

Originally produced in The Blank Theatre Young Playwrights Festival, Los Angeles, CA.

Tasmanian Devils

A Play in One Act

by

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Characters

VINCENT PALLINI: Male, 17. Scruffy brown hair. Anxious and contemplative. Presenting a biology project.

PENELOPE RISMARK: Female, 16. Brown ponytail. Somewhat condescending and neurotic.

NANCY ASTON: Female, 17. Black hair. Intellectual and individualistic.

MR. DRUNDEN: Male, 42. Burned out teacher.

SPENCER VALNER: Male, 17. Faceless, hooded. Could be anyone.

BILL PECKERSON: Male, 39. News anchor.

MARISSA LAIDE: Female, 35. News anchor.

Setting

A science classroom in an American public school.

Time

The present day.

(Lights up on a classroom. In the center, a SmartBoard showing a projected slideshow presentation. The title slide is labeled “Tasmanian Devils: by Vincent Palini. AP Biology, Period 3.” The student, VINCENT, stands near stage right nervously, holding index cards. His peers - PENELOPE and NANCY - sit at desks. MR. DRUNDEN, the teacher, sits at his desk by stage right.)

VINCENT

Hi, this is my presentation. I did it on, um, the Tasmanian devil.

(changes to a slide labeled “Background Info”)

Ok, so, the Tasmanian devil is an endangered marsupial that used to be native to mainland Australia but now -

(Penelope raises her hand.)

VINCENT

Penelope?

PENELOPE

Isn't this just supposed to be on mammals and insects?

VINCENT

Marsupials are mammals. I think.

(Looks to Mr. Drunden, who's trying to read a newspaper covertly positioned on his lap.)

VINCENT

Anyway, the Tasmanian devil is currently endangered. This is because -

(drops his notes)

Damn - sorry, one second.

(Vincent bends down, picking up scattered index cards, We hear one deafening gunshot. Two more. Penelope screams. Vincent looks forward and stares blankly, a deer in headlights.)

NANCY

Someone lock the doors!

(No one moves. Nancy runs to the door and locks it.
Vincent turns to her.)

VINCENT

(Urgently)
Shit. Nancy, the lights.

(Nancy turns off the lights, dimming the room.
Everyone cowers on the floor of stage right, near
Mr. Drunden's desk.)

NANCY

(Panicked)
Aren't we supposed to have training or something to prepare for this?
(Nancy puts her head in her hands.)

PENELOPE

We had that lockdown drill back in September.

VINCENT

I say we hide near the door. If he comes in, we just tackle him. We outnumber him.

PENELOPE

That's assuming there's only one. Besides, this isn't an action movie, Vincent.

VINCENT

No, I've thought about this a lot. I think we could handle it. For real.

(Nancy turns to him,)

NANCY

You've fantasized about saving the school from an active shooter?

VINCENT

I mean, yeah. That's nothing really out of the ordinary.

NANCY

That's honestly so messed up.

VINCENT

It's messed up that we even need to think about it.

(Vincent cranes his neck, looking anxiously out the door. He sees nothing.)

VINCENT (cont'd)

Our phones are still in Mann's room. I can't even contact my family.

(Contemplative silence as the students realize they might not be able to say goodbye.)

PENELOPE

Who do you think it is?

NANCY

Are you seriously gossiping when we're about to die?

PENELOPE

(Indignantly)

I have a right to know who's trying to kill me. I think it's Spencer.

NANCY

It's not Spencer.

PENELOPE

He's mysteriously absent and isn't on the trip. I guarantee it, the last thing we see before we die is going to be that stupid green fucking hoodie of his.

VINCENT

Hey, Mr. Drunden? Are you okay?

(Mr. Drunden sits there, catatonic. The students do not know what to do.)

VINCENT (cont'd)

How's this even happening? The district literally just hired new security.

NANCY

Not enough.

(Pause.)

NANCY (cont'd)

I think it might be over. I don't hear anything.

PENELOPE

There's no way it's over. We'd hear an announcement, they wouldn't just let us wait like this.

NANCY

Not immediately, that wouldn't be for a while. Ten minutes, maybe twenty.

(Another gunshot fires, jolting Nancy. Vincent has no reaction.)

PENELOPE

(Quietly)

I don't want to die. I'm not ready.

(Long pause, accentuating Nancy's erratic breathing. Vincent stands up as if possessed by some strange spirit, eyes forward. His index cards remain on the floor. He clicks the remote, and a slide labeled "DNA" appears on the screen.)

VINCENT

The Tasmanian devil has 14 chromosomes and relatively low genetic diversity. Their allelic diversity is measured to be 2.7 to 3.3, and their heterozygosity is somewhere in between 0.386 and 0.467.

(Nancy's breathing slows. Everyone stares at the screen, desperate for a distraction. The slide changes to one labeled "birth," showing a picture of baby Tasmanian devils.)

VINCENT (cont'd)

(With growing confidence)

Okay, "birth." A mother Tasmanian devil can birth up to fifty young at a time, but almost every pup will die. The mother has four nipples, which is nowhere near enough to support all her children and most don't make it past the early stages of their lives. Hey, Mr. Drunden, you wanted an interactive element to this, right?

(Mr. Drunden nods weakly.)

VINCENT (cont'd)

Can anyone think of an organism that has similar parenting practices? Doesn't have to be from this unit, either.

NANCY

The U.S. government?

(Vincent cocks his head, bemused, smiling slightly.)

VINCENT

Not really what I... okay, actually, never mind. Why is that?

NANCY

So, we're the dying pups. The system is that we're destined to die while others get to live. It's like what we were learning about in the last unit: survival of the fittest. The pups that get to the nipple have the opportunity to thrive and grow, while we die and become forgotten.

PENELOPE

I don't know if that's a great metaphor, though. If four out of the 50 or so survive, it's kind of the opposite with America, right? We're the unlucky four to die - the other 46 get to live.

NANCY

I guess.

PENELOPE

I mean, that's kind of the problem with finding metaphors in nature. There isn't any hidden meaning in biology, it's just DNA and ribosomes and stuff. You're trying to find meaning where there is none.

NANCY

Well, if biology is the study of *life*, then where else can you find meaning?

(Vincent places the remote on Mr. Drunden's desk, joining everyone on the floor.)

PENELOPE

I might have one. My project was on the Phlebotomous pallens, this amphibious cockroach from India. The mother keeps her larvae under her wing cases wherever she goes. The wing cases protect them from harm and they feed by chewing parts of their mom's back, nourished by her blood.

NANCY

Jesus Christ, that's disgusting.

PENELOPE

Not any more disgusting than dying nipple-deprived baby rodents. But the cockroach is kind of like New Zealand, right? Remember that shooting? Five days and assault rifles were banned (snaps) like *that*.

VINCENT

But it's not like it requires any sacrifice. No one's eating the government's blood if they ban semi-autos or something to protect children in schools. Maybe kangaroos are a better metaphor, with the pouch and everything.

NANCY

Well, at least I have both of you beat for the grossest organism.

VINCENT

Dude, I really don't think you can get worse than Penelope's.

NANCY

Mine was on the Adactylum mite, this microscopic parasite. Basically, a female mite births a ton of children (gestures at Vincent), just like your Tasmanian devil. The thing is, they're all female except for one male. The male has to impregnate all of the females prior to their birth.

PENELOPE

I'm going to throw up, I swear to God.

NANCY

The male dies prior to his birth, but the females survive. The cycle continues with each female, and it just continues happening for all eternity.

PENELOPE

If you keep talking about the incest bugs, I'm going to kill you before Spencer does.

NANCY

(Agitated)
It's not Spencer.

(Vincent looks out the door, seeing nothing, lost in thought.)

VINCENT

I think I get it. So basically, the way I see it, the mother is the country. The motherland, right? And the male is whoever has the most influence -

PENELOPE

Like the patriarchy?

VINCENT

Not necessarily; I just mean the President, Chief Justice, Senate majority leader, whoever. His job is to keep the status quo, even if the status quo is parasites impregnating other parasites. It's disgusting and horrible, but it's the system.

(Vincent is electrified by his own revelation, standing up and beginning to pace around stage right.)

VINCENT (cont'd)

Eventually, the male parasite dies out. But the females are pregnant, and they ensure that the system continues. They're the new America, the nation ten, twenty, thirty, one hundred years from now, where the precedent is for nonstop bug incest, so why not continue the nonstop bug incest? The status quo won't end because it's the way it's always been.

PENELOPE

I still feel like there are less repulsive analogies out there.

VINCENT

It's a repulsive cycle. How is all this any less repulsive than the parasite thing? Why is there so much goddamn apathy?

(Long pause. He doesn't get an answer. Maybe there is none.)

PENELOPE

(Resigned)

No one's coming to save us.

VINCENT

I think I can hear sirens. If you listen really closely, they're there. We'll be okay. Eventually.

PENELOPE

But how long until they arrive?

(Stage right darkens, obscuring the characters. We hear footsteps. An dropped object clatters to the ground, but we don't see it. From stage right emerges a figure in a green hoodie, face hidden: SPENCER. He picks up the remote from the desk, slightly to the left of the darkened area. He points it at the board, holding it like a gun - CLICK. The "birth" slide of the Tasmanian devil slideshow shifts to a memo sent by the school principal. We hear the disembodied, monotone voice of MRS. HANSOT, the principal, as she reads the memo.)

MRS. HANSOT

Greetings, George Wingate Academy. Once again, we are all indescribably saddened to hear of the poor souls that passed on Thursday. I've been asked to remind you that our mental health services are finite and the counselors are a bit overwhelmed at the moment. Additionally, the administration has decided to extend final exams until next Wednesday to allow time to grieve. We believe this to be a reasonable -

(CLICK - Spencer "shoots" the screen again. The content changes to a tweet from the incumbent president of the United States. We hear the disembodied, monotone voice of PRESIDENT TENSEN as he reads the tweet.)

PRESIDENT TENSEN

I am incredibly saddened to hear of the tragedy at George Wingate Academy this past Thursday, in addition to the recent shooting in Ohio. However, we must ensure that we don't make any

irrational decisions just because it's an emotional time. Americans, your Second Amendment rights are under attack.

(CLICK - Spencer once again changes the screen, this time to the artificial background of a news channel. From stage left and stage right, enter MARISSA and BILL.)

MARISSA

Today marks the one-year anniversary of the George Wingate Academy shooting of last June. Though time has passed, we are all very saddened by this tragic event. Exactly one year after the shooting that claimed the lives of so many, the George Wingate Gun Safety Act has failed to receive the required amount of votes to pass in Congress. Bill, your thoughts?

BILL

Well, Marissa, I -

(Spencer clicks once again. The screen changes to another news background, and Bill abruptly changes the topic.)

BILL (cont'd)

The nation is once again in mourning as students' lives were lost in a tragic school shooting yesterday. Not long after January's Louisiana shooting -

(Spencer clicks again. The screen stays the same, but Bill immediately interrupts himself to begin speaking about a different topic.)

BILL (cont'd)

We are incredibly saddened to hear about today's shooting at Roddie Winsbrick High. The state of Oregon has had a rough year, with three tragic -

(Spencer clicks again. The screen stays the same.)

MARISSA

As the year of 2027 comes to a close, we want to pay our respects to the tragic school shootings that have claimed the souls of so many children in the last twelve months. Today, we're speaking to expert Bob Willingham on the seemingly never-ending -

(CLICK - Spencer shoots the screen with the remote. Arm extended, he continues clicking. The screen keeps changing to different news backgrounds of all different colors, a rainbow of devastation. Bill and Marissa talk incessantly, but no sound comes out. The frequency of the clicks sounds like gunfire.)

(BLACKOUT)

(END OF PLAY)