

PAPER CUTS

by Ken Preuss

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STORY OF THE PLAY

Three comedic short plays featuring mixed-up love letters, messed-up decorations, and misplaced notebooks, lead to big laughs and moving reminders that relationships unfold in unexpected ways.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(3 m, 5 w, with some flexibility.)

Genders may be changed to fit your company and community. Couples need not be heterosexual. Corey can be female; Parker can be a brother.

AFTER MATH AFTERMATH

When Alice's plans to deliver her secret admirer poem to Dylan go awry, her best friend, Gabby, jumps in to save the day.

ALICE: (F) A would-be poet with a crush on Dylan.

GABBY: (F) Alice's fast-talking and funny friend.

DYLAN: (M) Alice's crush, confused, and possibly crushing back.

PINNING PUNNING PINING

While preparing decorations for a dance, Blake and Corey pin hearts, make puns, and pine for their dream dates.

BLAKE: (F) A distracted student decorating for a dance.

COREY: (M) A new volunteer with a penchant for puns.

HOW TO MAKE A PLAY FOR A GIRL

Justin's older sister offers advice on winning the heart of new girl, Katie. Can notebook mix-ups, drama auditions, and robot stories possibly lead to a happy ending?

JUSTIN: (M) A shy student longing for his dream girl.

PARKER: (F) Justin's older sister, eager to give advice.

KATIE: (F) A new girl in school, an aspiring thespian.

AFTER MATH AFTERMATH

(GABBY sits at lunch staring at her food. ALICE enters in a daze carrying books and a lunch bag.)

GABBY: There you are! I need your help identifying this mystery meat the school is passing off as chicken fingers. It's definitely *not chicken*, though the *fingers* part may be accurate. (Notices ALICE's distraction.) Alice? You okay? What did you get on your math test?

ALICE: (Evasively.) I don't remember.

GABBY: What did you do in class?

ALICE: I don't remember.

GABBY: You *do* remember *being there*, don't you? Oooh! Maybe you were abducted by aliens and lost a chunk of time. Were there mutilated cows on the spacecraft? That might explain the mystery meat.

ALICE: I was in class. I was writing a poem instead of paying attention.

GABBY: Again? If you keep writing poems during math, you're going to fail.

ALICE: I haven't written that many.

GABBY: One a day... five days a week... for a month.

ALICE: That's like *ten* poems.

GABBY: *Twenty!* (Laughs.) You really are going to fail. Was this another poem about Dylan?

ALICE: No. (Beat.) It was a poem *to Dylan*. (With great excitement.) I put it in his locker on my way here.

GABBY: That was brave!

ALICE: Sort of. I panicked as soon I as let it go, then hid in the bathroom hyperventilating into my lunch bag. (Beat.) I also didn't sign it.

GABBY: Why would you sign your lunch bag?

ALICE: I didn't sign *the poem*. It was a secret admirer thing.

GABBY: So, you're *half* brave.

ALICE: And half chicken.

GABBY: That's more chicken than they put in the chicken fingers. (Points to bag.) You have a sandwich?

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ALICE: End pieces from two different loaves and a slice of cheese with a questionable expiration date.

GABBY: Better than mystery meat. Least I'll know what killed me. (*Reaches into ALICE's bag and removes a folded sheet of paper.*) What's this?

ALICE: My math test. It's scarier than the sandwich. That whole bag was headed for the trash before I needed it to regulate my breathing.

GABBY: (*Unfolding the paper.*) Ummm... this isn't math.

ALICE: It's my *attempt* at it.

GABBY: It's a pretty *weird* attempt. (*Shows her.*) You rhymed "Dylan" with "Thrillin'" and used the phrase, "curiouser and curiouser." Was that a hint about your name?

ALICE: Let me see that! (*Grabs it and looks.*) This is bad.

GABBY: For math: yes. For poetry: it's a good first draft.

ALICE: There was no first draft! This is the poem!

GABBY: I thought you put it in his locker.

ALICE: I thought I did, too.

GABBY: Aliens! They planted false memories.

ALICE: (*Suddenly.*) Oh my gosh!

GABBY: Are you getting flashes of the abduction? Were they gray or green? Sketch them before the FBI erases your memory.

ALICE: (*Looks through her things.*) Gabby! I put my *math test* in Dylan's locker!

GABBY: Maybe we can get them to erase *his memory*.

ALICE: (*Mentally retracing her steps.*) I folded the test to hide my grade. I folded the poem to slip through the locker vent. I must've mixed them up. (*Sets poem down.*) What's going to happen?

GABBY: I don't know. Guys don't usually like it when a girl gives them a bunch of problems. (*Explains her joke.*) Math test? A *bunch of problems*? Get it? It's amusing.

ALICE: It's a *trainwreck*! If Dylan sees my test, he'll *think* I'm an idiot.

GABBY: How bad can it be?

ALICE: I only got twenty-five right.

GABBY: There were twenty-five questions.

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ALICE: I only got *number twenty-five* right. I missed the first twenty-four. (*Stands.*) I'm breaking into his locker!

GABBY: How?

ALICE: I'll try every three-number combination until I find one that works.

GABBY: You just got a four on your math test. I don't think numbers are your strong suit.

ALICE: A strong suit! That's what I need. One of those metallic armor things, so I crash into the locker and...

(ALICE turns and demonstrates as DYLAN enters. Dylan and Alice collide.)

DYLAN: You okay?

ALICE: Dylan! I was just going out...

DYLAN: ... for the football team?

ALICE: (*Smiles awkwardly.*) To get something. Sorry.

DYLAN: No worries. You seem to be in a hurry. I won't stand in your way. (*Smiles.*) Not unless I want to get knocked down. (*Steps aside and gestures for her to pass.*)

ALICE: Thanks.

(ALICE blushes, unsure what to do. She glances at GABBY then takes a few steps away.)

DYLAN: Oh! Before you go... I... found this in my locker.

(ALICE stops and cringes. DYLAN unfolds a sheet of paper. Alice's eyes go wide in horror.)

DYLAN: (*Cont'd.*) It looks like one of your math tests or something.

ALICE: (*Faking surprise, unconvincingly.*) Really?

DYLAN: Yeah. I thought you might need it back. (*Holds it out.*) I didn't mean to look at it. I was just trying to figure out what it was.

ALICE: (*Takes it tentatively.*) This is embarrassing.

DYLAN: Shouldn't be. I've seen lower grades.

ALICE: You have?

DYLAN: Well, no. *(Trying to cheer her up.)* But that's the best grade I've ever seen on a math test in my locker that belonged to someone else. *(There's an awkward beat.)* I... guess I'll see you later.

(ALICE and DYLAN look at each other for a moment.)

GABBY: *(Interjects.)* I'm sure you'll run into each other again.

(DYLAN heads off. ALICE turns to GABBY.)

ALICE: I can't believe he didn't ask how my test got in his locker.

DYLAN: *(Turns back suddenly.)* Do you know how your test got in my locker?

(ALICE is speechless. GABBY crosses to DYLAN.)

GABBY: I can explain that.

ALICE: *(Under her breath.)* You can?

GABBY: *(To ALICE.)* Of course. *(To DYLAN.)* It's all my fault really. You see, Alice failed her math test and didn't want her parents to see it, but she promised she'd never throw a test away without showing them, so I said, "What if I threw it away for you?"

DYLAN: *(Dubiously.)* Clever.

GABBY: I'm gifted. What can I do? Anyway. *(Takes test from ALICE.)* Alice gave it to me, and I realized this was more than a test. It was a cry for help. She was asking me to do something she couldn't do herself. She was stressed about the grade, but subconsciously, she was begging me to help the two of you get together.

ALICE: What?

DYLAN: *(At the same time.)* What?

GABBY: *(To both.)* Get together. Academically. As study buddies! *(To DYLAN.)* Alice has been thinking about you for a long time... as a potential math tutor, I mean. *(To ALICE.)* You are still interested in him, aren't you, Alice?

(Embarrassed, ALICE manages to grunt and nod. GABBY turns to DYLAN.)

GABBY: (Cont'd.) That was a "yes." Maybe you could tutor her in *speech*, too! Anyway. Alice was too nervous to ask you herself, so I decided to let the test do the talking. I dropped it in your locker to initiate a connection. (To ALICE, *feigning innocence*.) I hope you're not mad. I only did it because I care. You know it's not like me to be deceitful.

DYLAN: (To GABBY.) How did you know where my locker was?

GABBY: (Matter-of-factly.) Your locker is by the locker of the girl who dates the guy who mows my grandfather's lawn. I saw you there once when I tracked her down to tell her that her boyfriend's weedwhacker chipped the nose off my grandfather's garden gnome. (Crosses away, *setting the test paper by her lunch*.)

DYLAN: (To ALICE.) Is what she said true?

ALICE: (Still digesting what's happening.) I didn't even know her grandfather had a garden gnome.

DYLAN: I mean about the tutor.

ALICE: What? (Snaps out of it.) Oh. Um... yeah.

DYLAN: I could do that. Tutor you, I guess. When would you want to meet up?

ALICE: I'm free any time. (Grimaces, *fearing she's made herself look overeager*.)

GABBY: She means she can clear her schedule to accommodate yours.

DYLAN: I'll be in the library after school today. A math break would save me from analyzing poetry.

GABBY: Alice can help you with that! She *writes* poetry!

DYLAN: You do?

ALICE: I dabble.

GABBY: (To ALICE.) You *dazzle*! (To DYLAN.) There's an amazing poem she wrote right here. (Picks up a paper.)

ALICE: (To GABBY.) I'm actually going to revise that.

GABBY: No need to keep it a *secret*. I'm sure he'll *admire* it.

ALICE: (Tries to grab it.) He's not interested.

DYLAN: I'm *kind of* interested.

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(ALICE turns to DYLAN, surprised by his words. GABBY slips past Alice and hands it to Dylan. Alice tenses. Dylan looks to Alice who apprehensively nods consent. There is a moment of great anticipation as Dylan looks at the paper.)

DYLAN: This is her math test.

(ALICE sighs in relief.)

GABBY: *(Laughs at her perfectly executed gag then looks at the test in DYLAN's hand, pretending she's made an honest mistake.)* So it is. *(Crosses back to her lunch, flashing ALICE a mischievous grin.)* I must've gotten the poem and the test mixed up. How silly is that?

(ALICE grabs the real poem before GABBY can get to it and try anything new. DYLAN notices.)

DYLAN: *(To ALICE.)* So, is that your poem?

ALICE: Yeah.

DYLAN: *(HE waits a beat. SHE doesn't offer it.)* You don't want me to read it?

ALICE: I do. Not yet though. Soon. Hopefully.

DYLAN: Is it because you're nervous or not finished?

ALICE: Maybe a little of both.

DYLAN: Well, I look forward to it. When you're ready. *(Indicates the test paper.)* I'll take this test to help you figure out what went wrong. *(Removes a paper from his notebook.)* You can take *this* to help me figure out what it means. *(Hands the paper to ALICE.)*

ALICE: *(Looks at it.)* It's *Jabberwocky*.

DYLAN: I get the title. It's everything *after that* that gives me trouble.

ALICE: *(Recites without looking.)* 'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves.

DYLAN: Wait? How do you know this? It's like an alien language.

ALICE: I have experience with this poem.

GABBY: *(Interjecting at a distance.)* And possibly *with aliens*.

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ALICE: (*Ignoring her friend.*) It's by Lewis Carroll. If you're named Alice, you have to read his *Wonderland* books at some point. It's a law they attach to your birth certificate.

DYLAN: This is kind of working out great.

GABBY: Kind of? You're a perfect match! (*ALICE shoots her a look. GABBY covers quickly.*) With the whole math-literature combo. You know any *science* people we can get to analyze these chicken fingers? (*SHE distracts herself with the food to give them a moment.*)

DYLAN: So, after school, then? You translate. I'll tutor.

ALICE: It's a date. (*Quickly corrects herself.*) A deal.

DYLAN: (*A beat and a smile.*) Maybe a little of both.

(*They exchange smiles. DYLAN exits. ALICE watches in awe. GABBY crosses to her.*)

ALICE: That was the most romantic thing I ever heard.

GABBY: Yeah. (*Playfully.*) Made my stomach turn more than the lunch.

ALICE: I'm gonna go fix my hair and hyperventilate. (*Genuinely.*) Thank you for your help.

GABBY: I look forward to the wedding invite. Of course, you'll probably put the wrong thing in the envelope.

ALICE: (*Gathers her things.*) Laugh if you will, but by *not* giving him a poem, I got him to *give me* one.

GABBY: Maybe you're a genius. Not in *math*, obviously. (*Takes paper from ALICE.*) I'm impressed that you know *Jabberwocky*, though.

ALICE: I only know the first six words. I've got biology, history, and French class to figure out the rest.

GABBY: So, you'll be flunking *multiple subjects* by the time you meet him?

ALICE: Can't turn back now. I'm *through the looking glass*! (*Rushes out.*)

GABBY: (*Waving the paper.*) You forgot... (*Reads a bit, still calling out.*) There's a sword and a severed beast. Maybe it's a recipe for the mystery meat! (*Grabs her things and rushes after Alice, eager to help with her next adventure.*)

The End

PINNING PUNNING PINING

(BLAKE stands at a table with decoration supplies: string, pins, scissors, construction paper, a pencil, and a small basket of paper hearts. She looks DSL as something, or someone, holds her attention. COREY enters USR.)

COREY: Hey. *(Gets no response, follows her gaze, flashes a look of recognition, and speaks again.)* You're on decoration duty, too, huh?

BLAKE: *(Snaps back to attention.)* Hi. Yes. Sorry.

COREY: *(Looks at the supplies.)* So, what are we doing?

BLAKE: *(Removes a red heart from the basket.)* Pinning these hearts to the string so they can be hung up.

COREY: Feels like a metaphor, doesn't it? *(BLAKE gives COREY a look. Corey clarifies.)* School dance. People trying to get dates. Here we are *putting our hearts on the line.*

BLAKE: Sounds more like a bad pun.

COREY: *(Playfully defensive.)* That was a good pun.

BLAKE: You think that was a good pun? *(Smiles and hands COREY the heart.)* My heart goes out to you.

COREY: *(Laughs.)* Well played. *(Notices BLAKE glancing DSL again. Holds the heart back out to her.)* Sure, you don't want to give this to Xander instead? Or were you staring at Lexi?

BLAKE: *(A reply without thinking.)* It was Xander. *(Realizes what she's said.)* Wait. What? I wasn't staring... *(Realizes she's been caught. Sighs with a hint of a smile.)* Shut up and pin.

COREY: Sorry. *(Picks up a paper clip.)* Want me to get Xander to switch places?

BLAKE: *(An honest response.)* I'd have a heart attack.

(COREY playfully jabs the heart at BLAKE's shoulder, making loud barking noises. Blake grabs the heart, glances around, embarrassed, then speaks in a hushed voice.)

BLAKE: What was that?

COREY: *(Sheepishly explaining.) A heart attack. (Takes the heart back and does a feeble, greatly toned-down reenactment. BLAKE takes the heart back again.)* I thought we were doing the whole pun thing.

BLAKE: We were doing *wordplay*. We can do without sound effects.

COREY: Duly noted. I'll just pin. *(Holds hand out.)* Heart please. *(Sees BLAKE'S disappointed look.)* What?

BLAKE: *(As if she wanted to hear a pun.)* No clever joke?

COREY: You haven't found *any* of my jokes clever.

BLAKE: They were noble efforts. And distracting. *(Hints with a nod DSL.)* I could use the distraction.

COREY: Pinning... *and punning?* Are you sure?

BLAKE: *(Sets the heart on the string with a flourish.)* My heart's set on it.

COREY: *(Smiles and goes with it, pinning the heart to the string.)* Well, it's nice to see your heart's in the right place. *(A beat.)* So... why Xander?

BLAKE: You're supposed to be distracting me. Not dissecting me.

COREY: I can do both. Consider it a heart-to-heart conversation. *(BLAKE rolls her eyes, takes a pink heart from the basket and hands it to COREY.)* So?

BLAKE: So? Look at him.

COREY: I've seen him. He's not my type.

BLAKE: *(Glances again.)* He's definitely mine.

COREY: *(Looks DSL at Xander.)* Sure, he's attractive, in that football captain, boy band member, movie star, fashion model kind of way...

BLAKE: *(Playfully fans herself with the heart as she looks at Xander.)* Be still my heart.

COREY: There's more to life than looks, you know.

BLAKE: *(An accusatory laugh.)* Like you weren't offering to switch places, so you could be next to Lexi.

COREY: *(Glances Lexi's way. Flashes a "she is pretty hot" smile.)* Lexi and I happen to have a lot in common.

BLAKE: Yeah. She thinks she's the best-looking girl in school and you agree.

COREY: (*Playfully takes the heart from BLAKE.*) You're heartless.

BLAKE: But accurate.

COREY: Pretty much. (*Beat.*) We're both shallow, aren't we?

BLAKE: Yes. But we have exquisite taste.

COREY: Absolutely.

BLAKE: Back to work then.

COREY: (*Pins the pink heart in place.*) Pinning. Punning. (*Glances toward LEXI.*) Pining.

BLAKE: *Pining* sounds much nicer than "staring."

COREY: The alliteration is poetic, too. Compensates for the corniness of the puns.

BLAKE: Right. (*With a fun and fake fancy accent.*) We shant neglect our literary reputation. (*Pulls a white heart from the basket and points to it.*) Even when making *lighthearted* jokes.

COREY: I can't do *sound effects*, but you can do *character voices*?

BLAKE: You were barking like a dog. I was speaking with an impeccable British accent.

COREY: My bark happened to be from an *English* Foxhound... (*Takes the white heart from BLAKE and begins to attach it.*) Ummm, why are we pinning *white* hearts?

BLAKE: (*Winging it.*) They have different meanings, maybe? So everyone's represented? (*Pulls out a red heart.*) Red is love. (*Pulls out a pink heart.*) Pink is flirtation. (*Gestures toward the string.*) White is friendship.

COREY: Are there *purple hearts* in there? Maybe some of the older kids are decorated war heroes. (*Takes the red heart. Glances DSL. Notices something.*) Lexi and Xander are actually engaging in *tactical maneuvers* right now.

BLAKE: (*Looks. Frowns.*) That is definitely a *code-pink* flirtation situation. (*Eyes widen.*) And it's escalating! What do we do?

COREY: Retreat? Surrender? About-face! (*BLAKE and COREY turn around to face upstage.*) Better?

BLAKE: I don't know. Our dream dates are literally flirting behind our backs right now.

COREY: Time to stop dreaming then. Let's turn around and face reality.

BLAKE: I don't think I want to see it.

COREY: Me neither. *(Holds out a hand to reveal the red heart which is now slightly crumbled.)* My heart can't take it.

BLAKE: Let's just turn around and *focus on our work*.

COREY: Right. We can do that.

BLAKE: *(Takes a breath.)* On three.

(BLAKE counts to three silently with her fingers. In perfect unison, BLAKE and COREY turn around, look directly toward Xander and Lexi, gasp audibly, then look down at the table.)

BLAKE: Their arms were around each other.

COREY: Maybe they were just doing the old "tap the opposite shoulder" trick at the exact same time.

(To demonstrate, COREY's left arm reaches behind BLAKE to tap her left shoulder. Playing along, Blake looks to her left, but in doing so, sees the Xander and Lexi again. Blake looks away, raises her pink heart, and moves it down slowly until it disappears into the basket.)

COREY: *(After a beat of confusion.)* What was that?

BLAKE: My heart just sank. I mimed the pun to make it more sophisticated.

COREY: ...because mimes are the *height of sophistication*?

BLAKE: *(Smirking slightly.)* I attempted levity in a moment of despair.

COREY: I think silent puns are cute and funny.

BLAKE: *(Playfully doubtful.)* Really?

(COREY traces across the surface of the red heart, as if saying "cross my heart.")

BLAKE: *(Mocks COREY with a straight face.)* Obviously not *all* silent puns are funny.

COREY: Ouch.

(COREY lowers the red heart toward the basket as if it is sinking, too. BLAKE reaches out to stop Corey and their hands touch for the first time. There is a faint hint of attraction before they both pull away. The heart drops into the basket, and they recover awkwardly.)

BLAKE: *(With an honest smile.)* Thanks for distracting me.

COREY: Thanks for the opportunity. Thanks for distracting me, too. *(THEY share a beat.)* Shall we get to work?

BLAKE: Yes. We can continue pouring out our hearts, too. *(BLAKE pours the basket, so the remaining hearts - 3 red, 3 pink, and 3 white - fall to the table.)*

COREY: *(Surveys the hearts.)* This red-pink-white thing was a stupid idea.

BLAKE: Because love is fluid and everchanging, and it's useless to try to color-code and label it?

COREY: Because we have to follow a pattern and can't just pin them randomly. But your thing works, too, I guess.

(THEY laugh and with no audible plan, begin working in tandem. As Corey picks up a pin, Blake grabs a heart and sets it on the string, so Corey can pin it in place.)

BLAKE: *(Calls out a color.)* Red. *(THEY attach a red heart. BLAKE sneaks a peek at Xander and Lexi.)*

COREY: *(Adopts Blake's system.)* Pink. *(THEY attach a pink heart. COREY sneaks a peek at Xander and Lexi.)*

BLAKE: White. *(THEY attach a white heart, becoming aware of their great teamwork. Neither sneaks a peek at Xander and Lexi.)*

COREY: *(Making fun of the labels.)* Love.

(THEY attach a red heart. Blake sneaks a peek at the Corey.)

BLAKE: *(Adopting the new system.)* Flirtation.

(THEY attach a pink heart. Corey sneaks a peek at Blake.)

COREY: Friendship.

End of Freeview

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