



Sample Pages from
Stressed

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STRESSED

A TEEN SYMPHONY IN ONE ACT BY
Alan Haehnel



Stressed

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Characters

1M+2W+1 Either

ALEX (M or F)

MINDY (F)

JOSH (M)

CARMEN (F)

Set

Four platforms of varying heights, one for each performer. Each may have a designated light that comes on when he or she speaks, or the lights may remain at full throughout the play.

ALEX, MINDY, JOSH and CARMEN stand on the stage, on platforms of varying heights. Each may have a designated light that comes on when he or she speaks, or the lights may remain at full throughout the play.

ALEX: Pardon me for saying so, but I am...

CARMEN: You want to know how I feel? I feel...

JOSH: Yo, Dude, I've got to tell you that I am majorly...

MINDY: My life? Right now? One word:

ALL: Stressed!

JOSH: It's my girlfriend.

ALEX: It's school.

MINDY: It's my parents.

CARMEN: It's my coach.

JOSH: She...

ALEX: It's...

MINDY: They're...

CARMEN: He's...

ALL: Stressing me out!

ALEX: I am astounded. Do you know what I think? I think every teacher in the school gets together for this sadistic little meeting. They probably have, I don't know, bran muffins and coffee at these little get-togethers, who knows? Probably on a Tuesday, yeah, I'm guessing on a Tuesday afternoon they all meet up in the library. The agenda goes like this: Item 1. How to make the students' lives hell. Item 2: How to make the students' lives hell. Items 3-20. You guessed it — how to make the students' lives...

CARMEN: Hell, what does he want from me? Listen, I play hard. Ask anybody. I hustle. I work my buns off every game and every practice. Nobody works harder than I do. Oh, sure, I know anybody can just say that, anybody can fool themselves into thinking they work hard, but when you've got everybody telling you — not just your parents, but everybody — telling you about how hard they see you working, then you kind of get the feeling it's true, don't you think? And let me tell you why I do work so

hard. Because a year ago, when I asked coach why I wasn't getting as much playing time as some of the other girls, he told me, "Because you're lazy." Well, I'll tell you what, that hit me hard. That really got to me.

JOSH: You know what really got to me? Last week, right, she tells me, "Josh, I feel like we just don't have anything in common." I mean, like, what's that supposed to mean? We don't have anything in common. Right. So I say to her, "Baby, we got each other in common." She shakes her head like she does when she's telling me I'm all lame, you know, so I come in close to her and I grab her and I say, "We have our love in common." Dude, she, like, pulls away and says to me, "That's not enough, Josh." So I see the whole convo isn't going too hot, so my motto is, when things are looking glum, whenever possible, call on the Beatles. So I did. I said, "Not enough?" (He hums in tune to the chorus of "Love is All You Need.") Do-dee-do-dee-do, Do-dee-do-dee-do... Come on, Hon, sing it with me... you know the words! Dude, I thought she was going to slap me into next week.

MINDY: I thought they were going to ground me for life! And I didn't do anything. Seriously. I mean, okay, I forgot to go pick up my little sister from her kindergarten class, but she survived. She played with blocks the whole hour she waited. The teacher said so. My parents practically called me a criminal because Meemie played with the alphabet blocks for an hour after kindergarten. Big deal. You should have heard the lecture. Actually, you shouldn't have. It would have killed you off. All the big words: responsibility, loyalty, honesty, sincerity, and seven hundred other words ending with "ty" I can't remember right now.

ALL: Sssss...

All but ALEX continue to "sss" under ALEX'S speech.

ALEX: Some people equate the sound of stress with fingernails on a chalkboard. Most chalkboards, however, have been replaced. The squeak of a dry-erase marker on a white board — that is the sound of stress. Or a pencil scratching on a piece of paper, or the keys of a computer clicking. All of these methods can produce more homework, more torturous assignments to fill my afternoons and evenings and nights with pain. These are the modern-day sounds of stress.

ALL: Trrrr...

All but CARMEN continue to "rrr" under CARMEN'S speech.

CARMEN: Stress has a taste. The taste of sweat. The coppery taste in your throat when you've been running wind sprint after wind sprint. The taste of grass as you do push-ups, of chalk from the lines on the field, of rubber from your mouth-guard. But you need one other ingredient to get the exact taste of stress. You have to add in the taste of all the rotten words you want to scream at your coach but you just don't dare or you'll sit the bench for the rest of the season.

ALL: (*pronounced as a short "e"*): Eeeee...

All but JOSH continue to "eee" under JOSH'S speech.

JOSH: Dude, believe it or not, stress smells like the perfume my girlfriend wears. I can't remember what it's called. I better find out before Christmas 'cause it's on the list, you know. Anyway, it drives me crazy. Whenever I smell it, I know she's around and I love it and I hate it, you know? Because when I sniff that perfume, I start thinking about where she puts it... Dude, behind her ears, on her neck. Whoa, I'm powerless. Whoa, I'm whipped.

ALL: Ssss...

All but MINDY continue to "sss" under MINDY'S speech.

MINDY: The color of stress is light blue. That's the color I had to paint the hallway and the living room and the baseboards and the top part of the family room. Two coats, or I couldn't go out with my friends last weekend. I hated that color. By the end of last Saturday, I wanted to paint my parents light blue. It took all of my willpower to not dump that last half gallon right on their heads. Red isn't it. Or black. Light blue. Stress is a shade of light, disgusting... Blue!

ALL: (*sudden, shouted cheer*) S-T-R... E-S-S: We don't like it, so give it a rest. Nooooo stress!

JOSH: Check this out.

MINDY: Let me tell you something.

CARMEN: Listen up.

ALEX: Lend me your ears!

CARMEN: He's always telling me he doesn't like my attitude. He doesn't know anything about my attitude. Do you want to know what my attitude is? My attitude is, get the job done. That's what I'm out there thinking. I have to get the job done. The ball's in

front of me, my job is to get to it before the defence does. I try my best just to get it done.

ALEX: I can never get it all done. I mean, once the teachers have conspired against me, have had their meeting to coordinate the week's scheduled homework torture, there is no humanly possible way I can get it done. This is what I had last week, on Wednesday night: All-State band practice for two hours, physics for two hours, English for an hour and a half, French for an hour, SAT vocabulary review for an hour, and filling out a scholarship application for an hour. That totals, ladies and gentlemen, 8.5 hours of homework! That, to use the vernacular, is nuts!

MINDY: They're completely insane. I mean, they claim that they were young once, too, but I actually don't believe that. How could they have ever been young and suspect me of all the things they do? If they had been young, they would know it's practically impossible to shoplift, do drugs, drink like a fish, have rampant sex, vandalize tombstones and sneak out of the house all while IM-ing for a thousand hours a day and, by the way, still earn decent grades and get in by 9:00 on school nights. They must think I'm super-delinquent or something. I just...

JOSH: Don't get it, you know what I'm saying? I spend time with her. I like to spend time with her. I mean, who wouldn't, as long as you're, you know, a heterosexual Dude? She's gorgeous. She's funny. She kisses great. Her laugh is, like, angels laughing, you know? So after school I hang out at her house. Her mom says she might as well adopt me. We hang out during breaks at school. We hang out on the weekends. You know what she says to me? She says, "We never spend time together." I said to her, like, "What, do want me to get liquefied so you can put me in an I.V. bottle?" Dude! I mean...

MINDY: I mean...

ALEX: I mean...

CARMEN: I mean...

Each vocalizes a noise of frustration.

JOSH: Grrr!

MINDY: Aaaah!

ALEX: Oooo!

CARMEN: Eeee!

ALL: Do you know what all of this stress is doing to me?

ALEX: I get these migraine headaches.

CARMEN: I get these terrible nightmares.

JOSH: I get mega-bad acne.

MINDY: I get the worst menstrual cramps.

ALEX: I always know they're coming, my headaches, because these shimmery spots appear in my peripheral vision. Remember Fantasia? The old Disney movie, not the woman who won American Idol. It's one of the few shows my parents would let me watch because it featured classical music which was supposed to increase brain activity. The movie, that is, not American Idol. Anyway, there's this one segment in Fantasia where they have these sort of dancing water lilies. Or mushrooms. Or both. Anyway, they have some sort of dancing plant. The spots remind me of those.

CARMEN: In the nightmare, I'm standing in the goal. I've never played goalie in my life, but in the nightmare, there I am, and I can see the team way off in the distance, kicking a soccer ball. Only, the ball is huge. Even from a distance, I can tell that it's huge because, if it were regular size, I would only see a white dot, but in my dream the ball, even the black shapes on it — I can see it really clearly. I have this gross feeling in my stomach, like I know something terrible is about to happen. Plus, I know that I'm in the wrong position, but my cleats are glued to that spot, standing in the goal. I'm thinking, "Why am I here, playing defence in the goal? I'm a striker! I have to get over there with the team!" I can't move, though. I'm stuck.

JOSH: Seriously, whenever she, like, brushes me off, I break out unbelievable. I mean, even though I know it's pretty much a psychological thing and all, after we have a fight, I go home and I scrub my face big time because I know the zits are on the way. I take that old washcloth and I run the water so it's super-steaming hot, you know what I mean? And then, I soak that washcloth in the water so it's practically burning, right? I take a big breath, Dude, and then — really quick before I even have time to think about it, just like when you're trying to turn a big trick on your skateboard — I slap that sizzling-hot washcloth up on my face. Aaaah! When I take the thing off, it's like an instant sunburn, Dude.

MINDY: The bloating comes first. Have you ever seen a dead fish that's been in the water for a few days, how it floats upside down and

its belly is all puffed up? That's what I feel like. And PMS? If my parents have been hassling me, that time of the month for me becomes a tornado. A volcano. A hurricane. Think of a natural disaster, any natural disaster, then multiply it by 200. That's what I'm talking about. So, of course, I'm acting like a major witch with a capital B because my parents are being complete jerks to me, so guess what? They start getting after me even worse because of my attitude. When I try to tell them it's my period that's put me in a bad mood, my mother smiles this amazingly disgusting smile and says, "Well, that's the curse of womanhood, Sweetheart," which only makes me want to throw her bowling ball through the china closet.

ALEX: After the spots stop dancing, I know I'm going to get hit. Oh, the pain!

CARMEN: Suddenly, the ball starts rolling toward me. It's huge and getting huger!

JOSH: Yo, it doesn't matter that I scalded my face off the night before. I wake up and there they are!

MINDY: After the happiness of the bloating and a lovely case of PMS, here come the cramps!

ALEX: Right behind my left eye...

CARMEN: Coming right at me...

JOSH: Sprouting all over my face...

MINDY: In my back, in my sides, in my belly...

ALEX: Like a jackhammer...

CARMEN: Like a steamroller...

JOSH: Like a bunch of pregnant fleas...

MINDY: Like my guts are a wet towel somebody's twisting and twisting...

ALL: The pain!

ALEX: The agony!

CARMEN: The terror!

JOSH: The embarrassment!

MINDY: The scumbag who even dares to suggest that being a man is in any way harder than being a woman!

ALL: So, because of the stress...

ALEX: I end up staying home from school, locked in my room with shades over all of the windows.

CARMEN: All the next day, I keep thinking about the nightmare. At practice, even, I can't get it out of my head.

JOSH: I call up my girlfriend and tell her I just need to be alone for awhile.

MINDY: I chew on the bedpost until I snap it off.

ALL: Which...

CARMEN: Of course...

ALL: Only makes things worse. (pause) Much worse. (they all breathe a big sigh together) You want to know what else?

During the next segment, everyone talks simultaneously, but they all get to the bold words at the same time. The effect should be of chaos as they speak their various stories simultaneously; then short, sudden order when they speak the bold phrases together; then back to chaos again.

JOSH: So, anyway, like I was saying, the whole relationship thing really gets to me, you know? I mean, Dude, I'm not like a hippie or something — my parents used to be — so I'm not so naïve that I just think, Hey, why can't we all just get along and everything. I mean, I know it takes work and all, but I don't get why it isn't just easier. What is it? Like, **nobody understands** how to just have a relationship with another person without making the thing all complicated. I mean, face it, Dude, what could be more natural than a guy liking a girl and a girl liking a guy? It **doesn't make sense** that it should be so complicated. Hey, that's how the whole world got started, right? The boy dinosaur says to the girl dinosaur, "Hey, I like your scales" or something like that, and the next thing you know, they're having these little baby dinosaurs running around. It's the natural way, right? I mean, think about it — prairie dogs get together, and worms... wait a minute, I think worms don't. They sort of do it with themselves, which kind of **drives me crazy** to think about. Anyway, that's not my point, Dude. The thing I'm trying to say is that the whole relationship thing, the girl-boy thing, should be easier. Like, hey, **it's not my**

fault that I have other things to do besides just be with her. Life gets like that, Dude! It's not anybody's fault, you know? But the way she's always after me about it, I'm almost feeling like I **can't take it anymore!**

MINDY: You wouldn't believe how uptight my parents can get about things. You just wouldn't believe it, really. I think they must have gone to classes or something — uptightness classes. I wonder if that might be required for parents. Probably after they find out they're going to have kids, they have to go to this class to make sure that absolutely **nobody understands** how they come to their conclusions but them. They must have had the class. How could they come up with all the stuff they do without it? I mean, so much of what they do just **doesn't make sense**. But then, one of the major parts of the class has got to be this unit called, "How to Act Like Everything You Come Up With is Totally Right." You know what I mean? Like yesterday, my mother says to me, "Young lady" — she's always calling me "young lady," like she's forgotten my name — "you need to pick up your clothes off the floor of your room or you're going to be grounded for the next week." Grounded? For not picking up my clothes? It **drives me crazy** when they do things like that. Besides, my mother had the whole thing about the clothes wrong anyway. She didn't tell me about them before, so if I don't know, **it's not my fault**. Anyway, that's not the only thing that's wrong, not by a long shot, but the main thing is just this — I'm reaching the point when I feel like I **can't take it anymore!**

ALEX: I have a hard time figuring out what, precisely, is the worst thing about school. Is it the stress I feel around the fact that every teacher thinks I'm supposed to be a genius? Is it having to walk through the hallways and hear people whisper things like, "He's such a brain?" Or maybe it's the other kids — having to be the only one to raise my hand to answer a question **nobody understands** because they haven't done the reading. Sometime it's not that I'm incredibly smart; it's just that nobody else has a clue. I'm talking only because the topic **doesn't make sense** to them. I think the worst thing is that I can't seem to get away from these over-achieving impulses in my own brain, you know? For instance, yesterday, we had a huge test we needed to study for in Physics. My friend, Max, he's not doing very well in the class, though he's planning to go to college, so I asked him how long he had studied. He said, "For what?" I said, "Max, for that big test in Physics." He said, "Oh, was that today?" He doesn't even care. A thing like that **drives me crazy**, not because Max doesn't do the work, but because I can't not do the work. It's a compulsion with me. I really can't control it. I feel like **it's not my fault** that

I'm so anal about everything. Sure, lots of people look at me and think I don't have any worries when it comes to school. I'm top of the class and all that, but they don't know that I often feel like I **can't take it anymore!**

CARMEN: I sometimes wonder if my coach really knows what he's doing. I mean, he's a decent soccer player; anyone can see that. He can outrun all of us. He's all the time challenging us to races and we always lose. He can dribble the ball in the air for fifteen minutes — I've seen him. But that doesn't make him a good coach. He'll yell out this command that **nobody understands** and then he'll get mad at us because we aren't doing what he wants. Well, duh, we're not doing what you want, coach, because what you're yelling at us **doesn't make sense**. I remember this one time, during a game, okay, when for once, we were winning, 2-1, with only about two minutes left, and coach starts screaming to us about how we need to pull up the defence. "Pull up the defence! Pull up, pull up!" Pull up? This is the first time we've heard this. Then, when we don't "pull up" because we don't know how, he starts screaming insults — right during the game. "This **drives me crazy!** You're all a bunch of morons!" Then — this really blew my mind — he subbed in everybody! Everybody. I told him after that. I said, "Hey, that was totally unfair. **It's not my fault** that I didn't know what you meant. None of us knew!" Well, after that, he really started to hate me. I'm so sick of the way he singles me out. I've just about had it. Really. I'm serious when I say I **can't take it anymore!**

ALEX: So, of course, I'm not looking exactly my best lately. Bags under my eyes...

CARMEN: Falling asleep in my classes...

JOSH: My face looking like a pizza...

MINDY: All of my outfits pinching my waist and my thighs...

ALL: And people telling me all the time...

ALEX: Alex...

CARMEN: Carmen...

JOSH: Dude...

MINDY: Mindy...

ALL: You look stressed.

ALEX: And I'm thinking...

ALL: No sh...

CARMEN: Everybody's got advice. My nutty Aunt Morgan tells me I should try putting sprouted wheat under my pillow at night.

ALEX: My therapist says I need to practice meditation.

MINDY: My friend comes over and lights incense in my room. My father thinks it's marijuana, of course.

JOSH: My dog tells me I should try scratching the fleas on my backside.

CARMEN: Try a poultice made from rose hips and ginger.

ALEX: Think of a quiet mountain stream.

MINDY: Become a vegan.

JOSH: Take a long slurp from the toilet.

CARMEN: Sniff peppermint.

ALEX: Get a massage.

MINDY: Eat tofu.

JOSH: Lick the floor.

ALL: Nothing works! We are still...

CARMEN: Sss...

ALEX: Trr...

MINDY: Ess...

JOSH: D.

Each repeats his or her part of the word, in sequence, getting faster and louder, three more times, then all join together to shout the word.

ALL: Stressed, stressed, stressed, stressed, stressed! (*Beat — all stare tensely straight ahead. Then all let out a breath together.*) There was one time...

ALEX: I spent an entire day, 24 solid hours, on school and school-related activities. Sun up to sun up! That's how...

CARMEN: Crazy he was about this game. He was literally jumping up and down in front of us. Jumping up and...

MINDY: “Down from there, young lady!” my dad’s yelling at me, but you know what? I didn’t want to get off that roof. I wanted to...

JOSH: “Stay,” she tells me, right? “Don’t go. I don’t want to be alone.” So I stayed, even though I knew my step-mom was going to be, like, completely...

CARMEN: Steamed up about how we weren’t working hard enough, how we weren’t totally committed. But you know what? I think the team is more committed than he is. I don’t know how many times he’s gotten to practice...

MINDY: “Late for your period, young lady?” What kind of a question was that? I couldn’t believe it. I could not believe she was actually suspecting me of being...

ALEX: Pregnant guinea pig I had to take care of for my biology lab, and she was getting extremely close to delivery. I had to count the contractions. They’re hard to see through the fur. I mean, it was 2:00 in the morning and I’m pacing back and forth waiting for my science report to have her...

JOSH: “Baby, I’ve got to go home now.” “You don’t love me,” she says. I’m like, “Of course I love you” and she’s like, “You don’t really love me,” and I’m like, “I really, really do...”

ALL: Love, love, love it... if I could only get a break!

MINDY: A break.

JOSH: A break.

ALEX: A break.

CARMEN: A break.

ALL: A break from all this stress. Know what I would do?

MINDY: A break for me would involve sleep. And more sleep. I would get so much sleep I would have to take a nap from sleeping. And eating. Sleeping and eating. Without guilt. How would that be? No alarm clock; no calorie count; no “young lady, if you don’t get out of that bed and into that shower in five minutes, you are going to be grounded until Christmas”; no stressing about squeezing into the jeans you just spent 50 bucks on... just sleep and food, the two greatest joys in life. Sleep and food, without hassles. How would that...?

You know what? I know how that would be. It would be like the life my little sister used to have, when she was a baby. Maybe



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