



Sample Pages from Commence

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COMMENCE

A DRAMA IN ONE ACT BY
Christian Kiley



Commence

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Printed in the USA

Characters

IM, IF, 9 Any Gender

Student #1: Arranged the meeting with the principal.

Student #2: A good-hearted class clown.

Student #3: A speech and debate champ and future lawyer.

Student #4: A student athlete.

Student #5: A earnest promoter of school spirit.

Student #6: In a romantic relationship with Student #7.

Student #7: In a romantic relationship with Student #6.

Student #8: A student actor.

Student #9: A perceived troublemaker.

Student #10: A student who appreciates the everyday moments that have been lost.

The Principal: A man who wants to do the best he can by his students.

The characters can be played by anyone. They represent the artists (many of whom are student-artists) who must adapt to the changing circumstances involved with stay-at-home orders that have been issued around the world.

Setting

A video conference call. This play is intended to be performed in a video conference call or meeting. It is specifically geared toward actors who are not in the same physical space.

Time

The Present. During the peak of the Coronavirus.

Dedicated

To the Class of 2020

A group of STUDENTS and their PRINCIPAL are having an online meeting.

STUDENT 1: Thank you for agreeing to meet with us.

PRINCIPAL: Of course. I want to help you in any way I possibly can.

STUDENT 2: Can you bring me a pizza? I mean, having a pizza delivered to my house by my principal, during a pandemic would be epic. And one of those big pizza-sized chocolate chip cookies. Seems like a dumb idea until that bad boy is sitting right in front of me. Then once I top it with ice cream, that bad idea becomes oh so good. An à la mode idea.

PRINCIPAL: I'll see what I can do.

STUDENT 2: It's good to feel listened to, valued.

STUDENT 1: Pizza and giant cookies are great comfort food, but what we want to talk to you about is a topic I think we all care deeply about.

STUDENT 3: That's why we are here as a unified group, to bring validity to this.

PRINCIPAL: Sounds good. I am ready to listen.

STUDENT 3: We have demands.

STUDENT 2: Ouch, way to rip the band-aid off.

STUDENT 3: It's more like a tourniquet.

PRINCIPAL: An apt metaphor. These are unusual and challenging times. Like nothing I've ever faced in my career in education.

STUDENT 1: We agree. And these unusual times require creative solutions.

PRINCIPAL: And now your demands...

STUDENT 1: Yes. We received your email yesterday, not just us, everyone received it. The entire student body, parents, teachers, staff. I'm sure by now the email has made its way to every cyber channel out there.

STUDENT 2: From Insta to the dinosaur boneyard of Facebook.

STUDENT 3: We have a list of items.

STUDENT 2: Is the giant cookie on there?

PRINCIPAL: A list?

STUDENT 1: Yes. As you acknowledged in your email. The students, particularly the seniors, are losing all of the events that we have waited so long for.

STUDENT 2: Grad night. I mean roller coasters at 3 a.m. Sick.

STUDENT 3: Commencement. Graduation.

STUDENT 4: Baseball, track, all the sports. Senior night. Gone.

STUDENT 5: Rallies. The senior goodbye. Where all the classes rotate to their new grade. Ninth to tenth, tenth to eleventh, eleventh to twelfth, and the seniors, we stand in the middle and get that crazy ovation, feeling that energy pouring down on us from the bleachers.

STUDENT 6 & STUDENT 7: Prom!

STUDENT 6: I mean, we've been together for...

STUDENT 6 & STUDENT 7: Three years, eight months, two weeks, four days, twenty-two hours...

STUDENT 6: And nine minutes!

STUDENT 8: The spring play. I was finally going to get to portray my dream roles. Combined. Luke Skywalker as Hamlet! I mean, unheard of. Could you imagine the swordfight with Laertes? Lightsabers! Sparks flying (*acts it out with sound effects*). "You killed my dad." "He was spying on me when I was having an awkward conversation with my mom." "You broke up with my sister." "Agree to disagree. She returned all of my love poems. At least they were in chronological order." "I hate you." "You might just hate yourself. I can relate. I am the most self-loathing character in the history of Theatre."

STUDENT 9: Somebody mentioned that something like this happened before. And by before they meant, like horse-drawn carriages and women couldn't vote before.

STUDENT 10: It's the little things for me. The tiny moments that can't be replaced. Insurance doesn't ever cover that stuff in a fire, either. It's like a fire that destroyed memories that haven't even happened yet.

PRINCIPAL: This is an odd thing to say, but I am proud of you.

STUDENT 1: That's great. But we want a chance to tell our story.

PRINCIPAL: Years from now, you will be able to look back on this and say you not only survived, but graduated. You graduated during a state of emergency. You found meaning in the chaos. You won.

STUDENT 2: Oh, you mean that piece of paper. With the shortage of TP, you know what that is going to be used for now, right?

STUDENT 3: Easy, buddy. Stay on topic.

STUDENT 2: I am. We are protecting toilet paper like we should be protecting each other.

STUDENT 3: That was surprisingly profound.

STUDENT 8: Bravo! Well played! Like Shakespeare's fools, there is great depth in the jests.

STUDENT 2: Did you just call me a fool?

STUDENT 1: The point is, we would like to be able to recoup some of what we're losing, what we've lost.

PRINCIPAL: You give me too much credit. I'm not a medical doctor. Like you, I've never lived through anything like this. We're all losing things here. A lot of people, good people, are putting themselves at risk every day. First responders, nurses, doctors, heck – grocery store employees. People have lost their jobs. It is a scary and uncertain time.

STUDENT 1: Yes, we understand that. And we appreciate it. We do. But we would also like more than memories of binge watching shows we've already seen, eating junk food, and the four walls of our bedrooms as the highlights of our senior year.

STUDENT 2: You just described my dream.

STUDENT 3: Or a prison.

STUDENT 1: I read an article that many college athletes are being given consideration in regards to extending their eligibility. We would like to be given similar consideration.

PRINCIPAL: You want another year of high school?

STUDENT 9: Never. This has been like living a nightmare on loop. High school. It's like a movie you have such high expectations for, only to be crushed by the reality of its soul-sucking mediocrity. It's not so bad that you can laugh at it, even though it is trying to be serious in its ill-fitting ruffled tuxedo and clown shoes. You sit through it. It isn't overtly horrible, so you can't ask for a refund.

And then, when there are finally some good parts, they don't last long, and then the screen goes black.

STUDENT 5: It's not that bad. You just need to get involved.

STUDENT 9: Sure. With a t-shirt launcher and a confetti canon we can save the world.

STUDENT 5: Hey, that confetti canon wasn't cheap and we won't get the deposit back.

STUDENT 9: You're a real environmentalist, aren't you? At least your garbage is rainbow-colored.

STUDENT 5: I get it. You don't like rallies. You don't have school spirit. I can't force that on you or anyone. And I don't want to. I just wish you'd consider what a kind word and some positive energy can do for our world.

STUDENT 9: Keeping it real. I know this is hard for the rest of you to grasp with your firm sense of belonging, but a lot of us just don't feel connected with our half-inch by half-inch plot of land in the yearbook and our firm sense of anonymity.

PRINCIPAL: You have a wonderful vocabulary.

STUDENT 9: Why don't I have better grades, join Speech and Debate, and sit in the student section for games? That's really what you're asking, isn't it? A smart kid with no ambition. The worst kind.

STUDENT 3: Why did you agree to be a part of this? If you don't care about any of it.

STUDENT 9: I care. I just – You don't get it.

STUDENT 3: I get it. You just want a reason to be disconnected, isolated. COVID-19 gives you the perfect excuse. Why don't you just leave this meeting and go to some dark corner and molt.

STUDENT 9: You think I have the potential for growth. Thank you.

STUDENT 3: After you shed your horrible attitude.

PRINCIPAL: I'm not exactly sure what you want. I admire this, in theory. This is what I am supposed to be doing after all. Helping students. But perhaps we would all be better served by rescheduling this once you all get on the same page.

STUDENT 1: We are. On the same page. Here is what we would like. When this is over and the public solitude decree is lifted, we

would like to have some, not all, of our important life events take place.

STUDENT 2: I love the idea of being a twenty-two-year-old at my prom. I think they call that a chaperone.

STUDENT 3: The idea that we will be in quarantine that long is ridiculous.

STUDENT 9: Hey, Debate Club, ask the dinosaurs about that. Or any of the hundreds of nearly extinct species. Maybe it's our turn. Did you ever consider that? That maybe we, like the selfish children we are, just ran through all the earth's resources like a kid goes through tokens at a Chuck E. Cheese.

PRINCIPAL: This is a tremendously difficult time. There is no arguing with that. I can't make any promises, especially when I don't have a timeline. We could be in quarantine until...

STUDENT 3: Until when?

PRINCIPAL: I can't even guess.

STUDENT 3: Do you have information that you're not sharing with us?

STUDENT 5: Is there something we should know?

STUDENT 2: Please tell me there are still chocolate chip cookies in the world. At least the regular-sized ones. I can fuse them together to create an über cookie!

STUDENT 1: If you know something and you're not telling us...

PRINCIPAL: You're smart young people. You're plugged into the same information I am. I don't know anything I haven't shared. And it sucks. It really does. I think you all know that I have a daughter who is graduating with your class. I have thought about this moment, dreamed about it for a long time. I wanted to read her name at graduation. Hug her. Not watch her graduate in some virtual ceremony streaming on the internet, but in an actual physical place. For a lot of our families and their kids, this is the biggest moment of their lives. And now it may never happen.

STUDENT 2: I have a playlist. For prom. And lights. Not good ones. Okay, basically like a disco ball you would buy for a three-year-old. But check this out!

STUDENT 2 starts to play a song, there are flashing lights and the other STUDENTS start to dance. This goes on for several seconds and then PRINCIPAL even

joins in the dance. After a minute or so STUDENT 2 fades the music and turns off the flashing lights.

STUDENT 8: Silent disco. Remember that. I mean it's super bizarre to walk into a party and everyone is dancing to nothing. At least that's what it seems like to the person who doesn't have the headphones on. Do you think if someone who visited from another world or hit their head before all this started and just woke up would feel similarly? "Where is everybody?" Like a dream. Or a nightmare. Entire cities, Las Vegas, Broadway, airports, stadiums...ghost towns. Invisible discos. Everyone dancing in quarantine.

STUDENT 2: Hey, we can be socially distanced and not completely alone.

PRINCIPAL: That was therapeutic, the dancing. If you can call what I did dancing. But it was fun. Thank you. We should do this again when you are ready to discuss specific issues.

STUDENT 1: Can we have some of our events take place after this is over?

PRINCIPAL: What do you mean? Like during the summer? Or early Fall?

STUDENT 1: Sometime. We want these moments. Some of them at least. Something to cling onto and give us hope.

PRINCIPAL: I can't make any promises. I don't even know when things will be back to normal.

STUDENT 8: I would like to perform one last time. Preferably as Luke-Skywalker-Hamlet.

STUDENT 9: I would like to get my skull and crossbones beanie back. The Dean took it.

STUDENT 10: Just to walk the hallways one last time. Walk to my classes.

STUDENT 2: To get all the extra chocolate chip cookies that are left over from lunch, when they're still warm, in those little cookie envelopes.

STUDENT 3: We qualified for State in Speech and Debate. I'd like to give my speech.

STUDENT 4: One last at-bat.

STUDENT 5: The rally, the one with the confetti canon. I know, rainbow garbage.

STUDENT 6 & STUDENT 7: Our last-first or first-last dance.

STUDENT 6: Not the whole thing even.

STUDENT 7: Just one song.

STUDENT 1: When I was little, I don't remember the exact age, I attended a graduation ceremony. There was something amazing about it. The anticipation, the buildup to that celebratory moment, when the graduates scream, hoot, rejoice, it happens. All the caps, the mortarboards, get launched into the sky. And there is an end and a beginning in the same moment. Like turning the last page of a beloved book. Or maybe, very likely, a book that you had a wide range of feelings about and wrestled with, struggled with, and now, half-unexpectedly it's done. There will be other books. But that one, the defining book at this point in your life, is finished.

STUDENT 10: One of my favorite memories was my eighth-grade promotion. And not even the ceremony, but getting ready. We all met in our homeroom classes and got into our robes and then stood in a long line with all our classmates in alphabetical order. Seems pretty mundane but the waiting together, the collective anticipation for this huge, scary, kind of amazing moment, was actually better than the moment itself.

PRINCIPAL: I think this has been very therapeutic and valuable on many levels. I really don't want to be callous here, but I'm still unsure what you're specifically asking for and I have another meeting coming up.

STUDENT 1: Maybe we're asking for too much. We want promises that you aren't able to give.

PRINCIPAL: I want to, kid. You know I do. I'm truly sorry.

STUDENT 1: I know you are Dad. I was just hoping you could give us something to look forward to.

STUDENT 2: Dad? Dad. Dad!

STUDENT 1: Come on. You knew. Everyone knows. I'm the principal's kid.

STUDENT 3: Yeah, of course we knew.

STUDENT 2: Daaaaaad. Dad, Dad, Dad. Wow.

PRINCIPAL: I know this for sure, this will end and life will return to what it was. Maybe not exactly. But we won't be in quarantine. Not forever. Not even for that much longer.

STUDENT 1: Dad, what if I asked you to make us a promise. A promise that we would get one day. We'll call it a one-day-promise.

PRINCIPAL: What does that entail, exactly?

STUDENT 1: When this is over, no matter when it is, we get one day on our actual physical campus. There is a graduation, maybe even a dance at night. The clubs, sports, and activities get to meet one last time. It won't be ideal. But it will be something. Probably not games, plays, rallies, debates, but a chance to walk the field, stage, hallways, one last time. It will be something. Can you promise us that one day?

PRINCIPAL: I want to be able to. I really do. You've never asked for anything special from me, never made me your dad when I was your principal. You've received no special treatment. I want to be able to give this to all of you, all of our students. All I can say is that I will check with the higher ups and see what they say.

STUDENT 4: The sign of a great hitter is that they keep an at-bat alive. They don't leave the batter's box without fighting off pitches, taking a ball that might be a tad outside even when it appears as eye-poppingly good as a batting practice pitch. Fifteen pitches later, they're still in the box. And even if they groundout, pop-out, or strikeout, they extended that at-bat. There are so many benefits that come from extending an at-bat. For the batter's teammates.

PRINCIPAL: What are you saying?

STUDENT 4: We aren't going to leave the batter's box without keeping this at-bat alive for as long as we can.

PRINCIPAL: I'm not sure what I can do.

STUDENT 3: You can promise to give us one day and stand by that promise.

PRINCIPAL: I would love nothing more than to do just that.

STUDENT 9: Then do it! You can. You know you can. Sure, it's a risk. But the reward is far greater.

STUDENT 3: Why do you care all of a sudden?

STUDENT 9: Everyone doesn't care in the same way.

STUDENT 3: I respect that. Very true. Maybe we filibuster until we get our day.

STUDENT 2: I can read chocolate chip cookie recipes. There are a lot of them on the internet. Near infinity.

STUDENT 3: I can give my speech over and over and over...

STUDENT 6 & STUDENT 7: We can profess our unconditional love for each other.

STUDENT 7: Which can cause nausea, and in some cases vomiting to those people incapable of love.

STUDENT 6 and STUDENT 7 keep repeating "I loveyouloveyouloveyou" until PRINCIPAL speaks.

PRINCIPAL: I wish there was something I could do but I really have to go.

STUDENT 1: We know. You have another meeting.

PRINCIPAL: I am doing the best I can. I know it probably doesn't feel like that from your perspective. But I am trying. Countries are suffering, companies are suffering, and yes, individual people are suffering. My grandparents lived through the Great Depression and the Second World War. Every generation has its challenges. Recession, war, famine, and disease. This is your turn to stand up and persevere, endure, and rise above. When this is all over, what will we have learned? Will we be better people, a better society because of this? We answer that question with our actions. What will your answer be?

STUDENT 1: Spoken like a former history teacher.

PRINCIPAL: We are all students of history. Or we should be. You know this, you hear me say it all the time, at home, in the car, everywhere. You either continue to learn from history...

STUDENT 1: Or continue to get punished by the lessons you should have learned.

PRINCIPAL: You remember.

STUDENT 1: It's like a pop song refrain.

PRINCIPAL: That bad?

STUDENT 1: Worse. A pop song that stayed atop the charts for seventeen years.

STUDENT 9: Like hearing “Miss Independent” for going on two decades.

STUDENT 2: That was my jam. In the cradle. Thank you, Kelly Clarkson!

STUDENT 1: I respect what you are saying, Dad. I do. The reason I got this group of students together and not just my friends-

STUDENT 2: Ouch.

STUDENT 1: Sorry, not like that. My point is that these students represent our community. And the overwhelming consensus is that we want to have our day. I mean, ideally, we'd like to have more. But we are willing to compromise. Nothing is not a compromise. Accepting that, at our twenty-year reunion, we will look back on this and be proud that we survived it, is not a compromise. Rolling over for a two-month nap and forgetting all the things that we've been told our entire lives that are supposed truly matter, don't in fact matter at all. The things that many of us have invested in, while carrying our twenty-pound backpacks, getting less sleep than we should, and jumping through the hoops that we were supposed to in order to get this shimmering golden ticket, a V.I.P. front row seat with backstage passes to our future. All of it has to amount to something.

PRINCIPAL: It will. Just not on the timeline you were expecting.

STUDENT 1: If you say...

PRINCIPAL: Life is...

STUDENT 1 & PRINCIPAL: ...an exercise in delayed gratification.

STUDENT 1: We understand that. We have been eating our broccoli before our ice cream for our whole lives.

PRINCIPAL: Sorry. I love you. I care about all of you. But there is nothing I can do.

PRINCIPAL leaves the meeting.

STUDENT 9: He dipped. Did he just dip?

STUDENT 2: Wow, he really turned the tables on us. I mean, I have “had a meeting” in so many classes that my teachers think I have a medical condition.

STUDENT 3: You do have a medical condition. A psychiatric condition.

STUDENT 4: I can help with that. Nothing like getting hit with an eighty-five mile an hour fastball to bring you to your senses.

STUDENT 2: Is that a threat? Did you just threaten to assault me with a spherical piece of rubber or cork, wrapped in yarn, and covered in cow?

STUDENT 4: You even make that sound lame.

STUDENT 2: You know I'm not scared of you, right?

STUDENT 4: Easy to say when you're not actually in front of me.

STUDENT 2: That's sad. The Coronavirus even ruined bullying.

STUDENT 10: Maybe it's the new bully?

STUDENT 3: There is probably some truth to that. If we look at history, there has often been the opportunity for people to come together to fight a common enemy. It just so happens that soap and hand sanitizer are the bullets and bombs of this fight.

STUDENT 5: My mom is a doctor and she is doing her best to fight this. She is self-quarantining until this is over. In a motel across the street from the hospital. We video chat every night but it's not the same.

STUDENT 8: I'm sorry. Your mom is on the frontline of this fight.

STUDENT 9: Look, I know the principal is your dad but I'm glad he left.

STUDENT 1: I get it. It sucks.

STUDENT 9: That's not what I meant. I'm glad because this is our moment. We should be the ones to defend it, reinvent it even.

STUDENT 3: What are you suggesting?

STUDENT 9: We all know how graduations go. The ceremony. Weddings, graduations, funerals. They are landmarks of our human journey.

STUDENT 3: Wise words. Keep it coming...

STUDENT 9: I know, not bad for a near-flunky. What is a graduation, a commencement? A transition between stages, chapters of life, a symbolic rite of passage. There is a processional. Go ahead. Everyone walk away from your screen and walk back.

STUDENT 4: Really?

STUDENT 9: Yes, really. Walk away and walk back.



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