to the stage, and he would speak

Of ages past, of stories and of songs.

He'd give you all the setup for the play,

The scenery and context and the plot.

He'd melt away somewhere into the wings,

And he'd return around act two or three.

The CHORUS he was called, and here I am

To tell you of the evil, awful joke

That led to the insanity of good

MALVOLIO, a blameless courtesan.

When two knights and a scheming, singing fool

Decided they disliked MALVOLIO,

They played a prank that drove him nearly mad.

On that twelfth night, the lady asked the fool  
Why he would dare do such an evil thing.  
“Because I hate him,” was the fool’s reply.  
But soon he will regret that hate. And die.

*Exit CHORUS.*

I.

*Enter MALVOLIO*

MALVOLIO: It’s been a year since those accursed men  
Destroyed my life in one destructive stroke.  
They hid a letter on my path: a ruse  
To make me think OLIVIA was mine.  
I followed the instructions that they gave,  
Believing they were orders from her hand,  
And when the castle thought I’d lost my mind  
They trapped me in a dark and empty room.  
And did their best to drive me quite insane.  
But now this fool will know what he has done.  
I look to my revenge.

*Enter FESTE*

MALVOLIO: Ah, hello!

FESTE: MALVOLIO, I’m glad you’re looking well.

MALVOLIO: And you, FESTE. My fondest greetings, friend.

FESTE: I’m also glad you’re not still mad at me



About.. Ahem... what happened in the past.

MALVOLIO: *(aside)* Oh my dear fool, if fool you are indeed,

I do suspect you know what's soon to come.

Perhaps you're half prepared to meet your fate,

To pay for what you did,

FESTE: I'm sorry, what?

You're mumbling, I think. What did you say?

MALVOLIO: Oh, nothing, none at all. I have to go.

I have a letter that I need to write.

*Exit MALVOLIO, chuckling darkly.*

FESTE: I'd better watch my back. He's acting strange.

*Enter the Lady OLIVIA*

OLIVIA: MALVOLIO's been acting rather odd

These last few days. I hope you haven't been

Returning to your tricks and petty schemes.

FESTE: Oh no, my lady, only here to fool

And then, perhaps, to earn a bit of coin.

MALVOLIO is safe from me, I swear,

So let me entertain the court again.

OLIVIA: I had the strangest dream the other night,

That you returned into this castle's keep.

MALVOLIO was there as well, and, well,

The violence might have made me faint were not

I fast asleep already in my bed.

I wonder if you shouldn't leave this place.

FESTE: My dearest lady, worry not for me;

My jokes this time will barely hurt at all.

He'll be just fine, without an ounce of wrath

To spend on me or any in the court.

OLIVIA: You are a fool, but wiser underneath

Than many others seem to be aware.

I'll have Sebastian keep a watchful eye

Upon you both, ensuring nothing ill

Will fall upon the home I share with him.

## II.

*Open in the courtyard, where MALVOLIO is hiding behind a bush. There is a bench downstage, upon which rests a letter. Enter FESTE.*

FESTE: It seems that someone's left their mail in here

Though who that might have been, I cannot say.

To open someone else's mail would be

A crime according to our country's law.

Perhaps I should deliver it. And yet

I also sense an opportunity

To learn about another man's affairs,

Which always helps me in my tricks and pranks.

*(He opens the letter and reads it aloud.)*

This letter's just for you, OLIVIA,  
So, pray, don't let it fall into the hands  
Of that accursed fool who'd have me sent  
To bedlam, or, I fear, into the grave.  
I mean to have my full revenge at last  
Although it may be at an awful cost.  
If you be willing to assist me here,  
Which I believe you should, since as you know,  
It was your uncle and his stupid friend  
Who helped him bring against me such offense,  
I ask you only, keep him on the grounds  
So I have time to work my plan in full.

*(He carefully sets the letter back down.)*

I can't believe it! Truly I cannot,  
That he would try to take revenge on me.  
It was a harmless prank, and anyway  
The lady wouldn't work against a man  
As handsome and as loveable as me.  
I'd better get myself away from here  
In case MALVOLIO has got a scheme  
To trick me as I tricked him once before  
I think the wisest choice would be to go  
Along to Duke Orsino's stately home.

Until MALVOLIO's had time to calm  
Himself enough to quit his little grudge.

*Exit FESTE*

MALVOLIO: (*emerging from hiding*) I can't believe he fell for that so fast!  
I had prepared another dozen tricks  
With help from other fools that live downtown.  
But now that that's been done, I guess I'm off  
To Duke Orsino's, so that I can start  
Preparing things for when the fool arrives.  
I'll wager that he won't like his surprise.

*Exit MALVOLIO*

### III.

*Open on the courtyard scene again, with MALVOLIO in his hiding place. Enter CHORUS*

CHORUS: Our gentle predecessor, William S,  
Believed a play could jump through maps and dates.  
The stage can hold the world enough and time,  
And your imagination fills the gaps.  
So know, dear friends, that in the time between  
The next scene and the one that came before,  
Is afternoon and evening, and the place  
Is Duke Orsino's house, a ways away.  
MALVOLIO arrived there with a gift  
Of wine, perhaps some spirits or the like,

And asked the Duke to celebrate a bit  
Since 'twas a year ago that he was wed.  
When everyone partook, and all were safe  
And sleeping deeply in their comfy beds,  
MALVOLIO was hiding far upstage  
And waiting till he could unleash his rage.

*As CHORUS moves to exit, stage left, FESTE enters from stage left. They bump into each other.*

FESTE: oh dear, forgive me sir. Are you alright?

CHORUS: I'm fine, but do not let me keep you here.

You have a fate to meet quite soon.

FESTE:                 Wait, what?

CHORUS: Oh, nothing, nothing. But I'd better go;

I think they've need of me somewhere backstage.

*CHORUS exits rapidly*

FESTE: I do suppose I'm safe in here for now,

Because I'm far away from there, which means

MALVOLIO is far and any tricks

He has prepared can never reach me here.

But why on earth is no one else about?

I thought this time of night there'd be a squad:

If not the duke, then servicemen at least.

Perhaps I ought to get myself away

And go somewhere MALVOLIO can't guess.

*MALVOLIO emerges from hiding.*

MALVOLIO: You know, that is one way of doing things,

Although I would suggest another path.

Were you to leave, I'd find you once again

Because I'll never tire 'till you're caught.

But if you stay, I'll sit, we'll have a talk,

And then perhaps you'll find a better fate.

FESTE: I'd love to, don't you know, I really would,

And yet alas because it's getting late

I think it's for the best if I depart.

We'll have a talk sometime, perhaps some day

When light is bright and people are around.

But here and in the dark? I'm tired, sir,

And really think I ought to go and rest.

MALVOLIO: (*drawing a knife*) I'll take you to your rest eternally.

FESTE: On second thought, I'll stay. Let's have a talk!

MALVOLIO: I thought you might see reason if I gave

A bit of motivation. So, my friend,

Perhaps you can recall a year ago

When you decided it would be alright

To ruin my whole life.

FESTE:                   Okay, but look...

MALVOLIO: no FESTE, you should look! You evil man,

Here's how this goes: apologize or die.

FESTE: (*pulling a knife of his own*) I should have left you there inside that cell

Until you rotted; God, I hate you so.

You should have known that I'd see through your ruse.

I came prepared. There's poison on this knife.

MALVOLIO: You'll be destroyed, and then I'll turn my gaze

Unto your friends, Sir Toby and the Knight.

I'll take revenge upon you all, and soon.

FESTE: I'll stop you from these things; I swear it, sir.

Though I may be a fool, I'll see you bleed.

So I'd advise you now to drop the knife.

MALVOLIO: nope. (*He stabs FESTE, and exits*)

FESTE: well, this did not turn out the way I planned. (*Dies*)

*OLIVIA enters.*

OLIVIA: Orsino and Viola, where'd you go?

Sebastian thought a visit would be nice,

So here we are, and yet I haven't found

A single soul. Sebastian's searching now,

But I don't ... Oh my god, what happened here?

Dear FESTE lying dead? MALVOLIO!

He must have found a way to wreak revenge.

My poor dear fool, you took your joke too far,

And now it would appear you paid the price.

I'll go and tell your friends you dug your grave.

Perhaps they can avoid the mess you made.

*Exit.*



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