

WHAT I GIVE MYSELF

By Alan Haehnel

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CAST: 2 Females, genders flexible

SET: Teacher's desk, two chairs, computer

PROP: Backpack, manila folder, papers

Open to a teacher's desk with a chair behind it, a student desk in front of it. MRS. CHENEY, bespectacled, sits at the desk. SYDNEY enters.

SYDNEY: Mrs. Cheney? You wanted to...?

MRS. CHENEY: Ah, Sydney, good. Have a seat.

(SYDNEY does.)

Do you have any idea why you're here?

SYDNEY: You... you told me to come in.

MRS. CHENEY: Yes, but do you have any idea *why* I asked you to come in?

SYDNEY: No.

MRS. CHENEY: (*holding up an essay test*) Does this, perhaps, give you a hint?

SYDNEY: Uh...

MRS. CHENEY: I think, given your hesitation, that your answer is yes, you now have some idea why this essay concerns me.

SYDNEY: Okay.

MRS. CHENEY: So. Why don't you explain.

SYDNEY: Um, explain, why I did so bad on it or...

MRS. CHENEY: Start wherever you'd like, Sydney.

SYDNEY: That's the one on *Antigone*.

MRS. CHENEY: Yes.

SYDNEY: Well, um, the questions were a lot about the dad, and...

MRS. CHENEY: Whose dad?

SYDNEY: Antigone's.

MRS. CHENEY: I didn't ask any questions about Antigone's father. That would be Oedipus.

SYDNEY: Oh, yeah, I meant, you know, the king.

MRS. CHENEY: Creon.

SYDNEY: Right.

MRS. CHENEY: Antigone's uncle.

SYDNEY: Right, yeah. So, a lot of the questions were about...

MRS. CHENEY: All right, Sydney, we both know you didn't read the play.

SYDNEY: I did. Most of it.

MRS. CHENEY: Mm-hm.

SYDNEY: Yeah, except, I didn't pay as much attention to... you know, to the king, to Creon.

MRS. CHENEY: What did you get on this test, Sydney?

SYDNEY: Uh... not very good.

MRS. CHENEY: Give me a grade. Give me a number.

SYDNEY: I think... a D, maybe.

MRS. CHENEY: Correct. Whether or not you read most of the play, you earned a 64, a D, on the test. Not very good, as you say. (*handing the paper to SYDNEY*) Now, would you mind reading me the comment and the grade on the top of this paper.

SYDNEY: "B+, 88. Nice insight, Sydney. You really seemed to understand Antigone's dilemma, and I liked how you brought some of your own personality into your explanation."

MRS. CHENEY: Keep reading.

SYDNEY: That's... that's all it says.

MRS. CHENEY: On the top of the paper, but let me hear the other comments.

SYDNEY: (*looking through the paper*) "Great word choice!" "No wonder you get Antigone's character so good, it sounds like you have had to make some tough choices, too." "Excellent progress, Sydney. I'm glad you took the time to read most of this play, and you wrote more than you normally do on an essay test. You should feel very good about this."

MRS. CHENEY: Back to the first page, Sydney. How is the word "dilemma" spelled?

SYDNEY: I'm sorry. I didn't know...

MRS. CHENEY: No, just stick to the question at hand right now. "Dilemma." How is it spelled?

SYDNEY: D-i-l-l-e-m-a.

MRS. CHENEY: Is that the proper spelling of the word?

SYDNEY: Probably not.

MRS. CHENEY: Try definitely not. Nor would I ever write, "No wonder you get Antigone's character so good." I would write "well." I am an English teacher, after all. And I certainly wouldn't follow up, in the same sentence, with a comma splice!

SYDNEY: I didn't know we would be handing this back in.

MRS. CHENEY: I gave you a handout at the beginning of the semester stating which assignments I would be re-collecting for inclusion in the portfolio, and the *Antigone* essay test was on that list.

SYDNEY: I... okay.

MRS. CHENEY: Regardless, that is not the issue. What do you think is the issue?

SYDNEY: That I... that I changed the grade on it.

MRS. CHENEY: Not only did you change the grade, you changed all the comments. Most disconcerting of all, Sydney, and this I absolutely cannot believe, you forged my hand-writing, altering what I wrote into an entirely different message!

SYDNEY: I'm sorry. I didn't know we were going to hand it back in.

MRS. CHENEY: How would that look, do you suppose, to next year's teacher, if she read over "my" comments and found misspellings and incorrect punctuation?

SYDNEY: Bad.

MRS. CHENEY: Did your parents happen to notice those errors when you showed them the altered test?

SYDNEY: No!

MRS. CHENEY: Well, I can't say I'm surprised.

SYDNEY: I mean, no, I didn't show them, her, I didn't show her the test. My mother never saw it.

MRS. CHENEY: She never...? Sydney, you've been caught. You do understand that we take academic integrity very seriously here, don't you?

SYDNEY: Yes.

MRS. CHENEY: Cheating triggers a clear protocol: You get a zero on the assignment; you get reported to Mr. Tyrone; he calls home to your parents... you live with just your mother?

SYDNEY: Yes.

MRS. CHENEY: Well, Mr. Tyrone would need to call her.

SYDNEY: She's really hard to reach.

MRS. CHENEY: I'm just telling you the protocol. The point is, it's quickly out of my hands, after I report it. And you should be aware that the incident becomes part of your permanent record. We don't take these issues lightly.

SYDNEY: I realize that.

MRS. CHENEY: So I make it my policy, before handing the matter over to Mr. Tyrone, to bring the student in to find out if there are any extenuating circumstances or misunderstandings that might come to bear. Do you understand?

SYDNEY: I think so.

MRS. CHENEY: In other words, Sydney, this is your chance to come clean, to explain yourself--to me, before it goes any further. So, as I said before, you have been caught. Please do not lie to me anymore.

SYDNEY: I'm not lying. I never showed my mother. I mean, she doesn't see any of my school stuff. She's not... she works a lot, so she doesn't really get a chance to. She never... She doesn't get a chance to.

MRS. CHENEY: So when were you planning to show it to her?

SYDNEY: I wasn't.

MRS. CHENEY: Surely you were planning to show someone. The department head, a member of the administration? You were going to bring up your grade on the computer, show someone what I had given you...

SYDNEY: That's not...

MRS. CHENEY: And then you were going to show that person the paper as proof that I had made a mistake. Isn't that right?

SYDNEY: No! I don't even know how to get on the grade portal--I lost my password!

MRS. CHENEY: (*holding up the paper*) Then what is this *for*, Sydney? An art project?

SYDNEY: I just... I...

MRS. CHENEY: (*rising*) Come on. Never mind. We're going down to see Mr. Tyrone.

SYDNEY: No, please. It's just... something I do.

MRS. CHENEY: "Do"? Is this an on-going thing?

SYDNEY: Sort of.

MRS. CHENEY: Sydney, show me your English notebook.

SYDNEY: My...?

MRS. CHENEY: Your notebook, Sydney, where you keep all of your English materials.

SYDNEY: (*going through her backpack*) Uh, they're sort of not all in one place. I mean, were we supposed to keep...? I have some of my stuff. (*pulling out a folder with papers sticking out of it, willy-nilly, handing it to MRS. CHENEY*) I think that's mostly English.

MRS. CHENEY: We're not going to talk about your organization skills.

SYDNEY: Okay.

(*MRS. CHENEY looks through the papers in the folder for several seconds. SHE pulls out one paper, then another, then a third, placing them on her desk.*)

MRS. CHENEY: I have never... Sydney, this is even more serious than I thought.

SYDNEY: Okay.

MRS. CHENEY: In just that short time, I found three more instances of you forging my handwriting and changing your grade. Would I find more if I kept looking?

SYDNEY: Probably.

MRS. CHENEY: Do you do this in other classes?

SYDNEY: Yes.

MRS. CHENEY: And you forge other teachers' handwriting?

SYDNEY: Mm-hm.

(MRS. CHENEY pauses, considering SYDNEY's papers on the desk. SHE laughs slightly, shaking her head.)

MRS. CHENEY: I am just... well, I do have to acknowledge your talent for forgery. I actually thought, for a second, that I had misspelled "dilemma."

SYDNEY: I like the way you make your "e's" and "m's."

MRS. CHENEY: Sydney, what is this about? How did this start?

SYDNEY: Oh, I remember that. I can remember pretty exactly.

MRS. CHENEY: Go on.

SYDNEY: Um, it was in 8th grade.

MRS. CHENEY: *(incredulous)* 8th grade?

SYDNEY: Yeah. Uh, you know, I had Mr. Baxter. He would have us grade our own spelling quizzes? I mean, he walked around to make sure we weren't cheating, you know. Anyway, um, one day--it was close to Halloween, I remember, because he had his electronic witch set up on his desk, that made this "Eeooow" noise when you walked near it--and we were handing in our quizzes that we had graded. I didn't do too good, too well... got like a 12 out of 20 or something. But when we were handing them forward to Mr. Baxter, I saw on the top of Sue Barton's paper that she had put "20/20, 100%, A+, Awesome Job, Sue--I'm proud of you!"

MRS. CHENEY: But she hadn't altered her grade.

SYDNEY: No. No, the grade was right. I just... thought it was cool that she put down all those other comments, like she was the teacher. I mean, all she was supposed to put was her score, but she added all that other stuff. So, that night, I took out some of my papers and things and I... did that. On papers that I already had back, you know--I didn't try to fool anybody. I didn't show anybody. I just went back on my papers and I... you know, I just added some comments. "Good effort." "You're making progress, Sydney." "Don't give up." Things like that. Things that weren't really on the papers, but I... wished they were. I wasn't trying to fool anybody.

MRS. CHENEY: So let me get this straight. Your claim is that you go home, take out the papers that you get back from the teachers, alter the grades and the comments, all as just a...? A hobby?

SYDNEY: I guess you could call it that. I've never tried to take one of my changed papers and use it to improve my grade. I mean, if you looked at my report cards...

MRS. CHENEY: I did look up your grades.

SYDNEY: See? I mean, they're not very good. If I was trying to cheat, I'd be doing a pretty crappy, I mean, a pretty terrible job of it.

MRS. CHENEY: This must take a substantial amount of time, Sydney, time that would certainly be better spent actually studying, actually doing the work that would merit those comments from the teachers.

SYDNEY: I do study. But it seems like I end up studying the wrong thing, or, the wrong way, most of the time. I guess I just don't get stuff the way people want me to.

MRS. CHENEY: You say you're not trying to fool anyone. But what about yourself? You changed your grade from a D to a B+ on this *Antigone* test; from a C- to a B here; and here, from an F to an A, Sydney... I mean, I don't know what I wrote on the original assignment, but I certainly didn't give you an F and then write, "You really took this poem to heart, Sydney--excellent job!"

SYDNEY: Which one was that?

MRS. CHENEY: That was the technique analysis of Emily Dickinson's "The Soul Selects Her Own Society."

SYDNEY: (*continuing the poem from memory*)

Then shuts the door;
On her divine majority
Obtrude no more.

Unmoved, she notes the chariot's pausing
At her low gate
Unmoved, an emperor is kneeling
Upon her mat.

I've known her from an ample nation
Choose one;
Then close the valves of her attention
Like stone.

MRS. CHENEY: Did you know the poem before we studied it?

SYDNEY: No. I liked it. So I memorized it. That's what I meant when I wrote I really took it to heart.

MRS. CHENEY: I... Sydney...

SYDNEY: I like the last part the best.

MRS. CHENEY: The last stanza.

SYDNEY: Yeah.

MRS. CHENEY: Why?

SYDNEY: I don't know. I like the way "one" and "stone" kind of rhyme but not really, and I like the idea of having, like, all these possibilities, but then choosing one thing and saying, "That's what I need." I'm glad you showed that poem to us.

MRS. CHENEY: That's... very impressive.

SYDNEY: Really?

MRS. CHENEY: Yet on the test, Sydney... if you have such an appreciation for the poem...

SYDNEY: But the test wasn't asking about that.

(MRS. CHENEY pauses, takes off her glasses, rubs her eyes.)

I wish I wasn't being so much trouble. Um, could I show you one other thing?

MRS. CHENEY: What?

SYDNEY: I hope I can find it now. It's probably in that folder I gave you. Can I...?

(MRS. CHENEY hands the folder back to SYDNEY. SYDNEY rifles through it.)

At least I think it's in here. I don't know. Like you said, I have some work to do on my organiza... here it is. Do you have your grade book, or, do you remember what I got on that?

MRS. CHENEY: I have your scores up right here, on the computer.

(MRS. CHENEY looks at the paper SYDNEY has retrieved, then at the computer.) You... you gave yourself a lower grade on this?

SYDNEY: Yeah.

MRS. CHENEY: *(reading from the page)* "Not so well done if you consider that you procrastinated"--there should only be one "n" there--

SYDNEY: Sorry.

MRS. CHENEY: No, I'm sorry. That wasn't relevant. *(continuing to read)*... "Not so well done if you consider that you procrastinated so bad that you had to go to Sparknotes instead of doing the whole reading. Shame on you. C--"

SYDNEY: Yeah, I was kind of bummed about that. Because the "well done" you put on that paper--that was pretty much the best comment I got all year. So, see, I try be honest when I grade myself.

MRS. CHENEY: All right. Still, this issue of the forgery.

SYDNEY: It's weird. It's really weird. I shouldn't be doing it.

MRS. CHENEY: No, I'm past that. I'm not going to turn you in to Mr. Tyrone; I'm not going to give you a 0 on the assignment.

SYDNEY: I mean, I understand if you feel like you should.

MRS. CHENEY: I don't feel like I should. But do you understand how disconcerting it was for me to find these comments I had not written, yet they looked like I had? Handwriting is a very distinctive manifestation of the individual. When you copied it, altered it, I felt, frankly, violated.

SYDNEY: I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to make you feel like that at all. I was never going to show anyone.

MRS. CHENEY: I get that, but why did you take all the time and effort...

SYDNEY: Okay, I'll try to explain this. So I change the grade and I change the comments and I make the paper look like it actually came from the teacher. Your handwriting's pretty easy--it actually makes sense. Mr. Kindserske--he should've been a doctor.

Anyway, when I'm all done... oh, man, I'm sounding so weird!

MRS. CHENEY: No, you're not. Go ahead.

SYDNEY: When I'm all done, I read the grade and the comments, all in the teachers' writing, and I can sort of hear the teachers' voices saying what's on the paper. It's... nice. I guess that's why I go to all the trouble. To feel that. *(After a long pause, SYDNEY offers her folder of papers back to MRS. CHENEY.)* Do you want these?

MRS. CHENEY: No. No, those are yours. Um, on the *Antigone* test, though, that goes in your portfolio...

SYDNEY: Yeah?

MRS. CHENEY: I'm going to type up what you wrote on the test itself, then I'm going to grade it, as I normally would have.

SYDNEY: Okay. Then that can go in the portfolio. That makes sense. I can type it up, if you want.

MRS. CHENEY: No, I'll do it. But then, I'm going to hand the test to you, and I want you to put your grade and your comments back on it, in your own writing.

SYDNEY: Why?

MRS. CHENEY: I think other people should see it. I think it's an important assessment to include.

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