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for
Oscar Brockett
teacher

Cast of Characters

HEATHER FLETCHER, editor-in-chief of the *Panther*, senior at Thomas Paine High School, pretty, smart and headed to Stanford.

PETE JOPLING, sports editor, senior, he starts working part time on the local daily this summer and will attend the local community college.

KAREN WITKIEWICZ, production editor, senior, the cheer leader type, pretty, perky. She's going to the big state university, and will pledge her Mom's sorority.

RAJEEV NELSON, editorial page editor, senior, black, very bright, he always wears a Kufia (African cap). He's headed to Howard University.

ALMA RINCON, assistant editor, junior, Latina, she will be the editor of next year's *Panther*. She is quiet, but has an understanding of those around her.

SAMANTHA SMART, arts editor, senior, too smart for her own good, up on all the latest trends in music and popular culture, she might have a nose ring or a tattoo, or probably both.

KIRK MAYER, senior, bright, handsome but doesn't work at it. He delivers for Domino's.

MR. SMITH, the faculty advisor/publisher of the *Thomas Paine Panther*. He is young, handsome, slim, athletic.

Production Notes

In casting, you may be flexible as to the race and ethnicity of characters as needed.

In the casting of Mr. Smith, I would like you to feel free in changing his race and/or ethnicity to fit the particular theatre/school within which the production is being mounted. In so doing, you are free to change Mr. Smith's name to better fit his race and/or ethnicity. Though I like the name Mr. Smith.

Also, you may be flexible as to certain topical jokes (i.e., pop music) in changing them to fit the current popular culture. I use the term "State" to refer to the large state university. Please change "State" to the local version of the big state university (i.e., Cal, Michigan, Iowa, Texas, Purchase, you get the idea). Thomas Paine High School is a school in your local area in your state.

Finally, the dialogue should flow and overlap and interrupt as any real conversation between teenagers. These are bright, articulate, high-energy high schoolers.

THE THOMAS PAINE PANTHER

by T. J. Walsh

(At rise:)

(The office of the Thomas Paine Panther at Thomas Paine High School. There are four or five PCs on desks, a laser printer. The place is a complete mess of papers, books, posters on walls, just a jumble of things, used pizza boxes, paper bags from McDonalds and Burger King, a pyramid of coke cans. The place appears to be used sometimes as a home away from home by its staff.)

(Sitting around the desks, drinking soft drinks are: HEATHER FLETCHER, senior, the editor of the paper. She is bright and pretty and full of energy. PETE JOPLING, senior, is eating some M&Ms. He is the Sports Editor. KAREN WITKIEWICZ, senior, is a pretty cheerleader type, she is the Production Editor, she is typing up notes as the Editorial Board talks. RAJEEV NELSON, senior, sits with his feet up on a desk, eyes closed, listening, he is the Political Editor. ALMA RINCON, junior, is looking through a file of photos, she is the Assistant Editor and next year will be the editor of the Panther. SAMANTHA SMART, senior, is the Arts Editor, and she is fiddling with a CD Player and looking through stacks of CDs as the action starts.)

(The Editorial Board is meeting to select the “best of” and “worst of” last issue of the Panther for the school year.)

SAMANTHA. Who took Coldplay?

RAJEEV. Wit did.

KAREN. Shut up, Raj.

HEATHER. All right, worst hair?

PETE. Rajeev Nelson.

RAJEEV. What’s wrong with my hair?

PETE. What’s right with it?

ALMA. What about Ms. O’Hara?

HEATHER. No faculty yet.

PETE. She'd win, though. I think that hair of hers meets NFL helmet safety standards.

RAJEEV. Stanley Boyd.

KAREN. He doesn't have any hair.

RAJEEV. My point.

SAMANTHA. *(Still looking:)* Who took Snoop?

RAJEEV. The police.

HEATHER. Okay, Stanley Boyd for worst hair?

SAMANTHA. Bald at 18. Now that is genetics at its finest.

PETE. Yeah, Stanley's dad is my dentist. Sometimes, when he's working on a back molar, I can see my reflection in his head.

HEATHER. Okay, best hair?

PETE & RAJEEV. Melanie Morgan.

HEATHER. I said best hair, not highest hair.

KAREN. Kirk Mayer.

SAMANTHA. Yeah.

ALMA. Kirk Mayer is good.

PETE. Kirk Mayer? He's got a butt cut. He may as well be walking on his hands!

(RAJEEV and PETE give high-fives to that.)

HEATHER. A tie?

RAJEEV. Gender it. Kirk for guy, Melanie for girl.

PETE. Kirk Mayer?

HEATHER. All right. Kirk Mayer and Melanie Morgan, best hair.

(KAREN types it up, ALMA pulls a photo out of the file.)

RAJEEV. Okay, best nose hair.

HEATHER. Shut up, Raj.

PETE. Mr. Lorca, definitely.

KAREN. I'd vote for your dad, Pete.

PETE. My dad doesn't—

HEATHER. Best dressed, guy.

KAREN. Kirk Mayer.

PETE. Would you stop it with the Kirk Mayer. Kirk Mayer this, Kirk Mayer that. He's a loser, Wit.

PETE & RAJEEV. Loser!!!!

KAREN. I like how he dresses.

PETE. He dresses out of Goodwill or Domino's, depending on what night you catch him.

KAREN. I like it.

RAJEEV. When is that pizza going to get here?

HEATHER. I vote for Rajeev.

RAJEEV. Thanks, Chief.

PETE. Rajeev? Rajeev? Best dressed? Maybe if you're going after the U.N. look.

RAJEEV. At least I gotta look.

KAREN. Pete's gotta look. Kinda retro Greg Brady with a pocket protector.

PETE. Thanks, Marsha.

HEATHER. Best dressed guy.

ALMA. We all know who it is.

KAREN. But I hate him.

RAJEEV. So do I.

PETE. Me, too.

SAMANTHA. Me, too.

(Silence.)

KAREN. Look, Heather, we don't have to—

SAMANTHA. He dumped you, now you can dump on—

HEATHER. Steve Hunt, best dressed guy-slime. Okay, best dressed, girl.

PETE. Melanie Morgan.

KAREN. She didn't say "shortest skirts."

RAJEEV. I'll go for Melanie Morgan.

SAMANTHA. I vote for Heather.

PETE. Jeans and a tee-shirt, Heather-in-Chief?

HEATHER. Thanks, Sam.

KAREN. What about Wanda?

ALMA. Kinda exotic.

KAREN. A definite look.

SAMANTHA. Everything she wears is black.

RAJEEV. You gotta problem with that?

SAMANTHA. I think clothing should represent a broad spectrum of color diversity.

KAREN. Isn't that from a Benetton ad?

PETE. The Gap.

ALMA. She got into Harvard.

HEATHER. Really?

ALMA. That's what I heard.

KAREN. Cecily Moore.

HEATHER. Cecily, yes.

RAJEEV. Too perfect.

PETE. Never wore the same dress twice.

SAMANTHA. Too rich.

KAREN. A bitch.

RAJEEV. A well dressed one.

PETE. You and Cecily are going to be pledge sisters at State, Wit, so you'd better get used to her.

HEATHER. Okay, Cecily Moore, Best Dressed Girl. All right, funniest senior?

PETE. Well, you know, I mean....

RAJEEV. No, Pete, she said "funniest," not "homeliest."

KAREN. Mickey Wright.

PETE. Mickey Wright?

(They all nod. They all laugh.)

HEATHER. Okay. Mickey Wright. Next. Smartest senior.

SAMANTHA. Now, who's the valedictorian?

RAJEEV. I think she's in this room. Isn't it our esteemed Heather-in-Chief?

PETE. Why, I think you're right, Brother Nelson.

RAJEEV. I ain't your brother. I like you, but I ain't your brother.

SAMANTHA. A full scholarship to Stanford? Studying in France this summer.

HEATHER. What about Wanda?

KAREN. Heather. It's you. Move on.

RAJEEV. Where's that pizza? Wit, call Domino's again. It's been over 30 minutes.

KAREN. They don't do that 30 minutes thing anymore.

(KAREN is dialing the phone.)

PETE. Yeah, some moron ran over a nun in Ohio trying to get a pizza somewhere under 30 minutes, or something.

(A knock on the office door. KAREN hangs up.)

PETE. All right, it's here! *(PETE opens the door.)* Kirk, we were just talking about you.

(KIRK MAYER walks in wearing a Domino's shirt, cap and jeans. He is tall and handsome but hides it behind unkept hair and a slouch. He has two large pizzas in one of those Domino's hot packs and a six-pack of Coke.)

KAREN. Hi, Kirk.

RAJEEV & PETE. *(Mimicking Karen:)* Hi, Kirk!

KIRK. Karen.

PETE. We just voted you best hair.

KIRK. What?

HEATHER. Pete, shut up.

KIRK. Twenty-two dollars, fifty-one cents.

HEATHER. We told them to put it on the *Panther* account.

KIRK. Oh. They didn't tell me that. I gotta call.

KAREN. Here's the phone.

SAMANTHA. You want to dial it for him, Karen.

KAREN. Shut up, Sam.

(KIRK dials the phone. SAMANTHA mouths silently to Karen "He wants you". KAREN throws a ruler at her.)

KIRK. *(On phone:)* Yeah, Cindy. Kirk, I'm at Paine. The Panther. They want to charge. Okay, thanks. *(KIRK hangs up the phone.)* Okay. What are you guys doing here?

HEATHER. We're putting out the Senior Edition of the *Panther*.

KIRK. I thought the Superintendent said we couldn't do that.

HEATHER. They said the seniors couldn't vote on it. Not that we couldn't put out a senior edition.

KIRK. I get it. Mr. Smith know about this?

RAJEEV. You going to tell him?

KIRK. He could get in trouble.

RAJEEV. Maybe?

KIRK. He's your advisor.

HEATHER. He tried to close us down.

KIRK. Your "April Fool's" issue was crap.

SAMANTHA. It was funny.

KIRK. It hurt a lot of people.

SAMANTHA. It hurt a lot of the faculty, you mean.

PETE. It was honest.

KIRK. It was stupid. Mr. Smith was right to pull it.

HEATHER. It was already out, everyone had read it.

KIRK. If he hadn't pulled it, you'd have been shut down for the rest of the year.

HEATHER. So much for freedom of the press.

KIRK. You're not free to libel people.

HEATHER. Check the first amendment. If it's true we can print it.

KIRK. That doesn't mean you should print it.

HEATHER. We're putting out the paper tonight, Kirk, you're delivering pizzas. See the difference?

KAREN. Heather, maybe he's right. Mr. Smith could get in deep—

HEATHER. The *Panther* has put out a Senior Edition every year for 67 years. Now, because some faculty can't take the fact that we tell the truth about them, they shut us down.

KIRK. You're not shut down. Just the Senior Edition.

HEATHER. The Superintendent said the senior class couldn't vote on best and worst, not that we couldn't put out a Senior Edition. I have the letter, you want to read it.

KIRK. Technicality.

SAMANTHA. Kirk, I like you, but why don't you just go deliver that double pepperoni that's getting cold in that pouch and let us worry about the *Panther*.

KIRK. You're part of this, Karen?

KAREN. Well, I—

HEATHER. We're doing it together. All of us.

(KIRK looks at KAREN. She turns away. He looks at HEATHER.)

KIRK. What's happened to you, Heather?

HEATHER. I chose to grow up, Kirk.

KIRK. Bad choice, Heather. *(He is at the door.)* You know, you people are going to give over-achievers a bad name.

HEATHER. Thank you, Dr. Domino.

(KIRK turns and leaves. HEATHER shuts the door behind him. She looks around. Everyone is looking at the ground or the wall, but not at HEATHER.)

HEATHER. If you guys don't want to do this, say so now. *(Silence.)* Then we're all still in?

RAJEEV. Yeah, I'm in.

PETE. Yeah.

ALMA. Okay.

SAMANTHA. I'm in.

HEATHER. Karen?

KAREN. Maybe we should call Mr. Smith.

HEATHER. I thought this was about Mr. Smith. That's the whole point. Do you think he should have pulled our "April Fool's"

edition? Did you like going in front of the Superintendent? We all almost got kicked out of this place because of Mr. Smith. Would you be going to State? Would Rajeev be going to Howard? Would I be going to Stanford? Would Pete be starting work on the *News* this summer? No. We all almost lost our futures because of Mr. Smith.

(Silence.)

KAREN. Mr. Smith helped get you in Stanford. And Raj in Howard and he definitely got Pete on the *News*.

HEATHER. I would have gotten in without him.

KAREN. Maybe.

HEATHER. If you want to leave, then leave.

(Silence. They all look at her. She decides.)

KAREN. Fine.

(KAREN picks up her things and leaves. A silence. Finally:)

HEATHER. Anyone else? *(Silence.)* Then lets do it. It's faculty time. Get out the mug shots, Pete. Okay, who's first? Alma, why don't you type in the copy.

(ALMA sits where KAREN was sitting. PETE pulls out a manila file with photos of the faculty. He pulls out a photo of an older man and pins it to a bulletin board.)

HEATHER. Okay, Mr. Hearn?

(Silence. Nobody's in a good mood any longer.)

HEATHER. Now, he's definitely best nose hair.

SAMANTHA. No, I think best ear hair. Mr. Lorca is best nose hair.

HEATHER. Okay, good, I'll go with both those. Next.

(PETE pulls out a photo of a young, pretty woman.)

HEATHER. Mrs. Sheriff.

PETE. Best high heels.

SAMANTHA. Best nutcracker? You heard what she did to Mr. Billings.

(They laugh. It's loosening up again.)

HEATHER. Good, next.

(PETE shows a photo of a man.)

PETE. Mr. Sheldon.

(Everyone groans.)

ALMA. Mr. Nyquil. I fell asleep in his class five times this year.

PETE. I have.

RAJEEV. Me, too.

SAMANTHA. Yeah, me, too.

HEATHER. It's unanimous. Okay, next.

(PETE holds a picture of an older man.)

PETE. Mr. Seaman.

RAJEEV. Most fertile?

(Everyone laughs. PETE pulls a photo of an older woman. The laughter stops.)

HEATHER. What are we going to do with Mrs. MacDonald?

ALMA. Let's skip her.

SAMANTHA. How about first to buy the farm?

ALMA. Sam, that's cruel!

HEATHER. Yeah, we'll skip Mrs. MacDonald. Next.

(PETE pulls out a photo of a handsome young man, maybe in his late twenties, early thirties.)

HEATHER. Mr. Smith.

PETE. Best name.

HEATHER. Worst teacher?

ALMA. He's the best teacher I've ever had.

HEATHER. How about giving him the Benedict Arnold award?

ALMA. Look, lets just skip Mr. Smith.

HEATHER. This is *about* Mr. Smith, Alma.

ALMA. You don't understand.

HEATHER. What don't I understand? He shut down the Senior Edition. You're a junior. You're going to have another chance. Not us. How many awards did we win at the state competition this Spring? Twelve. This paper was everything to me, everything!

ALMA. You don't understand anything.

HEATHER. He sabotaged us. The "April Fool's" Issue was tradition. If the faculty can't take a joke then—

ALMA. Yeah, well, April Fool's on us.

HEATHER. What's that mean?

ALMA. Nothing.

(HEATHER looks at the others and then toward ALMA.)

HEATHER. *(Suspicious:)* What are you talking about, Alma.

ALMA. Nothing. I'm getting out of here. This isn't... I thought this would be fun. It's not fun anymore.

HEATHER. "April Fool's" on us?

RAJEEV. Do you know something, Alma?

(ALMA goes to pick up her back-pack. RAJEEV grabs it first.)

ALMA. Give it to me, Raj.

HEATHER. What's going on, Alma?

ALMA. Give me my backpack, Raj!

SAMANTHA. Alma, what is it?

ALMA. Give it to me, Raj!

HEATHER. No, what is it that—

ALMA. He's sick!

(She grabs his backpack from RAJEEV.)

HEATHER. Sick?

RAJEEV. Sick? Mr. Smith? Man, he's the healthiest person I know. I mean, the way he works out.

(ALMA starts toward the door.)

ALMA. Never mind, I'm not going to be a part of this.

HEATHER. What do you mean, he's sick?

ALMA. Forget it!

HEATHER. Alma, tell me!

ALMA. No!

HEATHER. Alma!

(ALMA starts to open the door.)

HEATHER. Don't let her out, Pete!

(PETE blocks the door. ALMA stops.)

HEATHER. Alma, tell me. I'm your best friend. *(HEATHER speaks softly:)* It's okay. You can tell me.

ALMA. He's sick.

HEATHER. Sick how? With what?

(Silence. The others look at each other, wondering.)

RAJEEV. What's he sick with, Alma?

ALMA. He called my Mom.

HEATHER. Mr. Smith?

ALMA. He wants my Mom to represent him. He wants her to help him if there's a problem with the District. He's reporting it to the District.

PETE. Problem?

(Silence.)

ALMA. He just found out. He's got it.

(The others finally understand. A silence.)

PETE. Really?

RAJEEV. Holy sh—

PETE. Mr. Smith?

SAMANTHA. Mr. Smith?

HEATHER. Mr. Smith. Wow.

(Silence.)

PETE. Maybe we shouldn't do this.

RAJEEV. Yeah.

SAMANTHA. I don't believe it.

(Silence.)

HEATHER. We've got to print it.

(The others turn and look at HEATHER. Silence.)

ALMA. What?

HEATHER. We've got to print it. Tonight. It's news.

ALMA. We're not going to print it! I shouldn't have told you!

HEATHER. We're a newspaper aren't we? This is news, isn't it?

ALMA. It's private.

HEATHER. This is a public school. Now, this is a story to go out on.

RAJEEV. We can't print something like that. We don't have any verification.

HEATHER. Alma, are you sure of what you heard?

ALMA. No, no. I might have misheard or something.

HEATHER. Yeah, right. It's the truth and we all know it. And we can't get hurt if we print the truth.

PETE. Why print it?

HEATHER. Because its news and we're a newspaper, that's why.

PETE. Yeah, but Heather, it's nobody's business.

HEATHER. This is a public institution. The students who go here and the faculty who work with him have a right to know. I mean, you're in danger if you're in contact with him.

ALMA. That's not true.

HEATHER. Isn't it? You wanna go play basketball with him in the gym, Raj? Now that you have this information, would you go play basketball with him?

(Silence. RAJEEV doesn't answer.)

HEATHER. The students and faculty and staff of this high school have the right to know these kinds of things.

ALMA. It's going to get out.

HEATHER. Unofficially, maybe.

PETE. He's not going to do anything to put anyone in danger. I mean, it's Mr. Smith. He's the one who taught us about ethics.

RAJEEV. Hey, is he gay? I didn't know he was gay.

SAMANTHA. He's not gay. I've seen him out with women.

HEATHER. He doesn't have a girlfriend.

ALMA. How do you know?

HEATHER. I know.

PETE. He's not gay, I mean, well, he doesn't...he's not gay, you know, I mean, we could tell, you know, I mean, it's usually obvious, isn't it? Look at Mr. Parks.

(Silence.)

HEATHER. I'm printing it. It's our duty.

RAJEEV. We can't, Heather!

HEATHER. I make the editorial decisions. We're printing it!

RAJEEV. We need verification. You know the rules. Independent corroboration.

HEATHER. Mr. Smith made that rule.

SAMANTHA. That's just standard journalistic ethics. If we print it we need verification.

(They all look at HEATHER. Suddenly the door opens. Outside is MR. SMITH. He is a handsome man, slim, athletic.)

MR. SMITH. Verification for what?

(Silence in the room. MR. SMITH walks in with KAREN and KIRK behind him. Silence in the room. Everyone unconsciously takes a couple steps back. MR. SMITH picks up on this. He looks at ALMA. She looks away. He smiles slightly and shakes his head.)

MR. SMITH. You putting out the last issue?

(Still silence. MR. SMITH looks up at the bulletin board with faculty photos. He sees his. He sits down at the computer terminal and reads.)

MR. SMITH. Mr. Nyquil? That sounds like Alma, as I remember you had some slumber problems in his class. Best nutcracker? You think that one up, Sam? Best nose hair? Umm, I've been meaning to speak to him about that.

(He looks up at the students. They look away.)

MR. SMITH. I thought we talked about this.

HEATHER. We're seniors. It's our right. It's tradition.

MR. SMITH. These seem innocent enough, though sophomoric. I'd have thought better of you all. *(He looks at his photo on the bulletin board.)* I'm next? Was my interruption ill-timed? Don't let me interrupt you. Mr. Smith. *(Silence around the room.)* No takers? How about biggest S.O.B.? How about First to Amend the First Amendment? How about—

HEATHER. How about HIV positive?

(The loudest silence you've ever heard. It is a long silence in which nobody moves. Finally, MR. SMITH smiles.)

MR. SMITH. You're the best journalist I've ever taught, Heather.

HEATHER. Is it true?

MR. SMITH. Verification? Is that what you want?

HEATHER. Yes.

MR. SMITH. First rule of journalism. Verification of the truth.

HEATHER. Is it true?

(Another long silence. MR. SMITH looks at all the students in the room. They won't look him in the eye. MR. SMITH paces around the room a bit, looking things over. Nobody says anything. He finally stops in front of ALMA.)

MR. SMITH. It's true.

(ALMA turns away.)

ALMA. Mr. Smith...

MR. SMITH. It's all right, Alma.

(The others are just stunned. They don't know what to say. MR. SMITH pulls one of the Cokes from the six pack and opens it. He sips.)

MR. SMITH. I've verified it for you, Heather. You going to print it?

HEATHER. It's the truth. It's news. It's relevant to our readers.

MR. SMITH. Don't forget that it's sensational. It will cause a sensation.

RAJEEV. We're not printing it. You can't, Heather.

MR. SMITH. Yes, she can, Raj. She's the Heather-in-chief. But you're missing the question, here, Raj. You're not thinking in the manner that I taught you in Honors History. The question isn't whether she can print it. What's the question, Raj?

(RAJEEV thinks. From now on we see the MR. SMITH of the classroom. He is in full command. He teaches in an aggressive, Socratic method, pointing, asking questions, pushing his students to think. He is dynamic and brilliant and the type of teacher that makes a difference.)

RAJEEV. Will she?

MR. SMITH. Close. But that's not it, either. Karen?

KAREN. Mr. Smith, I'm so sorry...

(Pause.)

MR. SMITH. *(Sighs.)* So am I, Karen. Samantha?

SAMANTHA. The question is: *should* she print it.

MR. SMITH. Yes, Samantha. Good. That's the question before our Heather-in-Chief. Not "if" she can print it. Of course she can. It's the truth, it's relevant, it's news. The question is "should" she print it. Should you print it, Heather?

(Everyone looks at HEATHER.)

HEATHER. Yes. We should.

MR. SMITH. Not "we," Heather. You. I taught you that. You're the editor. You found that out on April Fool's Day. You, as editor-in-chief, are responsible for what the *Panther* prints. And I, as publisher, am responsible for what the *Panther* prints. In this particular case, I have a vested interest in whether you print your story, so I'm recusing myself from this decision. It is your decision alone.

(Silence. Everyone looks at HEATHER. MR. SMITH sips his Coke.)

HEATHER. How'd you get it?

(MR. SMITH smiles.)

MR. SMITH. Good. If you're going to print the story, you want more information. Yes. Well. I'm not sure how I got it.

HEATHER. Are you gay?

MR. SMITH. How is that relevant?

HEATHER. It would suggest how you became infected.

MR. SMITH. It would, wouldn't it.

HEATHER. Are you?

MR. SMITH. Do you think I am?

HEATHER. I didn't think so before.

MR. SMITH. Yes, we're both aware of that, aren't we?

(HEATHER takes a step back. She looks at the other students.)

HEATHER. What do you think?

RAJEEV. Mr. Smith isn't gay, Heather.

HEATHER. He might be.

PETE. We'd know. Wouldn't we? He isn't gay.

KIRK. What if he is. So what? What does that matter?

HEATHER. It matters to the story.

ALMA. We can't print it. I'm sorry, Mr. Smith.

MR. SMITH. Alma, it's nobody's fault.

KAREN. You can't print this, Heather. What about our ethics as journalists? This would be, it would be unethical. This is against everything Mr. Smith has taught us. This is private. This is Mr. Smith's private business. If he chooses to tell, then it's his decision.

HEATHER. There's also an ethical matter of public safety.

KAREN. What about the right to privacy?

HEATHER. There is no right to privacy in the constitution.

RAJEEV. The Fourth Amendment.

HEATHER. Illegal search and seizure? Are we invading anybody's domain?

MR. SMITH. Isn't my body, my domain?

(Silence. HEATHER thinks about that.)

HEATHER. No. This information is a matter of public safety. It takes precedence over your right to privacy. "A right to privacy is not a right to secrecy."

MR. SMITH. Quoting me to me. Good tactic.

PETE. He could lose his job if you print this.

HEATHER. If I don't print it, then I'm not doing my job! *(To MR. SMITH.)* Would you print it?

MR. SMITH. I don't know. Honestly.

ALMA. What should we do?

MR. SMITH. You must discover what is right, and then do the right thing. If I've taught you guys anything, it's to do what you think is right.

RAJEEV. But *we* don't have to print it.

HEATHER. If we don't publish it then the students and faculty of Thomas Paine High School won't ever know! They have a right to know! The District won't publicize this. They'll sweep it under the rug. Cover it up. It's our duty to print it!

MR. SMITH. Ahhh, duty. Your duty as a journalist?

HEATHER. Yes. You taught us that. Duty. Part of the virtues of being a complete human being.

(MR. SMITH now goes into his teaching mode. He is dynamic and his interaction with the students is demanding and no-nonsense.)

MR. SMITH. Raj, what are the four virtues?

RAJEEV. Fortitude, Temperance, Prudence, Justice.

MR. SMITH. Karen, "fortitude."

KAREN. The strength of mind and courage to persevere in the face of adversity.

MR. SMITH. Pete, "temperance."

PETE. Self-discipline, the control of all unruly human passions and appetites.

MR. SMITH. Samantha, "justice."

SAMANTHA. Fairness, honesty, lawfulness and the ability to keep one's promises.

MR. SMITH. And "prudence"...Heather.

HEATHER. Practical wisdom and the ability to make the right choice in specific situations.

MR. SMITH. Fortitude, temperance, prudence, justice. To be a virtuous human being is the highest goal to which a person can aspire. If I've taught you anything in these last four years it's that.

HEATHER. What are your values?

MR. SMITH. Values and virtues are not the same, Heather. Values is a morally neutral term. It indicates preference. Virtue is a quality of character by which individuals recognize and *do* the right thing. You must do the right thing to be a virtuous person. Are you a virtuous person?

HEATHER. This isn't about me.

MR. SMITH. Isn't it?

HEATHER. I'm a virtuous person.

MR. SMITH. Then I have no doubt you will do the right thing.

HEATHER. But I need information to make the decision.

MR. SMITH. I thought you just needed verification?

HEATHER. You know what I mean.

MR. SMITH. This is an interesting test for you, Heather. Though I don't like being the subject of your test. But Aristotle would be pleased with this test. He argued with Plato. Aristotle didn't think virtue could be taught, completely. He felt it needed to be acquired through practice. Raj, what did Aristotle say?

RAJEEV. "We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts."

KAREN. I want to vote on it. I vote we don't print it. All those in favor?

(Everyone raises their hand except HEATHER.)

PETE. We're not printing it.

MR. SMITH. It's not your decision, Pete. Any of you. It's Heather's decision.

HEATHER. Why shouldn't I print it?

SAMANTHA. It could hurt Mr. Smith.

HEATHER. So?

ALMA. Heather, we're just a high school newspaper.

HEATHER. You're going to be the editor next year, Alma. If you think the *Panther* is just another high school newspaper, maybe you shouldn't be the editor.

ALMA. It's not our job to ruin people's lives.

HEATHER. We're not ruining his life. *He's* already done that.

KAREN. Heather, Mr. Smith is...well, we all know how much he's meant to us during high school.

RAJEEV. He's our friend. We shouldn't do this to friends.

HEATHER. Friend? What's a friend? Would a friend pull our issue?

KIRK. What the hell do you know about friendship, Heather? We used to be friends, remember?

HEATHER. Get over it, Kirk. That was a long time ago.

KIRK. Best friends for life, remember? That's what you said.

HEATHER. We all have to grow up, Kirk.

(The others understand this conversation. An old wound, an old fight that has festered. Silence.)

MR. SMITH. I consider you a good friend, Heather. I've told you that.

PETE. "Without friends, no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods." Aristotle.

(PETE smiles, so does MR. SMITH, impressed.)

MR. SMITH. Very good, Pete I was wondering if anything I was teaching had sunk in. You people amaze me.

HEATHER. Don't change the subject.

MR. SMITH. I'm not changing the subject, Heather. This is about friendship and virtue and making choices. Everything that Aristotle talked about. Does virtue exist without a test of virtue? Does friendship exist without a test of friendship. Well, it seems you are being put to the test.

HEATHER. What about the truth?

MR. SMITH. What about it?

HEATHER. Don't I have a duty to the truth.

MR. SMITH. Without question.

HEATHER. Is the truth being tested here?

MR. SMITH. "Truth is great and will prevail if left to herself; that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate." Pete?

PETE. Plato?

MR. SMITH. Wrong by only a couple of millennium. Karen?

KAREN. Jefferson.

MR. SMITH. Good. Where?

KAREN. Virginia Act for Religious Freedom.

MR. SMITH. Excellent. Perhaps I should have more tests like this.

HEATHER. I'm sick of you doing this! Life isn't a classroom!

MR. SMITH. Isn't it? You haven't read your Aristotle very well.

HEATHER. Aristotle felt women were inferior to men.

MR. SMITH. Yes, that is true. And Jefferson owned slaves. And I am HIV positive. I hope the fact that I'm HIV positive doesn't negate what I've taught you over the last four years. Or make it less true or less relevant or...less.

(HEATHER turns her back on him. Silence.)

MR. SMITH. Look. I'd like you all to wait outside for a minute. So Heather and I can talk. Okay?

(Everyone looks at each other. They begin to file out the door.)

MR. SMITH. Will you stay, Alma?

(ALMA hesitates and then sits back down. The rest of the students leave. MR. SMITH closes the door.)

MR. SMITH. Thanks for staying, Alma.

HEATHER. What do you want to talk about?

MR. SMITH. Alma, will you promise that everything said here will not leave here? You'll never discuss this with anyone?

ALMA. Mr. Smith, how can you trust me. I told them that—

MR. SMITH. Virtue comes with practice, Alma. Aristotle was right about that. Okay? Promise?

ALMA. I promise.

HEATHER. I won't promise that.

MR. SMITH. *(Snaps:)* I haven't asked you to. *(Pause.)* What's this really about, Heather?

HEATHER. You know what it's about. You. HIV. And Thomas Paine High School.

(She looks at ALMA. HEATHER is a bit uncomfortable.)

MR. SMITH. It's about me. Yes. You hate me so much, Heather?

(Silence. Finally:)

HEATHER. Yes.

MR. SMITH. I'm sorry. I never wanted that.

HEATHER. You pulled our—

MR. SMITH. *(Shouts:)* Cut the bullshit, Heather!

(Silence. HEATHER is shocked, and so is ALMA. They've never heard Mr. Smith raise his voice in four years.)

HEATHER. It is! It is! You pulled our—

MR. SMITH. This is about you and me! Be honest about that, at least!

THIS PLAY IS NOT OVER!

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