

RED COMET
by Len Cuthbert

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SYNOPSIS

GRAY, a brilliant but analytical high school senior, is rebuilding a broken-down 1971 Ford Mercury Comet—a project that connects him to his past and his late father. ROSE, his creative and emotionally driven best friend, is focused on her art and chasing her future. As graduation looms, their friendship is tested by jealousy, misunderstandings, and shifting loyalties. Gray's obsession with the Comet and Rose's fear of being left behind collide, forcing them to confront what truly holds them together.

Through playful banter, heartfelt arguments, and a series of comedic and poignant encounters, *Red Comet* explores the tension between logic and emotion, the fear of change, and the unspoken bonds that define friendship. When Rose faces an unexpected move across the world, both must decide what—and who—they're willing to fight for.

CHARACTERS

GRAY: (M) A brilliant, senior high school student. Analytical. Driven by logic.

ROSE: (F) A creative, senior high school student. Eclectic. Driven by emotion.

SET

Either blank or a simple single set piece in each scene.

SCENE 1 – Early Summer

SETTING: A used car lot.

STAGE: Blank

AT RISE: ROSE and GRAY stand side by side facing out to the audience. ROSE is squinting at the rusted 1971 Ford Mercury Comet. GRAY breaks the silence.

GRAY

Tada!

ROSE

Tada? Was that an attempt to make it disappear? What is this?

GRAY

A 1971 Ford Mercury Comet. A classic.

ROSE

I had expected more car than rust. And holes. Does it even run?

GRAY

I hope so.

ROSE

You haven't even taken it for a spin?

GRAY

It doesn't need to run. I'm going to rebuild it.

ROSE

How are you going to get it home?

GRAY

Not a problem. I'll figure it out.

ROSE

You attempt to move that thing, you'll have car parts strewn from here to your garage.

GRAY

You're looking at the surface. I'm seeing heart ... and that's what gets me.

ROSE

You see heart. I see clogged arteries.

(ROSE moves DS closer to the car, squinting with discontent)

Gray, you can't buy this.

GRAY

Sure I can. I've got just enough saved.

ROSE

Your savings. For college?

GRAY

I'll earn it back. I've got a year. And scholarships.

ROSE

You're gambling your future on a scrap heap.

GRAY

Well, I appreciate your concern, but it's not just a car. It's an investment into freedom. Look at those lines. Look at the chrome. What's left of it. It appears depreciated now, but you'll appreciate it later. My dad used to say, when you build something yourself, it'll take you places you never expected.

ROSE

Yep. Out of the frying pan and into the fire.

GRAY

My dad owned one. If he were still with us, he'd be elated. It's one way of keeping him around.

ROSE

So, is that what this is all about?

GRAY

Not at all Rose. But it's one of those little things that makes it all feel right.

ROSE

Why did you bring me here?

GRAY

Because you're my bestie. I thought you'd be excited for me.

ROSE

I wish I could be. I can't pretend I don't see how this could wreck your future. We're supposed to be moving forward, not buying disasters.

GRAY

I'll rebuild it over the summer. Imagine this Comet on the road for our senior year. Trust me.

ROSE

Sometimes intuition is louder than having it all assembled in your head.

GRAY

And sometimes it's just noise.

ROSE

Why not give it a day, Gray. Sleep on it.

GRAY

I can't. The owner says another buyer's interested, but he's giving me first crack. I have to decide before the end of the day.

ROSE

That sounds a lot like a sales tactic.

GRAY

Maybe. Or maybe it's my shot. I'll never know if I don't take it.

ROSE

If you buy this, you'll spend every weekend under the hood instead of living your life.

GRAY

But this is living my life!

ROSE

I just hope you're not choosing that car over everything else that matters.

GRAY

Yes, there will be some sacrifices, but I won't let it get in the way of our friendship.

ROSE

I hope you're right.

(ROSE leaving)

Well, I've got to get my parents' car home. If you need a ride, I'll be in the car. I can't bear to watch a train wreck happen. Or in this case ... a car wreck destroying your future.

GRAY

Some people's wreck is another person's treasure. As the old saying goes.

ROSE

(ROSE stops for a final word)

And you want to know another old saying? If it doesn't add value, it's waste. Know who said that? Ironically, Henry Ford.

GRAY

I think old Henry was spot on. This beautiful machine will add value to my world.

(ROSE walks off, leaving GRAY staring at the Comet)
When it's all said and done, she'll see what I see.

(Lights)

SCENE 2 – Mid Summer

SETTING: GRAY's family garage.

STAGE: A bucket with a wet sponge or rag

AT RISE: GRAY is reading a Comet repair manual. ROSE appears.

ROSE

(After a brief moment)

Thought I'd come watch the genius at work.

GRAY

Shouldn't you be home creating award winning art?

ROSE

I'm no mechanic, but shouldn't all those parts be *inside* the car?

GRAY

My gosh, Rose. I so underestimated your ability to state the obvious.

ROSE

Tick, tick. One month till school. I'd rather ride this car than push it.

GRAY

Then pick up a screwdriver and get to work.

ROSE

Maybe you missed my earlier comment, I'm no mechanic. Can I help with something real?

GRAY

You want to help? Clean out the backseat.

ROSE

Do you have a shovel handy?

GRAY

Start with that bucket.

ROSE

This bucket? With the wet sponge? What am I supposed to do with –

GRAY

Stuff it in your mouth and scoop with the bucket.

ROSE

Oh, really.

GRAY

(ROSE hurls the wet sponge at him)

Oh. That's how you want to play it?

ROSE

Bring it.

(GRAY lunges. They scuffle playfully. ROSE tumbles backward with GRAY over her. A brief awkward silence. He gets up quickly and helps her)

That's a ten-yard penalty for holding.

GRAY

Ten-yard penalty on you for unsportsmanlike conduct with a sponge.

ROSE

Says the guy who tackled me.

GRAY

Technically, that was a defensive maneuver.

ROSE

Technically, you were on top of me.

GRAY

Yeh, well technically –

ROSE

Stop saying technically.

GRAY

(A short silence. ROSE brushes off her shirt)

You, uh, got grease on your arm.

ROSE

That's paint. I was working on my brick installation earlier.

GRAY

Brick installation?

ROSE

I paint my art across a bunch of bricks, label them in order, then stack them like a sculpture. Portable art. I want it ready for the Fall show.

GRAY

That's cool. Maybe you could paint something for the Comet.

ROSE

I'd have to label every part so it could be reassembled when it falls apart.

GRAY

You just wait Rose. When this is done, you're going to be eating your words.

ROSE

When I'm old and gray.

GRAY

You'll be old. I'll still be Gray.

ROSE

Stick with mechanics. Stand up isn't for you.

GRAY

I'll finish this before you finish your art.

ROSE

Oh. Really. Challenge accepted. Anyway, I think you'll probably make better progress without me bothering you. Get back to building your rust sculpture. I still want my ride before school.

GRAY

You'll get your ride. Promise.

ROSE

One month! Try not to drown in rust.

GRAY

(ROSE exits)

One month. That's no plan. That's a fantasy with a deadline.

(Lights)

SCENE 3 - Autumn

SETTING: ROSE's parents' home.

STAGE: A table with a pizza in a box.

AT RISE: ROSE paces in her living room. A pizza box sits on the table. She glances out the window, checks her phone, sighs, and starts typing a text.

ROSE

Where is he? No calls, no texts. And this pizza's turning to cardboard.

GRAY

(A knock. ROSE opens the door. GRAY steps in)

Hey Rose!

ROSE

Thank goodness. I was worried sick. What happened?

GRAY

Sorry, lost track of time. I had to drop off the lighting board at Pixie's for the Fall production.

ROSE

You went to Pixie's.

GRAY

Yeah. I told you I might swing by.

ROSE

No, you didn't.

GRAY

Oh. We had to work through cues. Then her mom ordered pizza.

ROSE

Please say you didn't eat any.

GRAY

That would've been rude not to. Of course I did.

ROSE

You realize I ordered pizza for us?

GRAY

You did? Shoot. Sorry. I thought this was just a homework night.

ROSE

It's cold now. I might as well toss it.

GRAY

Don't toss it. Is there pineapple on it? You know I love pineapple.

ROSE

Is that seriously what you're thinking about right now?

GRAY

I'm sorry, Rose. Really. The comet ran out of gas leaving Pixie's. Gas gauge still doesn't work and I think the fuel line's leaking. Her dad helped me out. Awesome people.

ROSE

Wonderful. Just like Pixie.

GRAY

Yeh, she's cool. She's the only person I know that can identify every constellation but also change the brakes on their car. Her dad taught her.

ROSE

Did you even get my text?

GRAY

Left my phone at home. You texted?

ROSE

You think? I texted, called, even considered sending a carrier pigeon. I was worried, Gray.

GRAY

I'm sorry Rose. Really. Without my phone, I didn't realize how late it was.

ROSE

Fine. Whatever. When do I get that ride you promised.

GRAY

I don't want you riding until all the kinks are ironed out and it's safe.

ROSE

So no one's even ridden in it yet.

GRAY

Oh, just Pixie tonight to get gas. Just for safety because her dad didn't want me to ride alone without a phone.

ROSE

So, Pixie's been in it. But not me.

GRAY

Only out of necessity, I swear. You'll be the first real ride. The finished version.

ROSE

It's fine. Doesn't matter. (beat) I actually had exciting news ... but now not feeling very excited.

GRAY

Hey, don't be. Tell me. I want to know.

ROSE

Okay. Remember my art piece for the school show?

GRAY

Your painting across the stack of bricks.

ROSE

Wow. You remembered. So ... guess what.

GRAY

Someone bought it!

ROSE

Yes! Three hundred and fifty dollars. My first real sale.

GRAY

That's amazing, Rose. You deserve it.

ROSE

Thanks. I was over the moon. Do you know what it feels like to have someone actually value your work enough to pay for it?

GRAY

It must feel incredible.

ROSE

Yeah. It really does.

GRAY

I'm so glad you feel that way ... because the reason I knew someone bought your art is ... the buyer was me!

ROSE

(Stunned silence)

What? You? You bought my art.

GRAY

Yeah! I love it. And I wanted something of yours in the garage. Something that made the space feel ... less empty, I guess. Isn't that cool?

ROSE

No, Gray. It's not cool. It's humiliating! I wanted someone to buy it because they loved the work, not because they knew me.

GRAY

But I do love the work.

ROSE

Why would you do that? It feels like pity. Where'd you get the money?

GRAY

Fair question. I was worried it might just sit there, so Pixie lent me some cash.

ROSE

(On the edge of exploding)

WHAT?! Are you serious?! So, you didn't think anyone would actually want it? And you borrowed money from her for my art?

GRAY

Yeh. What's the big deal? I don't see a problem here.

ROSE

Of course you don't. The big deal is ... you keep choosing Pixie for everything that matters!

GRAY

That's not fair –

ROSE

And you're not keeping the art, Gray.

GRAY

But I already bought it.

ROSE

Then sell it back.

GRAY

They said all sales are final.

ROSE

Then I'll buy it back.

GRAY

It's not for sale.

ROSE

You better believe it is. I'm buying it. What's your price?

GRAY

I'm not going to sell it to you.

ROSE

Name your price.

GRAY

This is ridiculous.

ROSE

You buying my art was ridiculous. How much?

GRAY

I don't know. A thousand bucks.

ROSE

What? It's not worth a thousand bucks.

GRAY

It is to me.

ROSE

(Quietly, angry but hurt. Pause)

Okay. Fine. I'll give you a thousand dollars.

GRAY

You don't have a thousand dollars.

ROSE

I sure do because I didn't dump my college fund on a rust bucket that leaks gas.

GRAY

And oil. It leaks oil too. But I'll fix that. Once I have the money.

ROSE

Well, score, because you're about to inherit a thousand bucks. I'm going to my room. Bring my art back, Gray. And eat that cold pizza before you leave.

GRAY

(ROSE exits. GRAY watches her go)

Rose, wait –

(GRAY stands there deflated. Looks at the pizza box and opens it.

Pause)

Nice. Pineapple!

(GRAY takes a slice. Stares at it. Doesn't eat it)

(Lights)

SCENE 4 – Mid Autumn

SETTING: School classroom

STAGE: A desk that sits two with two chairs.

AT RISE: ROSE sits at a two-person desk, books open. GRAY approaches from behind, hesitates, then slides into the seat beside ROSE.

ROSE

You can't sit here. I asked Pixie to be my partner. We already agreed. Don't make this into a thing.

GRAY

(Calmly)

No, she's not. Nova and Pixie teamed up.

ROSE

Not true.

(ROSE raises her hand)

Excuse me. Ma'am. I have a question.

GRAY

(Grabs her arm and pulls it down)

Stop.

ROSE

(Pulls her arm back)

Hands off, Gray. Just ... don't.

GRAY

Listen. The teacher paired me with Pixie. Then you asked Pixie and she felt awkward. So, she asked to work with Nova.

ROSE

(To the teacher)

All good.

(To GRAY)

You kidding me? I have no desire to work with you today.

GRAY

Fine. Then don't. You gonna complain again? You've turned this into way too much drama, Rose.

ROSE

Okay, then. I'll do my part alone.

GRAY

Individual group work. Bit of an oxymoron. This has been going on for weeks now. What's one more day? You do know this has to be done by the end of class and counts as marks.

ROSE

(ROSE turns away and starts reading the text on her own. GRAY looks at his text. Under her breath)

This makes no sense.

GRAY

Need help?

ROSE

Nope. I'm good.

(She flips a page, back and forth)

How am I supposed to come up with examples if I don't even know who Bernoulli Principle is?

GRAY

Not who. What. Bernoulli's Principle is the relationship between the speed and pressure of a moving fluid.

ROSE

Shhh. I'm concentrating.

(Silent but frustrated)

I don't even know what that means.

GRAY

It's how fast-moving fluids, like air or water, create pressure differences.

ROSE

Still Greek to me.

GRAY

Air moves faster over the curved top of an airplane wing than under it.

ROSE

Okay ...

GRAY

Less pressure on top, more below. That's lift. Plane flies.

ROSE

Why don't they just print that in the book? (pause, weakly) Thanks.

GRAY

You're welcome.

ROSE

(Desperately trying to remain independent of GRAY)

What's a venturi? Seriously?

GRAY

(ROSE listens even if she won't admit it)

A fluid flows through a narrow passage, speeds up, creating a low pressure. The carburetor on the Comet does this. It draws fuel into the airflow.

ROSE

That means nothing to me.

GRAY

How about this. A perfume bottle. Narrow tube, fast air, low pressure, liquid shoots up the nozzle. Same idea.

ROSE

Maybe you should be telling them how to write a text book. Why can't I get this stuff.

GRAY

You're an artist Rose. A damn good one too.

ROSE

Gee, thanks, I guess.

GRAY

(Brief silence)

I'm really sorry I bought your art. I did it because I love your work.

ROSE

(Softly, still resistant)

I know. I mean – yeah. I know.

GRAY

And it deserved to be sold. You're brilliant, Rose. I hope you know that.

ROSE

But how am I supposed to know if it's even good enough for someone to actually pay money for it?

GRAY

I'll bring it back and you can display it for sale again.

ROSE

And what happens if it doesn't sell?

GRAY

It will. It's too good not to. Stay mad if you want. It's okay.

ROSE

Maybe I don't want to.

GRAY

But you can, if it helps.

ROSE

What I need ... is help with this physics stuff.

GRAY

I'd love to. As long as we call it a truce.

ROSE

(Hesitates)

Just help me with this assignment and we'll see how it goes.

(ROSE slides the book toward GRAY. He leans in, and they start working silently)

SCENE 5 – Late Autumn

SETTING: Art Exhibition

STAGE: Bricks with artwork. Framed sketch of the Comet.

AT RISE: ROSE is setting up her brick artwork, the one that GRAY had bought.

ROSE

(Sees GRAY approach)

What are you doing here? This is artists-only territory. You're breaking about six gallery rules.

GRAY

It's the high school gym.

ROSE

Respect. When I'm here, this is a gallery. Now get out.

GRAY

Mr. Love, the art teacher let me in. He and my dad go way back. Apparently, I'm trustworthy.

ROSE

Little does he know.

GRAY

I wanted to see your artwork for the Winter Showcase.

ROSE

You can see it when everyone else does. No early access. Not even for you.

GRAY

Can't afford the entry ticket. I'm saving up for college.

ROSE

Don't touch anything. And don't buy anything either. You've already made one questionable art purchase.

GRAY

Hands are in my very empty pockets. I just saw Pixie's clay pot on display. It's called the Two Roads to the Heart. It's shaped like two arteries, but it looks more like an upside-down pair of pants to me.

(ROSE ignores him. Looking around)

Hard to believe this is our last year of high school.

ROSE

You're still here.

GRAY

Does it freak you out?

ROSE

That you're still here? Yes. That it's our last year, no. I'm applying to colleges.

GRAY

Somewhere close?

ROSE

Well, staying at home would save money, but my parents are talking about moving.

GRAY

Moving? Where? And when?

ROSE

I don't know. Stop asking questions. I'm working.

GRAY

(Picks up a sketch of the Comet)

What's this?

ROSE

Hey. I said don't touch anything.

GRAY

(ROSE grabs it from him and covers it)

Is that ...the Comet? You sketched it? Let me see.

ROSE

Go away, Gray. I told you I don't want you here.

GRAY

(GRAY takes it from ROSE)

It is the Comet. This is awesome. You did this? And ... it's red.

ROSE

Something wrong with that?

GRAY

No. I just never pictured it red.

ROSE

It's fire engine red. Not the rust red that it is right now.

GRAY

I always imagined it blue.

ROSE

Blue? Sure, if you want it to look cold and sad.

GRAY

Fact. The ion tail of a comet appears blue. Why red?

ROSE

Because roses are red.

GRAY

And Comets are blue.

ROSE

(Shows the artwork)

Not this one.

GRAY

It looks real good. Like the artist. I'm proud of you, Rose.

ROSE

Nice. Now release it and move along so I can finish setting up.

GRAY

(GRAY hands the art back to ROSE)

Okay, okay. I'll get out of your way. Oh. Are you going to Pixie's Christmas party next week?

ROSE

Party?

GRAY

You got your invite, right?

ROSE

(Fumbling for a response)

Uhm, I'm not sure. I'll have to check my email.

GRAY

She didn't email. Paper invites. I thought – never mind.

ROSE

Paper invites? Huh. Maybe I misplaced it. Or maybe ... (beat) Oh, why does it even matter?

GRAY

Strange. I'll ask her –

ROSE

Don't. Don't you dare. I don't need charity invitations. Just ... let it go. I'm fine. And I'll be busy with my art anyway.

GRAY

But if it was a mistake –

ROSE

It wasn't a mistake, Gray. And I don't need you fixing it.

GRAY

Okay. You get back to your world and I'll get back to mine. Whatever that is.

ROSE

Reconsidering the Comet's colour.

GRAY

Ah. Touche'. (pause) See you around, Red.

ROSE

(GRAY leaves)

Pixie's party, huh? Of course. Why would I make the list if he's there?

(Exhales, looking at her sketch)

Roses are red. Comets are too. (A breath) Hey there Pixie. Screw you.

(Lights)

SCENE 6 – Winter

SETTING: Rose's home. Gray skips the Christmas party to hang out with Rose.

STAGE: Blank

AT RISE: GRAY is waiting on ROSE's doorstep when he sees ROSE approaching

ROSE

(ROSE is carrying a grocery bag)

What ... are you ... doing here?

GRAY

Your mom said you'd walked to the store. I asked if I could wait out here and she said, "Knock yourself out." She's so much like you. Or you're so much like her.

ROSE

I'm so much like my mother? That's your opening line? Insult by compliment. Nice. What do you want, Gray? Shouldn't you be at Pixie's party?

GRAY

Yeh. Probably. But ... I'm here instead.

ROSE

You weren't invited here. I've got my own party.

(She holds up her grocery bag of snacks)

Snacks for one.

GRAY

Please don't frame this like some kind of pity rescue.

ROSE

Please don't treat me like I need one.

GRAY

I'm not. I came to take you to the party. In my freshly painted car.

ROSE

(ROSE looks past him to the Comet)

Red? You painted your Comet, red?

GRAY

Fire engine red. Just like you said I should. What do you think?

ROSE

What did you paint it with. A whisk broom?

GRAY

Nope. A sponge brush. Quick, easy ... and cheap.

ROSE

So, the issues are fixed now?

GRAY

Mostly. The engine still complains when it's cold. Kinda like you.

ROSE

Oh, really? Well ... the colour's nice.

GRAY

So, can I escort you to the party?

ROSE

I wasn't invited. Remember? You didn't tell Pixie anything, right?

GRAY

Didn't say a word.

ROSE

Then why show up telling me you're taking me somewhere I'm not wanted?

GRAY

Because I don't want to be there without my bestie.

ROSE

So, you're saying I should crash a party uninvited with someone who was invited?

GRAY

I guess you could put it that way.

ROSE

I just did. You've lost your marbles. You know how awkward that would be for me?

GRAY

Why would it be awkward?

ROSE

Are you clueless. Reverse the roles. I take you to something I'm invited to and you're not. How would you feel?

GRAY

I think I'd feel –

ROSE

Out of place. Exactly. For a straight-A student, you sure are blind to the obvious. The answer is no. I'm staying here.

(She steps past him, stops and looks at the car)

You know, the red suits it. It looks ... alive. Like it's proud of itself for once.

GRAY

It's also perfectly capable of taking you to a Christmas party.

ROSE

Yeh, ah, no thanks. Not happening.

(Brief awkward pause and then Gray decides it's best just to leave.

ROSE sits and opens the grocery bag. As he turns to go ...)

You like gummy bears?

GRAY

What flavour?

ROSE

I don't know. Who cares. They're red. That's the only flavour that matters.

GRAY

(GRAY sits next to ROSE with the bag between them)

Of course they are.

(Lights)

SCENE 7 – Early Spring

SETTING: Backstage at the school

STAGE: A prop that has a loose hinge.

AT RISE: ROSE and GRAY rushing in, breathless.

ROSE

(Carrying her costume bag)

Of all the nights to be late.

GRAY

(Juggling a tool kit, cue manual, and props)

Sorry Rose. I couldn't drive the Comet any faster.

ROSE

It wasn't your driving. Those stupid traffic lights saw us coming. They knew we were in a hurry. The one time I despised the colour red.

GRAY

Well, we're here. That's what counts.

ROSE

Ah, gee. Everyone's already out there. This is humiliating.

(She spills her costumes)

Oh, great. Even my costumes are trying to escape me.

GRAY

Don't worry. It's just a student performance.

ROSE

(ROSE is frantically changing)

Just? You kidding? These are our peers, Gray. They'll laugh if I screw up and I'll never hear the end of it. I'll look like a failure.

GRAY

You won't. It's okay. Just relax and breathe.

ROSE

The breathing I've got mastered. The relaxing, not so much.

GRAY

(He picks up a prop)

Of course. Tonight of all nights. This hinge is loose.

ROSE

You're the tech guy. You've got zero minutes to fix it.

GRAY

(Pulls a screwdriver from his bag and fixes it)

No worries. Easy fix.

ROSE

I hate being late and having to rush. I need to get into my headspace.

GRAY

(ROSE putting on a piece of clothing)

Oh no. Rose, you have a hole in your butt.

ROSE

Yes Gray. We all do.

GRAY

No. Your dress has a hole in the butt.

ROSE

Crap. See. This is what happens when everything's rushed. This is really bad.

GRAY

Nothing duct tape can't fix.

ROSE

You cannot duct tape my costume, Gray. I'm not going out there looking stupid.

GRAY

Relax. It goes on the inside. Sit on the stool while I fix it.

ROSE

(ROSE finds an envelope on the stool. GRAY fixes her costume)

What's this? Did you put this here?

GRAY

What is it?

ROSE

A card with my name on it.

GRAY

Wasn't me.

ROSE

(Reads)

“To an amazing artist, actress and singer. I’m so sorry about the party mix-up – total brain fail on my part. Hope you can forgive. Break a leg and knock it out of the park to the bums like me in the back row. Cheering you on, Rosie.” (pause) Pixie.

GRAY

Wow, that’s actually really nice. Cool. How does that make you feel?

ROSE

Embarrassed. And kind of stupid.

GRAY

There’s no need. We’re all here for you Rose. No one out there is waiting to judge you. They want you to shine. Make them proud of their school. I already am.

ROSE

Thanks. That means a lot. (pause) This card does too.

GRAY

Okay. Actors up front, techies to the booth. Go be brilliant.

ROSE

(GRAY hugs ROSE. She freezes, then hugs him back)

Okay, okay. I need to go before I turn into an emotional wreck.

GRAY

Belt out your song and knock those backrow bums off their seats. Break a leg.

(Lights)

SCENE 8 – Mid Spring

SETTING: Park Bench at school

STAGE: Bench

AT RISE: GRAY is sitting flipping through web pages on his phone.

GRAY

(ROSE approaches with books in hand)

Rose. Doesn’t your fourth period class start soon ... like five minutes ago?

ROSE

Cancelled. I’d go home but I’d have to be back for my last class. What are you doing?

GRAY

Skipping fourth period class.

ROSE

Skipping? I wish I had half your nerve. But if I did skip, it'd be the death of me. What's your excuse?

GRAY

Beautiful spring day. Fresh air's healthier than a room full of recycled carbon dioxide.

ROSE

Just the thought of that is revolting.

GRAY

(GRAY turns his phone toward ROSE)

What do you think of this?

ROSE

A white Comet? Please tell me you're not repainting yours white.

GRAY

No. Checking its value.

ROSE

Ah, seeing how much it appreciated. Spoiler alert. It didn't with that "unique" paint job.

GRAY

Actually, I was seeing how much I could sell it for.

ROSE

You what? No. Absolutely not.

GRAY

Tell that to my wallet. It's so empty it echoes. I have just enough for tuition, but I have to find cash for books and living expenses. I can't expect my mom to help. She's already tight on funds.

ROSE

Is this the real reason you're out here, skipping class?

GRAY

Part of it, I guess.

ROSE

Gray. You cannot sell the Comet. And that's final.

GRAY

Well, last I checked, you don't own it.

ROSE

Fine, then I'm buying it.

GRAY

Didn't we have this conversation already? Why would you do that?

ROSE

Because. That car is ...

(Catches herself)

Because you built that car. It matters.

GRAY

Yeah. I suppose it does. But you're not buying it. I'll just take it off the road, drop the insurance, and store it. We can visit it like long-lost pals.

ROSE

We could start a campaign: Save the Comet.

GRAY

That's really catchy. We'll raise, what, twelve bucks?

ROSE

Thirteen if I kick in the first dollar. What if you just sit on it until school's done? A few more weeks won't break you, right?

GRAY

I don't know, Rose. Insurance renewal is due and it's just unaffordable. I mean, is it really worth it?

ROSE

Gray, you can't sell it. Not right now. Let me help. I'll chip in for insurance.

GRAY

Not a chance.

ROSE

Why not? You bought my art.

GRAY

That you wouldn't let me keep.

ROSE

True, but ... you cared. And right now, I want to help you keep the Comet.

GRAY

Yeh, well, it doesn't work that way.

ROSE

Then tell me how it works, because I'm not watching you give up on this.

GRAY

Why does this matter so much to you?

ROSE

Because it matters to you. And we're besties, aren't we?

GRAY

Yeh. Of course.

ROSE

And I think your dad would be disappointed if you did.

GRAY

There she goes. Right for the heart. (beat) Okay. A few more weeks. But you're not paying for anything.

ROSE

Let's keep that option open, shall we? Hey. Let's skip fifth period and grab a burger at Patty's Palace. My treat.

GRAY

You're skipping a class? We really have hit hard times. I can't turn down a free burger.

ROSE

And I can't turn down a free ride in the Comet.

GRAY

(They get up to go)

Free? I think not. You're covering gas.

ROSE

I'm not paying for food and gas.

GRAY

Rose, you drive a hard bargain.

ROSE

And you drive a red Comet. I call shotgun.

GRAY

It's that or the trunk.

(Lights)

SCENE 9 – Late Spring

SETTING: GRAY's family garage or barn.

STAGE: Blank

AT RISE: GRAY stands before an invisible audience, rehearsing his valedictorian speech. With his notes gripped in his hand, he looks into an old mirror and fixes his hair, his glasses, licks his finger and rubs a speck off his forehead. He steps away from the mirror and walks confidently up to an invisible podium. ROSE enters quietly upstage and leans against a doorway, arms crossed, watching.

GRAY

I remember – my first day four years ago, a runny-nose, pencil-neck geek freshman, face pushed up against the locker doors like a slice of cheap lunchmeat, squeezing past towering sweaty seniors who had no time for a pipsqueak like me. Those days feel like yesterday. But just yesterday, I was one of those sweaty seniors, towering over pipsqueak freshmen, as they squeezed by, desperately trying to reach first period class on time. And for that, I apologize.

I remember – my first car. A '71 Ford Mercury Comet. A fixer upper that the owner had no time to fixer up, so he sold it to me. Nearly bankrupted me, but I couldn't say no. Well, I could say no, but I didn't. It was held together with little more than rust and optimism. The Comet was basically a Ford Maverick with self-esteem issues. I painted it myself with a sponge brush and Rust-Oleum "Fire Engine Red" paint.

I remember – motoring into the school parking lot in my red Comet, radio blaring Jim Steinman's line about, *Praying for the End of Time*. We've spent four years praying for the end of time. And without warning, the end of time has arrived. You want to know what I've learned? I thought I wanted to be a Maverick; independent and unorthodox. But I'm a Comet. A celestial body traveling around the sun with a visible nucleus and luminous tail. My challenge to you; don't be a Maverick. Be a Comet. Thank you.

ROSE

Wow. That was ... awkward. (beat) Pretty rough for a valedictorian speech.

GRAY

Rose. How long have you been standing there?

ROSE

Since you first said, "I remember," which is ironic, because you can't remember anything for the life of you, including the date we had planned last night.

GRAY

What date?

ROSE

I rest my case.

GRAY

We did? Shoot. I'm so sorry, Rose. I've been so anxious about this speech.

ROSE

And you should be.

GRAY

Well, it's my first draft and it needs a bit of work.

ROSE

What it needs is a shot of lighter fluid and a match.

GRAY

There was something wrong with it?

ROSE

Is that a question or a statement? What was right with it. Let's start there. At least you didn't open with the usual "Principal Whitmore, teachers, parents, and everyone who didn't get the Val."

GRAY

The Val? You mean, like an STD?

ROSE

Valedictorian. But honestly, a social disease does fit better.

GRAY

I don't know why I'm Valedictorian. They got the wrong guy.

ROSE

You get top grades in everything.

GRAY

It's easy to play by the system's rules, and yet I get this honor. You—you're original. You break the mold so brilliantly, the system doesn't even know how to grade you. You inspire me.

ROSE

Yeah. Whatever.

GRAY

The word valedictorian is Latin for, "to say farewell." Not, "look at my GPA!" The final words should be given by you. You have more right to be Valedictorian.

ROSE

Well, thanks. But that's not how the system works.

GRAY

Screw the system, is what you would say. Now tell me what's bad about the speech.

ROSE

You didn't mention high school at all. You didn't recall any school events, victories, challenges. Nothing. Just your car. The red vomit.

GRAY

Comet. Why do you call it that?

ROSE

Because that's what your driving does to me.

GRAY

The comet is a metaphor for what we should be.

ROSE

A celestial body with a luminous tail?

GRAY

You were listening.

ROSE

Cringing, mostly.

GRAY

So, you want to help me polish up my speech?

ROSE

I had planned to last night, but someone didn't show up and left me waiting. We need to make sure your speech isn't going to have the audience praying for the end of time. And why don't you have it memorized?

GRAY

Should I?

ROSE

Yes! And you need actual content worth memorizing. Start with the stuff you completely ignored.

GRAY

Like what?

ROSE

Like the hockey games! Cramming the Comet with more people than seatbelts.

GRAY

You always sat shotgun, windows down, hair flying. Cheered until you lost your voice. And you also stole my jacket.

ROSE

And I didn't give it back. The musical! *Anyone Can Whistle*? Remember me singing my heart out from beneath a pile of props and lighting equipment in the Comet?

GRAY

You couldn't even move. Leading lady Fay Apple. Unstoppable. The reason it sold out.

ROSE

I doubt it. You, Mr. Lighting Technician, were the real star. And your trunk was literally a mobile food bank at the Christmas food drives.

GRAY

Nearly flattened the leaf springs.

(ROSE looks at GRAY blankly)

They're long curved strips of ...

ROSE

Leaf springs aren't important. The real point was visiting the retirement home and giving 90-year-old Mrs. O'Sullivan a joy ride in the Comet.

GRAY

Windows all the way down and the stereo all the way up.

ROSE

You made her feel like a million bucks. Pretty sure she had a crush on you.

GRAY

If she did, it didn't show up in the will.

ROSE

Those were the moments we didn't think would matter ... they did.

GRAY

Yeah, great times. Great memories.

ROSE

(ROSE pulls the flat stone from her pocket and plays with it)

Exactly.

GRAY

We sure got around.

ROSE

Yeah. We did. You know, maybe you weren't far off mentioning the Comet. It wasn't just a car. It was ... the story.

GRAY

Really? Two minutes ago, you wanted to burn my speech.

ROSE

I know. But now I get it. The Comet was the common thread. It's where we laughed, schemed, argued, got hopelessly lost, and tried to figure out life. And through all of it, it kept us connected.

GRAY

I'm so glad it did. I don't know what I would have done without you.

ROSE

I was going to show you this last night.

GRAY

Is that ... a stone?

ROSE

You don't recognize it?

GRAY

(GRAY takes it and examines it)

Shaped like a kidney? You have a kidney stone?

ROSE

No, you goof. It's shaped like Australia. You gave it to me in grade five, remember? When you found out I'd just moved from there.

GRAY

Wait. You kept that all this time?

ROSE

Of course I did. All the girls giving me the stink-eye when you gave me this little rock ... and your attention.

GRAY

I was 11. Boys that age are oblivious to girl drama. Actually, I still am. So ... you're giving it back? That's a bit cold, don't you think?

ROSE

I'm not giving it back, Gray ... I'm going back.

GRAY

Wait. Wait. What?

ROSE

My dad is being transferred after we graduate.

GRAY

Back to Australia. On the other side of the planet. You're moving away. Why?

ROSE

I'm sorry, but I wanted to tell you last night.

GRAY

I missed a date, and you pack up and move to Australia? I can't believe this is happening.

ROSE

We're at a major crossroad in our lives. We're all graduating this week. Everyone has plans, and now I've got mine.

GRAY

I guess I just expected ... I don't know ...

ROSE

For things to just keep on going?

GRAY

No. I mean, I knew you would be going to college, but I just figured it was closer than the other side of the world.

ROSE

Life is unexpected. Things change. We go to school to grow up, and suddenly, we have to. And now... here we are. Who said something about the end of time finally arriving? You did. And here we are. The end of time.

GRAY

I just didn't think it would end this fast and, I don't know, that you and I ...

ROSE

You and I what?

GRAY

Well, you know ...

ROSE

No Gray. I don't know.

GRAY

Well, didn't you just say that we've been like real close since grade five.

ROSE

Yes, you and I have had this unspoken thing since grade five. So close that everyone assumed we were a couple, even though we weren't. Even I caught myself believing it sometimes. We were off-limits to everyone else. Maybe even to each other. Best friends, sort of dating, sort of not. But now, here we are. At the end of time.

GRAY

I didn't realize we were getting here this fast. We had great times. And now here we are, at a crossroads, and I feel like I just got t-boned in the Comet.

ROSE

Nice analogy. (beat) Did you ever like Pixie?

GRAY

That's the wrong question. The question isn't if I liked Pixie. It's why you're asking me now ... when you're holding a ticket to Australia.

ROSE

Then I'll ask it the right way. Were you ever ... attracted to her?

GRAY

Her charisma was magnetic, but no, she was a free spirit.

ROSE

Did our friendship ever keep you from being with her?

GRAY

No. But she did ask me once why you and I weren't official.

ROSE

And what did you tell her?

GRAY

I said, me and Rose? We're different. I'm an overthinker and ... and you wear flowers in your hair.

ROSE

How poetic.

GRAY

I thought about it. About us. But what if it didn't work out? I couldn't risk it. I couldn't imagine the Comet without you in that seat.

ROSE

So, you never took the risk.

GRAY

I never took the risk. I hate failing. And it kills me that I left you hanging last night.

ROSE

You didn't fail me, Gray. It's just a screw up. We all do it some time. My parents actually have given me the option of going or staying.

GRAY

Oh, really? Well, that's kind of them.

ROSE

No, it's not. I want them to tell me what to do, like they always have. If I stay, I lose family. If I go, I lose ... friends.

GRAY

Have you tried writing out the pros and cons?

ROSE

Of course you'd say that. That's your thing, not mine.

GRAY

That's not a bad thing.

ROSE

It is right now. I need logic. Strategy. A long-term plan. All the things you are. Not just stupid feelings.

GRAY

But your heart brings empathy and intuition. That matters just as much. Probably more.

ROSE

You've always been the one to steer us in the right direction. Head first.

GRAY

And you gave us the reason to keep going. You were the heart that made the journey matter.

ROSE

What about you? What's your big plan?

GRAY

College. Auto mechanics.

ROSE

Auto mechanics? You can't be serious. Did you use your head or heart to decide that?

GRAY

What's wrong with that?

ROSE

You're brilliant. I thought you had scholarships to go into engineering. I just figured you'd be doing – you know – white-collar, briefcase, coffee-in-hand kind of stuff.

GRAY

I did a pros and cons chart. And working with cars won. It's the whole reason I have the '71 Comet.

ROSE

I thought that was just your hobby. Not real life.

GRAY

It is real life. When I do what I love, I end up loving what I do.

ROSE

There you are, thinking with your heart. I guess you really do have one.

GRAY

I do have a heart. It just mostly kicks in when you're in the passenger seat ... yelling at my driving.

ROSE

My head says go with my family to Australia. My heart keeps pulling me back here. But then I think—what am I even staying for?

GRAY

Me. You could stay for me.

ROSE

You really think this – we – would work?

GRAY

I don't know. But I know it matters.

ROSE

Do you want me to stay?

GRAY

I want you to do what's right for you. But, yeah, I want you to stay.

ROSE

I don't know yet. I really don't.

GRAY

That's fair. Here. Keep your stone. If this is the end of time, I'm glad we made it this far. Together.

ROSE

That's nice but doesn't help with my dilemma.

GRAY

Maybe it does. I say we ride the Comet. See where it leads.

ROSE

What about your speech?

GRAY

Revised. "Principal Whitmore, teachers, and everyone else. We're not Mavericks. We're Comets: beat-up, rebuilt, and somehow brightest when we're moving together. These past four years were fueled by two Comets. One leaks oil. The other is a celestial body that lights up my sky."

ROSE

(Pause. Gray steps toward her. The moment hangs. He leans in, almost a kiss. She stops him gently, slips the pages from his hand)

You're going to need help with this. A lot of help.

(ROSE brushes past him)

Let's go ride the Comet.

(ROSE leaves. Beat. GRAY follows)

END