

CLAY

A one-act dramedy by
Carol S. Lashof

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

AARON, male, a junior.

SOPHIE, female, a sophomore.

WILL, male, a sophomore.

ZETA, female, a junior.

TIME

The present. Fall.

PLACE

A large public high school in the U.S. Specific locales (corridor, library, art room) should be suggested with the bare minimum of set pieces and properties.

Elements of this script were developed at the second annual Earl Hamner Jr. Playwrights Conference at The Hamner Theater in Nelson County, Virginia, co-sponsored by the Shenandoah Playwrights Retreat.

SCENE 1

(We are in the corridor of a high school during passing period. The usual chaos: BELLS RINGING, LOCKERS SLAMMING, cell phones emitting various RING TONES, STUDENTS TALKING, TEACHERS SHOUTING... AARON enters, wearing an obviously heavy backpack stuffed to the brim. He carries a notebook and pencil box as well. He stops center stage and squints at the audience. Then he swings his backpack off his shoulder, drops it on the floor next to him and addresses the audience.)

AARON: Hi. My name is Aaron. This is the beginning of my junior year of high school. I would like it to be wonderful. More likely it will not be. More likely it will be awful. That's just a guess, but an educated guess, based on past experience. Not that I blame teachers. I love teachers. Some of them. My first grade teacher for instance. I still send her a birthday card.

No. I blame homework. I hate homework. And teachers who won't give you extra time if you need it. And talking in class—because I'm a nervous wreck. Also group projects. I really, really hate group projects. You see, I used to get stuck doing all the work. Now I just show up late to group meetings and try not to do anything at all.

My relationships with my peers are problematic. You don't need to point it out. I am fully aware of the fact. My relationships with my parents are likewise problematic. I don't think I'll go into that right now. The point being—teachers are actually the least of my worries. Except they give so much homework.

There was a time when we didn't get homework. Well, maybe sometimes we had to write in a notebook or draw pictures but the spelling didn't matter and my teacher always wrote me a nice note which my parents would read to me since I couldn't

read yet, and then it was like not just my teacher was praising me but also my mom or dad too, like it was my dad saying "I love your funny picture of the pumpkin" – or whatever.

Wouldn't it be nice if that still happened sometimes? If, for instance, my bio teacher wrote a note on my lab report and my dad read it aloud: "I love your funny picture of the cell membrane?"

I miss first grade. Once we had to memorize a poem, and I didn't even mind reciting it in front of the class, because I loved the poem:

Fly away, fly away, over the sea,
Sun-loving swallow, for summer is done.
Come again, come again, come back to me,
Bringing the summer and bringing the sun.

It's not that I don't try to do my homework. I come straight home from school. I mean, what else would I do? I don't like "extra-curricular activities" and I don't like "hanging out with the guys" and I for sure don't have a girlfriend. So I come home. And I don't watch TV because TV is stupid. I just sit right down at the dining room table and I take out my books and sharpen my pencils and I look at the list of things I have to do and I think, this isn't so bad, what's the big deal? And I think, today will be the day when I finish my homework on time – I'll even finish it before my parents get home. And they won't yell at me. And I won't be stressed out. And after dinner I'll listen to some John Coltrane, maybe, or Santana and I'll go to bed at ten, and tomorrow I'll be rested and cheerful and I'll turn in all my homework and the rest of my life will be happy, and maybe I'll even get a girlfriend.

Wouldn't it be nice if that's what happened?

(Aaron sits on the floor cross-legged and begins sketching in his notebook. ZETA enters at a brisk pace from a different direction. She is also carrying a heavy backpack. She glances at her watch and then pauses to address the audience. Aaron and Zeta do not interact and remain in separate areas of the stage.)

ZETA: Of course I cheat. Listen. I'm taking AP Comp, AP American History, AP Bio—there's like three hours of homework every night for just that one class, Honors Math Analysis, French—only third-year French, because I took Spanish in middle school, then I switched to French in high school because that's what all the other high-end kids were taking. Or Latin. Or both.

Junior year. That's what the colleges really look at, you know. If I was one of the seriously smart kids, I would've taken Geometry in eighth grade, so I'd be in Calculus by now. And I'd be in fourth year French. And Latin. For instance, there's a girl on my crew team, Sophie Janowitz, she's only a sophomore, and she's first violinist in the orchestra, but she's in most of my classes. So I'm behind.

I don't cheat in Bio or History because I actually need to learn the material in those classes, so I can pass the AP exams. But if I wrote every English paper from scratch and never snuck a cheat sheet into a French exam, I would just die. The subjunctive? I mean seriously, what is the subjunctive? Truly, I have no idea.

Don't warn me about getting caught. I won't get caught. You only get caught if what you write yourself is bad and what you steal is good. But my work is fine.

I just don't have time to do it.

People say it's pushy parents who are to blame for kids like me taking too many AP classes and getting pneumonia. Or having a nervous breakdown. Or both. Because we're up 'til

1:00 in the morning doing homework and taking Adderall to stay awake 'cause we've been up since 4:30 in the morning doing Crew—if you want to go to an Ivy League, or any school that counts actually, any school that anybody's ever heard of—you'd better do either Crew or Lacrosse, and Crew doesn't require a tryout, just showing up. So I do Crew.

But it's not pushy parents. At least, not my parents. Actually, my mom tries to tell me not to do so much. But she doesn't understand. When she was my age, you could get into a good college with a 3.5 GPA and 1300, maybe even 1200, on the SATs. Can you imagine?

Also, I'm taking ceramics. I love being in that room—and just breathing. How could anyone not love the smell of clay?

Most people, when they talk about peer pressure, they mean pressure to do drugs and skip school and have sex. But that's not the pressure I feel. The pressure I feel is the pressure of all those other people like me, but better than me, about to graduate from high school and apply to college and it seems like they've all done these amazing things, like swum in the Olympics—swam?—or won the National Science Fair. Or both. And me, what have I done?

Maybe I could be a potter. Throw pots for a living. Does anyone actually do that?

(Zeta glances at her watch again and hurries off stage as WILL enters. He looks at the audience and considers before addressing them.)

WILL: I have this dream where I go back to my grade-school playground and I say to the other Black boys: Am I Black enough for you now? Am I? Black enough?

Kindergarten, first grade, second, third, it was always Sophie Janowitz and me at the top of the class and best friends. Math:

when the other kids were doing drill-and-kill arithmetic problems, row after row, we got to sit in the hallway with a book of logic games, like figuring out if you told your parents you'd wash the dishes for just a penny on the first day and then double it every day – by the end of week three you'd be making more than \$10,000. Sophie and me, we figured out by the time we were ten, we'd be billionaires. Then we got the giggles trying to decide how we'd spend all that money, and the teacher across the hall got mad about the noise and sent us back to our classroom and complained to Mr. Theodore about letting us be on our own in the hallway. But he kept on letting us anyway. He was chill. And he liked us, he trusted us – I could tell.

The third-grade spelling bee: down to the wire. Sophie spelled "orangutan." I spelled "CONNECT-I-CUT," remembering to say "capital C." We both messed up on "vivacious." She beat me on "rhythm."

This school is so big, if something gets screwed up, you can grow old and die trying to fix it. For instance, last year, in ninth grade, they put me in Algebra I instead of Algebra II – and by the time I got moved to the right class I was way behind and the teacher was pissed off about having to deal with me. He didn't think I belonged there – I could tell.

This year, my classes are mostly so boring I don't see the point of going. No one notices whether I'm there or not anyway. There's a computer that's supposed to call home when you're absent, but mostly I can erase the messages before my parents get home. My parents, they're always on me about college, college, college, like going to a good college is the only thing that could possibly count for anything ever. But they're not the ones who have to sit in those classrooms every day. They have no idea...

When I see Sophie with her friends, crossing the park on the way to school, or in the hallway between classes, she always waves and smiles but her friends, they look at me and they just see "scary."

I guess I'm Black enough for them.

(Simultaneously but with different ring tones, Aaron and Will's cell phones RING. Their conversations overlap and need not be fully audible.)

AARON: *(On phone:)* No, I need a *graphing* calculator. Yeah, it should be at least a TI 84 plus but the TI 89 Titanium is better... Yeah, I know how expensive they are... Office Depot. Or Staples... And could you tell Dad I can't go to Grandma's with him this afternoon, I have to see my history teacher. I know, but there isn't any other time.

WILL: *(On phone:)* Hey... Cool... Yeah, I'm down... For sure... Meet me in the park. By the fountain. Give me five minutes, I'm there...

(SOPHIE enters as Will is leaving. She stops to say hello, and he puts his phone away to speak to her.)

SOPHIE: Hey, Will.

(Hearing Sophie's voice, Aaron looks up. He watches her.)

WILL: Hey, Sophe. What's up?

SOPHIE: Bio Lab. You?

WILL: Nothing much. Meeting some guys.

SOPHIE: Don't you have a sixth period class?

WILL: Not really.

SOPHIE: What's that mean, not really?

WILL: There's a sub. He'll show a movie.

SOPHIE: Still counts as an absence if you're not there.

WILL: Yeah. So?

SOPHIE: So maybe you should go?

WILL: What for?

SOPHIE: Get good grades, get into a good college, get a good job, have a good life, you know.

(Pause. Will shrugs.)

Anyway, what if it's a good movie? My World History teacher showed "Braveheart" last week, that was cool.

WILL: I can get it at home on Netflix. If it's worth watching. If I've got nothing better to do.

(The bell RINGS. Aaron gathers his things and stands up.)

SOPHIE: Whatever. Gotta go.

WILL: Have fun pithing those frogs.

SOPHIE: Yeah. Later.

(Will exits. Sophie hurries off in the opposite direction. Trying to look casual, Aaron follows her.)

SCENE 2

(Zeta and Will are in the library after school. Will is relaxed, Zeta is anxious – pacing, shuffling papers, checking her watch, etc.)

ZETA: Let's start without him. It's 4:30. And it's my mom's birthday, so I have to go out to dinner with my family tonight. And I have a Bio test tomorrow. When am I supposed to find the time to write a dialogue "using at least three verb forms, including the subjunctive" *en Français*? I wish they wouldn't give us group assignments. No one ever shows up.

WILL: It's only Aaron who hasn't shown up yet. I'm here.

ZETA: Which is kind of surprising actually since you're almost never in class. I don't think I even know what your French class name is.

WILL: It's *Guillaume*.

ZETA: *Guillaume*? That's French for William? That's weird!

WILL: No weirder than *Zeta*. What's that French for?

ZETA: For nothing. I mean there's no French for Zeta.

WILL: Oh, so your name is really Zeta. I mean, in English? I didn't know that.

ZETA: See what you miss when you don't come to class? Maybe you should come more often. You might learn something.

WILL: Maybe.

(Aaron enters. Zeta sees him first.)

ZETA: There you are! Finally.

AARON: Sorry.

ZETA: Listen, I don't have a whole lot of time right now, so why don't we just friend each other on Facebook and chat online tonight. But I can't do it until around ten. Is that okay?

AARON: Um. I don't have Facebook.

ZETA: Really? Okay. How about MySpace then?

(As Aaron and Zeta converse, Will shifts focus away from them. He appears to be utterly distracted, staring into space or at the page in front of him, doodling.)

AARON: Actually, I don't have internet access.

(Zeta shoots Aaron an unbelieving look.)

ZETA: What, are you grounded? Tell your parents it's for a school assignment. Let them look over your shoulder so they know you're not visiting porn sites.

AARON: No, I mean at my house. We don't have internet.

ZETA: Oh, I'm sorry.

AARON: It's not like we can't afford it or anything. My dad just doesn't approve. *(Pause.)* I could meet before school tomorrow.

ZETA: I have Crew practice before school and then zero period lab. So, maybe we can just write a really quick draft now and I'll run it through the translation program tonight.

AARON: The what?

ZETA: English to French translation program.

AARON: The computer will do that for you?

ZETA: Yeah, if you have internet. *(Pause.)* You really didn't know that? Jeez, it must take you forever to do your French homework.

(Will suddenly looks up and speaks with some excitement. Aaron and Zeta are startled.)

WILL: Hey, how about this?

ZETA: What?

WILL: For the play. We could write about a family. And the different tenses could be different members of the family. I mean, each person would speak in their own tense. Like, Grandpa could speak only in the *passé composé*, and the baby could be the imperative, you know, like "*Donnez moi! Donnez moi! Donnez moi!*"

(Will acts like a baby, pounding his fists on the table and shouting.)

AARON: Shh. The librarian.

WILL: Or maybe Gramps should speak in the *imparfait*, 'cause that's the ongoing past tense, right? And the grandfather would be living in the past all the time.

(Will starts walking around like an old man leaning on a cane and speaking in a gravelly voice.)

When I was a young man back in the blazing hot summer of '69, we were living in an old broken-down VW bus on the mountainside and every day from sun up to sun down, we slaved away in the marijuana patch...

(Aaron can't help watching and giggling. Will straightens up and speaks normally.)

Or would that be the *passé composé*? "We slaved away"? Would that be *passé composé*? Or *imparfait*?

ZETA: What are you talking about?

WILL: The play. The play using three tenses.

ZETA: A dialogue! Not a play. A school assignment! For our third period class tomorrow. Which means we can't even meet during lunch. And it's "Verb forms!"

AARON: Huh?

ZETA: "Verb forms," not tenses.

AARON: What's the difference?

(Zeta waves the assignment sheet in front of their faces.)

ZETA: I have no frickin' idea. But it says "a dialogue using three verb forms..."

AARON: I thought they were the same thing.

WILL: Hey, I just figured something out. *Passé composé*? That's the "composed past." The completed past. Over and done with. Unlike the "*imparfait*," which...hey, that means "imperfect," doesn't it? So...

AARON: Yep. That's pretty much how Madame Clark explained it.

WILL: Yeah, well. I probably wasn't there that day.

ZETA: *(Rolling her eyes)* Yeah, you probably weren't. Or on the six other days when she repeated the same explanation.

WILL: Exactly! Who wants to listen to the same boring crap sixteen times? I'd rather figure it out for myself.

ZETA: Fine. Whether you come to class or not is your problem, but right now, could we focus? I need to catch the 5:00 bus and French is not my best subject, okay? I'm getting a B in Biology, that's bad enough. But at least it's an AP, so it counts as an A. Anyway, what about the subjunctive? We have to use the subjunctive and I don't even have any idea what it is.

(Pause. Zeta is nearly in tears. Will and Aaron look at each other. Will shrugs.)

WILL: Sounds like a disease. Subjunctivitis. Acute subjunctivitis, a disease of the liver.

(Longer pause. Then as if struck by a flash of brilliance, Aaron dives for his backpack, which is under the desk. He rummages through it for his French text and looks up the definition of "subjunctive" in the glossary.)

AARON: (Reading:) "A verb form expressing a contingent or hypothetical action."

ZETA: "Contingent?" Crap.

AARON: "Contingent." That's like if x then y. Or, you know, a contingency plan. And hypothetical...

ZETA: I'm not stupid. I know what "hypothetical" means. Stuff that might happen or might not happen. Like, for instance, me passing French is pretty fricking hypothetical, and it's getting hypotheticaller and hypotheticaller by the minute.

WILL: I kinda remember this. I think I mighta been there that day.

ZETA: I've been there every single stupid day. And I still don't get it.

WILL: You use it, don't you, I mean, the subjunctive, when you're expressing hopes and fears and, like Zeta said, stuff that might not really happen? Desires. Dreams. Wishes. *Je souhaite que...* Madame Clark turns into a mole rat. *Je rêves que...* Angelina Jolie is my girlfriend. *Je crains que...*

ZETA: *Je crains que* I'll miss the 5:00 bus. And *je crains que* my parents will be totally pissed because it's my mother's birthday. And *ma mère souhaite que* she were not turning 50!

WILL: And what do you *souhaite*?

ZETA: Me? I wish I had more time to do my homework.

WILL: (*Disneyesque:*) Don't you wish your prince would come?

ZETA: Oh, screw the prince.

WILL: Well, yeah, that's the whole idea, isn't it?

ZETA: (*Giving him a playful shove:*) Oh, shut up. I've got a bus to catch.

WILL: Come on, what do you wish? If you could be anybody, who would you be?

ZETA: I don't know, me grown up and not having to do school anymore.

WILL: What would you be doing instead?

ZETA: Ceramics. Throwing pots.

WILL: How about you, Aaron?

AARON: I want to live by myself in the woods. Work for the forest service. Counting birds maybe.

ZETA: (*To Will:*) What about you?

WILL: I don't know. Too many things. An architect or maybe an engineer – but not software, bridges.

ZETA: Then you're in for a lot more years of school. Maybe you should start showing up.

WILL: A writer maybe. They don't have to go to school.

ZETA: A writer? Oh, good. You can write our dialogue for us. What do we have so far – a grandpa, a baby, and someone who speaks in the subjunctive...

AARON: I'll be the baby. I can do that. (*Pounding on the table:*) Gimme! Gimme! Gimme!

(Will pinches Aaron's cheek.)

WILL: Gootchey-gootchey-goo. *(Pause.)* The subjunctive has to be you, Zeta. The lovely Cinderella, sweeping the hearth and dreaming, wishing, hoping, that some day her prince may come...

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