

OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

by

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SCENE 1

(A suicide hotline office. Multiple long tables are setup next to one another, forming a kind of stretching semi-circle. Multiple phones rest upon these tables, along with other random objects such as pens and papers. Chairs are spread throughout. MARK is sitting down in a chair at the far left end of the table, talking rather anxiously into a phone. WALT and CLARE are sitting down on chairs at the opposite end.)

MARK

Well no, no it's really just to check on... oh, you're busy? No, you can talk? OK, well... oh, you are busy? OK. Yeah, I'll wait. *(pause. MARK sighs)* Sure... *(longer pause)* Hi. OK, yeah, so basically... no, no, it's not for that. Well if you'd just let me get it out... heh... no, no, I'm not trying... well, OK, sorry... it's just I'm a little on edge here... so, just lemme tell you... can I tell you now? OK, look, I'm just trying to check in on... yes, my play... no? Oh, I thought this was the number... shit... *(hastily grabbing pen and piece of paper; scribbling)* OK, OK, thank you. Bye. *(dialing new number)* Hello, yes, I was told to contact you... yes, about the theatre... no, no, about submissions. *Submissions*, yes. No, no, for stageplays. Job applications? Well, I don't know about th--... oh, really... hmph... that's funny... well it's just 'cause I was told to... yeah, to contact you about this, so... right, OK. *(writing down new number)* No, I believe you. No, I don't think you're bullshitting me. No, that's OK... OK, bye. *(dialing new number)* Hello... uh, I was told to contact you... about, uh, well, concerning a... well, a concern. Sorry. More like just an inquiry, really. No, ha, no cause for alarm. No cause at all... uh, is this an OK time?

(One of the other phones in the office – on the opposite end of the table – begins to ring. WALT and CLARE glance at one another, then at MARK. MARK ignores this.)

MARK

Well, no, just a quick question, really.

(The ringing continues.)

MARK

OK, great... so, basically...

WALT

This is after hours for us, Mark!

MARK

Oh sorry could you just hold for a sec... (*cupping the phone*) One of you get it! I can't! This is important!

WALT

(*sitting back in his chair, crossing his arms*) Well, I'm not getting it.

MARK

Fine. What's one less person...

WALT

What?

MARK

On the face of the earth anyway, right?

(Pause. WALT and CLARE stare at the phone as the ringing continues.

MARK goes back to his phone conversation.)

MARK

Hi, sorry. I was just wondering... if a decision has been made yet?

(With a sigh, CLARE begins to get up from her chair but WALT blocks her path with his arm.)

WALT

*Don't.* You're letting him--

CLARE

*Stop* it.

MARK

On, on my play, yes. *(pause)* Ohh, fuck... no, no, sorry.

(CLARE answers the phone. She sits down in the nearest chair. We see her mouth moving in conversation but the words are not made audible to

the audience. WALT has slouched back in his chair, looking annoyed.

MARK'S words are audible...)

MARK

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, really. It's just, well... you're the, I think the *fourth* person I've... yeah, I've called about this now... oh really? It's a common thing... huh... well OK, could I get that number, then? (*writing down new number*) 0...4...2... right. OK, thank you. Ha, yeah, I'll try to remember that. Thanks. Bye. (*dialing new number*) Hi, I was told to contact you. Well... I'm a, I'm a playwright, I guess. Heh, well, no, I am, but... oh, really... (*pause, a sigh*) yes, OK. (*writing down number*) 8...3...4... alright, wow this is really something... well, oh, nevermind, it's not important. Thank you. (*dialing new number*) Hello, I'm a playwright. Well... aspiring, I guess. Well, I was told to contact you. Yeah, I was wondering if a... yeah, if a decision has been made yet. Basically. (*pause*) Oh, no. That can't be. Are you serious? It's just... yeah, well, it's just... nevermind, what's the number? (*writing down new number*) Thanks, bye.

(MARK hangs up with noticeable frustration.)

MARK

(*to WALT*) I feel like this is gonna be the one.

(WALT doesn't seem to care. MARK dials the latest number.)

MARK

Hello. I'm a playwright. I have a question for you. Thanks. Has a decision been made yet? On my play. (*pause*) Mark McCann. So, wait... so you're the guy? *The guy*, you know, *the guy*. To ask. The question I just asked. (*pause*) Heh, sorry. (*MARK briefly looks back up at WALT and points*

*down at the phone, nodding.*) OK... OK... *(pause)* So it's still being reviewed, then. Right, right, OK. Well, I would definitely be pleased just... yeah, just with a reading, even. *(pause)* Mmhmm... so I guess I'll just wait on a call... yeah, OK, I'll just wait then. Alright, OK, thanks for the update.

(MARK hangs up the phone slowly. He looks back up at WALT.

CLARE is still in quiet conversation with the suicide hotline caller.)

WALT

So how long you gonna wait on that one, Mark?

(Pause.)

MARK

*(shaking head)* I dunno.

WALT

You know what kinda life I think you lead, Mark?

(MARK stares at WALT.)

WALT

A life of *waiting*. Pretty good way to sum you up, I think.

(Looking down from WALT, MARK lets out a sigh.)

WALT

Mark, Mark. See what it does you? You're getting all *contemplative* again, Mark. And that's no good. No one needs that. *You* don't need that.

MARK

*(looking up)* You--

WALT

*(waving hand)* Anyway enough of the whining for one night. Please. You get in here, and what do you do? Start of the shift, and what do you do? You go *straight* for a personal call. First thing you do. Personal call. How unimportant do you think our job is, Mark?

MARK

Didn't say it's unimportant--

WALT

You're just lucky, you're just lucky I'm not some kinda... uh, *rat*, you know? 'Cause there'd definitely be a lot to say.

MARK

A *lot*, huh?

WALT

No, no, don't look at me like I'm some kinda self-righteous bastard hypocrite here, Mark. Look. I just happen to be *an employee* here, OK? Who happens to... to *appreciate* it when he sees his co-workers putting in the same kind of--

MARK

Yeah, yeah, I've heard it before.

WALT

You've heard; you haven't *listened*.

(Pause.)

WALT

When the fuck is Ted gonna be here?

MARK

Should be soon. He usually isn't this late.

(Pause. CLARE is still talking/listening on the phone.)

MARK

He's never been this late before. Actually.

WALT

No, that's right. He'll only be late when *I'm* waiting on him, I bet. Haven't even met this bastard and I hate him already.

MARK

Probably won't be up here much longer.

WALT

Why?

MARK

Thought you knew? He's just up here on, a... I dunno, I dunno what it's called... one of those things... but he's just up here from Seattle. For a while.

WALT

*Seattle?*

MARK

Yeah, you know, Washing--

WALT

*I know* where it is. But... why here?

MARK

I dunno, why not?

(Pause.)

WALT

Like a... *foreign* work assignment or something?

MARK

Yeah right right, that's it. Foreign work assignment.

WALT

Hmph. Well. Maybe he's a mole.

MARK

*Mole?*

WALT

Yeah, you know. *Mole*. Infiltrator. Spy.

MARK

You're a--

WALT

No, I don't think so. I think I've got a read on this *Ted* guy already, that's what I think.

(MARK looks away from WALT and over at CLARE. She is staring down at the table, looking fairly stressed as she holds the phone up to her ear.)

MARK

*(to WALT)* You should be on that phone right now.

WALT

No, *you* should be on that phone right now.

CLARE

*(cupping the phone)* TED should be on this phone right now. *(going back to listening)*

MARK

She's *new* here. Does that mean anything to you?

WALT

Yeah and she's also *off*. Like me. You think we're getting overtime pay for this shit?

MARK

I can't help it if--

WALT

Ted'll be hearing from me. No need to worry on that score...

MARK

Well *look*, Walt, I'm telling you. Clare can't handle this type of call. She hasn't had the *training* yet. Just look at her! I can see it in her face. I can see... the *inexperience*... in her face...

WALT

Pick up a phone, then, and take over. You're the hero here, right Mark?

MARK

...guy's probably got a... a *shotgun* or some shit--

WALT

Shutup, Mark.

MARK

...shoved down his throat. All the while, trying to talk. Trying to get *something* out.

WALT

Well how would *you* deal with a call like that, Mark? Huh?

(Pause. MARK is staring at WALT, then shifts his gaze to CLARE. He lowers his head, shaking it.)

MARK

I dunno.

WALT

Right. Right. (*pause; checks watch*) This Ted guy better get here in the next ten minutes...

MARK

Why ten?

WALT

You know what, now I think about it.... there's nothin to tell him, anyway. I'm just gonna head out.

MARK

No, no, you have to wait on your relief. Can't just leave before. That's why they call it "the--

WALT

You think I've got--

MARK

"the relief"...

WALT

*You think* I've got all night to sit around here? Waiting on this mysterious "*Ted*" fucker from *Seattle*? For all I know--

MARK

He'll be here.

WALT

*For all I know* this fucker's hopped a canoe back to the Evergreen State...

MARK

A canoe...

WALT

...and there's no fucking way, why should I? There's *no fucking way* I'm just gonna sit here on my ass all night, waiting for this guy for when he finally shows up, what is it I gotta tell him? Nothing important, that's for fucking sure.

(Pause. WALT stands up from his chair and moves over toward CLARE.)

WALT

C'mon Clare, let's go.

(CLARE is ignoring WALT...)

WALT

*C'mon* Clare, Mark'll take over.

(CLARE says a few more words into the phone, then finally hangs up.

She lets out a long sigh.)

CLARE

I don't think I can do this anymore...

WALT

*What?* No you handled that well, (*turning to MARK*) didn't she?

MARK

(*to CLARE*) Did you?

CLARE

I don't know! ...I think so... ugh... honestly... he could be slicing his wrists as we speak for all

I fucking know.

(Pause.)

MARK

Yep. That's right. You never know for sure, really. That's fine. It stops bothering you after a while.

(TED enters from stage-right, looking fairly winded.)

TED

Hey...

MARK

Ted! ...Hey...

WALT

Oh, so this is the guy...

TED

Walt?

WALT

Yeah.

TED

I'm your relief.

WALT

In a way.

TED

What?

WALT

True relief would've been on time.

TED

*Look, fella--*

(A phone rings. MARK rushes over to answer it.)

MARK

Crisis Clinic. *(pause)* Oh, hey Anthony... yeah, they're here. *(pause)* You want to go on speaker?

OK.

(MARK pushes the speakerphone button.)

ANTHONY (VOICE)

Hey everyone! I've got some sad news, actually... a crisis clinic in London was apparently shot up last night.

TED

*Shot up?*

ANTHONY (VOICE)

Hey... *Ted*, right? You're the guy, uhhhh...

TED

I'm up from Seattle.

ANTHONY (VOICE)

Seattle... right... like that city?

TED

*Seattle*. Yeah, like the city.

(Pause.)

ANTHONY (VOICE)

No, I mean *do you* like the city?

TED

Oh. Yeah, I like it alright.

ANTHONY (VOICE)

Were you in that, uh... what do they call it... fuck, that *pointy* thing, you know? I forget the name... that famous building th--

MARK

*Anthony*, Anthony... what do you mean they were "shot up"?

ANTHONY (VOICE)

Oh right, yeah... apparently some guy, some whacko just barged into the place with a... an *Uzi* or something--

WALT

*Fuck...*

ANTHONY (VOICE)

Yeah and, uhh... it was, it was really bloody, apparently...

(Pause.)

TED

...Terrible...

WALT

*(nodding)* Yeah.

CLARE

*(nodding)* Yeah.

MARK

*(nodding)* Yeah.

(Pause.)

MARK

OK, thanks Anthony.

ANTHONY (VOICE)

OK--

(MARK hangs up the phone. TED turns back to WALT.)

TED

*(pointing at WALT)* Now look, fella... I might actually have a *really* good excuse for being late, ever think of that?

WALT

I don't want to hear it. *(moving toward stage-right with CLARE)* You might be getting a call from this 'Geena' lady; she's been having a bad night. If she starts talking about her *father* a lot, just remind her of how wonderful her *mother* was. That's the key. Key is wonderful mom. Got it?

TED

Lis--

WALT

K bye have a good shift!

(WALT and CLARE leave. Pause.)

TED

Alright, alright, fine. Whatever. *(turning to MARK)* Where am I tonight?

MARK

Same place.

(MARK sits down in a chair on the far left end of the row of tables; TED goes over to sit in a chair on the opposite end. A long pause as the two just sit there, looking around for a while. MARK crosses his arms. TED taps his fingers.)

TED

*Jesus!* Doesn't *anyone* in this whole fucking city feel like blowing their brains out?

(MARK picks up the phone in front of him.)

TED

Who're you calling?

MARK

...Have to ask a few questions.

TED

About what?

MARK

My play...

TED

Oh, *Jesus*...

MARK

*What?*

TED

Look, Mark... what if more than one call comes in? I can't handle both!

MARK

Oh, yeah. We're really ringing off the hooks tonight...

TED

*Listen*, asshole--

MARK

*Look*, all I gotta do is... is... make it over *TEN*. If I can make it over ten--

TED

Ten what?

MARK

Ten readings. If I can get the play up to... to more than *ten* readings, to *eleven*--

TED

*You* look, what the fuck's the point I mean really now? Is your head really that far up into the fucking clouds, are you really that fucking ridiculous? You *can't* make a living at it, you just *can't*. You know what, I'll tell you something, out of curiosity I've asked around enough now to be able to say this so here's my conclusion for you: it's a helluva lot more difficult to make a living as a playwright than to live as a disabled person.

MARK

Well--

TED

So in other words, Mark, you'd be better off crippled. It's a JOKE, it's a JOKE, any profession in which it's *ALL BUT IMPOSSIBLE* to make a *fucking* living for yourself can be written off as a *God damned bullshit JOKE* profession, are you getting me at all here Markie? Listen, move on to something else, buddy, if you only take one bit of my advice *please* let this be it 'cause it's *surely* gonna be the most important of all...

(Pause.)

TED

Why, why you gotta make it so *hard* on yourself Mark? You wanna write, you wanna *write* things, OK, fine, there's other options out there, Markie! (*pause*) How about *movies*, the movie industry, or how about *TV*, you know that's not such a joke profession I bet a fella could make a dollar or two for himself in either of those businesses. If he's lucky. But really now, *plays*, come off it Mark, you're kidding yourself no one even watches that shit anymore anyway.

MARK

Nah, not movies... none of that *visual* crap... that's too complicated... I just wanna tell stories, you know?

TED

No wonder a fella can't make even *a buck* for himself in that *playwriting* nonsense... no one even watches that sort of shit anymore... and I gotta say... I can't blame 'em, really... I'd take a movie over a play any day, who the hell wouldn't?

MARK

It's, it's not just--

TED

And whattaya *mean*, "you just wanna tell stories"? Ohhh well what the fuck do you think movies are all about, Mark, what are movies all about?

MARK

You're--

TED

What, what do you really think they're about anything more than just that, *stories*? Well maybe to real *deep* thinkers they are, Mark, but that's all *normal* people give a shit about, Mark, is the story, OK? Whether it be a play or a movie or a God damned pantomime, nobody really gives a half-shit about anything else, OK? What do you, you talk about "*the visual form*" or some shit like that and nobody really gives a shit, Mark. The only difference is maybe, *maybe* you might have some *slight* chance of actually making a dollar or two in one business while in the other you're pretty much no better off than a fucking *hobo*, buddy, OK, a fucking *hobo*.

MARK

Well, I can't... I can't...

TED

Mark, OK... lemme ask you... what is your *true* enterprise?

MARK

My what?

TED

Your *true* enterprise. Your "*hoped-for path*". Your *aim*, your *aspiration*, your *desire*, your *goal*, your *hope*, your *intent*, your *mark*, Mark... your *objective*, your *purpose*, your *target*, your *wish*, your *want*-

MARK

I-

TED

Your *desideratum*.

MARK

Uh huh.

TED

I guess I already know what the answer is anyway. So you wanna be a playwright, right? Right, OK, so I'm gonna go by the notion here that, say, one in a million... you know, of these

*“playwrights”... one in a million actually manages to make a living for himself from it. So, technically, we’ll call it possible. K? ... K. I can tell you right now, Mark, and don’t take offense from this, I’m just trying to help you out here... the way you are, there’s no chance you’re gonna become that one in a million.*

MARK

Why not? What do you mean?

(The phone rings. TED answers.)

TED

Crisis Clinic. *(pause)* Oh, hey Anthony... is this about that London thing again? No, you know what, Anthony, I’ll be honest with you... we really don’t give a shit. How does that affect us? It doesn’t affect us *at all*, Anthony, in *any* way! *(pause)* Why? Because it happened in fucking *London*, that’s why! I don’t give a *fuck* about what’s happening over there! I wouldn’t expect anyone in London to give a *fuck* about what’s happening over *here*... no, no trust me, Anthony, Mark doesn’t give a shit either, OK? Now goodbye, Anthony... get some rest and stop worrying about us over here, please.

(TED hangs up the phone. He looks back up at MARK.)

TED

You’re too *meek*; you’re too *inhibited*.

MARK

*Bullshit, I-*

TED

*Don't*, don't react defensively. This is good for you, what I'm saying. You *need* this... you'll see... now... look... I know from experience, OK? I used to be a lot like you. Really sort of shy and self-conscious...

MARK

I'm *not*--

TED

That's OK! That's nothing to be ashamed of... unless you have a big you-know-what for yourself. Pick one. I pick... *objective*, let's go with that one. Since you *do* happen to have a big objective... and *aren't* just content with what you have... you have to *beat down* your inhibitions, Mark. *Beat* them right the fuck down. That's what I've been working on for years now; it takes practice. It's especially hard at first.

MARK

I don't, I don't, look, I don't--

TED

You *ACT* on your objective, *motherfucker!*

MARK

Shutup!

TED

You aren't acting! ... You're playing around... you're *pussyfooting* around... you're letting these people... you're letting *them* let *you* wait. That's unacceptable. You know what all this waiting is? It's *lost* time, Mark. Lost time. Never getting that back. How does that make you feel? Should make you feel *really* fucking angry, that's how it should make you feel. (*pause*) Now, I'll tell you something about myself. *My* want, my objective? Politics. Some day... some day I'll be at the top of that game. I've been working my way up... you know, the *ladder*. I'm quite a few rungs up now, actually... couple of years back, though... I wasn't even able to get onto the *first* one. The *bottom* one. You follow? The first--

MARK

The *rung*, yeah, right, the *rung*.

TED

Right. The *rung*. (*pause*) So. With a helluva lotta willpower, I began to *beat down* my own inhibitions... to *act out* on what was previously just in my head.

MARK

*What?*

TED

Yeah, lemme finish. You know, you have in your *head* these ideas of who you'd like to be. Ideally. Most people just keep 'em in their head... the exceptional ones aren't content with just that. They make the ideas happen. It's simple, really. Now, I have developed this kind of... kind of *side habit* in the process, but that's OK...

MARK

Whatta you mean?

TED

Well, it's just this smaller thing that's developed.

MARK

But it sidetracks you, then?

TED

No, no--

MARK

Exactly. You "*develop*" some other habit... you get, you get *sidetracked*... suddenly--

TED

*I'm not--*

MARK

Suddenly you're not even following... your, your *BIG* fucking... enterprise... anymore...

TED

No, no, *no*. I am. There are just, at times... there are other *concentrations*, sometimes.

MARK

Shouldn't be other concentrations.

TED

Bullshit. You can't, you can't just--

MARK

Man's remembered by his work.

(Pause.)

TED

Number one, I don't give a fuck. *Remembered?* Think that's why I do this? When I'm dead, I'm *dead*. Who cares? I'm gone. Remember me or not, *fuck* if I care. Number two, I'm still doing work. The habit still is work. You don't know. You're passing judgement.

MARK

You said "*habit*". You call it a "*habit*". That's like... that's, that's work that doesn't matter. That's *lesser* work.

TED

"Lesser work" my ass. It's important work. *You don't know*, so shutup. Just shutup.

MARK

Right. What is it then?

(Pause.)

MARK

The *habit*. What is it?

(TED stands up from his chair and makes his way offstage. He returns a few moments later, schlepping a woman's dead body across the floor. MARK simply stares on blankly as TED comes to a stop near the center of the row of tables and drops the woman's feet down to the floor.)

TED

Alright, you wanna know? Now you know.

(TED makes his way back to his chair. TED sits back down. A long pause as MARK stares at the body. TED stares at MARK.)

TED

That's it! That's my habit!

(Pause.)

TED

*Well? ... Nothing?*

MARK

What...

TED

My *habit!* You wanted to know, now you know.

(MARK cautiously moves to pick up the phone in front of him.)

TED

No, no, no, Mark. You don't wanna do that. Look. Put the phone down.

(MARK puts the phone back down.)

TED

Now... listen. You listening?

(MARK nods hesitantly.)

TED

*That (pointing at the body)* took work. Understand? It wasn't easy. *(pause)* Maybe that's not where I should start... look... look... it's an unfortunate side effect, OK? But there's nothing I can do about it. That's just how it is. It's a *compulsion*. Understand? ... Can't just *control* something like that. *(pause)* Let me tell you something. And this is the *point*, so listen. You think I had the *balls* to do something like this a couple years back? Well, I sure as hell *didn't*. With... with *change* comes a lot of things, you know? I'm moving up the ladder that I want to now. That's important. But also... now... I have to do this other thing.

MARK

Oh, you *have* to do it...

TED

Right. *Have* to. Right... so... Mark... you also have to be able to get to this point, see?

(Pause.)

TED

I know, I know what you're thinking. But listen. If I can do it, you can do it. Simple as that. You just have to be willing... to put forth the work. *(pause)* Trust me.

MARK

*(staring at the body)* How...

TED

Yes, I know, it's bad. I'm a bad man. But just listen to me Mark, would you? *(pause)* No, Mark, you're still staring at the dead fucking body. The dead body doesn't matter, Mark. *(pause)* The dead body doesn't matter, Mark.

(Pause. MARK continues to stare at the dead body.)

TED

*Mark.* Ignore it. Ignore, it would you? *Would you just... ignore... the dead bitch?* I brought her in here to make a point, to help *illustrate a point* but clearly... now you're distracted. *(pause)* Fine. Fair enough. Look.

(TED stands up from his chair, moves toward the middle of the table, and grabs a bunch of large spreadsheet-style papers. He walks over to the dead body and drapes the papers over her so that the body is more or less concealed now. Still standing there, TED turns to MARK.)

TED

Alright, *good*, eye contact. Now... I'm going to tell you something, Mark... let me start with this: *so* much of life consists of *invisible missed opportunities*. *Invisible missed opportunities*, Mark. *Usually*... they are invisible... because what we see appears so *competent*... that it seems only *natural* that it be... as it is. You follow, Mark?

MARK

No.

TED

Then you aren't listening. *Listen*. I know it's not right what I did. OK? I'm sorry for it. But I'm just trying to *help* you here, Mark. That's all...

MARK

*(shaking head)* You're just, you're just--

TED

*Be that* as it may. Mark. I know you've told me before about your writing... you tell me about how you *think* this, you *think* that, you *think* you *heard* from this other guy something about your script... or no, that other guy heard something from this *other* guy... and that's all you ever have to go by, Mark. 'Cause that's the way you live; that's the way you've chosen to live. You're

*accepting* of that shit, unbelievably enough. All you've ever got to go by when you call up, asking about your slaved-over script is how the guy's voice *sounded* or something and so then you have to draw conclusions from that. *Conclusions*, Mark, based on the *sound* of a fucking *voice*. Seems pretty ridiculous to me, Mark. Because it is. It is ridiculous. And you know the guy'll never give you a straight answer, it's always going to be something ambiguous, some ambiguous "Oh, it hasn't gone through the whole process yet" *bullshit*. Fuck, for all you know... these bastards just flat-out *lost* your script, Mark! *(pause)* *Poked* it away somewhere... where they figured someone'll get to it... eventually... but nope, no one ever really does. Maybe. Or maybe someone *did* read it. Fact of the matter is, you never really know for sure. 'Cause all you ever have to go by, Mark, is the *kernel* but what you need, what you *need*, Mark, is the whole fucking WALNUT!

(Pause. MARK has his head down at this point.)

### TED

You got that, Mark? The *whole* fucking walnut. Think you can get by in this life just with the *kernels*? Well, you can probably *get by*... but you won't get much more than that, buddy. Getting me yet? ... Look... you're only getting *limited* information about your world, Mark, about what is happening to you. Best you can do with that is try to fill in the blanks. But you never know if *your* version is right... or wrong.

(TED makes his way back over to his chair. He sits back down. MARK raises his head again to look at TED.)

TED

I know how it feels, Mark. I've been there. But I've beaten it. Most never do... most just accept their sad fate. Me, I found the solution to my problems. And here it is, stated most simply: ... want to hear it?

(Pause. MARK doesn't respond.)

TED

*Well?* Do you want to hear it or not?

MARK

*(simultaneously with "not")* Yeah sure, fine, *go*.

TED

... Be *more* assertive, and *less* inhibited.

(Pause.)

TED

*"More* assertive, *less* inhibited." That's the key. The *mantra*, even. Yeah, the *mantra*. To live by.

(Pause. MARK just continues to stare forward at TED.)

TED

Well, good. I can see it in your face Mark, some of this is getting through to you.

MARK

*(shaking head)* I'm tired.

TED

Hmmm. Well. Gotta learn to get used to this night shift thing, Mar--

(The phones start ringing. TED answers.)

TED

Crisis Clinic. *(pause)* Ahhh no, trust me, you don't want to slit your wrists, sir...

(Pause. MARK rests his head down upon the table as TED continues on with his call.)

TED

OK, alright, just please calm down, sir, and tell me... yeah, just tell me about it... talk it out...  
yes, just talk it out, sir... right... *(pause)* OK...

(A few more moments pass... TED is listening to his caller. MARK has fallen asleep. Lights fade out.)

## SCENE 2

(The same setting. MARK still appears to be sleeping with his head down on the table... TED is no longer around; however, the woman's

dead body remains on the floor. Suddenly, MARK jolts up from his chair and bursts out into song (with musical accompaniment)...

MARK

MORE ASSERTIVE, LESS INHIBITED?

ALRIGHT, FROM NOW ON: THE NICE GUY IS PROHIBITED

(MARK moves toward the center of the stage, where the woman's dead body still remains. Suddenly, THE DEAD WOMAN stands up. She sings to MARK...)

THE DEAD WOMAN

YES, FROM NOW ON: THE NICE GUY IS NO MORE

THERE'S NO TIME FOR THAT IN THIS WORLD OF WAR

MARK

IN THIS OLD OFFICE I'M ALL ALONE

I FEEL AS IF I'M SO FAR FROM HOME

AND I'M SICK OF THE WAITING; IT MUST END

IT'S TIME TO MAKE CHANGES; IT'S TIME TO OFFEND

THE DEAD WOMAN

THE WHOLE FUCKING WALNUT IS WHAT YOU NEED

STOP SETTling FOR LESS OR YOU'LL NEVER BE FREED

(Pause. MARK and THE DEAD WOMAN stare at one another. The musical accompaniment fades to an end. )

MARK

Yes... yes... “the whole fucking walnut”...

(MARK slowly turns away from THE DEAD WOMAN and begins to move back to his chair behind the table. Simultaneously, THE DEAD WOMAN lies back down on the floor. She pulls the sheets back over herself. MARK sits back down...)

MARK

The whole... fucking... walnut...

(MARK rests his head back down upon the table. Lights fade out.)

### SCENE 3

(The same setting. MARK is still sleeping; THE DEAD WOMAN remains on the floor. TED is back.)

TED

...So that’s why, sir, I wouldn’t recommend slitting your wrists. I wouldn’t recommend that at all; not even to my worst enemy, sir. *(pause)* Yes, that’s right, if you *really must* do it, then I’d say you’d be smart to go for... yeah, carbon monoxide. Yeah. Pretty much painless, yep, from

what I've heard. If you do it right, of course... mmhmm... charcoal briquettes should do the job, yeah. Just make sure, like I said, you're in an enclosed space.

(MARK wakes up from his nap. He looks around the area a bit, then at TED.)

TED

A car? Yeah, I guess that should do... but a small, well-sealed room would be even better, I think. *(pause)* OK... alright then, sir, glad I could be of assistance. No, thank *you*. Good luck.

(TED hangs up the phone, then looks up with a smile at MARK.)

TED

Well! Have a good nap, th--

(MARK jolts up from his chair. He starts singing to TED (but no musical accompaniment this time)...) )

MARK

MORE ASSERTIVE, LESS INHIBITED?

ALRIGHT, FROM NOW ON: THE NICE GUY IS PROHIBITED

(MARK moves toward the center of the stage, where the woman's dead body still remains. This time, however, the woman's dead body does not stand up. MARK just stands there, looking down at the dead body as if he's waiting for something to happen.)

TED

...What?

(Startled, MARK glances over at TED then back down at the body. He glances over at TED again...)

MARK

Huh?

TED

... Is that it?

(Pause. MARK stares down at the dead body some more before finally letting out a sigh, then making his way back over to his chair to sit back down again.)

TED

...What was that?

MARK

I dunno.

(Pause.)

TED

Ohhhh I get it! That was an *attempt*, right? You were taking my advice, right? You were trying to be “more assertive, less inhibited”... *right?* Yeah, that’s right! ‘Cause in order to be that, you have to be *impulsive* and *spontaneous!* That’s right, Mark! Ha! You crazy bastard, you’re getting it! Good! You kind of crapped out there, it’s like you were starting something but just kinda lost it... but that’s OK, it’s still progress! That is *definitely* still progress. Good job, Mark, just keep trying... keep being spontaneous, that’s right, just keep it up and you’ll--

MARK

*Fuck it. (pause)* I hate having to be so... *ambitious*... anyway...

TED

Huh? What? No, no, bullshit, Mark. C’mon. *C’mon!* What’s that... “I hate having to be so ambitious” *bullshit!*? Mark... Mark... lemme guess, ‘cause then you’d be happy with what you have, right? Mark, who’s happy with what they have? *Boring* people. *Boring* people are happy with what they have, Mark, *boring* people who don’t *live* anymore. They’re not *dead*, really, but they might as well be. Know what I mean?

MARK

I’m sick... of taking your advice, Ted...

TED

Oh, really? Well that’s, that’s nice... really...

MARK

I dunno, Ted, but I think it’s time... I just think it’s time I start being *me*.

TED

Wh--

MARK

I'm *sick* of your influence, Ted. You're just a... just a... you've always been this... *outside*...  
*influence*... and *not* a good one...

TED

Mark, you really need to--

MARK

I really need to find a way to just be *myself* from now on. OK?

TED

OK, yeah, sure.

(Pause. MARK and TED glare at one another. TED chuckles.)

TED

You can't even remember what that is. Can you?

(Pause. The phones ring. MARK answers.)

MARK

Oh *hey*, Margot... *(pause)* hmm, really... yeah, I know Daniel... no... *really?* ... wow... OK...  
you're going over *there?* ... Well... *(pause)* OK, alright. Fine. K. Thanks for telling me. Bye.

(MARK hangs up the phone. He looks up at TED.)

MARK

That was my sister... said her boyfriend went to London...

TED

*London?*

MARK

Yeah... yeah... I guess where he ended up... at this London Crisis Clinic... don't ask why, I  
dunno... anyway... seems like he got injured over there.

TED

...Not in that shoot-up?

MARK

Seems like it.

TED

Well... what the fuck're the odds...?

MARK

Anyway... she's gone over there now. To check on him.

(Pause.)

TED

Ah, well, it's just your sis. Still doesn't really affect *you*.

MARK

Thing is... she was gonna stay over at my place tomorrow 'cause she's getting hers sprayed. You know, bugs.

(Pause.)

TED

Well, *fuck*... that's a twist then, innit...

MARK

Yeah.

(Pause.)

TED

Damn good thing that happened then, huh? Now you'll still have the place to yourself...

(Pause. Without responding, MARK just decides to rest his head down upon the table once again.)

TED

Not again, Mark. Look, it's *night* shift! (*pause*) Damn it! I need you up, I need you with me! You know things start getting busy... around now... (*pause*) *damn it*...

(Lights fade out.)

SCENE 4

(Darkness around stage with lone spotlight on MARK as he is again sleeping with his head down on the table. We hear this line spoken by a female voice...)

FEMALE VOICE

*The last thing* that this world needs, Mark, is another playwright. You selfish little dick.

(MARK raises his head up from the table. He looks around.)

MARK

Huh?

(A second spotlight shines down upon the woman's dead body. Suddenly, THE DEAD WOMAN sits up and looks at MARK.)

THE DEAD WOMAN

*I said...* the last thing that th--

MARK

Yeah, yeah, OK... I heard you the first time...

THE DEAD WOMAN

Well, then? Don't you understand? It's *ambition* that gets people killed, Mark. You wanna end up like me?

MARK

How did ambition get you killed?

THE DEAD WOMAN

Nevermind the details, Mark, just take my word for it.

(While this is being said, MARK stands up from his chair and begins to move toward THE DEAD WOMAN.)

MARK

No, no more outside influences...

THE DEAD WOMAN

I'm not an outside influence, idiot, I'm *in your head*.

MARK

(*standing above her*) Why're you telling me this...?

THE DEAD WOMAN

You need to hear it.

(Pause.)

MARK

Listen, *bitch*--

THE DEAD WOMAN

*What?*

MARK

It's *what I like*. And I feel like I can make a...

THE DEAD WOMAN

A what?

MARK

A contribution.

THE DEAD WOMAN

You can make a contribution *here*.

MARK

Shutup...

THE DEAD WOMAN

*Right here.*

MARK

*Shutup...*

(Suddenly, MARK lunges downward at THE DEAD WOMAN and grabs her by her throat. He strangles her back to death. Slowly, he then makes his way back to his chair and rests his head down upon the table again. Lights fade out.)

SCENE 5

(The same setting. MARK is sleeping with his head down on the table. On the opposite side, TED is sitting down in his chair, staring at MARK. The woman's dead body is on the floor, with the sheets still covering her. TED slaps his hand down onto the table, waking up MARK.)

TED

Sorry Mark but I've only got so much patience, you know... I gotta do something about this body, she's beginning to smell...

(TED stands up from his chair and moves over toward the body. He tosses the sheets off of the body, then picks her up. Before exiting offstage, he turns back to face MARK.)

TED

Hey, uh... you're not gonna *tell* on me or anything, are you? You know I was just trying to help you, right? Mark?

MARK

... Yeah... I know...

TED

You know, Mark... I think... I think in the end, sadly, we can't know what to think. We just can't know what to think. But maybe that's OK and should just be... embraced?

MARK

What're you on about now?

TED

For a while... we think we know. But we really don't, in the end. We should all just have the courage to embrace not knowing what to think. You know? (*pause*) Things might be better that way.

(MARK just stares ahead, quizzically. With a nod, TED exits offstage with the woman's dead body. A few moments later, the phones start ringing. MARK answers the phone via the speakerphone button.)

MARK

(*clearing throat*) Hello... Crisis Clinic...

JACOB (VOICE)

Hi... my name's Jacob... I... I've never... called... a place like this before... but, uh... well... I guess... I guess I'd just like someone to talk to... about some stuff...

MARK

Hi, Jacob... well, you've called the right place.

(A beeping sound comes through MARK's phone now.)

MARK

Oh, Jacob... that's another call coming through for me. I'm just gonna take it *really* quickly and get back to you. *Really* quickly. OK? Just hold on there for a sec, please... (*pushing a button on the phone*) Hello?

CAMERON (VOICE)

Hello, is this Mark McCann?

MARK

Mark speaking.

CAMERON (VOICE)

Hello Mark, this is Cameron Goodyear from Eastbank Theatre calling. We're sorry to have kept you waiting on this call for so long... but anyway, I'm calling to tell you that we've decided to accept your play for at least one reading. We can't say for sure that we'd definitely like to *produce* it just yet, but we're definitely interested in giving it a reading or two. A production of course remains a possibility, depending on how well we feel the readings go.

(MARK remains staring down at the phone. No response.)

CAMERON (VOICE)

...Hello? *(pause)* Mark?

(Pause. MARK pushes a button on the phone again.)

MARK

... Hello, Jacob?

JACOB (VOICE)

Hi.

MARK

Hey, thanks for waiting buddy. Wow... lemme tell you what I just did, OK? Might help you feel better. I just... for once... I just followed my first instinct on something. My gut, initial instinct. I thought I really wanted this thing, you know, but for some reason... when I finally got that call... my intuition told me otherwise. I dunno why, Jacob, but the point is... I followed that instinct.

JACOB (VOICE)

Well... what was the instinct?

MARK

To just hang up. Just hang *right* the fuck up on this guy. Ha. I dunno why. I dunno why.

JACOB (VOICE)

Mmm.

MARK

But lemme tell you, Jacob... it felt *great*. And I'm sure I felt it for a reason, a good reason, and that'll become evident soon enough, I'm sure. That's what I'm going to start doing from now on. Following my first instincts... and that's how, I think, my life will change for the better. *That's* how to do it, Jacob. I'm sure of it. Just... just start following your intuitions in life. That's my advice to you.

JACOB (VOICE)

But... you haven't even heard any--

MARK

Doesn't matter. Don't need to hear your story, Jake. This applies to you, I can just feel it. I already know. Instinctively. *(pause)* Uh OK so... Jake? I gotcher answer right here, buddy. Ready for it? Jake?

JACOB (VOICE)

Whattayou mean?

MARK

OK... so... here it is: just stop *thinking* so much, Jake.

JACOB (VOICE)

You're telling me... y-you're telling me...

MARK

Yeah, look... look... just *live*. Know what I mean? Just go through the processes, man, just do what feels *natural*, and you'll be fine.

JACOB (VOICE)

(*a sigh*) I dunno... I dunno...

(MARK jolts up from his chair. Once again, he suddenly begins singing with musical accompaniment.)

MARK

YOU DON'T THINK YOU KNOW  
BUT REALLY THAT'S NOT SO  
YOUR TROUBLE IS TOO MUCH THOUGHT; TOO MUCH ANALYSIS  
THAT'S WHAT'S SENDING YOU INTO PARALYSIS

WHATEVER HAPPENED TO NATURALITY,  
FORGET ABOUT RATIONALITY  
WHAT YOU NEED IS INSTINCT AND INTUITION  
NOTHING ELSE IS WORTH ADMISSION

SO YES JUST LIVE, JUST LIVE I SAY  
THAT REALLY IS THE SIMPLEST WAY

(TED and THE DEAD WOMAN both walk out onto the stage together,  
from behind MARK. They join in. They're all singing into the  
speakerphone, to JACOB.)

THE DEAD WOMAN

LISTEN TO HIM, FOR ONCE HE'S RIGHT  
IT'S ALL THIS THOUGHT THAT'S MAKING YOU UPTIGHT  
JUST LIVE, JUST LIVE AND YOU'LL BE CONTENT  
DEEP REFLECTION IS NEVER WHAT WAS MEANT

TED

BECAUSE IN THE END IT'S ALL ABOUT FATE  
UNDERSTANDING THAT'S THE KEY TO THE GATE

TED, MARK, AND THE DEAD WOMAN

THE GATE OF HAPPINESS AND OF BLISS  
IT'S THE SORTA THING YOU SHOULDN'T WANNA MISS

(TED and THE DEAD WOMAN leave.)

MARK

SECOND-GUESSING YOURSELF IS NEVER CONSTRUCTIVE  
GUT INSTINCTS ARE ALWAYS MORE PRODUCTIVE  
STICK WITH YOUR INITIAL DECISIONS  
HAVE FAITH IN YOUR FIRST VISIONS

(MARK continues staring down at the speakerphone for a few moments.  
Pause.)

JACOB

Ummm...

(The speakerphone beeps.)

MARK

Oh sorry Jacob just hold on a second please, getting another call here...

(MARK pushes a button on the phone.)

MARK

Crisis Clinic.

CAMERON (VOICE)

Mark, uh... Cameron here from Eastbank Theatre again. I can only assume that, uhm, you weren't too thrilled with my initial message to you. *(pause)* Well, let me rephrase what I said a bit. We think we'd like to produce your play. I mean, we're pretty sure. Chances are very good. We'd just like you to come in for a reading before we start getting into all that. *(pause)* So... whattaya say? Reconsider?

(Pause.)

MARK

Hmmmmm... (*pause*) well...

(Curtain.)