

ONE-ACT (Cutting) -- WHSFA

Up The Down Stair Case by Bel Kaufman Dramatic Publishing Company

The fronts of the cut-outs may be decorated as desired by the cast and the director. Probably bright colors should be used and there may be a number of things written on them such as "Hi, Teach!" – "Let it be a challenge" – "Please Do Not Erase" – "A for Effort" and so forth as desired.

(Curtains open - Fade Lights up)

Bea Mocking Dr. Clark: *(Speaking in an "official" tone.)* Attention, please. This is your principal, Dr. Maxwell Clark. I wish to take this opportunity on the first morning of the first day of school to extend a warm welcome to all faculty and staff, **cut** blah, blah, blah...

BEA: *(nodding toward sound)* The same message every September. I'm Bea Schachter --- *(points up)* I have room 508.

SYLVIA: Sylvia Barret. *(Nods toward sound.)* First time for me.

BEA: Our Dr. Clarke always gives us his pearls in pairs – aims and goals, guide and inspire, help and encourage, new horizons and broader vistas.

SYLVIA: *(excited; confiding)* I'm about to teach my first class.

BEA: First ever? *(SYLVIA nods)* You're prepared?

SYLVIA: *(diffidently)* I thought I might begin with First Impressions: importance of appearance, manners, speech – on which I'll build a case for good diction, correct usage, fluent self-expression. From there it's just a step---

BEA: *(a smiling interruption)* You're sure you've come to the right school?

(Kasey exits while Lou enters)

LOU MARTIN: *(calling cheerfully as he comes in)* Hi, teach.

LENNIE NEUMARK: Looka her! She's a teacher?

CAROLE BLANCA: Is this room 304? Are you Mr. Barringer?

SYLVIA: No, I'm Miss Barrett.

ALICE BLAKE: I'm supposed to have Mr. Barringer.

VIVIAN PAINÉ: You the teacher? You so young.

LENNIE: She's cute! Hey, teach, can I be in your class?

SYLVIA: Please don't block the doorway. Please come in.

CAROLE: Good afternoon, Miss Barnet.

SYLVIA: Miss Barrett. My name is on the blackboard. Good morning.

RUSTY O' BRIEN: Oh, no! A dame for home room?

LOU: You want I should slug him, teach?

LINDA ROSEN: Is this home room period?

SYLVIA: Yes. Sit down, please.

LINDA: I'm not sure I belong here.

(*TOBY RODGERS comes in shyly and edges over to the far corner.*)

CARRIE BLAINE: We gonna have you all term? Are you a regular or a sub?

HARRY KAGAN: (*pompously*) There's an insufficiency of chairs!

SYLVIA: Take any seat at all.

JILL NORRIS: Is this room 309?

LOU: Someone swiped the pass. Can I have a pass? (*Dying of thirst*) I gotta get a drink of water!

RACHEL GORDON: What's your name?

SYLVIA: My name is on the board.

RACHEL: I can't read your writing.

LOU: (*in mock agony*) I'm dying!

LENNIE: Don't believe him, teach. He ain't dying.

HARRY: Stop your inconsideration of the teacher, you bums.

RUSTY: Can we sit on the radiator? That's what we did last term.

LENNIE: Pipe down, you morons. The teacher's trying to say something.

SYLVIA: Please sit down. I'd like to---

ELIZABETH ELLIS: Will you be teaching *avant-garde* creative writing?

(*A Bell Rings*)

SYLVIA: (*about to answer ELIZABETH but interrupted by bell*) That bell is your signal to come to order. Will you please---

LENNIE: When do we go home?

CARRIE: The first day of school and he wants to go home already.

LINDA: Maybe this is the wrong room. What room is this?

SYLVIA: This is room 304. My name is on the board. Miss Barrett. I'll have you for home room all term, and I hope to meet some of you in my English classes. Now, someone said that first impressions---

JILL: English! No wonder!

RACHEL: Who needs it?

LINDA: (*suspiciously*) You give homework?

SYLVIA: First impressions, they say, are lasting. What do we base our first---

(*Stops as she sees a girl, FRANCINE GARDNER, who approaches her with a slip of paper. FRANCINE is board, looking about indifferently*)

SYLVIA: Yes?

FRAN: Mr. McHabe wants Ferone right away.

SYLVIA: Whom does he want?

FRAN: Joe Ferone.

SYLVIA: Is Joe Ferone here?

LENNIE: Him? That's a laugh!

RUSTY: He'll show up when he feels like it. (*FRAN exits L.*)

SYLVIA: I see. Now. We all know that first impressions --- Yes?

(*HELEN ARBUZZI is standing in the door L.*)

HELEN: Is this 304?

SYLVIA: Yes. You're late.

HELEN: I'm not late, I'm absent. I was absent all last term.

SYLVIA: Please sit down. (*Noting lack of chairs*) I mean—stand up. (*Points to back of room*)

HELEN: I can't. I'm dropping out. You're supposed to sign my Book Clearance from last term.

SYLVIA: Do you owe any books?

HELEN: (*handing her paper; impatiently*) I'm not on the blacklist. That's a yellow slip. This is a green!

(*SYLVIA signs, and HELEN exits L.*)

LOU: (*during above*) Isn't the pass back yet?

LENNIE: Don't you ever give up?

SYLVIA: I'm afraid we won't have time for the discussion on first impressions. I'm passing out ----

LOU (*shouting; mock alarm*) Hey, she's passing out! Give her air.

SYLVIA: (*handing out cards*) I'm passing out attendance cards. Print in ink your last name first, your parents' names, your date of birth, my name – it's on the board – and the same upside down. Then I'll make out the seating plan. Any questions?

(Cut to...)

(*The following is almost simultaneous*)

SYLVIA: (*To VIVIAN, in back*) pg. 13

VIVIAN: There's broken glass back here—from the window.

SYLVIA: Don't touch the broken window. It should be reported to the custodian. Does anyone---

LENNIE: (*jumping up*) Me. I'll go. That's Mr. Grayson—he's in the basement.

SYLVIA: Tell him it's urgent.

(*As LENNIE goes out, another boy, CHARLES ARRONS, hurries in.*)

SYLVIA: Who are you?

CHARLES: Sorry I'm late. I was in detention.

SYLVIA: In what?

CHARLES: The Late Room. Where they make you sit to make up your lateness—when you come late.

SYLVIA: Fill out your card, please.

CAROLE: For parents' names, can I use my aunt?

SYLVIA: Put down your mother's name.

CAROLE: I've got no mother.

SYLVIA: Do the best you can.

(*FRAN has come back in L*)

SYLVIA: (*to FRAN*) What is it this time?

FRAN: (*crossing to hand a piece of paper to SYLVIA*) Mr. McHabe said you're to read this to your class.

SYLVIA: May I have your attention, please. There's been a change in today's assembly schedule. Listen carefully. (*Getting a bit confused herself as she reads*) "Please ignore previous instructions inCut off by Edward

(EDWARD WILLIAMS is entering L.

EDWARD: (crossing with papers) Here's my admit. He says I was loitering.

SYLVIA: Who?

EDWARD: McHabe.

SYLVIA: Mr. McHabe.

EDWARD: (leaning against wall) Either way.

SYLVIA: Class—please finish your cards while I call the roll.

(PAUL BARRINGER, a tall and handsome teacher, is entering L.)

EDWARD: I never got no card.

PAUL: (almost automatically) Any card.

SYLVIA: (at the same time) Any card. (She looks at PAUL, startled, inquiring. **More of an attraction** - You are---?

PAUL: Your fellow teacher, Paul Barringer. I teach English in 309. (Dropping his voice) Sorry to interrupt, but could I borrow your board eraser?

SYLVIA: Yes---no. I'm afraid it's gone.

ALICE: (rising; the beginning of a crush) I could go get one for you, Mr. Barringer.

PAUL: (going) Never mind. (smiles to SYLVIA) Anyway, we've got something in common.

SYLVIA: (blankly) What's that?

PAUL: (as he goes off L) No erasers.

SYLVIA: (to ALICE) Please, sit down. (to the class) I must take attendance. If I mispronounce your name, please correct me. (Reading from Roll Book) Arbuzzi, Helen.

HARRY: **ROBERT (Zach Johnson):** She's dropping out.

(LENNIE hurries back in L)

SYLVIA: Oh, yes.

LENNIE: The custodian says there's no one down there.

SYLVIA: (this is too much) How can he say that when he's down there?

LENNIE: (shrugging) That's what he says. Any answer?

SYLVIA: No answer! (Grips Roll Book again) Blake, Alice?

ALICE: (still looking after Paul) I'm present, Miss Barrett.

SYLVIA: *(smiling)* You're sure?

ALICE: *(turning front; embarrassed)* Oh, yes. Present.

SYLVIA: Blanca, Carmelita?

CAROLE: Carole. I changed my name.

SYLVIA: Blanca, Carole?

CAROLE: *(enjoying her new name; with a huge smile)* Here.

(KATHERINE is back at the door L)

SYLVIA: Borden...*(Seeing KATHERINE)* Yes?

KATHERINE: Miss Friedenberg wants the Service Credit Cards from last term.

SYLVIA: I'm in the middle of---

KATHERINE: She needs them right away.

SYLVIA: I wasn't here last term.

KATHERINE: *(going right on with a list)* Second, the office wants to know are the transportation cards ready. *(Putting paper on desk)* Third, fill this out immediately.

SYLVIA: Not so fast. The what cards?

KATHERINE: Transportation. Bus and subway.

SYLVIA: I haven't even taken attendance. *(Anxiously to LENNIE at the back, who has crowded onto seat with another boy)* Please don't tilt that chair—**young man**—I'm talking to you. *(He falls over.)*

LENNIE: *(scrambling up)* So I fell. Big deal.

SYLVIA: Are you hurt?

LENNIE: Naw, just my head.

KATHERINE: You better make out an accident report, three copies, and send him to the nurse.

LOU: The nurse ain't even allowed to give out aspirins. Only tea.

LENNIE: You call this a chair?

HARRY: *(ominous)* He could sue the whole Board of Education.

SYLVIA: You'd better go to the nurse. *(LENNIE starts off. After him)* And ask her for the accident report blanks. *(To KATHERINE, who still stands there impatiently.)* Is there something else?

KATHERINE: *(handing her paper)* You're supposed to read this to your class. It's from the library.

SYLVIA: (*correcting, automatically*) Library. Class, attention, please. (*reading*) “The school library is your library. All students are encouraged to use it at all times. However— (*takes quick breath*) —the library will be closed to students until further notice to enable teachers to use it as a workroom for their PRC entries.”

KATHERINE: (*as she hurries out*) I’ve got eleven more messages.

SYLVIA: (*to class*) We’ll get back to attendance.

(*FRAN enters L.*)

SYLVIA: (*sigh*) We won’t get back to attendance. What is it? (*annoyed*)

FRAN: (*bored*) New change in assembly program. Your class goes to different rows. X2 schedule rows.

SYLVIA: I see.

FRAN: (*handing paper, lackadaisically*) And this is urgent. From Mr. McHabe.

SYLVIA: (*reading*) “To all teachers. A blue Pontiac parked in front of the school has been overturned. If the following license is yours---” (*hands it back*) Tell Mr. McHabe I don’t drive. Now, class---

(*LENNIE is coming back in L*)

LENNIE: (*as he comes*) The nurse says she’s all out of accident reports, but she wants the missing dentals.

SYLVIA: Missing dentals? We’ll get to that later. (*Determined*) I’m going to finish the attendance, and then--- (*There’s a loud bell and the students are jumping up simultaneously, banging desks, etc*)

RUSTY: Hurray!

LOU: Saved by the bell!

SYLVIA: Just a minute. The bell’s much too early. It may be a mistake. We have so much to--- Please remain in your---

Cut to (They’re pouring off L.) all leave

SYLVIA: Please sit down. I’d like to--- We haven’t--- (*To ALICE and FRAN*) It looks as if we’re the only ones left. You’re Alice.

ALICE: Alice Blake. I want you to know how much I enjoyed your lesson.

SYLVIA: Thank you, but it wasn’t really--- (*To FRAN*) There’s more?

FRAN: (*nodding, bored*) Just one---you’re supposed to announce this to your class---right away.

SYLVIA: (*reading aloud*) “Please disregard the bell. Students are to remain in their homerooms until the next bell.” (*Hands it back to FRAN*) Thanks.

FRAN: (*contrite*) Maybe I should’ve given you this one first.

Cut to (JOE FERONE, a hostile young man, has ambled in L and now stands menacing over her desk.)

JOE: (*rocking on his heels*) You Barrett?

SYLVIA: (*as he tosses slip on her desk*) What's this?

JOE: (*insolently*) Late pass.

SYLVIA: (*speaking firmly but in a low voice*) That's no way to hand it to me.

JOE: My aim is bad.

SYLVIA: (*her voice rising a little in spite of herself*) There's no need for insolence. Please take that toothpick out of your mouth when you talk to me. And take your hands out of your pockets.

JOE: Which first?

SYLVIA: What's your name?

JOE: You gonna report me?

SYLVIA: What's your name?

JOE: You gonna give me a zero?

SYLVIA: I've had just about--- (*Standing up. Demanding*) What's your name?

JOE: Joe.

SYLVIA: Joe what?

JOE: Ferone. You gonna send a letter home? Take away my lollipop? Lecture me? Spank me?

SYLVIA: All I asked---

JOE: (*starting back for door*) Yeah. All you asked.

SYLVIA: I don't allow anyone to talk to me like that.

(*The Bell rings*)

JOE: (*as he goes*) So you're lucky---you're a teacher.

(*BEA enters room*)

BEA: Having fun?

SYLVIA: I'm having problems. I don't think I even understand the language. A student called me "Hi, teach!" Cut to next line And the paperwork! I'm buried beneath an avalanche!

BEA: That I can clarify. "Let it be a challenge to you" means you're stuck with it. "Keep on file in numerical order" means throw in wastebasket. "Interpersonal relationships" is a fight between kids. "~~Ancillary civic agencies for supportive discipline~~" means call the cops. "~~Literature based on child's reading level and experiential background~~" means that's all they've got in the book room. "~~Non-academic minded~~" is a delinquent, and "it has come to my attention" means you're in trouble.

SYLVIA: (*not knowing whether to laugh or to cry*) That I believe.

BEA: Did you get anything done in homeroom?

SYLVIA: I took attendance --- as far as B. A boy fell off a chair. And I forgot to have them salute the flag--- which may be illegal.

BEA: On assembly days, they salute in the auditorium. What's illegal now is Bible reading.

SYLVIA: (*smiles*) How about a short silent prayer?

BEA: Only if the word "prayer" isn't mentioned and if you don't move your lips. And remember--- there's no such thing as a Permanent Pass to the Water Fountain.

SYLVIA: (*holding up a paper from her desk*) What do I do about the P-P-P's?

(*Ella Enters*)

BEA: Almost sings, doesn't it? That's the Pupil Personality Profile, invented by Ella Friedenberg, Guidance Counselor --- who thinks she's Sigmund Freud.

(*ELLA FRIEDENBERG is standing up from behind one of the low cut-outs on the upper level*)

BEA: She bases her P-P-P's on such interview questions as "Why do you hate your parents?"

ELLA: (*aside to BEA*) If I don't ask, how do I find out? (*Turns front. In brisk lecture tone.*) Latent maladjustments may exhibit themselves in socially unacceptable behavior in the classroom. This is a crucial period in the development of the adolescent. Please send all new pupils to me for in-depth coverage. (*As she's going. An afterthought.*) However, send the disruptive elements to Mr. McHabe. (*ELLA is no longer visible.*)

SYLVIA: Mr. McHabe again.

BEA: Administrative Assistant. He's very strict. I don't know--- maybe he has to be, but try to avoid him. He's in charge of discipline, and supplies. He can't bear to part with a rubber band. Ask him for a pencil and he turns white.

(*MC HABE has risen during the above speech from behind another cut-out on the upper level.*)

MC HABE: (*to the front; forcefully*) To all Faculty: Diligence, accuracy, and promptness are essential in carrying out all instructions. Teachers with extra time are to report to the office to assist with activities which demand attention. Regarding the requisition of supplies, please anticipate your needs. (*Turns toward BEA*) Do not make excessive demands. (*Front again. A bit easier.*) Any teachers wishing decorative posters, we have a few left. Block letters, blue on white: "Knowledge Is Power" and yellow on green: "Truth is Beauty." (*Sitting.*) Also brown and tan of Swiss Alps. Slightly torn but still usable.

Cut to...

CHARLOTTE: (*grimly*) No books are to be removed from the library until the card catalog is brought up to date.

SYLVIA: (*as CHARLOTTE goes*) The librarian?

BEA: (*nodding*) Charlotte Wolf.

(SADIE FINCH has come on the upper level at the other side.)

SADIE: (sounding like a mimeograph machine) Teachers should function according to instructions. This means hand in on time!

BEA: Sadie Finch, School Clerk.

SADIE: Pupils are to report back to their homerooms to be checked off at 2:56. Dismissal bell will ring at 3:05 sharp. (*Bell Rings.*) This, however, is uncertain.

(MC HABE is on again.)

MC HABE: Send legitimate latenesses to the Lateness Coordinator. If excuse is invalid or suspect, send offenders to me. Please read to your students the list of infractions and penalties to instill in them a sense of civic responsibility. Post in a prominent place in homeroom. "A student who is late--- may fail to graduate." (He goes)

BEA: Have to leave you now. I'm trying to salvage a potential dropout.

SYLVIA: (after her) The very first girl I called on today was dropping----
(But BEA has gone. Remembering.) Arbuzzi--- Helen.

(HELEN steps in from L on the lower level)

HELEN: (speaking to the front, though talking to SYLVIA) I've got to drop out, Miss Barrett. I've got to work. I'm of age and my income is needed at home.

SYLVIA: (also speaking to the front though talking to the girl) Why don't we talk this over, Helen? Perhaps we could find some way to solve----

HELEN: (in a hurry to go) Why talk? Most school is a waste anyhow, every period another subject – Algebra, French, Eco, English, one after the other --- what good is it?

SYLVIA: If you'd give me a chance to---

HELEN: It's all a jumble and in every class the teacher tells you something different, till you don't know who to believe.

SYLVIA: But before you take this step that's going to affect your whole life, we should at least---

HELEN: Save your breath. (As she exits L) I'm better off out.
Cut to...

(SYLVIA turns to look at the blackboard where she sees her boldly written name. As she considers it, PAUL BARRINGER comes in lower L.)

SYLVIA: (amused at herself, addressing the blackboard) I think you were expecting a little too much, Miss Barrett.

PAUL: (pleasantly) Admiring your penmanship?

SYLVIA: (looks to him, smiles, then turns back to the blackboard) Suddenly my name looks unfamiliar to me. I have a strange feeling I didn't even spell it right.

PAUL: (*bringing hand from behind his back, with a gift*) For the school teacher who has everything.

SYLVIA: (*accepting; pleased*) A board eraser. Thank you.

PAUL: McHabe wasn't around, so I took tow.

SYLVIA: (*wryly to blackboard as she erases name*) You'll have to do better, Miss Barrett.

PAUL: (*smiles as he's going*) Sauve qui peut. (*Pauses at door L, looks at watch*) I have a free--- oops--- unassigned period. I'll be having coffee in the Teachers' Lounge.

SYLVIA: (*eagerly*) Maybe I'll--- (*catches herself; speaking more casually*) If I can get through the locker assignments---

PAUL: (*as he exits L*) Then I'll see you.

Cut to Joe/McHabe

(*MC HABE, holding JOE FERONE firmly by the arm, comes on lower L.*)

MC HABE: A moment , Miss Barrett--- was Joe Ferone in home room this morning? Did he stay till the bell?

SYLVIA: He was a little late, but he stayed till the bell.

MC HABE: You're certain? It's important. (*She compresses her lips, unwilling to answer a second time. Realizing he has to explain*) A valuable wallet was stolen from a locker during home room, and I understand Ferone was seen loitering in that vicinity just before the bell.

SYLVIA: Then it couldn't have been Joe. He was in home room.

MC HABE: (*almost disappointed*) I see. Was he any trouble?

SYLVIA: Trouble?

MC HABE: (*exasperated*) Disruptive? Rude? Any trouble? (*SYLVIA glances at JOE, who is watching her narrowly*)

SYLVIA: (*deciding*) No. No trouble.

MC HABE: If you think it helps to cover for them, then you're very much mistaken.

SYLVIA: Unless there's something else, Mr. McHabe, I'm going for a cup of coffee. (*Taken aback, he shakes his head, and SYLVIA walks past him and off L. They both look after her for an instant. Then JOE reaches down and takes McHabe's hand away from his arm.*)

JOE: Better luck next time, McHabe.

MC HABE: Mister McHabe.

JOE: (*smiles as he goes off L*) Mister.

MC HABE: (*after JOE; sure of himself*) Every year I deal with a lot like you.

(As MC HABE follows JOE off L, FRANCES EGAN appears on the upper level.)

Cut to...

(During this, KATHERINE has come on L, bringing some papers which she's reading as she crosses to Miss Barrett's desk)

KATHERINE: (reading) "Mr. McHabe to Miss Barrett. Please note that Joe Ferone has been placed on probation. Truant Officer reports no such address as the one given. ~~Subject teachers claim he's been cutting classes. Nurse says he's on Dental Blacklist.~~" (Puts papers down on desk as though too hot to handle, but as she starts away she gives them farewell pat.) Lots of luck, Joe.

(The lights are dimming quickly as KATHERINE goes off L, and a spot has come up on a part of the upper level at ULC. ELLEN, who is SYLVIA's friend, is coming into the spot of light. She holds an opened letter)

ELLEN: (calling back L as she comes into light) Watch the baby a minute, please. I've a letter from my friend Sylvia. We went through college together. Now she's teaching in New York. (She turns front, and starts skimming through the letter) "A far cry from Graduate School and Professor Winters' lectures on 'The Psychology of the Adolescent.' I have met the adolescent face to face. Obviously Professor Winters had not."

(During this, SYLVIA enters L, then crosses to another spot of light that comes up at DRC.)

ELLEN: (smiling as she continues reading.) "While you're strolling through your suburban supermarket with your baby in the cart, or taking a shower in the middle of third period—"

SYLVIA: (picking up with what apparently is in the letter) I'm automatically erasing the latest graffiti from the blackboard. Even the building seems hostile – cracked plaster, broken windows, carved-up desks, gloomy corridors. I've been here only two months, and already I'm in a battle I'll probably lose.

ELLEN: (addressing her directly) Over the boy you mentioned in your last letter?

SYLVIA: (nodding unhappily) Joe Ferone---insolent, contemptuous---very bright but flunking every subject.

ELLEN: Why fight for that one?

SYLVIA: (she too is wondering why) I don't know. Maybe because I sense something in his rebelliousness that's like mine--- that's against the same things. Or maybe it's just because he's been so damaged.

ELLEN: You're not there to fight for them. You're a teacher.

SYLVIA: (ruefully) I keep thinking of Mattie who was in college with us. Right now she's at Willowdale Academy holding seminars on James Joyce under the philosophic maples.

ELLEN: What keeps you from Willowdale? That other teacher--- Paul something?

SYLVIA: Barringer?

ELLEN: (eagerly) Tell me about him.

SYLVIA: (considering) All I really know--- he's clever, attractive. (Troubled) But there's something about him that---eludes.

ELLEN: (curious) Eludes?

SYLVIA: (trying to sort it out) It's hard to say. For one thing he waits till the hall traffic subsides before he leaves his room. I have an impression he does this to avoid being touched by the kids. And he seems just passing through here—marking time teaching till he gets published and he can leave.

ELLEN: And you and the girl students find this intriguing.

SYLVIA: (smiling) Devastating. There's a girl in my class, Alice Blake, who's almost love-sick over the man.

(ALICE has come up to SYLVIA from R, joining her in the spot of light.)

ALICE: The thing I really like about him, Miss Barrett----

SYLVIA: (trying to stop her) Please, Alice.

ALICE: He never sits behind the desk. Either he leans against it, or he sits on top. And have you noticed---one eyebrow is higher than the other?

SYLVIA: (insisting) Alice--- the subject is Homer's *The Odyssey*.

ALICE: I know. Also *The Myths and Their Meaning*. But have you ever noticed---

SYLVIA: (gently propelling her L) I'm looking forward to your paper.

ALICE: (giving up; as she goes off L) Yes, Miss Barrett.

ELLEN: (curiously; to SYLVIA) Well, have you?

SYLVIA: Have I what?

ELLEN: Noticed his eyebrows?

SYLVIA: The one that's higher than the--- (Stopping herself. Irked) What possible difference does----(Glances L, where she sees someone) Sorry. I can't finish now.

ELLEN: (reading again, from the letter in her hand) "I think it's Paul coming. I'll send the rest of this letter tomorrow."

(ELLEN is moving L out of the light, and PAUL is entering L on the lower level and crossing to join SYLVIA in her spot of light)

PAUL: (as he comes; indicating L) What's the matter with Alice Blake?

SYLVIA: (defensively) There's nothing the matter with Alice Blake.

PAUL: (pleasantly) Don't bit my head off. Especially now, because you're about to be immortalized---I've found a rhyme for Sylvia Barrett.

SYLVIA: Nothing rhymes with Barrett.

PAUL: (*suavely*) Fourteen karat. (*As she smiles*) Why did you insist on going home right after dinner last night? I thought we were having a pretty nice time.

SYLVIA: (*regretfully*) Papers to mark.

PAUL: No one can take it that seriously. You were put off by my bad mood. It was the latest rejection slip. The tone is not only polite, but patronizing. Why don't I write of something familiar?

SYLVIA: (*gently*) Well?

PAUL: (*with disdain*) What do they want me to write about? Calvin Coolidge High School?

SYLVIA: At least they couldn't say you're not familiar with---

PAUL: (*cutting in; irritated*) Kids sprawling in classrooms, yawning in assembly, pushing through halls--

SYLVIA: That's the surface, Paul. If you'd get closer----

PAUL: Do you get closer?

SYLVIA: I'm trying, but--- (*Ruefully*) I haven't even found what to call them yet---teenagers, youngsters, kids, young adults? Those expressions all seem stilted, inappropriate, even offensive.

PAUL: Let it go at pupil load. (*Eagerly*) Sylvia--- I've started on a new novel. This one's going to make it. Let's have a cup of coffee later and I'll tell you about it.

SYLVIA: Sure, Paul.

Cut back to Ellen – Ellen take time to pop up – flow – Ellen stays up through her next lines.

ELLEN: (*curious*) Are you reaching the students? (*Soft question*)

SYLVIA: No---but there was a beautiful moment yesterday. For the first time I was able to excite a class with an idea. I put on the board Browning's "A man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for?" (*With growing excitement*) And then we were involved---a spirited discussion---aspiration versus reality. (*Turning L, as though asking class*) Is it wise to aim higher than one's capacity?

VOICES: (*from the darkness, L*) Yes! No!

SYLVIA: (*to L*) Does it doom one to failure?

VOICES: (*L; excited*) Of course! Don't be stupid! How ya gonna make progress? What about ambition? So what? So all ya do, you get frustrated.

SYLVIA: (*to L*) And hope? What about hope?

VOICES: You've got to be practical. I say you've got to have a dream. Hitch your wagon to a star. What about--- shoemaker stick to your last? Miss Barrett--- call on me! My turn! Call on me!! Oh, please--- let me talk!

(*A light suddenly reveals MR. MC HABE's face, just inside doorway L*)

(*NOTE: MC HABE can be holding a flashlight pointed at his face from below*)

SYLVIA: (*startled*) Yes? Yes, Mr. McHabe?

MC HABE: Can't you keep your class in order?

SYLVIA: They're in order. (*Collecting herself*) We're in order.

MC HABE: Then what's the meaning of this?

SYLVIA: (*bewildered*) Meaning of what?

MC HABE: (*she must be an idiot*) All this noise?

SYLVIA: (*gathering force*) The noise, Mr. McHabe? That's the sound of thinking!

(*They stare at each other for a moment. Then MC HABE takes a breath*)

MC HABE: (*turning slightly as though addressing the class*) There will be a series of three bells rung three times indicating Shelter Drill. (*Back to SYLVIA*) Loud discussions do not encourage the orderly evacuation of the class. (*The light on him snaps off as he turns to exit L*)

ELLEN: (*after an instant of consideration*) I suppose he has his problems, too.

SYLVIA: But keeping order is getting to be the important thing. Enthusiasm is frowned on because it gets noisy. I don't know that I'm reaching them at all. Maybe other English teachers are more successful---

ELLEN: (*smiling as she goes*) Let it be a challenge to you.

SYLVIA: How do other teachers---- (*ELLEN is gone. SYLVIA turns*) Class--- can you tell me what you've gotten out of English so far?

All talk over each other – but in controlled voices – quietly very fast cut off by Joe

(*STUDENTS are standing up on each line and look straight ahead. They speak over one another*)

HARRY: ~~During my many years of frequenting school, I'm well satisfied with my instruction, and I hope to achieve further progress in my chosen program of study with~~

LOU: (*putting hand over his mouth to stop him*) Okay, Harry.

LINDA: What I got out of it is literature and books. (*Charles begins*) But having boys in class distracts me from my English. Better luck next time.

CHARLES: I hope this term with you will be good (*Lennie begins*) because you seem to be alive--- though it's too early to tell.

LENNIE: Being you're still new, you should know I made a bargain (*Edward begins*) with my teachers. If I don't bother them, they won't bother me.

SYLVIA: (*calling on him*) Edward.

EDWARD: (correcting her) Edward Williams, Esquire. (She nods agreement and he continues.) All the teachers flunk me because of the color of my skin. (*Rusty begins*) Frankly, I would prefer a teacher freely telling me I'm no good in English than giving me dirty looks in the hall.

RUSTY: What I learned in English is to doodle. (*Lou begins*) It's such a boring subject, I spend a lot of time doodling.

LOU: Essays--- a lot of gossip. *Ivanhoe* Is for the birds. (*Elizabeth begins*) George Eliot stinks, even though he's a lady.

ELIZABETH: A kaleidoscope. A crazy quilt. An ever-shifting pattern. ~~Shapes that come and go, leaving no echo behind. Such is my remembrance of lost and vanished hours of English from whence I arise, all creativity stifled, yet a Phoenix with hope reborn.~~ Will it be different this term? ~~The question, poised on the spear of time, is still unanswered.~~ (*Changing tone. Directly to SYLVIA*) I was supposed to be in Mrs. Schachter's Creative Writing class, but because of a conflict, I couldn't get in.

Cuts off static conversation

JOE: (*Talking front*) Why do you ask these questions? (*All students sit*) (*Joe talk to Sylvia – cross down stage center during dialogue*) What are you trying to prove? No one in this school gives a damn about us, and it's the same at home and in the street outside. You probably don't care for my language, so give me a zero in vocabulary. Anyhow, I'm quitting the end of this term—joining the dogs eating dogs in the lousy world you're educating us for. But don't worry. You'll still find plenty willing to play your game a baah baah little lambs, trot in step and get your nice clean diplomas--- served on dirt. Yummy! I trust this answers your question.

SYLVIA: (*answering, but talking to front*) You express yourself vividly, Joe. And your metaphors---from dogs to lambs—are apt. I'd give you higher marks than you'd give yourself. Joe—before you decide to quit, we should talk. Can you see me after school today? There's so much--- I wish I could convey what I---

JOE: (*mocking*) I don't understand them big words, and I'm busy after school. Every day. You'll have to prove yourself on your own time, teach. (*go to sit down*)

Bell Rings – Cut to all kids enter and sit test scene

SYLVIA: (*passes out test papers*) (*frazzled and cross to bookcase and grab tests*)

CAROLE: Why so many tests, teach?

SYLVIA: I learned your name, Carole. Couldn't you learn mine?

CAROLE: We see you every day. Why do we hafta be formal?

HARRY: ~~Because it's protocol—dum dums. Right, Miss Barrett?~~

CHARLES: You're a teach. Why not call you Teach?

SYLVIA: Don't open the test booklet till I tell you.

LENNIE: I don't care if I never open it.

LOU: (*leaning back*) Anything you say, teach.

Cut to...

SYLVIA: (correcting) Miss Barrett. (*Hands paper back to ALICE*) Put this away. (*Crossing back to her desk*) You're not to open your test booklets till I say "start." (*Picking up paper from desk*) Before we start, please pay attention to this directive.

SYLVIA (cont.): ~~The fact that Thanksgiving falls when it does this year is causing difficulties in midterm examination schedules. Since there will be no final exams, midterm marks will count as two-thirds of the final mark. Students are to place on the floor all books, notebooks, and personal possessions. Students may not leave their seats for any reason whatsoever. The proctor is to approach them at their seats to answer questions.~~ (*takes a breath*) "No questions are to be answered by the proctor. If a student desires to go to the lavatory, the proctor will escort the student to the door and summon the hall proctor who will escort the student to the lavatory--- male teachers will escort boys, female teachers will escort girls. Students must understand the importance of high ethical standards."

(The light has dimmed off through this except for the spot on ALICE BLAKE, whose mind has drifted to that which is most important to her.)

Cut to Page 44

SYLVIA: (calling for attention) All right, class. (*Looks at watch*) Read--- start. (*They open their booklets, register on the first questions, and then, almost simultaneously, they all groan.*) Get on with it. (*With vast sighs, wincing and indignation they start the test. SYLVIA gives a little sigh herself, and sits behind her desk. Cut Alice*

Cut to Joe

JOE: (demanding) Hey--- Barrett!

SYLVIA: (*aside to BEA*) Trouble. (*Getting up from desk*) Yes, Joe?

JOE: I have to be excused.

SYLVIA: We're in the middle of a test. (*As others are looking up*) Please continue.

RUSTY: What's the answer to question four?

CAROLE: (suspiciously) I don't think we covered part of this.

SYLVIA: No talking. Please do your best.

JOE: (*has stood up; sharply*) Barrett!

SYLVIA: Finish your test.

JOE: I want to go to the lavatory.

SYLVIA: (*crossing toward him*) Couldn't you wait till after---

JOE: (*cutting in*) No.

SYLVIA: (*to JOE; dropping her voice*) You have to be escorted.

JOE: So get an escort.

SYLVIA: *(to class)* Keep your eyes on your work. *(Looks out L)* I don't see---- *(Calling off L)* Proctor! Hall Proctor!

JOE: *(starting off)* I'll be back in a few minutes.

SYLVIA: *(holds his arm)* There's no escort.

JOE: *(regarding her)* So what are ya gonna do? *(Their eyes clash. SYLVIA takes her hand away.)*

SYLVIA: *(speaking softly, but with decision)* I'm going to trust you. **Do I have your word you won't get help or look up answers?**

JOE: *(with mock servility)* Sure **do**, teach.

SYLVIA: *(still speaking softly; curious)* Does showing disrespect make you feel better, Joe? More important? **A bigger man?** *(He glares at her, but has no answer. He turns and goes out L. SYLVIA starts back to her desk)*

LENNIE: **Some of these questions!**

SYLVIA: **Don't waste time. (sharply) Just do your paper, Charles.**

CHARLES: *(indignant)* I'm not cheating. I'm left-handed.

SYLVIA: **Since five minutes ago?**

CHARLES: **Okay, I'll do it right handed. Whatever you say, teach.**

Cut to...

(SADIE FINCH has appeared on the platform)

SADIE: All teachers. At the end of home room period, send those students who have failed to report for check out because they've left the building to Mr. McHabe. *(Going)*

SYLVIA: *(aside to self)* How do we sent students who've left the building?

(CHARLOTTE WOLF has appeared on the platform)

CHARLOTTE: *(to SYLVIA; severely)* I'm forced to cancel your library lessons on mythology. Your students create havoc. They have no respect for the printed page. Two of them took out books indiscriminately.

SYLVIA: What better way to show respect than by----

CHARLOTTE: *(interrupting; close to tears)* Not only that--- they misplaced *The Golden Age of Greece*, and they put Bullfinch on the Zoology shelf!

(ELLA FRIEDENBERG has appeared)

ELLA: I have some useful material for you, Miss Barrett--- **a few more** Personality Profiles. **Lou Martin exhibits inverted hostility in manic behavior patterns. Eddie Williams must curb paranoia due to socio-economic environmental factors.**

SYLVIA: What am I to do with that information?

ELLA: (*going right on*) My biggest concern is Joe Ferone. A dangerous situation. Explosive. **It's imperative to channel his libido aggressive impulses into socially acceptable attitudes.**

SYLVIA: How? What do you suggest?

SYLVIA: I'm not his mother.

ELLA: (*Back to SYLVIA*) He cuts classes. Disrupts others. Every stairway is clearly marked--- an up stairway, or a down stairway. He always goes opposite. (*Going*) You'll have to do something!

(*MC HABE, holding JOE FERONE firmly by the arm, has come in L, and stands just inside door.*)

MC HABE: (*straining to keep his anger in control*) Miss Barrett--- will you come here, please?

SYLVIA: (*recognizing trouble; rising*) Oh, dear---- (*Speaking to class as she crosses*) Concentrate on your papers. (*As she approaches MC HABE; keeping her voice low*) What is it? (*MC HABE is utterly outraged, but because of the covertly watching students, both he and SYLVIA speak in hushed voices*)

MC HABE: How dare you?

SYLVIA: How dare I what?

MC HABE: Let him out of the room unescorted?

SYLVIA: He had to go.

MC HABE: Unescorted?

SYLVIA: There was no hall proctor.

MC HABE: You should have waited.

SYLVIA: The situation did not warrant waiting.

MC HABE: His exam paper may be invalidated.

SYLVIA: (*uncowed*) Why?

MC HABE: (*it's harder to control his anger*) He may have been looking up answers.

SYLVIA: He told me he wouldn't.

MC HABE: He told you?

SYLVIA: Yes.

MC HABE: (*incredulous*) And you believed him?

SYLVIA: (*strong*) I believed him. (*MC HABE has to catch his breath before he can go on.*)

MC HABE: (*to JOE*) Go back to your seat, young man.

SYLVIA: (as JOE goes back to his seat; repeating) I believe him.

MC HABE: (gestures) ~~Girl in fourth seat—eyes on your paper!~~ (To SYLVIA) Will you come here, please. (He has stepped out of classroom into area at L. SYLVIA is following him to just outside her classroom door)

SYLVIA: Yes, Mr. McHabe.

MC HABE: (goaded but still hushed) This isn't the time or the place to explain to you the gravity of your position. You had explicit instructions. You disobeyed them. When Ferone finishes, put his paper aside.

SYLVIA: He did not cheat.

MC HABE: (a hushed explosion) They don't need your coddling; they need discipline. We have to punish them--- punish them for every infraction--- ~~because if we don't, they'll get it later from a cop or a judge. Ever been in a juvenile court? Sure, we've got to win their respect, but there's just one way strict enforcement! (Takes breath) There's a strong possibility your end term rating will be an unsatisfactory! (Turns. Points) See what they're doing. Keep track of them.~~ (MC HABE exits. SYLVIA turns, shattered, trying to collect herself, and crosses back to her desk. She glances at the students. None of them smile, or try to be funny. Almost deliberately they turn back to their papers. SYLVIA takes a deep breath, walks back to her desk and sits. The students are busy, impassive)

SYLVIA: (quietly) When the bell sounds, please bring your examination papers to my desk.

CHARLES: (rising; with a tone of respect) I finished early, Miss Barrett. (She nods and he brings his paper to her) ~~Actually I do write left handed sometimes.~~

All start to shuffle out...no straight lines

LOU: (his best manners) Hope I did okay, Miss Barrett.

ALICE: (Hushed) Thank you for sticking up for me—for us.

(The bell rings. The others, except JOE who continues to write quickly, get up and start forward with their papers. As the surprised SYLVIA is beginning to realize, there's a change in their manner.)

LINDA: (respectfully) It was a hard test, Miss Barrett, but that's not your fault. (After turning in papers, they exit L)

Cut to...

JILL: Everything's gonna be fine.

HARRY: If it was up to me, I'd say you're very satisfactory.

VIVIAN: Don't mind him, Miss Barrett.

RUSTY: (to HARRY, as they go) Big mouth.

ELIZABETH: (going) You had us very well prepared, thank you.

Cut Lennie's line

JOE: (*bitterly*) You may fool them, but you don't fool me. You're even phonier than the others because you put on this act--- being a dame you know how—pretending you give a damn! (*His voice rising*) Just who do you think you're kidding? (*He glares at her, then turns abruptly and starts back L. As he approaches the door, he slows down and then stops just inside the door, his back to SYLVIA*)

SYLVIA: (*quietly*) Anything else, Joe?

JOE: (*without turning; angry and unhappy*) Nothing else. Nothing. Too bad I can't believe you, that's all.

(As JOE goes out L, ELLEN comes on the platform, holding a letter)

Cut to...

ELLEN: (*it's time for SYLVIA to get sensible*) Sylvia--- is there any reason for not applying to Willowdale?

SYLVIA: No reason, except---

ELLEN: Except what?

(ALICE is coming on L, nervous, looking back over her shoulder)

SYLVIA: Except I like high school kids. I chose to teach here. No one forced me—it was my choice. And in spite of everything, I've got to keep trying.

ELLEN: (*half teasing*) **You feel your reach should exceed your grasp?**

ALICE: (*calling from classroom doorway*) Miss Barrett.

SYLVIA: (*sees ALICE; back to ELLEN as though finishing a letter*) Have to close. I'll phone tomorrow night--- after eight.

ELLEN: (*reading letter*) "Love, Sylvia." (*Realizing*) That phone call should have come tonight. (*Going. Concerned*) I wonder what happened.

ALICE: Miss Barrett--- I need help.

SYLVIA: What's the matter?

ALICE: I did something so stupid! I could die!

SYLVIA: What is it?

ALICE: The letter.

SYLVIA: What letter?

ALICE: (*in pain*) To Mr. Barringer.

SYLVIA: (*pushing her into a chair*) Alice--- **calm sit** down. (*Trying to sort this out*) You sent a letter to Mr. Barringer?

ALICE: You have to get it back. I mean, any minute he might----

Cut to...

ALICE: (*too upset to listen*) It's in room 309. On his desk. There was no one around and I left it on his desk.

SYLVIA: Well, go over to 309 and----(push Alice towards door)

ALICE: I'm afraid. (*Hushed*) Suppose he's there? Suppose he's read it? How could I face him?

SYLVIA: (*puzzled by the extent of her upset*) What's in the letter?

ALICE: It was a terrible mistake.

Cut to...

(*At this same moment, PAUL is coming on L, carrying a letter.*)

PAUL: (*seeing ALICE*) There you are. (*Clears throat.*) I received your letter----

ALICE: (*swallowing*) Yes?

PAUL: I want to talk to you about this letter.

ALICE: (*with a stir of hope; perhaps she's reached him*) You do?

PAUL: (*gesturing for her to come*) I'd like to see you privately.

ALICE: (*the stir of hope a little stronger; starting L; hushed*) See me? Privately?

PAUL: (*to SYLVIA*) Excuse us, please. (*SYLVIA nods, crossing back to her desk, where she sits.*)

ALICE: (*as she precedes PAUL out the classroom door into the area to L*) Yes, Mr.---- (*Stops herself, and starts to say "Paul," but she doesn't quite dare. Her hope is growing*) You want to talk about my letter?

PAUL: (*nodding*) And make a few corrections.

ALICE: (*bewildered*) Corrections?

PAUL: (*nodding again; professionally*) You use a series of dots instead of punctuation. Let's see, now. (*Reads quickly and without expression*) Dear Mr. Barringer. Last Sunday I took the subway to your stop-- - insert comma--- having looked it up on your time card dot dot dot. I hope you don't mind the presumption. (*Looks up*) That's misspelled. (*ALICE swallows with difficulty. This isn't what she expected.*) He continues rapidly and without expression) I walked back and forth across the street from your house -- - insert comma—back and forth--- insert comma--- and my heart was throbbing with this love I bear for you dot dot dot. (*Looks up again.*) "Throbbing" is a cliché. (*ALICE is too disturbed to speak. He continues, as before*) I think of you all the time dot dot dot. I pray to be worthy of you. (*ALICE is stunned and mute*) And if ever you need me to die for you, ...(*Alice runs out here!*) ...I will gladly do so dot dot dot. (*ALICE starts slowly L. Unconscious of this, he continues.*) I feel so deeply the truth and beauty—clichés, no need to capitalize. But I have to speak out this love I feel dot dot dot dot dot--- (*He looks up to see her going. Speaking after her.*) There are some repetitions here and a change of tense,

along with (But she's gone. He looks after her with a moment of concern, then shrugs and goes back into Sylvia's classroom)

SYLVIA: (as he comes in, she stands; deeply concerned; in a low voice) What did you do? (cross to him get in his face!)

PAUL: (defensively) I handled her letter the only possible way.

SYLVIA: How?

PAUL: As a composition. (Stand)

SYLVIA: Oh, no.

PAUL: Yes. (More defensive. Shrugs, anxious to pass it off) (Storm out mad!) What does a neurotic adolescent know about love?

(PAUL starts to reply, but he can't. He turns abruptly and walks out L. The anger goes out of SYLVIA. She suddenly feels defeated. She sits at her desk again, picks up her pen, and puts a piece of paper in position to write. She considers the paper a moment, and then starts writing, saying the words as she writes them)

(A bell starts ringing in short bursts. SYLVIA looks up at this and then goes back to her letter as the bell stops. Repeating)

(BEA has appeared on the platform)

BEA: (concerned) Sylvia—do you know what the commotion is about outside?

SYLVIA: What commotion?

BEA: (as she goes) Something's going on.

(KATHERINE hurries in L)

KATHERINE: (demanding) Miss Barrett – have you seen Mr. Barringer? He's wanted right away.

SYLVIA: He left just a moment ago.

KATHERINE: Where to?

SYLVIA: No idea.

KATHERINE: (hurrying off L) If he comes back, tell him call the office. Immediately!

(FRANCES EGAN appears on the platform)

***SADIE** **FRANCES:** (to SYLVIA; crisis) Please send down the Health card for Alice Blake---urgent. **Do you have any blank accident reports?**

SYLVIA: **No, I don't.** Has there been an accident? What's---

(But FRANCES is gone. MC HABE has appeared on the platform)

MC HABE: All teachers and students will remain in their rooms disregarding the bells until further notice. Lessons are to proceed as usual with no reference to the incident. Teachers are to discourage morbid curiosity.

SYLVIA: (more Frantic/react) **Mr. McHabe?** What incident? What happened?

(*MC HABE is gone. A siren begins faintly in the distance.* FRAN hurries on L. ELLA appears on platform)

ELLA: (*deeply upset*) Such behavior is completely atypical for a girl with such a stable Personality Profile. (*Going*) But there are factors beyond our control.

FRAN: (*to SYLVIA*) The office wants you to fill out this Emergency Form.

SYLVIA: Fill in what?

FRAN: (*surprised*) Don't you know? (*The siren is getting louder*)

SYLVIA: Is that the police or is it----

FRAN: Probably the ambulance. To take Alice Blake to the hospital. She fell out of a window. (*SYLVIA gasps collapses to black out*) (*SYLVIA go to desk during black out*)

(*The light has dimmed to black. The sound of the siren climaxes and stops. In the darkness, the curtain closes.*)

Cut to page 63

(*CHARLOTTE is coming on DR*)

CHARLOTTE: Is Sylvia back? (*As they meet; a bit uncomfortable*) I have a problem about Alice Blake. She's still listed in Sylvia's official class, and—

PAUL: (*on edge*) What's the problem?

CHARLOTTE: An overdue book. She owes the library forty-nine cents.

PAUL: What book?

CHARLOTTE: (*looking at slip of paper*) The Idylls of the King. Alfred Lord Tennyson.

BEA: (*pleasantly*) You could always send a posse to the hospital.

CHARLOTTE: I feel like a ghoul. But this is a matter of record. And not the first time. I had to warn her constantly about overdue books.

PAUL: Doesn't it get you a little excited that a student really cares to read?

CHARLOTTE: You sound like Sylvia. (*Strong*) I used to get excited. But with no help, no books, and constant demands, all I care about now is for some shred of library to survive.

PAUL: *(reaching into his pocket.)* And right now you need forty-nine cents?

CHARLOTTE: Right now I'm caught with trying to maintain the rules I didn't make. But if paying the forty-nine cents would make you feel better—

PAUL: *(bitterly)* I wish it were that easy.

CHARLOTTE: I remember your comments in the teachers' lounge. Getting involved does them no good. *Sauve qui peut.* Think only of yourself. Amused detachment, you said—that's the only way to remain intact.

CHARLOTTE: *(going L)* Make up your mind.

Cut and insert lines from pg. 62

PAUL: I'm the villain. *(Bothered)* How would you handle a love letter from a student?

BEA: I've no idea.

PAUL: *(after her)* As Ella Friedenberg would say--- I have a problem.

BEA: *(encouraging)* But you're working on it.

(SYLVIA is entering DR)

PAUL: *(putting himself down)* All I really care about is maintaining my amused detachment.

Enter Sylvia

PAUL: When I didn't see you yesterday, I was afraid you'd left us. *(Embarrassed; going)* Glad you're back.

BEA: I think he's a lot more upset than he shows.

SYLVIA: Perhaps. *(Concerned)* I couldn't even talk to Alice. She's not having visitors.

BEA: That's what I hear.

SYLVIA: *(to BEA)* **She** **Sadie** had only one comment about Alice's accident--- *(mimicking)* "Hand in before three, locker number and book receipts for Blake, Alice." McHabe tells us to keep our public image intact and our students in their seats. **Dr. Clarke urges us to be aware of our responsibility in a democracy.**

BEA: What else can they say?

SYLVIA: I don't know. Some indication they care about the girl. Are we supposed to be uninvolved?

Cut to...

SYLVIA: Are we teaching? Is anything getting through? Or are we just talking to ourselves?

BEA: You were missed yesterday. I had to go down and rescue your substitute. Your kids were turning her into a nervous wreck.

SYLVIA: Why would they do that?

BEA: Misguided loyalty.

SYLVIA: (*surprised*) To me?

Cut to...

SYLVIA: (*concerned*) I have a feeling my end term rating is going to be a big fat "U."

(*MC HABE is entering DL*)

BEA: No one is rated unsatisfactory unless certified loony.

MC HABE: That's not entirely true, Mrs. Schachter. (*Turns*) Regarding your requisition, Miss Barrett. We are all out of erasers. ~~All out of red pencils. Our order for window poles was sent to the Board last spring—we must be patient. There's been an epidemic of chalk stealing. Please keep chalk under lock except when in use. (Hopefully) However, we have some left over posters. Yellow on green "Truth is Beauty." Also black on white "Learning equals Earning."~~

SYLVIA: What I really need---

MC HABE: ~~We have to be patient. One thing more—a frivolous attitude and levity of tone toward attendance-taking are unsuitable to the high seriousness of our profession.~~

SYLVIA: ~~I'll try to cut down on the levity. Mr. McHabe,~~ Have you had a chance yet to go over Joe Ferone's examination paper?

MC HABE: Of course. ~~So did Mr. Bester.~~

SYLVIA: I've been waiting to hear. I daresay Joe Ferone has, too.

MC HABE: His mark was 86.

SYLVIA: Any evidence of cheating?

MC HABE: You'd have heard.

SYLVIA: No evidence of cheating?

MC HABE: That's right.

SYLVIA: Shouldn't something be said – if not to me, at least to Joe Ferone?

MC HABE: Why?

SYLVIA: I'm hoping he'll stay in school.

MC HABE: He should not have been let out unescorted. He knew it and you knew it. The fact that he didn't cheat---

SYLVIA: (*cutting in*) Should be noted.

MC HABE: To what purpose?

SYLVIA: No one likes to feel unsatisfactory.

MC HABE: If you're concerned about getting a "U"---

SYLVIA: I'm concerned about so many things, Mr. McHabe. (McHabe exits)

Cut ...cut pop ups to page 70

JOE: (*Walks into classroom*) Give me one good reason why I should stay in school.

(*SYLVIA has looked up at this.*)

SYLVIA: I can give you many good reasons.

JOE: To take what McHabe dishes out?

SYLVIA: It's time we talk this out. Stay after school and---

JOE: What's in it for you?

SYLVIA: (*frankly*) I'm beginning to wonder. For the time being, let's just say it's my job.

JOE: (*half angry; going*) If I didn't know better, you'd even convince me. Save it for the sheep.

(*Lighting change???*)

Cut to...

ELLEN: (*reading*) "Paul invited me to an end-of-the-term party but I just couldn't go. I mean, how could I celebrate with a man who corrects a love letter?" (*To SYLVIA; directly*) ~~You're leaving for Willowdale anyway, so what's the difference?~~

SYLVIA: The term ends this week. (*Bothered*) There was so much more I wanted to do.

ELLEN: (*humorously sarcastic*) Such as have a little talk with the Ferone boy and turn him into a model student?

SYLVIA: It's not a question of a model student. I wouldn't want him to be that. ~~I suppose Harry Kagan's a model student—he's also a stuffed shirt.~~ There's so much more to Ferone, but I can't seem to make any difference to him. (*Considering*) **And that's why I want to teach;** that's probably the one and only compensation; **to make a permanent difference in the life of a child.**

ELLEN: In your first letter you quote a kid who says she's better off out. As far as that school's concerned, maybe you're better off out.

SYLVIA: (*to ELLEN*) Have to go. I'll write as soon as I can.

ELLEN: (*going*) Don't forget.

Cut to class all file in...

~~(ELIZABETH has risen holding a paper)~~

~~ELIZABETH: Before we get to Macbeth, I have a piece of creative writing. (Reading, dramatically) "I saw him scuttling like a crook, making his fearful way, stealthy, among the dirty dishes crusted with~~

~~grease, bearing food to his secret sons behind the drainboard. How fearful were his eyes. Shall I kill him?" (Matter of fact tone) Miss Barrett, is it clear I'm writing about a cockroach?~~

SYLVIA: Crystal. But the subject is Macbeth.

ELIZABETH: (as she sits; darkly) If you start to stifle me, too!

SYLVIA: I want to hear from some others. Do you have your homework on Macbeth? (*CARRIE is waving her hand. SYLVIA is delighted*) Carrie! Good! I've been waiting all term for you to raise your hand. What's your question?

CARRIE: Do you wear contact lenses?

SYLVIA: (reproachfully) Only when I read Macbeth. Have you read the scene for today?

CARRIE: Not all the way. I mean, you already know who did it.

SYLVIA: Let's start at the beginning.

HARRY: Right. The way I see it—

SYLVIA: Charles.

CHARLES: The title is called Macbeth.

SYLVIA: The title is.

CHARLES: Macbeth.

SYLVIA: Didn't you read it last term in English?

CHARLES: I ain't never read it before.

SYLVIA: I've never read it.

CHARLES: Me neither. In this book the author depicts.

SYLVIA: Depicts.

CHARLES: This murder.

SYLVIA: We were discussing the theme, not the plot. What's the difference—Linda?

LINDA: The plot is what they do. The theme is how.

SYLVIA: Not exactly. Vivian?

VIVIAN: The theme is what's behind it.

SYLVIA: Behind what?

VIVIAN: The plot.

RUSTY: Mrs. Macbeth nudges him.

SYLVIA: You mean nudges?

RUSTY: Noodges. Being a female she spurns him on.

SYLVIA: Edward?

EDWARD: Edward Williams, Esquire.

SYLVIA: Esquire.

EDWARD: The theme is he kills him for his own good.

SYLVIA: (*shakes head in response to Charles' answer*) Toby.

TOBY: Me?

SYLVIA: Yes. You. Well, Toby?

TOBY: (*embarrassed*) I didn't have my hand up.

SYLVIA: But I'm calling on you.

TOBY: (*his nervousness growing*) Why me, Miss Barrett?

SYLVIA: (*gently*) Did you read it, Toby?

TOBY: Yes, but---

SYLVIA: What would you say is the theme?

TOBY: I didn't volunteer. My hand wasn't raised.

SYLVIA: We'd like your opinion.

HARRY: If you ask me—

SYLVIA: Not this time, Harry.

JILL: If you want the theme. Well, in my opinion, I think---

SYLVIA: I've asked Toby. (*Turns back to him; smiling; encouraging*) Toby?

TOBY: (*takes a breath; with an effort*) The author tries to say----

SYLVIA: Tries? Doesn't he succeed?

TOBY: He tries to show---

SYLVIA: He shows.

TOBY: He shows you mustn't be---be ambitious.

SYLVIA: Does he say ambition is bad?

CAROLE: Yes. Very bad.

SYLVIA: Toby. Isn't it good to be ambitious?

TOBY: Yes--- (*Struggling*) But not too.

SYLVIA: Not too what?

TOBY: Too ambitious is not so good.

SYLVIA: You mean, excessive ambition---

TOBY: (*with sudden decision*) Can lead to big trouble. That's the theme.

SYLVIA: (*with a glow of pleasure*) That's right. You're right, Toby.

TOBY: (*still uncertain*) I was right?

SYLVIA: (*delighted*) Yes.

TOBY: I figured out the theme, right?

SYLVIA: (*nodding*) I have to call on you more often.

TOBY: Why not? (*Half bravado, half confidence*) Why not? (*There is then a burst of simultaneous voice from all over the classroom, hands up at the same time, and everyone but JOE talking*)

STUDENTS: (*together*) Now my turn! Call on me! Oh, please! My opinion about Macbeth--- What Shakespeare is portraying--- My turn---- The main thing in Macbeth---- Miss Barrett--- Excessive and ruthless ambition--- My hand was up first--- Hey, Miss Barrett--- Teach!

(*In the midst of this the bell rings.*)

SYLVIA: (*smiling*) Saved by the bell. (*There's a groan of frustration*) Out with you. (*They're going*)

(All exit saying lines in conversation form - overlapping)

TOBY: Don't knock it. (*To CAROLE as they go*) Any time you want to know about themes---

RUSTY: (*going*) The real villain--- Mrs. Macbeth.

LOU: I say he was led on by the witches. Right at the top, they egg him on.

LENNIE: (*following them out*) Bubble, Bubble--- toil and trouble

EDWARD: What-a they know about toil and trouble?

RUSTY: Remember when she hollers "out, damn spot"? If she'd kept her mouth shut--- (*As they troop out L, SYLVIA becomes aware of JOE FERONE, who is still sitting quietly in his seat.*)

SYLVIA: The bell, Joe. School's out.

JOE: I heard.

SYLVIA: Is there something?

JOE: You've kept asking me to stay for a talk. Okay--- I've stayed. Here I am. How about that?

SYLVIA: (*realizing this is the showdown; rising; soberly*) I see.

JOE: (*challenging*) What do ya wanna say? Let's go. Let's have it.

SYLVIA: I've been going over your entire record, Joe. I'm struck by the discrepancy between your capacity and your achievement.

JOE: Would you mind putting that in---

SYLVIA: (*cutting in*) English? How about "I don't understand them big words, teach?" And you could keep asking me to repeat. You could drop some books. You could rock on your heels. You could---

JOE: (*to stop her*) Okay!

SYLVIA: This is important, Joe. To both of us.

JOE: My discrepancies?

SYLVIA: Your capacity.

JOE: (*demanding*) What's it to you? Why should you care?

SYLVIA: I do.

JOE: (*considers; perhaps he can let himself believe*) That's what you told me before---

SYLVIA: (*hope making her eager*) come back for next term. Don't drop out. Joe, listen----

JOE: (*meaningfully*) Are you listening?

SYLVIA: I'm trying to.

JOE: (*he's heard talk; his manner is over-casual*) You gonna be here?

SYLVIA: Joe---

JOE: (*as she hesitates*) That's a straight question.

SYLVIA: (*unhappy*) then I have to say no.

JOE: (*tightly*) No what?

SYLVIA: I won't be here.

JOE: (*impassively repeating*) You won't be here. I see. Well, thanks, anyway.

SYLVIA: That doesn't mean---

JOE: (*cutting in, bitter with disappointment; he's been had again*) We've finished our talk, Miss Barrett. (*Pauses at door L, all the bitterness of his life is this disappointment*) What makes you think you're so special? (*He goes out L*)

(*The crushed SYLVIA sinks back down into her chair. BEA appears on the platform above and notices her*)

BEA: (*puzzled by SYLVIA*) Sylvia--- (*SYLVIA looks up at her but can't bring herself to say anything BEA is suddenly serious*) Are you all right?

SYLVIA: (*still in shock*) I remember the first time I was able to excite my students about an idea. A lesson on Browning's "A man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for?" (*Wryly*) It made me feel special. (*SYLVIA and BEA sit in the chairs down stage center – casually during dialogue*)

BEA: Are you reaching for something?

SYLVIA: I'm falling flat on my face.

BEA: What's happened?

SYLVIA: How do you stand up?

BEA: You're serious?

SYLVIA: Yes.

BEA: Walk through the halls. Listen at the classroom doors. In one--a lesson on the nature of Greek tragedy. In another--a drill on "who" and "whom." In another--- a hum of voices intoning French conjugations. In another--silence; a math quiz.

SYLVIA: Yes, but what about---

BEA: Whatever the waste, stupidity, ineptitude, whatever the problems and frustrations, something exciting is going on. In each of the classrooms, all at the same time, education is going on—young people exposed to education. That's how I manage to stand up.

SYLVIA: Bea--- am I a dropout?

BEA: (*genuinely*) Don't be silly. You do what you feel is best.

SYLVIA: For the first time I've been seeing myself through the eyes of others.

BEA: Whose eyes?

SYLVIA: For one, Joe Ferone.

BEA: Get past the words, Sylvia, get to what they're really saying. I have to go. Another salvage problem.

SYLVIA: Thanks.

(*The light is dimming*)

BEA: (*SYLVIA is staring front again; she calls softly*) Get to what they're really saying.

(As BEA goes out) (SYLVIA and BEA freeze sitting in classroom)

Cut to....

(JOE appears up on center ladder) (Spot light on Joe)

JOE: Miss Barrett! *(She looks up to him. Hard, as before.)* What makes you think you're so special? *(She doesn't reply. He goes on.)* Are you listening? *(But a larger emotion is taking hold of him)* What I said---what I'm saying--- I'm saying you're so special! You're my teacher. So teach me. Help me. Hey, teach--which way do I go? I'm tired of going up the down staircase!

END Black Out!