

## The Good, The Bad, and The Guilty

Sometimes words just pour out of our mouths. Without much foresight, we let them flow loosely off of our tongues and hit our soft pallet then fly outward into the world like the delivering of an unplanned child. Sometimes, as writers, words spill out of our beings in a more eloquent way that can be just as instantaneous. An electric pulse can begin in our minds and ignite every neuron in our body to focus all energy upon our fingers as they run madly across our keyboards like tap dancers. The words come effortlessly, and in such a small period of time, a story is born.

I had this divine experience my freshman year of college while being home for Thanksgiving break. I had been brainstorming a play for my writing seminar, and as soon as I returned to my home soil for family and feasting, my hands began to twitch with the need to be typing. While sitting, my leg was in constant motion as I began to plot out specific lines of dialogue. My brow unintentionally furrowed over Thanksgiving dinner as I thought to myself—*it's time dammit, it's time. The incubation period is done, now the birth must come!*

And the birth happened indeed. Over three days, I alternated between eating, pacing, and typing with little time for any actions extraneous to the act of writing. I was indeed ready to deliver this work into the world. It started as a theme—“there’s a difference between being a good person and being a good character.” I knew that very line must be mentioned in the play with repetition for the audience to understand its prevalence. The theme stemmed from the many arguments I had with my boyfriend as we

fought over goodness. While he defended all people who achieved public quests of greatness such as Steve Jobs or Gandhi, I argued that goodness could only occur behind closed doors with those you loved. Public acts did not measure character but private ones did. This argument manifested itself in the play I wrote—causing me to stare at my computer for three days, running my hands through my hair and grasping it tight enough to give just a tinge of alerting pain.

Upon finishing, I was stunned. The play was dramatic. Very dramatic. It came to be about a family after the death of their patriarch as they are haunted by the mental presence he left behind. The father figure was a famous evangelical pastor—hailed for his deeds of public good—but he had been highly abusive behind closed doors. Saying that the play was dark would be an understatement. Not only had the preacher been physically, verbally, and sexually abusive, but, in the end, the mother reveals that she was the conscious catalyst for the father's heart attack. The entire thing seemed like a mixture of Tennessee Williams and the Jerry Springer, and I loved it.

The play's reception started with a simple in-class reading. There was a dramatic build up to the reading of my play—it was the last to be read due to the fact that the minimum was ten pages and my play was fifty. My professor decided to save the longest for the end. The reading began lightheartedly with my classmates stifling laughter as the readers attempted southern accents. Everything in the script seemed to be the typical American family drama: a dead patriarch; a legacy to protect; the idea of greatness versus the idea of goodness. But, the classroom progressively faded such a silence that the humming of the pipes above us sounded like a booming operatic choir. Things in the

reading were getting serious as characters disclosed the abuse they had endured, whether it was being beat with coat hangers or being forced into threesomes. By the end of the play, the silence continued for a moment after the reading finished, and then a loud applause echoed throughout the musty basement classroom.

My classmates seemed to love the drama of the play. “It was just so honest—I loved it,” one of them said with an enormous grin. “The play just speaks about what really happens to people—it’s so important,” another classmate insisted. My young student instructor took my arm, “You must go into creative writing.” My older professor, however, had to exit the classroom after the play for a break. She seemed to go from ecstatic to exhausted in fifty minutes. While I watched her hobble through the class’s doorframe, I wondered what she took from the work as she heard her students read it aloud.

*August Guilt* received a student production, and I found a director and cast to carry out its story. The cast complimented me on the work. “I love how it explores the concept of Guilt,” an actress in the play stated. Looking back on it, I now wonder if she actually read the script or only the title.

At one of the rehearsals I went to, they were running through the scene I would call the “almost rape” scene. The protagonist of the scene didn’t get raped, she just came close to it, but fate allotted her escape. What I found most powerful about the scene was the way it intercut between two spaces, producing one scene out of essentially two. The intercutting was not the main difficulty of the scene, however.

Because it was an “almost rape” scene, that meant there was an “almost rapist.” The boy playing this despicable character had been called in by a director as a friend to fill the part for which we had found no actor. I visited a rehearsal of this scene the cast had in a dance studio. Surrounded by mirrors, the actor and his female counterpart enacted the blocking for the scene as he restrained her on the ground. He fumbled his lines, however, and he failed at a move the director gave him. He then scuttled backwards with his chest expanded in anger as he looked off into the mirrors that surrounded him. His face was red and his hands quivered as he aggressively mumbled, “It hurts to kneel on this floor, and this scene isn’t easy to do.” The director could tell something was wrong, and she took him into another room. I don’t know what was said, but it was the first time I realized my play wasn’t “easy.” I felt both embarrassed and surprised as I wondered what it meant for the actor personally as he assumed such a role.

*August Guilt* premiered, and the audience seemed to receive the play with open arms. I accrued many congratulations and much interest in my writing process. One woman, whose daughter was in my show, had a family that had been affected by sexual abuse. The woman grabbed my shoulder with a shaking hand, and she thanked me for telling her family’s story. We collected donations for a local abuse shelter after the show, and the small play raised 150 dollars for the organization. I felt proud that my message must have resonated with audience members, and I felt that my words had realized their quest.

My own family, which had been affected by abuse, had a dramatic reaction. My mother would tell me later that while I was talking with my cast, my sister cried in the

lobby and was angry with me for the play's content. She said it wasn't my place to speak about such issues. While she exclaimed her frustration, my grandfather stared off into space, "shocked" as my mother put it. My mother, who was a strong advocate of the show, stated that this is what art is supposed to do. She said it was suppose to traumatize people into changing. Her son had obviously followed her viewpoint on art. By the time I reached them, they had all put on their happy faces and congratulated me on my work—telling me that it had an important message.

While coming out to see them as they acted proud of my work, I could see that my sister's eyes were still wet and her cheeks were red. As she said, "Good job bud—you're really showing the truth," I couldn't tell if I could believe her words.

Three months after the production, my pride in the work depleted as the play lost two competitions; it was my first taste of failure. I felt an existential crisis over if I was actually a writer.

I conversed with my friend about my turmoil at lunch. I had found him in the dining hall, and in my state of depression needed someone to talk to. "Does it mean that none of my work will ever be good? Does it mean I'll always fail?"

"Well, I wouldn't say that," said my friend with a sigh. His tone reeked of something he wanted to say but wasn't saying. I wanted the truth.

"But, you saw it, right?" I asked him. "What did you think of it?"

He put down his cup of coffee and looked me straight in the eyes. His head swayed as he dryly told me, "I didn't get the point."

I was silent. “The point was clear,” I stated. “It’s that there was a difference between being a good person and being a good character.”

“What does that even mean? That the preacher was a shit dude? Okay, whatever. All I got was that a girl was getting raped, and a woman got pummeled at the end of the show by the ghost of her husband—who apparently did A LOT of awful shit. Look, I know all about how post modern stuff can be weird and different—but there needs to be a point.”

“There was a point,” I defended, gripping my spoon though I hadn’t begun to eat, then adding, “and she didn’t actually get raped.”

“I have a question,” he began, looking about the dining hall, “Did you think about how *I* would feel watching the play? With my history? You could have warned me.”

My face became red and my stomach sank. My friend was a survivor of sexual assault, and the idea that I should warn him about the content before inviting him had never crossed my mind. I supposed he couldn’t gather much from the summary on the Facebook page, which solely described the play as “a southern family drama on the difference between being a good person and a good character.”

“I had to leave the play immediately to go and have a panic attack in my dorm,” my friend whispered across the table. “There’s a reason why trigger warnings exist.”

I apologized, and my friend said he needed to go. I ate my lunch alone as I pondered my failure and wondered: what the fuck is a trigger warning? I did not just feel embarrassed; I felt guilty.

Sometimes, August Guilt still haunts me, like the characters are haunted by the presence of the play's villainous father after his death. I think of it with a mix of humor, embarrassment, and a smudge of lingering pride. I think of all the great men who live for a goal while disregarding those closest to them. I think of my crying sister, and my stunned teacher, and hushed audiences, and my friend having a panic attack after seeing my play. I think of my friend's mother thanking me with her hand on my shoulder and her eyes wide in desperation. I think of the way in which us humans can shed words so easily, but those very words we shed can have consequences far from easy. When it came to writing, the birth could be simple, but the aftermath could be purely haunting.