

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Self

by Drew Tingwell

EXTRACT

© 1997 Drew Tingwell



This script is distributed by The Australian Script Centre
77 Salamanca Place Hobart 7004 Tasmania Australia
email admin@ozscript.org
www.ozscript.org
ph +61 3 6223 4675
fax +61 3 6223 4678

Scene 1

The space is dark.

Through the darkness, soothing ocean sounds begin to rise; rolling waves, distant gulls, a gentle breeze and, very faintly, a voice or voices singing "A Sailor Went to Sea".

RANDALL appears, standing at the end of a pier, staring out to sea. He is alone and seemingly troubled.

A voice drifts in. It is SELF, speaking quietly, almost drowsily.

SELF: I have this recurring dream...this recurring nightmare...and the only way to escape it...is to...

A blue light fades up on SELF to reveal him sitting in a deck-chair, apparently alone and in isolation from Randall. He becomes more and more anxious through the following.

This dream...it's one of those falling dreams. One of those dreams in which you can actually feel your stomach turning...Physically. Over and over...and over...as you fall. Except...I'm not falling through air, but rather through water as if it's air...or rather as if it's water that feels like air against my skin...no, no...it's water that just gives no resistance and lets me fall...as if through air. And so I fall...and I keep falling. And my stomach churns and I open my mouth to scream but all I do is swallow water, and I thrash my arms and kick my legs and I fall and I...fall and fall and fall and land...

RANDALL vanishes from view as the sounds cut off and lights snap up to full on SELF. He is sitting in his bed-sit, and he is not alone. Behind him stands MARCIE, who remains quite still, holding a covered tray of food. She looks at SELF with concern.

...Right here. Exactly here. Every single time. Without fail.

There is a pause. Finally, MARCIE clears her throat.

MARCIE: Ah...where would you like me to set this?

SELF starts as if surprised by her presence.

SELF: Sorry?

MARCIE: Your tea. Where would you like me to put it?

SELF: Oh...ah...anywhere. I don't care. On the table, if you like.

MARCIE crosses to the table and sets the tray down next to the typewriter. She casts a glance at the sheet of paper in the carriage as SELF rises and moves to the window, staring out.

MARCIE: You should write all that down, you know. All that dream stuff.

SELF laughs gently.

SELF: Write it down?

MARCIE: Yes, you never know. It could make quite interesting reading.

SELF: Yes, and it might stop me prattling on to you, eh?

MARCIE: No...no, of course not. That's not what I meant at all. No, I enjoy a good...chat. Now and then.

SELF: It's all right, Marcie. I understand.

MARCIE: Understand what?

SELF: I unsettle you. Make you ill at ease.

MARCIE attempts to adopt a more relaxed and casual pose.

MARCIE: Not at all. Don't be silly.

SELF: Oh, nonsense.

MARCIE: It's true

SELF: So you're quite happy being here?

MARCIE: Of course.

SELF: No qualms whatsoever?

MARCIE: No...none.

SELF: Oh, good! So why don't you sit down. Please. I'll get you a cuppa and we'll have a nice old chin wag.

MARCIE: Well, I'd be happy to. Honestly.

SELF: But you never have. In all the time you've been delivering my meals you've never once sat down for a chat. Not once.

MARCIE: Well...no...

SELF: I mean, it's not as if you've got a husband to rush home to, is it?

MARCIE flinches, hurt.

MARCIE: That's a little uncalled for, Mr. Self.

SELF[winces]: Sorry. Thoughtless. Sorry. [Beat.] But please, stay. Keep me company for a while.

MARCIE: Well...it's not that I don't want to.

SELF: No?

MARCIE: Of course not, no.

SELF: So you'll stay, will you?

MARCIE: I'd...love to.

SELF: Excellent!

SELF rushes over and holds the chair out for MARCIE to sit. She hesitates.

MARCIE: Although...

Slight pause.

SELF: Although?

MARCIE: Although I do have other deliveries to make.

SELF: Of course.

MARCIE: I mean, if I don't get a move on...

SELF: The mad will starve.

MARCIE: ...the meals will go cold.

SELF: Well, we can't have that now, can we, Marcie.

MARCIE: Well...no. (Slight pause) I'm sorry. You don't mind, do you?

SELF: No, of course not. You have your duties.

Pause. MARCIE starts to move out.

MARCIE: I'll see you tomorrow then.

SELF: I'll be here.

MARCIE: Good-oh. Enjoy your meal.

She goes. SELF turns to look at the table. He tentatively moves and stands in front of the typewriter.

SELF: Just write it down.

He sits facing the typewriter then tentatively reaches out for the keys. As his hands near them, however, his fingers curl into claws and he is unable to type. He retracts his hands sharply and shakes them out. He repeats this action a few times then stands, circles and returns to his seat. He sighs and reaches again for the keys. His hands hover above them as he speaks.

There were these...no.

Slight pause.

There were once these...no. There was...yes.

He quickly reloads the typewriter and poises himself as if about to write. He shuts his eyes and breathes deeply before commencing, his hands hovering above the typewriter keys but never striking them as he utters the following story.

There was this gladiator...in ancient Rome...at the time of the persecution of the Christians...who was one of the greatest warriors the world had seen. His technique was precise and refined, his skills and his reflexes unsurpassed. If he wished, he could slice in half ten people before the tenth even had a chance to cry out. But the trouble was, when standing in the middle of the Coliseum, the thousands of screaming fans cheering him on and baying for blood, he would simply seize up. All his finely honed skills would desert him. He would just stand there, mute and motionless, and soon the crowd's cheers would turn to jeers...as they roared their disgust and demanded some action. The Christians, whom he was supposed to be carving to pieces, would come up to him with reassurances, kisses, blessings and sermons of love and peace. But the gladiator responded to nothing. He just stood there with tears streaming from his eyes, the crowd's mocking laughter swelling in his ears, the Christians praying and rejoicing at his feet. And in disgrace he would be led from the arena, to be replaced by a much lesser skilled man who, despite his lack of skill, completed the task at hand. And he, the one who slaughtered the Christians, was hailed as a hero and praised by the crowd. And the other man, the shamed gladiator, went

home, confused, and, with nobody watching... hacked his wife and children to death.

Pause. SELF lowers his hands to his laps and sags in the chair. After a moment he sighs sadly and slowly removes the sheet of paper from the typewriter, turning it over and carefully studying both sides, searching for the words he has just uttered. But the page is blank.

Dream stuff.

He screws the paper up and lets it fall to the floor and then rubs his face vigorously before reaching for the covered tray. He pulls it in front of him and lifts the lid. The stew-like contents are greeted with a look of dissatisfaction and, almost reluctantly, he takes a fork and tastes the meal. He swallows as if it hurts to do so, considers another mouthful, then places the fork back down and replaces the lid before rising and taking the tray out to the kitchenette. He returns immediately without the tray and takes his over-coat from the coat-stand, puts it on and leaves.

Scene 2

A street.

CLIFF, an unkempt looking man, stands alone, clutching a paper cup. Unseen to the audience, a person passes nearby and he shakes the cup which rattles with the sound of a few coins. He extends the cup to the passer-by and follows their path.

CLIFF: Spare some change, please?

But the person passes and CLIFF is again alone.

Bastard.

After a moment someone else passes from the opposite direction and CLIFF again shakes his cup.

Spare some change, please?

He is again ignored.

Bitch.

A small group of people comes his way, still unseen.

Spare some change, please?

Again he is passed by.

Arscholes.

And now SELF approaches, walking with his head bowed. He nears CLIFF who automatically shakes the cup at him.

Spare some change, please?

SELF stops and looks up. CLIFF recognises him and immediately lowers the cup.

Oh.

SELF pats his pockets, looking for change.

SELF: Ah...well...um...

CLIFF: It's okay. Don't worry about it.

SELF: No no. I...um...

CLIFF: Forget it, mate.

SELF: It's just...I don't seem to have brought any money with me.

CLIFF: Yeah, well, not to worry.

SELF: Sorry.

CLIFF: She's right. No drama.

SELF: I'd be happy to help out. I mean...you know...normally.

CLIFF: Well, that's more than most, eh. Least you didn't just scurry past. Like a frightened rat.

SELF: No.

Pause.

Generosity is a dying art, I suppose.

CLIFF: Not wrong there. *(Slight pause)* Got a fag on you?

SELF: I'm sorry?

CLIFF: Cigarette. Can you spare one?

SELF: Oh. No. Sorry. I don't smoke.

CLIFF: No? Oh well, nobody's perfect.

CLIFF takes out an almost full packet of cigarettes from a pocket and pulls one out. He lights it and puts the pack away. SELF indicates the cup in Cliff's hand.

SELF: Who are you collecting for?

CLIFF: Eh?

SELF: Which charity?

CLIFF looks incredulously from SELF to the cup and starts to laugh.

CLIFF: Charity! Yeah, right!

CLIFF's laugh fades as he realises that SELF is serious. There is a slight pause before the penny drops for SELF.

SELF: Oh. Oh, I see.

SELF starts to move off.

CLIFF: Sorry, mate. Didn't mean to laugh at ya or nothin'.

SELF keeps moving without looking back.

SELF: That's all right.

CLIFF calls after the departing SELF.

CLIFF: Oh, come on, Self. There's no need to leave.

SELF freezes in his tracks and pauses. Slowly, he turns to face CLIFF, confused.

SELF: How do you know my name?

CLIFF: Eh?

SELF returns to CLIFF.