

Celebrating Australian Playwriting



Australian Script Centre



Presence

by Patrick Van Der Werf

EXTRACT

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PROLOGUE

Just before dawn on a cold morning. Light slowly rising.

Bob is asleep in his bed. **Molly** is sitting at the kitchen table. She hears a noise, perhaps a possum on the roof. She is startled.

Penny is standing on a street corner. She is cold. She shivers and listens.

Jake is standing in a different street.

JAKE: When I was five-

PENNY: When I was five-

JAKE: -I made my father die.

PENNY: When I was five a shadow appeared at the end of my bed. *(pause)* A demon with a human face that was marble white, eyes that glowed cold. *(she looks around, huddles against the cold)* I couldn't scream. I couldn't move. I couldn't even breathe.

JAKE: I couldn't move. I couldn't even breathe.

PENNY: The specialists said I would grow out of it. 'Who is he?' I begged them to tell me. *(pause)* 'Nobody' they said. A tiny part of my brain using my body against me. 'How do I get it out?' They said it would go away. I could do nothing.

She hears the song of a blackbird. She looks relieved. She exits.

JAKE: There was nothing I could do.

PENNY: When I was five I learnt to be afraid.

She exits.

JAKE: When I was five I lost the gift of sleep.

He exits.

Molly hears the blackbird too. She rubs the tiredness from her face, reaches out to touch the teapot.

MOLLY: Stone cold. At least it's morning . That GP says he'd give me horse tranquillisers if they were legal. 'Just a good night's sleep,' I tell him. 'Is that too much to ask?' He can't help me. *(she listens, hears steps, stiffens in her chair)* Oh God...I must be going mad. *(sad laugh. The steps draw closer and stop. Long pause)* Is that you, Karl? Are you back? You can leave your damn boots outside - they always have sawdust and blood on them. *(pause)* You won't make me turn around. I can barely keep my eyes open at work, you bastard. *(pause. She turns and looks)* Why do you hide from me?

Bob rises from his bed, exits. Sound of a toilet flushing.

MOLLY: *(continuing)* That you, Bob?

Bob returns to his room. He sits in his chair, takes up a book and begins reading.

BOB: *(calling)* Yeah, it's me! Who else were you expecting?

MOLLY: Are you alright?

BOB: *(to himself)* Mind your own business.

MOLLY: *(calls)* I said - are you alright?

BOB: *(calls)* Yes!

MOLLY: The new bloke's coming today. You'd want to give that room of yours a clean.

BOB: *(to himself)* Ah, get stuffed.

He begins to nod off, lowers the book, goes to sleep in the chair.

Molly rises from the table. She exits.

ACT ONE

1. BEDROOM

A room with two single beds.

Bob is sitting in his chair by the window. He is asleep with a book in his hand.

Sam enters. He looks at Bob, tosses his bag on the floor. Bob wakes up, sees him, starts reading his book.

SAM: Before we shake hands or anythin', I just wanna say that my old man reckons my only talent is for fucken things up. That might not be the best way to introduce myself, but it's the truth, and I wanna get that in before you get the wrong idea about me. If I fuck up, maybe you'll tell me. So I'll apologise in advance, eh.

Bob looks up from his book.

BOB: That's your bed.

SAM: Sweet. Name's Sam.

Holds out his hand. Bob ignores it.

BOB: I know who you are.

Sam flops down on the bed, vigorously tests the mattress. Bob watches for some time.

SAM: She seems alright - Molly. Do I call her Molly, or do I have to call her Mrs Kaufman? She likes a yarn. I s'pose you known her a while. That's the impression I get.

BOB: The chest of drawers is for you.

SAM: Sweet. Never brought much, but that don't mean I'm not stoppin'. I wouldn't call the bed comfortable. Don't know what I'd call it, apart from home. Just don't tell me some old codger died in it. I ain't sleepin' in no dead man's bed.

BOB: If you don't mind, I'll get back to my reading.

SAM: Nah, I don't mind. Sweet.

Sam sits up, begins to unpack, tosses his clothes on the floor. Long silence. Bob watches him.

BOB: I keep my room neat. Just so you know.

Sam piles his clothes more neatly, but still leaves them on the floor.

Bob takes a throat lozenge from a packet, pops it in his mouth. Sam looks at him as though waiting to be offered one. Bob is aware of this, but returns to reading his book.

SAM: Like readin', do you?

BOB: What do you think?

SAM: I only ask because I don't like readin'. I reckon if you gotta find it out from a book, they may as well stick your head in a jar. *(long pause)* Any sex in it?

BOB: I beg your pardon?

SAM: Fair question, I reckon.

BOB: I read westerns.

SAM: Westerns, he says. Who reads fucken westerns?

BOB: I do. Any objections?

SAM: No skin off my nose. I start work tomorrow. Got a job at the gravel pit. You'd know it if you saw it - dirty great hole in the ground. The way I see it, some poor bastard's got to dig up the gravel and whatever else. And the way I see it, all these pricks I went to school with, all gettin' their fat-arse degrees, and wouldn't know which end of the shovel to point at the ground. Maybe one day, if I get good at it, they'll pay me big money to dig their fucken graves.

Bob gets up, takes a few tired steps, puts the book away.

BOB: I wish you luck.

SAM: The old, silent type.

BOB: I beg your pardon?

SAM: My old Granddad - when he was alive - called himself the old, silent type.
Maybe that's what you are.

BOB: Just so you know, I don't like sharing. I been here nearly twenty years,
and I never had to share.

SAM: Twenty years - fuck me.

BOB: I got priority. Just you keep that in mind.

SAM: Twenty years... You must really like it here, eh.

Pause. Bob is thrown by this.

BOB: That's my business.

Sam takes off his shoes.

SAM: You got family?

BOB: Yeah.

SAM: You gonna tell me about 'em?

BOB: No.

SAM: Tah, thank you, sir - and fuck me for askin'. *(to himself)* What an
arsehole, I says under my breath.

BOB: What?

SAM: What time's tea? I says. I'm surprised you didn't hear me the first time.
(pause) And what have you got after twenty years? *(gets up, examines Bob's*

stuff) Few books, bits and pieces.

Bob gets up, goes to him.

BOB: You'll keep your paws out of my things. What's wrong with you? This is my room. *(pause)* My next room's just as likely to be a hole in the ground - you want half of that as well? And what's that smell? Christ almighty - that your shoes? I'm asking you a question.

SAM: I can't smell nothin'.

BOB: Put them outside.

SAM: They don't smell. What do you think I am?

BOB: I'll talk to Molly. This isn't gonna work out.

SAM: Geez. Settle down - you'll do yerself an injury. *(pause)* So, what've ya done with yer life so far?

BOB: What's that supposed to mean?

SAM: It's what my old man always asks. What have you done with your life?

Pause.

BOB: That's none of your business.

SAM: Maybe you done sweet fuck all.

BOB: *(laughs)* You'd know, would you?

SAM: No. That's why I ask.

BOB: I got married. We had kids, got divorced - end of story.

SAM: I reckon I'd wanna be well and truly sick of shaggin' before I'd get married. Wouldn't wanna miss what was out there, eh. Reckon I'd wanna be sick of a lot of things.

BOB: You got a lot to learn.

Sam sits in Bob's chair. Bob doesn't notice at first

BOB: *(continuing)* You ever seen a '54 Ford Mercury.

SAM: Nah, don't think so.

BOB: You know what it is?

SAM: I reckon it's a car.

BOB: It's freedom - that's what it is.

SAM: No shit?

BOB: So, don't tell me I've done sweet fuck all with my life. *(pause)* James Dean used to drive one. You heard of him?

SAM: Nah, who'd he play for?

BOB: Christ almighty...

SAM: You still got it?

BOB: I still own it.

SAM: Can I see it?

BOB: It isn't here.

SAM: That's too bad. Where is it?

Bob turns to see Sam in his chair.

BOB: That's my chair.

SAM: The room pongs of rum. I thought you was on the piss, but I reckon it might be your aftershave.

BOB: I said you're in my chair.

SAM: It's half-way between the beds. I reckon it must be our chair by now.

BOB: Get out of my fucken chair!

In a rage, Bob goes to him. Raises his hand to strike. Sam cringes. Bob grabs his arms, pulls him out of the chair, shoves him to the floor.

Bob can hardly believe what he's done, waits with apprehension for Sam to get to his feet. Sam gets up slowly. He can't even look at Bob. Instead he slinks to his bed and lies down, his back to Bob.

Bob has to sit down. He massages his chest, breathes hard. It takes him a long time to regain his breath.

He painfully gets up, goes to a pitcher, pours himself a glass of water. He drinks, his hand shaking.

Sam doesn't move.

Bob goes back to his chair.

BOB: I don't know why I did that. I owe you an apology. *(pause, looks at Sam)* I got two daughters. The older one, the wife poisoned against me. She's got two little kids of her own, but I don't see them much. *(pause, looks at Sam)* My youngest comes round now and again. She's had her problems, but we're getting closer. I know what it's like to be young. I've loaned her the car - that's why it's not here.

SAM: Freedom - that's what I got. Maybe you don't no more.

BOB: Who says I don't! *(pause)* I proposed to my wife in that car. We drove to Queensland for our honeymoon. And to the coast with the kids, later on. All my happy memories are in that car.

SAM: And you lent it to your daughter - geez.

BOB: She'll look after it! *(pause)* Besides, it was just rotting in the garage here. I've got no more use for it.

SAM: My old granddad reckoned everything had a use, no matter how old it got.

BOB: Then he was blowing you smoke, son. For God's sake, get those shoes out of my room.

SAM: Whingeing old prick.

BOB: What did you say?

SAM: I said you was a whingeing old prick.

Sam exits.

2 + 3. HOUSE, TOWN

Darkness. Night sounds; perhaps the wind, possums on the roof.

Molly enters. She is dressed for sleep, her hair a mess as though she has been in bed for a while but couldn't sleep. She paces a little. She moves downstage, listens.

She hears a laboured breathing - Bob asleep. She is reassured. But she continues to listen. She hears steps coming from up the passage. They draw closer and stop. She tries to ignore it, sits, checks the teapot.

A pause. She quickly rises, fetches a candle. She lights it, blows it out, relights it. She listens. She hears steps. They draw close and stop.

MOLLY: So that's your game. Coming and going as you please. *(long pause, sad laugh)* You'd bugger off for days and then I'd get woken up by those damn boots stomping through the house. When we buried you I made a point of