

Speak Up

By Angel Gabriel Velez

It had been a busy day in Huglan. At least, Bernie thought so, considering she was standing on a crowded sidewalk near the post office. She was leaning against the wall, ignoring the pedestrians passing through, and focused on her phone. In reality, she just didn't feel like talking to people and she felt that it was too much hassle. Besides, she was busy waiting for her package to arrive. In the meantime, she spent the past hour dodging questions from strangers, paying absolutely no attention to them. She especially did not acknowledge the obvious scammer nearby, walking towards her with suspicious strides.

The scammer stopped in front of Bernie. "The name's Beef, and have I got an amazing deal for you!"

Bernie looked up from her phone, stared at Beef, then looked back at her phone and replied, "Meh."

Beef sputtered before he regained his composure. "Believe me, this deal will change your life forever! All you have to do is pay me!"

Bernie gave no reaction. "Whatever."

Beef sighed as he threw up his hands in exasperation. "You know what? I'm going home."

To Bernie's inner delight, Beef kept true to his word and left Bernie alone, walking away to find some other poor sap to bother with his nonexistent "deals."

Before Bernie looked back at her phone, she noticed Michelle walking towards her and sighed. She knew she was going to have to deal with her friend.

Michelle waved and approached Bernie. "Hey, Bernie!"

Bernie shrugged as she kept her eyes glued to the screen. "Hey."

Michelle stared at Bernie with one eyebrow raised. "Nice to see you too. Got any plans today?"

"Mail."

Michelle glanced at the post office nearby. "Ah, I see now. Any other plans?"

Bernie shrugged. "Meh."

Michelle stared at Bernie with a dumbfounded expression on her face. "Geez, dude, how noncommittal can you get?"

Before Bernie could answer, she noticed the mailman walking over to the post office. She ran off, leaving Michelle in the dust. Once she caught up to the mailman, she asked, "Hey, is there any mail for me? I'm Bernie Vamas, by the way."

The mailman looked inside his mailbag and found a letter for Bernie. He handed it to Bernie and walked inside the post office. Puzzled, Bernie looked at the letter, then at Michelle. She ripped it open and read, her eyes opened wide in surprise.

Michelle looked at Bernie with curiosity as she asked. "So, what does the letter say?"

Bernie gulped before she explained, "Apparently, I have been summoned to the town hall by the mayor, all for the purpose of delivering a speech of any topic in front of the whole town, which will start in two and a half hours. And I don't even have a choice to back down."

Michelle gasped and then raised a thumbs-up in approval, saying, "Wow, really? That's awesome! Are you gonna do it?"

Bernie shook her head. "Never."

Michelle blinked with surprise. "What do you mean?"

Bernie crossed her arms. "Speaking in front of a large audience is too much of a hassle for me. It's just not really my style. I don't feel like dealing with so many people."

Michelle pleaded, "But you have to! I know you'll be good at it! And besides, you're forced to do so anyways."

Bernie sighed. "I suppose I have no choice. I just want to give a good speech and get this over with, you know?"

"Well, there is no need to worry, then! I can help you find a good topic for your speech!"

Bernie perked up a bit. "Well, if that's the case, then I guess I don't mind giving it a try."

Michelle nodded. "That's the spirit! Now, why don't we start the search at the cafe? Maybe we'll find something good there."

Bernie nodded, and thus, they walked inside the cafe next door. Little did they know, Zack overheard the whole conversation from the start, as he snuck out of the bushes. He said, "Well, talk about interesting! If that boring girl is gonna deliver the whole speech in front of this circus of a town, then I'm gonna make it so much more interesting! Ha!"

He discreetly followed the duo inside the cafe as well.

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The Capybara Cafe's interior was quite lively, to say the least. A pair of capybara statues accompanied the entrance of this cafe. Another pair accompanied the main area of the cafe, hanging by the walls for all to see. Then there was a fruity smell flying throughout the whole cafe, making the inhabitants of the cafe more thirsty and likely to buy the fruity mixes for their drinks.

After Bernie and Michelle observed the Capybara Cafe interior's atmosphere, the pair found a booth and sat down across from each other. Bernie ordered a salad and coffee, while Michelle ordered an omelet and a coffee with a fruity blend, considering it was still morning. Once the duo finally settled down in their seats, Michelle asked, "Bernie, have you came up with any ideas yet?"

Bernie looked down at the table. "Didn't I already tell you that I don't feel like dealing with people today?"

"Hey, maybe if you came up with a topic that you think is worth talking about, I'm sure you can deal with people just fine during the speech. Let's search for a topic now."

Bernie sighed and looked around the cafe. Michelle joined in on the search for a perfect topic. Little did they know that Zack crawled under their table, as he was waiting for a perfect moment to strike.

Michelle spotted the old men playing chess, witnessing the losing player throwing the whole chess board off the table and through the window, all while he screamed like a bird at his winning opponent. Michelle asked, "What about talking about the win rate of chess games?"

Bernie stared. "Nah, that sounds uneventful as hell."

Michelle scratched her head. Then she snapped her fingers. "Ooh, maybe you can discuss about the afterlife in your speech!"

Bernie cringed. "It wouldn't be a boring topic, but at the same time, I don't think it's a wise idea to stoke the fire of disagreement among the audience here."

"Oh, good point."

Before the duo discussed further about the topics, they heard a door swinging open. It turned out that Beef was entering the cafe. Alarmed, they both ducked their heads down, not wanting to deal with the infamous scammer. Thankfully, he seemed too depressed (due to not being able to scam anybody) to notice them as he sat down at a booth behind them. Zack took the

distraction as an opportunity and unscrewed the caps of both salt and pepper shakers. He hid under the table again.

Bernie and Michelle lifted their heads up and quietly sighed. Michelle said, "Phew, I don't think he noticed us."

At that point, the food arrived for Bernie and Michelle. Bernie simply ate some of her food while Michelle glanced over at the condiments, looked over at the waiter, and said, "I don't like salt and pepper on my omelet. I prefer ketchup instead, so can you please switch the condiments here?"

The waiter complied with this request and switched condiments with the booth behind them, which granted them the ketchup that Michelle wanted. Michelle cheered. "Thank you, sir!"

Bernie glanced at the writer couple and noticed them discussing ideas for their next story. That's when an idea hit her. "Hey, maybe I can discuss about ideas as a topic for my speech! Sounds like an interesting enough topic."

Michelle nodded her head with approval. "Ooh, that sounds pretty cool! We just need to elaborate further on that idea in order to make a proper topic out of it!"

Bernie nodded with agreement until she and Michelle heard Beef scream from behind them. "AH! Who the hell unscrewed my salt shaker? There's no way in hell I'm going to eat my omelette with salt now! Screw you, obesity!"

Bernie and Michelle took that as a cue to leave the cafe. Zack discreetly followed close behind, disappointed that his prank didn't pan out the way he hoped. At least it still worked on Beef.

###

Bernie and Michelle decided that Huglan Park would be the next best place to gather topic ideas. It took them an hour to get there, but the sights alone made the trip worth it. There were lush bushes strewn throughout the park, with flowers adorning said bushes. The fresh air only made the atmosphere more natural for the park. Not only that, but the people added to the atmosphere. Some people were jogging throughout the park. The same writer couple were also at the park, having picnic with each other as they enjoyed a meal and read a book.

After Bernie and Michelle were finished observing the atmosphere, Bernie said, "Welp, let's get to it."

Michelle sighed. Bernie still seemed noncommittal towards this goal, but at least she was starting to get into the swing of things. Unfortunately, they didn't notice Zack sneaking into a bush that stands beside them.

Zack held a stick in his hands as he held a ferocious dog back, clearly intending to sic the dog on them. "I hope you enjoy being a chew toy!"

Bernie and Michelle walked down the park pathway. Children rode past them in tricycles and made beeping sounds with their mouths. "Beep beep! Honk honk!"

Michelle smiled and looked at Bernie. "Perhaps you can make a speech about how ideas can fuel a child's imagination?"

Bernie nonchalantly stared up at the sky. "I think everyone already knows that, genius."

Michelle facepalmed. She inspected her surroundings once more. She spied a trio of young adult males hanging out on the bench, just chilling with each other. Based on Michelle's observation, she can tell that the first guy is moody, the second guy is confident, and the third guy is angry.

The moody guy sighed. "Welp, today seems pretty pointless so far, Sylvester."

Sylvester, the confident guy, shrugged. "Hey, you don't know that yet, Fella! Maybe something is gonna happen soon. You can definitely trust me on that!"

The angry guy huffed. "Oh, something will definitely happen to you if you don't take us to a restaurant like you promised! Now!"

Sylvester waved his arms in mock surrender. "Fine, you win, Dime."

Fella snickered, enjoying this turn of events. And with that, the trio left the park.

Michelle glanced back at Bernie. "Maybe you can write a speech about the idea of character dynamics?"

Bernie rolled her eyes. "That sounds lame. Next."

Zack finally took an opportunity to throw the stick out of the bushes, which landed right in front of the duo. He cried out, "Fetch!"

The dog just stood there and tilted its head, clearly confused on what Zack is trying to achieve.

Zack groaned. "Just get the stick, dummy!"

The dog looked back at the stick and the girls. It stared at Zack, confused on what it's trying to go after. At that point, the girls walked ahead after silently looking at the stick for a moment, which killed off Zack's chance for a perfect prank at the park. That made Zack whine.

"Ugh, there goes my chance of a perfect prank! I guess I'll just eat my steak sandwich to make myself feel better!"

The dog growled, clearly wanting the steak sandwich. Zack took the growl as a warning and ran out of the park. He still held on to the steak sandwich as the dog chased him.

Bernie and Michelle looked around the park until the former sighed. "Come on, ideas, enter my brain already."

As if on cue, Bernie spotted the writer couple and gasped. She then observed them for a bit until she reached a conclusion. "Maybe I can make a speech about how books give us many great ideas."

Michelle nodded eagerly. "Now that's the spirit! I see you're getting into this!"

Bernie casually shrugged. "I guess you may be right. Anyways, I think I know a perfect location to go to next, in order to build further on this idea."

Michelle followed Bernie out of the park with excitement. "Yep, I am definitely thinking what you're thinking!"

###

After it took another hour to get to Huglan Public Library, Bernie and Michelle got right to the task. They sat down at a table and observed the people in the library, hoping for more ideas to pop up. Luckily, Bernie's eyes immediately landed on the same writer couple, who were now writing down stories and discussing some ideas. Michelle's eyes followed and she immediately detected a pattern. "Ah, so you found the guys who consistently gave us good speech ideas. Well, go ahead and do your thing, Bernie."

Bernie vigorously nodded as she observed the couple, as she really got into the whole task of finding speech ideas. Unfortunately, Zack stepped onto the table and played his guitar loudly, intending to distract them from their task. "I'm just a loud city boy with a desire to get loud in a public library! These library rules can go disappear into boring nonexistence! Ha!"

Bernie covered her ears, trying not to lose her focus on the couple's discussion of writing ideas. Michelle tried to push down Zack. Zack gloated every time she missed. "Ha, try harder!"

After Bernie eyed the couple some more, something clicked in her brain. She may have finally figured out a topic. "I got it! My topic will be about creative writing!"

Then she dashed out of the library, saying, "I gotta go to the town hall and deliver the speech about creative writing! Wish me luck!"

Michelle gave her a thumbs-up, saying, "Good luck, Bernie!"

At that point, Zack had been kicked out of the library for causing too much ruckus.

###

Bernie walked onto the stage and stood in front of the crowd, having already prepared herself for this moment. The crowd waited in anticipation. Bernie heard rumbling sounds above her. It seemed like Zack had snuck backstage and climbed to the top with an intention to ruin the speech.

Then she took a deep breath. It was now or never.

"Today, I have something very interesting to share with the citizens of Huglan today. My topic is about creative writing, and how it gives us many ideas in life."

She heard the clattering of the spotlight above her and casually side-stepped away from that spot, just in case.

"As we all know, creative writing is the reason why we have so many stories in this world, but did you know that it also teaches us many lessons in life too?"

Zack sneered. "And did you know that it's also the reason for boring speeches?"

Just as Bernie expected, a spotlight fell down next to her with a loud crash. She cleared her throat and continued.

"For example, there might be a story out there that teaches us about the power of trust, and how we shouldn't let past histories affect relationships of any kind."

Zack stuck his tongue out at her. "It also teaches us to trust no one, which makes this speech pointless, so there!"

All of a sudden, another spotlight moved to shine on her eyes, and Bernie figured that Zack was trying to blind her.

"Shut up! Anyways, some of these stories might teach us to truly shine in any field you're passionate about, no matter what."

She looked down, simply moving her gaze away from the spotlight in order to regain her sight.

Then Zack threw a fishing line down, which hooked onto the back of Bernie's shirt. He snickered. "It should also teach us to make better speeches, which you're failing right now. Face it, your speech is completely pointless. Give up now."

Bernie winced. "Ow! Some of these stories may hurt us, but we benefit from those experiences as well, showing us that good stories can truly take us on a journey."

Zack used the fishing line to slowly pull Bernie up from the floor. Bernie was unable to move except float there in mid-air.

"What all of these stories have in common is that they all teach us to rise up and be the best that we can be!"

After she said this with much passion, Bernie held on to the fishing line and pulled it down, making her fall down and bringing Zack down with her.

Once they both hit the floor, with Bernie none the worse for wear and Zack left in a daze, Bernie looked back at the audience to see their reaction.

"And that's the power of creative writing!"

The audience stayed silent for a few moments, processing what just happened. Then they erupted with cheer, thinking that the speech was very entertaining and inspiring. Bernie smiled for the first time in a while after that.

###

Once Bernie waited near the post office (again) after the speech, she noticed how much more interactive she was with people ever since the speech happened. She was greeting the pedestrians and being a bit more friendly and outspoken towards people, in contrast to her antisocial and standoffish self from earlier.

She even greeted Michelle with much friendliness, which the latter noticed. "I see that speech changed you for the better. Amazing job, by the way!"

Bernie smiled. "That speech truly was a life-changing experience. Thanks for the help."

"No problem!"

Then Bernie noticed that one mailman was carrying the package she waiting for the whole time. She went up to the mailman. "Thanks for the package, I'll take it from here."

As she took the package and walked away, one thought occurred in her mind: After everything she had been through today, she thought the experience was actually pretty fun. She decided that perhaps she would do it again, if given the chance.

The mailman watched Bernie with gratefulness in his eyes, happy that she decided to help him. He gasped upon realizing something though. He growled and screamed into the air.

"Oh great, I'm never going to get the 'employee of the month' award now!"