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The Coming-Out Party

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Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

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Cover Page Footnote

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THE COMING-OUT PARTY

Selections from a One-Act Play

By THOMAS MCKAGUE

NOTE: Although we do not have the space to print the whole of this play, we the editors thought that the readers of the *Angle* would be interested in sampling a few selections from it.

SCENE: *Living room of the Adams' occupying most of the stage, with LAURA'S small room off to the right stage. The wall between the living room and LAURA'S room is indicated by a shimmering sheet of clear plastic.*

The living room is arranged perfectly symmetrically, with a gaudy red rug in the center, on which rests a long black table (set for a party, with plates, glasses, candles, etc.) surrounded by long-backed chairs. On the back wall is a painting of Washington, under which is a long book-case; books are notably absent from the shelves, which are crammed with vases and cups and odds and ends. Over the painting is a clock.

LAURA'S room contrasts in its bareness. There is a cot against the right wall (end of stage); there is a window at the back wall, with no curtains. The room is set back on the stage.

There are two entranceways, one at the left side of the stage, one at the right, in front of LAURA'S room.

The stage is shadowy-dark. There is some light in LAURA'S room due to the moonlight streaming in from her window. LAURA is seen sitting on her bed playing a large cello, looking out her window. She is a tall girl of about fourteen, with long, blonde-white hair. For a short period all that is seen on stage is LAURA; all that is heard is her mournful, ethereal tune. Her playing continues throughout the following.

Enter MOTHER. MOTHER is a stout, middle-aged woman who has affected the style and mannerisms of the conventional social matron. Her hair is dyed red, and done up in a style that is obviously too young for her. She is wearing a bright pink dress.

When MOTHER enters, the stage immediately is flooded with bright lights.

MOTHER: As usual, she's playing away. (*Walks around table, concentrating.*) Now let me see. There's a place for Joey, and for Sue, and for May and Dave . . . (*Looks up, shakes her head.*) Always such sad songs! Just listen to her. (*Back to table.*) Where was I? Oh yes. I'll place Ronnie here, and Jay next to him. And that leaves Jim. I think I'll place Jim here, across from Laura. (*Stands back.*) Now that looks nice! (*Clock chimes.*) Oh dear, it's seven o'clock. They should be here by now. I hope they're quiet.

(Footsteps are heard offstage, very faintly. Then soft knocking at the door. MOTHER goes to open it.)

Enter JOEY, a dark man of about twenty-five.

JOEY (*loudly*): Hi, Mother.

MOTHER (*finger to lips*): Shh! She'll hear.

JOEY: Ohh. (*Waves others in, finger to lips.*)

Enter SUE, MAY, DAVE, RONNIE, JAY, and JIM. They are all adults. They are all good-looking. All except JIM are dressed in white, the men in white shirt and pants, the women in a white sheath. (JOEY also is dressed in white.)

JIM is dressed in dark colors.

These people will alternately act as individuals and a group (CHORUS) throughout the play, excepting JIM.

They all tiptoe across the room. MOTHER points where each is to sit as they cluster around the table, sit when indicated.

MOTHER (*in a whisper*): Joey, you sit there. Sue, you next to Joey. May, right here. Dave, next to May. Ronny

and Jay, you sit across from each other. And Jim (*she gives JIM a nice smile*), I want you to sit at the end. Well, now that you're all seated, I'll give you your party favors. (*She takes a box from shelves, hands out crepe-paper hats to everyone.*) Now put them on, all of you. Come on.

JOEY (*loudly*): Aw, this is silly.

MOTHER: Shh!

CHORUS: Shh!

JOEY (*slumps in chair*): Oh, all right. I'll put it on, but it's, well, it's unmanly!

SUE: Now don't be difficult Joey. Put it on. (*He puts it on. SUE giggles. He gives her a fierce look.*)
(*Everyone puts on hats. MOTHER puts one on also, stands in front.*)

MAY: Mrs. Adams? Is that Lisa playing now?

MOTHER: Why yes, May. How nice of you to notice. She plays well, doesn't she?

MAY: Yes, she does. Does she always play so well?

MOTHER: Always. Some day she's going to be a famous musician. Daddy Adams and I have been saving up since she was born to send her to the Institute.

JAY (*in a sexy, breathless voice*): Oh, how nice, Mother Adams. I wish I could go to the Institute. But I haven't got any talent.

MOTHER: Don't worry, child. Some day you'll get some. Jim, you went to the Institute, didn't you?

JIM: Yes, I did.

MOTHER: And you haven't got a girl?

JIM: No.

MOTHER: How nice. Laura's fourteen today, you know. And she's very advanced for her age. I understand you've been quite a success?

JIM: Now that depends on how you look at it.

BONNIE (*raises his hand to attract attention*): Mother, does Laura know about the surprise party yet?

MOTHER: Please, boys, keep your voices down. No, she doesn't know yet, Ronnie. She'll be so surprised! I can't wait to see her face. Her first surprise party! Her first party! Her coming-out party! (*LAURA stops playing, stands by window in her room, looks at moon.*) Why, she's stopped playing.

JAY: Mother Adams, what do you think she's doing now, now that she's not playing?

JOEY (*loudly*): She's probably daydreaming.

JAY (*innocently*): About what?

JOEY: What all girls daydream about, stupid! About boys! (*All the men chuckle, except JIM.*)

MOTHER (*disturbed*): Now that's impolite, Joey. Besides, she'll hear you. (*She turns to JAY.*) As for your question, Jay, I really don't know what she's doing now. She's a very unusual child.

JAY: Maybe she's studying, or something. I wish I could study.

JOEY: You're good in anatomy. (*He laughs loudly.*)

MOTHER: Joey! Please be quiet. (*She looks towards LAURA'S room.*) Oh, I wish she would come out here! Should I call her? Should I call her, children?

CHORUS (*nodding*): Yes, call her.

MOTHER (*wringing her hands*): Oh but I do so hate to tell her what to do. She's such a difficult child. God knows, she's a difficult child. You know how she is, don't you, children? (*They nod in sympathy with her. MOTHER faces JIM accidentally.*) Of course she's a nice girl. A very nice girl. (*MOTHER turns towards LAURA'S room.*) But do you really think I should call her? You just don't know what she'll do.

CHORUS (*to MOTHER'S back*): Yes, call her.

MOTHER: All right, I'll call her then. I just know she'll be so happy she'll cry. (*MOTHER walks briskly to LAURA'S room, then comes back.*) Wait, children, I have a better idea.

JIM (*sternly*): I think it would be best if you called her now, Mrs. Adams.

MOTHER (*surprised at his directness, then relaxed*): Oh, I suppose you're right. Get your hats in place, children. (*They adjust their hats; JIM takes his off, unnoticed.*) Now remember, as she enters, everyone say 'surprise.'

JIM: She won't be surprised in the way you want her to be, you know.

MOTHER (*Looks at JIM annoyed, then turns and calls*): Laura? Oh Laura?

(*LAURA turns from the window, remains in her room.*)

MOTHER: Laura, come in the living room a minute. I have a sur . . . I mean, (*annoyed*) come here a minute, will you? *Enter LAURA. Her dress is overly-large, and of a dark blue shade, as can now be seen because of the brightly-lit stage. As she enters, she puts her hands to her eyes, due to the change in lighting from her room and the living room.*

CHORUS (*standing*): Surprise! Surprise! (*They immediately sit.*)

MOTHER (*smiling*): Surprise! Surprise, my daughter!

JIM (*standing after the others have sat down*): I hope you have a happy birthday, Laura.

LAURA (*turns to MOTHER in confusement*): Mother, who are they?

MOTHER: Now Laura, don't be difficult. After all, it's your birthday. They're your friends. They were the senior class officers in school when you were only starting. Don't you remember?

LAURA (*in a nervous whisper to MOTHER*): Mother, I don't remember them. I never saw them before.

MOTHER (*in a fierce whisper to LAURA*): Of course you do! (*To the group.*) She remembers you all, children. (*Again, to LAURA.*) Now Laura, don't be difficult. Please. They've

come here to give you a surprise party. You're at an age when you should start making friends now.

LAURA (*whispering to MOTHER, panic-stricken*): But I don't want a surprise party. I'm not ready for it. I don't know how to act.

MOTHER (*to LAURA*): Of course you do! It comes natural. Just be happy, that's all. Like the rest of them. (*To the group.*) See, I knew she'd be difficult. I warned you she would, didn't I?

CHORUS (*nodding*): Yes, Mother.

LAURA (*to MOTHER*): But Mother, who are these people? At least tell me their names.

MOTHER (*annoyed*): Oh, they're just people, Laura. That's Jim at the other end over there. (*She turns to JIM, smiling.*) Jim, I want you to meet Laura. Laura, this is Jim. He graduated from the Institute.

JIM (*standing, taking LAURA's hand*): How do you do, Laura?

LAURA (*nervously*): How . . . How do you do, Jim. (*To MOTHER, in a whisper.*) Mother, he's nice.

MOTHER (*to LAURA*): Of course he is dear. (*To the group.*) Now children, I want you all to have fun. I'll go get the birthday cake. (*She leaves via left exit. Couples at table whisper among themselves, slyly glancing at LAURA. LAURA sits at end of table opposite JIM. They stare at each other. She nervously fidgets with edge of table cloth.*)
Enter MOTHER, carrying a big cake with fourteen lighted candles.

MOTHER (*singing by herself*): Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you . . . Come on, children. Everybody sing. Sing happy birthday to Laura.

(*They all sing, including JIM. MOTHER stands next to LAURA with cake in hands. At the end of song CHORUS shouts 'hooray' and claps. JOEY blows party horn. LAURA remains dumbfounded.*)

MOTHER (*with tears*): Now that was so nice. Wasn't that nice, Laura? Wasn't that nice now?

LAURA: But Mother, it doesn't mean anything.

MOTHER (*shocked, cake vibrates as she talks*): What do you mean, it doesn't mean anything? Why of course it means something. It means a lot. Here I go through the trouble to get all of these friends to come here to be with you on your birthday, and you say it doesn't mean anything! I even buy you this big cake, and you say it doesn't mean anything! I try to make your coming-out party as nice as possible, and you say it doesn't mean anything! Oh, you just don't appreciate anything I do for you, Laura. I try, and I try, but you just don't appreciate me, Laura. (*She slams cake on table before LAURA, and exits, crying.*)

LAURA (*dumbfounded, looking after MOTHER*): Mother?

JOEY: Let's eat. (*He starts cutting cake.*)

SUE: Joey! Let Laura cut her own cake!

JOEY: Oh. I forgot. Here, Laura. (*He hands her the knife.*)

LAURA: Should I cut you all one big piece, or should I cut you each a small one.

JAY (*not, of course, understanding*): What?

JOEY: Cut us each a big piece.

(*LAURA begins to cut.*)

MAY: Oh, but Laura. You forgot the wish. You're supposed to make a wish first.

LAURA: I am?

MAY: Of course. Just wish for what you want most in the world.

LAURA (*looking at JIM*): I wish, I wish that I really knew you all.

* * * * *

LAURA (*shyly moves to front, center, near MOTHER, stands stiffly*): But what shall I say?

JIM: Tell us what you feel, now that you're almost a woman.

LAURA: But where shall I begin, Jim? Where shall I begin?

JIM: Begin with the clouds.

MOTHER (*to the audience*): Sometimes I think he's as bad as she is. (*She sighs.*)

LAURA: Well, all right then. I'll begin with the clouds. (*She gradually acquires a 'far away' expression.*) You see, ever since I was very young, I've spent most of my time in my room, over there. (*She points to her room. Blue lights dazzle on the shimmering wall for a moment.*) I used to watch the clouds from my window all the time. Every day, except when it rained, they would drift by as free as could be, and high above the world. They were my only friends. Oh, I used to watch the children play in the park across the street sometimes too, but that was nothing compared to what went on up there.

JIM: Go on, Laura.

LAURA: Well, I never felt like I was part of anything. I felt like I was an observer, watching the world drift by every day in the sky. Always the same. Always beautiful. And then one day things changed inside of me. No-one ever told me I was going to change, but when it first happened I knew I was at last about to become part of the world. I knew I was about to become a woman.

MOTHER (*disgusted*): Oh my God!

LAURA: What's the matter, Mother?

MOTHER: Oh, never mind.

LAURA: Well, it was the most important thing that ever happened to me. Just think, now I could even have a baby!
(*The girls of the CHORUS giggle.*)

LAURA (*frightened*): Jim, they're laughing at me.

JIM: Never mind them, Laura. I'm not laughing.

MOTHER: Joey, why don't you tell your story now. Laura, that's enough.

LAURA: I've started now, Mother. Why don't you let me finish? I want to finish.

MOTHER: I think we've heard enough, Laura. (*Whispers to LAURA.*) When will you ever learn, child? When will you ever learn?

JAY (*as if an idea just came to her*): Oh, now I know what she meant. Gee, I never thought of it that way, when it first happened.

JOEY: How could you have? You hadn't even reached the age of reason yet!
(*All the boys laugh.*)

* * * * *

(*Throughout the next scene, the CHORUS remain sitting, motionless, at the table. The stage is completely dark, except for the moonlight in LAURA'S room. LAURA and JIM stand by window.*)

(*LAURA pulls out a box from under her cot, cradles it in her arms.*)

LAURA: You know, Jim, I've never shown this to anyone before.

JIM: Not even Mother?

LAURA: She'd think it was silly.

JIM: Well, what is it?

LAURA (*hesitating, then determined*): All right, I'll show you.
(*She opens box, picks out a few of the waxed flowers within. They are luminous in the darkened room.*)

LAURA: They're flowers. From all over the world.

JIM (*surprised*): Well I'll be . . . How did you get them all?

LAURA: I just found names of people living in Asia and Africa in magazines, and wrote to them, asking them to send me a flower from their country.

JIM: Well, what do you know!

LAURA: After I got them I coated them with wax, so they'll last. Mother thought it was nice for me to have all these pen-pals. She never knew about the flowers, though. She'd say I was being presumptuous asking for them.

JIM (*handling one*): They're very nice.

LAURA: They're real, you know. The wax makes them look artificial, but they're real inside. (*She makes a bouquet for herself.*) Just think, Jim, these flowers have come to me from the other side of the world. From another world, as far away as the moon. They're so much nicer than the flowers we have around here.

JIM: They're not really different, Laura.

LAURA: Yes they are, Jim. They're from places I've never been, where there are elephants and native dancers and things I've never seen before. It must be wonderful, to be able to see all those places. I can never look farther than the sky.

JIM: What did these people say to you in their letters?

LAURA: They wrote in foreign languages, of course. But I always imagine they said 'Thank you for writing to me. Please enjoy the flower.' And safely folded in the note was the flower.

(*JIM holds his flower up to the moonlight. It sparkles.*)

JIM: It's beautiful, Laura.

LAURA: You can have it. But be careful with it. They're all very brittle. The wax chips off easily.

JIM: Sooner or later all the wax will come off. But I'll handle it gently. I'll wear it in my buttonhole. (*He puts the flower in his buttonhole.*)

LAURA: I think I'll put some in a vase on the window-sill, for display. They'll look nice in the moonlight. Tonight's a very special night.

(*LAURA leaves room. JIM stands looking at his flower. LAURA comes back with vase, puts her bouquet in it, sets it by window.*)

LAURA: There. Aren't they beautiful? It took me a long time to get them all, to preserve them, but I'm glad I did.

JIM: Almost too beautiful to be real.

LAURA: Oh, they're real. They just look artificial, that's all.