

A MATTER OF PRINCIPLE FOR JANET

By Ronald K. Burke

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

JANET: A pretty high school senior of exceptional talent. She intends to inform students at the School Assembly of the contents in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter From Birmingham Jail." She is challenged by members of the School Board, the vice-principal, her boyfriend and others. She insists on discussing the contents of the Letter. To Janet it is a matter of principle.

PHIL: A good-looking high school Senior and Janet's boyfriend. He invests a lot of energy trying to talk Janet out of her plans to discuss the ideas in Dr. King's Letter. They break up over this reality.

VICE-PRINCIPAL BLUNTLY: A man in his fifties, a super-worrier and an alarmist. He is in the habit of popping pills for his ailing stomach. And he has a peculiar habit of putting his forefinger in his ear and wiggling it fiercely to stop an itch. He is certain if Janet discusses the Letter riots will soon follow. He thinks the students will be encouraged to protest everything they dislike about school. He says: "The school will get a bad reputation if the ideas in that Letter are discussed at a student Assembly."

PRINCIPAL ADAMS: A well-dressed handsome woman in her forties. She is a thoughtful individual who supports Janet. She wears eye glasses with a chain. In addition she must be careful not to alienate her colleague Mr. Bluntly and concerned members of the School Board.

KAREN: She is one of Janet's closest friends and supports her in this tense time. Also, she is a member of the Student Council.

BETSY: Karen's nervous friend who questions why Janet is giving this type of presentation at the Assembly. Also, she is a member of the Student Council.

MAUREEN: The very proper President of the Student Council who is deeply concerned over Janet's situation. She invites Janet to attend a Student Council meeting to discuss her problem.

HARRY: A former boyfriend of Janet who steps right up to date her when he finds out she has "dumped" Phil.

MS. COLLINS: Janet's English teacher. A person most comfortable with herself. The students feel secure in her presence. She is a rock-solid English professor who quotes from the Masters frequently. She supports Janet and offers Maureen and the Student Council her classroom for the meeting to discuss Janet's presentation. She thinks it will be less nerve-racking for Janet to be in a place of familiar surroundings.

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by

Ronald K. Burke, Ph. D.

SCENE 1

SETTING: We see JANET alone at a desk in her English Classroom reading over the “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” There is a mobile blackboard at upstage center and a few desks scattered around the room. The teacher’s desk (MS. COLLINS) is beside the blackboard. JANET is seated center stage, SHE is wearing black pants, loafers, a white peasant blouse and a necklace with a gemstone attached.

AT RISE: *It is after school and EVERYONE is leaving for the day. JANET pauses from her reading to listen to an announcement over the loud speaker. We hear the distinctive voice of PRINCIPAL ADAMS.*

PRINCIPAL ADAMS: This is your principal speaking. Everyone--This is the close of a very productive and pleasant day. Thank you so much for your hard work today and have an enjoyable evening. I look forward to see you all at the Assembly this Friday. We may have a special student speaker. Good day.

(PHIL--JANET’s beau enters from up right. JANET’s chair is facing the audience. PHIL walks up behind her and massages her neck and shoulders. HE is wearing a dress shirt, khaki pants, and brown shoes.)

JANET: *(SHE knows who it is.)* Ahhhhh. That sure does feel good.

PHIL: *(Inquisitively.)* Under a lot of pressure--are you?

JANET: *(Surprised that HE would ask such a thing.)* Well, my goodness what do you think?

PHIL: *(Crosses to the blackboard. Beat)* Do you really want to know?

JANET: *(Folds her arms, taps her foot and then waits for his reply.)* Yes. Of course I do. Yes--as a matter of fact.

PHIL: *(Picks up a piece of chalk and examines it closely.)* I know very well we were coasting along nicely as probably the coolest and most popular couple in the school until this--this--ah--problem *(HE then makes an exclamation mark on the blackboard and puts the chalk back down very lightly.)* came up.

JANET: *(Stands up and faces PHIL.)* Problem? Problem? *(Crosses to PHIL.)* Is that what you call it--PROBLEM??

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PHIL: (*Turns away from her picks up the eraser and flips it in his hand.*) Well it is a problem to me when everyone looks at me in the weirdest of ways. I feel like a real jerk.

JANET: (*Obviously annoyed.*) Tsk, tsk, tsk. You poor thing. Poor Phil. People are looking at you in the “weirdest of ways.” I suppose I’m to blame for that, huh?

PHIL: (*Turns to her shaking his head. Places eraser back on the ledge.*) Now, honey I didn’t say that you were to blame. (*Beat.*) But I sure would like to hear that you are going to read a poem at the Assembly.

JANET: (*Now infuriated. SHE crosses back to the desk and puts her back to him.*) A poem? Did I hear you right? A poem? So that’s how it is. Me. Read a poem? What am I supposed to do? (*Turns to him abruptly.*) Forget about my principles? Is that what you want? Is that what you really want? Is it--huh?

PHIL: (*Apologetically.*) No, no, no, no, no. I would never ask you to do that. You know me better than that. I know this means a lot to you but, but, but . . .

JANET: (*Putting him on the spot.*) But what? Say what you really mean. “*My-girlfriend-is-a-troublemaker-and-a-rebel.*” Isn’t that what you really want to say?

PHIL: (*Pleading.*) Certainly not. Honestly Janet you’ve got to reconsider this presentation. The School Board, the vice-principal, and a bunch of other people are really concerned over the school getting a bad reputation from this kind of Assembly. It will only energize students to act in the wrong way.

JANET: (*Absolutely disappointed with PHIL. SHE takes off her necklace and slaps it in PHIL’s hand.*) I don’t care what they think of me. (*Beat.*) And--by the way do you remember what you said when you gave me this necklace?

PHIL: Yes, of course. I would *never* forget that.

JANET: Well? Can you say that now? (*Beat.*) Never mind I will. You said in a (*SHE begins to sob*) deeply sincere way: “Let this necklace be a symbol of my love for you--I’ll always support you no matter what.”

PHIL: (*Tries to get close to her but SHE backs away.*) I meant every single syllable.

JANET: (*SHE faces him then backs off as though HE were a monster.*) How can you say that now? You want me to read a poem! A poem for crying out loud! A poem. (*Firmly subdued SHE whispers*) Please go. (*Then loudly*) GO!!!

PHIL: (*Near the up right exit and holding up the necklace.*) Are you sure you don’t want to think this over? You are under a lot of stress.

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JANET: (*SHE walks over to the mobile blackboard, takes the eraser from the ledge and throws it at PHIL.*) Get out! Get out! I never want to see you again! Go! Get out of my sight! NOW!!!

PHIL: (*Pleading as HE ducks from the eraser.*) Janet, Janet. Please, please. (*HE exits in a hurry.*)

END OF SCENE

SCENE 2

(Enter KAREN and BETSY after a pause. THEY rush over to JANET pull up desks and sit close to her.)

KAREN: (*SHE is wearing jeans, a blouse, sneakers, and a baseball cap backwards. SHE leans in to JANET.*) Okay give us the juicy details.

JANET: (*Still in a daze over her fight with PHIL.*) Huh? What? (*Beat.*) Oh--hi you guys.

BETSY: (*SHE wears beige slacks, a school sweatshirt and a beret. SHE is overly eager.*) Hey Janet, c'mon. What's going on?

JANET: (*Heaves a big sigh.*) Laaadeeez! Give me a chance to catch my breath--okaaay?

BETSY: (*Still curious.*) All right. After you collect your thoughts we want to hear all about it.

KAREN: Yes, why did Phil dash out of this room and mutter to himself all the way down the hallway. He didn't even speak to us.

JANET: (*Trying to be matter-of-fact.*) Oh we broke up. Or should I say I broke up with him.

KAREN and BETSY: (*In unison.*) You did! Really!

JANET: (*With utmost certainty.*) Yes I did. Really. And I am one angry lady--thank you very much.

BETSY: (*At her wits end and wanting to know more.*) Why? Why? You two are the school's perfect couple.

KAREN: (*Incredulously.*) I can't believe this. Are you sure? You're not making this up are you? Janet? (*Beat.*)

JANET: (*Straightforward.*) It's the truth--honest. Phil would not support me at this very crucial time--I needed him and he backed off.

BETSY: Crucial time--backed off--what does all that mean?

KAREN: (*Impatient with BETSY.*) Haven't you been paying attention around the school lately? Janet is going to discuss the ideas in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" at the Assembly this Friday.

BETSY: (*Surprised.*) No kidding? What is so awful about discussing ideas in a letter someone wrote?

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JANET: *(Gets up from the desk and begins to walk around the room.)*
Nothing at all. But vice-principal Bluntly thinks it will create protest groups, make some students anxious, and bring on an undesirable reputation for the school.

(Suddenly MR. BLUNTLY's voice is heard. HE enters the classroom.)

MR. BLUNTLY: That's right. *(HE pops a stomach pill.)* That is precisely what I think. *(Beat.)* Let's leave the building and go home now girls. Have a nice night ladies.

(HE remains to talk to JANET. KAREN and BETSY exit. BETSY turns and says: "We'll see you at the Student Council meeting JANET.")

(Standing over JANET with one hand on his stomach.) Well young lady what are you doing here at this time when everyone has gone home?

JANET: *(Flatly.)* I've been going over Dr. King's Letter for the Assembly on Friday.

MR. BLUNTLY: *(Pulls up a desk and sits. HE wiggles a finger in his ear.)* Ah yes. That is what I wish to discuss with you. *(Beat.)* First of all is there anyone outside of the school who has put you up to this? That is--any interlopers from a radical group?

JANET: *(Bordering on the sarcastic.)* If you mean outside agitators Mr. Bluntly--with all due respect that is certainly not the case. No way.

MR. BLUNTLY: *(Smiles as HE appears relieved. HE pops another pill.)* That's fine Janet. I just want to be sure you are not being influenced by any wrongful sources. You know the type I mean?

JANET: *(With much sincerity.)* Believe me Mr. Bluntly this entire idea came to me in class as we were studying the Civil Rights Era. The letter struck me as a terrific example of American Literature.

MR. BLUNTLY: *(Condescendingly.)* I see. Hmmp. American Literature. *(Beat.)* That time in our history was most interesting. Dr. King always found himself in the midst of unrest. *(Pill time--Beat.)* I hope you are aware of the social upheaval that accompanied King's labors?

JANET: *(Proudly.)* I've studied the period extensively. Besides he was nonviolent. To expect Dr. King's Letter to encourage violence is just not going to happen.

MR. BLUNTLY: *(Rises from the desk and begins to pace back and forth and wiggles a finger in his ear.)* We'll see. And you are not worried that the students will think this is an invitation to protest everything they don't like about our school? You don't believe they will be encouraged?

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JANET: (*In all honesty.*) I don't think so sir. (*Beat.*) By the way--have you read the Letter?

MR. BLUNTLY: Ahhh no not all of it. It's been a while. I do know he wrote it while incarcerated. And (*Beat.*) that's another matter. The word "Jail" in the title (*Pill time.*) bothers me and the School Board as well.

JANET: I'm sorry everyone feels that way. I think the Letter is an important part of our learning at this school. It explains in striking language the anguish and pain a group of Americans suffered for so long a time.

MR. BLUNTLY: (*Showing desperate feelings.*) I believe honestly we do not have to revisit that era again. (*Beat. HE crosses to up right door and turns to her.*) I will see you at the Student Council meeting where you will have my "Against" vote. (*Pops a pill for emphasis.*)

JANET: Thank you for your time Mr. Bluntly.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 3

(MR. BLUNTLY exits and enter JANET's former boyfriend HARRY—then MR. BLUNTLY returns (*Beat.*) looks at them shakes his head and exits again.)

HARRY: (*HE is wearing jeans, sneakers, and a zippered leather jacket.*) What's going on? I heard you and Phil are no longer together? Is that true?

JANET: (*Sardonically.*) Hello Harry.

HARRY: (*Realizing HE forgot to greet her.*) Oh, I'm sorry. Hello Janet. (*Beat.*) So what's this all about?

JANET: (*Glad to see HARRY, SHE stands up.*) Wow. News sure travels fast in this place. Yes. Phil and I are not going to be seeing each other ever again. That's for sure.

HARRY: (*Fumbling with his words.*) Oh--that's good. Oops--I mean that's not good that you broke up but it is--oh I don't know what I mean.

JANET: (*Laughing.*) Ha, ha, ha. Don't be upset Harry. (*Beat.*) I needed that laugh. It is so great to see you now.

HARRY: (*Aware that HE is catching her on the rebound HE crosses over to her and places a hand on her shoulder. SHE backs off.*) You know we were great together one time. The football games, the parties, the times we went bike riding, the movies, the fun picnics and those long walks.

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JANET: *(A bit confused. Sits down.)* Harry--Harry you've got quite a vivid imagination. We only went for one walk and we only went to one movie. We never did those other things you say we did. Isn't that so?

HARRY: *(Pulls up a chair and sits next to her.)* But I like to think we did. *(Beat.)* We had fun at the movie and that walk in the park--right?

JANET: That was a year and a half ago. *(Beat.)* Ohhh--I guess we did.

HARRY: Any chance we could begin to see each other again?

JANET: *(Knowing that was coming.)* Of course. That sounds like fun. *(SHE rises and paces back and forth to voice a warning to him.)* But we should not rush into this okay?

(Excited HARRY rushes to her and gives her a great big hug for a long, long time. HE doesn't notice SHE is crying over PHIL and secretly wipes the tears away with a hankie. Suddenly PHIL appears in the doorway, sees them embracing and exits angrily. HARRY is unaware of this and speaks.)

HARRY: By the way--why are you so angry with Phil?

JANET: He won't support me in my discussion of the King Letter.

HARRY: The King what?

JANET: Dr. Martin Luther King's "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

HARRY: *(Completely lacking any knowledge of the entire event.)* Doctor who? What letter? Is it important?

JANET: *(Speaks matter-of-factly and somewhat disappointed in him.)* You might say so. Listen I have to get busy here. Give me a call later, okay?

HARRY: You betcha. *(HE exits.)*

END OF SCENE,

SCENE 4

(JANET is at her desk. Enter from up right doorway MS. COLLINS--JANET's English teacher. SHE crosses to her own desk and looks for some papers.)

MS. COLLINS: Oh, hi Janet. I forgot my homework--ha, ha. What are you doing here? *(Pause. SHE realizes JANET is in a sad mood.)* Are you okay?

JANET: When you told me I was selected to present anything I wished at the Assembly Friday I did not think it would cause this much of a problem.

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MS. COLLINS: (*SHE crosses down, pulls up a desk and sits next to JANET.*) Tell me what's going on? Is the Principal Ms. Adams giving you a difficult time over this?

JANET: (*Stands up and begins to pace while talking.*) Oh no. Ms. Adams has been absolutely terrific the whole time.

MS. COLLINS: Then what is the difficulty.

JANET: It's my boyfriend Phil and that Mr. Bluntly.

MS. COLLINS: (*Trying to calm her down SHE speaks softly.*) Okay relax. Tell me one thing at a time. What about Phil?

JANET: I don't want to burden you with this.

MS. COLLINS: Janet--I've been your English teacher and Advisor since you entered this school. I think you should be sharing your problems with me. (*SHE moves in closer and offers her shoulder to JANET.*)

JANET: I gave Phil his necklace back. Also, I told him to stay out of my life. He thinks I'm nothing but a nuisance and a troublemaker. He wants me to read a poem. A poem--imagine that? Does he call that support?

MS. COLLINS: But didn't I see Harry coming from this room

JANET: Oh he was here to give me some comfort. Believe me I needed it at the time.

MS. COLLINS: (*Nodding and understanding SHE moves JANET's head gently away and stands up.*) I'll let you youngsters work that out. (*Beat.*) Now what has Mr. Bluntly been saying to you?

JANET: He thinks my presentation will create mass confusion, embarrass the School Board and give us a bad reputation.

MS COLLINS: Oh honey, he can be a real pain sometimes. He does react impulsively at times in situations like this. I can understand his viewpoint--although some of us don't agree with him. I believe he will calm down after he thinks this over. He has done so in the past.

JANET: He told me he was going to cast an "Against" vote at the Student Council meeting.

MS COLLINS: Let's wait and see. He might have a change of mind after he hears what you and others have to say when we meet.

JANET: Will you be at the meeting? I hope so.

MS COLLINS: Oh yes. I wouldn't miss this for all the world. That is why I offered this room. I knew you'd feel better in here. "Insecurity" as has been stated, "is we mortals greatest enemy."

JANET: Thank you so much for your generosity.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 5

(A bare stage except for a flat with a door up center marked 'ENGLISH—MS. COLLINS. HARRY is about to open the door when along comes PHIL.)

PHIL: *(Sarcastically.)* Where do you think you're going?

HARRY: *(Also sarcastically and a bit afraid of PHIL.)* If I want you to know I'll tell you--okay?

PHIL: *(Very slowly and angrily.)* I saw you and Janet hugging in this very classroom just a while ago.

HARRY: *(Moves away from door and puts hands on hips defensively.)* So? What does that prove?

PHIL: *(Storms downstage turns and walks back upstage and stares at HARRY.)* You know she is my girl. *(Flips necklace in his hand.)*

HARRY: What do you mean "My girl?" You don't own her. *(Beat.)* Oh--I see--she gave you the necklace back.

PHIL: *(Ignores that statement.)* I know you guys dated a few times but it wasn't quite the same as our closeness. We've been together for a year and a half. Everyone in the school looks at us as the perfect couple.

HARRY: *(HARRY is zipping and unzipping his jacket nervously and worried PHIL might get physical.)* Now look Phil--I meant no harm. She came on to me. She nearly threw herself at me sobbing and crying. Ask her.

PHIL: *(Shaking his head from side to side.)* I find that hard to imagine. She is a pretty strong woman.

HARRY: *(Again defensively.)* She did. Honest. Just ask her.

(Suddenly the classroom door opens and it is JANET. SHE speaks only to HARRY.)

JANET: Oh, hi Harry. You got here sooner than I thought.

HARRY: *(Sticks out his chest.)* You call--I respond.

PHIL: *(Snidely.)* Well now--isn't that just dandy? How cavalier.

JANET: Never mind him Harry.

(SHE grabs HARRY's hand--THEY cross to stage right to exit. PHIL follows and steps between them putting his face close to HARRY's. Then JANET shouts at PHIL.)

JANET: Go ahead Phil hit him! Show us how immature you really are!

PHIL: *(Backs down after JANET's remark. Points a finger at HARRY.)* Just watch your back Buster. You never know when . . .

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JANET: *(Hands on hips and stares angrily at PHIL.)* When what Phil?
When what?

MS. COLLINS: *(Enters from classroom.)* What's all this noise about? Is something wrong people?

JANET: Nothing Ms. Collins. Just straightening out some things. Right Phil?

PHIL: Ah, ah, yes. Just clearing up a few things.

MS. COLLINS: Well, get along everyone it's getting late. Your folks will be wondering what happened to you.

JANET and HARRY: Good night Ms. Collins.

PHIL: Good night Ms. Collins.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 6

(A bare stage except for two meeting tables arranged like an upside down "V" with three chairs for one table and two for the other. In between the two tables is the chair for JANET. The Student Council President, MAUREEN, sits beside her. Tables are up center. As the scene opens the COUNCIL MEMBERS and its GUESTS enter from stage right. THEY enter in the following order: MAUREEN, the President of the Council is first. SHE is dressed in a business suit, wears horn-rimmed glasses and her hair is pulled back in a pony tail. SHE holds a clipboard close to her chest. SHE is followed by PRINCIPAL ADAMS and then VICE-PRINCIPAL BLUNTLY after which is MS COLLINS. Then KAREN and BETSY follow in a solemn mood. Finally JANET marches in carrying the Letter. THEY stand next to the chairs that were assigned to them by MAUREEN when THEY entered the classroom.)

MAUREEN: *(Most judiciously.)* Everyone please sit. Thank you. Do you all know each other?

(All MEMBERS nod in the affirmative.)

Fine. I'll dispense with the introductions then. We are meeting because it was thought we should meet and discuss this problem that has arisen lately. I have put together the following agenda: Each person here will be allowed to make a statement for or against Janet's proposed presentation at Friday's Assembly. Then Janet will respond to your assertions. Subsequent to all of the statements we

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will conduct a secret ballot. Any questions? *(Beat.)* Fine we will proceed. Principal Adams you have the floor.

PRINCIPAL ADAMS: *(SHE puts on her glasses and looks around the room smiling.)* Ladies and gentlemen this is certainly a first I must say. I am so happy that we can have students, faculty, and the Administration meeting to discuss a campus problem. This is what Democracy is all about. Isn't Maureen doing an exceptional job?

(The GROUP offers a light applause.)

I have not read Dr. King's Letter since my days in college and that was some time ago. Really folks it was.

(All MEMBERS smile at her humor.)

I understand the Letter is viewed by some as a breeding ground for much civil unrest. And others see it as an articulate explanation of why African Americans protested. I have to say Janet has a perfect right to discuss the speech under the First Amendment. There are those who do not want her to speak and there are those who support her. I am sure that rational minds will prevail. Thank you very much. *(SHE sits down.)*

MAUREEN: Thank you Principal Adams for that opening statement. And now let us hear from Vice-Principal Bluntly.

BLUNTLY: *(Stands up. Leans forward and puts both hands on the table. First HE places his forefinger in his ear and wiggles it--then HE pops a pill. HE clears his throat.)* Ahem. When I heard Janet was going to read the Letter I became upset. I thought the school would receive much negative press and the students would be encouraged to riot. Also, I suspect she is being influenced by questionable outsiders who could be influencing her. Do we really know what the outcome of such a presentation will be? I see ugly protests. Even though it is a secret ballot I am proud to vote against such a preposterous act.

MAUREEN: Thank you Mr. Bluntly. Ms. Collins would you care to say a few words?

MS COLLINS: Yes Maureen and thank you. As you all know the English Department boasts about its brightest students by allowing them to make a presentation with a piece of writing of their own choosing at an all-school Assembly. Janet--who is one of our prize pupils--has decided to discuss the ideas in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail." I have no qualms about that. She is a student of fine ability. When people complain to me that she is going to cause trouble I remind them to recall what Voltaire

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said: "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Men and women have fought and died for this country's privilege of free speech. And I think we should not be so willing to abuse that inalienable right. Moreover, our speaker in question is not a rabble-rouser. I happen to be one of those who approves of Janet's decision. I think the Letter is an excellent example of American Literature.

(At this point MR. BLUNTLY can be heard clearing his throat in a mocking manner.)

MAUREEN: Thank you so much Ms. Collins. Our next speaker is Karen.

KAREN: I'll be speaking for myself and Betsy.

(BETSY smiles in agreement and nods at EVERYONE.)

We have read Dr. King's Letter. We are totally positive and agree that all of the students in this school should know the contents in that piece of literature. It contains information that many of us did not know about. Some of this happened such a long time we could not have known about them. We were amazed at some of the things King said. We both think the subject matter should be passed on so students will know of the past history of a group of our fellow citizens. Also, we do not think the students will respond by rioting. *(SHE sends an angry look at MR. BLUNTLY.)*

MR. BLUNTLY: *(Rises, crosses to MAUREEN and gives her a slip of paper with his vote.)* I've heard enough of this nonsense. I give you my "Against" vote young lady.

(HE storms out of the room BETSY claps her hands and then says: "Oops." and bows her head embarrassed.)

MAUREEN: For our final speaker today we turn to Janet.

JANET: I'm so sorry Mr. Bluntly left but he did say he read the Letter some time ago. My personal ethic demands I talk about the ideas Dr. King said in his Letter. I believe firmly in myself and what I intend to do. I would not be able to look myself in the mirror otherwise. It would be against my principles if I backed out of this.

MAUREEN: Those are commendable words Janet. I think we all understand your approach to this event. We admire your integrity.

JANET: In any case, I will discuss the thoughts Dr. King mentioned in his very informative Letter. I'll present it now as I will at the Assembly. To begin--Dr. King and the African Americans had been

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protesting their degradation as second-class citizens for years. The public demonstrations were receiving no responses except for a letter in the BIRMINGHAM POST HERALD by eight clergymen which asked King to "Wait" since his actions would create a high degree of social unrest. He replied by his now-famous Letter which he wrote from his jail cell after being incarcerated for nonviolent marches.

(There is a knock on the door. MAUREEN crosses to see who it is. We hear her say: "Of course, come in boys." HARRY and PHIL enter. MAUREEN remains standing. HARRY sits in BLUNTLY's chair. PHIL sits in MAUREEN's seat next to JANET.)

MAUREEN: Sorry for the interruption Janet, please proceed.

JANET: Ah--yes thank you. King had tried and tried to get the white power structure to meet with him. When it finally did happen they broke their promises anyway. He asked them to remove the "Colored Only" signs from store windows and business entrances. A few took down the humiliating symbols of discrimination but they were back up shortly after they were removed. The whites said consistently: "Wait." Or "In time changes will be made." King reacted to those asking him to wait by writing the Letter while he was in the Birmingham Jail. *(JANET looks around the room for encouragement.)*

MAUREEN: *(SHE senses JANET's nervousness.)* Go on Janet we are anxious to hear what he said. Continue your statement.

JANET: King tells the reader it was impertinent for Clergymen to say in their communication to him: "Give integration time." But in his reply he listed some compelling reasons for the long-time disappointment and discontent. He asked those troubled by his actions how they would feel if they saw crazed mobs lynch their relatives whenever they chose to do so? Could they tolerate witnessing the drowning of their brothers and sisters at anytime? How would they respond watching men in blue curse, kick, and even murder their close friends and kinsmen and women? Never mind the fact that blacks must live in the middle of abject poverty in the richest country on earth. Could they endure extreme poverty in the midst of great riches? Could they live with these acts?

(PRINCIPAL ADAMS's cell phone rings. Quickly SHE answers it and stands away from the table.)

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PRINCIPAL ADAMS: *(SHE speaks into the phone.)* This is a meeting I must attend. Your problem will just have to wait. Thank you very much. See me in my office in the morning. Go on with what you were saying Janet.

(SHE gestures to MAUREEN to keep the meeting moving along.)

MAUREEN: Yes Ma'm.

(The MEMBERS all look at each other nodding and smiling about the PRINCIPAL's response to the caller on the cell phone.)

JANET: To continue my discussion. King's reasons for his frustration were needless to say heart wrenching. For instance he wrote that he felt a deep sense of anger and bewilderment when he tried to explain to his children why they were not allowed to enjoy the pleasures of an amusement park advertised on television. How infuriated, he said, one can become at a social system that allows this to happen. He felt helpless when he saw these small persons suddenly have tears roll down their cheeks when they learn Funtown does not admit black children.

MAUREEN: Oh my, my, my how unfeeling and heartless of the people then.

JANET: *(Looks over at MAUREEN.)* I know Maureen--isn't it despicable? King said when parents talk to their children about their own experience "ominous clouds of inferiority" would begin to form in the psyche of the children. As well their own world view developed an unconscious bitterness toward white people. Children are forced to have early experiences with horrific racism.

HARRY: *(Smacks his forehead with the heel of his hand)* Wow! Did that kind of treatment to little children really happen? I mean totally? Now I can understand why people acted the way they did. Totally. These are examples of bigotry aren't they? Is that the correct word? *(Looks at MS COLLINS)* Sorry to interrupt Janet.

JANET: *(Smiles at HARRY.)* In addition, King told his readers that nothing could impact one's personality more than when you know you have to sleep in the uncomfortable corner of your automobile on a cross-country trip because motels will not accept you. It is further demoralizing he would say to see signs of "White" and "Colored" reminding you of your place in a segregated society. There is also the degrading terms like "nigger" and "boy"--a very demeaning term for an elderly man. Also, wives and mothers are never shown respect or even addressed by the salutation "Mrs." Women were considered inferior to men.

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BETSY: (*Spontaneous interruption.*) Hearing this makes me feel so terribly sad. To treat women that way is awful. Oh, I'm so sorry Janet, I didn't mean to stop you.

JANET: That's okay Betsy. I think I know why you are so upset. But let me go on. Being harassed 24/7 simply because you are an African American placed all blacks in a tiptoe stance. Always wondering what would happen next. Always being sensitive to the sudden and unforeseen cruel actions of the white racists. Always nervous and looking over your shoulder. Those feelings can press on the mind causing inner fears and "outer resentment." Dr. King's word for this was a sense of "nobodyness."

BETSY: I doubt if we will ever be able to understand fully what someone feels who has been through that kind of treatment.

JANET: (*SHE looks at PHIL who has a humbling look on his face.*) So for all those reasons blacks were not willing to keep on waiting. Those examples should inform you why men and women who have lived through those terrible times were more than anxious to gain life, liberty, and the right to pursue their happiness. African Americans did not wish to live in the "abyss of despair," (*Beat.*) Sooo folks that is what I will say to the Assembly on Friday.

(*MEMBERS of the meeting compliment JANET's presentation with a light applause.*)

PHIL: You know Janet. I heard many times how bad it was in the South years ago. But hearing it put into real examples by someone who experienced racism gives me an entirely different degree of understanding.

(*JANET gives PHIL a curious glance as if to say: "What is it with you anyway?" PHIL smiles at her and shrugs his shoulders.*)

MAUREEN: Okay folks check your mark on the ballot in either "For" or "Against." I thought the meeting went just fine. Good luck Janet.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 7

(*A bare stage. PHIL is walking from Stage left to Stage right. At stage right VICE-PRINCIPAL BLUNTLY enters, crosses to PHIL and puts his hands out to stop him.*)

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PHIL: *(Stops abruptly. HE gives a quizzical look at BLUNTLY.)* Yes?
What is it Sir?

BLUNTLY: *(Puts hands on his hips.)* Where do you think you are going?

(PHIL shows the clipboard to BLUNTLY who takes it, peruses the list of names and shoves it back at PHIL.)

PHIL: I'm asking student to sign this petition if they wish.

BLUNTLY: *(Grabs PHIL by the arm crosses to stage left and BOTH exit.)* Not anymore you're not. Come with me now!

PHIL: *(As THEY cross to stage left PHIL speaks in a resigned manner.)*
Darn, it looks like I have no choice in the matter.

END OF SCENE

SCENE 8

(At down stage right we see PRINCIPAL ADAMS at her desk. MS COLLINS is sitting across the desk conversing with the PRINCIPAL when from stage left BLUNTLY storms across the stage pulling PHIL by the arm.)

BLUNTLY: *(Grabs clipboard from PHIL.)* Look. Just look at this!
Already he is starting trouble.

PRINCIPAL ADAMS: *(Rises from desk and crosses to BLUNTLY takes the clipboard and scans it.)* What seems to be the trouble here Mr. Bluntly?

BLUNTLY: *(Pops a pill. Wiggles finger in his ear.)* Well, isn't it obvious?
This young man is putting together a group of agitators to protest what they do not like about this school.

MS COLLINS: *(Rises from her chair and crosses to stand beside PHIL showing her siding with him.)* Are you sure about this Mr. Bluntly?
Have you read the petition? It is simply asking students and faculty to sign the paper and give a vote of confidence for Janet's presentation at the Assembly this Friday. Isn't that correct Phil? At the very least that is what we decided at the student council meeting.

PHIL: Yes, that is my sole purpose. Honest. I was deeply impressed at what I heard at the Student Council meeting.

BLUNTLY: *(Sorely disappointed that MS. COLLINS--one of his colleagues--sided with this young man.)* Ahem . . . errr *(Pops two pills. Wiggles finger in is ear.)* I continue to be somewhat nervous as you all well know. Remember those riots in the nineteen sixties?

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This kind of thing can resurrect them, I firmly believe. I am still against her reading this man's Letter.

PRINCIPAL ADAMS: Mr. Bluntly I thought we clarified this at the Student Council meeting. Regardless of how we stand on the issue we do not believe in censoring Janet's address. No matter what she says we must abide by the first amendment to the Constitution--part of the Bill of Rights--

BLUNTLY: (*Feeling patronized.*) Yes, yes, I know all that for goodness sake--give me some credit will you please?

PRINCIPAL ADAMS: I don't want to sound like a civics class to a scholar like you Mr vice-principal but we are obliged by the following: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, . . . and you know the rest I presume.

BLUNTLY: Well of course I do Ms. Adams. I am without a doubt not going to abuse the first Amendment rights. But isn't this going a bit too far? I think the students will rally to protest whatever they don't like about our proud school.

PRINCIPAL ADAMS: I surely don't believe it is encouraging the student body to protest. The subject matter is clearly a learning experience. It will certainly be informative to the youngsters.

MS COLLINS: Yes, I'll second that statement. Every member of the faculty who I've talked to is looking forward to the Assembly. Moreover we are all notably proud of this exceptional student.

BLUNTLY: (*Beginning to soften.*) Well, ahhh, ummm. Let me think about this. (*Sits back. Pops a pill.*) Hmmm. (*Looks at MS. COLLINS*) You say all the faculty, eh?

MS COLLINS: Yessir, every single one I've talked to in the Teacher's Lounge.

PRINCIPAL ADAMS: (*Changing the topic and the mood.*) Let me say something. Mr. Bluntly, am I correct in noticing you are not all that pleased with your hallway monitoring duty at the closing of the school day?

BLUNTLY: (*Pops three pills. Places hand on stomach.*) Ah, yes ma'am I can think of much nicer chores than policing the halls at the end of the day.

PRINCIPAL ADAMS: Such as?

BLUNTLY: You know I was a champion wrestler here at the school many years ago. And the Wrestling final matches are coming up this month. And a chaperone has not been assigned that duty?

PRINCIPAL ADAMS: That is very helpful to me Mr. Bluntly. What if I relieved you of that hallway duty for the remainder of the year? What if I assigned you to chaperone the wrestling matches?

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BLUNTLY: *(Takes clipboard from PHIL and writes his name on the petition.)* You have a deal Ms. Adams. *(Returns clipboard. Long pause.)* . . . But don't expect me at the Assembly.

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