2005 Third Place Personal Narrative

Acting Up

Twenty-four matching black sweaters, proudly emblazoned with a list of twenty-four names, paraded into a spacious auditorium on the backs of twenty-four high school students. We were the cream of the crop and the select of the select. Each person in my school’s drama department had endured audition after audition in preparation for this event. After two weeks of grueling competition, only twenty-four were left; we were the chosen few selected to attend the prestigious five-day competition and workshop known as the Shakespearean Festival.

When we entered the auditorium it was already bursting at the seams. The red velvet walls of the room caged me in with a buzzing swarm of teenagers. And not just any teenagers. Actors. Thespians. Stage freaks. In other words, the Drama Department of every high school in the state.

*What have I gotten myself into?*

Gingerly stepping over a lanky girl sprawled on the floor, I sank into the nearest empty seat. As I surveyed the hundreds of unfamiliar faces, my throat tightened in an all too familiar way. Even among my classmates, I felt overwhelmed and utterly alone; I was new to the “drama kids” and knew absolutely no one.

*I’ll probably fail in every round of the competition and let everyone down.*

A movement in the corner of my eye caught my attention. Looking to the seat on my right, I noticed a shaggy-haired boy in a baggy shirt and jeans three sizes too big. He turned and cocked his head at me, meeting my eyes.

“Jessica?”

I blinked incredulously at him. “Yes–wait, how do you know me? I haven’t even met anyone yet.”

His slightly sullen expression broke into a broad grin. “Oh, I have my sources.” Reaching out, he gently brushed a stray hair out of my face. The softness of his hands took me by surprise and I reflexively jerked away.
His eyes merely laughed at me as he said, “Name’s Riley. Don’t mind me if I fall asleep during the opening speech. They sound the same every year, y’know.”

As Riley predicted, the opening speech was boring and almost amusing in its monotony. I, however, was far from bored; my brain rapidly formed connections as I silently observed my surrounding classmates. Rick had two false teeth and a not-so-secret crush on Andrea. Harold was an extremely chubby loudmouth, used to be on the football team, and would make a perfect Tevye in the upcoming *Fiddler on the Roof*. Kyra was a former anorexic now resorting to bulimia. According to Brianna, our director *only* let Mark on the Shakespeare Team because he had an insanely oppressive stage mother. Bit by bit, I became acquainted with these strangers in my typical second-hand fashion. I would have been happy to spend the rest of the evening in such contemplation, but the shaggy-haired boy sitting on my right wouldn’t stand for it.

Riley nudged my elbow. “You’re pretty lucky to get on the team on your first try.”

“Yeah,” I mumbled back, straining to hear the conversation on the row below.

“Y’know, you could look at me when I’m talking to you.”

Immediately my face became bright red; I glanced at Riley and grinned sheepishly. “Sorry. I’m just not used to things here. And I’m not really social anyway.”

“Oh really? Well, hang with me, and see if I can’t change all that.”

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The hallway had long since been deserted for the four o’clock workshops. Unfolding the gigantic workshop schedule, I announced, “Next we can go to Dazzling Stage Makeup, Tips and Tricks for Voiceover Auditions, or...Stage Combat,”

Riley rolled his eyes and snorted. “You’ll learn more about stage combat from *Monty Python*. Why don’t we ditch the workshops?”

“And do what?”

“Talk?”

“Just stay here?”
“Sure.”

“Err—okay.”

In his skillfully charismatic manner, Riley immediately drew me into earnest conversation. Before long, we were exchanging life stories and revealing embarrassing secrets.

“So, when I was in middle school, I grew my hair kinda longish and...permed it. Who knows what I was thinking.” Riley shrugged and grinned. “A few punks called me Jesus until I shaved it all off.”

I replied, “At least you didn’t have a crush on two gay guys in a row.”

“I sure hope not.”

“Wait, that’s not what I—”

“I know what you meant.”

“Did I ever tell you about the time—”

A high-pitched voice interrupted shrilly, “Riley? Oh my gosh, I can’t believe I found you! I’ve hardly seen you all week!” The voice seemed to be attached to the petite blonde girl rapidly trotting towards us.

Riley straightened out of his slouch and said nothing. The girl, dressed in a tight green shirt and a pleated miniskirt, gave Riley a peck on the cheek as she smoothly entwined her fingers in hers. Turning toward me with a beaming smile, she exclaimed, “Hi! I’m Megan!”

A sudden, gnawing feeling engulfed me. I idly fingered the worn spots on my jeans, feeling more than a little foolish.

He sure failed to mention that he had a girlfriend.

Megan stood on her tiptoes and nosed her heart-shaped face into my field of vision to peer at me. “And I guess you’re the new girl. I’ve been so curious about you, but you never talked to me!” Her eyebrows quirked.

“Too good for us crazy actors?”

“No, I just—”

“Well, you’re too good for Riley, believe me.” She winked and smiled at me, but the smile didn’t reach her pinched eyes. “I don’t know why I put up with him sometimes.”
I glanced at Riley, hoping he would steer the conversation elsewhere, but he merely raised his eyebrows and looked away. I shrugged my shoulders at Megan. “We’d better get back so we don’t miss the banquet.”

*Why didn’t he tell me about her? If he already had a girlfriend, he shouldn’t have confided in me, and I definitely shouldn’t have confided in—*

“Ooh, you’re absolutely right,” Megan chirped.

Riley suddenly blurted out, “I have to check in with the techies for our one-act tomorrow. Later.” He disappeared around the corner.

“Finally. Now we can have a little girl talk!” Megan linked her arm with mine and started pulling me down the hall. “If you don’t believe me about Riley, you should ask him about our song. He wrote the most beautiful love song and performed it *on stage* just for me. And after the show, he acts like it was nothing. Nothing! The most heartbreaking ballad I’ve ever heard and he goes on...life as usual.” Megan jabbed me pointedly in the ribs. “I’m telling you, he’s really unbelievable.”

*He probably tells her everything. I should have delivered a public speech on my personal life and saved him the trouble of telling it to her later. Could her skirt get any shorter?*

“You seem to like him anyway,” said I.

“Let’s be honest with each other.” Megan stopped walking and whirled me around to face her. “You’ve got a thing for my boyfriend.”

“What—I never said—and no I don’t—”

Megan shook her head at me sympathetically. “I’ve heard it all before. No, don’t say anything, you don’t have to admit it. Even if you’re not madly in love with him now, you will be. He has a way with girls, all girls, including me. But with me, it’s so much more involved, you couldn’t possibly understand—”

“But he’s just my friend—”

“I’ve been dating him since the 6th grade. He knows more about me than I and my parents know about me combined! If I were to leave him *now*, after everything we’ve shared, it’d be like...like...losing a part of myself. Don’t you see? He gets bored and chases after other girls, but he *always* comes back to me.”

I grunted noncommittally.
“He’s playing you, sweetheart. Trust me on this.”

The clatter of silverware and the sound of tempestuous chatter emitted from the dining room ahead of us. Freeing myself from Megan’s claws, I put on a half-smile. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to steal your boyfriend.”

Megan flashed a sickeningly sweet smile. “Be sure that you don’t.”

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Eventually, the final rounds of the Shakespeare competition arrived. For the first time that week, I was frantically nervous. Everything went awry at exactly the wrong time. My hair flopped unceremoniously out of its ringlets. Pins in my billowy dress wouldn’t stay put. Around the corner someone was shrieking about mascara and misplaced shoes. One of my classmates had lost his crown and his cape while I was quickly losing my composure.

A combination of sleep deprivation, homesickness, and my innate fear of failure cracked my confident facade. Ransacking my brain for escape plans, I told myself I wasn’t made to be an actor anyway. As I was choosing between hiding and faking sick, Riley showed up.

“Hello, stranger.”

The sound of his voice sent a wave of relief washing over me.

“You look like you could use some help.”

Yes.

Riley furrowed his eyebrows and stared intently at my makeup case. “You’ve been avoiding me.”

I strummed my fingers together tersely. “Megan’s idea.”

Riley groaned, “She’s not my girlfriend. She just thinks she is.”

“I’m not so sure.”
Suddenly my head was whipped around and my face was three inches away from Riley’s. He kept his hold on my chin and muttered, “Forget about Megan.” He suddenly squinted at the messy state my hair was in. “Let me fix that.”

The movement I thought would repair my disarray of curls turned into something entirely different. One of his arms ended up encircled around my waist while his right hand touched my cheek. He pulled me into him, handling me softly—as if I were made of glass. A small corner of mind whirred incessantly as I floundered in my own emotions. Time slowed to a crawl and I noticed tiny, irrelevant details. He had on a olive-green jacket. Someone had written “gullible” on the ceiling in permanent marker. My left hand was twitching. The sensory overload became too much. I snapped.

All at once, my pent-up frustration—at Riley, at Megan, and at myself for being lured into their game—exploded. “What are you doing?” My voice, barely below a shout, scraped against the air before cracking.

Riley released me as if he had just burned his hands on a hot stove. “What has gotten—”

“You’ve known me for, what, a week? You have a girlfriend! And now you start acting like...well, yeah. Like that.” My face burned as I stumbled around my own words.

Riley rolled his eyes and slouched against the wall. “You act like you’ve never even...dated...or anything before.”

“I haven’t.”

Disbelief flashed across his face. “Seriously?”

I examined the floor, too embarrassed and aggravated to respond. Well, he’s attracted to you. Is that so terribly wrong? Yes. No. Yes.

Heaving an exaggerated sigh, Riley said, “I should’ve known—you really are a freak.”

“What?”

“You basically attached yourself to me now you blow up for no—”

“You decided to spend your time with me!”

“So I’m a nice guy who humors shy and insecure girls.”

“Riley? I’ve been looking all over for you!” echoed a voice outside the room.
Squinting down the hall outside the doorway, I discerned Megan prancing toward us, who proceeded to deftly linked her arm with Riley’s. The shaggy-haired boy simply tilted his head toward me and smirked.

That self-assured smirk framed by that insolent face kindled my growing resolve to play this game to the finish. Raising my eyes, I nodded civilly and said, “See you after the show.”

Megan’s eyebrows quirked. “Yeah, I need to find my scene partner…”

Riley rolled his eyes and sauntered out the doorway.

Staring after Riley, Megan chewed her lip fretfully. “What has gotten into him?”

Not being the giggling type, I found myself giggling anyway. “Who knows! I don’t pretend to understand males.”

Megan snickered. “You know, we should hang out sometime. You’re not so bad.”

“You mean after I’m through stealing your boyfriend?”

Twirling her hair between her fingers, Megan said, “Boys are useless anyway. Well, yeah, I need to get ready. See you around.” She smiled warmly and left.

*Why was I here, again?*

The clock on the wall relentlessly ticked, ticked, ticked.

*Oh, right! Show-time!*

I ran out the door.