ON THE EXHALE

by Martín Zimmerman

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CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

The lone part in this play should be played by a Woman in her late-30s to mid-40s.

NOTES ON PRODUCTION

Two things are a must: 1) Robust physicality 2) Metaphoric (live?) sound. Those who know my work know these two elements have a vital place in most (if not all) of my plays. Though they are not as explicitly written into this particular script, they are no less essential here.

Please do not use a weapon in production. You'll find the result much more compelling if the actor uses her body to suggest a weapon. Other props are OK, but less is more.
You always imagined it happening to you.

Some young student
always male
in your cramped basement office
twitching with anger
fear
about not getting into med school
law school
or the like
about mountains of debt swallowing his stillborn future
and all because of you.

Because you dared make him look outside himself
see past his narrow experience
to the inherent difficulties that come with not being male
because no
you wouldn't consider changing his grade
but most of all
because you dared challenge him...

Entitlement mixes with adrenaline
with fear
with testosterone
you smell the incendiary cocktail
wafting off him
while his leg twitches wildly...

Until he lifts the edge of his shirt
a simple, subtle gesture
graceful even
he flips up the bottom corner of his tasteful green button-down
and there it is.

Obediently waiting in its holster.

Eyeing you with its obsidian stare.

You slowly raise your hands
Why?

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Instinct, probably?
You've seen it a hundred times in movies
this is the way you survive when someone pulls a gun, right?
you slowly lift your empty arms
the international symbol of plaintive innocence
never mind that this young man isn't a cop
and even if he were
raising your hands
is far from a guarantee of survival

Still
your hands ascend
weightless
while words
tumble out
heavy
and insubstantial
at once
they're all that stands between you
and this man
his gun
its obsidian stare
maybe you're right
maybe there's something to your point of view
maybe we can take another look at your final grade--

That's when you feel it.

Warmth.

Takes a moment to register it's your own.

That you're in shock.

That you never heard the shot.

Never saw the muzzle flash a few inches from your face.

The warmth continues spreading down your face
trickles into your mouth

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and when that first taste of iron hits your tongue
--pure rust invading your mouth--
all your sensation floods back.

Burning
stabbing
throbbing
as he blasts
and blasts
away
as life
slowly slips
from
your
grasp...

And then you wake up.

(Breathe.)

The first time you have this dream
is the time you ask a student
a male student
to kindly consider the premise that there just might be some small disadvantage to
being a woman
--it's a women's studies course after all--
and to try to incorporate such a perspective into his paper revision.

What you get back is no revision at all
but the original paper covered in post-it notes
full of borderline violent screeds about your "insidious propaganda"
the college's "inhumane curriculum requirements"
and your "appalling vendetta"--three underlines--against men.

This is the first time you entertain the possibility that it might not be someone else on
the news next time.

That next time it just might be you.

This is when you start locking your office door
even during office hours
especially during office hours
and post a cute hand-written sign urging students to "please do knock!"
you do it under the excuse of needing to concentrate on your research
but what distraction could there possibly be at the end of a lonely basement hall?
and every time you open the door
you hope your students won't notice how you pause just a bit
to see if you can catch a glimpse of anything through the cracked door
see anything shining
before you open wide
with a smile
invite them in
blame your slowness on your age
and the heavy door
oh this heavy door, you say with a chuckle

After a few semesters the young man in question
--in your head you call him The Catalyst--
he graduates
magna cum of course
and your panic starts to subside
the dreams recur less frequently
but recur nonetheless
so you still
you remain vigilant.

Each class you identify a most likely candidate
just a minor mental checkmark
and maybe you start leaving your office door open again
but this time with a strategically placed mirror
something tasteful with a funky frame
something you thrifted! you tell the students
you place it right at the spot
where you can see anyone coming round the corner
from your desk
and maybe you even move your desk
give yourself just enough time to run to the door
and slam it shut
should you need to.
At least this is what you tell your therapist one Wednesday afternoon when she remarks that you seem especially on edge.

The Catalyst of your confession is not some student this time but the little stickers that have suddenly appeared in every window now that concealed carry is the law of the land Thank you, Supreme Court! little stickers with the silhouette of a menacing weapon --a 9mil you will later learn-- with a bright red line through it.

The stickers people are now legally required to put up if they don't want someone carrying a weapon into their establishment as if that's something one should have to state aloud "no please don't bring that thing that's likely to get one of us killed into my otherwise peaceful place of work"

it really should be the opposite you think an opt-in sort of thing where those who truly prefer weapons should be required to post "weapons, please!"
or something of the sort so you and everyone else who's sane can know exactly where to avoid

Because now each time you see that silhouette and all its attending terror it feels like an assault you sweat start to palpitate but more than that you wonder if some troubled young man who wouldn't otherwise will suddenly turn to violence precisely because he has that subtle reminder that silhouette and all its potency

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power
sex
knocking around somewhere in his subconscious
and well
even though it makes sense that she of all people would need one in her window
the last place you expect to see one of these silhouettes staring at you is on your
therapist’s door.

So she of course senses your anxiety
asks an incisive question
and it all comes out:

About The Catalyst
the recurring dream
the mirror on your office wall
the many "minor" precautions you've taken
you pretend to laugh it off
try to make it seem like you have a sense of humor about the whole thing
because this is the first time you've admitted any of this to anyone
and naturally you're worried what she'll think of you
but when you've finished you have to admit that you feel lighter.

Unburdened.

Closer to her.

(Breath.)

Until you hear the hint of skepticism in her voice.

Though she does her best to conceal it
you still sense it
in the up-glide at the end of each sentence
in her false affirmation
you probe her to see if your intuition is correct
slip in a subtle "you know what I mean?"
but when her response is vaguely noncommittal
you remind yourself to never question your intuition again.

This is the first time you feel judged by your therapist.

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As you drive away from her office full of shame embarrassment at having shared those thoughts but most of all at having thought those thoughts you have this sudden streak of recognition and laugh out loud because of course she'd judge you of course she wouldn't understand the stakes aren't the same for her if something happens to her if some unstable patient walks in and decides to disregard the little sticker in her window she has a successful husband a large and loving family for her children to fall back on but if the same thing happens to you there will be no one to take care of Michael.

Yes.

Michael.

Who starts second grade next month.

Michael...

...who is the greatest choice you've ever made.

The first true choice you've made.

Before Michael yours was the path of least resistance. School was always easy for you so graduate school seemed like the next logical step you've even navigated academia and all its potential pitfalls with ease grace...
But choosing Michael meant choosing challenge every step of the way.

And not just choosing the donor
driving yourself to all the appointments
having no relief on diaper duty--
those were the easy parts.

(Breath.)

To choose to have a child by yourself
in the quiet bedroom community surrounding your college's campus?

It means choosing the subtle scrutiny of everyone around you.

Choosing to endure their silent belief
that yours is a place of yearning
yours is a place of lack.

At first
the lack of sleep makes you mistake their pity for approval
support even
but when the offers of food
and childcare
turn to barbecues
and playdates
where some single man is always present
the smiles on the cherubic faces of your friends
seem to have something else behind them
some implicit question
like...
_haven't you forgotten something, dear?_

And when months of single men
fail to yield any change in your life
women start appearing in their place
--these people aren't prejudiced, after all--
and though you find the women a more alluring option
they are not _the_ option
not _your_ option
not right now

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so you stop showing up
start politely declining invitations
saying you'll be out of town
or Michael's not feeling well.
And when it turns out you were lying
when you get caught in line at the grocery store
or taking Michael to the park
well then their soft-eyed sympathy
turns to resentment
brittleness of spirit
how could you be so ungrateful as to turn down their charity, after all?
It's the worst thing you can do to a well-meaning white liberal
reward their good intentions with ingratitude.
They'd sooner have a murderer in their midst.

So you turn even further inward
lose yourself in the oasis of his smile
in the eyes that seem wiser than they can even comprehend...

He'll never know how grateful you are that he never asks
why the playdates and barbecues are suddenly a thing of the past
why he doesn't have a mommy and a daddy
or a mommy and a mommy
he will never know how grateful you are
that he just seems to know...

This is how you come to be alone with Michael.

This is how you come to be uniquely terrified of what might happen if a student
rounds the corner
weapon in hand
and you're too buried in a book
to see it in the mirror
and get the jump on the door.

Because then who'd take care of him?

Your sister is six hundred miles
and a universe away
and absent her unlikely return to reality--
someone who pities him, that's who
someone who'll silently wonder whether he's better off
whether your demise was merely some small hurdle in his narrative of triumph.

And pity is no recipe for excellence.

(Breath.)

Those are the first words out of your mouth when you hear there's a shooter.

Even before your flash of relief
at how circumstance has vindicated your paranoia
even before you wonder whether your therapist will be forced to apologize the next
time you see her
for doubting you
judging you
if you even live to see her
before any of those thoughts can surface
you find yourself whispering the words as if in a trance.

Pity is no recipe for excellence.

Then
you find yourself bounding towards the door
eyes on your mirror the entire time
until you're just about to slam it shut
when you catch your Department Chair
the one who came to tell you
looking at you quizzically.

You always imagined it happening to you.

So when you hear her say
"There's a shooter at the school"
you think she must mean your school.

Not the school.

The elementary school.
(Breath.)

Next thing you know
you're standing at a police barrier
in a line of other anxious parents
waiting for some word.

Absent any information
parents pull out phones
start streaming CNN
MSNBC
to see what they can tell you
the absurdity of watching reporters on your phone
who are standing mere feet from you
reporters who know nothing more than you do
is lost in the upside-down logic of this moment.

Minutes pass
hours
or so it seems
without any updates from police
data plans buckle
phones die...

When you hear it.

The sound is so much duller than in your imagination
yet it's unmistakeable.

So is its direction.

As officers start to pour out of the building
you know it can only mean one thing: the shooter has become his own victim.

Answers are now inevitable.

The sheriff separates parents by classroom
and grade
and soon everyone is lined up like children anxiously waiting for their teachers on the first day of school.

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You watch the sheriff work his way from classroom to classroom
grade to grade
dispatching some grades wholesale to the safe-zone where their unblemished children wait.

With others, he goes down the line name by name
some parents collapsing into others' arms.

When it comes to your grade
your room
2C
he stops short
and lowers his gaze.

Though he soon finds strength to speak
by that point it is unnecessary.

Still
he stumbles on
unleashes a stream of information

- How the teacher did her best to barricade the room
- How the shooter forced his way in despite her efforts
- How the shooter took his own life in that very room

all of which feels painfully irrelevant when stacked against the sheer magnitude of the fact that your son is no longer alive.

You silently resent that the sheriff is still speaking
that he's dared to speak at all
resent every word that crosses his quivering lips
so you tune him out
only to notice birds still singing
squirrels preparing for the fast-approaching winter
leaves caressing each other in the cool autumn breeze
and you resent them too for their casual indifference.

By the time the sheriff moves to the microphones
you resent the sun for giving light enough to see
the air for giving oxygen to breathe
anything and everything that allows you to go on living while your son is dead.

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Because there you are.

Still alive.

Still living, at least.

And incapable of doing anything to remedy that most unfortunate fact.

You glance at your phone
out of habit
or because the body seeks comfort in routine
when an alert on your screen warns you Michael is an hour late for soccer practice.

...

You find your thumb sliding unlock on the screen
starting to dial your sister
six hundred miles and a universe away
because "Sharing your joy multiplies it. Sharing your pain halves it."
or so you remember reading somewhere.
And just as you're about to hit send on the call
you remember where it was
on the wall of your dentist's office
and wonder how something that seemed so inane in the midst of a root canal
could possibly comfort in a moment like this
before wondering how your mind can be so fucking feeble
as to think about a root canal right now.

Then you wonder if your sister
in her hazy ignorance
could possibly comprehend what you are about to tell her.

And even if she could would she care?

You suddenly see the virtue in her philosophy of radical detachment.

You consider not saying anything about what's happened
but calling her anyway
just to ask her advice on how she manages to float through life so unencumbered.
Instead you just stand there
while slowly
or quickly?
you have no idea
a vigil materializes in front of you.

Your body soon buzzes from the hymns all around
hymns whose vibration almost swallows you whole
along with candles
silk-screens
solemn prayers
that all feel so poignant
so prescient in the moment...

But when they yield to a steady stream of lunches
pot-lucks
support groups
suddenly you see the latent pathology in this endless cycle of nurturing
in meals so carefully prepared but perpetually uneaten
in comfort so aggressively given yet so rarely received...

And all of it focused with particular intensity on you.

Because you need the nurturing more than most
because Michael was "all you had"
and now that he's gone
well, what do you have to live for?

And while you don't disagree
you still sense a haughty superiority
in their gestures of support
a message beneath their bundt cakes
and floral arrangements:
"If you'd just listened to us
if you'd taken our advice when you had the chance
well, you wouldn't be alone right now, would you?"

As if another body in your bed would blunt the pain.
You consider asking them if their lumpy, inadequate partners actually bring them any solace.

Instead you let your thoughts drift to the shooter’s parents who you find yourself thinking about a lot more than the parents of the other victims.

You imagine the singular depth of their loneliness.

And find it familiar.

Or at least you imagine it to be.

And maybe you even call a journalist who wrote about them ask him how to reach the shooter's parents and when he says they'd rather not be reached by you or anyone maybe you offer him some cash to make it worth the effort.

But when he still declines emphasizes their overwhelming need for privacy you press no further because you harbor no anger no ill-will toward them even though their need seems somewhat ironic to you.

Still, you respect it.

Because you can’t even begin to imagine. Not that.

So you recede back into the sea of other mourning parents and tolerate their pity as far as Michael's closed casket funeral --"the only option" according to the funeral director. When the intensity of their grief feels especially false you bear it nonetheless so as not to seem ungrateful. But when you've put the box that supposedly holds your son into the ground you go home and vow never to talk to them again.