

The Last Poetry Reading

A Play in One Act

by Bella Poynton

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CHARACTERS: (2w/2m)

- Shawna: A professor of English, 30's.
- Theo: A professor of Philosophy, 30's.
- Laura: Chair of the English Department 50's.
- Bill: President of the College, 50's.
- Amari: A foreign exchange student in his 20s (played by the same actor playing Theo)
- Carol: A veterinary student in her 50's (played by the same actor playing Laura)
- Jayden: A college senior (played by the same actor playing Theo)

SUMMARY: Professors Shawna Paxton and Theo Miller find themselves caught up in the whirlwind of trying times at a small northeastern liberal arts college in the years after the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite their demands to know what exactly is going on with the institution, and whether they should begin looking for new jobs, Shawna and Theo are given ever increasingly cryptic messages and signals. Meanwhile, steadfast administrators, Dr. Laura Nolan and Dr. Bill Monroe, desperately try to keep the institution amidst mounting financial pressures, demonstrating that there is never one person to blame in these complex scenarios. As the play progresses, the audience witnesses the gradual unraveling of both the college's financial stability and the morale of its employees and students. Despite these collective efforts, the institution is on the brink of collapse. Will the planned merger with a neighboring institution finally go through or will the ivy tower ultimately prove to be built on shaky ground.

AN IMPORTANT NOTE: While this play is loosely based on my own experience of events that occurred before the closure of Medaille University in Buffalo, NY in 2023, none of the specific events depicted are biographical. The play itself is entirely fictional. None of the scenes are based on real happenings, and no characters are based on any real living person. Previous Medaille faculty, staff, and students loved Medaille fiercely and were devastated by its closure. The play is not intended to criticize the institution, any involved parties, or any individuals involved with the attempt to save Medaille; in fact, I hope the piece uplifts, legitimizes, and sheds further light on the feelings and struggles of everyone involved. The play is intended to serve as a larger metaphorical exploration of the current difficulties in higher education, and the greater cultural implications embedded in the closure of small collegiate institutions across the US.

SETTING: A small college in Buffalo, NY.

TIME: The 2022-2023 school year.

RUNTIME: 40 minutes

Scene 1

(Lights up on Dr. Bill Monroe, speaking to everyone out in the audience. This speech is genuine, heartfelt, and full of sincerity. There is no satire here... but that doesn't mean there can't be funny moments.)

BILL:

Welcome everybody, to the 2022-2023 school year!

(Applause.)

Thank you all for being here this afternoon. It's so wonderful to see you all here today.

The start of the school year is such an exciting time for faculty and staff; so many hopes and dreams and new opportunities for us and our students.

So, hey, I want to give you the go ahead to really get to know your students this first week.

Don't worry about teaching. Honestly, I mean that. Connect with the students. Learn their names.

Listen to their stories. Making those connections will pay off. Students invest when they feel seen. But of course, you all know this already.

Our faculty are some of the best educators in Western New York!

...Now, I know you're all probably wondering, why did I call this town hall?

You're probably thinking—we've already had convocation, so, what's up?

You've also all probably noticed that President Grant has stepped down and I'll be serving as interim president this year.

(He gives an uncomfortable chuckle. He looks up and gestures to an unseen person.)

Anna, could you—um—make sure the doors are—? Yes, thanks. Thank you.

Friends, there's no easy way to say this, and I am sorry to have to break the news, but when I took this position, I promised myself I would always be honest with you.

So, I'm going to just come out and say it. Because you deserve that.

The money is gone. All of it.

The previous administration's plans to boost enrollment and interest in our programs by building a new athletic field and starting new sports teams—simply didn't work.

There are lots of reasons. We know some of them.

COVID, of course, and a general decline in traditional college attendance is another.

There just aren't as many students as there used to be.

Millennials didn't have kids!

Young people are transitioning right into jobs from high school. They have to work.

They have to provide for their families.

Brothers and sisters, parents who aren't making ends meet financially.

Children are back in the workforce in many states, now.
...They don't have time for school anymore.

(Another uncomfortable chuckle.)

The endowment is gone, too.
We've—we've had to sell a few of the campus buildings to make payroll this year.
But that was a successful endeavor! And we *are* going to make payroll.

(Pause.)

The closure of the university is not—entirely outside the realm of possibility.
I won't lie to you. And I know this is a shock, but please, rest assured. We have a plan.
A good plan! A plan that is going to work.
I have full confidence that we will save this place.
We will save this college and bring it back to its former success.
I can't say much about it right now, but we'll tell you as we find out ourselves.
And until then, I want you to rest assured that with hard work and steadfast commitment, we can bring this institution back!

(Lights fade.)

Scene 2.

(Lights up on Shawna and Laura sitting in Shawna's office. Shawna goes to speak, but then doesn't. Laura goes to speak, but then doesn't. This happens a few times, before...)

LAURA:
My email is probably blowing up.

SHAWNA:
Should I go?

LAURA:
Shawna—it's your office.

SHAWNA:
Oh, yeah...

LAURA:
I couldn't concentrate right now, anyway.

SHAWNA:

Do you want to go to lunch? Maybe we should go to lunch?

LAURA:

Yes. Absolutely. Let's do that. I could go for some lunch.

SHAWNA:

Lunch will help.

LAURA:

Always lunch!

SHAWNA:

Now?

LAURA:

Yeah.

SHAWNA:

Great. Lunch.

(They don't move. Pause.)

LAURA:

Ugghhhh. I'm sorry, I've gotta at least check—

(She cannot evade it anymore; Laura opens her laptop and looks at her email.)

LAURA:

Yep. Just like I thought.

SHAWNA:

Who all?

LAURA:

The usual suspects.

SHAWNA:

Just ignore them.

LAURA:
Not really my style.

(Pause.)

SHAWNA:
I mean, at least now we know that all the rumors are true, right?

LAURA:
Oh, I always knew they were true.

SHAWNA:
Wait, what?

LAURA:
I'm one of the faculty council representatives to the board. We've known something was wrong for years.

SHAWNA:
Years?

LAURA:
Sort of. Kind of. But it's not really something you can talk about out loud because then you're spreading rumors, you know?

SHAWNA:
But you suspected.

LAURA:
That building a huge off-campus athletic field for such a small school was a big miscalculation?
Yeah. But I didn't expect this to happen this soon.
Or maybe I did. Maybe I was just hoping that enrollment would go up after COVID...
I was just...

(Theo appears in the doorway. He looks a little shell shocked.)

LAURA:
Where've you been, Socrates?

THEO:

I tried to go for a walk? But I just wound up sitting in my car while. Must be all the years of adjuncting. Feels like it's the only place in the world that's really mine.

LAURA:

We're going to lunch.

SHAWNA:

Yes, Lunch!

THEO:

Great. Sure. But—hold on. Before we go—can I just—
Can I—

(He closes Shawna's office door.)

THEO:

What the actual fuck is going on? Did Bill just announce that the college was closing?

SHAWNA:

Sort of? Kind of?

LAURA:

No.

THEO:

Because that's kind of what the fuck it sounded like.

LAURA:

Let's not panic. There isn't enough info to panic, yet.

THEO:

Are you kidding me right now? He said there's no money. You know; the green stuff that allows us to live day to day? He said they sold campus buildings. He said closing is a possibility.

LAURA:

Yes, but there's a plan.

THEO:

Riiiiight. A plan that he didn't explain at all.

LAURA:

Well. He can't yet. Legal stuff. We're not supposed to say anything about it.

SHAWNA:

Um. That means you know something we don't know.

THEO:

Which, in itself, is sort of messed up.

LAURA:

Oh my god, both of you, stop. What happens if I tell you something before it's confirmed and then it changes, and then you get mad at me for giving you false info?

THEO:

I guess that's a sound argument for a Department Chair. But I still don't like it.

(Shawna has a realization)

SHAWNA:

Wait ...It's a merger, isn't it?

THEO/LAURA:

What?

SHAWNA:

A merger. It's gotta be.

LAURA:

Who told you that?

SHAWNA:

No one. I know someone from the English conference circuit who teaches at this university in Pennsylvania, and her college had to merge with two others to stay open. I also read the Chronicle with depressing regularity.

THEO:

Nerd.

SHAWNA:

You play Fantasy Football; you have no leg to stand on here.

THEO:

Cold.

SHAWNA:

So, unless someone is on the verge of donating, I don't know, 70 million dollars... it has to be some sort of merger.

LAURA:

Guys, this is how rumors get started. Don't start going around telling people this stuff.

SHAWNA:

I won't blab, but... I'd prefer a merger to losing my job. Can I hold onto that dream?

(Lights fade)

Scene 3.

(Lights come up on Bill. He is gesturing to a power point that we may or may not see. As Bill gives these speeches, they should become more and more absurdist in their delivery and tone, but not in a way condescending way that makes Bill look ingenuine. It's the absurdity of the situation that should become apparent, not Bill himself.)

BILL:

So, as you can see here, our timeline for the merger is 24 months.

And this is actually incredibly fast for this kind of project. We're aiming high, Falcons!

And I know we can do it. It's been awful keeping all this info secret these past few weeks; I'm so relieved to finally be able to tell you about it.

Yes, I know many of you already figured out that some sort of merger was imminent—but that doesn't shock me! You're some of the smartest people I know!

(Pause. This is true. This is real.)

Now, this merger is specifically why I was brought on board as interim president, and I pledge to work my heart out to make this happen. Day in and day out. I love this institution. It's my home. And I know for so many of you, it's your home as well.

So, now for the difficult part. This is going to be hard.

While many of you have been throwing the word “merger” around, you should know that this won’t *technically* be a merger. It’s a convenient word, but I encourage you to start shifting away from that terminology. Officially, this is an acquisition.

(Pause.)

I encourage you to think of it more as an... *integration*.

Integration is a positive term that I think we can all get behind!

Additionally, because it’s an integration, and not a merger, we’re all going to have to pitch in in terms of expedited labor. Every piece of curriculum we offer, all 65 programs and over 5,000 classes, have to be resubmitted to the state if they’re going to be absorbed by another institution all together.

(Pause.)

Oh—is there a question? Sam? Yes?

That’s a good question. We’re not quite sure about names yet.

It’s likely that because it’s an integration, that, uh—this institution will—
Lose its name.

(Pause. With positivity!)

We might be able to have a lounge or building that will retain our name.

And, of course, the Falcon spirit! We’ll always have that.

(Lights fade.)

Scene 4

(A hallway, just a little while later. Shawna is walking to her office. She runs into Bill.)

SHAWNA:

Dr. Monroe?

BILL:

Shawna! Hi, hi, nice to see you. Or should I say Dr. Paxton, now?

SHAWNA:

Oh yeah—that happened last year. But, thank you! It’s nice to see you, too.

BILL:

So sorry I wasn’t able to come to the last poetry reading.

SHAWNA:

Oh, don't worry about it. There's always another one coming up.

Listen, thank you for everything you're doing to make sure the merger—I mean—integration—happens.

BILL:

Well, I'm doing everything I can. And if there's anything I can do to help you, please don't hesitate to ask or email, and let me know—

SHAWNA:

I actually do have a few questions.

BILL:

Oh—

SHAWNA:

If you don't mind.

BILL:

Sure. Of course, not.

SHAWNA:

It just seems like we're not getting much decisive information, you know? Every time someone asks a question, the response is "I'm not sure," or, "We're not really able to answer that at this time," or, "We'll know more next month."

BILL:

We're giving faculty and staff as much information as we can. There are a lot of legalities that come along with this.

SHAWNA:

Sure, I get that. And I don't really care all that much about the name of the institution or the parking situation, or anything like that. I'm just more concerned with the *likelihood* that any of this will actually go through to begin with.

BILL

I don't really understand the question, Shawna.

SHAWNA:

I mean, what do you think are the actual chances of this going through? 20 percent? 50?

BILL:

Shawna, at this point in time, I don't think it's necessary to—

SHAWNA:

But I do. Let's be real about this. The age of the old, aristocratic, upper-class professors has come and gone. Profs are just—working class people, now. Mostly.

So, are we just sort of deluding ourselves here?

BILL:

I don't really feel comfortable going into specifics about—

SHAWNA:

I mean, how likely is it that everything that needs to happen will happen by the end of year?

BILL:

We have to have faith and continue to work hard.

SHAWNA:

But is that ethical?

BILL:

Is it ethical to work hard?

SHAWNA:

No, is it ethical to tell 400 faculty and staff—educators in a field where people no longer make a lot of money—that they shouldn't worry about their economic futures? To continually mollify their anxiety? And tell them that their jobs are secure?

BILL:

No one ever said there's nothing to worry about. I certainly never said that.

SHAWNA:

Right, just like I said a minute ago—no one's saying anything.

BILL:

This is why we have the town halls.

SHAWNA:

Where most of our questions aren't answered. We all walk up and down the hallways like nothing's happening. We grade our papers, and we go to our department meetings, and we meet with our advisees and pretend nothing is wrong! And I just can't wrap my head around that? Am I missing something?

BILL:

Shawna, please. Let's keep in mind where we are...

SHAWNA:

Why aren't we forming support groups in preparation for the worst?

Why aren't we meeting with career counselors? Why aren't we in conversation with the Department of Labor, thinking about alternative career paths for faculty who won't be competitive on the market anymore?

BILL:

It wouldn't be good for community morale.

SHAWNA:

Community morale?

Liberal arts courses are on the chopping block. Our partner school is science driven.

So, should everyone in my department start looking for a new job?

BILL:

I think—I think you need to do what's best for you, Shawna.

I'm sorry this is causing you so much distress.

But I—I have another meeting in just a few minutes, so, so—you have a lovely weekend.

(Bill exits. Shawna hears the sound of a few office doors shutting. She realizes that many of her colleagues likely heard this interaction.)

SHAWNA:

Shit.

(Lights fade.)

Scene 5

(Lights up on Carol, a veterinarian student. I imagine this student will be played by the same actor playing Laura.)

CAROL:

The students know something is going on, Doc. There are rumors we're closing. I'm a non-traditional student, obviously, so I get that you're caught in the middle, and can't really say anything. Look—I've had jobs—shitty jobs. Jobs where you're scared to even... whatever. But—I'm in the vet program here, and there are a bunch of us who are terrified. There's no other program like it in the area. Like... not for hundreds of miles. There's nowhere for us to transfer. I can't leave the area. It's just not possible for me. I have family issues and money issues. I have sick relatives. I have kids. I have grandkids. I have a lot of other shit. And I know what the response is going to be—You're just going to have to change your major—boo-hoo, cry me a river! But I don't want a generic biology degree. What's that going to do for me? You can't do anything with it. It's a worthless degree unless you go to grad school. I'd have to become an RN or a PT or a PA and that would be years and years more work. And I don't have the money for it. And honestly, I don't have the time... I went into this program because it's a clear path to a job. A real job. If this school closes, that is; my whole life plan is out the window. Gone. So—can you please, please, tell me that's not gonna happen?

(Lights fade.)

Scene 6

(Lights up. Shawna's office. Shawna is staring out her window and Theo is sitting on her office sofa, throwing pencils into the cork board, or making paper airplanes. There is a general feeling of malaise and gloom.)

SHAWNA:

So, there's this guy.
He's a pretty well-known entrepreneur.
I can't remember his name, but he's famous on social media and you'd recognize him if you saw him. Anyway—I saw this clip of him a while back, and I just—haven't been able to stop thinking about it. In the clip, he's at one of his talks, right?

And he's giving people—mostly men—advice on what to do with their lives, and how to make gobs of money... and this one woman raises her hand, and says, "Hi, yes, thanks—I'm wondering what you think about college nowadays? My son is 17 and we're weighing our options and deciding what direction we want to go in for next year."

Now, the son is standing right there with his mother.

And the entrepreneur says, "Are you going to be paying for his college?"

And the mother goes, "Oh, yes, yes, I will be."

And the entrepreneur gives this kind of smirky condescending chuckle, and goes, "Then, enjoy your four-year vacation, bro!" And the whole audience erupts into laughter and applause.

(Lights fade up to reveal that Shawna is talking to her friend Theo, who is sitting across from her, nonchalantly building a house of cards on her desk.)

THEO:

Do you think the applause was more to acknowledge the privilege of having your parents pay for your college than it was to criticize the value of a university education?

SHAWNA:

Nope. It seemed like he was saying, "college is a joke, bro."

THEO:

Shawna, he's one guy.

SHAWNA:

But, do *you* think it is?

THEO:

What?

SHAWNA:

Do you think college is a joke?

THEO:

Um. No? Having a college degree is still correlates to higher levels of happiness by far.

SHAWNA:

According to the research.

THEO:

According to *all* the research. Lots of studies. Peer reviewed. Very credible.

SHAWNA:

But maybe Bill's right about the downward trend. Maybe the guy on the video is right and college degrees have outlived their return on investment.

THEO:

You're not really serious, are you?

SHAWNA:

Look, if I can't work out my uncertainties with you, then who can I talk to?

THEO:

Look—I see your dude-bro startup story, and I raise you this:

I saw this meme on Twitter—sorry—X—that basically had a list of years, and next to each one, there was like—a life instruction for young people. So, it read:

1990: Go into STEM

1995: Go into STEM

2000: Go into STEM

2010: Go into STEM

2015: Go into STEM

2022: ... Are Nazis really that bad?

SHAWNA:

In response to the Kanye stuff?

THEO:

Probably. But the point is, when you continually devalue arts and humanities, for decades at a time, you wind up with a population of professionals who are unable to think critically about misinformation. So, all of a sudden, you get kids talking about whether it's okay to be a Nazi, or thinking "Osama Bin Laden had a point," or insinuating the Civil War had nothing to do with slavery.

SHAWNA:

I can't even—

THEO:

Of course, these things seem insane to us, but not to someone who has never taken a course based in history, or literature, criticism. So, what we do is valuable.

SHAWNA:

I feel like there will be arguments that students can get all of that on TikTok or Insta with the right algorithms.

THEO:

Do you really think it's the same thing?

SHAWNA:

Of course not, but are we in the minority, now?

Are we the insane old people who are saying "Ooohh—these kids these days! With their rock music and their long hair! It's the end of society as we know it!"

THEO:

Don't let this shit warp you into thinking we have no skills.

SHAWNA:

We should probably start applying for other jobs.

THEO:

Hundred percent. I've been. For like two months now.

SHAWNA:

Woah. Bold.

THEO:

Don't tell Laura. She'll lose her mind.

SHAWNA:

I didn't think you would. There's this weird feeling of "don't be a defector, stay the course and you'll be rewarded!"

THEO:

Sounds a lot like a cult to me.

SHAWNA:

See, I understand that objectively, but there's this other part of me that thinks good things will come to those who stay loyal. Quitting is bad, blah blah blah. All that millennial workhorse logic.

THEO:

Oh, I'm the same way. But I'm a man, so I get to be less agreeable publicly without any consequences.

SHAWNA:

Excuse you?

THEO:

Think about it. How often do you do something you don't want to do because you think the people around you will think you're angry and difficult?

SHAWNA:

All the damn time.

THEO:

Well, stop that shit. Think to yourself "would a man do it?" And if the answer is yes—eat.

(Lights fade)

Scene 7

(Shawna's office. She's hard at work at her desk.

Laura walks up to her open door and gently knocks on the doorframe.)

LAURA:

Hey!

SHAWNA:

Hey! What's up?

LAURA:

Do you have a minute?

SHAWNA:

Sure; I don't teach until 2.

LAURA:

Yeah, I just wanted to talk for a sec. Five minutes, max.

(Laura comes in and half shuts Shawna's door.)

SHAWNA:

Oh—kay. Shut door... Is everything—?

LAURA:

Yeah, absolutely. How's all the curriculum resubmissions going?

SHAWNA:

Slow, but going. As if I have time for this shit...

LAURA:

Nobody does. Five committees, five classes, five advisor meetings for five student organizations—

SHAWNA:

And five hours of sleep a night!

LAURA:

That's about right. Hey—I'm sorry I wasn't at the last poetry reading.

SHAWNA:

Don't worry about it. People have lives. Most people would rather have a root canal than see a poetry reading.

LAURA:

Oh my god, that's not what I meant—

SHAWNA:

And anyway, everyone has like 3 times more work this semester, I get it. Did you want to talk about course offerings for fall, or—?

LAURA:

No, no. Listen, Bill came to talk to me.

SHAWNA:

About? I don't really know what that means.

LAURA:

He said you expressed some concerns.

SHAWNA:

... Yeah?

LAURA:

Publicly.

SHAWNA:

It was just here in the hallway.

LAURA:

Shawna, I can't have you having full blown outbursts in the hallways.

SHAWNA:

Outbursts?

LAURA:

Listen, I know this is a difficult time.

SHAWNA:

Yeah, I would say so.

LAURA:

But I think that anxiety is misplaced. The school is not going to close. The merger—sorry—integration—is going to go through.

SHAWNA:

Hey no one wants to believe that more than me.

LAURA:

Then, believe it.

SHAWNA:

But there's no proof. And I didn't have an outburst.

LAURA:

Outburst, tantrum, whatever you want to call it—

SHAWNA:

You're not going to convince me that there's no cause for concern, here.

LAURA:

Your feelings are valid. The problem is, I can't have members of my department having breakdowns in the hallway while students are watching.

SHAWNA:

There were no students. It was a Friday after hours. No one was in the hallway.

LAURA:

That's not what I heard.

SHAWNA:

Oh, okay, so you guys talked about this like—at length? I thought what I said to Bill was in confidence. So, this kinda feels like a betrayal.

LAURA:

It's not. No one is upset. We just want to make sure everyone feels safe.

SHAWNA:

Well, I don't feel very safe.

Keeping everyone in the dark and insisting people not talk to each other about this isn't creating a safe space. It's protecting the board and leaving 400 employees to fend for themselves.

LAURA:

Shawna, it's not me. I have to do what I'm told. You know that.

(Pause.)

SHAWNA:

I know. I—I won't do it again.

But you have to admit that everyone is ignoring the rhinoceros in the room.

LAURA:

Isn't it an elephant? The elephant in the room?

SHAWNA:

There's this play; an absurdist play, called *Rhinoceros*, where everyone in this French village starts turning into Rhinoceroses, but no one will acknowledge it's happening except this one guy. And he desperately tries to get the other people around him to—

(Laura stands. She's not up for talking about French absurdism.)

LAURA:

Shawna? We both have to teach at 2. We can talk about French rhinoceroses later. You're free to talk about whatever you want in your office with the door closed.

SHAWNA:

I'm free to talk. But only in secret.

(Pause.)

LAURA:

It's to protect the students.

SHAWNA:

Is it? Shouldn't they know what's going on, too?

LAURA:

There's nothing to know. We're not closing.

SHAWNA:

How can you say that with so much confidence?

LAURA:

Because schools don't close! Colleges don't close.

How many colleges do you know that have closed? Can you name three?

It's just not a thing that happens.

SHAWNA:

... Of course, it could. Everything is an experiment, Laura.

The economy, the government, legal system, education, the whole fucking country is just one big, huge messed up experiment. Just because it hasn't happened yet doesn't mean it never will.

(Lights fade)

Scene 8

(Lights up on Jayden, a college junior or senior in a Falcon's hoodie.)

JAYDEN:

It doesn't surprise me, Doc.

Like, I was on my way to graduate, right? Only a year and a half to go.

Like—I did that! All on my own. My major was dope, too. Professor Denison is the GOAT, you know? I liked my Criminal Law class. Oh—and that class on White Collar and Corporate Crime? That class was bomb. I didn't like Statistics, though. That shit was hard.

I guess I'm not shocked because—seemed too good to be true, you know?

When I was in high school, some of those admissions people came to visit one day and I didn't bother going to the aud to listen. I didn't have great grades or anything and you gotta have good grades for college, right?

But then I was in the lounge at the vending machines and Dr. Caffrey came up to me. He asked me about my sketches from drawing class and the music I was listening to. We talked about real life shit. He didn't even bring up college. We talked the whole period.

So, I was like, I could go to a school like that.

I could go to school with teachers like that, who were real.

And shit was good for like three years.

And now all these rumors? Yeah, that's cap, Doc, but I guess I'm not surprised.

Some of the Criminal Justice majors are talking about where they're gonna transfer and all that, but I don't know. I don't know if that's for me. This was my place.

Nobody from those other schools came up and talked to me on admissions day, you know?

(Lights fade.)

Scene 9

(Lights up on Bill, he's staring at a power point on his computer, there at the podium. Enter Laura.)

BILL:

Hey! You're here early. Meeting doesn't start for another—

LAURA:

10 minutes or so. Just wanted to come by and see how you're doing.

(Bill chuckles.)

BILL:
Huh...

LAURA:
What?

BILL:
Nothing, it's just, not many people have asked me how I'm doing. You might be the first.

LAURA:
Well good then. Glad I asked. So. How are you?

BILL.:
Best not to answer questions like that.

LAURA:
Come on.

BILL:
Come on? Really? They're cutting half of our programs.

LAURA:
Not half. More like a third. There's still a lot of hope.

BILL:
Laura, I've gotta put on a strong face for everyone else, but don't make me have to do it with you, too. I've gotta have a few people I don't lie to.

(He continues to review his slides.)

LAURA:
I'm not asking you to lie. I'm asking how you are.

BILL:
Not great. Not good, even. This whole thing is a nightmare, really.

(Pause. Laura doesn't know how to respond.)

BILL:

See? And here we are. You might say you want to know the truth, but then what? Where do we go from there? It's not like any of us can work any harder. At least I know I can't. I'm only sleeping enough to function, and every ounce of my effort is going into this.

LAURA:

Bill—

BILL:

This is why it might be better to lie and tell everyone—even you— that everything is going well even though it's exponentially worse than last month.

LAURA:

No. I said I wanted the truth and I'm glad you told me.

BILL:

Well, you're a better person than me, then. I

LAURA:

Heh. Like one of those startup business guys.

BILL:

Startup business? What do you mean?

LAURA:

Did you know I had a short stint in business school? Before I got my PhD in Lit?

BILL:

Somehow, I missed that one.

LAURA:

Well yeah, I went to business school for a year. I had this dream of starting a—
Well—That doesn't matter. But—

BILL:

A what?

LAURA:

It was just a stupid idea.

BILL:

No, tell me. How has it never come up?

LAURA:

I don't know. I don't talk about it much anymore.

I had this idea to start a sustainable housing company. Not like luxury condos in cities but more like—micro sustainable units in urban areas. You know. To make things more affordable for—anyone. Everyone.

BILL:

I had no idea.

LAURA:

The point is when you say that—that you don't want to speak the truth aloud—it reminds me of so many of the business moguls I met. They all had this weird trait where they would just—continue to say that things were all right even when they were going south. They spoke it aloud as if it was the truth. Like, somehow, they believed that if they *spoke* something with enough conviction, it would come to be.

They really believed they could speak things into existence. Sheer force of will.

BILL:

Did it work?

LAURA:

That's the thing. Sometimes it did, and sometimes it didn't.

BILL:

Well, was there any pattern? Could you tell when it would and when it wouldn't?

(Laura shakes her head.)

LAURA:

Maybe I would have known if I'd stayed in business school...

(The sounds of people filtering in. Laura and Bill know the conversation is over now that people are arriving. Laura exits to sit in the audience and Bill goes to the podium.)

BILL:

Friends, I know the email sent out this past Monday seemed to come as a shock to a few of you, and I wanted to clarify a few things.

(Pause.)

We did find out, recently, that some of our programs will be cut. There was just no way around this budgetarily. But I've been assured that this isn't likely to affect the security of any one particular faculty member. We *will* find a place for everyone! Whether it's on faculty or as an administrator. Additionally, because of intense budgetary cuts and freezes, we are looking for volunteers for spring semester registration and advisement...

Everyone will be asked to take on an extra 20 or 30 students.

(Pause.)

Pardon? Yes—yes. I know this is a lot. I—I understand that, but I am confident that you are all capable to taking on these important additional activities...

Finally—one other announcement! And this is a good one. We will still be recruiting students at our open house events this year and our admissions office will still be reaching out to boost enrollment. Volunteers needed!

Ah, Question—? Donna?

Right—yes. That's a good question. And unfortunately, we're not completely sure which programs will still be here, and which ones won't, so—we won't be able to give perspective students any guarantees...

We're also—still not sure about the name. I keep getting that question and I'm sorry I can't offer more clarification. And—no. We aren't positive which admissions office any interested perspective students would need to apply through. Ours. Or theirs. Or... both.

But! We are going to continue moving forward with that Falcons spirit!

(Lights fade.)

Scene 10

(Lights up on Shawna's office. She's lying back in her chair. Some sort of meditative music for relaxation is playing. Theo enters.)

THEO:

What's up? What is this music...?

SHAWNA:

It's my depressed-life-doesn't-make-sense anymore music.

THEO:

Okayyy. I guess I sort of hear it? Your taste in music is so weird.

SHAWNA:

You play Fantasy Football; don't talk to me.

THEO:

What is it you have against my fantasy football?

SHAWNA:

Literally everything.

THEO:

Fair.

SHAWNA:

Theo, I'm going to be homeless—I mean—unhoused. I'm going to be unhoused. I did the math and I think I'll be okay until September... maybe October? But after that—

THEO:

You're not going to be unhoused. And if you are you can move in with me and Maya.

SHAWANA:

Awww, oh my god, how nice is that? Really?

THEO:

...No. She would murder me. But you'll figure something out.

SHAWNA:

Do you know how horrible the job market is for people in English?

THEO:

Shawna. I'm in Philosophy. It's *objectively* worse.

SHAWNA:

I'm having heart palpitations.

THEO:

Why focus on the negative?

SHAWNA:

Well, apologies for not being an expert in stoicism like you. I enjoy my anxiety, thank you very much. Anxiety has to have some sort of evolutionary benefit, right? Otherwise, it would have never developed!

THEO:

Shawna—

SHAWNA:

And if it did develop, but no longer benefits us, then it would have slowly disappeared over several generations of evolutionary—

THEO:

Shawna!

SHAWNA:

Wait a minute. Wait-wait-wait... Why are you so chill right now? I mean you're usually kind of chill, but not *this* chill.

THEO:

I need to tell you something.

SHAWNA:

Oh my god. What is it?

THEO:

Nothing—

SHAWNA:

You're not sick or something / please, please tell me you're not sick or something!

THEO:

I'm not—I'm not sick or anything! I just—Got a new job.

(Pause.)

SHAWNA:

Oh. Oh. Well, that's... great! Where?

THEO:
Bonaventure.

SHAWNA:
College?

THEO:
No, hardware store. Yes, college! It's just a VAP position in American Studies.

SHAWNA:
...American Studies?

THEO:
It's interdisciplinary. They'll probably fire me within a year for teaching too much philosophy, but hey, a guy can try.

SHAWNA:
I'm super happy for you.

THEO:
You're pissed at me.

SHAWNA:
I'm not.
...Really? American Studies?

THEO:
You are. I can tell.

SHAWNA:
I'm not pissed at *you*. I'm happy for you. For real. I just feel like somehow everyone else got the memo about how to handle this situation, and I... didn't.

(Pause.)

THEO:
I knew someone there. At St. Bonaventure.

SHAWNA:
Ah. I see.

American Studies...

THEO:

We like to pretend things don't work that way, but everyone knows they do.

SHAWNA:

Thank you for admitting that at least. It sort of makes me feel better.

THEO:

I'm nothing if not cynically honest.

SHAWNA:

To a fault.

THEO:

That being said, I'm sure something will come up.

SHAWNA:

How can you say that? I don't get it. Especially you! You're the one who reads Camus, and Sartre, and Nietzsche, and Kierkegaard, and all those broody European white guys who didn't think life was worth living.

THEO:

Ah yes, but there's also Marcus Aurelius. Who *does* think life is worth living. And Kierkegaard eventually comes to some optimistic conclusions. And Nietzsche? You know what his cure for existential dread is?

SHAWNA:

What?

THEO:

Passion. Living your life with great passion, and not avoiding the shitty moments, but rather, recognizing them for what they are.

SHAWNA:

So, just let the joblessness wash over me?

(Theo rolls his eyes.)

THEO:

Do you want to go to lunch?

SHAWNA:

I could go to lunch.

THEO:

Great. Lunch.

SHAWNA:

Always lunch!

(Shawna grabs her bag.)

SHAWNA:

What does Nietzsche say about lunch?

THEO:

Not much. But we do know he suffered from digestive issues. Which is probably why he was such a jerk all the time.

(Lights fade.)

Scene 9

(Lights up on Bill speaking to the audience.)

BILL:

Falcons. Congratulations on making it through another fantastic school year. I commend each and every one of you. We worked hard this year. We tried our best. We got up every day and gave one hundred and ten percent of our efforts to trying to make this thing happen.

So many of us did twice, or three times the work we were asked to do.

And you should all feel proud of everything you've accomplished. I know I'm proud of you.

(Pause.)

But the acquisition has fallen through.

(Possible audible reactions from the auditorium.)

Just a few days ago.

I know you all probably have a thousand questions.

How could this have happened? How could something like this happen to so many people who were all trying to do the right thing?

The truth is: I don't know. I can't tell you.

I'll probably be examining that question for many years to come right along with you.

(Pause.)

We don't know exactly why it fell apart, and we likely never will.

It's not within our legal purview to ask why our partner school made the decision they made...

And I know it's hard to hear, but we're going to have to live with that.

Sometimes, things don't make sense.

And trying to *make* them make sense is somehow... worse.

Would that mean we did something wrong?

Or our friends or colleagues did something wrong?

Or our integration partners did something wrong? But that simply isn't true.

Sometimes our best isn't enough. Sometimes the circumstances for success just aren't there.

So, maybe we can look at this as a special moment.

Where we don't get a happy ending we wanted, but we don't get to wallow in tragedy, either.

Instead, we get to walk away with a kind of understanding of the world that not many people ever learn. That there's so much beyond our control, so much that it's almost *earth shattering*—but that trying to make it better, somehow, even just a little bit is, still, for whatever reason, worth it.

I am glad we tried as hard as we did.

I don't regret one moment of it.

It made us better people.

It made us better educators.

It gave us knowledge and wisdom that not many others have.

And in that way, we are victorious.

(Pause.)

There's no plan B, friends. There are no secret strings to pull, or people to ask.

Short of a miracle, we'll be closing our doors on July 1st, 2023.

I want you each to know how very sorry I am to have to deliver this news.

HR will be in touch with everyone to discuss unemployment packages.

(Lights fade.)

Scene 10

(Lights up on Amari, a foreign exchange student.)

AMARI:

Dr. Paxton? I just found out. I just read the email.

What does it mean? Does it really mean that there won't be a college anymore? Like—like it's closed forever? Not just—for a semester or—like for renovations, but, like, like a store? That

went of business. Like a mall? I don't understand. I didn't think schools closed here. I never heard of that before. I told my family that nothing like that ever happened in the US. They're going to think I don't know what I'm talking about. And—I just got here. Last semester. It took months and months to figure everything out with my VISA and financial aid and scholarships and all of that. I was supposed to stay here and play football—I mean—soccer. Soccer. But I don't think any other school is going to let me play... And if I have to go back now, what will I tell my family? Of all the colleges in the whole wide USA, I just happened to go to the one that closed? The email said something about transferring. About Teach-Out. What does that mean? Teach-Out? There was a list of schools we could pick from, but—does that include international students? I don't know if my VISA will still work, and no one is picking up the phone in the office support services office. Or in admissions. Or in Student Life. Does anyone even work there anymore? Or did they all leave? We are still here, Dr. Paxton. I—I'm confused. I don't know where to go for help. And I don't know how to do this by myself.

(Lights fade.)

Scene 11

(Lights up on a small café. Ambient café sounds. Laura is sitting there, working on her laptop. Shawna approaches with coffee.)

SHAWNA:
Hey...

LAURA:
Hey...

(Shawna sits. Laura shuts her computer. There's an awkward, sad pause. They sip their coffees.)

LAURA:
Thanks for meeting.

SHAWNA:
I'm glad you texted.

LAURA:
How are you?

SHAWNA:
I'm good! I'm okay. You?

LAURA:
Can't complain.

SHAWNA:
Theo said you were working for a non-profit.

LAURA:
Yeah. Sustainable housing services. It's great. And I teach one class at State. Which is nice.

SHAWNA:
Do you miss it?

LAURA:
Every day.

SHAWNA:
What about the whole "those who can't do, teach" thing?

LAURA:
A gross fallacy. It's more like "those who can't teach are frequently unintelligible."
What about you? What are you up to these days?

SHAWNA:
Adjuncting. Three different schools. Eight classes.

LAURA:
Wooah that's—

SHAWNA:
It's actually... fine? Most days, when I'm driving around from school to school, and it's *not* snowing, I don't want to kill myself. And that's the goal, right? Not to dread what you do every day? Am I exhausted? Yes, but, the more you do, the more you *can* do.

(They sip their coffees.)

LAURA:

To a point.

SHAWNA:

I'll be fine. There's always next year.

LAURA:

Listen, I'm sorry really about the whole—

SHAWNA:

No, *I'm* sorry. Things were weird after the hallway thing, and I didn't know how to—

LAURA:

That was nothing. It wasn't even that serious of an issue. I shouldn't have ever said anything to you.

SHAWNA:

Really? Cuz, it sort of felt like I lost one of my best friends.

LAURA:

You didn't. I was a mess, then. But I couldn't let anyone know. Some people fall apart quietly; some people fall apart louder. The louder is probably healthier if we're being honest. So, I'm sorry. For anything that happened last spring.

(Pause.)

SHAWNA:

Do you think other schools will close?

LAURA:

Probably. The Chronicle says the worst year will be 2024-25. Online course curriculums are growing rapidly; institutions in the south are catching onto this, but somehow, the northeast isn't, which I don't understand.

SHAWNA:

You should go into admin.

LAURA:

Hah! Those jobs don't fall out of the sky. You've gotta know someone.

SHAWNA:
...Were we in a cult?

(Laura laughs.)

LAURA:
No. We were part of a thing that was dying, and no one wants to admit they're dying.
(Laura delivers this next line in a satirical voice)
The ivory tower is indestructible! The pillars of Truth! Integrity! Discovery! Excellence will prevail!

SHAWNA:
And lunch.

LAURA:
Always lunch.

SHAWNA:
Hey so, I thought, since you said you wanted to try to make it last spring—I would invite you to the next poetry reading. It's a big one for me. I'll be sharing a lot of my stuff.

LAURA:
Yes. Yes! Absolutely. When is it?

SHAWNA:
Next Friday. 6pm. Houndstooth open mic.

LAURA:
I will absolutely be there...Where is Houndstooth again...?

SHAWNA:
Hah—I will send you an invite, okay? On Facebook?
And we will get a drink after. Like regular friends! Who go out and have fun sometimes!

LAURA:
Oh god, wouldn't that be something!

(They both chuckle and sip their coffee.)

SHAWNA:

You know what I can't stop thinking about? After all of it?

After all the drama and the nonsense and the meetings and the anxiety and the rewritten curriculum and the constant cattiness? It's this one stupid story my brother told me last summer.

Right after we closed. I mean—It's not even really a story. It's just something that happened.

He's like ten years younger than me and belongs to this super bougee gym downtown that mostly college kids go to, and he always sees Falcons kids there wearing the Falcon's t-shirts and hoodies, you know? So, I guess there's this one guy he sees a lot because they usually go at the same time, or whatever. And one day, my brother goes up to the kid and says, "Hey, I heard about what happened to your college. I'm so sorry, dude." And the kid says "No problem, man. It is what it is."

And my brother says, "So, what's next? Where are you transferring?"

And the kid just shakes his head, and says,

"Nah, bro. I think that's it for me. I think I'm done."

*(They sit in silence. They stare at their coffees.
Lights fade. Blackout.)*

END OF PLAY