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OBSESSIVE HOPE

by

Richard Oehrlein

An Honors Capstone

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Honors Certificate

to

The Honors College

of

The University of Alabama in Huntsville

April 26, 2024

Honors Capstone Project Director: Dr. Angela Balla

_Richard Oehrlein_____ April 26, 2024_____

Student Date

Project Director (signature) Date

Department Chair (signature) Date

Honors College Dean (signature) Date

Honors College
Frank Franz Hall
+1 (256) 824-6450 (voice)
+1 (256) 824-7339 (fax)
honors@uah.edu

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___Richard Oehrlein_____

Student Name (printed)

___Richard Oehrlein_____

Student Signature

___April 26, 2024_____

Date

Richard Oehrlein

HON 499

Dr. Angela Balla

26 April 2024

Obsessive Hope

Characters in the play:

ALEX: The main character. He owns a small grocery store.

REMY: Alex's friend.

MIKE: The owner of the Omega Bank branch.

LEA: A journalist.

MOM: Alex's mother.

ZLO: A successful businessman.

Act 1, Scene 1

[Alex is working behind the counter with a smile on his face and a graduation cap by the register.]

REMY. [Running into the store.] Please tell me you guys sell toothbrushes. I left mine at home five states away, and every other store has been closed.

ALEX. Ah, a new customer. I haven't seen you here before. Yeah, toothbrushes are in aisle six, across from the supplements and next to the toothpaste. I'm Alex, by the way. What's your name?

REMY. Hi Alex, I'm Remy. Aisle six, you say? Cool. [He goes to grab the toothbrush.]

ALEX. So, where are you from?

REMY. I'm from Delaware.

ALEX. Cool. What brings you here to this city?

REMY. I'm here to meet up with a few family friends. They reached out, saying they had some news they wanted to share with me.

ALEX. Who are they? I know everyone here and can tell you what their favorite snacks are. It might be worth grabbing a few.

REMY. Why are you so talkative?

ALEX. Well, I just graduated college, so I'm a bit more excited than normal. Plus the store's slowing down for the night, and I'm bored.

REMY. Good for you. Graduations always bring a tear to my eye, watching my students go on to do bigger and better things.

ALEX. Ah, a school teacher. Never would have thought it.

REMY. Yeah, neither did I. I do have a few questions about the city, though. Mind helping me out?

ALEX. Sure, what'cha got?

REMY. For starters, what's up with this Trouble Street? Seems a bit odd for a street name.

ALEX. Good old Trouble Street. A couple of decades ago, there were a lot of musicians here and they were all set up on Treble Street, like the clef. Over time, though, they moved out, and the name needed to be changed to reflect that. The problem was that people would keep calling it Treble, so they couldn't change it that much, and eventually settled on Trouble due to the decline of our music industry.

REMY. That... seems a bit odd. Thanks, though.

MOM. [Offstage.] Alex, we're closing in five minutes. Wrap it up!

ALEX. Well, sorry I can't stay and talk more. However, if you have any more questions, you can reach out to me at this number. Stay safe out there—this city has a real fire problem.

REMY. OK? Oh yeah, here's my number so you know it's not spam. Well, see you around, kid.

[Lights go out and Alex calls Remy.]

ALEX. Hey, Remy, are you busy?

REMY. I've got some time. I'm on my lunch break, though. What's up?

ALEX. I'm torn...

REMY. I'm going to need a bit more than that to help you. Unless you meant literally and need an ambulance.

ALEX. I have two career paths in front of me and I can't make up my mind. Do I stay here, working at the store? Or do I go out and do something new?

REMY. From what I've seen, you're doing a good job managing the store. I would stick with that if I were you.

ALEX. Thanks, Remy. Mom and Dad kept saying I shouldn't waste my life here, but I do like working here, so I wanted an outside opinion.

REMY. No problem. If you need anything else, feel free to call me.

[Click as a phone call ends. Lights turn back on. A Christmas tree is in the back left corner of the set. A calendar is on the back wall, where the audience can see it. It reads DECEMBER. Alex is at the register. A radio starts playing.]

RADIO. It's a cold one, folks. Bundle up and be safe out there due to the icy roads today.

[A few seconds later, a crash is heard and Alex uses the store phone to make a call.]

ALEX. [Crying.] Remy? It's Alex, there... there was a crash and my parents... didn't survive.

REMY. What? Deep breaths, Alex, deep breaths. [Alex is breathing slowly and deeply.] That's it. Now, what happened?

ALEX. There was this driver who ran a stop sign right into my parents' car. The funeral service is next weekend. At least I still have their recordings on this phone, so I have some way to remember their voices.

REMY. I'll see if I can get some time off on Thursday and Friday. We'll get through this, OK?

Act 1, Scene 2

[There is a calendar in the store, somewhere the audience can see it. The calendar is clean, signaling that today is the first day of the month Alex is working behind the counter, a car key by the register. Remy enters the store.]

REMY. Hi there. Do you have any Pop-Tarts left?

ALEX. Oh hey, Remy. Yeah, we should have some left in the back, but let me check. [Gets up and starts rummaging through some boxes.]

REMY. Thanks. How are you doing today?

ALEX. I decided to buy a new car last week; however, it wiped out most of my savings. It is a nice car, though, so I think it's worth it.

[Alex gets a call on the store phone sitting on the counter next to the register.]

ALEX. Hold on one second, Remy. [Answering.] Hello, this is Alex.

[Lights go on on the office set where Zlo is using a rotary phone.]

ZLO. Hi there, Alex. This is Maxwell Zlo. I am calling to discuss renewing your rent lease.

Please meet me at 42 Trouble Street tomorrow at 11:00 a.m.

[Hangs up, and the office set goes dark.]

ALEX. Great, just what I needed now, a higher rent.

REMY. How much does he raise it each time?

ALEX. He varies it, but usually it's around fifty to one hundred dollars each month. I have a bad feeling about this one. I can't explain why.

REMY. [Jokingly.] What, like a thousand-dollar increase?

ALEX. He's not that bad, but I'm willing to place a bet on it if you want to lose some money.

REMY. Well, since him raising it by a lot would be bad for you, I don't want to make it worse by having you do something for me, so if he raises it by [stops for a moment, as if pondering a good amount to say] at least five hundred, I'll buy you a consolation lottery ticket.

ALEX. You're on. If it is under a five-hundred-dollar increase, then I'll give you 5% off your next purchase. If it is five hundred or more, then you buy me a lottery ticket.

[They shake on it and Remy leaves the store.]

ALEX. Still, meeting with Zlo is never a fun time.

Act 1, Scene 3

[The calendar has a single X showing that one day has passed. Remy enters the store. Alex is behind the counter with a stack of papers on the counter.]

REMY. So, how'd it go?

ALEX. You were right. He screwed me over this month.

REMY. Wait, how?

[Lights fade in the store scene, and then Alex puts on a suit jacket and heads to the office scene.

As he enters, the lights turn on in the office scene.]

ZLO. Well, well, well, if it isn't my favorite tenant. Alex, good to see you. How were things this month?

ALEX. It's been business as usual. What do you want to talk about, Zlo?

ZLO. [Tossing a baleful glance through the window at Alex's car in the visitor parking space.]

Well, a little birdie told me about your new car. Congratulations are in order. My friends say it's a very expensive model.

ALEX. [Nervous.] What's your point?

ZLO. Well, I figured that if you can afford a great new car like that, then you can obviously afford an increase in your rent. I think bumping it up to ten thousand dollars this month would be reasonable.

ALEX. Are you insane? I can't afford that! I don't even make eight thousand dollars each month, let alone ten.

ZLO. Well, I think you can; therefore, your rent is set. Ten grand by the end of the month. Have a nice day, Alex.

[Lights fade in the office scene. Then Alex takes off the suit jacket and heads to the store scene, and when he enters the store scene, the lights turn on.]

REMY. Well, then... I never expected that.

ALEX. Obviously, neither did I.

REMY. So you have a month, right? How much do you have saved up?

ALEX. About a thousand dollars. I had more, but the new car used up most of it.

REMY. Well, what about selling the car?

ALEX. I just bought it. I'm not selling it immediately—that's just throwing money away.

Besides, we need a long-term solution.

REMY. Well, I owe you a lottery ticket. It isn't much, but it might pay out enough for this month, at least.

ALEX. Well, I need all the hope I can get. Do you know any way I could get a loan?

REMY. There's my friend Mike. He owns the local Omega Bank branch. Maybe he could help you out. He owes me a favor anyway.

ALEX. Cool. Wait, how did a bank branch owner come to owe you a favor? Aren't you a teacher?

REMY. You don't tell your life story to everyone you meet, and I have a few secrets I'd like to keep.

ALEX. Alright, fair enough. For that lottery ticket, since I'm picking, let's go with 14, 26, 27, 45, 54, and 10. There we go, the Lightning Hope Lottery, kinda auspicious, but whatever works.

[Sticks ticket in his pocket.] Well, I have a loan application to prepare for. Hope it goes better than the rest of my day.

REMY. Ha ha, yeah. It should. Mike's a good guy—he'll help.

Act 1, Scene 4

[The calendar in the back has three Xs showing that two days have passed. Alex is tossing his checkbook onto the counter. Remy enters the store.]

ALEX. Before you ask, I didn't get the loan. I'm not that mad about it because he did his best.

REMY. But how did it go wrong?

[Store lights go down. Alex puts on a suit jacket as he moves to the office set. The office lights come up. This time, Mike is in the chair behind the desk, dressed in a nice suit and tie.]

MIKE. Hello there, Alex. It's nice to meet you. I understand you want a loan.

ALEX. Yeah, I ran into a bit of trouble with my rent, and I need a way to pay it off.

MIKE. I can't say that's an uncommon issue in this city, but I'll need to ask you a few questions.

First of all, how much is your rent?

ALEX. It was recently raised to ten thousand dollars.

MIKE. OK, and how much do you want to borrow?

ALEX. Well, I should only need three thousand by the end of the month.

MIKE. That sounds much more reasonable than a ten-thousand-dollar loan. However, I don't think I can accept your application because it seems like there is no way for you to pay it off.

Your rent is ten thousand dollars per month, and you make about seven to eight thousand dollars per month, meaning you're probably going to need another loan next month. That isn't sustainable for you or for the bank. If you have any way to pay it off, however, we can work something out.

ALEX. You... you can't be serious. Please, is there anything I can do?

MIKE. I want to help you, but a second job might be your best bet.

ALEX. I can't take a second job! I run a convenience store full-time.

MIKE. Then there is nothing I can do for you. I'm sorry, Alex.

[At that, the lights go out on the office set. Alex returns to the store set.]

REMY. Well, I'm out of ideas. I understand where he's coming from, but still. Do you have any ideas, Alex?

ALEX. Eh, I have a whole month so I'm sure I'll figure something out.

REMY. [Slightly nervous.] OK...if you're sure.

[The lights go out.]

Act 2, Scene 1

[The calendar has twenty-three Xs to show there are seven days left in the month. The store shelves are about half empty.]

ALEX. It's been about three weeks since Zlo raised my rent. I just have to find some way to get four grand in a week. I don't know what I'm gonna do about this situation. I can't seem to get the money fast enough. I'm pretty desperate right now. The store's been with my family for generations. My grandfather opened it fifty years ago and it's stayed family-owned and operated the entire time. Losing ownership of it would ruin the last thing my parents and I truly shared.

REMY. Wow, that explains why you're so invested in keeping this place. I knew the store meant a lot to you, but I never realized how much.

[Enter Lea.]

LEA. Hey guys. What are you up to?

ALEX. Oh hey, Lea, I was just telling Remy about my store and its history.

LEA. I don't think I know all the history either. I remember you told me some of it five years ago when we met, but not the whole story.

ALEX. So my store, Wooten Wares, has been in operation since my grandfather opened it about fifty years ago. Dad grew up in the store and took over when grandpa retired. He and Mom ran the store for twenty years with me helping out for about two years. After... after they died, I took over and have run it the last five years. There's not much else to it, but it still means a lot to me. So I want to ensure I keep the store family-owned and operated, even if it's just me.

REMY. Where does Zlo come into the picture?

ALEX. Well, after the accident, I had to start paying rent instead of my parents. Zlo took advantage of my naiveté. He told me that one-month leases were preferable since we can adjust the rent based on real-time data. He implied this would make it more affordable in the long term than a simple twelve-month lease. I bought his rationale, and, well, rent went up every month no matter how the store did. And now, it's stupidly high.

REMY. How is he getting away with gouging you like this?

LEA. Probably because nobody else knows what's going on.

ALEX. What do you mean, Lea?

LEA. If more people knew what was going on, maybe that would pressure Zlo into backing off and lowering your rent to something more reasonable.

ALEX. That sounds like a good idea, but we would need to tell a lot of people at once; otherwise, Zlo might just ignore it.

REMY. Like an interview?

LEA. That could work, but there needs to be a story for my boss to approve the interview.

ALEX. I might have an idea for that. I think Mike—Remy’s bank manager friend—said something about high rents being a common issue in the city lately. We could do something to show people that they aren’t alone with this issue and use me as an example. Think about it: a small business owner whose livelihood is threatened due to rent. Now that’s a sob story.

LEA. OK. I’ll tell my boss about the plan, and see if we can get enough evidence for the story. Then I’ll recommend you as an interviewee.

ALEX. Thanks, Lea.

Act 2, Scene 2

[There are just six empty squares left on the calendar. The store has lost a few more products, bringing it to about 40% capacity.]

LEA. Well, I think we have the basics planned for the interview. My boss gave me the green light for the story, so we might be able to get it out in as few as three days.

ALEX. Thank you, Lea.

LEA. Well, see you tomorrow, Alex. We’ll go over the location tomorrow, and hopefully interview tomorrow.

ALEX. Well, see you, Lea.

[Lea leaves the set. Alex starts packing things up. A few seconds after Lea leaves, Zlo enters.]

ALEX. Can’t you read the sign? We’re closed.

ZLO. That’s no way to greet your landlord.

ALEX. Zlo? What are you doing here?

ZLO. I wanted to see how my favorite tenant is doing. Imagine my surprise when I saw you talking with that reporter.

ALEX. Lea is just a friend. She has nothing to do with my rent.

ZLO. Hey now, I never said she did, but thanks for confirming what my sources already told me. I know about the rent report you two are planning on releasing.

ALEX. Yeah, and are you scared? We're going to tell the whole state what you've done.

ZLO. I can't say I'm comforted by it, but it won't matter. I've spoken with her boss and we agreed that the report can wait a few more days. By then, I'll have your store and it won't matter what you do.

ALEX. Why do you want my store so much?

ZLO. You see...wait, no. Actually, I think it's better if any hypothetical motives stay mysterious because it gives you less to work with. Either way, I can see you are well aware of this fact, but you have six days to pay me, or I get the store.

ALEX. [Through his teeth.] Get out.

ZLO. OK then. I know when I'm not wanted. Have a nice night. [Zlo leaves.]

ALEX. [To himself.] What am I gonna do? I need more money fast. Wait, that gives me an idea. [Turns to the scratch-off cards behind him.] I have a whole bunch of these, so what's the harm in using just a few? I'm sure it will all work out.

Act 2, Scene 3

[A few more items are removed from the shelves, while another X has been added to the calendar. There are two piles of scratch cards on the counter: a large pile and a much smaller one. Alex is alone in the store.]

LEA. [Entering the store, dejected.] Hey, Alex. I've got some bad... [notices the pile.] What are you doing?

ALEX. [Like he's stating the obvious.] Trying to get the money for the store.

LEA. By gambling?

ALEX. I already paid for these, so technically I'm losing money not using them. These barely sell anyway.

LEA. How much have you won?

ALEX. [Looking at the small pile, moving his finger like he's adding things up.] About two hundred dollars.

LEA. And how many tickets have you used?

ALEX. [Looking at the larger pile.] About two hundred.

LEA. Alex, this isn't healthy. Plus, you got me off track. I have some bad news.

ALEX. Just what I needed, MORE BAD NEWS! What's up?

LEA. Well, apparently my boss wants more information on the story, which will push the broadcast back by at least another week. So we can't air it in time to actually help you.

ALEX. I figured that's what happened. Zlo stopped by last night. I think your boss' decision was his doing.

LEA. I tried talking to my boss to change his mind, and he refused to budge. He even said that if you lost the store, it would make for a better headline. The nerve!

ALEX. Yeah, well, that means these [gesturing to the cards around him] are my best bet, unless you have any other ideas. [Remy enters as Alex is talking.] Luckily, I'm getting pretty close. I'm only four hundred dollars away now.

REMY. Hey, guys, I have some bad news.

ALEX. Not you, too.

REMY. Wait, what did I miss?

ALEX. Well, the interview was delayed, so I'm relying on scratch cards to try and still have my store by the end of the week, and now there's whatever issue you have.

REMY. My news is sad, but not that bad. I'm leaving in a few days to go back home. My flight is in five days. I don't know what to say, but you're just four hundred away, right? I can give you the rest of the money. I don't have it on me, but I saw an ATM around the block.

ALEX. [Starting to break down in tears.] That would be a big help, Remy. Thank you. Thank you so much!

Act 3, Scene 1

[The store is empty; only fixtures like the register and shelves remain. Alex is alone. A radio is on in the background, playing some light music.]

ALEX. Damn it, Zlo! I told you I have nothing left. But no, since I was able to pay the rent, clearly, I can pay it again. Just ignore the fact I have basically nothing left to sell.

[Lea and Remy enter, but Alex doesn't notice them.]

ALEX. Never mind the fact I only got the money due to these stupid scratch cards. Never mind the fact I'm in a month-to-month lease that only ever increases. I have nothing left! Damn you, Zlo!

REMY. I have never seen you that angry at someone before. I take it that things didn't go too well?

ALEX. Of course not. Zlo argued that since I reached his rent of ten thousand dollars, I can clearly do it again.

REMY. How? You don't have anything to sell.

ALEX. I know that. I told him that, and you know what he said? He said I can figure something out. I already did the impossible once.

LEA. You're kidding.

ALEX. Wish I was. But nope. The store's gonna have to close soon.

[The radio stops playing music.]

RADIO. And now it's time to announce our winning lottery numbers!

ALEX. Oh right. Hey Remy, I still have that ticket you gave me. [Pulls out the lottery ticket.]

Maybe tonight I'll get lucky.

REMY. Maybe.

RADIO. Tonight's winning numbers are 14, 26, 27, 35, 54, and 10. Have a nice evening.

[The radio goes back to playing soft music.]

ALEX. Wait! Wait a second, guys! My ticket was very close to that. I had 14, 26, 27, 45, 54, and 10. That's gotta be worth a lot, right?

LEA. [Pulling out her phone to look it up.] I hope so. [After a few seconds.] It's worth fifty thousand dollars?!

ALEX. Wow, that's a lot right there! With that much money I can easily restock the store and cover rent for a few months. Just what I needed!

REMY. I'm happy for you, Alex! After everything you went through, it feels like a sign from above!

ALEX. I don't care how it works. It could be God, the devil, or Jim down the street who made this happen. The how doesn't matter, only that I'm saved.

[Remy turns off the radio.]

ALEX. Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to call my suppliers so I can get to restocking this place.

[In the heat of the moment, Alex gives Lea a hug.]

ALEX. See you tomorrow, Lea.

LEA. [A bit shocked.] See you tomorrow, Alex.

Act 3, Scene 2

[There is a film crew in the store as well as a large camera. Alex has his suit on. The shelves are still barren. Lea is by the camera.]

LEA. Good morning, Alex. It's your big day today. Are you ready?

ALEX. I've waited the whole month for this chance. Of course, I'm ready.

LEA. Great. Just remember, be honest, and tell your story. It's a powerful story

[The camera starts rolling, and Lea gives a signal to start.]

LEA. Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Lea Rodriguez, and we're here at Wooten Wares with the owner, Alex Wooten. Today, Alex is going to share his story about the challenges he's facing with his small business. Alex, thank you for joining us.

ALEX. Thank you, Lea, for allowing me to share my story. It's not easy, but I hope it can help people.

LEA. Alex, tell us more about when the rent increases started becoming a significant challenge for Wooten Wares.

ALEX. The increases began about four years ago. Maxwell Zlo, my landlord, convinced me that switching to a month-to-month lease would be more flexible and beneficial. He argued that it would allow for real-time adjustments based on market trends. At the time, his advice sounded reasonable, and I trusted him.

LEA. How did this flexibility turn into a challenge for you?

ALEX. The flexibility was a façade. Every month, regardless of the store's performance, Zlo increased the rent. It went from three thousand to six thousand dollars over the past four years. I tried discussing it with him, but he always had some excuse or another. But to me, the increases felt like a never-ending cycle of financial strain.

LEA. That sounds incredibly difficult. How did you cope with the pressure?

ALEX. It took a toll on me, both emotionally and financially. I had to cut more and more out of my life just to keep up with the escalating rent. Running the store was more about survival than passion, especially last month. Fortunately, I had good friends to keep me grounded and they helped me get through the challenge.

LEA. What happened last month to make you say that?

ALEX. Just when I thought it couldn't get worse, Zlo raised the monthly rent to an outrageous ten thousand dollars. It was clear he wanted to push me out, and I felt helpless. My grandparents had built this store, and I couldn't bear the thought of losing it.

LEA. I can't imagine the emotional strain you've been under. Why don't you share more about your family's connection to Wooten Wares?

ALEX. Wooten Wares has been in my family for over fifty years. My grandfather opened it, and my parents dedicated their lives to running it. Growing up in this store, it became more than just a business—it became a part of our family's legacy. Losing it would be losing a piece of my identity, my history.

LEA. Your determination to keep the store alive is admirable. What steps did you take to try to resolve the situation before resorting to this interview?

ALEX. I tried negotiating with Zlo, but he was relentless, and the banks wouldn't help me. This interview was my last resort. I thought it would be a way to expose Zlo's unjust practices and hopefully garner community support. I had to resort to gambling to make the last bit of money I needed. But as you see [gestures around at the empty shelves], the rent payment took a large toll on my business.

LEA. It's clear that Wooten Wares means a lot to you, and your story resonates with so many

small-business owners facing similar challenges. We hope this interview sheds light on the struggles you all endure. And Alex, I hope you can find a way to come back from drowning in debt. Your legacy surely won't end here.

[With that, the camera is turned off. The film crew starts packing up while Alex and Lea talk.]

ALEX. So, about last night, umm, do you want to go get dinner with me on Thursday?

LEA. That sounds great.

[They leave together.]

Act 3, Scene 3:

[The store is full of both customers and products. Alex is busy behind the register. There are Halloween decorations to show we've gone from summer to fall.]

ALEX. Bye, Richard. See you next week.

RICHARD. Bye, Alex.

[The store phone rings.]

CUSTOMER. Excuse me, where is this Trouble Street I've heard so much about?

ALEX. [To the customer.] Hold on a second, I have to take this call. [Picks up the phone.] Hello?

ZLO. Hello there, Alex. Due to your interview [coughs], I have decided to allow a renegotiation of your rent. I believe...

ALEX. [Interrupting Zlo.] Great. I'm thinking we go back to how it was five years ago, with the one-year lease at three thousand per month. That seems fair, right, Zlo?

ZLO. While I am willing to agree to the one-year lease, going back to three thousand dollars per month is a bit too extreme. There are rising costs and inflation to consider. I think four thousand per month would be much more fair, don't you agree?

ALEX. Over five years? No way. I know \$3500 is much closer and a good compromise.

ZLO. No, \$3600. I think this amount...

ALEX. [Interrupting Zlo again.] No, you aren't listening to me. With everything you've put me through, be happy I'm not asking for less. Let's settle on \$3500 per month.

ZLO. Fine.

ALEX. We'll meet up to sign the new lease on Saturday, at 7:00 a.m. For now, I have a store to run.

ZLO. [Sighing.] Very well.

[Alex hangs up the phone.]

ALEX. [To the customer.] Sorry about that. Now, where were we? Oh yeah, good old Trouble Street.

[The lights go out.]

[A phone call starts between Alex and Remy.]

ALEX. Hey Remy. You coming down this summer?

REMY. Yeah man, actually, I have some big news! I am changing schools. I figured it was time to move on.

ALEX. Really? Where to?

REMY. You know the school a few blocks away from your store? Charleston Middle?

ALEX. You chose to move all the way here?

REMY. I did. I got the chance, and I felt it was time to be closer to my friends.

ALEX. Well, you picked a great time too. I finally proposed to Lea.

REMY. Wow! I can't believe it. When's the wedding?

ALEX. In June, so you could attend.

REMY. Congratulations! I'm so proud of you, man. See you in a few months.

Richard Oehrlein

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Dr. Angela Balla

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Overcoming Trauma and Insecurities Through Writing

Back in 2018, I lost my best friend. Today, I can finally move on. Writing this play was a major part of this journey because I got a chance, after all these years, to say goodbye to him. But this writing could not have happened without the works from my Honors Reading Literature and Culture class. *Lysistrata* helped me realize the potential of writing as a way to deal with loss, while *As You Like It* helped with some of my imposter syndrome by showing a friendship that matched my experiences. Then there are the other works from class, namely, *The Rover*; that helped with my confidence in writing romantic scenes because each author had their own approach. Additionally, knowing self-published authors and seeing how they're just normal people showed me that authors are not special people, and because of that, anyone can be an author. The plays read in class all helped me get a play written, despite originally thinking it was something out of my reach. Writing this play showed me a different side to the texts, and I realized how much these works actually inspired me. With *Lysistrata*, I was able to connect the dots between 'I have experienced tragedy' and 'tragedy can fuel writing' to get 'I should write about my tragedy.' With *As You Like It*, I was comforted by the knowledge that my friendships were real, and I was inspired to give others that same sense of validation. With *The Rover*, I learned to take a step back and see that since all these authors handled romance differently, I could go with romance in my own way, even if that meant leaving it out of my play.

I needed a way to grieve the death of my friend. I couldn't figure things out for a while, but then in class, we read *Lysistrata*, which showed me how to use drama as an outlet for my pain. Aristophanes was an ancient Greek playwright with a gift for comedy. All was not well for him, though. In 431 BCE, the Peloponnesian War began, and according to Vassiliki Kotini, Aristophanes saw the war as a terrible thing. His grief inspired *Lysistrata*, a comedy urging for the end of the war. The play makes that point early on, when Lysistrata says:

.....But now,
 if only all the women would come here
 from Sparta and Boeotia, join up with us,
 if we worked together, we'd save Greece. (Aristophanes 38-41)

Lysistrata's words show that Aristophanes truly cared for Greece. It is even clearer to me that he viewed the Peloponnesian War as the end of Greek civilization. While I cannot know for certain what Aristophanes was thinking at the time, my best guess is he chose to insult the war within the framework of a comedy as the best way to express his grief.

From personal experience, I know when there is a shred of hope, a person will pursue it to the best of their ability. I personally poured my heart into my play, seeing it as the best way to document Alex's memory. I did not previously realize the act of writing could be cathartic. I knew about other forms of art to express grief, but for some reason, I never extended that to writing. I saw writing as something different; a creative project, but not art. But then, I read *Lysistrata*, and while I did not realize at first how much impact Aristophanes' grief had on the play, something stuck in my subconscious mind. When I did realize it, I knew I could use writing as a way to finally get some closure. One of my biggest regrets is that I never got a chance to say

goodbye to Alex, so in my play, I made sure I could finally say, “Bye, Alex” (Oehrlein 3.3.2). I did not just write this play to grieve; I wrote it for closure.

Now that I knew writing could be therapeutic, I had to convince myself that I could write out my grief even though I had never really put time into creative efforts. My only prior creative experiences were telling short stories and playing tuba in my middle school band. Going from that to writing a play was a big jump for me. There was a part of me that was not sure if I could actually write the words I wanted. However, I already knew people like me could write, and write well. I have read a lot of self-published books and web novels these last few years. These are stories written by people from all walks of life, all over the world, and all ages. For example, Shane Purdy (a.k.a. Wolfshine) is currently writing eight series of books and has self-published them on “Royal Road,” a website for independent authors to share their works. He is also a full-time Computer Science student. I have talked to author Jay Boyce through *Discord*, and she even put the character of Alex into her newest book *Clover City*. I got to know her as a person, and that helped me humanize authors, helping me to see that I can do what they do. If these people could write hundreds of pages worth of books, then there is nothing stopping me from writing twenty pages of my own. I knew that even if my work was not the best, it would be something that I made.

Once I realized there was a way to express my grief in a way that I could reasonably perform, all that was left to do was to get started writing. I wanted to get all of my insecurities out while I was writing this play. So I had to find some way to address my imposter syndrome regarding friendships. That’s when I remembered *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare. I can’t really point to a specific line to sum up an entire friendship, but Rosalind’s vow of friendship to Celia from *As You Like It* always jumped out at me: “Well, I will forget the condition of my

estate, / to rejoice in yours” (Shakespeare 1.2.15-16). This simple statement, where Rosalind puts aside her worries and grief to be happy for Celia’s good fortune, indicates the type of friendship I usually have. I want to be happy for my friends, even if I am going through troubling times.

Although this statement from Rosalind is rather simplistic in the grand scheme of things, it validated my feelings about friendship. Friendships don’t need big affirmations as I had feared; a friendship can just be as simple as ignoring my worries to help or to cheer for a friend.

Rosalind’s line also helped me develop the characters of Alex and Remy. At first, I wanted Remy to become Alex’s friend over the course of one scene, going from strangers to friends in one conversation. But over time, it morphed into a long-term friendship, with the audience seeing the beginning of that friendship and then the current-day version. I was inspired by Rosalind’s line when I wrote this exchange:

ALEX. Hey, Remy, are you busy?

REMY. I’ve got some time. I’m on my lunch break, though. What’s up?

ALEX. I’m torn...

REMY. I’m going to need a bit more than that to help you. Unless you meant literally and need an ambulance. (Oehrlein 1.1.34-38)

With this exchange, I wanted to show that Remy is willing to set aside whatever he can to help Alex. It is similar to what happened between Rosalind and Celia: where Rosalind is ignoring her issues to be happy for Celia, Remy is putting his time aside to help Alex. To me, another important characteristic of friendship is being there for each other, even for more trivial matters. I hope that message came through in my work.

There was one other roadblock with this project involving my dislike of romance. I almost went without adding it, despite it being a major component of the plays read in class. I

went through various scenarios in my drafts trying to find something that would feel natural. Early versions had Alex start then stop dating Lea in the second act, as he tries to juggle all the stresses in his life. Other versions had him never start dating in the first place, and just remain friends with Lea. While going over the assigned plays a second time for more inspiration, I realized different playwrights depict different levels of romance. This realization meant I could choose to write no romance at all. In *The Rover*, for example, Angelica views romance in a transactional way, charging a thousand crowns per month to date her. Wilmore declares: “How wondrous fair she is. A thousand crowns a month” (Behn 2.1.106). In *Lysistrata*, there is no transactional drive for romance; it instead appears to be based on making each partner happy. That’s how I interpret this section:

.....Then you must submit—
 but do it grudgingly, don’t cooperate.
 There’s no enjoyment for them when they just
 force it in. Besides, there are other ways
 to make them suffer. They’ll soon surrender.
 No husband ever had a happy life
 if he did not get on well with his wife. (Aristophanes 176-182)

The last line strongly implies *Lysistrata* sees romance as being based on happiness instead of monetary gain. These two plays have characters with different views on romance, and that led me to realize not being interested in romance was also a valid option. I did ultimately have Alex and Lea get together, but that was one of those moments where the characters were in charge, and I just documented what they did. But the romance remained small and within my comfort level. I used these plays as inspiration and validation, but the most important lesson they taught

me was that I do not have to base everything on the works of others; instead, I can go in a different direction.

Finally, there is one last aspect of this play to consider. Zlo, the character who stole the show from me, went above and beyond his original purpose. He changed a lot from the beginning of my journey. I called him ‘Obvious Evil Guy’ in the first few drafts, because he was meant to be comic relief in a play that did not have an antagonist. He was also a reason for me to reach out to people to get some help for his lines. But gradually, he shifted from a comic relief character to an overly silly antagonist to a greedy landlord antagonist. Looking back on it, the journey of this play was his journey. His first lines help to show this difference. Initially, he says, “Thank you for applying to my totally normal company. I hear you are interested in the min, I mean uh, waste disposal job?” (Oehrlein 2) But in the final version, he is much more serious: “Hi there, Alex. This is Maxwell Zlo. I am calling to discuss renewing your rent lease. Please meet me at forty-two Trouble Street tomorrow at 11:00 a.m.” (Oehrlein 1.2.8-9) These two lines do not sound like they belong to the same character, with the first sounding like a cartoon villain pretending to be normal, and the current version sounding like a real businessman. Zlo started as a whim—just a reference to *Vaudevillain* by Alex Wolf, another “Royal Road” web novel—with no real characterization besides him being a punchline. He became a joke of an antagonist that I only wrote as a coping mechanism. He finally became an actual thought-out character. Throughout the revisions, I made sure to keep some of the humor that made him so dominant in my mind. Zlo was the only difficult character to write, since everyone else was based on a real person. After figuring him out, the rest of the pieces fell in place around him.

In the past, I did not take assigned reading seriously. I simply read the book and never thought about it again. The plays Dr. Balla chose inspired me to write this play and allowed me

to see a whole new side to the art of writing. The despair Aristophanes felt over the fall of Greek civilization gave me the confidence I needed to express my grief. Shakespeare reassured me about my ability to be a good friend. A variety of authors showed me I was free to write in the manner that best suited me. I felt like I pushed my limits in writing this play. I am thankful to the Honors College for the opportunity to complete a Capstone project where I could test myself and see what I am capable of doing.

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