

## ACT I

### SCENE ONE

(The scene is a busy sidewalk cafe, somewhere in a big metropolitan area. As the lights come up, we see HAROLD, a well-known theater director in his mid-50s, elegantly dressed, enjoying a leisurely lunch at a table near the street. A number of other diners are seated in the background. Another man, LIONEL, an actor in HAROLD's latest production, approaches rapidly, walking in an odd manner--perhaps to avoid sidewalk cracks--and engages the first in conversation.)

LIONEL  
(Angrily)

Harold! Harold, you bastard! You've just killed me!

HAROLD

Lionel? What the hell are you talking about?

LIONEL

The part! How could you give me this terrible role?

HAROLD

You mean the lovable, crazy inventor who creates a flying car?

LIONEL

That's the one. I'm going to die! I can't believe...

HAROLD

Don't be daft! You're not going to die. Why, I remember when Stella Roman's character was supposed to die during one of her arias--Tosca by Puccini, if memory serves--by leaping to her death from a prison parapet. She landed safely on the off-stage mattresses--she had demanded an extra one that night--but the landing surface was too springy, so she was catapulted back on stage and had to die all over again...

LIONEL

Her character was *supposed* to die, Harold, and Ms. Roman lived for many years after that.

HAROLD

Can I at least finish my meal before we delve into the existential platitudes? I find it difficult to seize the day before I'm fed. Care to join me? Some lunch might do you good.

LIONEL

I suppose I could sit a while.

(Sits down at the table, reluctantly)

HAROLD

You look peckish. Why don't you get a sandwich or some salad? Maybe a Bloody Mary?

LIONEL

Yes! Yes. I could use a drink.

HAROLD

(To WAITRESS off stage)

Miss! Can I get a Bloody Mary for my compatriot here, please? Thanks.

LIONEL

Are you trying to avoid my issue?

HAROLD

Unfortunately for me, my young thespian comrade, no issue can be entirely avoided. At best, they can only be forestalled by the rapid consumption of spirited libations.

(To WAITRESS again, still off stage)

Miss! Make that two, please. Bloody Marys! And make mine a double.

(To Harold)

Now, what seems to be your crisis *du jour*, if I may inquire?

LIONEL

Well... I've read the script... and the lovable, crazy inventor character lives!

HAROLD

That's quite curious, actually, since *my* copy of the script features that exact conclusion.

LIONEL

You don't see my problem, do you? Listen, what are some of the roles I've played?

HAROLD

You mean besides Lady MacBeth? No wait... That couldn't be! To my knowledge, no man has played the dreaded lady from The Scottish Play since Basil Rathbone's untimely two-step into the orchestra pit during the semi-centennial Cursed Play Festival in Belfast back in 1978. Or was that Peter Ustinov? I always had such a hard time telling which of those two was which...

LIONEL

There are *other* cursed plays?

HAROLD

Sure! I think. But I can't for the life of me figure out why Brigadoon is considered cursed.

Excerpt from "A Twist of Fate" 10-minute play.  
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LIONEL

You would if you saw it performed. Harold, could you focus please? My *life* is at stake here!

HAROLD

Oh, yes. Your previous roles. Do you suppose reciting your stage credits will help save you?

LIONEL

Maybe, if I can get you to see my concern. A brief rundown will illustrate my point.

HAROLD

Now this is a quandary. Shouldn't you have *established* a point before you try to illustrate it?

LIONEL

Just see what you can remember.

WAITRESS

(Enters with drinks, sets them on the table):

Your Bloody Marys, gentlemen.

LIONEL

Thanks. What? No *celery*?

WAITRESS

I'm so sorry, sir! I must've forgotten it. I'll get you some celery right away. My apologies!

LIONEL

It doesn't matter. I'm going to die anyway. What difference does a piece of celery matter in a world full of ill-fated omens?

HAROLD

Some celery would be lovely, Miss--when you get a chance. By the way, did you know the Bloody Mary was invented by the famous comedic actor George Jessel in 1939?

WAITRESS

Well, I heard it was named after Mary Pickford's favorite drink of rum, grenadine, and Maraschino. But then again, I just work here.

LIONEL

I heard it was named for a cocktail waitress named Mary who worked at Chicago's infamous Bucket of Blood Club. In any case, don't you think there are more pressing matters here?

HAROLD

(Quaffs his Bloody Mary in one go)

AH! You mean the incredibly fatal decision to cast you as a charming, lovable character that gets the girl and lives?

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WAITRESS

You're a director?

HAROLD

Why, yes. Yes I am.

WAITRESS

Oh, that's so *amazing*! What films have you done? Are you in town for the Uwe Boll festival?

HAROLD

Miss, I'm a *theatre* director. I direct *plays*, not movies.

WAITRESS

What's the difference?

LIONEL

About eighty bucks a ticket.

WAITRESS

Oh. I think I'll just go and fetch that celery now.  
(Exits)

LIONEL

You obviously don't get the gravity of my situation, so let me come to a point on this.

HAROLD

So soon? Is it Tuesday already?

LIONEL

It's a legitimate fear!

HAROLD

Phobias make the world go round, my friend. What is it about this role in particular that scares you? You've been in enough productions in your career. You don't have to sweat getting the job done.

LIONEL

It's not that. It's just... every role I've ever played... My character always dies. And I'm alive. I'm afraid if this character lives, *I'll* die!

HAROLD  
(Laughs)

LIONEL

It won't be so funny when I'm gone...

HAROLD

You're *serious*? Not to make light of your neuroses, friend, but your superstition has got to be one of the most outlandish I've ever heard. Really? You've *never* played a role where your character hasn't died?

LIONEL

That's right! All my roles have been fatal ones. I've played Polonius and Guildenstern in two productions of Hamlet; King Lear; Haemon in Oedipus; Willy Loman in The Death of a Salesman; Lennie Small in Of Mice and Men; Red Shirt Ensign Number 5 in Star Trek: The Musical; Henry Higgins in My Fair Lady...

HAROLD

Excuse me! The character of Henry Higgins doesn't die.

LIONEL

Not usually, no, but he did in *that* production. The director was reimagining it as a zombie apocalypse-meets-dialect coach melodrama set in the early 1840s. It was a grisly death, too.

HAROLD

Don't you think the fates of your previous roles were simply a matter of coincidence? Look, fictional characters are just that: *fictional*. There is no way any character's fate is tied to the fate of the actor playing the part. I can't *believe* I just uttered those words!

LIONEL

That's as may be, but I just can't shake this feeling. Call it a portent, if you will.

HAROLD

Lionel, it's not good for an actor to get pigeon-holed into a certain type of role. You don't want to wind up like Peter Lorre, do you?

LIONEL

Peter Lorre was famous!

HAROLD

Yes, but he was type cast. So was Boris Karloff. And Ben Johnson. And Sylvester Stallone.

LIONEL

Sylvester Stallone's not an actor. Besides, he's still alive. Is this going somewhere?

HAROLD

Yes! An artist of the stage needs to stretch and grow, never satisfied with the results of his or her work--always improving, modifying, creating. If you continually play roles where your character dies, you'll run the risk of a stagnant, unfulfilled career!