

In Light of One-Act

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“She picked it!”

It’s October, and you can already see your breath. Your uniform skirts are slowly transitioning into the boys’ dress pants that you bought for cheap at Walmart. As the remaining warmth of your senior year dwindles away, the anticipation only grows.

“Guys, she finally picked it!”

Your friend shows you the orange poster hanging in the halls. Your director has picked the one-act play. *Finally*. The wait felt like forever. Then you read the poster.

“*The Little Match Girl?*”

You and your friends are skeptical, but you all go to auditions anyway. Of course you go; it’s your “*thing*.” It was not your best audition, but you feel assured anyway.

You get the lead.

You celebrate privately—finally, *finally*, a good part. You still blush with embarrassment whenever anyone addresses you as “the main character.” Even though you have the most acting experience in the cast, secretly, you feel incomplete. Like you don’t deserve it.

Like always, December approaches, and the rest of your winter is devoted to the play. Go to school, work, then play. Write eight-page essays for class and then go to play. Stay up past two in the morning

working on homework, then go to school, then play. Sob in your boyfriend's arms about your *prababushka* passing away, then go to play two hours later, where your friend plays the role of your character's dead grandmother. Don't say anything about it. Go to your internship where you have to pass on weekly meetings because you have play. Don't get scheduled to work for two weeks because, guess what, you have play. But it's fine, because you love it all the same, right?

Perform for critics to prepare for competitions and learn that you need to look colder, but not "too cold the whole time." Stand outside in the snow to get a better feel: it's even better if you're in your socks. Driving your car that takes twenty minutes to warm up in the negative fifteen-degree weather for weeks on end makes it easier to remember what freezing feels like. Think more seriously about method acting, about sitting outside with no coat or shoes on in the icy weather to get a real feel of what it's like to freeze to death—just to spite your director, to spite everyone, and then decide not to because you don't have time to waste to torture yourself. Eventually, master the art of looking progressively colder over the span of thirty minutes. You're sweating under your costume-under-another-costume combination, but luckily the circulation in your fingers and toes is not the greatest, and the stage floor is always ice cold through your socks.

Listen to more critiques that you disagree with as an actress and blocking coordinator for oral interpretation. Work with your director when she decides to reconfigure almost all of your blocking and try to remember the specific spots you're supposed to hit, even though no one remembers where they really are, and it changes almost every time.

You have a quiet fondness for the scene with your father. It's a terrible scene, really. The character is an alcoholic and abusive widower, and he yells at you and takes off your gloves and shawl and throws your basket of matches across the stage (try to stay in character as you attempt to save it from falling off the edge multiple times). The actor who plays your father is your friend, and you have been in theater together for years. You're great at working together, you really are, and it's bittersweet. Out of all five plays that you've shared, this is probably the only scene that you two have ever really interacted with each other in.

Performance night arrives before the regional competition. You're actually *nervous*. It's your last ever performance for oral interpretation. Your reader's theater group (which won superior at state) is opening the

show. You want to cry, and you start shaking, because you realize that this really is the end. You don't need to throw up, you don't need to throw up—you think about how a guy a couple of years older than you mentioned that he always threw up before all of his play performances, and you have a great desire to not continue that tradition.

The crowd claps, you bow, and then rush off the stage with your friend, running through the halls in heels and a dress to quickly change into your costume and add on to your "poor dead girl" makeup.

Vocal warm up. Pray. Try not to cry again. Places. The curtain opens, and you're once again glad that you've never had the opening line. You're the only one offstage, but since you're performing, you don't lie down on the floor (like you usually do to bide the time) and quietly pace instead. Peek into the crowd for a millisecond and recognize your old castmates from previous years. Realize that, soon, you'll be one of them. Step onto the stage, try to sell matches, get yelled at, freeze, cry, and then die. Routine work. You're not sure how to react when you hear that a majority of the audience cried, so you just shoot them a thumbs up and awkwardly laugh whenever anyone mentions it to you.

Practice more. Pack the trailer. Wake up early to go to regions and realize that you were assigned the same dressing room you used during your first one-act competition. It's both fun and a chore to apply stage makeup onto the reluctant boys in the cast, but you're glad that it doesn't have to be perfect. Help the girls out too. Years of play (and also going through a . . .phase) has made you experienced in eyeliner.

Curtain. Stand offstage. Step into the light, try to sell matches, get yelled at, freeze, cry, die. Don't think about your dad in the crowd, watching you *again*. Step offstage with Leah, one of your best friends that has been performing with you since day one. Watch as the friend that plays your father visually dies on the inside as he discovers your character's dead body. Curtain. Rush everything off stage so as to keep within the forty-five-minute time limit, even though you are nowhere close to it. None of your tears on stage were real, and when your junior-year best friend starts sobbing because she realizes that you and the rest of the seniors will be leaving her, keep your heart hardened. You can't let those feelings come out yet.

Listen to the judges' critiques. Sit in the front row for the first time. You win a superior actress award, and your play places first in the region: you're going to state.

Practice, practice, practice, and then practice more. You perform on the second morning of the three-day state run at South Dakota State University. Something is in the air, besides the flurries of snow—nerves, excitement. An absolutely electric feeling.

You're one of the last to leave the dressing room, and you all head to the stage and line up. The time starts now. Set the stage, take your position offstage left. Barely resist the urge to nervously bounce on your toes as anticipation buzzes through you. Curtain. Act. Be real. Start freezing, more and more with every second. Every step must look painful, every breath must feel like glass. Your fingers should be numb and barely usable. Try to protect any exposed skin, especially your ears, nose, and feet. Slip and fall on stage (intentionally, of course)—it doesn't matter if it hurts.

Hands shaking, barely manage to grab a fake match from your beat-up basket and swiftly pretend to light up the battery-powered candle that you're concealing in your hand. Make sure that the basket is carefully placed behind the curtain line so it's not knocked over at the end. Your body is warm but twitching harshly. Freeze, freeze, freeze. Warm tears pool in your eyes as you watch a flashback of your character's dead mother dance with a younger you, humming "The Holly and the Ivy."

And then you're alone, but you're too into it to let it get to you. Wiping your tears with weak and stiff fingers, slowly curl onto your side and sob. Sob in front of hundreds of people and make sure that they see your face. Your body is convulsing: coldly, sickly, *convincingly*, and you remember your director emphasizing that this moment should be *long*, and, since it's state, you *really* drag it out. The awful, raw sounds of hyperventilating, of choking, echo into the dark audience, and everything that you decided that you were too busy to feel comes out as you slowly count the seconds in your head: . . . *ten* . . . *fourteen* . . . *fifteen* . . . *sixteen* . . . Then, relax your entire body: your head, neck, ankles, tongue, toes, knees. Everything. A thick silence. You're dead.

Snow dancers twirl around your grey body as Leah softly plays "In the Bleak Midwinter" on the flute, and they drape their white tulle skirts and wrist-attached dance scarves over your entire body. The entire ensemble appears out of the wings, solemnly humming the rest of the song.

Electric.

As this is happening, the snow dancers slowly strip you of your first layer, tugging off your socks and unzipping the back of your dirty grey dress, pushing the sleeves and bodice as far down as they would go. The lights fade. Your “mother” enters, and the lights return. Again, you hear her humming “The Holly and the Ivy.”

You snap up, as if from a dream. Look at the audience, then at her, then back to the audience with a growing smile on your face. You do not have to act this time.

“Mama!”

Stand up, revealing an angelic, white dress, and make sure to not step on the snow dancers as you take off running into your mother’s arms. You’re barefoot.

That’s when time slows. You hug her, hug her tight with every ounce of love and pain that you’ve felt this year, and laugh through your tears as she spins you in the air. She sets you down and you step back, looking at her, taking it all in. There is a gold light shining on her, and you see that she is crying too. You’re not sure if she’s ever cried in this scene before, and you can see in her eyes how bittersweet she feels, another junior, watching the seniors move on.

That light.

You’ve never noticed the gold that they used, and, just for a second, your eyes follow it, up and out toward the audience. Heavenward. Streams of white and blue and gold pour through the dark, and you know, you *know*, that this is it. Your last moments on stage, your last minutes of feeling like this. It is only the first week of February, but your senior year has ended. Your mother holds your face and pulls you into another, possibly unscripted hug, and you both feel each other shaking with tears.

Leah, your “grandmother,” steps into the light, and you gasp, “Grandma!”

Run to her. You can see it in her eyes; she feels it, too. The light. These were both of your final moments. Your final *real* moments. You hug tight, and then she guides you offstage with your mother into the afterlife.

Return the embrace that your crying costumer gives you once you step offstage. Slip on your purple slides (you’re not allowed to be barefoot backstage). You just know that your makeup is a mess. You feel a release, lighter. Watch the wreck that your father turns into as he sobs

over your first costume layer. Those were real tears too, he tells you later. Manage a few shaky notes of backstage humming. Lights out. Curtain. With the little energy you have left, speedily tear down the set. Nearly sprint to the room where the judges are located, laughing with your crew. Sit in the front row again; your friends saved you a seat. Your mom gave you a tissue as you made your way in, and you clutch it in your hand as you listen to the feedback. You realize, for a great majority of the time, you cannot stop crying. Dab away the little tears before you wreck yourself again. You still feel like a feather, the same weight as the spirit that left from the little match girl. Quietly respond “thank you” more times than you can count.

After critiques, everyone slowly leaves the room. You change out of your costume for the last time and remove all of your tear-stained stage makeup and then reapply a more basic look. Brush your hair. You’re done crying, you realize. And you’re free. Free of *what*, you’re not quite sure, but you know that this part of your life is over.

The cast feels weird because the usually lively crowd was oddly quiet during the performance. It turns out, they were crying.

Maybe they were all crying for different reasons, but you think that you all realized something. Everything is finite. Nothing will last. Sometimes that’s awful, but sometimes, when you take a moment to notice every speck of dust floating in the streams of golden light flooding down on you, it’s kind of beautiful.

Anna Unser is a first-year English major from Aberdeen, South Dakota. Post-master’s degree, she plans to pursue a career in developmental editing. When she’s not dedicating her time to speed-running her degree, she’s either reading the same novel she’s been trying to finish all year, watching *Dead Poets Society* again, or making yet another playlist on Spotify.