

Anticipation

Heat rises from the pavement, blistering my feet through my new sneakers. I have no idea where I'm going. I've only been here once and my memories are fuzzy. I find the door and slip inside the cool dark theatre. A faint aroma envelopes me, but I can't identify it. A few kids sit on the stage. They laugh, socialize. I sit in the audience, not quite sure what to do.

A man enters. He's wearing ripped sweat pants and a baggy T-shirt, and holding a stack of scripts, a CD player, and a yoga mat. ENTER STG L: Richard Width, theatre director.

I expect him to say, "Stand here, move there." Instead, he talks about passion, love, life and all its hardships. He makes us stand still and do nothing but breath. He sends us on scavenger hunts, searching for the contents of our own backpacks. It scares me.

And what does yoga have to do with acting anyway?

That was three years ago. Although I didn't know it at the time, my high school career and my life hinged on the moment I walked through that door.

Mr. Width challenged me. He made me think about things I'd always taken for granted. And about things I'd never considered before, like an artist's role in society. He pushed me out of my comfort zone. Sometimes the things he asked for seemed impossible. He insisted I throw a temper tantrum. On stage. In front of the entire cast. For five minutes.

But he was always there for me. He told me it was okay to be scared or embarrassed or jealous. And he showed me how to use those emotions in my work, and then let them go.

When Mr. Width looks at me he sees more than my student identification number. He sees the complex combination of aspirations, desires and frustrations that is me. Mr. Width is a teacher, director, and wise man. He is the older brother some of us never had. Most importantly he is a friend. And if I ever need to talk, the comfy chair in his office is always open.

Mr. Width cares.

Amidst the anticipation of opening night he is brimming with pride – and in some precarious cases, relief. Never was that more apparent than on opening night of my first play. I was terrified and nervous and excited, all at the same time. Finally the curtain opened and I stepped on stage. The rest of the night was pretty much a blur. The moment I remember was the heartbeat between the last word and the applause. In that moment, standing on stage next to all my friends, I was filled with exhilaration, elation, and relief. *We did it.*

Three years and twenty shows have passed. I've played leading roles in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, *The Seagull*, and more. I've helped direct and produce *The Importance of Being Earnest* and *Saint Joan*. Most importantly, I've transitioned from the terrified freshman to mentor. It's inspired in me a passion that I want to pursue in college and beyond.

I owe much of this to Mr. Width. In the beginning I was just a spark. A good teacher would have seen that spark and fanned it into a flame. But an extraordinary teacher – Mr. Width – saw the spark and made *me* fan it into a bonfire.

The sun is still hot, and the soles of my not-so-new sneakers soak up the heat. It is the first day of rehearsal for our latest show, and the stage awaits. I slip inside the cool dark theatre. A faint aroma envelops me. It is the smell of anticipation. I laugh and greet my friends. Excitement clings to me like static-charged nylons. Then, through the bright lights, I see a small figure sitting alone in the audience. She looks at the stage, and at us, with a mixture of apprehension and yearning. I feel the heat from the lights slide off me as I go to her. “Hi. You’re new, aren’t you?” I take her by the hand. “Come join us.” I bring her on stage and we sit with the others. “Let me tell you about Mr. Width ...”

ENTER: Dani Alcorn, center stage.