

THE ZIT PRIZE

By Alan Haehnel

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CHARACTERS

PHOEBE	The narrator and inspiration of the Whitehead Essay Contest
MRS. TORRINGTON	English Teacher
DENISE CHAMBERS	Essay contest judge
DONNA GRAYSON	Essay contest judge
MR. MACOMBER	Essay contest judge
ARIEL	Essay contest participant
KAREN	Essay contest participant
TASHA	Essay contest participant
SARAH	Essay contest participant
NATHAN	Essay contest participant
BEN	Essay contest participant
JOE	The one Phoebe inspires
RAINA	Student audience member
MICHELLE	Student audience member
LYZA	Nathan's girl friend
TRACY	Ben's girl friend
ELEANOR	Audience member, adopted friend of Phoebe
MRS. WHITEHEAD	Phoebe's mother
MRS. TOULAINÉ	Mrs. Whitehead's neighbor
MRS. DODDS	Phoebe's teacher

PROPS LIST: A pile of essays

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(Bare stage. PHOEBE enters. SHE wears a dress circa 1918. SHE stands with her arms akimbo, looking around, sizing up the situation.)

PHOEBE: Daunting. Almost overwhelmingly so. *(to us)* Greetings. I am Phoebe, Phoebe Wh... No. Just Phoebe will suffice, for the moment. *(to the wings)* This is what I need. I need Mrs. Torrington over here, standing at the lectern. I need six chairs here, straight line.

(MRS. TORRINGTON enters. Stage hands bring in her lectern, which MRS. TORRINGTON stands behind, frozen as if in mid-speech. Other stage hands bring in the chairs. PHOEBE speaks to us again as the stage is set.)

Inspiration. Do you know the meaning of that word, literally?

(PHOEBE accidentally moves in front of one of the stagehands. Throughout the play, SHE displays a talent for getting in the way. SHE speaks to the stagehand.)

Sorry. Excuse me.

(HE nods and moves around her. PHOEBE turns back to us.)

Inspiration: It means "to breathe in." Inspire. *(SHE breathes in.)* Expire. *(SHE breathes out.)* Of course, now... *(looking at what has been set up behind her)* Wait. People. The chairs are empty; I need people in them. Nathan, Karen, Tasha, Ben, Sarah, Ariel, please, in that order.

(PHOEBE continues to speak to us as the named CHARACTERS hurry in and take their seats.)

Of course, now, those words--inspire and expire--have taken on different meanings, broader meanings than simply the... the... I shouldn't still be talking. Mrs. Torrington, if you please.

(MRS. TORRINGTON speaks as if addressing a group at a school assembly. SHE shows no awareness of PHOEBE.)

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MRS. TORRINGTON: ...this special opportunity that comes only every other year, of course, to hear the finalists read their essays. Before we proceed, however, I would like to introduce our panel of judges, all distinguished members of the community, all having a long connection with...

(MRS. TORRINGTON freezes when PHOEBE speaks.)

PHOEBE: The panel! The panel of judges. Bring them out. Put them here, in a line. We should see them.

(Stage hands bring out three chairs for the JUDGES. The JUDGES enter and sit in them. PHOEBE speaks to us while the JUDGES are coming out.)

Of course, in actuality, they'd be sitting out there, where you are, where you couldn't see them, but this is theatre. We can use our imaginations. We can... we can... here they are. The judges.

MRS. TORRINGTON: Mr. Thomas MacComber, who has been helping us with this contest for the past fourteen years?

MR. MACCOMBER: *(standing)* Sixteen, Mrs. Torrington! Sixteen!

PHOEBE: And drunk every time.

MRS. TORRINGTON: Thank-you, Mr. MacComber.

MR. MACCOMBER: Wouldn't miss it. Wouldn't miss it! Love being here.

MRS. TORRINGTON: And Miss Denise Chambers, representing the Groverton Historical Society.

(MISS CHAMBERS rises slightly from her chair, nods.)

You've been doing this for a number of years as well, haven't you?

(MISS CHAMBERS raises her hand slightly, smiles wanly.)

MR. MACCOMBER: Sixteen years for me! Love it!

MRS. TORRINGTON: And, of course, our most senior representa...

(EVERYONE freezes but PHOEBE.)

PHOEBE: Yes, yes, this is taking too long! This is not the issue. The panel of judges is not the... Last but not... and so on and so forth, Mrs. Donna Grayson, oldest member of the panel, direct descendant of the founder of the award. This is her... nobody-

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really-cares... umpteenth year helping to judge. Thank-you, Mrs. Grayson.

(EVERYONE unfreezes.)

MRS. TORRINGTON: Thank-you, Mrs. Grayson.

MRS. GRAYSON: *(waving)* My pleasure. Thank you.

(Back to the freeze.)

PHOEBE: Isn't she cute, isn't she lovely? Moving right along. Moving right... *(PHOEBE walks behind the seated STUDENTS, referring to each one.)* Nathan: confident. Karen: desperately wanting to check her text messages. Tasha: focused. Ben: wishing he had availed himself of the lavatory before sitting down. Sarah: trying to look sophisticated. Ariel: terrified. Terrified as a... little... shaking thing. Myself? Myself: disgusted. *(to the wings)* Take it away.

(The stage hands come out and remove the chairs and the lectern. The OTHER CHARACTERS exit.)

Take it all away! Clear it! Strike it! All of it! The lectern, the panel of judges, take it, take them... just... just.... I am keenly aware that, thus far, I have not well purported myself, and I sincerely apologize. I cleared the stage so I might clear my mind. Let me be straightforward. I am dead. My name is Phoebe, as I mentioned. I am a muse. I am the muse of the Phoebe White...

(SHE pauses, then speaks to the wings. The stagehands follow the orders SHE gives.)

Bring out Raina and Michelle. Seat them here. Put Raina's hand out in front of her. No, down, like that. Good. That will be hard to maintain. *(to RAINA, who is frozen)* Don't move. *(PHOEBE turns to us.)* I wasn't always like this. When I died, in 1918, at the age of 16, I was really quite an optimistic, calm person. This prize, this essay contest, my mother created in my memory. So, naturally, I was assigned to watch over the proceedings, to provide inspiration for the contestants. *(to RAINA, whose hand has started to lower)* Uh-uh, keep it up. Very good. *(back to us)* Over the years, though, certain events have transpired that have served to... dampen my good spirits. For one, this auditorium--the very one I used to sit in here as a student in Groverton, New Hampshire--why, for the first several years of the contest, this space was festooned with bunting

and flowers. The band played, the mayor came. Now, it's just another assembly, squeezed in between pre-prom warnings--"If you drink, you will have your legs amputated and spoil that \$500.00 dress!"--and... and... every other event that requires the gathering of the students. \$500.00, by the way. For a dress! One could purchase a brand new car, in my day, for less than that! No matter, no matter. Phoebe, stay focused! (*SHE slaps herself on the cheek.*) Yes, yes! (*to RAINA*) Keep that hand aloft! (*to us*) You may wonder why I am torturing this girl. It is because I am angry with her. She is seated in this auditorium, gathered with the rest of the students of Groverton High School. That is, she was. If you'll remember, a few moments ago, when I had everyone out here, Raina--this girl--and her friend Michelle, would have been in the audience, at that point. Do try to keep up. The chronology might be confusing, but... you must try to keep up. Regardless: Raina and Michelle, seated in the audience, waiting to hear this year's essays read aloud, and this is what transpires between them:

(*RAINA and MICHELLE unfreeze. RAINA rubs her arm.*)

RAINA: Ow.

MICHELLE: What?

RAINA: My arm, it's like, sore. Weird.

MICHELLE: What's this assembly for, anyway?

RAINA: Oh, it's The Zit Prize.

MICHELLE: The what?

PHOEBE: The what? The what?

RAINA: The Zit Prize. It's an essay contest. They've been doing it for, like, 300 years or something.

PHOEBE: No, no, no. Try 92 years. I died in 1918. The contest began in 1919 and has occurred on a biennial basis ever since. So, in actuality, they have been doing it for, like, 46 years, Raina.

MICHELLE: Why do they call it The Zit Prize? That's disgusting.

PHOEBE: Why indeed.

RAINA: That's right--you only moved here last year. I forget that. I feel like, like, you've been here forever.

PHOEBE: (*mocking*) It's like, like, like, yeah!

RAINA: Anyway, they don't actually call it The Zit Prize. It's named after some girl who died in the Middle Ages.

PHOEBE: The Middle...?

RAINA: She went to this high school. Anyway, check out her last name: Whitehead!

MICHELLE: Ew! Ga-ross!

RAINA: I know, right? The Phoebe Whitehead Essay Contest!

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MICHELLE: That is sick! Who would name their kid something like that?

PHOEBE: Away. Take them away. Quickly. Before I do something rash. Something violent.

(MICHELLE and RAINA exit; the stage hands take away their chairs.)

Yes. My name is Phoebe Olivia Whitehead. Whitehead is a distinguished name, and some of you are giggling now because you are thinking of a raised, whitish-yellow infection on one's face that adolescents squeeze as a national past-time. I am a close relative of Alfred North Whitehead, perhaps you've heard of him, the co-author, along with his former student, Bertrand Russell, of the seminal work Principia Mathematica? And still, some of you cannot refrain from tittering... there's another word I can't use! "Titter" once meant to laugh, in a restrained fashion--still means to laugh in a restrained fashion--but these two highly-mature boys, leering like... like... sick things, are obviously reacting to the evolution--or should I say pollution--of "titter" that puts them in mind of the protruding portion of a woman's torso. *(toward the boys)* Titter! Titter, titter! *(PHOEBE sighs heavily.)* One gets tired. Particularly when one's very name, over the years, becomes a blemish. Breathe in, Phoebe. Breathe out, Phoebe. Inspire, expire. Funny how the opposite of inspire has come to mean the end. The expiration date. She expired. She died. I expired in 1918. Tetanus. I punctured my hand with the tine of a pitchfork. And died. The likelihood that any of you would come into contact with the tine of a pitchfork is virtually nil. The likelihood that any of you would die from tetanus is also virtually.... So far, this has been--to use an acronym coined during a war that occurred 20 years after my expiration--a snafu. I apologize. Again. I wanted to tell you, to show you, how inspiration works. At least, how my inspiration works. Oh, damn it, I forgot! Oh, I never used to swear. You people swear all the time now, do you know that? The word "damn" has become practically quaint next to... *(to the boys SHE referred to earlier)* Oh, go titter some more, why don't you? *(to the wings)* Bring out Mrs. Torrington. With her lectern. *(to us)* I'm not going to talk anymore. Here is Mrs. Torrington, announcing the subject for this year's essay contest.

MRS. TORRINGTON: The prompt for this year's Phoebe Whitehead essay contest was in the form of a question, as it always is. This year's question, about which all of our finalists have written, was "What is the source of your inspiration?"

PHOEBE: Take her away. You see why I should have brought that in earlier, as part of the introduction? The... the irony that I am the

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muse of the contest, the inspirer, and the actual topic this year is inspiration... that needed to come in earlier. *(to herself)* Do not apologize again, do not apologize again. *(to the wings)* Bring out the judging panel. With a table and three chairs.

(The stage hands bring out the table and three chairs. MR. MACCOMBER, MISS CHAMBERS and MRS. GRAYSON come and take a seat. PHOEBE says, to us:)

I have no idea what I'm doing.

MR. MACCOMBER: I have the list practically memorized, and I know for a fact that...

MRS. GRAYSON: Anything you once memorized has long been flushed away, Thomas.

MR. MACCOMBER: What is that supposed to mean?

MISS CHAMBERS: I actually have...

MRS. GRAYSON: It means that I don't trust a drunk.

MR. MACCOMBER: Neither do I! I'm glad we have that in common. And I'm glad we don't have to worry about any such thing at this meeting.

MRS. GRAYSON: Oh, don't we?

MISS CHAMBERS: If I could...

MR. MACCOMBER: By the way, have you ever heard of the famous latin saying "In vino veritas"?

MRS. GRAYSON: When was the last time I heard that saying?

MR. MACCOMBER: In vino veritas! In wine is truth!

MISS CHAMBERS: Could we get to the matter at hand?

MRS. GRAYSON: I remember now. The last time I heard that saying was when you brought it up at the last meeting. And the meeting before that. And the meeting before that. It almost seems as if you're trying to justify drinking, Thomas MacComber.

MR. MACCOMBER: I am merely suggesting that alcohol is a useful tool in the pursuit of truth.

MRS. GRAYSON: Now that deserves a billboard: Alcohol: A useful tool in the pursuit of truth. With "please pursue truth responsibly" in small print.

MISS CHAMBERS: What is the source of your inspiration?

MRS. GRAYSON: Pardon me?

MISS CHAMBERS: I propose that as this year's question for The Whitehead Essay Contest.

MR. MACCOMBER: Been done. Twice.

MISS CHAMBERS: Actually, no, I have the list of questions since 19...

MR. MACCOMBER: I propose...

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MRS. GRAYSON: "In vino veritas" is probably not an appropriate prompt for a high school essay contest, Thomas.

MR. MACCOMBER: Given our current economic situation, I think we should...

MRS. GRAYSON: Your current economic crisis is directly connected to your current bar tab.

MR. MACCOMBER: I don't have a tab. Nobody lets you carry a tab anymore.

MISS CHAMBERS: (*rising*) I'll just go ahead and make up the posters, then.

MRS. GRAYSON: Isn't it gratifying to know that your actions have prompted a wise, new policy?

MISS CHAMBERS: (*exits*) Thank-you. I'll just... thank-you.

MR. MACCOMBER: Given the current economic situation, what measures might the future generation take to...

MRS. GRAYSON: We're supposed to prompt the essay, Thomas--not write it.

MR. MACCOMBER: Let me work this out. Denise, write this... where did she go?

PHOEBE: Fine. Enough. Take them away. So what do we call that?

How do we fit that into this discussion of inspiration? Mr.

MacComber nightly seeks inspiration in liquid form and fools himself

that he has found it. Mrs. Grayson has come to believe in nothing but money and gossip. And quietly, behind the scenes, efficiently

and neatly, Miss Chambers administers all the necessary affairs of the Phoebe Whitehead Essay Contest and Trust Fund. I touch,

inspire--none of them. Whom do I touch? Whom did I touch this year? I could tell you, certainly, outright, now, but, no—not yet.

Build suspense. That much I have learned. That much I have...

This is Phoebe yammering again. Going on like a... a... So! What,

you may ask, might be my criteria for selecting the essayist upon

whom I would bestow my inspiration? Confidence? Why, then, I

would have no choice but to inspire one Nathan Drexler. Bring out

Nathan! And Lyza! Nathan and Lyza, come forth!

(NATHAN and LYZA's conversation is highly flirtatious.)

LYZA: Watcha doing, Nate?

NATHAN: Nothing much, Lyza.

LYZA: Watcha want to be doing, Nate?

NATHAN: Watcha want me to want to be doing, Lyza?

PHOEBE: Ah, the witty repartee.

LYZA: I want you to want to be hanging out with, oh, I don't know... me.

NATHAN: Why would I go and do something like that?

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LYZA: Because I could make it worth your while.

NATHAN: Oh, you could, could you?

LYZA: Yes, I could, could I.

NATHAN: Then, guess what?

LYZA: What?

NATHAN: I want to want to be hanging out with... you. Let's go.

LYZA: Wait.

NATHAN: What?

LYZA: I thought you were supposed to be working on that essay thing.

NATHAN: What essay thing?

LYZA: The Zit Prize essay thing.

NATHAN: Let me tell you a thing or two about that essay thing.

Number one: I'm going to win it. Number two: I'm going to win it big time.

LYZA: What's it about?

NATHAN: What?

LYZA: Your essay, dummy.

NATHAN: Oh, dummy, huh? You calling me a dummy?

LYZA: No tickling!

NATHAN: A dummy?

LYZA: Nathan Drexler, if you tickle me, we will not hang out and I will not be making anything worth your while. Now, what's your essay about?

NATHAN: Don't know.

LYZA: You haven't written it yet?

NATHAN: Haven't started it yet. But by the time it's due tomorrow, it'll be started, it'll be finished, it'll be a winner. It's writing, right? And who's the best writer around?

LYZA: Let's see... Tasha Harrington's pretty good.

NATHAN: Oh, please.

LYZA: And Ariel Densmore.

NATHAN: Ariel Densmore.

LYZA: You heard me.

NATHAN: You're comparing me with Ariel couldn't-write-her-way-out-of-a-wet-paper-bag Densmore?

LYZA: Who would be writing inside a wet paper bag?

NATHAN: Whatever, Lyza. But when I have twelve hundred extra bucks to throw around...

LYZA: That's first prize?

NATHAN: Not that I'll win it, according to you.

LYZA: Oh, you will.

NATHAN: You're just after my money.

LYZA: Among other assets.

NATHAN: I bet you are. Come on.

(THEY exit, hand in hand, clearly intent on devilish pursuits.)

PHOEBE: Young love. As I said, if confidence were my main criterion for bestowing inspiration, none other than Nathan would do. But what if it were, say, the opposite? Ben, if you please, and his friend Tracy.

(BEN enters, looking downtrodden, holding hands with TRACY.)

BEN: I don't have it done. It's due tomorrow. I suck.

TRACY: Well, do you have any of it?

BEN: Barely.

TRACY: Show me.

BEN: It's on my iPhone.

TRACY: You typed it on your iPhone?

BEN: Yeah. I heard of this girl in Japan who typed a whole novel on her iPhone when she went back and forth to work on the subway so I thought I'd try it.

TRACY: You don't ride the subway.

BEN: Yeah. Whatever. Here it is.

TRACY: *(reading)* "The 2011 Whitehead Essay by Benjamin Silverfarb. Inspiration sucks. This essay sucks. I suck." Ben!

BEN: What?

TRACY: You can't write this!

BEN: I know. It's just a start. It's probably the truest thing I'll come up with, though.

TRACY: Ben!

BEN: What?

TRACY: You can't write this!

BEN: I know, I said. I don't know what I'm going to write. At least it's a start.

TRACY: No, it's not! Why did you write this?

BEN: Because I once heard of this famous writer--I don't remember who it was--but he made his first draft intentionally really bad so he'd get all the stuff out of the way that he knew he didn't want to write. He called it his taking out the garbage draft. I thought I'd try it.

TRACY: This is all the garbage you have to take out? "Inspiration sucks. This essay sucks. I suck"?

BEN: Sue me.

TRACY: Why are you even entering?

BEN: I don't know. So I can lose.

TRACY: You want to lose?

BEN: I don't know. Somebody has to.

(HE starts to exit. TRACY follows.)

TRACY: Ben!

BEN: What?

TRACY: You can't write this!

BEN: I know. I told you, it's just what I *don't* want to...

TRACY: When are you going to write what you *do* want to?

BEN: I don't know.

(By now, their voices have faded as THEY've exited.)

PHOEBE: Poor Ben. Wouldn't it be kind of me to rain my inspiration upon the poor, withered plant of his soul? *(pause)* Excuse me, but that was a... that was a metaphor! Rain my inspiration upon the poor, withered plant--that was a figure of speech! I know it was hardly original--I mean, rain upon a withered plant, how often have we heard that?--but... I finished it! I so often want to use poetic language, you see; I get the impulse, but the comparisons don't materialize. I'm like a... like an... an unpoetic thing! You see? Anyway, where was I? I was showing you.... Speaking of metaphors, I just have to note one thing, one change in the language over the years that I find astounding. Ben, the one we just saw, the pitiful one, did you hear that word he used over and over? You people say it all the time! Now, I'm not a language prude. I've tried out various word fashions over the years, from "the cat's pajamas," which came in shortly after I died, to "cool" which arrived about 20 years later and has never gone away, to "boo-boo," which has also hung on. It's groovy, Daddy-o, I'll catch you on the flip side; we'll get jiggy with some bodacious yuppies and if I get any of this wrong while I'm hanging with my peeps and avoiding the 'rents, it's just my bad, dude. You see? I can try it all on, like leg-warmers, though I have to admit the language I died with is still the language I'm most comfortable with. With which I am most comfortable. But that word, the way Ben used it? This su... I su... Inspiration su... I cannot bring myself to say it! Of course, I made reference to an even nastier term when I mentioned snafu, but that's hidden in an acronym. It's interesting, though--if I change the context, I can say the word. The calf sucked at his mother's udder. *(to the "tittering" boys)* Don't even start. *(to us)* The tornado sucked up our neighbor's cows. Why am I stuck on cows? The word "suck," the way you use it these days, even young children! A three-year-old! "Mommy, I don't like this pudding! It su...." Extraordinary. What am I doing? What did all of that have to do with my purpose, with the concept of inspiration? *(slapping herself*

in the face) Phoebe! Get-back-on-track! All right. Yes! Criteria for deciding whom I should inspire! Most confident: Nathan; least confident: Ben. Perhaps I should confer the gift of the muse upon the most financially needy, given that the Zi... I can't believe I almost said it myself. Such is the power of language! Watch out! Given that the Phoebe Whitehouse Essay contest comes with a substantial cash award, perhaps I should aid those in greatest financial need. For this distinction, I bring out two finalists--Karen and Sarah--both communicating using...Bluetooth, I think it's called.

(KAREN and SARAH enter.)

Bluetooth? Incidentally, in 1918, had these two come out in public with contraptions in their ears, seemingly talking to themselves, they would have promptly been institutionalized. Karen and Sarah.

(KAREN and SARAH both face front, talking to separate people on their cells.)

KAREN: Hello?

SARAH: Hey, Girl.

KAREN: What's going on?

SARAH: What's shaking?

KAREN: Where?

SARAH: If somebody wants to pay my way.

KAREN: No go. Funds too low.

BOTH: I told you, I'm broke.

KAREN: How much fun is it to look at all the stuff you can't afford?

SARAH: Can't you just rent a movie and bring it over?

KAREN: Oh, like they'd let me use their credit card.

SARAH: Listen, you don't even bring up the word money in this house.

KAREN: No, not yet--he's been looking like crazy.

SARAH: Only part time, and they hate it.

KAREN: I can't find one either.

SARAH: As if. I should take up a collection.

KAREN: Yeah, if I win the Zit Prize.

SARAH: There's always the Zit Prize.

BOTH: I should go work on my essay.

KAREN: Okay, see ya.

SARAH: 'Bye, girl. Call me when you get back.

(BOTH GIRLS look straight out, sigh heavily, then yell, together.)

KAREN and SARAH: I hate money!

(THEY exit.)

PHOEBE: Hm. I think, perhaps, they don't hate money so much as they hate the lack thereof. Over the years, I am pleased to say, monies derived from the Whitehead Essay Contest have funded many a family dinner--particularly gratifying in 1931 and '33, when dinner was particularly hard to come by; have helped over two dozen winners fund their college pursuits; have even provided the initial capital for a landscaping business that continues to this day. Seed money. For a landscaping business? That wasn't bad. For someone who never thinks of things like that, it was worth... Regardless, monies from the Whitehead Contest have also been spent frivolously, I must admit, on vanities and any number of shiny, fashionable objects that either broke or could not maintain interest beyond a month. Ah, well. Should money motivate my inspiration? Or should it go, perhaps, to the most prepared? If so, bring me Tasha!

(TASHA enters.)

Tasha tends to deliver long monologues to her dog, who, because of canine incontinence issues, will not be present. Imagine a large, hairy, friendly beast.

TASHA: Come here, Hagrid. Good boy. Hagrid, I am ready. I am ready to write my essay. Four writing utensils—two pencils, two pens—laid out at the top of my desk next to a yellow, legal-sized writing pad. That's for the hand-written rough draft. Laptop charged, keys and screen cleaned, virus protection scan recently run, for the subsequent drafts. I have a full water bottle with lemon and ice. I have emptied my bladder. My playlist is set with a classical mix of Mozart, Chopin, Brahms and occasional Pink Floyd—the same selections my parents used to play for me in the womb. I have three Ziplock baggies filled with equally apportioned snacks of dried bananas, almonds and Red Hots. My room is spotless. I have duct-taped black paper to my windows to avoid distractions. If I could have, I would have bound and gagged Aaron so he couldn't come in to ask annoying questions, but I had to bribe him instead with an I.O.U. of \$20.00 which I intend never to pay. Hagrid, as much as I love you, your panting and whining to have your belly rubbed might also keep me from my goal, so you, too, will have to go in a minute. I am a writing machine. In four hours and twenty-six minutes, I will emerge from my room with a viable draft of an award-winning essay. Wish me luck, my faithful hound.

(TASHA exits.)

PHOEBE: Impressive. Should all that preparation invite my inspiration?

Hm. Let's see—we've seen confidence, lack of confidence, monetary need, extreme preparation... Ah, but perhaps I should grace the person with the most to lose. Ariel, please, and Mrs. Torrington.

(ARIEL and MRS. TORRINGTON enter. The stage hands bring out a teacher's desk and chair for MRS. TORRINGTON.)

Ariel comes with a history, you see, and with history comes, of course... with history comes... oh, never mind. Ariel's situation.

ARIEL: Mrs. Torrington, hi.

MRS. TORRINGTON: Hello, Ariel.

ARIEL: Hi. I need to talk to you, or, to someone.

MRS. TORRINGTON: Well, I'm someone, or so I've heard.

ARIEL: Great. I mean, I hope you're the right someone. No disrespect, but I need to talk to someone who can help. I mean, I know you're a helpful person, generally, but...

MRS. TORRINGTON: Ariel, why don't you tell me what your concern is, and then, if I can't help, I'll try to direct you...

ARIEL: I have to win the Zi... the Whitehead Essay Contest!

MRS. TORRINGTON: Oh. Well, I'm glad you're planning to enter.

ARIEL: Yeah, but I have to win.

MRS. TORRINGTON: I'm sure you'll be a strong contender. Your writing...

ARIEL: I can't just be a strong contender, Mrs. Torrington. I have to win!

MRS. TORRINGTON: So you've said, Ariel, but there really is no way anyone can guarantee...

ARIEL: We win this contest, my family does. It's a tradition, a major tradition, going back like 60 years.

PHOEBE: Now that may be an exaggeration.

MRS. TORRINGTON: That's very impressive.

PHOEBE: Let me think.

ARIEL: My great-grandfather, my grandmother, my great-aunt, my great-uncle, my uncle, my mother...

PHOEBE: True, true.

MRS. TORRINGTON: I get the picture.

ARIEL: They've all won the Whitehead Prize! Usually at least second place, although my brother got third, but he's pretty much a slacker, but I'm not! I am definitely not a slacker. I have to win. Who do I talk to?

PHOEBE: 63 years, actually. Her great-grandfather won in 1947.

MRS. TORRINGTON: Ariel, you're asking for the impossible, here.

PHOEBE: Every time a member of her family has entered...

ARIEL: Every time a member of my family has entered, they have won.

And now it's up to me. I can't break the tradition! It would be... a disgrace!

MRS. TORRINGTON: Are you feeling pressure from home about this?

ARIEL: Well, some.

MRS. TORRINGTON: Some?

ARIEL: I've had a call or a card from a previous winner at least once a day for the past two months. "How's that essay coming, Ariel?" "No pressure, Ariel—just do the family proud!" "Anytime you want to run a draft by me, just give me a call!" And it's supposed to be a secret, but two days ago I overheard my mother hiring a caterer for the after-announcement party.

MRS. TORRINGTON: Well...

ARIEL: She's renting a giant tent!

MRS. TORRINGTON: I...

ARIEL: And a live mariachi band! So for some people this might be a nice little contest and winning would be an enjoyable feather in their cap, but this is life and death for me! Mrs. Torrington, I have to talk to somebody! I have to win!

(As PHOEBE talks, MRS. TORRINGTON and ARIEL exit.)

PHOEBE: Well, that is certainly an example of a highly contemporary American word and concept: Stress. So, perhaps, on the basis of sheer blood pressure readings and familial expectations, I should have visited Ariel with my inspiration this year. So, all six of our finalists have had their moment, now, to... to... make known their particular... uh... criterion for... their need for my... *(SHE pauses for a long moment.)* I'm sorry. I've reached a difficult moment here. I'm not sure what to... *(PHOEBE closes her eyes and calls out.)*

Eleanor! Eleanor, are you out there? Eleanor!

ELEANOR: *(from the audience)* Uh, hello?

PHOEBE: *(opening her eyes)* Eleanor, is that you?

ELEANOR: I... yeah. I'm Eleanor.

PHOEBE: Eleanor, please come up here.

ELEANOR: I don't think... I think you dialed the wrong number or something. I'm not the Eleanor you're looking for.

PHOEBE: Oh, I know, but you'll do. You really will. Please.

ELEANOR: *(reluctantly standing)* Wha...?

PHOEBE: Please?

ELEANOR: Okay, but, uh, I'm not, like, part of this or anything.

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PHOEBE: My best friend was Eleanor. She used to always help me when I got stuck on things, which was very often. May we have two chairs?

(The stagehands bring out the chairs. ELEANOR is onstage by this point.)

Please, won't you sit down? *(to us)* I'm not ignoring you. I just felt suddenly very overwhelmed and... and lonely. Sit down, please, Eleanor. Thank you for coming up here.

ELEANOR: How did you know I was...?

PHOEBE: Oh, I didn't. It was just an old impulse, to call out her name, your name, when I was in trouble. I quite expected no one to answer. Eleanor isn't a common name anymore.

ELEANOR: I know. I don't know why my parents picked it.

PHOEBE: Do you suppose they might have named you Eleanor in anticipation of this very moment?

ELEANOR: I... no.

PHOEBE: No, of course not. Silly notion. But again, thank you.

ELEANOR: Sure.

PHOEBE: So. I am dead.

ELEANOR: Yeah, I caught that.

PHOEBE: Have you ever talked to a dead person before?

ELEANOR: Uh... not unless you count my sister on a Saturday morning.

PHOEBE: Oh, that's funny! That's very good. My Eleanor had a wonderful sense of humor, too. Unlike me, she was very witty, and she could make up poetry on the spot.

ELEANOR: Cool.

PHOEBE: How has this been so far?

ELEANOR: You mean, me coming up here?

PHOEBE: No, no, before that. This whole...

ELEANOR: The play?

PHOEBE: Yes. I suppose that's the... genre. The play. How has the play been?

ELEANOR: Uh, okay. You know, pretty good.

PHOEBE: Boring?

ELEANOR: Well... in places.

PHOEBE: Mainly where I've been jabbering away.

ELEANOR: Mainly there, yeah.

PHOEBE: My poor mother.

ELEANOR: Huh?

PHOEBE: I was just thinking. I've always been known as a jabberer. After I died, my poor mother had a terrible time.

ELEANOR: Pretty sad, huh?

PHOEBE: Yes, well, of course. It's against the natural order of life, isn't it? For the child to die before the parent—very sad. But my mother had a very difficult time with.... What if I don't yammer about it, though? What if I show you, show everyone? Would that be better?

ELEANOR: Uh, yeah. I mean, you know, "show don't tell," right? That's what my English teacher always said.

PHOEBE: Of course, of course! I like that! Show, don't.... I'll bring out my mother! (*to the wings*) Bring out my mother, please, and her friend Mrs. Toulaine. That was Eleanor's mother—my Eleanor's last name was Toulaine. I always thought that sounded so French and elegant.

ELEANOR: Right. I'm Eleanor Stubbs.

PHOEBE: Oh. That's very nice as well. Here are my mother, then, and Mrs. Toulaine.

MRS. TOULAINÉ: Rachel, have you given much thought to a memorial for Phoebe?

MRS. WHITEHEAD: I've given it so much thought. Linda, I loved the child dearly.

MRS. TOULAINÉ: Of course you did.

MRS. WHITEHEAD: But you know how she was. I mean, what would be a fitting memorial for a child who was so utterly... inept? My heavens, there was not one thing, not one instruction you could give Phoebe but that she would do the opposite. Then, when you would count on her doing the opposite, she would do something just a few degrees east or west of the opposite so you never knew what to expect, except not what you had intended! No, never what you intended in the first place.

MRS. TOULAINÉ: She did... struggle.

MRS. WHITEHEAD: It's a mercy that your Eleanor was such a patient friend... and guide. The town might have burned to the ground by now if not for Eleanor.

ELEANOR: Ouch.

PHOEBE: I did have a penchant for dropping lit lanterns.

MRS. WHITEHEAD: We intend to establish a trust in Phoebe's name, for deserving future students at Groverton High School.

MRS. TOULAINÉ: That's wonderful.

MRS. WHITEHEAD: But the award should have some sort of focus, some purpose... two qualities that were terribly lacking in Phoebe. She was an awful student. But I do miss her. She stumbled through life like a three-legged puppy, but I miss her so.

MRS. TOULAINÉ: Oh, Rachel, poor woman. You know, Eleanor did mention to me a few weeks ago that Phoebe had had some success with an essay she wrote for Mrs. Dodds.

MRS. WHITEHEAD: Really? For old Mrs. Dodds? She is a very stern critic.

MRS. TOULAINÉ: Apparently, Phoebe's writing impressed her.

MRS. WHITEHEAD: This is the first I've heard of it. I'll have to speak to her. Thank you, Linda. That's very encouraging. I am certainly going to speak to Mrs. Dodds.

MRS. TOULAINÉ: I hope it will help; I surely do. Let me know if there's anything I can do.

MRS. WHITEHEAD: Thank you, Linda.

(MRS. TOULAINÉ exits as MRS. DODDS enters.)

PHOEBE: So my mother went to see Mrs. Dodds, who was very intimidating. We were all as scared of her as we were of... of...

ELEANOR: Witches?

PHOEBE: Witches! Yes. But, much to my mother's surprise, Mrs. Dodds did vouch for me.

MRS. DODDS: I must admit, Mrs. Whitehead, that Phoebe's essay came as quite a surprise, given her previous desultory work.

ELEANOR: What does that mean?

PHOEBE: All over the place.

ELEANOR: Gotcha.

MRS. DODDS: Not only was it virtually free of errors, a rarity in and of itself, but the expression, at points, bordered on inspired.

MRS. WHITEHEAD: Inspired?

MRS. DODDS: Yes. She wrote quite a moving portrait of the joys of planting and tending the family vegetable garden. I gather that is an extensive avocation shared by both you and your husband.

MRS. WHITEHEAD: Uh... might you have kept a copy of the essay, Mrs. Dodds?

MRS. DODDS: No, no. I returned it with my comments. I imagine Phoebe has it. Pardon me; very sorry.

MRS. WHITEHEAD: It's all right. We all have a hard time grasping her absence.

MRS. DODDS: I imagine you'll find it among Phoebe's school effects.

MRS. WHITEHEAD: I'll be sure to look for it. Thank you, Mrs. Dodds.

MRS. DODDS: As to your idea of an essay contest in Phoebe's memory, I would certainly endorse it. Though I would have liked to see more of her writing to determine if the garden piece was an anomaly or the first hint of a nascent talent in Phoebe, I... we never got that chance, unfortunately.

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MRS. WHITEHEAD: Yes. Unfortunately.

MRS. DODDS: Let us assume it was the latter. Yes, I think we can believe that Phoebe was finding her place, as a writer, an essayist.

MRS. WHITEHEAD: Thank you, Mrs. Dodds. It was very kind of you to see me.

MRS. DODDS: Not at all, Mrs. Whitehead. Not at all.

(MRS. WHITEHEAD and MRS. DODDS exit.)

PHOEBE: So.

ELEANOR: So. The Phoebe Whitehead essay contest was born.

PHOEBE: It was.

ELEANOR: Awesome.

PHOEBE: Eleanor, may I tell you a secret?

ELEANOR: Uh, I guess.

(ELEANOR leans in so PHOEBE can whisper in her ear.)

Oh. Okay.

PHOEBE: *(indicating us)* Should I tell them?

ELEANOR: Well...

PHOEBE: I should.

ELEANOR: Maybe you want hold off on that. But tell us, who did win the prize this year?

PHOEBE: Would now be a good time to reveal that?

ELEANOR: Sure. And how about if we listen to the committee a little bit, huh? I like those three. I like how the old lady rags on the drunk guy.

PHOEBE: Rags on him. That's a fairly new expression. For some reason, I picture a Raggedy Ann doll. They were all the rage the year I died.

ELEANOR: No, it's not that. Ragging on somebody relates to being on the ra... uh, let's leave that one alone.

PHOEBE: Why?

ELEANOR: If you have trouble with "this sucks," you probably don't want to know more about ragging.

PHOEBE: I see.

ELEANOR: The committee?

PHOEBE: Oh, yes, of course! Bring out the committee.

(The COMMITTEE MEMBERS come out. The stage hands set up a round table and chairs. The COMMITTEE sits, looking at the essays.)

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This is the three of them deliberating after hearing this year's entries. They, of course, get written copies as well. They always meet the same night as the assembly, so they can make the announcement the next day.

ELEANOR: See, we didn't need to know all that. You do that quite a bit, you know.

PHOEBE: I'm sorry.

ELEANOR: No, it's cool. I just... why don't we...

PHOEBE: The committee. Let's listen.

MRS. GRAYSON: All right, then. Let me be the first to say that I sat in that auditorium and listened to these essays and thought, "These are uniformly bland." Now that I have had a chance to read them, I find them... uniformly bland.

MR. MACCOMBER: I thought a couple showed promise. This one... by Arlo Dunsmore. I thought he...

MISS CHAMBERS: Ariel Densmore. It's a girl.

MRS. GRAYSON: It's hard to read when your eyes are bleary, isn't it?

MR. MACCOMBER: Now, look, Donna, don't start again. Not that it's any of your business, but I haven't had a solitary alcoholic beverage this evening.

MRS. GRAYSON: Of course not, Thomas; you always make sure your drinks have plenty of company. I don't think we should even give the prize at all.

MISS CHAMBERS: Our charter says we have to award...

MR. MACCOMBER: You say that every year. You can't keep the money yourself, you know.

MRS. GRAYSON: As if I would be the one tempted?

MR. MACCOMBER: I like what this Arlo boy has to say. He credits his family!

MRS. GRAYSON: Her! Her family! And don't you see the whole essay is a thinly-veiled attempt to claim she has a right to the prize simply because she's a Densmore? It's desperate!

MISS CHAMBERS: My ranking is...

MR. MACCOMBER: I liked it.

MRS. GRAYSON: I want a sober judgment.

MR. MACCOMBER: I am providing a sober judgment.

MISS CHAMBERS: (*getting up to leave*) I think I'll go ahead and give Mrs. Torrington a call.

MRS. GRAYSON: The last sober judgment you made was when you voted for Nixon! And see how well that went!

MR. MACCOMBER: Now look, why does every conversation with you turn to politics or money?

MRS. GRAYSON: You're accusing me of having a narrow range, Mr. "in vino veritas" every year?

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MR. MACCOMBER: Ha! Shows what you know; we meet every other year. Now, Miss Chambers, what did you... now where did she go?

ELEANOR: That's probably enough, Phoebe.

PHOEBE: Do you think so? All right. Enough of the committee. Were they fun?

(The COMMITTEE leaves; the stagehands take away the table and chairs.)

ELEANOR: Yeah, they were awesome. So what happened?

PHOEBE: Oh, Miss Chambers delivered the results to Mrs. Torrington, and she announced them the next day.

ELEANOR: And they were...?

PHOEBE: Ariel Densmore, first prize; Tasha Harrington, second; and Ben Thurston, third.

ELEANOR: Okay. So you decided to be the muse for Stress Girl, right?

PHOEBE: Uh... can I tell you another secret?

ELEANOR: No, Phoebe, look... I'm going to go sit back down, okay?

PHOEBE: Eleanor!

ELEANOR: *(leaving the stage)* This is your thing, for the audience. The whole audience. You can't start... I mean, you can't start relying on me, here. It's your thing. *(from the house, still standing)* No secrets, just... go ahead, Phoebe. Who did you inspire? Tell us about it.

(PHOEBE seems frozen.)

Phoebe? Tell us about how you inspired Ariel or whatever.

PHOEBE: I didn't! I didn't inspire any of them! Mrs. Grayson was absolutely right—they were all completely uninspired essays this year. I never helped any of the finalists.

ELEANOR: So, what? You took a year off?

PHOEBE: No! I chose someone.

ELEANOR: Who?

PHOEBE: Joseph Backerstone.

ELEANOR: Who?

PHOEBE: Joseph Backerstone. *(to the wings)* Bring out Joe.

(JOE enters.)

Him.

ELEANOR: Oh. I'm sure there's a story to this, so I'm just going to sit back down and let you tell us.

PHOEBE: Well, I... I still hadn't settled on whom I might inspire, you see, and one day, about two weeks before the initial drafts were due, I was floating around Groverton High, and I heard someone whistling one of my favorite songs, "Let Me Call You Sweetheart."

(JOE starts to whistle the tune.)

It was very odd to hear, coming from someone today. So I followed the sound, and there was Joe, just standing near the library entrance, whistling this old tune. He was waiting for his mother to pick him up. There was a flyer for the Whitehead contest posted on a bulletin board nearby, so, I blew on it—one of the few physical tricks we're allowed as muses—just to make it flutter a little. Joe noticed. I liked that he kept whistling as he was reading the flyer. He never stopped whistling that wonderful song: *(singing along with JOE's whistling)*

Let me call you "Sweetheart," I'm in love with you.

Let me hear you whisper that you love me too.

Keep the love-light glowing in your eyes so true.

Let me call you "Sweetheart," I'm in love with you.

I decided, then and there, that Joe was the one for this year. Ideas, you know, they never go away. Even half-formed ones. We muses can see them. We know where to go to gather them, on this incredibly vast, colorful field in the sky. Many of them are ancient—unrealized concepts from the earliest times—the Sumerians, the Mayans, the Greeks. But it's a constantly undulating place, too, this field of ideas, constantly changing as new thoughts float up and join with the old. For Joe, that wonderful whistler, I gathered the most vibrant bouquet of various bits of inspiration as I could carry, and I poured them on him late one night.

(JOE looks startled, suddenly struck. Stage hands bring out a chair and a desk with a laptop on it; JOE immediately starts typing.)

Oh, it was a wonder to watch my inspiration catch fire in his mind! He wrote for hours, ignoring everything. His essay was about music. Muse-ic. It even included a few lines from "Let Me Call You Sweetheart."

JOE: *(reading from his computer)* So I have come to feel that, without music, even gold can crumble to rust; and with music, even dirt can burst into stars.

PHOEBE: It was good. It was very, very good. By the time Joe stumbled to his bed, he knew he had created something special.

(JOE shuts the computer, gets up, almost falls over from sitting so long, and happily exits. The stagehands remove the desk and chair.)

But you know what? The next morning, before Joe had printed out the essay, he spilled a mug of hot chocolate all across the keyboard. A move worthy... of me. Gone. The essay was gone, and Joe didn't have the heart to type it again. I gathered more inspiration. I tried to flood him with it. But he couldn't get it back, couldn't get it back. Time ran out. Time just... ran out.

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