

Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing

A monologue by Taylor Basso

From "An Evening Free of Judgment"

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**ACT I**

**SCENE II**

KATE, a well-dressed woman of colour, occupies the same stage as DOLORES did previously. She delivers her tale to the audience.

KATE

Hi... everyone. You don't know me. My name is Kate Monroe. Hey. I'm here to broach a couple of subjects that can be a little bit dicey -- gender, and ethnicity, and how they relate to self-esteem. Now, I hear all of you nay-sayers groaning in the back rows, but I promise, this will be an enlightening and educational endeavour for us all. At the end of the evening, I'll come around (I've volunteered to make canapés since the community centre is so low on funding), and why don't you tell me if you haven't learned something?

I'd like to start this discussion by lamenting the poor depiction of women of colour in the popular media. To what kind of role models do our little girls have access? We've got Dora the Explorer, a girl whose proclivity toward socializing with a monkey wearing Wellingtons, a talking map, and a knapsack with an eating disorder suggests a serious abuse of hallucinogenic drugs or at least intense and vivid delusions. Tyra Banks won't be a good role model until "smiling with your eyes" becomes a legitimate career option. There's Missy Elliott, but I don't know if I trust a woman who would remove her head from her shoulders and dance around with such reckless abandon. And then there's Maria from *Sesame Street*. I don't know what that bitch is up to, but she seems shifty. If it sounds bad now, it was terrible when I was a girl. Women of a visible minority had

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only a fraction of the visibility, if you'll pardon a bad pun, that they presently have. It was pretty much me and Uhura, every night, as I awaited for a distant future... the arrival of which I would almost certainly die long before.

It didn't help that I stuck out like a sore thumb at school. My homeroom was whiter than an episode of *Antiques Roadshow* in the middle of a blizzard. There was the bare handful of other minority students, but I could never relate to any of them. Jennifer with the wonk-eye, where her stare followed you around the room regardless of where she was actually looking, like the Mona Lisa. Haunting, in its own way. There was Scabby Rosa. Stabby Andrea. The Korean exchange student with the crazy religious parents who finally went off the rails the day before spring break and started showing everyone her nipple, and then we never saw her again after that. So you understand that I was at a severe deficit as far as female role models went. All I really had was my mom, and she wasn't as, you know, as impressive as the other girls' moms. The other girls would emulate their mothers, like, "when I grow up, I'm going to be an attorney" or "I'm going to be a nurse" or "I'm going to be a publisher." I'd try to join in, but somehow "when I grow up, I'm going to be dismissive" didn't have the same ring to it.

It's not fair to say my mom was just dismissive; she did have a job. She was an office assistant to the thirty-fourth largest land developer in Modesto, California. As you might imagine, it kept her away from home a lot, particularly as we lived in Utah. In order to placate my sister and me, she would occasionally toss us

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KATE (cont'd)

some sort of toy or goody to make sure we didn't lace her Carnation Instant Breakfast with barbiturates. She didn't care enough to go out and buy us something we might conceivably want, so she'd just bring us things she found around the office. Date stamps. Stenography pads. Notary seals, legal-sized paper. They were novel, but you can't fill the hole in a little girl's heart with manual hole punchers and windowed envelopes. I got more and more despondent. One day, as I was sitting in the living room watching *The Wacky World of Tex Avery* and pondering whether the note I'd leave before running away should be in the passive or active voice, when my mom opened the front door. She was presently engaged in an affair with her married boss, so her blouse was disheveled and she smelled of men's cologne and disrepute. Not wanting to bother with me, her eldest daughter, she simply tossed a box of software in my direction and went upstairs to her bedroom for a bourbon and a bubble bath. Disappointed yet again, I lifted up the box to examine it. What I saw on the cover was life-changing.

*"Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing."* You might scoff at the idea that my mother's misplaced attempt at generosity via embezzled typing software would induce anything but rage. If you believe it, though, I felt hope. For the first time in my life, I felt hope. There, smiling at me from the cover, was Ms. Mavis Beacon. A proud, scholarly-looking Black woman. She was, to me, the perfect role model. Here was a woman, ethnic and powerful, prideful without militancy, satisfied in equal parts with her Blackness and her typing ability. I was inspired -- yes, I'll say

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inspired -- by this woman of colour who had clawed her way to the top of the crude, male-dominated typing industry, carved out her niche as a typist-slash-entrepreneur, and made it all available to me. Mavis Beacon was offering me a lifeline in the form of a keyboard, the chance to follow her footsteps. I could find pride in my heritage and success without compromise. I could be the next Mavis Beacon.

It was around that point that I became a recluse. I shut myself away in my room and typed all day. Each night, I would complete my exercises, increasing my proficiency. Simple sentence fragments at first: "sad ads lad ask." It was nonsense, jibjabber, but for the longest time it was my Bible. I moved off of home row, ventured into the great unknown: the Ts and Rs and Is and Os. "Riot dots sort star rats." Then the Ns and Ms and Es, Mavis guiding me by the hand the whole time. "Stand at the track. Jack is a man." Actual sentences now; beautiful, blessed coherence. Then, the Vs. The Zs. The Xs. The number row. The impossible possible, nothing off-limits. Shit was getting real. "Henry is a professor. His class has 22 students. There are 17 girls and 5 boys." I was a fluent typist and with every keystroke I was demolishing gender walls and erasing colour lines. Every night, as I'd finish my lessons, I would look up to my framed copy of the Mavis Beacon installation manual. I would gaze reverently at my late-coming role model, and then I'd fall asleep and dream of the zany adventures we would have together. Usually, they involved typing.

I'll never forget the day I decided that merely being good at typing

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wasn't enough. It was a brisk December day, falling between the sugar cookies of Christmas and the vermouth-clogged vomit of New Year's Eve. I was sitting by the credenza, practising my air-typing, when I noticed my sister Bette taking my customary place near the keyboard. I swear to you, it's like she didn't even know what it was, which is very possible as she was eight months old at the time. She clattered and pecked at the keys, rending a cacophony from what should have been a symphony. It was like watching a virtuoso play a cat. I knew then that I had to teach her. I had to teach all of them, and that's when the whole thing became jarringly clear. I was destined to take Mavis's place. Kate Monroe Teaches Typing.

After that, I started to kick my typing into overdrive. I took meals at my computer monitor. I got kicked out of school for typing noisily through class on a keyboard I carried everywhere, strapped to my ankle in a large holster. I flunked middle school, but I didn't care. Who needs home room when you've got home row? I botched my piano recital. Turns out treating a piano like a keyboard is a good way to induce seizures in an epileptic adjudicator. I was "removed" from the Girl Scouts. They cited my bad attitude, though I maintain that they were the ones with the bad attitudes, and when a crazed mugger jabs the muzzle of his pistol at their necks and demands that they type a document at 95 WPM, I can't wait to see them mash their Thin Mints against the keyboard, the entitled little bitches. Basically, I lost my whole life outside my typing, but it didn't matter. It was Mavis 'n' me, to the end, Thelma and Louise. I even wrote Mavis a letter proclaiming my

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passion for typing, and expressing my gratitude for everything she'd done for me. I also asked if she'd mind typing her name onto a glossy and sending it back to me. She never responded to my letter. This will become significant later, but at the time, I brushed it off as her being unable to get back to me due to her busy schedule, typing for shahs and the Sultan of Brunei and whatnot.

With or without Mavis's written support, I made a name for myself within the community. The local news did a fluff piece on me where I typed for a bunch of elderly patrons of a life enrichment centre. They were critically bored. Some of them were born before the advent of typing and thought I was trying to conjure a spirit with my clacker machine. I became renowned as the greatest typist in the Four Corner states. I typed the entirety of *The Brothers Karamazov* in seventeen minutes then started in on the book of Revelation before I collapsed of dehydration. I eroded so many keyboards that I eventually had one custom built, forged by the fires of Hell and oiled with the blood of orphans. I grew tired of speaking and had a voice simulator installed in my computer but I typed so fast the computer started *screaming* and *caught fire* and *I watched it burn*. In short, things got very intense in a very brief amount of time, which should have been my sign to ease up and maybe refocus on something productive, like learning how to ungnarl my fingers from the claw they had become.

Instead, I ramped things up toward their inevitable bloody conclusion. I decided the best way to gain the attention of Mavis Beacon and the acclaim of the international typing

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community -- a community I was convinced existed, despite all evidence to the contrary -- I needed to have a one-woman typing exhibition. A public forum for everyone to see how amazing I'd become. I issued my invitations, 375 of them, with 374 RSVPed declinations. My family wasn't coming; my mom was under a table somewhere in Modesto and my sister was too young to know what was going on but old enough to know I scared the hell out of her. The Girl Scouts declined. I guess it was a bit arrogant of me to invite them in the first place after some of the things I'd typed on the sides of their houses. The crowd from the retirement home didn't come because they thought I was going to draw a pentagram in the middle of the stage and convoke Selena or something. Every single invitee turned me down -- all but one. Mavis Beacon.

Now, she hadn't exactly accepted my invite either, instead forsaking any sort of response altogether, but to me it was validation. No news is good news, and my strong female role model had chosen to bless me with just that. So I diligently went about preparing for my big recital. The space was rented out and the equipment set up: a computer, my Franken-keyboard, and two chairs. In one, I would type so fast I took everyone in the room to another place, another time: one with boundless possibility and no discrimination against gender or ethnicity or race or age or sexual orientation. I was going to type the world into equality. And in the other chair, Mavis Beacon -- only she's not in the chair, she's standing and cheering me on, clapping and chanting as my deft composition obliterates every

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"ism." It was going to be the greatest day of my life and Mavis Beacon was going to be there to share it with me.

She never showed. After an hour, I thought maybe she had just typed the address and directions up wrong, but of course she didn't, she's Mavis fucking Beacon. I was all alone in the auditorium, just me and my computer. It used to be enough... My sadness turned to rage. How dare she? What, was she afraid I'd beat her? I probably would. She was old, a has-been. She was over the hill. It was my time to shine now, and that old cow just couldn't bear to step out of the spotlight. Well, I'd learn her a thing or two. It was time to nip the situation in the bud. It was time to throw down with Mavis Beacon.

I stormed home and tore down my framed installation manual, ripping it apart in my search for a phone number, any phone number I could call. I found one on the back, all the way down by the proof of purchase. Craftily hidden, you tricky bitch. I punched in the numbers, and a voice answered that was so smooth it could have belonged to Mavis herself. For a moment, I was stunned, starstruck. Could I really go through with this, levy a war against the woman I'd esteemed so highly for so long? Steeling myself, I realised I had to. It was the only way out. "Is this Mavis Beacon?" I asked. I was told it was the company that made *Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing*, yes, but she was only the receptionist. Good enough, I thought, and I let her have it. I went through everything -- my mom, the book of Revelation, Selena, everything I've told you tonight. I ramped up to my finale, and let me tell you, if I'm

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an excellent typist, I'm an even better orator. In an impassioned diatribe, I condemned Mavis Beacon and everything for which she stood, and demanded accountability. I was sobbing by then. The receptionist, Linda, her tone instantly softened as she gave me the four word shock that changed my life: "oh, honey... Mavis Beacon isn't real."

It felt like my heart had been ripped out of my chest. She went on to explain that Mavis Beacon was the invention of some old white dude, that the photo on the box was of some retired Caribbean model who'd probably never typed a day in her life. She kept going, but I was deaf and dead now. Of course she wasn't real. It all made sense now: why she hadn't responded to my letter, why she hadn't come to my exhibition, why my feverish search for her place of residence had come up totally dry. To say I was shattered would be a gross understatement. My eyes welled up anew, and I tossed down the receiver as I fled to the streets -- Linda imploring me to wait, to no avail. I didn't even know where I was going, all I knew was I needed to leave. I ran outside, a fearful, blind mess, hands over my eyes. Unfortunately, that ill-fated phone call happened to coincide perfectly with the street cleaner's nightly passage. It arrived just as I exited, and well, I'll spare you the graphic detail and just say the street definitely needed a lot more cleaning afterward. I supposed it was a blessing in its own way. The doctors told me I was lucky to be alive. I had survived, but not without a cost: I lost both of my hands. Yeah, these are fake.

KATE slams her fake hand against the top of one of the chairs unflinchingly.

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KATE

I suppose it goes without saying that I definitely needed to reprioritize my life at that point. I learned something that day, beyond the fact that it's really hard to reattach a set of hands, even if a helpful street person finds them and dutifully brings them to the hospital a few hours later. I learned that I couldn't use a fictional character to misplace my own feelings about my ethnicity and gender -- that my resolution on those issues would have to come from within. And, to an extent, they have. Leaving Utah has helped a lot. I feel a lot more confident in myself, and I feel like by coming up here and sharing my story, maybe I can be a role model for a young girl, whose story won't have to end in heartbreak, social alienation, and a variety of tricky medical procedures attempted by a man with an incredibly dicey degree from a country I'm at least 80% sure doesn't exist

I haven't typed a word since... couldn't if I wanted to. I choose to focus on healthier pursuits. Soccer. Tap dancing. Actually, jokes aside, I've really gotten into cooking lately. The Betty Crocker cookbook is sacred to me. Ethnicity aside, I've kind of found myself relating to ol' Betty. I just invited her to a cookout I'm having. I hope she shows; I'd be pretty bummed if she didn't. So, you know, cross your fingers. If you can. I can't.

Fade out.