

Graven Images

by Stephanie Buckley

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DEDICATION

To my students who would never use my class to sleep, catch up on homework or use their phones and to my in-laws would who never take unsolicited pictures of the Amish.

STORY OF THE PLAY

An online public speaking class presents familiar educational challenges: students are disengaged, sleeping, doing last night's homework, playing on their phones, etc. However, today's class adds a new complication: a break in the space-time continuum that forces the class to spend all of eternity in Zoom!

CHARACTERS

(7 characters and extras)

TAYLOR: An overachieving student.

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: A public speaking class teacher navigating remote learning.

ALEX: Taylor's best friend and biggest fan.

JORDAN: A sleepy student.

CHARLIE: An intelligent but unprepared student.

DREW: A phone-obsessed student.

CAMERON: A seemingly average student.

OTHER STUDENTS: Students with expressive faces.

*All characters' genders are flexible. The actors and director may select preferred pronouns.

NOTE: Photos of *Pale Portrait* by artist Betsy Knapp can be found online.

TIME: September 2020.

PLACE: A public speaking class meeting via teleconference.

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(AT RISE: Several faces fill the boxes of a public speaking class's teleconference. TAYLOR is already speaking. MS./MR. WILLIAMS occasionally takes notes. ALEX seems enthralled by Taylor's speech. DREW is obviously using a phone. JORDAN is sleeping. CHARLIE is writing something on a paper that is out of the frame. CAMERON is staring absently at the screen. OTHER STUDENTS demonstrate a range of reactions: boredom, polite attentiveness, complete indifference, etc.)

TAYLOR: *(Reading expressively.)* Then we rented a huge house in the Outer Banks of North Carolina right on the beach. We had a pool, beach access and, of course, our family's boat, "The Taylor," which is named after me.

(Other than ALEX, the STUDENTS who are paying attention roll their eyes at Taylor's arrogance.)

TAYLOR: *(Cont'd.)* However, this trip was not merely fun in the sun. As you all know, I care deeply about the earth and its environment, so I toured North Carolina's wetlands, nature preserves and wildlife conservations to learn about their delicate ecosystems. As a budding historian, I studied the barrier islands where Native Americans once built plentiful lives, the lost colony where European sailors once built fragile settlements, and the land where aviation pioneers proved that flight was possible.

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: *(Waving hands to get TAYLOR's attention.)* Taylor, I am sorry to interrupt, but how much longer is this speech?

TAYLOR: *(Annoyed at the interruption and looking through the document.)* Well, Ms./Mr. Williams, I still have to talk about the art galleries that I explored. *(Looking and addressing MS./MR. WILLIAMS directly.)* I took the liberty of making a slide show of a few of my favorite pieces, *(Looking through the document again.)* Then I go into the breathtaking drive. Then I discuss how my family decided to redecorate our house during our two weeks of self-quarantine upon our return.

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: *(Unimpressed.)* How many more pages, Taylor?

TAYLOR: *(Counting.)* Um... six.

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: *(Shocked.)* Six? *(TAYLOR nods.)* Well, I'm afraid we are going to save the rest of your speech for another day. *(TAYLOR and ALEX look disappointed.)* I appreciate how prepared you are. However, this is just a simple, getting-to-know-you speech. Just a brief description of what you did this summer.

TAYLOR: *(Displeased.)* Oh.

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MS./MR. WILLIAMS: We are all... *(Searching for the word.)* enthralled by the very detailed description of your eventful and educational summer vacation, but we do have other students who need to present their speeches today.

ALEX: So, Taylor's speech is over?

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: *(Nodding.)* For now, yes, Taylor is done.

ALEX: *(Applauding.)* Woo! Great job, Taylor!

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: *(Half-heartedly joining ALEX's ovation.)* Yes, wonderful job, Taylor. *(Noticing the disengagement of the class.)* Class, didn't Taylor do a wonderful job?

(ALEX continues to clap enthusiastically. CAMERON politely claps along. OTHER STUDENTS also join in with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The clapping wakes JORDAN who immediately starts clapping along. CHARLIE stops writing for a moment, claps once or twice and then gets back to work. DREW does not look up from the phone. The applause dies out—Alex is the last one clapping.)

TAYLOR: *(With a proud smile.)* Thank you, everyone.

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: *(Clearing throat to get the class's attention.)* Before the next speaker begins, I just want to remind you of what is expected in the audience when a classmate is speaking. Not meeting in a physical classroom does not give us permission to be disrespectful to the presenter. So... no sleeping. *(JORDAN, who has already started to nod off, snaps back into an attentive state.)* No completing homework for another class. *(CHARLIE drops the pencil and looks forward guiltily.)* And put your phones away so you are not distracted. *(EVERYONE looks at DREW who continues to use the phone.)* Drew.

DREW: *(Without looking up from the phone.)* Yeah.

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: *(Aggravated.)* Can you please put down your phone?

DREW: *(Still on the phone.)* Um... yeah... wait one second.

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: *(Furious.)* Drew!

DREW: *(Irritated.)* Okay, okay. *(Putting the phone down.)* I'm not on the phone.

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: *(With a forced smile.)* Thank you. Okay, let's see who is next...

(As MS./MR. WILLIAMS looks at the class roster, JORDAN's eyes start to close, CHARLIE begins writing, and DREW picks up the phone.)

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: *(Cont'd. Noticing the students' behaviors.)* You guys! We just went over this: no sleeping, no homework, no phone!

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JORDAN: (*Awake again.*) I'm sorry, Ms./Mr. Williams. I haven't had to wake up this early since like... March. I'm trying, but...

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: Please listen to the next speech, Jordan. (*JORDAN nods.*) And try to get to sleep at a reasonable hour tonight. (*Jordan nods again. MS./MR. WILLIAMS notices that CHARLIE is still plugging away at homework.*) Charlie.

CHARLIE: (*Stops writing; apologetically.*) Sorry, Ms./Mr. Williams. I totally forgot to do my physics homework last night. If it isn't done, Mr. Martinez is going to hate me.

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: Why aren't you worried that I'm going to hate you for doing work for another class during public speaking? (*CHARLIE opens his/her/their mouth to answer.*) You know what? I don't want to know. Please just put the physics work aside and pay attention to the next speaker.

CHARLIE: (*Moving the physics homework to the side.*) You got it, Ms./Mr. Williams.

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: And, Drew. (*DREW does not notice; louder.*) Drew!

DREW: (*Without looking up.*) Yeah.

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: (*Loudly.*) PUT. THE. PHONE. A. WAY.

(*With an eye roll, DREW puts the phone aside, crosses arms in front of his/her/their chest and looks forward without enthusiasm.*)

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: I think we have time for one more speech today. (*Skimming the roster.*) Cameron, why don't you share what you did this summer?

CAMERON: Um... okay. (*Nervously grabbing handwritten notes that are to the side.*) I didn't do anything too exciting.

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: That's okay. Go ahead, Cameron.

CAMERON: (*Reading mechanically from the papers.*) This summer was mostly boring. I spent a lot of time inside on my phone. Sometimes, when it was hot, I would go to my grandparents' house and swim in their pool.

(*Some STUDENTS start to lose interest. JORDAN fights to stay awake. CHARLIE glances over at the physics homework. DREW is clearly in phone withdrawal. Even MS./MR. WILLIAMS seems a little bored.*)

CAMERON: (*Cont'd.*) My mom and I did go on one trip to Amish Country in Pennsylvania. The Amish dress in old-fashioned clothes and do not use modern technology—no cars or smartphones or anything. We went on a horse-and-buggy ride and my mom bought some crafts.

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CAMERON: *(Cont'd. Becomes more comfortable and less robotic-sounding.)* It was really pretty there so I decided to take some pictures. I started just taking nature pictures, but then I took some pics with actual Amish people in it. They started covering their faces and saying “No pictures, please. No pictures, please.” I thought that was pretty weird. My mom showed me this pamphlet that said that the Amish believe that taking pictures breaks one of the Ten Commandments—the commandments are, like, these ten rules that God said people have to follow and stuff. One of them says, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” I still didn’t really get it but basically that means that God didn’t want statues or paintings. So photos are kind of like that, and Amish people don’t want them. So I was like, okay, no pictures of the Amish. So, my mom went into another stupid craft store, and I was totally bored. I went for a walk away from the touristy areas. Like where the real Amish people live who aren’t just trying to sell people stuff. But everywhere I went, I felt like someone was, like, watching me. You know that feeling?

(The STUDENTS are more engaged. Some students may nod affirmatively—they know what it feels like when someone is watching them. No one is sleeping, doing homework or on their phones.)

CAMERON: *(Cont'd.)* So, I look around and no one seems to be looking at me. There are Amish people around—farming and stuff—but everyone is busy and doesn’t seem to care that I am there. I keep walking, but I cannot shake the feeling that I am being followed. At this point, I decide to get back to the stores and find my mom. I take out my phone to call her and, suddenly *(Putting out his/her/their right arm as if holding a phone.)* some old Amish dude grabs my arm—the arm that’s holding the phone. I scream and drop my phone and the dude steps on it—like really hard. And I’m, like, totally freaked out. So the old Amish dude says, *(In the voice of an old man.)* “You took my picture.” *(With a natural voice.)* And I’m like, “Well, um... yes, I did, sir.” And he’s like, *(In the voice of the old man.)* “Where is it?” *(With a natural voice.)* And I’m like, “What do you mean? On my phone, right there under your foot!” And he goes, *(In the voice of the old man.)* “Don’t you lie to me, kid!” *(With a natural voice.)* And I said, “I’m not lying. The pictures are on my phone!” And he is gripping my arm really hard with his bony hand, and I am completely freaked out. I decided to just bolt out of there—just leave my phone and get out of Amish country. But then he says, *(In the voice of the old man.)* “I’m not an idiot. I know how these things work. They’re not just on your phone. They’re in the clouds.” *(With a natural voice.)* “You mean ‘the cloud,’” I said. But it’s like he didn’t hear me and said, *(In the voice of the old man.)* “The clouds. Oh, God, I hope it’s not too late.” *(With a natural voice.)* And he let go of my arm, and I tried to back out of there. I said, “Listen, sir. You can have the phone, the pictures, everything. I’m sorry.” But he screamed, *(Dramatically in the voice of the old man.)* “NO!!! You have to throw them away!” *(With a natural voice.)* “I will! I will!” So, I slowly picked up my phone as the old man looked on. I open the photos and showed him as I put each photo in the trash, but he still wasn’t happy. *(Looking up to the sky as the old man.)* “What about the clouds?”

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CAMERON: *(Cont'd. With a natural voice and posture.)* I tried to explain to him that my mom made me put my phone on airplane mode because she wanted it to be a family day and didn't want me on the phone with my friends all day. So he didn't have to worry about the cloud. The photos were only on my phone and now they were gone. But the old Amish dude started crying, and I felt really bad. So I said, "There are no more 'graven images,' you're all good." And he said, *(In the voice of the old man.)* "Oh, so you know your commandments. What's the sixth commandment? Huh? Huh?" *(With a natural voice.)* So, I literally heard of the Ten Commandments like ten minutes earlier. I was lucky that I remembered the "graven image" thing. So, I said, "Uh... no." So he said, *(In the voice of the old man.)* "'Thou shalt not kill,' but you're killing me. You're killing me little by little." *(With a natural voice.)* And I was all, "No, sir, I am *not* killing you." Then he told me that when he was a child, the Amish were taught that when someone takes their photos, a little piece of their souls is stolen in those photos. That the camera traps a piece of them that must live in the picture forever and ever with no hope for escape or salvation. *(CAMERON quietly scans the audience's faces and continues dramatically.)* And I couldn't help but think that, if this old Amish man was right, all of us would have nothing left to our souls. Think of all the photos and videos we have taken in our lives. How many pieces of our souls are sentenced to eternal TikToc dances? How many versions of ourselves must live forever with filters of dog faces and flower crowns? Is there a universe of face swaps where mothers' faces live on toddler bodies and babies' heads are atop mature women's bodies? *(CAMERON shudders.)* In my nightmares, I see them: hundreds of thousands of versions of me trapped ceaselessly opening the same Christmas gifts, wearing uncomfortable first day of school clothes, riding an endless Ferris wheel at a crowded amusement park. And I think, what have we done? In our attempt to preserve every moment, we will send our bodies to the grave with nothing left of our immortal souls. *(With a natural voice, but the cadence of the old man.)* We are killing ourselves. We are killing ourselves little by little. *(It is quiet. MS./MR. WILLIAMS and the CLASS are transfixed. After a beat, CAMERON continues without any of the former intensity.)* Then I found my mom. She got me a slice a Shoofly pie and let me eat it during the ride home. *(A pause.)* And that's it.

(The CLASS looks at CAMERON in amazement. Cameron awkwardly looks at all of the faces—not understanding why the class is so quiet.)

MS./MR. WILLIAMS: *(Clearing throat to get the class's attention after a moment.)* Wow... um, Cameron. That is an... *(Searching for the word.)* incredible story. It sounds like you had an enlightening and thought-provoking experience.

CAMERON: *(Not understanding MS./MR. WILLIAMS' intent.)* Yep, my mom and I tried making Shoofly pie at home, but we couldn't get the recipe quite right.

End of Freeview

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