**THE 40 PAGE PROLOGUE**

Characters:

ALAN : a male lead actor in his forties, successful, self-important; has had cosmetic work done

ROBYN: a female ex-soap starlet in her thirties, depressed

ZEPHYR: a fledgling actor just out of NIDA, new-age

MARIGOLD: a cast member in her thirties, type cast as a character actor

ROLAND: a cast member in his thirties

BARTENDER: a ripped young man who is an ex-cop turned PI, masquerading as a bartender

LEGION: an Amazonian with a bizarre Mohawk resembling a Roman centurion helmet, who is a hench person hired by the bartender/PI

ROOM SERVICE PERSONNEL: young female in hotel uniform

NEUROLOGIST ONE

NEUROLOGIST TWO

NEUROLOGIST THREE

**ACT I**

**SCENE 1**

The Top End Hotel, Darwin, 2021, where the cast of the Birthday Party has reconvened. They have not seen each other for several years, since the pandemic shut down their long running and successful production of Harold Pinter’s ‘The Birthday Party.’

The cast is all staying in the hotel, where an annual conference is being held for neurologists.

Five chairs are set up in a semi-circle, and the two lead actors are seated in the central chairs. two of them. ALAN waving a wad of script pages.

LEGION, a striking character with hair fashioned into a Roman helmet, leans against the left side of the stage, spits on a dagger and throws it across the stage into a drum, piercing the cover. The other actors seem not to notice.

ALAN: ‘You’re always saying we should go back to the beginning…

ROBYN: No, Alan, I meant before the beginning, before things….

ALAN: Before things what?

ROBYN: Just before.

ALAN: So, that’s what we’re going to do.

ROBYN: What?

ALAN: What I’m telling you…

ROBYN: What exactly are you telling me, Alan?

ALAN: I’ve paid this writer…

ROBYN: What writer?

ALAN: Which writer? You mean which writer.

ROBYN: (Sighs). Yes. Which writer? Is he well-known?

ALAN: (shrugs) Not on Twitter? I don’t know. He’s some chap been browning his nose on my Twitter account for some time now.

ROBYN : Is he good?

ALAN: He says good things about me. Here, shall I read you some of what he’s written? Do you have a Twitter account? I could forward you…

ROBYN: (Sighs). Has he written...anything ….that’s not on Twitter?

ALAN Shrugs

ROBYN :(Snatches ALAN’s phone). Here. Let me be the judge.

What’s his name? ALAN: (Looks sheepish) Birthday Boy Number One?

ROBYN: Seriously?

ALAN: It’s an homage.

ROBYN: To Pinter?

ALAN: To me.

ROBYN: Sounds more like he wants to be YOUR number one, Alan.

ALAN: Humph, You’re just jealous.

ROBYN: (Reads): Listen to this. I mean, have you actually read this? Or do you just count the likes?

ALAN: Try to take this seriously. I think we’re on to something. He might be the next Brecht.

ROBYN: He’s absurd all right. Listen to this. ‘Have play in mind. Birthday Suit.’

ALAN: And?

ROBYN: It’s a play all right, Alan. A play for your cock.

ALAN: Don’t be ridiculous. Read what he says. ‘Have play in mind’. Only a WRITER could have a play in mind. Your mind’s in the gutter. He simply wants to write the prequel to The Birthday Party. This chap knows I’m famous for the lead role in Harold Pinter’s The Birthday Party. Naturally, he wants to write the ultimate role of my life.

ROBYN: I thought “The Birthday Party” WAS the role of your life.

ALAN: Alright, the PENULTIMATE a role of my life.

ROBYN: (reading Alan’s Twitter account on his phone) mmm….Have play in mind? High drama, maybe. (waves pages of script). But not a written script.

ALAN: You always think the worst of people.

ROBYN: You set the bar very low, Alan. Because of you, I have lowered my expectations that people will ever treat me well.

ALAN: You’re not banging on about THAT incident are you?

ROBYN: It was YOU doing the banging on, Alan. I was doing the objecting. And I still am.

ALAN: I mean, don’t forget the earth is about five million years old….at least. Who can afford to live in the past?

ROBYN: Don’t go quoting Pinter to me. It’s not very original.

ALAN: Pinter had some great quotes. He also said “The past is what you remember.” And I find myself more and more forgetful…

ROBYN: Conveniently so.

ALAN: I have a condition.

ROBYN: Pinter went on to say “Imagine you remember, convince yourself you remember…or pretend you remember.” He was writing about people like you, Alan.

ALAN: I forget things.

ROBYN: Forget Pinter, here’s a quote from me. “Don’t pretend to forget.”

ALAN: Look, that thing….that was a long time ago. I’ve told you, I got carried away. Great actors do that.

ROBYN: You can’t blame your acting skills for what you did. You need to face reality. After all these years. (pauses, looks in the distance) It never goes away for me.

ALAN: (beams ) I told you, a good actor likes to make an impression. Besides, I’ve been told I’m an excellent lover.

ROBYN: Lover? Is that what you think happened?

ALAN: We’ve been over this so many times. I was IN the role.

ROBYN: (sighs) You had no right….

ALAN: You can’t be that upset. Not after such a long time. After all, you’ve agreed to be in this play now.

ROBYN: I thought it might be an opportunity for you to make amends.

ALAN: Amends? Me? It’s you who should be doing the apologies.

ROBYN: Pardon?

ALAN: (laughs, cruelly) For your recent performances. I mean, have you read your reviews? Plastic without the fantastic. My personal favourite; She knew her lines to a fault...along with so many acting faults. How about this one? She can close a play at the Opera House faster than a global pandemic.

ROBYN: Enough, Alan.I thought you said your memory was fading. You seem to remember those reviews. I don’t read reviews. I know lately, I’ve been …. wanting.

ALAN: Wanting? Aha! I knew it. You missed me. I knew it.

ROBYN: (shakes head vigorously) Ever since… that night, I, my acting, my heart just isn’t in it.

ALAN: Sounds like I made an impression after all.

Enter MARIGOLD and ROLAND.

MARIGOLD: Did I hear Alan saying he made an impression? Got yourself a star on the Hollywood Boulevarde?

ALAN: Not yet, I’m afraid, Marigold.

MARIGOLD: Better get a move on then. There must be somebody you can pay to get one. I mean, all the Aussies in LA are getting them.

ROLAND: (Offering a hand to be kissed) ALAN, it’s been eons. Now I see what you meant by an impression. New teeth. (He stands back to examine ALAN’s face) and you’ve had some work done. (He turns to ROBYN) Robyn, dearest, you never change.

ROBYN: (wincing) ROLAND, good to finally get the cast back together. Where’s ZEPHYR?

MARIGOLD: She’s meditating. Said she’ll be here when the candle burns out.

ROLAND: (looks puzzled, shrugs) So, we’re back on the road. Same old cast, same old lines?

ROBYN: (waves a hand) ALAN has a surprise for us all. He’s got a NEW script, a prequel to The Birthday Party. Same characters I guess. New lines.

MARIGOLD and ROLAND (in unison) A new play!

ROBYN: Tell them, Alan.

ALAN: (waves script) It’s not...he hasn’t put the finishing touches on it yet.

ROLAND: It looks substantial

MARIGOLD: Something to work on. I’ve been dying to get back on stage.

ROBYN: How much EXACTLY has this chap written, Alan?

ALAN: It’s a prologue.

ROLAND: I hate prologues.

MARIGOLD: I thought you said it was a prequel.

ALAN: It’s a prologue to a prequel.

MARIGOLD: I don’t understand.

ROLAND: I do. It’s a chance for Alan to stand out front of stage and hog the limelight.

MARIGOLD: But it can’t ALL be prologue, Alan. I mean, look at it.

ROLAND: It’s encyclopedic.

MARIGOLD: The prologue’s just the first page, surely.

ALAN: (grins) Don’t underestimate the value of a prologue.

MARIGOLD: Are we talking in kilograms?

ALAN: Prologues are ancient dramatic tools.

ROLAND: Then you must be a prologue, Alan.

ALAN: What? Oh. Funny. Now, seriously, the ancient Greeks used prologues to set the scene. He sidles up to Marigold and pats her bum. ) Marigold, quick quiz. Who was the father of the prologue?

MARIGOLD: I give up. (She tries to shake him off, but he grabs tighter.)

ALAN: Euripides!

MARIGOLD: (Elbowing him) You ripped these trousers, I’ll rip your manhood!

ALAN: You women have all taken pandemic precautions very seriously.

ROBYN: It’s called social distancing, Alan. If you ask me, it’s got its advantages.

ALAN: I liked the way things were.

ROLAND: You were explaining about the prologue, Alan.

MARIGOLD: The prologue to prequel.

ROLAND: Sounds like a wank to me.

MARIGOLD: Sounds like someone’s rewriting history.

ROBYN: Or making it up if you ask me.

ALAN: No one’s asking you.

ROLAND: Whatever. It’s new lines. (He reaches down and pulls knitting from his tote. Eyebrows are raised. Roland pokes out his tongue.) Go on, Alan, tell us what we’ve signed up for.

ALAN: Thank you, Rolly. Where was I? Prologues. Yes. And Shakespeare was very fond of prologues. Look at Romeo and Juliet. The Bard leaves the audience in no doubt what they’re in for.

 “Which but their children’s end, nought could remove,

Is now the two hours’ traffic of our stage;

the which if you with patient ears attend,

what here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.”

MARIGOLD: This writer chap, your Twitter fan, the one with the oversized prologue, is no Shakespeare, I’m guessing.

ALAN: I told Robyn he might be the next Brecht.

ROBYN: Pinter. You meant “The next Pinter.”

ALAN: Brecht, Pinter, as long as the critics give this writer an impressive tag…

ROLAND: As long as we’re quoting Pinter, it might be helpful to remind this new writer that Pinter also said “One way of looking at speech is to say it’s a constant strategem to cover one’s nakedness.”

MARIGOLD: That would explain his moniker, Birthday Suit number one.

ALAN: (a looking defensive) It’s Birthday BOY Number One.

Enters ZEPHYR. She has a yoga mat rolled up under her arm.

ZEPHYR: Hi all. (She is dressed in active wear. She unrolls the mat and starts stretching and warming up. She beckons to ROBYN to join her.)

ROBYN: (stands up and stretches, warming up) I’m with Roland. I’m not a fan of prologues.

ALAN: What about the Canterbury Tales? Chaucer’s prologue is a famous mood setter. It oozes with sensuality….in the right hands.

(pauses to warm up his voice) then stands and recites from memory.

‘And bathed each vein with liquor that has power (he comes up behind ROBYN and mimics humping her)

To generate Therin and sire the flower

(He comes close to Zephyr and cups her breasts)

When Zephyr also has, with her sweet breath

Quickened again, in every holt and Heath,

The tender shoots and buds, and the young sun

(He pumps his fist)

Into the ram one half his course has run.’

ROBYN exits. ZEPHYR punches ALAN in the groin. ALAN doubles over.

ALAN: They really should bring back the codpiece.

**ACT I**

**SCENE II**

The Top End Hotel Conference room.

The room is set up for a conference, with chairs facing backwards towards a podium and two large screens on the wall. The first visual says, ‘Social Distancing: The end of the Baby Boom?’ Another reads ‘Isolation: Is it paralyzing our brains?’

LEGION, at one end of the stage, polishes a knife and throws it at a second drum, piercing its cover.

ALAN and ROBYN enter. ALAN starts by turning some of the chairs around to face the audience. Then he pours himself a coffee and stuffs a pastry in his mouth.

ROBYN: Alan, when I said I wanted to go back to before…

ALAN: (waving pages in her face) Isn’t it brilliant? A prequel!. They’re all the rage in Hollywood

ROBYN: It's a prologue, Alan. But, I was saying, maybe we can’t go back, maybe we just have to write the ending.

ALAN: But Brecht's already done that.

ROBYN: Pinter.

ALAN: Whoever. You can’t rewrite the greatest absurdist play writer of all time.

ROBYN: I’m not talking about the play.

ALAN: But that’s why we’re here.

ROBYN: That's not why I’m here.

ALAN: I don’t understand.

ROBYN: I know you don’t. Or at least, some days I think you really don’t get it. And that makes me feel sorry for you. Other days, I really believe you are acting the part of a man who doesn’t get it, just so you can get away with all that …..stuff you do.

ALAN: Stuff? What stuff?

ROBYN: Oh, you know. The liberties you take with women.

ALAN: Women like me to touch them. I don’t get complaints.

ROBYN: Zephyr punched you in the groin yesterday.

‘’

ALAN: That’s just the way she and I have a bit of fun. It’s not an actual complaint.

ROBYN: Look at me, Alan. Really look at me. You are getting a complaint from me. I am still upset by what you did, and I want you to take it seriously.

ALAN: I told you, over and over, I was acting. I was IN the role.

ROBYN: The role didn’t call for THAT, Alan.

ALAN: Some of my best reviews have come when I’ve improvised.

ROBYN: I came here to confront you.

ALAN: You came here to act. No one else will hire you. This is your last chance.

ROBYN: No, Alan, this is YOUR last chance.

ROOM SERVICE PERSONNEL: (arrives with a birthday cake. The candles are alight and singing Happy Birthday.) Delivery for Robyn?

ALAN: (points to Robyn) That’s Robyn.

ROBYN: It’s not my birthday.

Room service personnel holds out her hand for a tip. Alan points to Robyn, who snarls at him and reaches in her pocket for a five dollar note. The Room Service Personnel courtesies and exits. Robyn holds up her hands in surrender.

ROBYN: What’s going on here? Are you responsible for this?

ALAN: I thought you might appreciate the gesture.

ROBYN: It’s NOT my birthday. And I don’t need to be reminded of the past.

ALAN: (stares out into the distance) Shakespeare said “The past is Prologue.”

ROBYN: That was Antonio in the Tempest. And he’s the villain, trying to wipe out his dirty deeds.

ALAN: I’ve never played the villain.

ROBYN: Don’t kid yourself. Besides, Shakespeare is often misquoted. You conveniently ignore the line that follows, “What’s to come is yours and mine to discharge.”

ALAN: That sounds sexy.

ROBYN: It was meant to sound serious. Deadly. It means, yes, you can’t change the past. But it’s only prologue. The real acts that follow are up to you.

ALAN: (shudders) Look, how about this? I’ll come clean about the whole… business...after we finish this play?

ROBYN: But we’ve only got the prologue.

ALAN: So far…the writer sends me script pages in installments.

ROBYN: You’ll keep your word?

ALAN: My words are my livelihood.

(The other three actors file in and start helping themselves to breakfast supplies.

Roland takes a sample bag and scoops pens into it.)

ALAN: Guys! Good news! He’s sent through more pages.

ZEPHYR: Sent? Why doesn’t he forward copies to us?

ALAN: (waving wads of paper) He doesn’t email. These are hand-delivered…to my door. With Lindt chocolates and a single rose.

ROLAND: Told you he was a wanker.

MARIGOLD: How many Acts?

ALAN: (Beams) It’s the rest of the prologue!

ROLAND: The rest?

**ACT II**

**SCENE I**

ROBYN’S hotel room. There is a Pilates ball and a yoga mat beside the bed. There are two birthday cakes, one alight with candles, on the luggage table.

The lights are dim, and there is movement under the covers. ROBYN stirs and opens her eyes to find ALAN in her bed.

She turns and thumps the stranger in her bed. He slides off the bed, knocking over the birthday cakes and lands, belly up, naked, on the Pilates ball, which rolls and squashes the cake.

ROBYN switches on the lights and reaches for the phone.

ROBYN: Hello? Reception?

ALAN: No need for room service. Though I might need an ambulance. I almost caught alight.

ROBYN: That’s not…..ALAN! (Puts phone down) What on earth were you thinking?

ALAN: FERN, dear, it’s me BRANCH.

ROBYN: Alan, Fern and Branch are characters from a play. Years ago, remember?

ALAN: How could I forget you, Fern? We were a match made in heaven.

ROBYN: It’s Robyn. And you need to explain yourself.

ALAN: Branch needs his little Fern.

ROBYN: You’re unbelievable. This is a matter for the police.

ALAN: You can’t really mean that.

ROBYN: What did you expect?

ALAN: Rompy-Pompy, that’s what I expected.

ROBYN; Rumpy-pumpy. It’s called rumpy -pumpy.

ALAN; I like my term better.

ROBYN: You had no right…

ALAN : I get confused, that’s all. When I climbed into our bed…

ROBYN: MY bed

ALAN: Okay, your bed. Nowadays, you have to make allowances for Branch.

ROBYN; For who?

ALAN; For me.

ROBYN: Why? Because you’re a man? Women have been making allowances for men for generations.

ALAN: (lifts a finger) Because I’m an actor.

ROBYN: What’s that got to do with it?

ALAN: You wouldn’t understand.

ROBYN: Try me.

ALAN: Because I’m such a fine actor, I get so….

ROBYN: Confused? Like an old fart?

ALAN: Dedicated. To my craft. My method. It makes me…it makes me believe.

ROBYN: You don’t actually believe I’m your partner in real life, do you?

ALAN: Well, in the moment...and you, well you seemed to believe it too, my dearest FERN.

ROBYN: It’s acting, Alan. And it’s Robyn, not Fern. I mean, did I ever once give you the idea that I wanted that sort of thing? Let’s not forget, you put that….that thing…

ALAN: That was years ago. I’ve explained. I was onstage, in character. And besides, it thought it was symbolic.

ROBYN: Symbolic?

ALAN: Yes, you know, the whole Brecht Birthday Party thing.

ROBYN; It’s Pinter, not Brecht.

ALAN; Brecht, Pinter, it doesn’t matter. They’re all absurd.

ROBYN: You’re the absurd one. You hurt me, Alan.

ALAN: Because it was a one-time thing?

ROBYN: You actually hurt me. Physically. On stage.

ALAN: What? Never. With those things? I mean it’s not as if they were alight.

ROBYN: (Throws her hands up in the air) Honestly, Alan, sometimes I wonder if you think like the rest of us.

ALAN: Like women? Good Lord no.

ROBYN: Like the rest of the world.

ALAN: I didn’t think….

ROBYN: You DID think. You thought about using those ….

ALAN: Props.

ROBYN: Yes, ALAN, props. You certainly put some thought into how to use them.

ALAN: I’m creative. It’s my craft.

ROBYN: But you don’t think about ME, my needs.

ALAN: BRANCH doesn’t think about other people.

ROBYN: BRANCH is a character, caricature, actually. You, Alan, are a person. or at least, you’re supposed to be.

ALAN: It was just a momentary lapse. Branch won’t do it again.

ROBYN: Who won’t?

ALAN: I won’t do it again.

ROBYN: (sighs) It’s always just a momentary lapse with you, Alan. That might explain this, in my bed this morning, but, I’m telling you, it takes more than a momentary lapse to do what you did to me on that stage.

ALAN: What? Poking my fingers in the pink frosting? (he scoops up a finger of frosting and sucks it off slowly) The audience loved that.

ROBYN: And after that?

ALAN: So, I improvised.

ROBYN: Smearing frosting on my chest was a touch inappropriate, Alan.

ALAN: There, you said it. A touch inappropriate. Let’s leave it at that, shall we. No need for the police and all that.

ROBYN: It's not about the frosting, Alan. It’s ...you know, what you did next.

ALAN: I got carried away.

ROBYN: That won’t hold up as a defense. I mean, we were ON STAGE, for God’s sake.

ALAN: It was dark. The lights were out. The audience had no idea. I mean, nobody saw. Nobody knew.

ROBYN: I saw. I knew. It happened to me.

ALAN: Think of my reputation. Nobody needs to know.

ROBYN: Nobody needs to know what?

ALAN: The naughty thing BRANCH did ….(pouts, childishly) Branch needs to learn to use props properly.

ROBYN: Props?

ALAN: (Nods) Props. I’m an actor. I use props.

ROBYN: I’m not a prop, Alan.

ALAN: Branch is sorry, Fern.

ROBYN: I’m NOT FERN. And you didn’t do it to Fern. you did it to me.

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**ACT II**

**SCENE II**

LEGION throws another knife at a drum. And takes a seat in a booth in the hotel bar.

Zephyr and Robyn are seated on stools at the hotel bar.

A ripped bartender is making showy cocktails with smoke and mirrors.

A sign above the bar advertises the upcoming Top End Cocktail Competition, “Cock of the Top.”

An older man in a suit and tie is drinking at the far end of the bar. He has a lanyard ID tag for the Covid Conference, and a trade fair bag with “CU in the NT” on the front.

The women stare at the bartender's muscles while he jiggles and muddles.

BARTENDER: What do you think? Could I take out the competition?

ZEPHYR: If we’re talking Mr Top End, then definitely.

(bartender turns away from them)

ZEPHYR: And maybe Mr Bottom End too.

BARTENDER: (sighs and turns back to his customers) I’m talking about my cocktails.

ZEPHYR: (winks) So was I.

BARTENDER: You women, with you lot, it’s always the same. You can’t see past my physique to judge me for my skills.

ZEPHYR : When I’m looking at your physique, I’m thinking about certain skills.

ROBYN: Zeph! (To bartender) You think we don’t understand? Try being us.

ZEPHYR: (unconvincingly) Yeah, try being us.

BARTENDER: If you work here long enough, you find out that women today are all hypocrites.

ZEPHYR: Hypocrites?

BARTENDER: Hypocrites.... with a sweet tooth.

ROBYN: I don’t understand?

BARTENDER: They all want their eye candy.

ROBYN: You’re not suggesting we can’t look? Men have been ogling us for eons.

BARTENDER: If all you see of me is my muscles, my tanned skin…

ZEPHYR: And your incredible sapphire eyes.

ROBYN: Zeph, you’re not helping our case.

BARTENDER: Exactly. In my book, looking, ogling, is harmful.

ZEPHYR: What’s the harm in looking?

BARTENDER: The harm is….you’re missing the best part of a person.

ZEPHYR: But, my looks ARE the best part of me.

BARTENDER: (a shakes head) That might just be the saddest thing I’ve heard at this bar. And believe me, working here, I’ve heard ALL the sob stories.

ROBYN: Zeph, you can’t really believe that?

ZEPHYR: (shrugs) Well, I never wanted to believe it, either, but the truth is, when men actually get to know me, they find excuses to leave.

ROBYN: You’ve just met the wrong men, that’s all.

ZEPHYR: Even my Father. He left when I was three. And that’s the longest any man has ever stayed.

BARTENDER: Three years…..

ZEPHYR: Long enough to know me.

CONFERENCE ATTENDEE: I’d stay.

ZEPHYR: They all say that….til they know me.

ENTER ALAN, dressed younger than his age, looking smug. He heads straight for the bartender, without acknowledging ROBYN and ZEPHYR. He looks the bartender over.

ALAN: Something spectacular, please.

BARTENDER: Aplomb?

ALAN: As long as you slip in some of your muscle juice.

BARTENDER: (sighs) See, girls, people are just checking out the body.

ZEPHYR: He’s not gay, if that’s what you’re thinking.

ROBYN: Zeph….irrelevant, much. Though he might be….

BARTENDER: That’s my point. Everyone looks.

ALAN: So?

BARTENDER: You're all stuck at the intro.

ROBYN: Like our new play. All we have is a prologue.

ALAN: It’s a good start.

ZEPHYR: But where’s it going?

ALAN: Trust me.

ROBYN: That’s the thing, Alan, we don’t.

ALAN: (huffing) Well, trust the writer. That’s what we do, we thespians.

BARTENDER: You mean, you only spout someone else’s lines?

ALAN: Don’t we all?

ROBYN: I like to think we at least put our own interpretation on them.

ZEPHYR: Yeah, we make what we say, sound like we mean it.

BARTENDER: How do I know when you’re not acting

ALAN: That’s the art of it. If the actor is good enough, you never know.

BARTENDER: So **I** can never really know **you**?

ROBYN: Until someone finds you out.

ALAN: (turning suddenly) Look who’s here? Of all the gin joints….it’s my neurologist.

They all shrug.

ALAN : (Waving and beckoning) TAG! Join us! What’s your poison? Everyone, this is TAG. This is the last place I would expect to see you.

TAG: But I told you, I was flying up for the Covid conference. That’s why I couldn’t see you until the following week.

ALAN: Rubbish. I had no idea you were up this end of the continent. Let me buy you a drink. ( gestures to the bartender) Tag, in your professional opinion, is this a natural specimen?

TAG : I...er…don’t think I should comment.

ALAN: See? This bartender is acting too. He’s wearing a costume. Problem is, ( he points to a tattoo) he can’t change it.

ZEPHYR: Maybe he doesn’t want to change it.

ALAN: Rubbish. He regrets his looks, just like we all do. Problem for him is, he can’t change. I mean, how would this man ever get the part of Alan Turing, code breaker?

TAG: I saw you as Turing. Years ago, now. Brilliant. I really believed…

ALAN: Gandhi?

ROBYN: Alan, you wouldn’t play Gandhi, seriously?

ALAN: Ben Kingsley won an Oscar…

ROBYN: In the last century.

ZEPHYR: When dinosaurs ruled the academy.

BARTENDER: Misogynists and Racists.

ROBYN: Same thing. (turns toTag) We haven’t been properly introduced. I’m Robyn, and this is my coworker, Zephyr.

TAG: (taps ID on lanyard) Dr Thagwe Tzangerai. Call me Tag, everyone else does.

ZEPHYR: Can I call you Thagwe? It sounds so much….

BARTENDER: Less like a label?

ROBYN: More like his actual name?

ZEPHYR: I just like saying it.Thagwe.

TAG: You’re a breath of fresh air. I’ll have a gin thanks.

ALAN: You can take the boy out of the colonies….

ROBYN: Alan! Sorry, Thagwe, I’d like to say my colleague is off his game tonight, but truthfully, he’s always like this.

ALAN: Manners, please. Now, Tag, here, he’s my specialist, aren’t you? What fateful providence brought us here tonight?

TAG: I told you, I’m at a Covid conference. We’re exploring the long-term adverse effects of social distancing.

ALAN: (squeezing Robyn’s butt) I told you we were meant to touch each other.

ROBYN: (pulling away) Not like that.

ALAN: Tag, you don’t need a conference to tell you what we already know. The human race would die out if we couldn’t touch each other. Stands to reason.

TAG: That’s not exactly…

ALAN: Anyway, since you’re here, I may as well spill the beans. Tag, here, he’s been studying me. He’s DIAGNOSED me.

ROBYN: Finally…

ALAN: Go on, Tag, tell them.

TAG: I don’t think that would be professional.

ALAN: Then I’ll tell them, and you can confer.

ZEPHYR: There’s something wrong with you, Alan? I’m sorry.

ALAN: YES. It’s a two-edged sword, a blessing and a curse. I’ve got “WANKO Syndrome.”

ROBYN: I knew it.

BARTENDER: What the?

ALAN: Tell them it’s true, Tag.

Tag nods, swirls his drink.

TAG: That’s the nickname for it, in both neurological and psychiatric circles.

ZEPHYR: They have circles? Like magicians?

TAG : (Looks puzzled) Not really. My American colleagues love an acronym.

ZEPHYR: LOL

TAG: The syndrome itself is rather more serious than its acronym suggests.

ZEPHYR: GAMO

ROBYN: What?

ZEPHYR: Get a move on. I can see you’re never on Snapchat.

ROBYN: But what about Alan’s … condition? What was it again?

ALAN: WANKO

ROBYN: Sorry. Just couldn’t resist hearing it one more time...from the source.

TAG: (Clears his throat) It’s a relatively new syndrome. Well, only recently recognised in the western world. It…. (coughs again) stands for Working Actor Never Knocks Off.

ROBYN: You can’t be serious.

ALAN: (looking pleased) It explains why sometimes...I get carried away.

ROLAND: (enters, does double-take at sight of TAG). Tag? What on earth are you doing here? I thought you only toured the globe by four-star golf clubs?

ALAN: (wedging himself between Tag and Roland) Rolly! drinks are on me. What are the odds of running into Tag up here, of all places?

TAG: Rolly….

ROLAND: The old golf partners. who’d have thought?

TAG: I’m at a conference….

ROLAND: A room full of financial advisors. That’d cure insomnia.

TAG: It’s a NEUROLOGY conference.

ROLAND: What the?

ALAN: You two probably have a lot of catching up to do. (gestures hurriedly over to a table) You two get settled in over there, and I’ll get muscles here to rustle up some potions for you both.

ROLAND: Well, it’s been ages since I’ve seen you, Tag. Any solid stock market tips?

ROBYN: Alan, I thought Tag was your medical specialist? A neurologist?

ALAN: He is. (whispers) Confidentially, Rolly sees him too. Solid tips is a euphemism for erection treatments.

ROLAND : Neurologist?

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**ACT TWO**

**SCENE THREE**

Alan and Robyn remain at the bar. The bartender is packing up.

ALAN: So you see, it’s a medical condition. I can’t be held accountable.

ROBYN: Should I feel sorry for you?

ALAN: It’s a condition. I just have to live with it.

ROBYN : I live with what you did to me every day.

ALAN: The neurologist says people have to make allowances for my …..my disability.

ROBYN: Seems rather convenient to me. Would it get you off bank robbery too?

ALAN: Hmm… I’ve never played a thief before.

ROBYN: You stole something from me.

ALAN (YAWNS) Think I’ll retire for the night. Branch needs his beauty sleep. EXITS.

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ROBYN picks out the decorations from her drink, leaving fruit and umbrellas on the bar. She drains the last of her cocktail. The bartender turns and cleans the bar surface.

ROBYN: So, did you manage to record anything useful?

BARTENDER (reaching into his jeans front, pulling out a recording device, wincing as he rips off adhesives) I won’t know til I get all this hooked up to my computer… back at my place. Patience.

ROBYN: Patience? I’ve been patient for eight years.

BARTENDER: Then you won’t mind waiting another five or six hours.

ROBYN: (sighs) Tell me, now that you’ve met him, what did you make of Alan?

BARTENDER: (shudders) He’s a creep, all right. But you don’t get jailed for being a creep.

ROBYN: But you believe my story?

BARTENDER: I didn’t need to meet him to believe your story. Statistically, a woman coming forward with a story like that, especially a woman whose life is in the toilet, statistically, it’s gotta be true.

ROBYN: Thanks…I think.

BARTENDER: Just going with the stats. But, yeah, I agree, the creep needs to pay for what he’s done.

ROBYN: What did you make of his ...diagnosis?

BARTENDER: A bit suss. Problem is, (taps his equipment) even if we nail him on tape, we still only have proof he’s a creep.

ROBYN: A creep with an excuse for being a creep.

BARTENDER: In court, it’ll be a diagnosis.

ROBYN: You mean he’s going to get away with it?

BARTENDER: There is another solution. (He gestures to Legion, who is polishing her pistol)

ROBYN: I’m listening….

BARTENDER: People disappear out here.

ROBYN: What are you saying?

BARTENDER: You must have heard the stories. Peter Falconio...Azaria Chamberlain…

ROBYN: You mean, feed him to the dingoes?

BARTENDER: (considers for a moment, then shakes his head) Not necessarily. An unfortunate encounter with a croc…

ROBYN: Come on, you were a cop before you were a private detective. You can’t seriously be suggesting we take the law into our own hands?

BARTENDER: It wouldn’t be us doing the law-breaking...necessarily. I’ve never seen a croc or a dingo incarcerated for its crimes against humanity. Out here, we just accept it as a risk of living at the Top End.

ROBYN: Accept?

BARTENDER: Being taken...eaten, whatever.

ROBYN: (shudders) Too gruesome for me.

BARTENDER: It doesn’t have to be a grisly end...do you know how many people disappeared up here during Cyclone Tracy?

ROBYN: Nope.

BARTENDER: Me neither, but I heard it was a heap. All those years, and no sign of one of them.

ROBYN: How sad…

BARTENDER: I heard of one bloke, out at Humpty Doo, swears he was holding his wife’s hand one minute and the next…

ROBYN: What?

BARTENDER: Whoosh!

ROBYN: Whoosh? What do you mean, whoosh?

BARTENDER: That's his story. though his mates reckon he wanted her gone. Got another, younger version on the boil.

ROBYN: You can’t be serious?

BARTENDER: It’s not my story. Just saying...if you don’t trust the courts, the system, to bring you justice, and who does? I reckon we could have old Alan meet with an accident. (He points over to Legion).

ROBYN: No. I couldn’t do that to Alan.

BARTENDER: He as good as did that to you.

ROBYN: I still couldn’t…

BARTENDER: Disappeared, then?

ROBYN: (shakes her head) No. Look, I’m not like that. That’s not my style. I do want him to acknowledge what he did to me. And part of me wants him to feel what I felt, that night.

BARTENDER: I know a bloke could organise a gang bang…

ROBYN: (Stands up, stool falls over) No! Let’s concentrate on what we came for. A confession. You keep shmoozing him at the bar and see if you can get him to confess.

BARTENDER: It still might not be enough.

ROBYN: What Do You call a celebrity squirming under cross-examination?

BARTENDER: I give up.

ROBYN: A fucking good start.

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**ACT TWO**

**SCENE FOUR**

TAG and ROLAND are enjoying a few drinks at a far table. Legion is at a nearby table, cleaning a hunting knife.

ROLAND: All this time, and I never knew you had two professions.

TAG: You mean besides golf?

ROLAND: Mate, if you’re a professional golfer, I’m a brain surgeon. No wait, that’s you, isn’t it?

TAG: What are you getting at?

Roland reaches for Tag’s lanyard, pulls his spectacles on and examines it.

ROLAND: Looks almost authentic.

TAG: Well, as long as it fools Robyn, that’s all that matters. Besides, this conference is better than you’d think. I’m actually learning a lot.

ROLAND: I don’t get it. It’s like I’ve joined the ensemble again, but it all turns out to be a dream. (leans forward) What are you really doing here?

TAG: Helping out a mate.

ROLAND: Who? Alan? I wouldn’t have thought he’d need help. With anything.

TAG: Look, mate, between you and me, he was a bit worried about meeting up and working with Robyn again.

ROLAND: You mean, because of the way her acting’s gone off these last years?

TAG: (whispers) Apparently, they had a bit of a fling, way back.

ROLAND: What? Alan and Robyn? I never saw it.

TAG: Well, it’s true.

ROLAND: Truth in drama is forever elusive. Or so Pinter says.

TAG: Anyway, the way Alan tells it, Robyn didn’t take too kindly to Alan breaking it off. Phone calls all hours of the night, driving by his house, four dozen pizzas being delivered at 4:00 am…

ROLAND: I don’t think I’d mind that kind of a break-up, if there was free pizza as a reward.

TAG: Stalking, Rolly, stalking. It’s pretty scary stuff. Apparently she became quite unhinged. So you see, he was a bit anxious about meeting back up with her.

ROLAND: Doesn’t sound like Robyn. Are you sure?

TAG: You can never be sure with Alan. But I’m his friend. And…He needed a wing man. And I’m him.

ROLAND: A wingman? To do what, exactly?

TAG: Protection.

ROLAND: And you’re the best bodyguard he could afford?

Roland looks over shoulder at Legion who is now polishing her Nunchucks.

TAG: Not that kind of protection. I’m here to make Robyn back off, and to get you lot to feel sorry for Alan, because of his….condition.

ROLAND: A condition you two idiots made up?

TAG: Actually, it’s a real condition. Or so Alan says. I really hope so, because I chatted up a lady neurologist last night with a story about how I treat high profile celebrities with this condition, and she seemed really impressed, if you know what I mean.

ROLAND: (sighs) So, I’m supposed to believe you’re not my golfing partner and financial advisor . Instead, you’re a neurologist who treats Alan for a condition that might actually exist but he doesn’t have it, but you want Robyn to believe Alan has it, so she’ll leave him alone? Have I got it?

TAG: (mimics a golf swing) Hole in one. Wasn’t it Pinter who famously said that golf was better than sex?

ROLAND: (nods) half right. it WAS Pinter, but he was talking about cricket. And he went on to say that sex wasn’t too bad either.

TAG: He got that right. That lady neurologist last night….not too bad. What she and I did though, it wasn’

ROLAND: (shakes his head) So...no stock tips, then?

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ALAN sidles up behind LEGION at the table where she is seated, cleaning her weapons. He strokes and sniffs her red ponytail. LEGION shakes her head so vigorously that ALAN is pushed backwards, holding his damaged nose.

LEGION : When did they relax the social distancing laws?

ALAN: I only touched your hair.

LEGION: And hair is a part of my body. Not to be touched, except by invitation.

ALAN: Actually, hair is not a living part of you. It’s dead.

LEGION: Like your brain?

ALAN: (miffed) Don't they teach manners up in the Top End?

LEGION: Up here, we view some manners as white man’s artifice. (She holds up a flick knife to the light) But we take appropriate behaviour very seriously.

ALAN: Well, I didn’t touch your flesh, just the dead bits. So, technically, I’m in the clear.

LEGION: I’m guessing it’s okay to touch your dick then?

ALAN: (beaming) Now we’re getting somewhere…

LEGION: You said it’s okay to touch the dead bits.

ALAN: (0ffended) Look, it seems I got off on the wrong foot.

LEGION: I don’t care what you get off on.

ALAN: I care. Maybe I should buy us a few drinks and we find out what we get off on?

LEGION: (appoints knife in Alan’s face) Maybe I should….no wait. Let’s have that drink, and you tell Legion all about your fantasies. How about you detail all your dirty deeds?

ALAN: (takes a seat, raises a hand) Bartender! Two whisky sours. Make it four.

BARTENDER whips up cocktails and brings four on a tray. Places them on the table.

ALAN hands one to LEGION.

ALAN: Straight from the bar. No need to fear date rape.

LEGION: There’s not much I fear. But I am wary of a man who mentions date rape when someone enquires about his past deeds.

ALAN: Wary, eh? But not afraid? Something tells me you’ve got rape fantasies?

LEGION: (shudders, and is quiet for a minute). What makes you think it was a fantasy?

ALAN: I’m confused…some women, in the past, well, they like ‘forceful Alan.’

LEGION: How do you know they like it?

ALAN: They say things.

LEGION: Like what?

ALAN: Oh Alan, you’re so forceful.

LEGION: Are you sure you’re not quoting lines from a play? I do know who you are.

ALAN: Tell me you’re not curious?

LEGION: You’re casting me as rape curious? Believe me…

ALAN: Curious about me, the great actor. Curious to see if the rumours about my prowess are true?

LEGION: The only thing I’m curious about is you, Alan.

ALAN: They all say that.

LEGION : They?

ALAN: Women. Women who want me.

LEGION: And what do these women get?

ALAN: They get what they asked for. Forceful Alan.

LEGION: And what does Forceful Alan do?

ALAN: I could show you.

LEGION: Dirty talk. I want to hear first. Tell me how it plays out.

ALAN: Well, the way it usually plays out, I, we, there’s usually a hotel room.

LEGION: And there’s drinks?

ALAN: Plenty. Sometimes I have to let them talk first.

LEGION: How tiresome…

ALAN: You Said it. Mostly they want a part.

LEGION: A part of what?

ALAN: A part in a play. And I tell them, you want a part, well, so do I. I want a part of you. And I take it.

LEGION throws her drink in Alan’s face.

ALAN: No need for theatrics, dear.

LEGION: It’s not ‘dear’, it’s not even ‘she’, not that you bothered to ask. It’s ‘they.’

ALAN: Look, if this kind of thing makes you uncomfortable, we can just pretend.

LEGION: Pretend?

ALAN: Pretend it never happened.

Lights dim.

**ACT THREE**

**SCENE ONE**

LEGION throws a knife at a drum then exits.

Next day rehearsal. It is morning, and the ensemble are gathered around the breakfast spread in the conference room. Roland is filling a bag with stress balls from a trade table advertising medications and techniques for premature ejaculation. A sign reads, “Overcome your short-comings.” There is a house of cards at the end of the table, and in his haste, Roland knocks it over.

ALAN: (laughs) Same old Rolly. Can’t keep an erection.

ROBYN : (she bends down and retrieves the cards, lifting them in a way that shows the cards are all glued together. She replaces the construction on the trading table. Sighs). Honestly, you haven’t evolved along with the rest of the human race.

ALAN: Because I’m perfect, just the way I am.

ROBYN: Sure…

ALAN: Look. (points to new wad of script pages). Here, the author says so right here. It’s on Twitter. If you’re following me, and I know you all are, you’ll have seen this already. “I believe you are perfect for this part.”

ROLAND: Are you sure you’re not the one tweeting yourself?

ZEPHYR: Yeah. I was beginning to wonder….I mean, (She extricates her jammy fingers from the pages) Just who writes this crap?

ALAN: Fans. My adoring fans. I’ll admit, this one, Birthday Boy Number One, he’s a bit…

ZEPHYR: OTT?

ALAN: Huh?

ROLAND: Over the top. I mean the name alone, it suggests….

ZEPHYR: It suggests Alan made him up. Let me look at my watch….yes, it’s Confession time.

ROLAND: (crosses himself) Oh, come on, tell Father Roland all about your great confession.

ROBYN: And, while you’re at it, make a FULL confession.

ALAN: What do you mean?

ROBYN: As Maya Angelou observed, “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you.”

ALAN: (looks uncomfortable) I don’t know what any of you are getting at. Birthday Boy Number One is a real fan. And more than that, he’s a real author. (waves script) I mean, this guy’s your bread and butter.

ZEPHYR: Yes, buttering you up for sure.

ROLAND: Look, you’ve got to admit some of the writing in these pages is well, substandard.

ZEPHYR: Which is why we all think ...Alan, you might be the playwright.

ROLAND: Come on, you can tell us. Say, you’re Birthday Boy Number One.

ALAN: Well, there’s some truth in what you two are saying….

ZEPHYR: I knew it!

ROLAND: Spill the beans

ALAN: I can claim the monicker. If you care to read my reviews, and the reviews of those who’ve tried to copy me, I’ve often been called “Birthday Party Number One” or “The Original Birthday Boy.”

ROBYN: It’s not quite the same…

ALAN : Close enough.

ZEPHYR: So you did write this drivel after all?

ALAN: First of all, it’s not drivel. Some of the lines are quite….

ROLAND: Predictable?

ALAN: Perhaps, but there’s only so many words in the English language. Some of the combinations are bound to crop up more than once.

ZEPHYR: Come on. Just tell us.

ROLAND: Tell us.

ROBYN: I’ll say it with you, if that helps. On the count of three. One, two, three...It was me. I wrote this pile of substandard drivel.

ALAN: No…

ROBYN: I’ll help you. (She moves his lips and speaks in lip synch) It was me.

ALAN: (breaks free of Robyn) Don't put words in my mouth.

ROBYN: ISN'T THAT WHAT ACTORS ARE SUPPOSED TO DO? Have words put in their mouths?

ALAN: But...but it wasn’t. It wasn’t me.

ZEPHYR: I believe you, Alan. It’d take someone with courage and unique talent to write a prequel to a famous play.

ALAN: (shakes his head) It’s a prologue to a prequel.

ZEPHYR: Whatever. I realise now, it’s not something Alan COULD do.

ALAN: See?

ROLAND: How do we know you’re not acting, right now? You could be spinning us a line.

ZEPHYR: True.

ROBYN: Hey. Whoa, there a moment. Remember, Alan’s got a diagnosis.

ROLAND: Ah, yes, the condition.

ALAN: My neurological condition.

ROLAND: What was I thinking? What WAS Tag’s label for you? Let’s see, shall we get him back to explain it to everyone?

ALAN: It’s not important. I mean, the name’s not important.

ZEPHYR: WANKER

ALAN: What?

ZEPHYR: Your condition.

ALAN: WANKO.

ZEPHYR: ITCF If the condom fits…

ALAN: What?

ROOM SERVICE PERSONNEL enters, carrying wads of paper.

ROLAND (signs for the pages) New pages have arrived. (flicks through the pages). They are poorly written, alright, and most of the lines are for Alan...but….I’m inclined to believe Alan. He couldn’t have written these. He hasn’t had time.

ALAN : I THINK I'M OWED AN APOLOGY.

ROBYN: There, we have to remember Alan’s condition. Now, with everyone’s permission, I’m sending Alan off to learn his new Lines. (turns to Alan and strokes him under the chin) You’ve got an awfully big monologue. But you like it that way, don’t you. It will be you, just you, hogging the limelight.

ALAN: (Beams) Just me?

ROBYN: Like the title of your favourite Shakespeare play, As YOU Like It.

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**ACT THREE**

**SCENE TWO**

Robyn is in her hotel room, typing new pages of script

Bartender is on the floor, doing push-ups.

There is a knock on the door. “ROOM SERVICE”

ROBYN: Would you mind?

BARTENDER: One hundred and ninety seven...one hundred and ninety eight...one hundred and ninety nine…

“ROOM SERVICE!”

ROBYN: Coming!

BARTENDER: Lost my place...one hundred and ninety nine...! I’ll go.

ROBYN: (sighs) Since I’m the one paying you by the hour, It’d be quicker for me if I get it.

Robyn shuts her laptop noisily and pushes her chair back. The chair falls over. She walks around it and steps over the bartender, who presses up just as Robyn is stepping over him. She falls, landing on her back. She lies there, staring at the ceiling. Bartender resumes his push-ups.

BARTENDER: zone hundred and ninety-…

“ROOM SERVICE!”

Startled, Robyn moves to get up.

Bartender does a mental calculation, muttering under his breath, before doing a final push-up.

BARTENDER: Two hundred!

He springs up and leans against Robyn’s back as she answers the door.

The room service attendant is a female, very young and wearing a tight uniform. The bartender looks her up and down.

ROBYN: I thought you told everyone that ogling does damage…

BARTENDER: To both the ogle and the ogler. I know. But, I was just acting when I said that. I was role- playing.

ROBYN: So this WANKO syndrome of Alan’s, it’s contagious?

BARTENDER: (looks offended) I’m nothing like Alan.

ROBYN: Every man is shades of Alan. He’s just the primary hue, (She unscrews the cap on a magnum of burgundy on the room service trolley) the big red…(She pours a glass) the full-bodied bottle of (she takes a gulp and winces) ...man spirit.

BARTENDER: Man spirit ?

ROBYN: (nods) mmm...maybe you should name a cocktail after him?

BARTENDER: What? The Alan? (Thinks) the Alan Key? like the screwdriver, only lame.

ROBYN: (takes another gulp and winces again) Man Spirit. It’d be like this wine, (lifts the bottle and examines it) doesn’t live up to the hype on the label, and, like cirrhosis of the liver, it’ll kill you.- on the inside.

Room Service woman coughs. The bartender holds out a napkin for her. She lets it fall to the ground. She coughs again.

BARTENDER: Cough into your elbow. Pandemic manners please!

ROBYN: (Fishing for money in her pocket) She doesn’t have a cough, she’s waiting for a tip.

BARTENDER: Right. (he strikes a pose and flexes his biceps.

ROBYN: Two apologies. One for the lousy tip. It’s all I’ve got. And two, for the lousy room-mate. He’s all I could get on short notice.

ROOMSERVICE PERSONNEL exits.

BARTENDER; (pouting) So you’re NOT giving Alan the old heave-ho?

ROBYN; I gave Alan the old heave-ho years ago.

BARTENDER: That’s not the heave-ho I was referring to. I was thinking of something more permanent. I have contacts.

ROBYN: You and your…. contacts. I told you, I’m not hiring some henchman…

BARTENDER: Hench-person.

ROBYN: A woman? That would be justice. Is she Alan’s type?

BARTENDER: Not a she, I’m afraid. Legion prefers the personal pronoun, THEY.

ROBYN: Legion? Does she have her own army?

BARTENDER: Legion IS her own army.

ROBYN: Huh?

BARTENDER: It’s a biblical thing...apparently.

ROBYN: Well, I’m not involving myself in murder-for-hire.

BARTENDER: If it’s the money you’re concerned about…

ROBYN: (shakes her head) It’s not the money. It’s… I just don’t want what you’re suggesting.

BARTENDER: To have him rubbed out? They could just injure him. you know, eye for an eye….dick for a chick….

ROBYN: Will you stop? I said no!

BARTENDER: But just think about it…problem solved.

ROBYN: I said NO!

BARTENDER: Suit yourself. You come up here all full of huff and gruff. You get me all interested...and…what did you expect?

ROBYN: It’s not foreplay. It’s a,business transaction.

BARTENDER: I...I got worked up, that’s all. ANYWAY, (he picks up the script) you’ve done so much planning...I just thought….

ROBYN: Well, don’t think.(snatches script back) I’ve gone to all this trouble as you call it, to ...hurt Alan , yes. And it’s working. This, for me, this lousy script, is hurt enough for Alan. I'm not having him killed. I’m humiliating him. And that’s satisfaction enough.

BARTENDER: How exactly?

ROBYN: Well, the reviews, for a start. and the cast. They all think he’s a,chump.

BARTENDER: They already thought that.

ROBYN: The audience? His fans? Alan will lose face over this.

BARTENDER: If it’s loss of face you’re after, Legion could arrange that, and a great deal faster.

 ROBYN: I told you. This (flicks through the pages) this is enough. I’m killing him off on stage.

A KNOCK ON THE DOOR; BARTENDER HAS RETURNED TO HIS PUSH-UPS

ROBYN: (sighs) More room service? Never mind, I’ll get it.

BARTENDER: My turn.

BARTENDER OPENS THE DOOR. ZEPHYR PUSHES PAST HIM. SHE SEES ROBYN WITH A MASS OF PAPER, TYPING AND ANNOTATING.ROBYN MAKES AN ATTEMPT TO SHOVE THE PAPERS UNDER THE SHEETS, BUT ZEPHYR DIVES ONTO THE BED AND RETRIEVES THEM.

ZEPHYR: CITA

BARTENDER: Change is the answer?

ZEPHYR: (Shakes head) Caught In The Act. SO, you are the infamous Birthday Boy Number One!

Robyn looks embarrassed.

ZEPHYR: cat’s out of the bag. What exactly are you playing at?

ROBYN: I…It was just a prank. I’m trying to humiliate Alan. I’m just trying to make Alan look feeble.

ZEPHYR: But you make all the cast look feeble, not just Alan.

ROBYN: Sorry, Zeph. Alan deserves this.

ZEPHYR: I can’t argue with that.

ROBYN: Than you’ll keep my secret.

ZEPHYR: For now…

ROBYN: Thanks. he had it coming.

ZEPHYR: What?

ROBYN: His comeuppance.

ZEPHYR: WTF? Anyway, I came up here to tell you something.

BARTENDER: What?

ZEPHYR: Not you, Robyn. Um, what I came to say, is, that Tag is delivering a keynote speech on WANKO syndrome in ten minutes. Alan wants the whole cast to attend.

ROBYN : Seriously?

ZEPHYR: Yes, so they can understand his condition better.

**ACT TWO**

**SCENE THREE**

This is the conference room at the Top End hotel, where Tag is delivering his keynote address to a room full of neurologists.

TAG: (coughs) Thank you. As Britain’s second most famous playwright, Harold Pinter famously observed, “In acting, there is no hard distinction between what is real and what is unreal.” And as Britain’s most famous playwright, Shakespeare observed, “Therein lies the rub.”

Magnetic Resonance Imaging, in particular, the newer, dynamic MRI, has allowed for the confirmation of long-suspected psychological diagnoses. So much so that these diagnoses now have a place in neurology. Narcissi sim and Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (head-Knock dementia) now sit as comfortably in the neurologist’s handbook as Motor Neurone Disease and St Vitus Dance. With dynamic and chemically challenged imaging, we are able to prove the existence of conditions previously thought of as personality defects or merely human variants. Today I add another condition to the neurologists tool kit. My research has proved what many suspected, that three out of seven actors are living with a disability. These actors have difficulties in disrobing from their roles. This is particularly prominent among stage performers, who, in long-running plays, might spend more hours being someone other than selves. Even after a play has finished, there is evidence of seepage into real life. You’ve no doubt heard the story of the original TV Superman coming to believe he could fly…or Jack Lord, the star of Hawaii 5.0, who came to believe he was the Lord of The Fiftieth State.

Plato warned us of this syndrome thousands of years ago. The revered philosopher declared that it is impossible to be both an actor and a civilian.

Shakespeare has a lot to answer for. Due to the popularity of his plays, if indeed he did write all of them, there have been 112 permanently incarcerated actors who came to believe they were King Lear… 32 Henry the Fifths, and a staggering 78 Malvolios. For every actor deemed insane, there are thousands living with their disability. Hosni believes that is why some actors are said to be playing the same part in whatever role they are cast. Fontaine has pointed out the high divorce rate among actors, blaming the shift in personality when an actor fails to properly disrobe from a role.

To add to their woes, actors experience vicarious traumas through the roles they take on. The public demands violence, and some actors give it their all. They make us believe in the torture they ensure, and the losses they suffer. We have to remember… they are suffering too, almost as if it happened to them.

This would not be a keynote address without a case history. May I introduce Alan, who was a child actor who knew nothing other than acting, who was abused by his manager, emotionally and sexually. It should be no surprise then that he embraced the role of birthday boy because in that role he could regain the power balance. The longer he played Birthday Boy, the more he came to believe that’s who he was.

And, if you look at these graphs, the data is clear. This is MR image when Alan has to state his legal name and details, and this…this is the image when Alan says he is Stanley, the Birthday Boy from his most famous role. Clearly, the images speak for themselves. The amygdala lights up as birthday boy. There is genuine belief in this character. But wait, as they say in the telescoping ads, there is more.

In these non-dynamic MRI’s we can see tiny plaques, each laid down after playing a role. I believe these plaques are cementing the notion that this is Alan’s true identity. As the plaques take over the original tissue in the amygdala, there is much less belief in his legal,identity. Self is being replaced in the brain by role.

Now, remedial issues. What are the strategies we can set in place to prevent this syndrome, this… loss of self?

There is applause from the audience of academics.

TAG: I’ll take questions from the floor.

NEUROLOGIST ONE: Why is this condition only being recognised now? And have you considered this to be a variant of the New Brunswick cluster?

TAG: As I explained, this condition was recognised for centuries, by psychologists. But only since the advent of new technologies such as dynamic MRI, could we prove that real physical changes were occurring in the brains of those afflicted.

NEUROLOGIST TWO: If as you say, plaques are being laid down in the brain, replacing real life experiences with fantasy, or role-play, is there no hope of a cure?

TAG: (nodding) I fear you may be right. But the strategies I have laid out before you, well, we hope they would prevent further damage. And now, I ask for your respect, as I bring out Exhibit A, my case study.

Alan springs up and stands beside Tag, bowing repeatedly as if he has just completed a performance.

TAG: You all know this familiar face. This was the face of famous roles. Some of you know Alan from his early days in Home and away. Others recognise him from his house paint ads. Most of you know him as his most famous role, from Harold Pinter’s “The Birthday Party”. (pauses) Sadly, that is how Alan now remembers himself.

There is silence.

The cast members huddle at the back of the room, whispering and express their sympathy for Alan.

MARIGOLD: I feel awful. If I’d known about Alan’s condition, I’d have been more understanding.

ROLAND: Okay folks. Time to pose the question. The question we’re all thinking.

MARIGOLD: Go on….

ROLAND: Are we all just role playing? Who are WE, really?

ZEPHYR: Well, I for one, just don’t want to know.

ROLAND: Why on earth not?

ZEPHYR: (crying) Sorry. I don't know why Tag’s talk got to me. I mean, it didnt really make me feel sorry for Alan. Well, a little bit.

MARIGOLD: What is it, then?

ZEPHYR: (sniffing and blowing her nose). I…I was hurt…as a child. And now, it’s best if I’m not feeling myself. Ever. When I act, I can shed my sad self. I LIKE being someone else. And I bet, if you’re honest, you all feel the same way. What Tag says might be true, and I know I might be laying down plaques in my brain or whatever that will change who I think I am. But, for me, that’s a good thing.

MARIGOLD: (a hugging and consoling Zephyr) Zephyr might be onto something. Acting in a positive role might eventually cover over the sad and bad experiences of childhood. It could be quite therapeutic.

ROLAND: Or it could be quite schizophrenic.

MARIGOLD: Whatever. It would be worth a try.

ROLAND: According to Tag, we are already doing it.

ROBYN: I don’t want to be someone else. And I’ve tried erasing the bad bits. They just find a way of re-emerging.

MARIGOLD: : We need to concentrate on Alan. He’s obviously been suffering. And we’ve …well, we haven’t been all that understanding, have we?

ROLAND: Guys, I don’t think we should embrace what Tag says….

ROBYN: Why ever not? He’s a specialist in the field, isn’t he?

ROLAND: I’m just saying….Don’t believe everything you hear.

MARIGOLD: Well, I’m no specialist, but I say we all resolve quietly to be more sympathetic to Alan. I forgive him.

ZEPHYR: I forgive him….

ROLAND: What say we give the old bugger a second chance? I forgive him….

MARIGOLD: What’s the old saying? Through understanding comes forgiveness?

ZEPHYR: I think you’ll find it’s “Through forgiveness comes understanding.”

ROBYN: Well, that makes no sense at all.

MARIGOLD: Well, I say we give it a go. Let’s try forgiveness and see what happens. Especially you, Robyn.

ROBYN: Yes, especially me.

They all turn from their huddle at the back of the room when specialist stands up starts shouting at Tag.

NEUROLOGIST THREE: Dr Tzargerai, interesting keynote speech. Your first, I note. I took the liberty of checking out your credentials….

The audience is quiet. Tag looks worried.

NEUROLOGIST THREE: And, quelle surprise? You don’t exist!

The audience gasps.

TAG: I.. I… (throws his arms up in surrender) You are an intelligent bunch. Found me out. mea Culpa. I am no neurologist.

Audience boos.

NEUROLOGIST THREE: Then how do you expect us to take you, and your case study… seriously?

TAG: Simple. I claim WANKO syndrome for myself.

There are cheers from the audience. Alan gives him the thumbs up. Roland calls out Bravo!

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**ACT THREE**

**SCENE THREE**

Bartender is now dressed in camouflage gear. He has brought Legion as his plus one to the opening night. They are sitting in the front row, both looking menacing.

The cast is huddled together behind the stage curtains.

It’s opening night, and there are last minute changes to the script.

Alan is sweating.

ALAN: New lines? Minutes before curtain call? I can’t learn all this before curtain call.

ROBYN: It’s okay. You don’t have to LEARN the new lines. They’ll be fresher if you read them anew.

ALAN: Anew? Don’t go all Shakespeare on me, Fern. Branch is nervous enough.

ROBYN: Just read the pages, Alan. You’ll be fine. After all, you told us all you’re a wanker.

ALAN: WANKO! It’s not an adjective, it’s a syndrome.

ROBYN: Sorry. Look, I know you trust this writer, what’s his name?

ALAN: Birthday Boy Number One.

ROBYN: You wouldn’t have brought us all here if you didn’t think this play would be the next big Brecht.

ALAN: That’s what he said.

ROBYN: Who?

ALAN: Birthday Boy. The playwright. God, I hope he’s nailed the ending.

ROBYN: Believe me, this play will be a scorcher.

ALAN: I’ve never been in a play where I don’t know how it ends. I feel….

ROBYN: It's a prologue. Think of it as a new beginning. My advice…Just keep acting. You’ll be fine.

ALAN: When true silence falls, we are left with echo.

ROBYN: What?

ALAN: Something Pinter said.

ROBYN: Well, do as Pinter said. When the audience goes quiet. You know, that moment when the last hand claps?

ALAN: I LOVE that moment…

ROBYN: I know you do. Now, when the audience goes quiet, like Pinter says, that’s when you echo.

ALAN: Echo?

ROBYN: That’s what actors do, remember? Echo the writer’s words.

ALAN: Would you stand out in front with me? When I do the new prologue, I mean.

ROBYN: I will be right there with you, I’ll even turn the pages for you….like the pianist’s assistant.

ALAN: (kisses Robyn and grabs her butt cheek) Thank you. You know, I was worried you might be angry with me, you know, for what happened, but you seem to have got over it.

ROBYN: I’m trying forgiveness.

Just Robyn and Alan are out the front of the curtains.

Audience claps loudly.

ALAN: (bowing profusely, beaming) Thank you, thank you.

ROBYN: (stage whisper, handing him a page) Read the first page.

ALAN: (takes page, squints, reaches for spectacles in top pocket). I have real pleasure in accepting this award.

Robyn stoops to lift a trophy. Alan frowns, then smiles.

ROBYN: Read on.

ALAN: This award is truly unexpected. It is given to only a few actors, in rec9gn9tion of their work behind the scenes.

The audience gasps. On a screen above ALAN, is a film playing recordings of Alan’s activities during their stay at the Top End Hotel. It includes ALAN sniffing and stroking LEGION’S hair, grabbing the room service personnel’s butt, groping Marigold, Zephyr and Robyn, and man-handling the Bartender.

Curtains open and all the cast are there, standing around an enormous birthday cake, lit with a myriad of candles. The cast have copies of the new prologue in their hands.

The cast read on, and Roland. Nods. They whisper.

ROLAND: Listen, the script calls for all the cast, that’s us, to push Alan’s head into this enormous cake topped with myriad candles. They are lit.

MARIGOLD: Won’t that be dangerous?

ZEPHYR: There’ll be some trick to the candles. He’ll be okay.

ROLAND: Okay. Trust the playwright…

ZEPHYR: Trust the play, right?

ROLAND: On three. One….two….three… Happy Birthday to you….

They beckon to Alan, who walks over to the cake. Robyn whispers stage directions.

ROBYN: Birthday Boy moves in close to blow out the candles.

Alan moves in close.

ROBYN: Give him some room, guys. Space please.

The cast step back from the cake.

ALAN: Song please.(gestures to the audience, who break out into Happy Birthday.

ALAN: Anyone got a light?

LEGION springs up with a BBQ lighter she has pulled from her belt. Alan looks her over, leering.

ALAN: Thank you, ma’am.

LEGION: (pulls a knife) It’s they.

ALAN: Thank you They. Is that a foreign name?. (He squeezes Legion’s butt. She makes a martial arts move and throws him to the floor. The audience cheers. Alan looks perplexed. Robyn gestures for him to get up and take a bow. The audience cheers again. Legion gives him the rude finger…and the BBQ lighter.

Robyn hands him another page of script. Alan reads it and lights the candles. There is an explosive noise and Alan hair catches on fire, melting his face, searing his lips together. Marigold and Zephyr throw their cloaks over him, as he collapses in a heap on the floor. Beneath the cloaks, he convulses, then is still.

The audience gasps.

Robyn moves to the front of the stage.

ROBYN:The late, great playwright, Harold Pinter told us what we already knew but hardly believed. there are no hard distinctions between what is real and what is unreal. Nor between what is true and what is false. Truth in drama is forever elusive. Apart from the known and the unknown, what else is there?

LEGION springs up again and cuffs Robyn, who throws the script into the burning cake, then sinks to the floor, sobbing. Legion reaches for some of the burning script, blows on the pages and reads.

LEGION : Pinter also told us, ‘But when the storm is over, and the night falls, and the moon is out, in all its glory, and all you’re left with is the rhythm of the sea, of the waves, you know what God intended for the human race, you know what paradise……’

THE END