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Based On A True Story

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Based On A True Story

Angelyka Cava

1st Place Short Story Winner

Dear Students of [REDACTED],

After much discussion regarding options to continue [REDACTED] University's legacy, the Board of Regents has voted to cease operations at the end of the current academic semester. Due to the university's financial issues, it would be impossible to continue providing education. We have decided that the school's closure is in the best interest of our community.

In light of today's events, classes are cancelled for the day. We are having an informational session to provide support for all students at 10:00 AM in the student services center.

Sincerely,

Dr. [REDACTED]
Interim President

[REDACTED]
Chief Student Affairs Officer

~~~

“Oh.”

That's all I can say after reading this email. I mean, I should've seen it coming. Last year, they shut down the College of Arts & Sciences without warning. Our little liberal arts school hasn't felt the same since. While it's obvious things have been sliding downhill, I thought it would be at least ten years before we plummeted to the bottom of the mountain.

Welp. Guess I don't have school today. With the exception of this email, I'm completely out of the loop. I wish I could attend today's 10:00 meeting, but it's already 10:03 and I live about a half hour away. I don't think it's worth driving over the river. Maybe I can text someone else about what's going on.

Hey Naomi. Are you attending today's info session?  
How are you holding up? The news today is devastating

~~~

Naomi Akana is a third-year history major from Hilo, Hawaii. Despite the large honors scholarship she received, she never thought she'd end up at [REDACTED] University, yet she ended up falling in love with the community, and surprisingly, the cold weather. She couldn't have been happier with her choice to come to Portland.

At least, until today.

An early riser, she woke up at six in the morning. While replying to an email from her boss, she noticed a new message titled "URGENT NEWS." The contents that followed made her heart fall out of her chest and land in her stomach to be consumed by gastric acids.

Her school couldn't be closing. She had a plan. A plan to graduate *summa cum laude* next year, get accepted into [REDACTED]'s grad school program, and then pursue a career as a policy analyst. Now, she's thrown into a tornado with all of her schoolmates and professors, left to twirl around in the uncertain chaos without any direction. She has no idea where she will land, and that reality gives her the constant urge to vomit.

It's been a few hours, and she's barfed a few times, but she still feels sick as she sits in the student center, waiting for the session to start. Her phone buzzes in her pants pocket and she ignores it. Five minutes late and people are still piling into the room, faces red and slimy like washed tomatoes. But to Naomi, crying does no good. She has to stay strong. She has to be ready for whatever bullshit will be thrown at her in this meeting. She has to look the administration in the eye and let them know that whatever they pulled did not break her.

~~~

“I heard about your school, so crazy! How are you holding up?”

Countless relatives have phoned my home with questions about what happened at school. I wasn't expecting similar questions in my only sanctuary, the martial arts studio, but here we are now. I hear her voice from across the gym before she runs up beside me, standing a bit too close. Her glossy crystal eyes look like I just told her that my dog died. I've never really talked to this girl before, except for the one class when I partnered with her about a month ago. I'm surprised that she even remembers that I go to [REDACTED].

“Yeah I'm doing fine. Nothing I can do, I guess.”

She nods in sad sympathy, probably wanting more juicy details, but I shut down. I don't want to talk. Not to her. All I really want to do right now is punch things.

~~~

Dr. Celia Holmes has been teaching psychology at [REDACTED] University for fifteen years. She watched and helped the College of Arts & Sciences to grow and prosper... then fall to pieces. And now it's going to be nothing.

Just like her position. How is she going to quickly find a career as fulfilling as this? It's not like there's a shortage of professors. How is she going to support her kids as a single mother

with no job? Living in Portland is pretty fucking expensive. And her daughter was going to attend [REDACTED] tuition-free next year as a freshman. Where will she go now?

She's not ready for her first class after the announcement, in just an hour. There's no way she can give her students the reading quiz she gives every Tuesday, not after they've had to deal with their school closing on them. But she can't cancel class and cheat them out of the education they already paid so much for. She definitely does not want to see her students, sad and anxious from the uncertainty that they must face.

With a big sigh and a brave mask to hide her own worries, she steps out of her house. Off to Starbucks. She'll need a lot of coffee to get through the day.

~~~

After I got back home from martial arts last night, all I paid attention to was my PlayStation. I didn't do diddly squat for school. I did not finish reading the required chapters for today's psychology quiz. And it's not just because of what's been going on with school; it's because I didn't want to. The textbook bores the fuck out of me.

I don't really care if I get another 0/10 on the quiz at this point. It's hard to care about anything when you know your school's going to close. But I am worried about Dr. Holmes. Compared to her, I'm not losing much.

She scurries into the classroom, two minutes late as she always does, and while she has a smile on her face, I notice the smallest hint of fear hidden in her hazel irises. She sits on the table closest to the front of the room, facing us students. "Hey class. We're going to skip today's test, I'll just give you all ten points for free. Do you guys want to talk about what happened yesterday?"

I really don't want to talk about what happened, and it doesn't seem like anyone else does. We all stare at the mirror of awkward silence hanging in front of us, none of us willing to shatter it.

At least, not until Anne's sharp voice hits the glass. "I hope you guys have heard about the walkout I'm organizing that's happening tomorrow at noon. We're going to peacefully protest against the lack of transparency from the administration."

Suddenly, a bunch of stones are thrown at the glass.

"Anne, I'm definitely going to be there!"

“It’s so shitty what they did!”

“How can this be happening?”

“It’s so unfair.”

“What am I going to do with my life now?”

“They better listen to us tomorrow.”

“We deserve our money back.”

I don’t talk, because I don’t talk in class. It’s against my nature. But I’m getting angsty, like a bunch of ants are crawling all over my legs. I want to jump out of my seat and run outside. Or even better, jump out the window. I want to smash every computer in the building, I want to tear apart every tree on campus, I want to steal everything in this place to get back all the money I’ve wasted coming here.

Once all of my classmates air out their grievances, we stare at the broken glass that covers the floor. The mess that the school has made of us. Each individual shard feels so alone, so fragile, but together we’re all experiencing the same problem. Now that we’re broken, we can’t be put back together again.

“All of you deserve so much better than this,” says Dr. Holmes. In all our worrying, we never asked her how she’s doing, even though she’s never forgotten about us.

“How are you doing?” Anne finally asks.

“Well, I’ll get through this somehow. It just sucks that we’re not going to get severance packages. We’re not even getting paid for the full month of May since our contract ends.”

WHAT?

I feel the heat from my head pour into every crevice of my body, until I feel like I’m stepping on hot coals and lava pours from my hands. I need to run. I need to burn all of this energy off. I need to find every single person in charge of this shitty situation, roundhouse kick them all in the kneecaps, and clock them straight in the jaw. Or else I’m going to release all this pain on someone in the room, someone who doesn’t deserve it.

~~~

Dr. Gene Fischer has been working at [REDACTED] University for one year, but his legacy at this institution spans over a decade. It’s strange to remember that thirteen years ago, he graduated as a biology major who won Thesis of Distinction for a study on

bacteria. After obtaining his PhD, he worked a few years as an adjunct professor. This year was his first as an actual, real faculty member, complete with an office and everything.

All that disappeared. In less than three months, he will be completely jobless. He'll be homeless, since he's been living in the apartments with his pregnant wife. And he'll be without a major part of his identity.

He needs a walk. Some fresh air. He's being suffocated in his tiny office, a reminder of everything he'll lose.

He steps outside. He's always loved the campus, small but well-kept. He always runs into the groundskeeper and his assistants, who work their asses off to maintain the beautiful Northwestern flora that decorate the sidewalks and buildings. He wonders what will happen to all of it once the school closes. Who will own [REDACTED]?

The streets are empty, except for someone running. Fast. Toward him. He sidesteps out of the way as she forces herself to a halt, just before she collides into him. He knows her, Jaune. He never had her as a student, but she's been to his house several times

for the dinners that professors host for honors students. Yet another thing he'll miss.

“How are you doing?” he asks her. Same sad look as the girl in martial arts last night, but he feels it deep inside. Hopefully, Jaune knows the difference.

Jaune takes a couple of moments to recover her breath, signaled by her pointing up to the sky with one hand as she hunches her back. “I’m okay, considering everything that’s going on right now. I just really needed to get out of class. Are you doing fine?”

“Well, I’m okay.” Dr. Fischer laughs, forced and awkward as the backing tracks in bad sitcoms. “Maybe I’ll have to go back to my job at Walmart.”

Jaune finds his joke funny in a dark way, but does not laugh. It might be impolite. “Yeah, I’m sorry about that. I’ll see you around?”

He nods, but she doesn’t see it. She’s already off in the other direction. She’s never been one for small talk.

~~~

I should not be going to work right now. Today, I have absolutely zero tolerance for anyone’s stupidity and I am on the brink

of beating someone bloody. But here I am, setting my belongings on my designated desk while my boss fills me in on what's been going on in the mailroom. She's asked me how I've been but I don't even remember what I said anymore, probably something like "okay" or "fine" or something else that definitely does not encapsulate the fury boiling in my chest.

I see Mailman David lugging a large cart full of packages behind him, a smile on his face as usual. Even in my state, and even though I should be annoyed that I'll have to sort out all that shit, I can't help but smile back. But despite his bare teeth, I can see a layer of liquid covering his mocha-colored eyes.

~~~

David Parker has been delivering mail in Portland for twenty years. [REDACTED] University has always been one of his favorite daily stops. Seeing all the smiling students and faculty made his day. Even though he was just the mailman, many stopped to say hello and ask him about his day. He's always wanted to attend a college like this, and giving these wonderful people their mail made him feel like an integral part of the community.

He thought yesterday was just another regular day in his route, but he noticed something different on the way to the mailroom. Nobody he passed had a smile on their face. Some even had tears streaming down their cheeks. Nobody acknowledged his existence.

The mystery was solved when he got to the mailroom. Anne, the Monday afternoon worker, informed him of the closure.

He didn't know how to react. He couldn't react. He couldn't do anything but stare at Anne, another student with watery eyes. He wanted to help her, he wanted to help everyone in the room. He didn't want to lose this community. Little did he know that the community would also lose him.

~~~

Tons of students crowd on the campus green, all united for one cause: bringing awareness to the unjust actions of the [REDACTED] administration. They hold signs:

CU IN COURT

WHERE DID MY MONEY GO?

ALMOST GRADUATED!

Anne stands in the front, holding a megaphone. So many eyes and ears are on her. There should be so much pressure to say the

right thing, but she doesn't care. What's more important is the anger in her voice, the demand for making things right.

She's not sure if this walkout will do anything. No one is. But she has to keep trying.

~~~

Since I got home from work, I've been in my garage for about half an hour, whacking the shit out of my punching bag. Sweat pours down my forehead and into my eyes, blurring my vision. I do strike after strike after strike, using whatever part of my body feels most natural. I don't think. I'm tired, but I can't stop. If I stop, I'll think. About [REDACTED].

In the middle of a combo, I hear my phone buzz. I rarely get texts from anyone, so I'm super starved for attention. I end with a roundhouse kick then stomp over to my phone.

Naomi 5:37 PM

Eh, I'll make it through.

Jaune are you coming to the protest?

It's happening right now

We're speaking against the lack of transparency of administration

After reading the text, I slam my phone onto the hard floor beneath me. It survives the fall as it always does. But I really need to stop doing that.

I don't want to reply to Naomi. I don't want to go to the protest. I don't have time for that shit.

Why should I care? I'm done with [REDACTED].

I seem like I got away okay. I seem like I'm set to graduate, but they've screwed me over too. I'll take part in the commencement ceremony at the end of the semester, but I still have one more class I need to finish in order to get my degree. Plus, even if I graduate, my diploma will be from a school that no longer exists. I won't ever be able to visit my alma mater. I may not have to worry about transferring or finding a new job, but I still feel cheated. If I could have foreseen the closure of my school, I never would have come here in the first place.

There's nothing I can do. I'm a powerless ant underneath the cleated shoes of the establishment. Even a colony could still easily be destroyed by the administrative exterminators.

I have to accept my uselessness.