

In Suspense



By

Leonard Goodisman

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JOHN SULLIVAN writes... This play dives into the murky waters of racial and class stereotyping within the U.S. educational system and how that influences the severity of disciplinary measures, and just as importantly, the horizon of expectations the school itself pins on students who aren't part of the privileged power dynamic. The African-American central character, Marie, is squeezed between the draconian / biased judgments of her school's principal, the expectations of her parents – who all have prejudice to deal with in their personal and work lives – and her own efforts to keep pace academically in an school environment that doesn't seem to recognize the impact of her learning disability on performance, especially with standardized achievement tests. Her parents level of support is strong, unbending, and shrewdly applied; her father's efforts to suss out what really happened and why Marie was blamed on the basis of purely circumstantial evidence lay bare the prejudice – and relative digital illiteracy – at the core of the principal's actions.*

Ultimately Marie draws on her own inner resources (and the support of her network) to find the necessary resilience to shake off the principal's abuse and move beyond labels that marginalize students from the “wrong side of the tracks” – in terms of race, ethnicity and/or class. When Marie's father reflects on his own path through life – a struggle Marie's situation closely parallels – he says with some earned bitterness, “this is always going on.” In Suspense made me reconsider all the surface progress that's been made in combating racism / equalizing educational / social opportunities in relation to the important work that's still ahead.

IN SUSPENSE

BRIEFLY

A minor infraction, if it occurred at all, leads to punitive procedures endangering the life of an African-American teenager Marie. She is suspended and cast out from high school. While her father, with inspired if desperate sleuth work, insists she is innocent and every

person around her claims to be doing her best, free from prejudice, acting appropriately, each fails to support Marie. Teen suicide is too much a problem, especially among African-American teens.

CHARACTERS:

Mother, Lorraine, forties, African-American

Marie, high school sophomore, African-American

Father, Jack, forties- African-American

Principal, Miss Boulet, late forties, could be Caucasian or African-American(for an additional nuance.).

Lawyer, just retired, sixties, Caucasian

Act I

Scenes 1: Marie in study hall.

2: Mother and Marie at home in living room.

3: Father, mother, and Marie at home in living room.

4: Marie, father, mother, the Principal in the Principal's office.

5: Marie, mother, and father at home in living room.

6: Father and lawyer in the gym.

Act II

Scenes 1: Marie, mother after work at home in living room.

2: Marie, mother, father after work at home in living room.

3: Mother, father at home in living room; Marie enters later.

4: Father, principal in principal's office; mother enters later.

5: Father and lawyer in the gym.

6: Marie in the living room.

7: Mother in the living room.

SYNOPSIS

Busy parents find their high school teenager, Marie, is home from school because she has been suspended. Her parents, Lorraine and Jack, work hard to find out what triggered that suspension; Marie appears to not know, at least she says she doesn't.

Eventually, they find out that a very stern, maybe unreasonable principal has suspended Marie for a computer attack. Jack, a network engineer, is pleased at first that his daughter is picking this computer network stuff up. When he realizes that she is not really into computers, he investigates and wonders whether Marie was really involved and whether a computer attack even took place. His wife, Lorraine, takes a different, more conciliatory tack. Meanwhile, Marie suffers and imagines herself becoming more and more a part of the rejected subculture in school, the "kids at the end of the hall."

Jack meets the retired lawyer who wrote what he considers a well crafted although perhaps somewhat flawed law on suspensions and gets a dose of the reality of litigation. The lawyer gets a dose of reality also. Jack and Lorraine meet the principal, who feels under intense pressure amongst other things to meet the new standard state measures of school performance.

Eventually, disaster strikes, each character with a separate perspective about what has happened and what's best to do, fight or plead, forgive or sue. Each has a stake in and realizes that he/she has contributed in some way to this horror; none knew how to deal with it before it was too late.

SCRIPT HISTORY

The play has been worked through two drama groups but has never been produced.

TIME / PLACE

2003, today, the U.S., specifically Washington State

SCRIPT – follows.

RUN TIME

About 90 minutes, minimal set required.

IN SUSPENSE
ACT I

Scene ONE

(Marie is walking on stage, on her cellphone. She is sharply dressed, upbeat, excited.)

MARIE

Savie, the teacher's late. I have nothing to do. (Pause.) You're in study hall so we can talk. (Pause.) No one cares if you talk in study. (Pause.) I'm going out for hurdles this afternoon. (Pause.) I can do that, fly over the hurdles and run fast. I'm sure I can. Try out with me, for something, please. (Pause.) You can. There's all these events (Pause), running and jumping. After the tryouts, I'm going out for the spring musical. (Pause.) I don't care what part I get, as long as I dance. You know I love to dance. (Pause.) You can sing. Please come. Oops, the Assistant Principal just walked in. I'll text you.

End Scene 1

Scene TWO

(In the living room, Lorraine is dressed for managerial/ office work, ready to leave.)

LORRAINE

(Phone in hand, sips coffee while reviewing papers, alternately putting down the papers to sip her coffee. To phone.) Hold on a minute. Marie, where are you? (Pause.) Come on. You'll be late for school. (Pause.) What's the matter with you today? (To phone.) They'll all sign up and close the deals today. I guarantee. I'll be there. That's why. Hold on. (To Marie.) You've never been late for anything. Today, because I'm especially busy, you're late. I called these meetings; I can't be late. Visitors from Chicago, everywhere. (Pause.) Come down right now. No matter what you look like, or where you are in dressing. We have to talk. (Phone.) Sorry. I didn't mean you. My daughter's getting ready for school.

MARIE

Okay, I'm coming. *(Enters in pajamas.)*

LORRAINE

What? I can't believe this. You're late for school and you're not even dressed.

MARIE

I'm dressed, Mom. Look

LORRAINE

In your pajamas?

MARIE

It's pajama day at school. (She models her pajamas.) They're called jammers; everybody's wearing them today. Even the teachers, maybe not the teachers.

LORRAINE

(To Marie.) Pajama Day? In those old pajamas; they're not even your cutest. And I was looking out the window, I don't see any of the other kids in pajamas.

MARIE

I'm sorry, Mom. That was a joke, a bad joke.

LORRAINE

Not funny. What's wrong with you recently? You're so up and down. (Phone.) I know the guy from Milwaukee is negative. We'll settle him down. Hold on. (To Marie.) I get it. A new school is hard but this was too big a promotion for us to pass over. We had to move.

MARIE

So we moved.

LORRAINE

Good move, nice house but new school, new challenges; you have to make new friends.

MARIE

New crazy exams no one understands.

LORRAINE

You always understand in the end. (To phone.) Hold on. I'm rereading the proposal. (To Marie.) Is it learning disabilities again? You beat them in third grade. I did, for me way back when. I know, new, complicated challenges in high school, more reading, read more, read faster We might have to work harder.

MARIE

Mom. We?

LORRAINE

Maybe it's something new. We'll see a doctor, maybe on Friday. I think I'm free. (To phone.) Call you on my way in. (Pockets phone.) So why aren't you on the bus to school?

MARIE

There's no school today, Mom.

LORRAINE

What do you mean there's no school? The school bus just went by with your friends, a school bus passes every five minutes. School is not closed.

MARIE

There's no school for me.

LORRAINE

What do you mean "for me"? For you?

MARIE

They've declared a special holiday for me, Mom. Mom, I was suspended.

LORRAINE

Don't tell me. You just did. I don't believe it. I'm not getting angry. One. Two. Three. (*Turns.*) Four. Look. Listen. Tell me. Whatever it is, I won't go ballistic. It's drugs. Tell me you're into drugs. Tell me you're **not** into drugs. You're into drugs, aren't you?

MARIE

Mom, you know I'm not into drugs. You know how bad I want to be a cheer leader; and on the track team; they test you before they let you on. So you know I'm not into drugs.

LORRAINE

Okay, you're not into drugs. What are you're into? You're pregnant. My god. I'm not going to get mad. That boy you went out with on Friday, right? Steph – ano or something.

MARIE

Steven, Mom.

LORRAINE

Stephano made you pregnant, didn't he? I knew he was no good. They're going to say it's because of who we are. We're all like that and we're always going to be that way. **

MARIE

What way, Mom. You're the least way person I know. Last Friday was the first time we went out, Mom. If he made me pregnant in one shot, he'd be good, wouldn't he?

LORRAINE

Good for what?

MARIE

Mom, even if we did it, I wouldn't know I was pregnant yet, maybe not for weeks. And we didn't do anything. And they don't suspend you for being pregnant; I heard that a girl last year was out to here. Mom! I'm not pregnant.

LORRAINE

And if you did something, you wouldn't tell me anyway.

MARIE

Probably not.

LORRAINE

So, I'm trying to stay calm here and you have to help me. Why did they suspend you?

MARIE

I guess I was bad; I messed up but not that bad, I don't think.

LORRAINE

Bad, but not so bad. Why'd they suspend you? Whatever, we have to face this, together.

MARIE

I'm facing it. I was sitting in the computer lab talking to a friend and I didn't notice that the clock on the wall wasn't working; I mean it was slow or something. I didn't mean to be late but by the time I realized about the clock, I couldn't get to class on time.

LORRAINE

For being late to class, you got suspended?

MARIE

Not exactly. When you're late, you fill out a late form. I botched filling out the form.

LORRAINE

What botch?

MARIE

I don't know but they said it was wrong.

LORRAINE

Who said it was wrong? For not filling a form out correctly, you got suspended?

MARIE

I'm not sure. Then they said that there was some kind of attack on the school's computers at that time and it came from the computer I was sitting at.

LORRAINE

You attacked the computers? You know how? Jack's going to be proud, but it seems stupid too. I'm not criticizing or being judgmental but it doesn't seem very smart.

MARIE

I didn't attack anything, Mom. I don't think. I don't know. I was sitting at the computer, trying out some of the apps they have on it. I don't know what they do.

LORRAINE

You're telling me you might have attacked the schools computers but you're not sure. And that's what you were suspended for.

MARIE

I don't know.

LORRAINE

You really don't know what you were suspended for? (Marie shakes her head.) I can't believe it. A young woman like you, with so much to look forward to.

MARIE

Come on, Mom. You know better than that. Being a girl sucks.

LORRAINE

Does not! What are you talking about? It's just like being a boy today.

MARIE

It is not. Boys do anything they want, go wherever, hang out. A girl does anything and everyone knows she's in trouble or going to be or looking for it. If she's black, she's a ho' so it doesn't matter anyway. **

LORRAINE

What? You realize, years ago, people said black women was the freest people on earth. No one expected anything of them so they could do anything they wanted to. That's ugly.

MARIE

Good for them. Yes, it's ugly, dumb. Now everybody expects everything of them, us, because they do and they know they'll screw up, so they will, I will, I guess I did. **

LORRAINE

That's not true; it's just not. You're upset. Slowly now. We take this slowly. Someone told you you were suspended, right? Someone said "You are suspended for ... " They must have told you why. You must have seen the principal or someone about this.

MARIE

The Principal called me into her office and said I was being suspended for three days. She handed me a form. It's upstairs in my room. She said if I'm on campus before Friday, she'd call the police.

LORRAINE

She'd call the police but she didn't tell you why you were being suspended.

MARIE

She did, sort of. She said it says on the form: violating the student conduct code, section 100203, or section one hundred million thousand or something like that.

LORRAINE

Okay, okay. I'm staying calm, pretty calm. What's the conduct code say... in that section?

MARIE

I don't know.

LORRAINE

(Looks at her watch.) I can't digest all this right now. Gotta rush to my meetings. (Upset.) Get the form. We'll read it carefully and face this together; Jack, Dad might be good here. Sorry. Stay home today. Relax. We'll figure it out. I'm sorry. I must sound weird. This was a big promotion for me and its complicated. I can do it but this... suspension, I can't seem to focus on it right now. Later, sweetie. It'll be okay. (She hugs Marie and exits.)

MARIE

(Tearful.) Right, Mom.

End of Scene 2

Scene THREE

(Family room.) Lorraine is puttering nervously.

JACK

(Entering.) Okay I'm home early. *(Kisses his wife.)* I got your phone call and hurried home. What happened?

LORRAINE

I hurried home myself, right after my meetings but you didn't have to come home right away,. They need you on the computers at work.

JACK

I didn't actually come home right away because I didn't get your message right away, not for over an hour after your first call, I've been calling and you weren't answering.

LORRAINE

Sometimes I forget that I put it on no ring and then I miss some calls.

JACK

But you didn't miss mine; you decided not to answer.

LORRAINE

Okay. I didn't think you should leave work early.

JACK

How could I not? You leave me a message that we have an emergency and you don't know what to do about it but you don't want to tell me about it in a phone message but you want me to know immediately, but, since you can't reach me, you'll just tell me about the emergency later. You sounded shaken and worried, maybe mixed up and I don't know what else. You think I could stay at work after hearing something like that?

LORRAINE

I was afraid, if you left work early, you'd have to give the reason and then you'd have to talk about the emergency and you might not want to talk about this at work. You know everyone is always curious about us anyway, about you; you said so yourself. **

JACK

That's right. They don't really believe I am where I am and I can do what I do given that I am who I am. What did I say? Too bad for them. **

LORRAINE

So, it might be best if you didn't talk about it at work or in messages someone might see, or they might think we are like that. **

JACK

Talk about what? We're like what? (Nods that he knows.) **I'm home. What's up?

LORRAINE

I didn't think your boss...

JACK

Right. My boss is not supposed to know that anything ever goes wrong for me, for us; it would confirm whatever it is we think he thinks we're really like. Maybe you're right, but it's too late to worry about that now. What happened? **

LORRAINE

And I was afraid you would get too mad so I thought I should tell you at home and...

JACK

Okay, I'm home. I'm not mad. What?

LORRAINE

Marie, Marie.

MARIE

(Enters.)

JACK

I guess it has to do with Marie.

LORRAINE

She's not sure.

JACK

You called her.

LORRAINE

Yes. Marie, you tell your Father.

MARIE

I was sitting at a computer and then I was late for a class and then they said there was an attack from that computer on the school servers.

JACK

You attacked the school servers? Why would you do that!

LORRAINE

Jack, take it easy. It's Marie.

JACK

(Chuckling) Maybe there's a bright side. My career's in computers, computer security; I've tried a million times to get you to press a key, enter a stroke, get into it and you never showed the slightest interest. Remember that math game, Marie, when you were little, my little Marie, my Murmer?

MARIE

Stop it, Dad.

JACK

You shoot and if you hit the right numbers, PHLOOP; a funny noise and fifty points.

MARIE

That was for little boys, Dad.

JACK

It didn't hurt that we improved your math skills. Remember the one where you chase your tail and eat yourself up before the screen turns orange? Little Murmer was good at that.

MARIE

Actually. I don't remember. I guess I wasn't good at it. But it wouldn't surprise me if it taught me to spell. And I'm not your little Murmer anymore.

JACK

We had good times, even if, you never liked the technology. But you learned enough to attack servers? That's wild! How'd you do it? I had no clue you knew how.

MARIE

I'm not attacking servers. I don't know how. I didn't do it. I don't know what I did.

LORRAINE

I think you misunderstand the whole thing, Jack.

JACK

Probably. I thought we had a little reason to be proud. Getting over your shyness with technology could lead to a great career. Maybe I can get you a summer job. You attacked the school server! But you got caught. And now you deny the whole thing.

MARIE

Dad, there's nothing to be proud of, nothing to deny. They suspended me from school.

JACK

What? They can't just suspend you without... telling your parents. Did they hurt you?

MARIE

It's not like a beating, Dad. They...

LORRAINE

Marie's sixteen now. I'm not sure, by law, they have to tell us anything.

JACK

Forget the law. What do you mean suspended? Who told you? How? When? Tell us.

MARIE

I told you except for the part where they called me into the office.

LORRAINE

You didn't tell me about that.

MARIE

Yes, I did. You weren't listening . You forgot.

JACK

Whose office? Who called you in? When? Talk to us, Murmer.

MARIE

Yesterday.

JACK

Why did you wait for today to tell us?

MARIE

I don't know. I was hoping it would... I thought it might go away. I don't know.

JACK

You didn't want to face it.

LORRAINE

You don't have to say that, Jack. Who called you in? To whose office?

MARIE

The Assistant Principal got me and took me out of class to the Principal's office.

JACK

He "took" you. Did he touch you, hurt you?

LORRAINE

Let her tell it, Jack, the main points anyway. You can get the details later.

JACK

Details? The Assistant Principal grabbing Marie and...

LORRAINE

Jack.

MARIE

They closed the office door. The Principal was at her desk with her back to me; then she suddenly turned around and started talking fast. She said they knew what I did and they'd caught me. She gave me this suspension form. (*She hands it to him.*)

JACK

(*Scans the form.*) What does this say? It's completely generic.

MARIE

She said the Assistant Principal would escort me from campus as soon as I had my coat and books and, if I was seen on campus before Friday, she'd call the police.

JACK

Call the police about what?

LORRAINE

Stop it, Jack. Call the police about her being on the high school campus when she was not supposed to be there because she was suspended. You understand perfectly well.

JACK

You can't go to school? They don't want you there, won't let you in? How long has the world fought for school for us? How many generations? Now they won't let you go. **

LORRAINE

That's what suspension means. It's not like Marie is setting a precedent to reverse history, not on purpose anyway. **

JACK

Maybe continues a trend. But Marie, you do realize how important school is, don't you?

MARIE

I remember.

JACK

A gateway to society, how you meet your fellow young men and women, your ticket to a good job. I met your mother...

MARIE

Dad, you've told me all that, convinced me. I'm not against school. I got it; I do my work.

LORRAINE

We have mentioned this before. *(Laughs)* But. *(To Marie)* it wouldn't hurt if you did a little better with your grades.

MARIE

My grades are okay.

LORRAINE

But your test scores.

JACK

I know we've gone over this. School's the path for young people to grow into adults; especially for us; they'd be so quick to say we had a fair chance and didn't make it. **
School can make all the difference. And it's fun.

MARIE

I know and it's fun when it's fun, not now. I'm not sure what I did and and not sure why this is such a great opportunity to lecture me that I don't do well enough in school. I didn't mean to do anything. I don't know what I did. If you're going to help me, help!

JACK

Did anybody else got suspended?

MARIE

No one got suspended with me.

JACK

Or suspended at some other time?

MARIE

Kids get suspended all the time, especially the kids who hang out at the end of the hall sometimes at the end of the yard after school. There's a whole bunch of them.

LORRAINE

Who are they? You've never mentioned them.

MARIE

I don't know them. I just see them; I hear about them. The "kids at the end of the hall", in the yard. They hang out there together between classes, during study breaks, whenever. Sometimes one of them sort of disappears and people talk about it. I don't know.

JACK

Who are they? Tell me what you know about them.

LORRAINE

Take it easy, Jack.

MARIE

There's a girl called Biggy. I heard she gets in trouble all the time, shoplifting once; that's what I heard. There was one of them whose mother tried to commit suicide and a girl in a wheel chair and a guy with crutches and Hadran, he's different because, he's incredibly fast, on the football team when they let him play, not very often, maybe not any more. One girl stopped coming to school last year and kids were whispering "suicide".

JACK

And you know them? You hang out with them?

MARIE

Are you listening at all, Dad?

LORRAINE

She said she doesn't know them; she doesn't hang out with them. She just sees them at the end of the yard. Isn't that right? And you shouldn't whisper especially not about suicide.

MARIE

(Shakes her head.) Sorry, mom. No one hangs with them. They hang by themselves.

JACK

But they got suspended?

MARIE

That's what I hear, that they've been suspended a lot, again and again, but not with me.

JACK

Tell me more about them. What do you talk about with them?

LORRAINE

She doesn't talk to them, Jack! Why do they matter? Why carry on about them?

JACK

I want to know who Marie was suspended with and what's really going on.

MARIE

(Crying.) No one, Dad. I already told you everything I know. It's just me.

JACK

This is crazy. *(Checks his watch.)* It's not too late. You think the principal is still in?

MARIE

Why?

JACK

Do you think she's still in at this time?

MARIE

She might be. I've seen her there late in the afternoon after I watch the cheer leaders practice. Are you going to... go see her?

JACK

We're all going; we have to.

MARIE

But if I'm at the high school before Friday, they'll call the police.

JACK

Great. Then I'll call out the army. Let's go.

LORRAINE

I think I'd better go too. Some negotiating skill might go a long way here.

JACK

I already said we're all going. You two get ready. Maybe I can check out this form the principal gave you on line. *(He continues softly, lovingly, and sympathetically)* Murmer, it'll be alright. Everything will work out; we'll fix it.

LORRAINE

Or try to.

JACK

But you will have to wear something other than pajamas.

MARIE

(Getting herself together, afraid but feeling a little better.) I know, Dad.

End of Scene 3

Scene FOUR

(The Principal is at her desk, scanning papers, smiling, listening on the phone. We hear Jack offstage, raising his voice; the Principal looks toward the door and frowns.)

JACK

Miss. Please, we need your help; it's urgent. If the Principal's in, let us see her. She'd want that in an urgent matter like this. (Pause.) I understand. She mostly meets people by appointment. Okay, **only** by appointment. Surely, there are exceptions. (Pause.) We're not trying to upset the system with exceptions. We're school supporters but if we don't see the Principal until Friday, there'll be nothing left to discuss except the legal ramifications.

LORRAINE

He didn't mean that, not at all. That's the furthest thing from our minds.

JACK

I said that, yes, no, I'm not threatening anything. I only meant it as a metaphor.

MISS BOULET

(Frowns) Good chat. We work hard for our students, for your children, our children. It'll work out; you'll see. They grow up. *(Hangs up, smiles; calls out.)* Let them in, please.

LORRAINE

(Enters) Good afternoon. Thanks for seeing us. It's good to meet you. We know you're busy and we have no appointment but...

JACK

(Following her) We had to see you, and straighten things out, about our daughter Marie.

MARIE

(Enters last, sheepish and afraid but defiant at the same time. She nods and looks away.)

MISS BOULET

Yes, well, here we are.

LORRAINE

We want to know how Marie's doing in school.

JACK

We know how she's doing in school; she could be doing better, but she's not failing. Marie says you've put her on suspension. She showed us a form you sent home.

MISS BOULET

Her records show Marie just transferred in this year. Procedures differ from school district to school district, state to state. I'm sure you're aware. We follow our process, although none is required in this case; our process lets interested parties, students, parents or guardians when appropriate, know what's going on.

MARIE

(Mumbling) I don't know what's going on; I must not be an interesting party.

LORRAINE

'Interested', Marie.

MARIE

I know, Mom. I was sort of joking.

MISS BOULET

Kids joke a lot these days.

MARIE

(Mumbling) They have a lot to joke about.

LORRAINE

Often, solutions are a question of working together. Could we have been contacted before suspension? I've been active in Marie's school since kindergarten,...

JACK

A very hard PTA worker.

LORRAINE

A reading volunteer, teacher conference aide; I even graded papers for a teacher. They can be so overworked. Nothing like this has ever happened, never.

MARIE

Mom, this is high school.

LORRAINE

When there were minor problems, we were always called. And we came immediately.

MISS BOULET

This is high school, as Marie says; students are adults. With our state's privacy laws, we don't talk to anyone unless the student's present or signed a notarized permission voucher.

LORRAINE

A voucher.

MARIE

An admission voucher?

MISS BOULET

Permission.

MARIE

I'm here. Hello.

JACK

She's given us the permissions we need. Marie's here:

MISS BOULET

She is, isn't she? Under her suspension terms, she must not be on this campus at this time.

MARIE

And you're going to call the police.

LORRAINE

But, you see, it's just that suspension we came to talk about.

MISS BOULET

But, **you** see, that conversation takes place off campus or without your daughter...

LORRAINE

Without Marie?

MISS BOULET

And it really can't take place without her because of privacy concerns.

JACK

Unless we have a signed notarized whatever you said.

LORRAINE

In any case, we're here now. What's the suspension for?

JACK

We want to understand, and frankly, we don't, and neither does Marie. Please help.

LORRAINE

I know Marie did not do anything bad, certainly nothing calling for anything so...so...extreme. If we understood and knew the details then...

MISS BOULET

Many parents are surprised when they find out what their child actually did. It's good to catch them at **these things** early, with some chance of teaching them a lesson.

MARIE

Now it's 'these things' I did.

JACK

Did what? The suspension form Marie brought home doesn't say what she did.

MARIE

Did my homework. That must have been my mistake.

MISS BOULET

Maybe not enough homework judging from your scores on the standardized tests you took recently. Although your grades could stand some improvement too. Don't you think?

MARIE

Homework has nothing to do with those tests. Everyone knows that.

LORRAINE

Marie has some difficulties with tests, true. But let's focus on what she's suspended for.

MISS BOULET

This copy of Marie's suspension form says clearly and exactly that she violated the student code of behavior. adopted by the school board on September...

JACK

I saw the behavior code on line, when it was adopted, that it was adopted. We support Marie's school; always have...but what did Marie do?

MISS BOULET

She violated the student code of behavior.

LORRAINE

But how is the code of student behavior relevant to Marie? Please.

MISS BOULET

The student code of behavior.

JACK

The behavior code for students ...

MISS BOULET

The student code of behavior. Every student is given a copy. I'm sure Marie remembers.

MARIE

(Sheepishly) I don't remember seeing a copy, no.

MISS BOULET

It was in your welcome packet.

MARIE

(Mumbling) Which no one reads; it's endlessly long words and everyone's afraid of being called a dork for reading it.

MISS BOULET

And each teacher goes over it the first day in each class.

MARIE

I don't remember any mention of it by a teacher, ever, maybe before the students arrive.

MISS BOULET

See? Attitude is part of the problem.

LORRAINE

Marie's upset. Please tell us what she did; none of us know; it's so central to our chat.

MISS BOULET

We're all very upset. But shouldn't Marie tell, instead of mumbling and denying things?

MARIE

But I don't know.

MISS BOULET

I have no obligation to show this; perhaps I shouldn't. With Marie's permission, I can. I help every way I can, within privacy concerns. Every child gets a fair chance. The code says a student shall be suspended for an act that threatens the security or safety of the students in school or the school itself.

JACK

What could Marie possibly have done that threatened the safety of other students?

MISS BOULET

Obviously you don't know what teenagers do with computers; you don't know what computers do or what teenagers are capable of. A computer attack is threatening to students, even if you don't know today's technology threats. Hackers can steal student identities.

LORRAINE

Please, understand, Jack is...

JACK

(With a touch, he stops Lorraine.) What kind of system do you have?

MISS BOULET

She could have started the school on fire or caused the toilets to overflow or...

LORRAINE

(Concerned for his temper.) Jack, let me ask. Please. Are you sure Marie did this?

MISS BOULET

She was at the computer in the computer lab. Yes.

LORRAINE

Our daughter wouldn't do something like that. She doesn't know enough about computers to do that sort of thing. *(Laughs.)* I don't either frankly. I'm sure you do but...

MISS BOULET

That doesn't matter.

JACK

The point is how can we be so sure Marie did this, whatever this was?

MARIE

Um, but, uh, isn't it possible there's been a mistake and...

MISS BOULET

No. You weren't so bold to say that when we first brought you to the office. Why is that?

MARIE

But I want to say now that my parents are with me that it could have been a mistake.

MISS BOULET

Now you want to say it was one of the other students in the lab? You want to name someone? You were with a friend and there were two other students. Who did it?

MARIE

No. I can't name someone else; people probably already despise me for being arrested or whatever this is, and I don't know what we're talking about. But whatever it is, it could be someone else. Couldn't it? It couldn't be me; I don't know what it is.

MISS BOULET

NO! No mistake. You think you're going to go round and round till the whole conversation gets tied up in knots and confusion; but we have proof.

MARIE

Easy to say there's no mistake if you want there to be no mistake, so everyone despises me.

LORRAINE

I'm sure your classmates don't despise you. (Marie nods her head that they do.)

JACK

See the importance, psychologically? What's the proof? Please, I'm more than interested.

MISS BOULET

Look at your daughter's behavior. We don't have to share proof or even justify anything.

JACK

That's outrageous! Why? How? We don't understand how you do things.

LORRAINE

We're asking for help, not talking about obligations. Wouldn't it be better if you showed us, told us all you know so Marie learns from this, with our support and your support.

MISS BOULET

Some students don't want to learn, won't learn, won't follow the code no matter how many times we tell them.

JACK

This is not about some students. This is Marie.

MISS BOULET

Well, she knows what she did. Ask her?

LORRAINE

Please, she says she doesn't know and we believe her, (Marie looks to her mother thankfully) for the moment at least. (Marie looks at her mother disappointed.) We respect your process.

MISS BOULET

She chooses not to remember.

MARIE

I didn't choose anything.

MISS BOULET

Maybe for some people, how they behave is not a choice. **

JACK

What's that supposed to mean? Never mind.

LORRAINE

Excuse me but...

MISS BOULET

She says she didn't choose anything; we all choose. She chooses not to remember.

JACK

Mam.

MISS BOULET

My name is Miss Boulet.

LORRAINE

Miss Boulet.

JACK

Give us the proof to make her remember, to help her face up and learn from this experience; this is a school; it's about learning.

MISS BOULET

Parents don't need proof to discipline their children. And the school doesn't either.

LORRAINE

But we like to explain why we discipline our children, hoping that's how society works.

MARIE

They do like that explaining and disciplining.

JACK

Show us, so we can show Marie how important this really is.

MISS BOULET

We treat all people equally, here. *(Pulls out a paper.)* So I'll have to show all students their proof. I'll show you this, although I don't know whether you'll understand it. **

JACK

(Quickly takes out a note card and a pen and copies some information down.)

MISS BOULET

What are you doing? *(Grabs the sheet.)* I didn't intend that information to leave this room.

LORRAINE

Sorry. We're not taking it anywhere. Jack didn't want to forget. He's very detail oriented.

JACK

I'm just trying to understand as completely as I can.

MISS BOULET

Well that's proof! Marie did it. The lab teacher turned that over to us. Marie was at the computer identified in the record of this attack. I really have to go now. You really have to go now too.

End of Scene 4

Scene FIVE

(Family room. The three of them enter, returning from their meeting with the Principal,.)

JACK

We were all pretty quiet in the car.

LORRAINE

We're all stunned. And the Principal would be livid if she knew you stopped by the computer lab on the way out. But that's you, Jack. Always... Did you find out anything?

MARIE

I showed Dad which computer I was sitting at, the "scene of the crime."

LORRAINE

You were mouthing off with the Principal. You can stop now. It's not really like you.

MARIE

When they had me in the office, the Principal, Assistant Principal, the security officer...

JACK

You didn't say before that a security officer was there.

MARIE

I was frightened then; I didn't know what to say. But, with the two of you there, I didn't want you to think that I was totally afraid of her. She's such a big bully.

LORRAINE

She's just trying to do her job the best way she knows how.

JACK

I can think of a better way. (Lorraine looks at him.) If a kid does something wrong; you don't cut him off from what school offers. If he's having trouble relating, we could make some effort to involve him. School may be the answer.

LORRAINE

Your daughter's a 'her' not a him.

JACK

I was thinking of me.

MARIE

And I'm not a kid, Dad, even if Miss Bully wants to spank everybody around her.

LORRAINE

She's the principal. Let's not make fun of her name.

JACK

Don't let it get in your head. You're still you, to us. And what is her name? Really.

MARIE

Everyone in the class, my almost friends, now ex-friends I guess, call her Miss Bully. So, I'll never dance or play sports now; she won't let you if you've been suspended.

LORRAINE

They're all still your friends and that's certainly not her name. I don't know about dance.

MARIE

Her name's on the suspension form and she said it quite clearly, but no one calls her that.

JACK

I didn't get it. I saw B-O-U-L-E-T, but how do you pronounce it, how did she pronounce it? She mumbled it.

LORRAINE

You didn't want to get it. She said it clearly.

JACK

She should know better. We know her and she knows who we are. She's not better than us, no matter how she says her name. **

LORRAINE

Maybe, but we can't call her Miss Bully.

JACK

What should we call her? Remember what she's done.

LORRAINE

If we can't talk about her politely, let's not talk about her at all.

MARIE

Fine with me.

LORRAINE

What did the two of you do in the lab?

JACK

The lab teacher hesitated at first, confused that we were there, but then he let us in.

MARIE

He was frightened. The Principal is scary... to us kids, to the teachers, to everybody.

LORRAINE

We said we weren't going to talk about her like that.

MARIE

Okay, we won't. The computer I had been sitting at was exactly how I left it.

LORRAINE

They can move things around and then put them back. How do you know?

JACK

I asked whether they rearranged things, rebooted the computers, or anything like that.

MARIE

It's not going to do any good, I know. I'll never play sports; but, Mom, Dad was extreme, like a detective on TV. He got permission for me to turn my computer on and he looked over my shoulder when I logged on and he wrote things down. He was way cool.

JACK

I specifically asked the lab teacher whether any computer or network maintenance had been done, things turned off and on, or moved; I went through the list.

MARIE

The lab teacher got weirder and more nervous. Then he says "Uh. We do maintenance on Friday." Dad writes it down. Suddenly, the lab teacher says we'd better leave.

JACK

I was finished anyway.

LORRAINE

How come you call him the lab teacher? Don't you know his name?

MARIE

He wasn't our regular teacher. Dad called him that.

LORRAINE

A great influence on your daughter. I always get a name. So where does that leave us?

MARIE

He was so afraid! Are you afraid at work, Dad? Are you frightened at your work, Mom?

JACK

Of what? Everybody knows when I screw up; nobody notices when I don't. That's computer security; yeah, I'm afraid of screwing up; some people would love me to screw up and confirm whatever they want to confirm about our kind. So, I wear a tie, whatever that proves. But I'll explain our computers; I'm proud of them. This guy wasn't. **

MARIE

And you, Mom?

LORRAINE

Nobody watches me at my work so there's nothing to be frightened of. My team gets the contracts signed eventually. That's mostly what they care about? **

MARIE

You always get the work done?

LORRAINE

We do pretty well.

MARIE

He was scared. Not of you, Dad. He wanted to help you, us. Something scared him.

JACK

Pretty strange. I thought we'd talk one professional to another. Why be that scared?

MARIE

The more I think about all this, the scarer I get.

LORRAINE

More scared, Marie. (She frowns.) We're here, behind you, beside you.

MARIE

You guys are so out of it, you don't see. But sometimes I hear in your voice that you're scared too, afraid people will do things. You heard her and you say you still don't see it. What did the Principal say when I walked in? I mean after the hellos and whatever.

JACK

I don't remember.

LORRAINE

She said you weren't supposed to be there, at a discussion about you, but it couldn't take place without you. First, that made me dizzy, then angry, then I don't know what.

MARIE

She said (imitating the Principal) "She is here, isn't she? Under the terms of her suspension, she should not be on this campus at this time."

LORRAINE

How could she say that? How could she think that way?

JACK

They suspend you and you can't discuss it because you're not allowed in school until the suspension is over. There must be another way.

LORRAINE

It gives you a headache to think about it. But what about who did it? If you didn't, if it was really a mistake, why didn't you say who actually did, which kid in the lab?

MARIE

You want me to rat someone else out to get out of this myself? I can't do that. Besides, I don't know what the 'it' is to say who did it? If I saw someone do it, I wouldn't know.

JACK

I'm proud you're not ratting on people but I wish you did know more about computers.

MARIE

But I don't. I don't understand this. I'm sure the Principal and the Assistant Principal don't either. It feels rotten, like she, everyone's after me, or... Maybe we should just let it pass. Everybody says the Principal is very ...

LORRAINE

Very strict?

MARIE

Strict. Yes, no. That's not strict when you're so quick to suspend someone when they don't even know what they supposedly did. People say they're afraid because she's mean.

LORRAINE

Mean? Like vicious or vengeful?

JACK

That's the fear in the lab teacher; maybe she has an extra measure of mean for you, us.

LORRAINE

Jack, we can't prove she's being extra mean and the lab teacher... **

MARIE

Was afraid she would get him for what he was doing; and I'm afraid too.

LORRAINE

Father and daughter, two of a kind. Let's hope you're both mistaken.

MARIE

Let's forget it; I go to school on Friday. Hopefully the kids in my class will talk to me.

LORRAINE

Why wouldn't they?

MARIE

Because I'm on the Principal's bad side; no one wants to be anywhere near her bad side.

LORRAINE

It could all be forgotten one day and you could still be a cheer leader?

JACK

Why a cheer leader? Wouldn't it be better to be on a team so other people cheer for you?

MARIE

I sing and dance, like in the school musicals, and jump high. In cheering, they throw you real high; I could learn to do a flip way up in the air. That's what's I want to do.

LORRAINE

You were great dancing in the spring musical in your last school.

JACK

You were great in all the musicals, since kindergarten.

MARIE

I'll probably never be in a musical again, or be a cheer leader or on the track team. That's everything. She knows that and they say she keeps kids who she suspends off the teams, when she wants to. Mostly she wants to. She keeps them out of other school things too.

LORRAINE

You act like this isn't just punishment; like it's an execution, like you've been branded.

JACK

Pushed out.

MARIE

I wasn't so scared with the two of you there; I even got mad. But now, I think about it and I'm very scared. There's things she can do. The kids at the end of the yard have been suspended again and again. That girl Biggy there and gone, again and again.

JACK

Suspended or at the end of the yard. I'd like to see those kids, talk to them.

LORRAINE

You can't talk to everyone. How's anyone going to learn anything if they get suspended?

MARIE

It's very scary when they say you did something so you're different, so you're out.

(Lights go down.)

End of Scene 5

Scene SIX

(A gym, retired lawyer works out lightly as Jack enters shadow boxing violently.)

LAWYER

You might want to take it easy if you don't mind me saying. *(Takes a break in his sets).*
You're really pumping hard. You'll kill yourself.

JACK

Sorry if it throws everyone else here off. I'm pissed. I'm just pissed.

LAWYER

I can see that. What is it?

JACK

My daughter, but it's not her fault. It's not her. I mean she screwed up but I screwed up plenty of times. I bet you screwed up.

LAWYER

Don't mention it, thanks.

JACK

Everyone screws up. But this is different, crazy. She got thrown out of school, suspended, I mean, and I can't believe it.

LAWYER

Kids. For what?

JACK

I had less than a minute to look at the "proof", two minutes to look at the "scene of the crime", as my daughter put it. From what I saw, I can't believe she was suspended. I think I can prove she didn't do anything wrong. But here's the thing. She's suspended! From a public school. There's no process! What's the charge? What's the evidence?

LAWYER

This is a public school? *(Jack nods.)* Like a local high school, in this school district, right? Not some out of the way place. Every state and school district can be different.

JACK

That's right, right here. You'd think there'd be protections, maybe an appeal process.

LAWYER

Quite a coincidence. Before I retired, a few of us school district attorneys wrote the law that covers suspensions, a beautiful, complete process, presumed innocence, evidentiary hearings, appeals, everything, without drowning the school districts in paperwork.

JACK

You wrote a law that guarantees the rights one expects and the principal is telling me my daughter gets none of that? What's going on?

LAWYER

How long's the suspension?

JACK

Until Friday.

LAWYER

I mean, for how many days was your daughter suspended?

JACK

Three days.

LAWYER

(Starts laughing.) Okay, I got it now.

JACK

What's so funny?

LAWYER

Not funny. Sorry. That's a short term suspension, five days or fewer. We wrote the law for long term suspensions. We figured, if we spelled out details for every case, no school district would adopt the process. A beautiful law, a major career accomplishment for me. (Jack shrugs indicating he doesn't understand.) Each school district had to adopt our law our suggested process. They could develop an alternative or just say they were developing one and stonewall forever, never adopting anything. Get it? Our law did great. Every school district in the State adopted it.

JACK

Did great? This process you set up is great, you're saying, except that it doesn't apply.

LAWYER

Not in your case, I'm afraid, not for suspensions of less than a week.

JACK

What's the process for my daughter's short term suspension?

LAWYER

There is none. The school can do whatever it wants.

JACK

You're proud of the protections you gave students but you created a system where kids have no rights at all. I can prove my daughter didn't do anything even remotely violating the almost secret student code but no one cares. Kids have no rights at all.

LAWYER

I didn't create a system where kids have no rights. They had no rights before. Some rich guy's son was suspended and whacked a school district up and down the State courts so they asked us to set up a fair process. We did, for long term suspensions. The school district adopted it. So now there's a process for everyone, equally for all students.

JACK

For all students?

LAWYER

A fair process, good law. The situation's much better than it was before.

JACK

What's a fair law? What's a good law?

LAWYER

If you write a law and it's adopted, it's a good law. If it doesn't get overturned in court, it's a very good law.

JACK

You say the situation's better. Maybe it's worse. The principal doesn't use long term suspensions, too much trouble. You've legitimized short term suspensions, creating an underclass of students who get suspended again and again, short term only of course, excluded from everything at school, except huddling together at the end of the schoolyard. And they're probably mostly minorities or disabled kids or poor, so no rich guy whacks a school district again.

LAWYER

When you write legislation, you do what they tell you; you do the best you can. You make compromises. We figured, a short term suspension, a few days, let it go. There's so little at stake.

JACK

(He blows up, physically attacks the lawyer, short of hitting him, trapping him in a corner until the lawyer can get away.) So little at stake? My daughter's life is at stake. Young people's lives are at stake. Why do you say there's so little at stake? Because she's a petite person, or a little different. You bag of bull! *(Continues while the Lawyer talks.)* **

LAWYER

(Talks while Jack continues.) Take it easy. Easy.

JACK

So little at stake? What if I take your daughters or granddaughters and tell them they can't go to school, be on the teams or in the band or anything, can't go to class. You piece of track turf! What if your granddaughters can only huddle at the end of the yard to look out at the puddles in the rain. Pond scum! I ought to pound you into that wall.

LAWYER

(Shouts as Jack continues.) You're crazy. This is assault. No wonder your daughter's in trouble. A little stress and your true nature comes out. I'm out of here. *(Exits.)*

JACK

My nature? So little at stake? You're a lawyer so there's nothing at stake. It's open season on lawyers anyway. You're nothing but a sloppy tire track in the muddy dirt road that runs around the athletic field. How much more can there be at stake than a young person's life? Or a retired person's, not a lawyer? Any life? *(He shadow boxes.)*

End of Scene 6 - End of Act I

ACT II
Scene ONE

(Living room)

LORRAINE

(Enters) I'm home. You wouldn't believe the day I had. All those people here on business, and what do they want to do? Site-see. And do business at the same time. You here Marie? Marie. Eat at the touristy restaurants. What do I know about that? This is the best restaurant in town. We don't have time to go out. You like the burger place, okay. A car is driving us around and I'm carrying this lap top with videos to show, contract details, project plans, budgets, specs. I'm trying to get them to pay attention; they're gaping at the rainbow over the fountain downtown. Marie!

MARIE

(Enters.)

LORRAINE

There you are? I'm home as early as I ... You don't look so well. What'd you do today?

MARIE

Nothing.

LORRAINE

You didn't go to school so you did nothing? You can still study, do your homework.

MARIE

Mom, I didn't go to school so I don't have any homework.

LORRAINE

They put you on suspension but your teachers told you what homework you have, what the class is doing so you could keep up on your own, maybe with parental help.

MARIE

Big parental help. Mom, the teachers told me nothing.

LORRAINE

You have the textbooks and you know more or less what chapters you're on.

MARIE

No textbook for English, study sheets, and I didn't get any this week.

LORRAINE

But the class did? (Marie shrugs; she doesn't know.) You could have said something. I could ask your teachers. Your father could have.

MARIE

You guys do a lot, but you're busy. I forgot to mention it.

LORRAINE

And your friends?

MARIE

My classmates? My few friends? I couldn't reach them.

LORRAINE

So what did you do? You watched TV all day?

MARIE

No, I didn't watch TV. I did nothing.

LORRAINE

What's the matter with you? You love TV.

MARIE

I started to watch a little but I got bored.

LORRAINE

You and your friends always watched shows and talked about them at the same time.

MARIE

It's fun messing around about the shows with friends, what she did was dumb, what he did was cute, ... but this is a new school; the kids I know are in school and I'm not.

LORRAINE

You actually found the shows boring if you can't talk about them? (Marie shrugs.) Maybe it was a bad show. Suspension'll soon be over. Friday you go back.

MARIE

Not really. The secretary from the Principal's office called. She said not to come in on Friday. I'm suspended for Friday.

LORRAINE

What? Why? You had a three day suspension, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday.

MARIE

But I came on campus to see the Principal on Tuesday.

LORRAINE

Because you came in to see the Principal on Tuesday, your suspension was extended?

MARIE

The secretary didn't explain. She said she didn't know. The Principal told her to call.

LORRAINE

But they have to explain what's happening!

MARIE

You heard her, Mom. You were there. They don't have to explain anything and they don't.

LORRAINE

Don't be depressed, baby. It'll all work out. (Marie shrugs.) I saw Brenda's mother, one of the few parents I know so far. She mentioned a party on Saturday. That'll be fun.

MARIE

I didn't hear. (Lorraine looks puzzled.) Mom, I didn't hear because I'm not invited.

LORRAINE

No one invited you? (Marie shrugs.) They must have made arrangements at school; you weren't there so they forgot. Did you call anyone? You have to reach out also.

MARIE

Yes, Mom. I called Brenda twice, texted her, whatever.

LORRAINE

Maybe she wasn't home.

MARIE

It's a cell phone, Mom. It doesn't matter whether you're home.

LORRAINE

You think Stephano will be at the party? Listen, I'll call Brenda's mother and...

MARIE

And ask them to invite me? No, thanks. I reached Suzie. She actually picked up. She didn't mention a party. She just said she was busy.

LORRAINE

I'm sure they meant to invite you. You don't know what Suzie was busy with?

MARIE

She said she didn't have time to go over it and her mother was behind her calling her or something. And I'm sure I'm never going to find out.

LORRAINE

I'm going to call up and...

MARIE

You can't call someone and tell them to invite me to their party and can't say it's because they meant to invite me. Why would anyone want to invite someone who's suspended? What a dumb word, like I'm hanging from a wire.

LORRAINE

Come on. It's only until Monday. I'll mention it to your father.

End of Scene 1

Scene TWO

(Living room. Jack and Marie face away from each other. Lorraine is in the background.)

JACK

(Turns to Marie.) There you are. Mom says you're pretty down.

LORRAINE

She's down, like she's going to throw herself off a bridge or something. Sorry. I saw an article about suicide yesterday. Very scary. Marie says kids talk about it.

JACK

What kids?

MARIE

The kids at the end of the hall. Sometimes, one is missing and there's talk about suicide. I heard. I guess they get pretty down, at the end of the hall.

JACK

You're down, because you're out of it. No school, no homework, no kids to kick around with. But you're going to get back in. That's the point, no matter about Ms. B...

MARIE

Dad, we're not kids, even if you call us kids.

JACK

You're my kid, Murmer, always will be.

MARIE

I don't want to always be a kid, or someone else's anything.

JACK

I'm years older than you and, know what? I'll always be, the same number of years older.

MARIE

Great, Dad. Are you sneaking in a math lesson here? I hate word problems.

LORRAINE

You guys are really great at sticking to the topic, aren't you? In a meeting...

MARIE

Is this a meeting, Mom? What's the topic?

LORRAINE

I don't know. You have this suspension hanging over your head and you say you have nothing to do until Monday and you're probably falling behind in your work.

MARIE

It's not hanging over my head. It feels like it's hanging me.

JACK

Hang on. You're hanging from it. Just kidding. If you have no homework, we can get the text and go through stuff, like we used to do, Memory, Murmarie, just like me; my little Murmer, my Marie. We pulled you through.

MARIE

Pulled me through?

JACK

Early math stuff, so-called learning disabilities, whatever they said. I just meant maybe we helped a little. Now, new school; we're busy, no time to help. It's more on you.

MARIE

Without help, I can't handle it?

JACK

You can. You are handling it.

LORRAINE

Definitely. We're proud of you.

MARIE

No, you're not and I'm not handling it. Some people in particular don't think I'm handling it. My grades are okay but my test scores suck. The questions on those tests are weird.

JACK

Test scores aren't everything. You've got a whole lifetime to be who you want to be and test scores don't have to be a part of that. You'll pull yourself together.

LORRAINE

I had bad grades one quarter in college. I almost failed out of school. You'll work it out.

MARIE

How? What should I do?

JACK

You have to decide.

MARIE

Decide what? With who? I don't know anything about deciding. And everyone's deciding for me anyway. I thought I was kind of a good dancer.

LORRAINE

You should take lessons.

MARIE

I did, Mom. Remember? I stopped when we moved because I wanted to dance in school musicals and workout with the cheer leaders; such cool uniforms. Now I'll do nothing. I'm ineligible. Decide this, decide that. The Principal decides everything, for everyone.

JACK

She's not deciding anything!

MARIE

She is. Now I bet everyone believes I'm worthless. I might as well just go down to the end of the yard and huddle with the other.... out-casts, outsiders, outs.

JACK

That's silly, Murmer.

MARIE

Don't call me Murmer anymore. And I guess, now, because you went in to argue and nothing came of it, everyone believes I really did something.

JACK

What did you do?

MARIE

Nothing. I don't know. I told you. Don't you believe me?

LORRAINE

Okay, someone did "it". There were other kids in the room. One of them did something, nothing worth being suspended for, but another kid did it and you didn't. Right?

MARIE

I'm supposed to say another kid did it, not me? Did what? Remember I don't even know.

LORRAINE

It would be good to know who did it, other than who the principal picks out. We have to offer her something in this negotiation. Who was the friend you were with? Brenda?

MARIE

Mom, please don't.

LORRAINE

Okay, not Brenda. Suzie? Her mother told me Brenda was really good on computers.

MARIE

Suzie couldn't make a new paragraph in a document. Even I can do that. You should see her English papers. I don't know what she tells her mother. Mom, you have to stop.

LORRAINE

But if you're shielding someone, then what does that mean?

MARIE

Shielding? That means you believe I did something, was involved, even if I wasn't, because I won't rat someone else out. You're talking like the Principal. No one believes me.

JACK

I do. But what do you believe everyone believes you did?

MARIE

I... I don't know.

JACK

I don't know either and I believe you didn't do anything like Ms. Bully says.

LORRAINE

Jack, stop that.

MARIE

Wait. You called her Bully just like we all do. You believe me. You found out some things when we went to the lab? Didn't you?

JACK

I do believe you and yes, I did. I did some research with what I found in the lab.

MARIE

Like a detective. Thank you, Dad. (*Smiles and then sours.*) You're trying. But it won't matter, will it? Miss Bully won't listen. She won't care. No one will.

LORRAINE

Jack, we love Marie. Marie, we love you, but we, I, agree. We can't make them listen.

JACK

She has to listen.

MARIE

She doesn't have to. And she won't. (*Marie exits.*)

End of scene 2

Scene THREE

LORRAINE

Jack, why are you doing this?

JACK

What else can we do?

LORRAINE

We can help Marie through this.

JACK

I'm helping her. How else can we help her?

LORRAINE

By agreeing with her that **it** can't be helped now but we'll help so it doesn't happen again.

JACK

So she believes that we believe she's guilty. That's what you think she wants?

LORRAINE

She may be. She was there. Why would the principal go after her?

JACK

We know, not for sure but... Marie's vulnerable, we are. People who have to blame other people for everything pick people to blame who it's easiest to get away with blaming.**

LORRAINE

She's just like us, Jack. So, it doesn't do any good to talk like that about her, especially not now. If Marie had done better in her school work...**

JACK

Her school work! Is that her failure? Maybe our failure. Academic failure we'll call it, but it is not the same as attacking the school's computers and doesn't suggest suspension.

LORRAINE

To Miss Boulet, apparently, it's the same. Marie has never faced this kind of thing alone.

JACK

The principal doesn't get to define what's the same. And she's not alone. We're there.

LORRAINE

But we weren't there before this happened. We were busy at work.

JACK

All the more reason we have to be there now, unequivocally, all the way.

LORRAINE

Not like this, not by making a big stink out of everything so we make everything worse.

JACK

How can pointing out that a mistake was made, that Marie is innocent, be making a big stink out of everything? It's not everything and innocence doesn't stink.

LORRAINE

Some people, like Principal Boulet, don't appreciate it when people point out mistakes. For her, being told they're wrong is everything. (Jack shrugs.) That's where the stink comes in. She's the principal; she's going to make it very bad for Marie, for us. Are you sure you're not fighting just because that's what you always do?

JACK

What's what I always do?

LORRAINE

Fight. Sometimes I think you aren't fighting for this or that but just because you fight.

JACK

I don't always fight. But if you're attacked, you fight.

LORRAINE

I don't fight.

JACK

Of course, not. You're a goodie-goodie, you don't ever have to fight.

LORRAINE

Yes, I talk. And I stay out of trouble.

JACK

But this is not about you. This is about Marie and she's in trouble, now, today.

LORRAINE

You think Marie is in trouble because she takes after me, she doesn't fight hard enough.

JACK

Marie is Marie but if this is fighting, now is the time to fight, whoever she takes after.

LORRAINE

Fighting for what? Marie says you'll just get Miss Boulet mad and make matters worse.

JACK

There's nothing more Ms. Bully can do, is there?

LORRAINE

Her suspension was extended an extra day, because we brought Marie on campus.

JACK

All the more reason we have to do something, stand behind Marie, behind her innocence?

LORRAINE

If she's innocent, even if we don't know of what. To me she's innocent, but Ms. B. says

JACK

How many times are we going to go over this. She's innocent! There's a good chance nothing happened and if something happened, Marie is innocent of it, of using the computers to attack the school, whatever exactly the Principal says she did.

LORRAINE

But she's not innocent of getting on Miss Boulet's bad side, of failing to understand the system, of not learning to survive in it, of getting in trouble. Jack, be practical.

JACK

She's not innocent of being the kind of person who's not innocent. We're all guilty. **

LORRAINE

Not what I meant. We don't know that anything like that is going on. **

JACK

It's always going on, whether we know it or not, worse since Ms. Bully is who she is. **

LORRAINE

Fighting won't make anything better. Marie, much as I love her, is not innocent, not innocent of anything the Principal says she's not innocent of. That's the way it works.

JACK

Then we're guilty of failing her. All of us!

MARIE

(Enters.) You were screaming.

JACK

(Running over.) Oh, my god. I'm so sorry. My Little Murmer, you'll always be my...

LORRAINE

(Running over.) It was nothing. We were just discussing, loudly, Just talking things over.

MARIE

I'm not your Little Murmar. I'll always be Marie, no matter how loud you scream.

LORRAINE

Jack, Marie's right. You shouldn't have been screaming. Okay, **we** shouldn't have been,

MARIE

And maybe you're both wrong. Maybe this has nothing to do with innocence.

JACK

You think this is about race? **

MARIE

I don't know about that but Miss Boulet has to be right and, for someone like Miss Boulet to be right, someone like me has to be wrong, guilty.

End Of Scene 3

Scene FOUR

(The Principal's office.)

MISS BOULET

Come in.

JACK

(Enters) Miss Boo –li-é? Is that how you say it?

MISS BOULET

No one in our family uses that old pronunciation. We don't put on airs.

JACK

Sorry, Miss Boo-lit. Thanks for seeing me.

MISS BOULET

Always happy to see a parent. It's part of my job and a great pleasure.

JACK

My wife, Lorraine, apologizes. She couldn't get off work, but she may join us.

MISS BOULET

Everyone's so busy in their careers these days. *(Calls to the secretary)* If Marie's mother comes, please just let her in. *(To Jack)* There's a call I'll take; excuse me in advance.

JACK

Of course. I came about Marie, Marie's suspension. You know that.

MISS BOULET

It's over. Monday, she'll be back in class then.

JACK

Yes, Monday. We could talk about that. She was supposed to be back in class on Friday.

MISS BOULET

Yes, at first.

JACK

But she got a call saying not to come until Monday.

MISS BOULET

She was at school on Tuesday; you came in with her; I could have... but I decided to just let it go; her suspension was three days. That's Wednesday, Thursday,...

JACK

I can count but she was here for our conference, not for school. She wasn't in class.

MISS BOULET

We follow our procedure even if it seems vague to you.

JACK

Even if it's not written down anywhere.

MISS BOULET

A day of suspension is a day away from school. There are no State laws governing this.

JACK

The law's another thing we can talk about.

MISS BOULET

Whatever you like, but, I have only a few minutes; let's make good use of our time.

JACK

Our time, okay. *(He takes out a sheet of paper.)* I'm trying to understand what happened. I wrote down the proof you showed me that Marie attacked the school's computers.

MISS BOULET

You weren't supposed to copy that information down. Even so, ...

JACK

You probably know exactly what it is; I'm going to say it anyway. So, it's on the record.

MISS BOULET

We're not required to keep a record in a situation like this and we won't.

JACK

I will; so we all know what was said. Even if it's just for me. *(Ms. Boulet nervously looks through some papers.)* This message you gave me is a copy of...

MISS BOULET

I did not give it to you and I did not intend for you to copy it down but you did. So be it. It wasn't obtained in good faith. That's not how we deal with such matters.

JACK

I copied it in good faith. Since there's no formal process, so be it. In good faith, let's say what it actually is. (*Miss Boulet nods.*) It's a record of a message sent by one computer over the network to another. See, it says "UPDATER," a request from one computer to another, using the UPDATER program.

MISS BOULET

I didn't go into details, not the details of these computer languages.

JACK

I looked it up. It's a computer request, a request.

MISS BOULET

An attempt to take over the other computer.

JACK

A request. The Updater program allows one computer to "take over" another, if you put it that way, in order to update the software, correct errors, add new software or the like.

MISS BOULET

It can take over another computer, change, destroy its files. That's what we call an attack.

JACK

This is a request and only with an operator at the receiving computer and only when the operator approves the so-called "take over" request can anything more happen. It's hardly a takeover attempt if someone at the other end has to welcome you in.

MISS BOULET

As I was told, it could take over the other computer if someone makes a mistake. Most takeovers, I think you'll agree, involve someone making a mistake.

JACK

Could a student make a mistake? Why might a student be able to sit down at a computer and send a message like this and make a request like this?

MISS BOULET

Sometimes I'm very proud of our students. Students get into computers and do amazing things. That doesn't make it any less dangerous.

JACK

Except no one got into anything to send this message; there's nothing amazing about it. The UPDATER program is an icon on the desktop of every student computer in school.

MISS BOULET

UPDATER, I didn't know that.

JACK

I suspected. A student sits down at the computer, logs on with their school account, and there it is, the UPDATER program. One click and the program is open.

MISS BOULET

(Shocked) One click and... How do you know what the computer desktop looks like?

JACK

I visited your computer lab. I looked over Marie's shoulder when she logged in. I saw! A few clicks more on the UPDATER program and a message like this is on its way.

MISS BOULET

(Angry.) Tuesday when you came to my office, you trespassed in the... You give us all a bad name, breaking into the school's computer lab. No wonder your daughter... **

JACK

People like? I broke into nothing. We were checking on Marie's things, coat, bag, and ** your lab faculty monitor ... let us in, very helpful in fact up to a point, in a funny way.

MISS BOULET

Helpful? I wonder who the faculty in the lab at that time was who... who let you do that.

JACK

See what the students see? You should be proud of what you give them. I got the pictures of the screen and, I'll certainly not tell who the lab faculty was if you're so angry about it.

MISS BOULET

No matter. I already know. *(The phone rings.)* Excuse me. *(To the phone.)* Let him go Monday. We'll discuss it at the meeting Goodbye. *(To Jack.)* That wasn't wise of him.

JACK

Gone? He wasn't giving anything away. He didn't know what I'd see or make of it. He tried to chase me out but he wasn't sure he had the right to. He tried to do the right thing.

MISS BOULET

How do you know? Maybe he knows nothing. Maybe he doesn't know what the right thing is or where he'll be working next year, or next month.

JACK

That's unfair.

MISS BOULET

He's none of your business. That's for sure. I'm not sure any of this is your business.

JACK

It's my daughter we're talking about. It's her life, her life in school, my business.

MISS BOULET

Your daughter's life in school depends on grades, test scores; that's what school is about; grades, not the UPDATER program. Had she been in class on time and paid attention...

JACK

Excuse me. The UPDATER program icon is on the computer desktop. A student at her computer is supposed to do things and learn; she should be trying things, experimenting with the tools you make available, a few clicks and this is what the computer sends out.

MISS BOULET

An attack is an attack.

JACK

An attack on what? The computer to which the request was made is identified in the message. See. It's not a server with grades or sensitive information. It's the admin computer, with the appointment calendar. It's nothing to attack.

MISS BOULET

Nothing to you, but any attack, even if the attacker chose a poor target, is still an attack. We integrate modern technology into education but I'm here to defend this school. And how do you know what computer that is?

JACK

You're here to teach kids, not suspend them! I'll tell you how I know that.

MISS BOULET

(Furious) Your kind... can't be trusted. I can tell from looking at you. It doesn't matter. It ** really doesn't. He's history. He's lucky if he works anywhere in this State again.

JACK

Don't take it out on him. He didn't do anything against you. He was scared, unsure of himself. Marie saw it. He was frightened, plain and simple, maybe frightened of you.

MISS BOULET

Not frightened enough.

JACK

The point is that this is not an attack. At worst, this is just a student experimenting with the tools you put in front of her, or him, experimenting as should be done in school.

MISS BOULET

"Her" in this case, yes. An attack is an attack, no matter how you describe it. Some people don't appreciate what school offers. **

JACK

Another reference to some people; maybe we appreciate school more than others, more than you. My wife says I'm too inclined to fight. Let me help with your computer system. I've volunteered in school before. I'll make it a showcase.

MISS BOULET

You're kidding. You think you'll buy your daughter's clemency? *(She answer the phone.)* Thank you. Great. By the way, make sure you-know-who is not at that meeting Monday. Who? Guess. That's exactly who. Thanks. *(She hangs up)* We'd better wrap this up

JACK

Let me ask you one more question. Which student made this attack?

MISS BOULET

Your daughter did. This is the proof.

JACK

Is it? This number in the message is the IP address of the computer that sent it.

MISS BOULET

Parents have a difficult time accepting what their children are capable of. Whatever an IP address is, it has nothing to do with your daughter or this situation.

JACK

It has everything to do with it. It identifies the computer that sent this message and this other IP address, a different number *(He pulls out another piece of paper)* is the address of the computer my daughter was sitting at. It's a different IP address.

MISS BOULET

I don't know what you saw or what you can prove but it doesn't matter, not the least bit. Your attack can't undermine what we know.

JACK

Not everything is an attack. I'm not attacking you and my daughter did not attack any computers. I'm just trying to straighten things out.

MISS BOULET

It's time you got out, left my office. I mean I'm sorry but we've used up the time we had.

JACK

Bear with me a moment more. Say, there was an attack. Then, it was made by a student sitting at a computer with that IP address in the message you showed me and my daughter was at a computer with a different IP address, at a different computer.

MISS BOULET

Maybe a PC can have more than one IP address.

JACK

Good thought. On some networks, yes, but not this school's.

MISS BOULET

And maybe an IP address can change from one moment to the next. You don't know.

JACK

Another good point, dynamic IP addresses, but not on your network. On your network, an IP address changes only when someone changes it and the computer is rebooted, essentially turned off and on again.

MISS BOULET

Please...

JACK

That computer was not rebooted between the time my daughter sat at it and when I saw it.

MISS BOULET

You seemed to have seen a great deal, whatever you actually saw.

JACK

I saw in the history log how long it had been since the last reboot. You know computers keep logs of key events. Those are the facts.

MISS BOULET

This is not a hearing of fact. Your observations and arguments are not deciding anything here; things have already been decided. I was told this is proof that there was an attack and your daughter was behind it. We have the facts we want.

JACK

You sure that's what you were told? Anyone familiar with your systems would know that's not true.

MISS BOULET

I run a school, not the computers; I don't clean toilets, or mow lawns. I protect the school. Given uncertainty I err on the side of protecting the students and the school.

JACK

Protect my daughter! She's a student. I know computers. There was no attack, nothing here to punish her. The facts show that what happened shouldn't count against anyone.

MISS BOULET

You're attacking. But it's going nowhere. In school these days, they judge me, my whole career, every year, on student scores on standardized tests. That's what counts. Look at your daughter's test scores.

JACK

She feels bad that they're low.

LORRAINE

So do I, very bad. Test scores! I've been a principal for fifteen years and...

JACK

How about what students learn? Doesn't that count? How about how they do in life?

MISS BOULET

Tell it to the legislature. They only want to hear about test scores. Why isn't your daughter in class on time? Why can't she fill out a form the way it's supposed to be filled out? Why aren't her grades and her test scores better?

JACK

Her mom and I can't help much; we don't know anything about these new state tests.

MISS BOULET

Neither does anybody else. Teachers hate them and won't teach to them. But they can close a school if its test scores are too low; and they can close a career. Why don't you help your daughter with those instead of whatever else you do?

JACK

Whatever we do, maybe her mom and I haven't spent as much time with her as we should have, but school is so much more than grades and test scores.

MISS BOULET

Today, school is test scores! If your daughter didn't do it, just supposing it were possible she didn't, who did? Who as your facts tell it did the attack? What about that question?

JACK

Good question, assuming, pretending there was an attack, the IP address identifies the computer that sent this message as being in the computer lab.

MISS BOULET

There were four people in the lab beside the lab instructor: your daughter Marie with her friend and two honor students. So, it was your daughter or her friend, maybe attacking together. We have the right offender!

JACK

More likely the honor students. They would more likely know how. If IP addresses are assigned in order; one computer after another, around the computer room, since this number is eight higher than my daughter's and the honor students were sitting across the room, it was most likely them, not someone sitting next to my daughter. One of the honor students' computer sent this message.

MISS BOULET

That won't prove anything except what we've already proven. But okay. Four teenagers in the lab, experimenting, showing off. I know students. "Look what I just did on the computer. I sent a message that can take over the whole school. I can change your grades." The other kids egg them on. "Oh, that's so cool. You are rad." Even if everything you say is true, they're all in it together. Like a gang; I'm sure you're familiar with gangs. ** Your daughter was in it too. We have the right person!

JACK

I'm familiar with gangs from the movies. Please, if the message was sent by a computer an honor student was at, talk to them. Don't suspend them, but talk to them. If they're honest, they'll clear this up.

MISS BOULET

This is already clear. I have no reason to talk to the honor students. They have very supportive, significant parents. Their test scores are excellent. You'll have to leave now.

JACK

I want to help. I can teach people about computers. I was...

LORRAINE

(Enters) I'm sorry I'm late. Oh, oh. I sense what's going on here.

MISS BOULET

We were just wrapping up and your husband was leaving now.

LORRAINE

Jack gets so involved in details. He wants everyone to understand computers the way he does. I don't know bits and bytes. It's a miracle when I send an email and it says what I want *(Miss Boulet smiles impatiently.)* and goes where I sent it. *(Miss Boulet nods.)* Jack sometimes doesn't know when he's said enough. *(Jack begins to talk, but she hushes him.)* Marie's a good girl, a great dancer. *(Jack tries to speak; she stops him.)* She doesn't do as well in school as we'd like; but I hope she'll catch on. We're looking into her medical condition, maybe Friday. Did you see her in last year's musical? Oh, different school, but how important are such activities for students who haven't found their step yet.

MISS BOULET

Your daughter is fine; I'm sure of that. This is just a short term suspension.

JACK

It's not just an anything.

LORRAINE

Jack, please. Marie's very sensitive. Once she started crying because the teacher said her paper was sloppy. She's very depressed now because the kids planned a party, I think, at school, for Saturday evening; and forgot her because she wasn't at school with them.

MISS BOULET

Kids can be forgetful.

LORRAINE

And cruel. Marie needs a chance. She wants to be on the track team and dance , to contribute to the school program as her ideal. Maybe she's been a little slow on tests but if she had another chance, now that she sees how serious it is, I think she can prove herself.

MISS BOULET

She has another chance, on Monday. I certainly hope she does turn things around.

LORRAINE

That's not a fresh chance, not really. She feels a dark... stigma on her. No longer eligible for dance or track, this or that, unwanted, the kind of isolation that drives a kid to sui...

MISS BOULET

She'll get over it. I know my kids. They always do. Nothing serious comes of these suspensions. Kids realize, as you say, how serious the situation is and their schoolwork improves. Hopefully their test scores also.

JACK

I don't believe that. They...

LORRAINE

Shush. Miss Boulet, can we try another point of view. Marie's a sensitive girl. Can we suspend the suspension? Call it a probation suspension? If Marie gets in no more trouble for the next month, then...

MISS BOULET

We have no way of doing that.

LORRAINE

How about for three months? How about until the end of the school year? And let's say she has to do some community service or school service?

MISS BOULET

We can't suspend the suspension. No one would take it seriously. And we can't let students exchange services for their punishment.

JACK

Why not? That's a good idea.

MISS BOULET

I've been a principal for a long time; I know my kids. Nothing bad will come of this. If Marie is as good as you say, she'll come back to school on Monday and shine. *(Pause.)* We have to move on now. Thanks for coming and for your concern about Marie.

JACK

She's our daughter! Miss Boul-i-é, please.

MISS BOULET

That's Boulet, thank you.

JACK

My wife begged you. I showed you proof there was no attack, at most a student experimenting with the technology you provided. And that student was not my daughter! I showed you the proof of that too. Isn't it possible that you, a principal, even a principal can be mistaken?

MISS BOULET

(Explodes.) A principal mistaken? I'll tell you, first, why I became a principal. When I went to school, we had principals. Don't snicker. We did, just as you did. And those principals were never wrong. I remember. A principal is a principal and a principal is not wrong. A principal is not wrong because a principal is a principal. You think you can come in here and undermine my career, my life, because of some sense that you were treated unfairly a hundred years ago. Me too. Everyone's been treated unfairly at some ** time. *(She pushes them out.)* I'm sorry for whatever I can be sorry for but I cannot and will not be sorry for being the principal. Your proof can only prove the proof, not the facts. Superintendent might be in my future; for now I'm the principal and I'm not wrong.

End of Scene 4

Scene FIVE

(The gym. Jack is shadow boxing hard again.)

LAWYER

(Enters.) Oh oh. You again? You going to come at me today?

JACK

I don't think so. I guess I'm a little sorry, but not really.

LAWYER

I didn't expect you would be. I gave your case some thought though.

JACK

Not as much as I did.

LAWYER

I'm sympathetic, really, in my own way. But thinking about it as a potential case, sympathy doesn't buy groceries, except if it's the jury's sympathy you get.

JACK

I have iron clad proof that, one, no attack was committed, and two, even more iron clad proof, that what looked like an attack, was not done by my daughter.

LAWYER

Let me guess. Miss Boulet said it didn't matter. No law says she has to care about the so-called proof you brought and she doesn't. *(Laughing lightly.)*

JACK

How did you know? What are you laughing about?

LAWYER

I warned you about the law and I should have warned you about Ms. Boulet too, a tough, stubborn lady you don't want to tangle with her. She makes mincemeat of her adversaries.

JACK

I was not tangling with her. The whole thing was not my choice. I'm not her adversary.

LAWYER

If you disagree with her, you're her adversary. If you have proof, all the more. Everyone was afraid to call her "Miss Bully" even behind her back, so they called her The Bullet,

as if she were gunning for everyone. She had a way of freezing, her eyes the color of the law, staring at someone who disagreed as if daring that foolish someone to draw a gun.

JACK

Charming. Glad we got that straightened out. Miss Bully's no lawman; she's a horror, a threat to the whole country, to democracy, human rights. She's a terrorist.

LAWYER

Take it easy. She may be all those things but you have to know who you're dealing with and it's best you get that off your chest here in the gym.

JACK

It's off my chest and in my fist. I don't understand how she could be the way she is and be in charge. I keep thinking I should take it to court, that I owe my daughter that much.

LAWYER

It would be expensive. I'm maybe sympathetic enough to this case. But I know who you're facing and you have to understand where she's coming from.

JACK

Why? She doesn't care where anyone else is coming from; doesn't care about the kids.

LAWYER

A case is a battle about the law but, first and foremost, it's a battle between people.

JACK

It's supposed to be about the law and the facts.

LAWYER

It's also about people. If I took this case I'd be arguing against the guy I trained to replace me at the district; I can beat him. but they might hire outside counsel, who might beat me. And I'd be arguing against the process and legal protections I put in place; I'd be arguing against myself and I'm a tough opponent (*Laughs.*)

JACK

This is not funny.

LAWYER

I might take your case. I really might. Your daughter's been done a wrong.

JACK

Thank you. Pro bono? These things can be expensive.

LAWYER

They can be. Lawyers are not allowed to do work for free.

JACK

No volunteering? On a pure percentage basis then, no payments from me.

LAWYER

If you have a case; I'm not sure. Don't fly off in all directions; let me explain.

JACK

Explain how we could lose, how my daughter is punished for something she didn't do and it's not a violation of anything anyway and there's no case. Great. Yeah, explain.

LAWYER

If a case is criminal, you have to show what was done is against the law. You have to find a law that was violated. This Principal violated no law. She's much too smart for that.

JACK

Smart enough to beat the letter of the law, but how about the intent of the law?

LAWYER

Intent's hard to prove; since no law was violated, it would have to be a civil case, brought as a civilian, just joking; you'd have to show some damage was done, and it's best, simplest if it's financial damage, a lot of financial damage. That's what people understand.

JACK

To the kids, my daughter? That should be easy.

LAWYER

Don't get mad, but damages would be difficult to show. You went to college. Your wife did too. And your daughter will. What damages were done by this event?

JACK

If she overcomes this and goes to college, nothing happened? Miss Bully gets away with it.

LAWYER

Pretty much. On the other side, if a kid goes bad, psychologists argue the kid would have gone bad anyway. A single event shows who they are; but it's not the cause. The kid was going there anyway. It doesn't make a kid. So no sympathy in court on that score.

JACK

I don't want sympathy. I want an apology that my daughter was falsely accused, punished for something she didn't do, maybe permanently scarred by this. She deserves an apology.

LAWYER

Apology is a word lost from our vocabulary, especially from the vocabularies of people in power. The Bullet's not going to apologize. Bullets don't, especially not to a student.

JACK

To the whole community! That Bullet, that Bulldog, needs to be removed; she shouldn't be running a school, not even a reform school.

LAWYER

Don't start ranting. We're not arguing. We're trying to figure out whether you have a case. She can rant with the best, if it's a ranting match. Understand. She's been a principal for years. Now she'll be judged by these new student test scores. I'd guess your daughter's test scores aren't great.

JACK

She mentioned that.

LAWYER

Pretty open for her. She must like you, just kidding. Somewhere, it was decided scores of students who have been suspended, because they missed school maybe, would not be counted. No principal would admit this influence but you see what's coming?

JACK

Maybe this ought to be a class action suit, by all the kids suspended and their families.

LAWYER

I thought of that. It would be hard, impossible to find out who those families are.

JACK

The school has a record; the district has a record.

LAWYER

The privacy laws protect the school from giving out those names. *(Laughs)* You think the privacy laws protect you; they protect schools more. You could run a newspaper ad but families would rather forget, would not come forward; this class action won't happen.

JACK

The natural thing for The Bullet is to find a reason to suspend kids who score low.

LAWYER

Unfortunately. Then their scores don't count; the school's stats look better.

JACK

The more kids are kept from school, the further they get from good grades, what we want them to learn and be. We drive them out and down. School's should make good citizens, teach how to live in the society we want, but this school is not that kind of society.

LAWYER

You're ranting again. There were discussions at the district along those lines. That school teaches your daughter about society has long been replaced by the idea of teaching the kids reading and writing so they can get a job, make money, and spend it.

JACK

Kids who can't score high, whose parents couldn't, continue the cycle. We drive them down and out.

LAWYER

True, most kids who get suspended are poor, without full-time parents or parents who can't help much. Your daughter was a mistake. You and your wife probably do all right.

JACK

That's maybe why I never saw this coming. I forgot who I was. But it's very personal with me now; this is my daughter. You're not going to drive her out.

LAWYER

It's not me; take it easy, even if suspensions drive kids out. What to do? Some districts have suspension buildings, students on suspension in a building next door to the school. They're expected to keep their work and their grades up, or try to. They're given help.

JACK

From a building next to but not in the school? Great. They need school to have a chance to catch up, or even keep close behind; we bring them to school but don't let them in.

LAWYER

It's better than what we have in this school district as you noted. People are trying. Students there have texts; get assignments; teachers help them. But, not here.

JACK

What idiot designed the program we have? Is that another one of your beauties?

LAWYER

I worked to help kids! Nobody tried to hurt your daughter. I did a good job at my work; I didn't design anything. I just do law. It was worse before, much worse.

JACK

I can't imagine. How do we bring this case, my daughter vs. Miss Boulet and the school district? I'm ready? What's the next step? My daughter is listening; she wants to know.

LAWYER

I don't know. You have your high-sounding ideals but where's your financial damage?

JACK

Lawyers are crazy, absolutely crazy. Do they care what's fair?

LAWYER

This case will fly if it flies at all only if, and you've thought of this, it's about race. Don't look at me. We would have to show that this was done to your daughter because she was black, excuse me, African-American.

JACK

She still is ... black. So am I, as you've noticed.

LAWYER

Miss Boulet is smart. I'm sure she didn't say anything obvious. How would we show your daughter was picked on because of race? She has to remember things that were said, with a witness present, that suggested discrimination based on race.

JACK

There was nothing overt and no witnesses.

LAWYER

Exactly. Nobody's going to believe you. And everybody is going to be in your daughter's face challenging her about where she was discriminated against, when, by who.

JACK

She's never mentioned anything. Of course not. She doesn't want to face anything like this and doesn't want it to exist so she's not going to say it and maybe not even see it.

LAWYER

Of course, not. There are protective laws these days and legal precedents but it would be pretty hard on her. How would she handle it? How would she like it?

JACK

How would you like it? How would I? Could you handle it? Could I? That's not what I want for her. She's not ammunition in a war. What a mess you've made of this world!

LAWYER

Me? I had a great career. They paid me well and I was worth it. We made good law, as good as possible, the law the legislature wanted. It was adopted and never overturned,.

JACK

Great.

LAWYER

Your daughter's case changes nothing. Maybe you can't win; but don't put it at my door.

JACK

And what about who gets punished by this good law. Is it fair that it's used mostly against the most defenseless students, handicapped, minority, poor, whatever?

LAWYER

The law is good law and fair law. A law says how people should behave; it can't force them to behave that way. So, the law's abused and used inappropriately. Don't put that at my door. I do law, not people.

JACK

If a law doesn't get people to behave, what good is it?

LAWYER

You get under my skin.

JACK

And you under mine. Perhaps, it's all about skin, skin in the game, the color of that skin.

**

End of Scene 5

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I was witness to a student wrongly accused and suspended from high school. I offered advice and evidence to the school administration but was rebuffed and threatened by them. I went before the school board to explain the case; but was rebuffed again and chastised because I made ad hominem remarks about the principal. A total loss? Perhaps not. Before that incident this principal was the first choice for next State Superintendent of Education. Afterward, she was not considered and did not get the job.*

In working through the play with prospective actors and other playwrights, I was amazed at how many of them were aware of the outcast students “by the far fence” and amused how in different schools there were different funny names for them. I was also amazed at how many people had attempted suicide or had some brush with it. The statistics on suicide and suspensions are each frightening and perhaps related.

Research shows that some schools are doing imaginative things for students who would otherwise be suspended, kept out of school though they may need school most. Other school districts do nothing or worse.

That’s the story but a play must go deeper. A play is about characters into whose souls we can see. Each character is on stage because his or her life depends on it; each is struggling to do the best thing possible with the challenges the world presents. Even if, in this play, each character fails, human resilience gives us a happy ending.

AUTHOR BIO:

Leonard writes primarily for theater. Besides creating plays, he’s produced and engaged in all aspects of theater. His work entertains but also stimulates and inspires one’s sociological, psychological, and political consciences, and through these one’s spirituality.

He was Development Director at Eclectic Theater and artistic director at the Pocket Theater until each closed, also a TPS reviewer / rater for local plays. Of his forty full length plays, ten have been produced and of his many more one acts plays, many more have been produced.

SCENE SIX

(The living room. Marie wanders in and around in her pajamas again, disheveled more than earlier. She has a cell phone she dials.)

MARIE

Hey. Brenda, I'm texting again in case my last one didn't go through. *(Clicks the phone.)* That's stupid. She'll think I'm desperate. I am. *(Laughs.)* Why would I text someone who doesn't want to be texted by me. She could text me, but she won't.

(Stops in front of the mirror.) Look at that person. That's a hair style! Those are the ugliest pajamas I ever saw. *(Wanders on.)* I should go to the mall and get some new pajamas; but, who can I go with. What if I ran into someone there? If they saw me, buying pajamas. That's dumb. What if I saw the cheer leaders at the mall. What if... that's dumb.

What's that? I thought Suzie's number popped up on my screen; but I must have imagined it. Why would she call someone like me?

(Stops in front of the mirror.) Who's that? Who's that ugly creep? They would never let anyone as ugly as that be a cheer leader or on the track team or dance. *(Crying.)* Never. *(She lies down, looking in the mirror. Then puts her head down, asleep or dead.)*

End of Scene 6

SCENE SEVEN

LORRAINE

(Lorraine enters the living room, on the phone.) Who is this? Suzie? Hi. What? You wanted to call Marie but your mother didn't want you to so you're calling me so I can tell Marie you called. That's sweet I guess. *(Pause.)* Your mother wants you to stay clear until this thing with the Principal blows over. Call Marie. Why tell me? You can't reach her? Oh. You have to go? Oh. Bye.

LORRAINE

Marie. Marie. You here?

LORRAINE

(Wandering on stage.) What are you doing on the floor? *(Screams.)* Where are we? In the hall? At the end of the school yard.. Oh, my god. No! *(Screaming.)* Oh, my god. NO!

(Covers her eyes.) (*Her phone rings and she opens it.*) I gotta call 911. Jack, Jack. I came home and she was on the floor. I have to call 911.

JACK

Lorraine? You there? You're breathing funny. I called to... check in. Everybody okay?

LORRAINE

NO! Your daughter's...

JACK

Marie. Marie's the only daughter I have. What about her?

LORRAINE

She's lying on the floor. I have to call 911.

MARIE

(Runs up and takes the phone from her mother.) Dad? Mom's weird. Mom, what? I was looking in the mirror, Mom. I really need new clothes. I lay down looking at the awful image of me in the mirror and I fell asleep.

LORRAINE

Oh my God. (Hugs Marie.)

MARIE

What are you screaming about, Mom? And crying? And squeezing me like that? Mom?

LORRAINE

(Recovers.) I lost it. Okay? I've been pushing hard at work and I lost it. Give me that. (Takes the phone back.) Jack, Marie's okay. I always thought she took after me, you know, go along with things, negotiate, maybe give in a little, but come back later. She's like me, but she's also the other way, like you.

JACK

What?

LORRAINE

Marie takes after me, but after you too, a lot. I think she'll be okay. She's a fighter.

JACK

She takes after herself.

LORRAINE

I saw her on the floor and (crying) ...

MARIE

(Takes the phone from her.) Dad? Dad? Yeah, this is Murmer, Marie. Mom's having a moment or something like that but I think she'll be okay, after she takes me to the mall..

The End

NOTES

Scene 1 - goofy assistant principal

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *I was witness to a student wrongly accused and suspended from high school. I offered advice and evidence to the school administration but was rebuffed and threatened by them. I went before the school board to explain the case; but was rebuffed again and chastised because I made ad hominem remarks about the principal. A total loss? Perhaps not. Before that incident this principal was the first choice for next State Superintendent of Education. Afterward, she was not considered and did not get the job.*

In working through the play with prospective actors and other playwrights, I was amazed at how many of them were aware of the outcast students "by the far fence" and amused how in different schools there were different funny names for them. I was also amazed at how many people had attempted suicide or had some brush with it. The statistics on suicide and suspensions are each frightening and perhaps related.

Research shows that some schools are doing imaginative things for students who would otherwise be suspended, kept out of school though they may need school most. Other school districts do nothing or worse.

That's the story but a play must go deeper. A play is about characters into whose souls we can see. Each character is on stage because his or her life depends on it; each is struggling to do the best thing possible with the challenges the world presents. Even if, in this play, each character fails, human resilience gives us a happy ending.

AUTHOR BIO: Leonard writes primarily for theater. Besides creating plays, he's produced and engaged in all aspects of theater. His work entertains but also stimulates and inspires one's sociological, psychological, and political consciences, and through these one's spirituality.

He was Development Director at Eclectic Theater and artistic director at the Pocket Theater until each closed, also a TPS reviewer / rater for local plays. Of his forty full length plays, ten have been produced and of his many more one acts plays, many more have been produced.