



“Rhythym of Dread” by Denise Dominguez
3rd Place, Short Play 16-18

Rhythm of Dread**Characters**

SAM: Teenage high school student. Nonspecific gender, any race. Has tendencies to double and triple check most things they do or prepare.

ENGLISH TEACHER: Teacher, late thirties. Nonspecific gender, any race.

ALEX: Teenage high school student. Preferably Hispanic/Latino, nonspecific gender. Friendly, kind, optimistic. SAM's friend.

STUDENT 1: A student in the classroom, female, any race.

STUDENT 2: A student in the classroom, nonspecific gender, any race.

STUDENT 3: A student in the classroom, male, any race.

Setting

A high school student's room

A high school classroom

A high school hallway

Scene 1

At Rise:

(A soft and cool colored light rises. SAM is packing their bag to go to school.)

SAM: 6:30 AM, here we go. Another day, another battle in my head. Another list to check and double check. Triple check. *Check.* Should I just stay? Maybe it'd be better that way, I mean, I'd hate it less. I'd have less of a pain in my chest. That would be better. Maybe I'm overthinking? I don't like overthinking *(beat)* *(light short laugh sounding almost like a sigh)* I say while *overthinking*. But, hey, I can't afford another absence. Actually, I probably can't even afford being late.

(SAM is ready, backpack on. Lights go down into darkness.)

(Lights rise again, this time to a classroom. Desks are set in a 3 x 3 grid, a blackboard and a teacher in front of them. There is a sideways view of the classroom. Students are sitting quietly. SAM gets up as a dark cool purple washes over the rest of the scene, they stand out due to a spotlight that rises on them. Only SAM is moving, everyone else is still.)

SAM: 8:30, first period. Not a fan of being up this early at a class, just to forget it and drown it out in the end. Subconscious. Waves of noise come from time to time, into my mind, not very consistent. Sometimes they're nice, peaceful, like the noise of the ocean. I like it. Other times, they crash with a storm, rumbling, thunder and all. And, those times, no matter what I do, I drown *in* them. 'What if' scenarios fill my mind. 'What if' I didn't check enough times for my lunch? Did I forget it? 'What if' I miss the bus today? 'What if' I fail a test today? 'What if' I lose a friend today? 'What if' I can't hide fast enough? 'What if' they find me? 'What if' my phone dies? 'What if' I can't send, "I love you," one last time? 'What if' I can't say 'goodbye?' 'What if?'

(Bell rings, the wash fades, and movement starts again. Only SAM is still. Lights go out.)

Scene 2

(Lights rise again, setting is implied to be a hallway, with lockers. The lighting is warmer.)

(SAM is standing center stage and seems dazed, but is snapped out of it by ALEX who enters from stage right.)

ALEX: Hey, how's it going?

SAM: Huh? Oh, hey Alex. Uh, it's okay.

ALEX: Like, okay okay? You look a little pale if I'm being honest.

SAM: No, no. You know how it is. Thought I left my ID at home, "*oh no.*"

ALEX: You didn't though, right?

SAM: No! Or did I? No wait ... *(takes some time to think)* No, I didn't.

ALEX: Okay, okay good to know.

SAM: Don't do that to me.

ALEX: Got it.

(They laugh for a second. Laughing subsides.)

SAM: Hey, so, uh, could you help me with the Spanish work? Accent marks are, like, not for me.

ALEX: Sure, we can meet during lunch. It's not just you, accent marks are kinda ...

(Lights fade while ALEX and SAM are talking and walking offstage.)

Scene 3

(Lights rise again, another classroom. Same desk layout. SAM enters from stage right into the classroom, this time students are talking and moving more. SAM sits down at a desk, the bell rings. A wash over the classroom again, same color as last time, everything stills again. Spotlight on SAM as they get up and start talking.)

SAM: Second period, class drones on. I can't help but gaze at the clock every other minute. Why am I here if I won't learn? Oh well. At least the waves aren't overflowing and I'm not drowning. Not yet at least. In trying to focus on the dampened ramblings of the teacher, a bit escapes me because,

(A student reaches in his bag in the background, he is lit up by a light to match SAM)

SAM: 'Why is that kid reaching into his bag?' *(beat)* oh, he was just getting gum.

(Light on the other student goes out, only the spotlight on SAM remains)

SAM: I'm sorry. You know, it's fine, I'm fine and it'll be okay. Just, *one, two, three, breathe in, one, two, three, breathe out.* The seconds are passing as I'm counting. Almost. Just a few more minutes, and *(bell rings)* ... there it is.

(Movement starts again, wash fades. SAM grabs their bag, and walks off stage right from where they entered. Lights go out.)

Scene 4

(Lights rise again, a hallway again, same warm lighting as last time. SAM is in thought.)

ALEX walks onstage from stage left to meet with SAM center stage. Once again ALEX intervenes.)

ALEX: Hey, hey, you feeling better?

SAM: Ah, yeah. Yeah, I'm okay.

ALEX: Hmm. *(nods)*

(There is a bit of a pause, silence. SAM looks like they're holding something back. They are. SAM eventually speaks.)

SAM: Okay, no. I'm not exactly the best right now.

ALEX: What's up? Can I help with anything?

SAM: *(Deep breath)* Okay. Well, it's not really as big a deal as I'm making it if I'm being honest. Am I? I am. I mean, it's not like anything happened, I just overthink everything into a big deal and it's really nothing. Sorry.

ALEX: Well, it can't be that *(thinks for a second)* not big of a deal if it's got you like this. I won't push, I don't want to. But seriously, if it's bothering you—

SAM: I mean, I saw this person reach into a bag ... I just don't want to worry about ... You know? I, ... I just want to sleep. I wanna go home.

ALEX: Oh. Do you want to talk about it? It's okay.

SAM: No, no, it's okay. Sorry. You're right, it's okay. It really is. I really don't want to bother you. You probably already have enough to deal with as is and I'll just make it worse, I—

ALEX: Hey, it's okay. If you need to let it out, *let it out*. It'll be like a weight off your shoulders. Just know, I'll *always* be here for you. Just know that, alright? Maybe we could go to the library or something, just until you feel better, you know? I'm pretty sure they'll understand.

SAM: Thanks, really, it means a lot. But it's fine. You'll be— *we'll* be late. Or absent ... I mean I'm only one tardy away from detention, and I'll just cause you trouble. Plus, you have an important test next hour, right? You probably don't wanna miss that. Or, uh, you'll probably want as much time as possible. *(a deep breath)* It's okay, I can handle it. It's lunch after this hour anyway. Just a little bit longer.

ALEX: Okay then, you sure?

SAM: *(Thumbs up)* Yep. Don't worry about it. Thanks though.

ALEX: Alright ... sounds good. Just take care, alright? See you in a bit.

(ALEX and SAM wave at each other weakly while walking opposite directions off stage.)

Lights go out once again.)

Scene 5

(Lights go up again, in a third classroom with the same layout. SAM takes a seat, and the lesson begins)

ENGLISH TEACHER: Good morning, please open your notebooks to the next available page.

Today we will be reviewing—

(Colored wash over the classroom, a spotlight on SAM. The colored wash is a warmer purple this time. SAM, still sitting, simply turns to face the audience to talk. Everything else is quiet and still, except for the teacher still showing movement.)

SAM: Third period. English. One of the reasons I don't regret coming to school as much. There's something about looking at words, how they work together to make sense, and it *just makes sense*. I just love how it rolls off the tongue, language. So many words, so many meanings and nuances to explore. One thing I can have control over is how I write. I write language with words, and it's nice because it just *is* and it sounds right, *just right*. I don't have to worry about overthinking since language is easy to nitpick, it's easy to pick at, pick everything apart. Overthinking is nice with language. From the order of the words in a sentence, to an extra comma.

(A spotlight shines on ENGLISH TEACHER as they speak, seemingly continuing SAM's thoughts.)

ENGLISH TEACHER: We *could* just let it be, or we could analyze it. We could delve into the *why*.

SAM: Into the very depths of human thought. Into the *why* of the flow. The *why* of the words themselves.

ENGLISH TEACHER: Why would the author write this specific work in that specific manner? What does that reflect on the text?

SAM and ENGLISH TEACHER: It might seem pointless to do this,

SAM: I think it's riveting.

ENGLISH TEACHER: But at the very least, you'll come out of the analysis experience understanding a bit more about others and yourself.

SAM: *Wanting* to understand more about everything. Because in language lies communication. Message, rhythm, feeling, opinion, *passion*. All transmitted through words. And, for a moment, all of those emotions well up and you can just feel all that was put into those words. All those feelings, of wanting to be heard and understood. In that moment, you understand. And it just clicks. It clicks.

(The sound of a gun cocking.)

(The colored wash slowly dissipates, and everyone looks around frantically. It is silent.

Everyone slowly hides away from the door and any place allowing visibility, careful not to make noise.)

(A gunshot. A colored wash over the scene, it is darker and a cooler, bluer, tone than other times.)

SAM: *(in tears, breathy and trying to remain calm)* Third period, still. Not what I expected. I didn't expect this. I couldn't expect this. There's a line between overthinking and expecting, a subtle line. You can overthink as much as you want, try to expect as much as possible. But, more often than not, you won't expect what you overthink. Classic, "right in front of you," scenario, classic "in hindsight," scenario. Classic, "I knew it," scenario.

STUDENT 1: I wonder if this'll be on the news. Will my parents see? If anyone's out there, *please*, just let this end soon. I don't know what I did to deserve this, but I just want to see my parents again.

STUDENT 2: My sister's in another classroom. My sister's in *another classroom*. Which class was it? I think she can make it out. If I'm not able to, at least she will. She'll be okay.

STUDENT 3: I think my phone is on silent. Right? I... I don't remember. It's too bright to take it out though. I can only hope.

SAM: My mind is flooded, waves refusing to cease. Waves that wet my eyes. Waves of *'What if's* that turn into a flood of *'I should have's*.

STUDENT 1: 'I should have' said "I love you," this morning.

SAM: 'I should have' gone with Alex.

STUDENT 3: 'I should have' faked being sick.

STUDENT 2: 'I should have' stayed home.

STUDENT 3: 'I should have' left when I had the chance.

STUDENT 1: 'I should have' made sure my phone was completely charged.

STUDENT 2: 'I should have' seen this coming.

SAM: 'I should have' said "thank you," or at least "goodbye."

ALL STUDENTS: *(Voices cracking, like a whimper) 'I should have.'*

SAM: Yet despite all those '*I should have*'s and all of those feelings, despite the rhythm of my bursting heart and my flooding mind, despite all of that, I can't find the words. I just don't think I can transmit this feeling of dread culminating to my quivering lips.

(SAM cries, softly, choking. A lot is going through their mind. Varying cries, from soft to sobs, can be heard from the other students. There is no sound other than crying.)

(Lights fade out, as sobbing lessens. End of Play.)