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Commencement

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EIGHT

by **Ella Hickson**

Genre: Drama

Cast Size of 8

EIGHT swept the board at the biggest arts festival in the world, the Edinburgh Festival, in 2008. An underground hit propagated by sensational word-of-mouth, it went on to win a coveted Scotsman Fringe First Award, the NSDF Emerging Artists Award and the Carol Tambor 'Best of Edinburgh' Award, awarded to only one show across the thousands of productions at the festival.

Introducing eight beguiling oddballs, struggling to define what it is to be normal amidst the dissolution of social, moral, sexual and cultural boundaries in *The Naughties*. From high-class hookers to those who make friends in morgues, to single mothers and bereaved gallery owners, *Eight* gives all of these otherwise neglected characters center-stage, including the moving, politically punchy portrait of a man who has lost everything except his memories of the 7/7 London bombings ("*One of the finest pieces of writing I've yet heard about the aftermath of that terrible day*" – Joyce McMillan, *The Scotsman*).

Katrina's Path

by **Rob Florence**

Genre: Drama

5 Males, 2 Females

In a series of interconnected monologues, seven New Orleanians relay and relive their epic journeys through Hurricane Katrina. These characters experience as much humanity, inspiration, and even humor as they do trauma and horror from within America's worst natural / manmade disaster.

commencement

written by

Clay McLeod Chapman

for Hanna Cheek

Commencement was originally commissioned in 2009 by Company of Fools (Denise Simone and John Glenn, Core Company Artists) in Hailey, Idaho.

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Cast breakdown: One performer, female – three characters

Part I – *staph infection*: Sarah Havermeyer (age 41)

Part II – *early release*: Julie Keady (age 17)

Part III – *keynote speaker*: Mary Keady (age 42)

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Though there are three female characters in *Commencement*, it is strongly encouraged that all be played by the same performer. The desired effect is to present that alchemical moment within the third segment (*keynote speaker*) where each woman's story finally interconnects during the delivery of Julie Keady's graduation speech. This intersection is performative – where our actress must shift from one character to the next with a certain fluidity, gradually transitioning from Sarah Haver-meyer reading Julie's speech to Julie herself. Though it is Sarah who is reading the speech – for Mary Keady, Sarah's voice slips away and is replaced by Julie's, hearing her daughter through her own words. In this respect, Julie is able to deliver her speech as if it were her graduation day.

part one: *staph infection*
Sarah Havermeyer, *forty-one*

They gave me my own waiting room. Hid me in the pediatric wing, far away from the other families. It's much quieter at this end of the hospital. Less hectic here. Less parents, less press. Spent the last hour simply listening to the hum of fluorescents over my head.

Went over to the window on a whim once, lured in by the camera flashes. The parking lot's all gone now. It's suddenly engulfed in a forest of transmission antennas, budding up from the roofs of these news vans. The network call letters look like initials of young couples carved into the bark of each tree. *KBCW-TV plus WGBO-4. WDBJ-7 hearts WSLs-10 4-eva...*

When Mitchell was much younger, he and handful of kids from the neighborhood all went out into the woods behind our houses to play a game of hide-and-seek. When it was Mitchell's turn to be *it*, he leaned his head against his own tree just as everyone else had before him. Closed his eyes and counted to a hundred. By the time he turned back around, he found himself facing the woods all alone. *Ready or not, here I come* – echoing through the trees. But what Mitchell didn't realize – and why would he, really – was that everybody else had already run home by then. Didn't stop him from playing, though. Peeking behind each tree. Searching for his friends.

An hour went by before I was on the phone with the neighbors, asking if they knew where Mitchell was. But none of their kids would say, shrugging their shoulders. When there weren't any parents left to call, I took to the woods myself. Flashlight in hand. Finally found him leaning against a tree, huddled into himself. *Shivering*. Poor thing caught pneumonia that night. Had to take him to the hospital, waiting in this same room.

Want to tell me what happened?

No.

We can keep it between you and me, if you'd like. Promise I won't tell.

I don't want to talk about it.

There are never any magazines here. Nothing but coloring books flung across the floor. Crayons scattered all around, like shell casings discharged from a rifle. Every color of the rainbow falling to the floor, round after round after round...

Not that I feel like reading right now. Simply had that reflex to flip through something. Get my mind off things. Picked up a coloring book without even realizing what it was at first, skimming the pictures just to pass the time. Glancing at all the empty animals, empty cartoon characters. Page after page. Their blank bodies filled in with scribbles, crayon spread everywhere. No consideration for coloring in the lines, whatsoever. You'd think they'd all been shot, every animal hemorrhaging Crayola across the page. Their splatter pattern in *Razzle Dazzle Rose* or *Tickle Me Pink*.

The amount of times I've sat here over the years, waiting amongst all the other mothers – I've lost count by now. They blend together after a while. All the check-ups. The mumps. Flu shots. Chicken pox. Not to mention ear infections. A tonsillectomy. A sprained wrist. The list just goes on and on...

It's a wonder my son even reached high school.

How any of our children made it this far.

Not that the news is saying anything. Not until the police notify the next of kin. The reporters have been recycling the same information for hours now, the live coverage sounding stale already.

No names yet. Just numbers.

Last time I had to wait this long, it was because Mitchell had swallowed something he shouldn't have. *Marbles*. Started complaining about his tummy aching at the dinner table, refusing to finish his macaroni – so the very next day, I brought him in for an X-ray. And sure enough, there they were – a constellation of bright white contrasting against that ghastly black of his stomach. The negative image of a half dozen glass pellets settled into his belly. A grape cluster tethered together in pale veins.

Benjamin Pendleton had put him up to it. Said he'd be his *best friend* if he swallowed the whole set, all ten marbles. And to think that Mitchell had almost made it, more than halfway there – determined to earn Benjamin Pendleton's approval, to win this position as his pal, *bestest friends*, only giving up once his throat constricted itself, his own esophagus refusing to

swallow anymore, no matter how hard he tried, no matter how hard he forced himself to eat one more, *just one more*, begging with his own throat to let him ingest just one last marble before stumbling back home, sick to his stomach.

To *prove* his worth. As a *friend* to Benjamin.

Want to tell me who put you up to this?

No.

Mitchell – you're only hurting yourself by not saying anything.

I don't want to talk about it.

The police have been ushering all the parents in through the rear entrance of the hospital, away from the camera crews. The second I saw Wendy Pendleton in the hallway, barely able to even stand on her own two feet – I knew why she was here. Recognized her right away, even though we hadn't spoken to each other in ages. Not since our sons were in the third grade together.

Her eyes had glazed over. Nothing but a pair of marbles settled into each socket, flickering under the fluorescents. Felt like I was staring at a teddy bear. Not some mother who'd just identified her son.

They've placed a police officer right outside my door. *For my protection*, they say. They're worried some wandering father might find me here, hiding amongst the stuffed animals. The jigsaw puzzles. The coloring books with the mottled corners, their pages sticking together from all the constant gnawing.

part two: *early release*

Julie Keady, *seventeen*

Give me a name. Any name. Pick any student from this school and I bet you I can list off all the books they've ever checked out without even needing to use the computer.

It's a talent I have. Got a lot of time on my hands here. Besides – it's more fun to flip to the back of the book, to the index card holstered along the cover. All the students who've ever checked it out are right there – a winding column of names in different colored inks, different handwriting. Dates winding backwards. Some so far back, well before I had ever set foot into this school – the names don't even sound real anymore.

Like ghosts.

Mitchell's name pops up in a lot of library books. More than most students here. Sometimes his name is the only one listed, written five times on top of each other. Ten times. Filling up the whole card. *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* October 15th to November 2nd. *Slaughterhouse-Five*. January 10th to the 23rd. *A Clockwork Orange*. February 13th to March 6th.

One Flew Over The Cuckoos Nest. Page 86. In the margins, in different colors of ink, you can read:

So – what'd you think?

What?

The book. Did you like it?

The movie was better.

You should totally check out Animal Farm. It's about communism – but with pigs.

I started eating lunch in the library as early as my freshman year. Spent my study halls there already, shelving books for extra credit. I'd always been a bookworm at heart, no matter what my friends said. They'd tease me about it all the time, but I was itching for Ivy League and needed my transcripts to prove it.

One of my jobs here was to flip through the books. Find the vandalism. White-Out the dirty doodles. Erase all the explicit scribbles. That sort of thing.

Mitchell would take notes. He circled words. Phrases were underlined. Particular passages were boxed in with pencil. Felt guilty for having to rub out his thoughts. I'd read over all his annotations before erasing them, seeing if I could figure out what he thought about the book. Whether or not he liked it.

Nobody else checked out the books he did. Not in a long time.

Breakfast of Champions. Page 45. In the margins, in different handwriting, you can read:

Since you've already departed from the required reading list, you should totally read Naked Lunch next.

What's that?

William S. Burroughs. We're not allowed to carry it here – but I've got a copy at home, if you're interested. I could let you borrow it. I'll leave it on the third bookshelf, second aisle. Between Whitman and Wordsworth.

Whatever.

Students will say they each had a moment. An encounter with Mitchell that they never mentioned before. Never brought up. Not until now, when everyone's looking. At the time, they'll say, it didn't seem like such a big deal. But now – now – if they'd only told a teacher, maybe, just maybe, things would be different today. Maybe they could've stopped this all from happening. They want to say they saw the warning signs. They want to lay claim to've known all along. Truth is – none of them ever cared. Mitchell Havermeyer was a social ghost, haunting the hallways of this school long before he shot himself. Students will never let him go. He's all ours now. Our own boogeyman mascot.

Mitchell would sit by himself in the library, always with some book open before him. His mom still packed his lunch. Always the same sandwich – PB/J. A Granny Smith and a Zip-Lock full of Oreos. Four Oreos. A can of soda with a napkin wrapped around it, soaking up the condensation so that it clung to the can. And on the napkin – a note from his mom, written in magic marker. The words were all blurred, the letters loosened by the wetness, ink bleeding into the napkin.

Brave New World. Page 132. In the margins, half in cursive, the other half in print, you can read:

Have you read Lord of the Flies yet? Think you'd like it.

How do you know? You don't know anything about me.

This was totally against library policy, I know. The librarians would've kicked me out if I'd gotten caught. But I had an idea.

Since Mitchell checked out the same books more than once, as soon as he'd return them and I'd have to attend to my requisite scribble rinsing – I'd find his notes in the margins and try responding with some of my own. *Pen-pals*. It'd be fun. It'd all be there, everything we ever wrote – our correspondence tucked away in the pages, where no one would find us. No one would ever know.

Establishing contact had to begin broad. Had to cast a wide net, responding to four or five of his favorites. It was impossible to tell which book he'd choose to check out next. I had to look at his patterns, trying to determine what he'd want to read all over again.

1984 or The Dharma Bums. Catcher in the Rye or I Am Legend.

First contact was in *On the Road*, page 33: *What's up?*

Simple. Straightforward. Nothing too complicated. Wrote it right below a bunch of his notes before slipping the books back on the shelves. Didn't sign my name or anything, keeping it anonymous.

Two weeks later, his response: *Who's this?*

I wrote back: *Did you know Kerouac wrote this book on an endless sheet of paper?*

Two weeks later: *So what?*

I wrote back: *He didn't want to waste time switching out sheets, so he fed a whole roll into his typewriter. That way he could just keep writing and writing and never stop. Pretty cool, huh?*

part three: keynote speaker

Mary Keady, *forty-two*

Julie was supposed to deliver this year's commencement speech. She'd agonized over it for weeks. Fretted over every sentence, wanting each word to be perfect. I'd peek my head into her room whenever I'd see her lights still on late at night, finding her fast asleep at her desk. Her cheek resting on what she'd written thus far. Took every bit of willpower I could muster not to read it, peering over her shoulder.

You're gonna have to wait until graduation, mom, she'd say, catching me red-handed. You'll hear it along with everybody else.

Julie always sat in the front of her class, no matter what the subject. Always tried to be as close to the chalkboard as humanly possible. Never wanted another student's head blocking her view.

She took three bullets – all by herself. The entrance wounds lined up along her chest, like a row of red ribbons, the rosettes bursting through her shirt, as if she'd fallen short from taking home first prize at this year's science fair: *second place second place second place...*

Graduation was sparse this year. Less in attendance, less parents. Half the families who'd lost their children didn't even show. The Pendletons. The O'Rourkes. The Connors.

I went. My husband had been against going – but I made him attend anyways. I wanted to hear this year's keynote speaker. I wanted someone to make sense of what had happened – and who better, really? I wanted to hear what their advice would be for the future. What words of wisdom they'd dole out to the students who survived.

Aim high. Achieve your dreams. Don't give up.

They got our Governor to step in at the last minute. To ease our school's collective pain. He spoke of healing. He spoke of forgiveness. But he didn't speak to me.

Brought along my camera. Didn't seem right to go to graduation without it. I listened as each student was called up, one at a time. Their names echoed throughout the auditorium, the loudspeakers making them sound hollow. When they finally reached the K's, I pulled out my camera, ready to snap off a shot, listening to the assistant principal run through Kagan, Kagebeck, Kahn.

Julie Keady. She'll rise up from the mass of gowns and tassels, taking the stage.

Julie Keady. She'll step up to the principal and shake his hand, receiving her diploma with the other.

Julie Keady. She'll turn towards the audience, facing every parent sitting in that auditorium. Waving her certificate in the air. And I will be right there, clicking off the picture. Saving that moment forever.

Julie...

They skipped over her name. Hopped right onto Anne Kellaway and just kept on going. Lancaster. Lassiter. Lee. I listened to her slip farther and farther away from me. Manuella. Matthews. Ming. Why wouldn't they let her graduate?

I'd been weeding our garden when the phone rang. I figured the answering machine would pick it up, so I didn't budge. Just kept on digging. But as soon as the machine would click on, the person on the other end would hang up and call back. Had to've been a salesman soliciting for something. *Are you happy with your current phone service provider?* Who else would keep calling like that? Over and over again. You'd think they'd leave a message if it was so important. Here I am – on my hands and knees. All covered in dirt. Certainly wasn't about to track mud all over the kitchen floor just to answer the phone.

That's why I was the last parent to the hospital. Bill had beaten me to it. The police had called him from work. He'd already identified Julie's body by the time I got there, sitting amongst all the other parents in the waiting room. No need to identify her again.

But the police weren't going to let me see. They told me I was too late. If I wanted to see Julie for myself, I'd have to wait.

Wait for what? I asked. *What else is there?*

We buried her the day after graduation. More parents showed up to the memorial service than our own kids' commencement, forced to swap ceremonies at the last moment. For

those families that had lost their children – rather than watch them graduate, we all attended each other's funerals. I saw the Pendletons. The O'Rourkes. The Connors.

No Sarah Havermeyer. Her son wasn't amongst ours. Mitchell's yearbook picture wasn't one of the dozen framed photographs wrapped in their own floral wreath, standing upright at the front for all to see. I turned around at one point during the service, sifting through all the students and teachers. Just to see if I could find her. See if she'd show up. Pay her respects.

Julie's principal took to the podium, directly addressing all the parents. He spoke to us of healing. He spoke of forgiveness. But he didn't speak to me.

The police returned Julie's backpack after they'd rummaged through it. Her commencement speech had been inside, tucked into her French textbook. Couldn't bring myself to read it – when only a few days before, there was nothing in this world that I wanted to do more. *Nothing in this world*. I tried. Several times, I held the paper up to my face, making it as far as the first sentence before the back of my throat would begin to burn.

Her words deserved to be heard. They needed to be read out loud. Because letters of acceptance keep coming in, even now. All the scholarship offers. The study guides. Because colleges keep sending Julie housing surveys to figure out which dorm she'll be living in next year.