

**EXQUISITE CORPSE**

**Sample Packet**

By Maggie Smith

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**SYNOPSIS:** The creative writing class of Mary Magdalene's Preparatory School for Girls have less than three hours to finish editing their school's literary magazine. Too bad they don't have any poems to edit. In a last-ditch effort to complete their task, the girls lock themselves in their classroom in order to have a long and hard conversation that even the smartest among us can't answer: What makes good poetry?

## **CHARACTERS**

**HESTER HELLER** - a senior in her first year of creative writing, joined because she happened to have a free period; carefree and cool; Darcy's older sister, hellbent on taking her down a peg

**ANNE "DARCY" HELLER** - a junior in her third year of creative writing, head editor of the literary magazine; a headstrong leader in need of perfection

**MADELINE MEYER** - a freshman, unaware of what she's gotten herself into; desperate to impress but even more desperate to get home before curfew

**DOROTHY SOLIS** - a junior in her third year of creative writing; a quiet poet with more passion than anyone could know

**JO FOSTER** - a sophomore in her second year of creative writing; funny and loud, disinterested in seeming intelligent

**SARA HUNT** - a senior in her second year of creative writing; a tennis player more interested in quality than getting the job done

**CARRIE BLACKWELL** - a senior in her third year of creative writing; loyal and heartfelt, but ready to take those qualities elsewhere

## **SETTING**

Room 209 of Mary Magdalene's Preparatory School for Girls

CARRIE

We've been arguing about this for ten minutes. Either you come up with a solution or I'm starting a coup.

DARCY

You don't even know how to spell "coup."

CARRIE

You don't need to spell to start one.

MADELINE

Isn't coup just soup with a "C?"

JO

No, that's alphabet soup.

DARCY

I will not be belittled because I'm upholding standards.

MADELINE

*[A new title]* What's Heard at Dawn?

DARCY

A rooster. A rooster is what's heard at dawn.

DOROTHY

Darcy, come here for a second? I have a question.

*[DOROTHY pulls DARCY aside.]*

DOROTHY

Okay, buddy, what's going on?

DARCY

What's going on is none of you are pulling your weight.

DOROTHY

*[Forced enthusiasm]* Alright! Let's take a step back. Ask ourselves some questions. What do we need?

DARCY

I need a team of people who are willing—

DOROTHY

*[A variety of shushing and interrupting noises]* We. I said we. What do we need? Physically.

DARCY

Enough pieces for a literary magazine.

DOROTHY

Okay. And how many do we need?

DARCY

Forty at least if we want to keep it around the same length as last year's. It could be more or less, though, depending on the length of the pieces.

DOROTHY

And we have five?

DARCY

Yes.

*[MADELINE calls from the whiteboard.]*

MADELINE

Dorothy? Could you—

DOROTHY

I'm busy. *[To DARCY]* We have thirty-five to go, then. So...

HESTER

*[Laughing]* We're so screwed.

DOROTHY

Hey. Hey. No. Well, maybe, but not for sure.

DARCY

There is no possible way—

DOROTHY

Yes. Yes there is. How many submissions did we get?

DARCY

Around 50?

DOROTHY

So then we accept them.

DARCY

We can't accept them all. We have standards.

DOROTHY

Okay, so then we accept thirty-five more of them.

DARCY

But the material—

DOROTHY

Bud, bud, look at me, I don't care about the material. No one here cares about the material. You're the only one here who cares about the material. And that's so great for you that you care about things like that, but for now, we gotta put it aside.

DARCY

But the cursing.

DOROTHY

Okay. Okay. God— Alright. Why were pieces cut from the magazine?

DARCY

What do you mean?

DOROTHY

Content warnings, come on. Give 'em to me.

DARCY

Okay. Well, the cursing, obviously. Blasphemy, innuendos, lust, greed, sloth, gluttony, envy, anger—

MADELINE

Dorothy—

DOROTHY

Not now. *[To DARCY]* Keep going, what else?

DARCY

Pride—

DOROTHY

Stop naming deadly sins.

DARCY

Someone wrote their real home address and that's just a security issue, if nothing else.

DOROTHY

Okay, yeah, that's not great, what else?

DARCY

Drug usage, murder, general lack of morals. War, pestilence, famine, death—

MADELINE

Dorothy, I'm really sorry, but I'm running out of ideas. Could you maybe come over—

DOROTHY

Madeline, I swear to God. *[To DARCY]* Is that it?

DARCY

Someone wrote a really graphic piece on childbirth. But that's all of them, for the most part.

JO

I once again misunderstood the assignment.

DOROTHY

Great. Okay, and what did Mrs. McCarthy say needed to be censored?

DARCY

Anything I wouldn't say in front of my mother.

DOROTHY

Okay...

*[There's a beat.]*

DARCY

That's it.

DOROTHY

That's it? Why did you censor all of the pieces, then?

DARCY

Bad.

DOROTHY

Bad?

DARCY

They were bad.

DOROTHY

Morally or artistically?

DARCY

Both.

DOROTHY

Okay, let's go through this. What can we be lenient on?

DARCY

Nothing.

HESTER

Everything.

DARCY

She wasn't asking you.

*[MADELINE leans on the whiteboard, watching the conversation.]*

CARRIE

What about the sinning?

SARA

And the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse?

DOROTHY

And we could just edit any major cursing, the blasphemy, even the home address could be changed?

JO

If you change the address then I'm requesting you cut the piece entirely. I want people to know where I live.

DOROTHY

What do you think, Darcy? Is it doable?

DARCY

I mean, yes. But what about the ones that just aren't good?

DOROTHY

Then those are still cut. You said it yourself, we need standards.

DARCY

Fine. Fine.

CARRIE

Great, because I have a whole pile of ones that I think you were too harsh on.

DARCY

And how many is that?

CARRIE

I don't know? Twenty-five?

DARCY

Okay, well, twenty-five doesn't help us. Add that to the five we already have, we still need ten more.



HESTER

Then we write ten more.

MADELINE

We could do an Exquisite Corpse?

DARCY

Absolutely not.

SARA

Okay. What about this— We can look through older pieces that we didn't submit?

DARCY

If we didn't submit them in the first place then why would we want to try to submit them now?  
We don't want leftover poems.

CARRIE

We're running out of options, Darcy.

DARCY

Oh my God— Fine. Look through your old poems. But I swear to God, if any of you try to submit a piece you got lower than a 95% on—

HESTER

Yeah, find good poems. We got it.

*[MADELINE gets up from the whiteboard and turns around to look at it.]*

MADELINE

Uh, Darcy?

DARCY

What could you possibly need help with?

MADELINE

I swear it was an accident.

DARCY

What was?

MADELINE

I erased about half of the titles.

DARCY

Why?

MADELINE

I didn't mean to— I was leaning on the board and I guess my sweater rubbed up against it and it just... Erased it— I think some of them can still be read, though.

DARCY

*[Unbelievably calm]* Okay. Who?

MADELINE

Uh... Me?

DARCY

*[Slowly raging]* No. Who thought it was a good idea to let you be a part of the editing team?

MADELINE

I, uh... Registered for the course?

DARCY

You know what? Fine. This is fine. Half of the ideas were unusable, anyways. Just go look through your poems or whatever and find something you can submit.

MADELINE

But you already looked through all of my pieces.

DARCY

What do you mean?

MADELINE

When the submissions opened for the magazine? I asked you to go through my poems with me and help me find the ones to submit. You told me all of them were bad and I should just stick to editing this year.

DARCY

Right. I don't know, then, go write something new.

MADELINE

About what?

DARCY

Do I have to do everything— I don't know! Your biggest secret that you've never told anyone, your mother's maiden name, I genuinely could not care less.

MADELINE

Okay, but can I—

DARCY

Go!

*[MADELINE grabs a notebook and runs to the corner of the room. She furiously splits her time between writing and paying attention to the girls speaking.]*

MADELINE

We've got— Okay, this is fine, we've got about forty-five minutes to get this figured out before the janitor comes through the classrooms—

HESTER

How could you possibly know that?

DARCY

And kicks us out. Ten poems in forty-five minutes. Easy.

SARA

There's no way we're getting it done in time.

DARCY

Not with that attitude. You just need to know good poetry from bad poetry.

HESTER

And what exactly is "good poetry?"

DARCY

Mine. Duh.

HESTER

Oh, of course. Sure.

*[DARCY begins to dig through her backpack to find her journal.]*

DARCY

You just need to write good poems. Poems that stand the test of time. A poem that adheres to literary standards, follows rhyme or metre or—

HESTER

There's no such thing as a good poem. Or a bad poem, for that matter.

DARCY

Says you. Meanwhile, Langston Hughes is taught in schools all over the world. Sounds like good poetry to me. Ah—

*[DARCY pulls out her notebook. She turns to a page covered in multiple sticky tabs.]*

SARA

Did you analyze your own poem?

DARCY

Someone had to. Listen—

*[DARCY steadies herself, and reads.]*

DARCY

Her silk voice echoes through the room  
 She keeps her hand in mine  
 Her words lull my mind far away  
 Capture moments in time.

She stirs a pot upon the stove  
 I copy, do just fine  
 The food tastes like a memory  
 Capture moments in time.

She grips light to the steering wheel  
 She sings a song in rhyme  
 The windows fog up with laughter  
 Capture moments in time

DARCY (cont.)

There'll come a day when she's long gone  
I'll need her, she was mine  
The book, the pot, the car, the grave  
All were moments in time.

*[A beat.]*

DARCY

It's about my mom.

HESTER

Who's still alive.

**[END OF EXCERPT]**

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