

Tales from an American Theme Park: A One-Act

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&
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Abstract: In this piece, a teacher-educator and his former English Education student dramatize their shared experiences as both teachers and students in a one-act play that investigates the myriad tensions of American public schools. Their project marbles Maxine Greene's (2008) lauding of "aesthetic education experiences" with Johnny Saldaña's (1999, 2005) work in "ethnodrama" to invite the audience to tease out their own conclusions about the tensions of public education.

Keywords: Teacher education, tensions, satire, arts-based education, attrition, alternative schooling.



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Sophie Whiteside is an English major at Ball State University with a specialization in Literature. As a former homeschooled student, Sophie loves reading, writing, and working with counselors and campers during the summer.

PREFACE:

Sophie wasn't the only one to leave the classroom.

Twenty-one students had originally enrolled for her section of Introduction to English Education, the first major course in the Education English program at the mid-sized, Midwest university where I teach. The class usually attracts first-year students interested in becoming middle or high school English teachers; though in any given term, a small handful of students enroll in the course having recently changed their major or transferred from another, often smaller community college. Sophie embodied the latter.

And, per the major's typical attrition, twenty year-old Sophie was ultimately joined in her departure by two other nontraditional college students who, by the end of our semester, had each decided that teaching just wasn't for them.

They all had different reasons. Sophie's calculated choice was both consistent with the unique, self-admittedly "weird" lens through which she viewed the world, and emblematic of the tensions that plague—or perhaps, perpetuate—the education system writ large. Having been homeschooled for all her pre-college life, Sophie approached the teaching profession from an inherently detached and almost comically romantic philosophical foundation. It wasn't just the physical structures of schools and classrooms that Sophie needed to learn; it was the entire spectrum of discourses and dispositions unique to the American public school paradigm.

Whereas her peers had long since been institutionalized—and thus, nearly immunized—to the mechanized notions of assessment, accountability, routine, and other facets of "factorized" education, Sophie could gaze upon these foreign phenomena with the fresh eyes of a girl who spent the better part of her youth reading and writing whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted, wherever she wanted. She learned to love writing because she was never forced to *do* writing; she cherished reading because she always had the option of not. Granted, her proclivities toward the humanities likely derived just as much from her natural abilities in those areas than from the affordances of the homeschooling model; but the fact that she never had to worry about pleasing a disgruntled teacher or passing a dysfunctional test undoubtedly made doing school all the more pleasant.

Maybe it was predictable, then, that Sophie would leave teaching. The images of schooling that she'd conjured from years of consuming the tales of Laura Ingalls Wilder had, over the course of countless hours nestled under the comfort of her bedsheets, woven a fabulous tapestry of scholastic nostalgia: an innocent, almost cherubic yearning to teach and learn in a manner that exists only on the faded, inked pages of forgotten children's stories. It didn't take long for Sophie to realize that, despite her longing to preserve her little house

and the prairie on which it rested, the character of Mrs. Wilder was really just the well-crafted reflections of an inherently unknown stranger. A figment of a beloved series, long since cancelled.

Melissa Gilbert sells skin cream now. And her character's bonnets are packed in a warehouse somewhere.

But for me, Sophie's departure signified more than just another disillusioned college kid calling it quits. All the tensions and stresses and conflicts and pressures by which we all seem to measure our profession never left the forefront of her consciousness for the four months we shared a classroom space. Even as a first-year preservice teacher, Sophie engaged with teaching with such profundity that her leaving compelled me to seek her out to figure out what she saw in what we do that made her want no hand in it.

My quest brings us here.

Sophie's story offers but one of the hordes of tales of teacher tensions. Yet because, without question, Sophie showed more promise and skill as a teacher than most of her colleagues, I was drawn to her decision to leave the classroom before she ever really entered it. I knew her story had value, if only for its tragic brevity, and as a teacher-educator, my initial impulse was to conduct some sort of research on my former student: to gather some groundbreaking data that I alone would analyze and interpret and that, through my own privileged lens and from my own polished platform, I would later disseminate according to the traditions of empirical scholarship and publication.

And so the rollercoaster began.

Sophie and I entered the preliminary stages of the research study process. I asked her questions, she answered, I added more, she elaborated. Rinse and repeat. Three cycles worth. Nothing too formal at first. Just scouting for any promising leads. There were recordings. And emails. And coffee shop whine sessions. We had member checks and interrater reliability and axial codes and all the other markers of a fine project.

Yet as I continued transcribing these initial conversations verbatim and arduously coding the documents—which, by this time, had formed quite the compendium—I began to question if my current pursuit was really in the best interest of Sophie, her story, or the countless other students, teachers, and stakeholders who may benefit from a nontraditional, more accessible approach to critically grappling with matters of schools and schooling. The academic inside me was fighting the good fight, or so the story goes; but as a teacher and writer and actor and mentor and father and citizen, I lamented the whole, sterile mess of it.

I didn't *want* to research Sophie. Hers was not my story to consume, process, and purge for my own professional gain. And the organic conversations we quickly found ourselves having flowed more like those of beleaguered soldiers waxing chaotic about their shared turmoil on the soil of some far-off land than of an academic studying some pseudonymous participant.

Sophie was not my project; she never had been. Her story of studentdom marbled so richly with mine as a teacher that before long we both agreed that rather than subscribe to the tenets of conventional

scholarship, we each strongly longed for a different approach: to provoke, as opposed to prescribe. To perpetuate abstraction rather than alleviating it with tables, charts, and graphs. There had to be a different way, we hoped: some fresh perspective and collaborative endeavor we could utilize to achieve our respective ends while still reaching the people who, we felt, needed a new way of seeing themselves in their struggles.

And Sophie certainly knew struggle, at least in her feigned attempts at reconciling her childhood passion for prairie schooling with the plaguing realities of contemporary education. Despite her brief tenure as an English Education student, she had seen enough in her limited field experiences (as well as in the pedagogical dispositions of her peers who, for the most part, were products of the public school system) to disincentivize any fleeting inclination to stay in the program.

Her concerns were robust: complex, yet nuanced and sophisticated. She saw schools as cold places, inherently and irrevocably severed from the real concerns and ambitions of its students and teachers. As capitalistic mechanisms impervious to human agency, schools operated as barren, monstrous wastelands: isolated pockets of dissatisfaction and artificiality whose pervasive undercurrent of distrust and apathy ultimately corrodes any attempts at authentic liberation. Further confounding the perilous state of state-funded schools, Sophie argued, was the fact that teacher-education programs perpetually failed to address the harsh demands and dehumanizing conditions of *real* teaching. Granted, Sophie conceded that teaching still ranks among the most important and potentially powerful professions in the world. But the fragility of preservice teachers' resolves, Sophie lamented, renders unsustainable whatever energies and activisms and advocacies with which these future teachers someday enter their classrooms.

It's almost as if, Sophie once offered, we all are waiting around for something really good to happen, all the while knowing that whatever's behind the fence isn't real and we're all just wasting our time. But we wait there anyway because it's what we've always done, even though we know there's something better on the other side of the parking lot.

I've never been homeschooled. And it's been years since I've been a first-year student of anything. Still, something about Sophie's framing of her own educational experiences made me think that maybe we had more to offer our field together than we did separately.

Thus, in the interest of preserving the rawness of her insights—and in the innovative spirit of ethnotheatre/drama (Saldaña, 1999; 2005)—we determined that, rather than simply writing *about* Sophie or researching her as a subject of *my* scholarship, the two of us would collaborate on a piece that dramatizes our shared experiences as students and teachers. As we dove deeper into the project, we realized that neither of us felt comfortable (or capable) addressing teacher tensions in a traditional, academic way.

Maybe that's one of the tensions, we thought. *We're constantly trying to revolutionize English/Education, but we keep writing in the same way, for the same people, in the same places. The themes and words have*

changed, but the Language is still very much the same. Maybe we should find a different way to talk with our audience, especially since we're not exactly sure what we want to say or how we want to say it. Maybe it would work better if the audience could tease out their own conclusions, free from the limitations of our prescriptions...

Our Play. As our talks evolved, we found that we kept framing our struggles—as students, teachers, and budding scholars in our own rights—in terms of something else. Metaphors became the means to mobilize the feelings we couldn't articulate. Laziness became a dialogue; Class became a kid; Rules became a Loud Speaker; Teaching became a sideshow act; and Education itself, a theme park. As those metaphors extended, so too did our realization that maybe art would make the best vehicle to navigate our frustrations.

Art, after all, has always served as a placeholder for certainty. An arts-based, or “aesthetic education,” as Maxine Greene (1988) argues, is “integral to the development of persons—to their cognitive, perceptual, emotional, and imaginative development,” (p. 7). As Language Arts students by trade, Sophie and I both recognize that art offers a means to negotiate our concerns and anxieties with our competing worlds, thus echoing Greene’s (1988) assertion that aesthetic experiences create an awareness that “we are in the present as living, perceiving beings becoming aware that there is always, always more,” (p. 16). What better way, then, to discuss the tensions of Language Arts education than by employing both language and art.

And so we offer you this play. A singular act, conceived from the unique lived experiences of two players on opposite ends of the educational world’s stage: Sophie, a fiercely self-driven, sensitive, home-schooled aesthete who spent four months studying to be a teacher before ultimately quitting. And Jeff, her former teacher-educator. This play is an original work only insofar as its characters have never seen the light of day or ink; but the story itself is certainly not new. Only its production.

Each of us embodies several characters and perspectives of this show. We’re all Clowns in our own ways: each of us, occasionally, an Old Man. We’ve all been Laura’s mistaken for Dorothy’s and we know what it’s like to hang on the Sound System’s every word. We curse our signs but hold them dear. And, boy, do we love our traditions. The data from our discussions might never make it to charts or graphs, but we’re both content with having it live in the lives of the characters we created.

Though our play has never been performed, at least not on a stage, its tensions and victories, complexities and anxieties have all been felt by anyone who’s ever stayed the course in hopes for signs of validation that may never come. Jeff and Sophie are just two people. A teacher and a student. The former has no idea what it’s like to be homeschooled, and the latter can’t reconcile a career spent preparing students to embark on a profession from which so few professionals emerge unscathed. And yet, in their own ways, despite their differences, they each know what it’s like to stand immobile. Next to a fence. With strangers you know so well. Waiting for your turn to see, first hand, the beast on the other side.

Because teaching isn’t just one thing. It’s honorable and horrifying. Rewarding and degrading. Sometimes we’re sculptors molding young minds; other times we’re stumbling through a minefield. In many

ways, it's the best and most precious and proudest and coolest job in the world. And some days it just feels like you're baking in line, waiting to board a ride that can't be seen but whose rumbling shrieks and screams and cries of laughter can be heard for miles and felt in your bones.

The ground keeps shaking as you inch, trembling, forward.

**TALES FROM AN AMERICAN THEME PARK:
A ONE-ACT**

CHARACTERS

THE SOUND SYSTEM
LAURA
OLD MAN
MOM
SON
ONE LADY
ANOTHER LADY
THAT GUY
OTHER GUY
CLOWN

PLACE

The line waiting to board "Mineshaft,"
a rollercoaster at an American theme park.

TIME

Present Day

SCENE 1

(AT RISE, ALL stand in a straight line in front of a giant fence that spans the stage. Throughout FENCE are tiny, sporadic holes that people can look through. On the FENCE are various multicolored posters and SIGNS. Behind the FENCE hangs a giant banner that says "Mineshaft." OFF STAGE the sounds of a ROLLERCOASTER can be heard. ALL appear fidgety, checking their watches, peeking through the holes in the FENCE, and suspiciously looking around at each other. A mix of emotions can be seen on their faces. A nervous, fatigued tension consumes the space. CLOWN slowly slithers among the crowd, silently antagonizing everyone, moving between them.)

THE SOUND SYSTEM

(From OFF STAGE, over a loudspeaker)

Would the owner of a brand new, 400 gig, white iFace TurboX Plus please report to Gate B. Your item has been found. Also, there are several lost kids wandering around the vending machines. Maintenance, initiate Code Black. That is all.

(Enter LAURA, frantically trying to find her place in line)

ONE LADY

(relieved, to ANOTHER LADY)

Gosh. Good thing they found that. Somebody was probably pretty worried there for a second.

ANOTHER LADY

I know, right! I just hope it wasn't my kid. He's already lost three this month.

ONE LADY

(shocked and concerned)

Three? Has he already ridden?

(LAURA finds a place behind ONE LADY and ANOTHER LADY.)

ANOTHER LADY

(embarrassed, fatigued)

Oh yeah, he's on again right now. I'm not really sure how since he keeps losing his iFace, but I don't know. He keeps figuring out a way to slip through, I guess.

LAURA

(somewhat frazzled, and meekly, to ONE LADY and ANOTHER LADY)

Excuse me. Did he say lost kids?

ONE LADY

(confused, annoyed)

What?

LAURA

That voice. Just now. Over the system. D-D-Did he say something about lost kids?

ANOTHER LADY

(to LAURA, getting suspicious)

How long have you been standing there?

LAURA

Me? Oh, I just got here. Why?

ONE LADY

What do you mean you just got here? How could you just get here?

LAURA

Um...I don't really know what you mean. I-I wanted to ride, so I got one of these Quick-Tick stamps and got in line.

(ONE LADY and ANOTHER LADY share a skeptical glance.)

ANOTHER LADY

(to LAURA)

But you've been here before, right?

LAURA

Actually, no. This is my first time. I've never even seen one of these rides. I've never been to any place like this. It's beautiful!

(down the line, CLOWN can be seen bothering OLD MAN, trying to get him to laugh. THAT GUY and OTHER GUY stand by watching, laughing to themselves.)

OLD MAN

(to CLOWN)

I've told you before, please leave me alone. I don't need you!

THAT GUY

(to OLD MAN)

Oh, come on, old man! Let him be!

OTHER GUY

Yeah, he's just trying to do his job!

OLD MAN

(to THAT GUY and OTHER GUY)

Well, he should find another job! I don't need him bothering me! I'm perfectly fine waiting alone!

THAT GUY

Whatever.

(CLOWN leaves OLD MAN alone and goes to stand by SON, trying to entertain him.)

OLD MAN

(to himself)

Shouldn't even need him anyway. Used to be able to just stand.

ONE LADY

(to ANOTHER LADY)

Poor Old Man. Doesn't even know how to wait in line anymore.

ANOTHER LADY

Yeah, you think he'd get used to things by now.

LAURA

(continuing, to ONE LADY and ANOTHER LADY)

How long have you two been here?

ONE LADY

(*really thinking, to ANOTHER LADY*)

Seems like forever, right? (to LAURA) Look (points OFF STAGE, toward the end of the line). You can't even see the beginning of the line anymore. That's where we got on. Somewhere back there. Seems like forever ago. Damn. We've really come a long way.

(CLOWN has been overhearing the conversation and runs up to ONE LADY and squeezes her nose.)

CLOWN

Honk! Right on the nose!

(CLOWN runs away giggling and goes back to SON who's been watching, unamused.)

THAT GUY and OTHER GUY

(laughing in appreciation of a good joke)

ANOTHER LADY

(clearly in pain)

Ugh. I hate that clown. Maybe the old man's right; why do they even have that guy anyway?

LAURA

(trying to be comforting)

I actually read that it's something new they're trying. To make the wait more pleasant or something. More entertaining? Make sure we don't get bored and leave, I guess.

(MOM has been eavesdropping; she's standing by SON who's playing games on a tablet and swaying his head side to side, ignoring CLOWN.)

MOM

(to LAURA)

Ha! Bored and leave? Yeah. Like we'd leave after waiting this long!

THAT GUY

(to LAURA)

Yeah, and watch your mouth! Don't you know ya can't say the B-Word anymore? Not in this line, anyway.

OTHER GUY

Yeah, shut up! Every time someone says the B-Word, somewhere there's a clown that falls down dead!

(CLOWN, having heard this, performs a comically elaborate, dramatic death. THAT GUY and OTHER GUY laugh and applaud.)

ONE LADY

(to LAURA)

They're right; don't let anyone hear you talking like that. Just keep your eyes straight ahead and a smile on your face. Even if ya gotta fake it.

OLD MAN

(to ONE LADY)

Ha! Fake it?! There is no fake anymore. No real. (to himself) It's just the line and nothing else.

ANOTHER LADY

Yeah, but the ride'll be worth it. (to ONE LADY, in a sing song manner, almost like a recitation from memory) Right? Ya can't ride the ride if you don't wait in line.

ONE LADY

Right. (to LAURA) And that's why we're here. Everybody knows the ride'll be worth it.

OLD MAN

(to himself)

It's just the line. It's all just the line.

LAURA

Aren't any of you excited, though? I heard this is, like, the best ride in the world...

MOM

Yeah, okay, Dorothy! I don't know what you heard, but this sure ain't the best ride in the world. It ain't even the best ride in this damn park!

LAURA

There are other rides in this park?

ALL

(uproarious but comically brief laughter, except OLD MAN)

OLD MAN

(to himself)

Didn't used to be.

MOM

(still laughing)

Of course there are other rides in the park! Buy nobody ever goes on 'em because this one's just the biggest and the first one ya see when you walk in. It's on all the posters and signs and everything. But yeah, there are others. Tons of others.

ONE LADY

(getting annoyed, to MOM)

Well then why don't you take your kid and go ride one of them, huh? If this one's so bad...

MOM

Hey, back off, lady. I rode this ride when I was a kid; My kid'll ride this ride. That's just how it's gonna be.

LAURA

You're going to ride with him too, though, right?

MOM

Hell no! I'll wait with him, at least for now, but I already been on this one. One's enough for me! Ain't no point in goin' twice.

THAT GUY

We've been twice! More than twice!

THE OTHER GUY

Yup, tons of times!

LAURA

You guys have been more than once?

THAT GUY

Of course we have! We've been so many times, we know all the spins and curves by heart!

THE OTHER GUY

Yeah, it used to hurt a lot, back when we first started, but now we know when to keep our arms in and when to brace ourselves for all the wild turns.

THAT GUY

Yeah, there sure are a lot of ups and downs!

CLOWN

(runs across the stage on pinches THAT GUY)

Honk! Right on the nose! (runs away cackling, back to SON)

THAT GUY
(laughing)
Classic clown. Got me again!

THE SOUND SYSTEM

(from OFF STAGE; ALL listen attentively)

Valued Customers; this is just a reminder that if you are not taller than the sign, you cannot ride the ride. Even if you feel taller than the sign or think of yourself as taller than the sign or identify as taller than the sign, you still cannot ride the ride. This is for the safety of all passengers.

(a mix of indiscriminate cheers and boos goes through the crowd. Everyone seems to have an opinion except LAURA. She looks around for the SIGN but can't see anything.)

Also, maintenance, six more screws have fallen out of the tunnel on turn five, and four carts have derailed from the second hill. There's nothing to worry about folks; they were only half full, but maintenance, please initiate Code Pink. That is all.

(ALL stand pensively and reflect on what they just heard.)

OLD MAN
(to himself)
They need a new sign.
ONE LADY
(to ANOTHER LADY)
What's Code Pink again?

LAURA
(to OLD MAN)
What sign? I don't even see a sign?

ANOTHER LADY
(to ONE LADY)

I think it's when maintenance repaints the loading bay again. No matter what breaks, they just keep painting and painting. That way it still looks nice.

OLD MAN
(to LAURA)
They haven't fixed the sign.

MOM
(to OLD MAN)

Shut up, Old Man. You heard him! It's for our safety! My kid ain't gonna be dragged off that ride by some fattie who shouldn't even be on there!

OLD MAN

(almost pleading, to LAURA)

They need a new sign. They've been measuring wrong. Too many people can't ride. They need a new sign with better measurements.

THAT GUY

Some parks on the other side of town don't have any signs! Anybody can ride!

MOM

(snaps at THAT GUY)

Yeah, and people fall off all the time, too!

OLD MAN

(to himself)

People fall here.

ONE LADY

(to OLD MAN)

What are you all talking about? They have standards, don't they? Ya gotta have standards at a place like this, right? (in a condescending tone) This ride just isn't for everybody; some people just shouldn't go-

OLD MAN

-I'm not talking about standards, I'm talking about measurements! We used to have some. I think. But those signs, I've seen 'em myself. They're broken. And the words are starting to fade and chip. They need new signs.

ANOTHER LADY

(to ONE LADY)

And you can't even ride if you don't wait in line. You gotta earn the ride.

ONE LADY

That's right.

(ALL stare accusingly at LAURA.)

LAURA

(trying to divert attention)

Well, what about those screws? And the carts that fell off? Shouldn't they close the ride? Don't they need to fix it?

(ALL pause and look at LAURA, confused.)

THE OTHER GUY

(after a pause)

Close the ride? But...we've all been waiting? What about our turn?

LAURA

Well, couldn't we just go on one of the other rides? On the other side of the park?

ALL

(uproarious but comically brief laughter, except OLD MAN)

MOM

(still laughing)

Yeah, right, lady! After waiting this long, you just wanna go stand in another line? Those rides ain't for us! You gotta have a special pass or something to wait in those lines!

LAURA

Yeah, but you said—

(MOM throws her arms up and exits, furious. LAURA just stares in confusion.)

ONE LADY

—Forget what we said, Dorothy. You don't know what we've been through, how long we've been waiting. We're tired. Our feet hurt. And we're hungry. This is the ride we're supposed to be on. Just let us wait. It'll all be worth it. The sound system keeps promising us that! (after a pause) You're not even supposed to be here anyway.

LAURA

But that sound system said it was broken!

ANOTHER LADY

Maybe it's the system that's broken...

CLOWN

(runs over to ANOTHER LADY, who quickly stops him)

Honk! Right on the—

ANOTHER LADY

—I swear to God, clown, I'll end you right now!

(CLOWN looks at ANOTHER LADY, then at ALL, resigns to the fact that he's no longer wanted, takes off his nose, sighs and starts to walk OFF STAGE. THAT GUY and OTHER GUY stop him.)

THAT GUY and OTHER GUY

(stepping out of the line, to CLOWN)

Oh Captain, my Captain!

(*THAT GUY and OTHER GUY exchange a long, emotional stare with CLOWN. ALL watch in silence.*)

CLOWN

(*proudly, gratefully, emotionally*)
Thank you, boys. Thank you.

(*CLOWN exits.*)

LAURA

(*after a pause, to ALL*)
But what if the ride really is broken?

THAT GUY

Who they gonna get to fix it, huh? Maintenance? Maintenance can't fix anything! Everybody knows that. They just do whatever the sound system tells 'em to. But they're not really fixing anything.

LAURA

Well, why not?

ANOTHER GUY

Because they can't! Real shame, too. They pay all that money to go to one of them fancy maintenance training schools. They get their nice uniforms, then they come to a place that only lets 'em paint signs and kick kids out of the vending machines.

LAURA

So they *can* fix the rides, but they just don't?

OLD MAN

(*to himself*)
We used to.

ONE LADY

(*to LAURA, maternally*)

They can't. Whoever's on the other end of that sound system won't let 'em. Doesn't trust 'em or something. They got their own people or machines or whatever to fix the rides that're really broken. Maintenance is just here for us. Kinda for show. To make us feel better.

ANOTHER LADY

(*more to herself than to LAURA*)

Yup. Them and the clowns. Keep us from getting bored.

THAT GUY and ANOTHER GUY

(*in mock tears*)

No!!! The B-Word!! Another one!!

OLD MAN

(to LAURA)

They used to let us fix the rides. Some parks still do. But none around here. We used to be able to sit and ride with the guests, check to see what worked and what didn't. Where it was scary and where it needed spruced up a bit. We even used to wait in line with them, figure out what sorts of rides they liked and why they were even here. We asked the guests what they wanted to ride and designed rides for them. We always kept it safe. And we never lost any kids at the vending machines.

ONE LADY

(*dismissive and accusatory, to OLD MAN*)

You lost kids, old man. Plenty.

ANOTHER LADY

Yeah, and nobody ever asked me what I liked.

OLD MAN

(*to himself*)

We tried.

ANOTHER LADY

You didn't try! We filled out those stupid surveys but nobody ever read, em', right? You always just did whatever you wanted, no matter what we really needed! And yeah, you stood out here with us while we waited, but only cuz you missed the line and wanted to stand again! It wasn't really for us! You just liked the wait!

OLD MAN

But at least we could read the signs!

(*SON, for the first time, notices MOM is gone. He puts down his tablet, removes his headphones, steps out of the line, and looks all around. ALL watch, unsure how to react.*)

THAT GUY

(*cautiously, to SON*)

You alright, man?

SON

What?

ANOTHER GUY

(*cautious but caring*)

Yeah, do you, like, need anything?

SON

(*to ALL, deadpan*)

No. Where's my mom?

LAURA

(steps out of line, to SON, maternally)
She just walked away for a little bit. But she'll be back soon!

SON

(surveying the situation, suspicious, cautious)
That clown gone?

LAURA

He is. It's just us now. (to ALL) But we're not going anywhere, right? I promise. We'll all stay here with you and make sure you get on the ride. Okay? We're almost there. Are you getting excited? Are you ready?

(SON absorbs what LAURA has said. He steps further out of line, slowly looks back at the beginning, then at ALL. He turns around and faces the FENCE that blocks the view of the ride. OFF STAGE the sounds of the ROLLERCOASTER FADE OUT.)

SON

(to LAURA, more genuine than before, almost frightened)
What happened? I can't hear anything anymore.

(LAURA looks around, unsure of what to say. ALL just stare and listen. Then, to SON.)

LAURA

(with increasing futility and desperation)
Well, that's okay! Look, I think we're all getting on next. It's almost our turn. We've all come this far, let's just stay together and get on soon. We'll ride together! Okay!

ANOTHER LADY

(after a pause, aside, to ONE LADY)
Do you think it's really broken this time?

ONE LADY

(to ANOTHER LADY)

I don't know. I can still hear something behind the fence. I think.

LAURA

(to SON)

Well? Will you ride with us?

THAT GUY

(*stays in line, overselling it*)

It's really cool, kid!

ANOTHER GUY

(*matching THAT GUY'S enthusiasm*)

Yeah, we've ridden tons of times!

THAT GUY

Tons of times!

LAURA

(*realizing it probably won't happen*)

Let's do it! We're so close!

OLD MAN

(*to himself*)

Right on the nose.

(*SON steps further out of line and examines ALL from head to toe. He pays no attention to the FENCE. After examining everyone carefully, he stops at LAURA. ALL wait in suspense.*)

SON

(*deadpan, after a long pause*)

This line sucks.

(*SON exits. ALL stand in silence. LAURA is heartbroken.*)

THAT GUY

(*aside to ANOTHER GUY, earnestly, after a long pause*)

Think the clown coulda saved him?

ANOTHER GUY

Beats me. But at least he wouldn't have been bor-well, you know...

THAT GUY

(*with a strange, almost foreign compassion*)

Yeah. Probably not.

(*from OFF STAGE, the sound of the ROLLEROASTER returns. ALL look around, eager to see and hear what comes next.*)

SOUND SYSTEM

(*excitedly, with pride and energy*)

Congratulations, riders! You've made it to the front of the line! Your time has come!

(an instant, fidgety, positive energy returns to ALL. Smiles beam, their posture straightens, and each person checks one another over to make sure they're presentable. Only LAURA and OLD MAN remain pensive and quiet; motionless.)

ONE LADY

(to ANOTHER LADY)

We did it! It's finally our turn!

ANOTHER LADY

I've been waiting for this for so long!

THAT GUY

This is it!

OTHER GUY

We earned this!

OLD MAN

(to himself)

I do miss it.

LAURA

(still looking in the direction of SON, now gone)

He missed it. He was so close.

SOUND SYSTEM

Maintenance, please initiate Code White! And congratulations again, everyone. Thank you for waiting!

(CLOWN enters. He's dressed in a formal academic regalia but is still wearing his make-up and shoes. He's carrying a stack of large envelopes and begins distributing them to ALL. They open their envelopes and compare the contents with one another, smiling and exchanging various signs of support and congratulations.)

LAURA

(after a pause, confused, to CLOWN)

What is this?

ANOTHER LADY

(to ONE LADY, comparing papers)

Oh, look at you! Gorgeous!

THAT GUY

(to OTHER GUY)

Hey man, lookin' good! Nice!

LAURA

(to CLOWN, frustrated)

Excuse me! What are these? Where did they come from?

(CLOWN looks at LAURA, waves, gives a "thumbs up," and exits.)

OLD MAN

(to LAURA, almost like a confession)

It's your prize. It's what they give you for waiting.

ONE LADY

(catches a glimpse of LAURA'S paper; to LAURA)

Oh, honey, yours looks great! Nice work!

LAURA

(confused, to OLD MAN)

But...but this is just a picture of me waiting in line!

THAT GUY

(looks at LAURA'S paper; to LAURA)

Damn, girl, you look good! Congrats!

LAURA

(to OLD MAN)

I don't understand. After waiting for so long, this is all we get?

ANOTHER LADY

(to LAURA)

Oh, come on now, you weren't waiting that long...

LAURA

(losing control, frantic)

But...but what about the ride? Why would I want a picture of me waiting in line? It makes no sense! This doesn't mean anything!

OTHER GUY

(to ANOTHER GUY)

This is, like, the best picture I've ever gotten in line! You wanna go again?

THAT GUY

(excited)

Hell yeah! Let's do it! (to ONE LADY and ANOTHER LADY) You guys wanna come, too?

(ONE LADY and ANOTHER LADY look at each other and shrug their shoulders. Then they look at OTHER GUY and THAT GUY and nod in agreement.)

THAT GUY

Awesome! The line doesn't look too long now. Let's do it!

(THAT GUY, OTHER GUY, ONE LADY, and ANOTHER LADY start to exit. They walk past LAURA, who's been staring at OLD MAN.)

OTHER GUY

(as he passes LAURA, to LAURA)
We've been on this tons of times.

THAT GUY, ONE LADY, ANOTHER LADY
Tons of times!

(all four exit, laughing and comparing papers; after a pause, OLD MAN starts to exit past LAURA.)

LAURA

(as OLD MAN slowly walks by)
So there really is no ride?

(OLD MAN stops, sighs, turns, and slowly walks back to LAURA. He avoids eye contact and approaches hesitantly. He looks down at her paper.)

OLD MAN

It really is a good picture. You look good in this line. You could do good here. If you wanted.

LAURA

Did you do good here?

OLD MAN

I think so. When I could find it.

LAURA

Are you going back with them? To wait again?

OLD MAN

I will. It's what we do. Would you like to join me?

LAURA

(looks at her picture, pauses)
I would. But I think it's time for Dorothy to go home.

OLD MAN

It really is a good picture of you.

LAURA

They should've gotten my good side.

(*LAURA starts to exit.*)

OLD MAN

(*in one last plea*)

Goodbye, Dorothy.

LAURA

(*pauses*)

My name's Laura.

(*LAURA exits; after a few moments, OLD MAN exits the opposite side of the stage which now sits empty, the ROLLERCOASTER still audible from OFF STAGE*)

SOUND SYSTEM

(*after a pause*)

Ladies and Gentlemen, this is just a reminder that we are still open for business. Maintenance, please stand by.

(*CURTAIN*)

References

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