

The Snare

a play
by

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Production Note

The Snare was first performed on July 19, 1996 by Playhouse On The Square in Memphis, Tennessee. The cast was as follows:

Buster	Bill Baker
Harry	Jason Francis
The Doctor	Tim Spencer
The Nurse	Wanda Mooney
The Orderly	Joe Cocke

The production was directed, choreographed, and designed by Patti Hatchett with costumes by Pat Bogan, lighting design by Lonn Bailey, original music composed by Rick Robinson, and stage managed by Tim Olcott.

The script was Awarded Best New Play for 1996 by Playhouse on the Square in Memphis, TN.

"Laughter alone does not respect
any taboo; the comic alone is
capable of giving us the strength
to bear the tragedy of existence."

– Eugene Ionesco

"An audience will laugh at things
happening to you, but they
certainly wouldn't laugh if it
happened to them."

– Buster Keaton

Act I: The Machine
Scene One

As the lights go down, there is a low sound, staccato and harsh: someone shuffling a deck of cards. This repeats a number of times, flowing over and into the sound of a man coughing.

The lights rise on a cell. Concrete walls, dirt floor, a steel bucket in one corner.

There is a small window on back wall. Faint light filters through the bars.

A cot rests beneath the window, a large bundle of threadbare and stained blankets on top.

A bare lightbulb hangs by a rusty wire from the ceiling.

A heavy wooden door, banded with steel. Set into the door, a slit. The slit is open, dark eyes peer in. We can hear muted voices from the hallway beyond.

The sound of coughing rises, building to a harsh, rasping choke.

Buster sits up on the cot, coughing violently and wrapped in the blankets.

The fit turns to retching, and he barely makes it to the corner, vomiting into the bucket.

He rolls onto his back with his head downstage, arms outstretched, right foot crossed at his left knee.

Tableau.

He "swims" his way across the floor – sweeping his arms, kicking his feet, and spitting water into the air.

The murmuring outside increases and Buster stops.

Silence.

He turns his head to look at the door.

Pause.

The slit closes.

He rises, kicking feebly at the door.

Soft piano music drifts in through the window.

He goes and peers out.

Stretching his hands out past the bars, Buster throws his head back and waves his hands in the air, conducting an invisible orchestra.

Silence, but for the music.

There is a sound at the door.

Buster spins and sits on the edge of the cot, his face blank.

The door opens and a nurse enters carrying a neatly folded stack of fresh linens.

Following close behind her is an orderly. Large, ugly, dull face. He stands by the door.

Buster sits, staring.

NURSE

Buenos días, Señor. Es un día muy, muy lindo, ¿no? ¡Mire estas sábanas! ¿Por qué no me permite cambiarlas para que estén limpias y frescas para esta noche?

She reaches to unwrap him.

He edges away from her.

NURSE

Ay, por favor. Señor Keaton. ¿Tenemos que hacer esto todas las mañanas? Trato a tantos otros enfermos. ¿No quisiera que se las cambiara a usted? ¿Por favor?

She catches a corner of the sheet between her fingers.

NURSE

¡Ya!

She tugs at the sheet, trying to unwrap him, crooning all the while.

NURSE

¿Por qué me cuesta trabajo? No sea travieso conmigo, por favor. Puede portarse bien cuando quiere. Yo lo sé. ¿Señor Keaton? ¿Por favor? ¿Para mí?

He jerks away from her. She stumbles to the floor, hissing between her teeth.

The orderly steps forward but she stops him with a sharp shake of her head. She straightens up, her smile somewhat brittle.

She stretches out her hands to stroke his arms and chest and face, crooning softly.

Buster stares back at her, stonefaced.

NURSE

¿No querría que su cama estuviera bien limpia? ¿Señor Keaton? Permítame decirle algo, a las mujeres no les gustan las camas sucias. ¡Ay, no! Nos gustan las camas limpias, con sábanas limpias, tan frescas y agradables sobre la piel cuando nos deslizamos dentro, al lado de nuestro hombre. Oh, sí, sí...

...Buster relaxes, allowing her to unwind his blankets. She lets them fall, one by one, to the floor.

NURSE

Olá señor.

She reaches out to touch his face, but he jerks away, backing into the corner. Smiling, she makes up his cot with the fresh sheets, all business now.

NURSE

Bien.

He turns his back on her. She gathers up the old linens and goes to the door.

NURSE

Buenos días, Señor.

She leaves.

The orderly shifts his feet, spits on the floor, and follows her.

The door closes and we hear the rasp of the key in the lock.

Buster turns and stares at the cot with its new sheets. Slowly, he moves forward and touches them lightly with his fingertips. He picks at them, pulling out one corner.

With a sudden fury, he rips the bed to pieces, wraps himself up again, and sits staring out at the audience.

Pause.

The slit in the door slides shut.

Buster turns his head at the sound.

He blinks once: Eyes open, eyes closed, eyes open.

Music drifts in from outside once again, mingled with the voices of children.

He stands on the cot, turning to face the window.

There is a sound at the door and he turns quickly, resuming his pose on the edge of the cot.

The orderly enters, goes to the corner, picks up the bucket, turns, and leaves the cell.

There is an indistinct noise from the hall.

The orderly returns, trudging across the cell to set the bucket back in the corner.

He turns and looks at Buster for a moment.

Pause.

The orderly shifts on his feet and moves out the door, leaving it open behind him.

The doctor enters, carrying a chair in one hand.

DOCTOR

Good morning, Señor Keaton.

Moving into the cell, he sets the chair across from Buster and sits down. Lighting a cigarette, he tosses the match into the bucket and nonchalantly blows smoke back over his shoulder towards the open door.

The orderly staggers in, carrying a heavy table on his back. He sets it down between the chair and the cot and steps back, drawing a pint bottle of liquor from his pocket.

DOCTOR

Póngalo en la mesa, por favor.

The orderly sets the bottle on the table and steps back.

DOCTOR

¿Y los vasos?

The orderly shifts on his feet and moves to the door. Halfway across the cell he bumps his head on the lightbulb hanging from the ceiling.

He stops.

He looks up, cocking his head to one side.

He shifts on his feet and leaves, returning a moment later with two drinking glasses. He arranges them on the table with the bottle.

DOCTOR

Es bastante, gracias. Te notificare si te necesitamos.

The orderly exits, closing the door behind him. There is the rasp of a key in the lock.

DOCTOR

Good morning, Señor. I trust you slept well?

Pause.

DOCTOR

I myself slept like a baby. It was not too warm yesterday evening. If there is one thing I cannot stand, it is heat. Keeps me awake. I'm forever tossing and turning. Drives my wife crazy. You slept well, did you say?

Pause.

DOCTOR

Well. I see you are anxious to begin our session, Señor. And so we shall, so we shall. Tell me, are you familiar with The Keeley Cure? I don't expect you are, but you will be. The Keeley Cure is, like many of the treatments I specialize in, it is merely a technique, a tool. A tool to repair this machine, this thing we call our self, our brain, our heart, our body. We are built with such fragile care, Señor. Fearfully and wonderfully made. And yet our inner workings are protected by only the thinnest of shells. This frame, our skeleton, our bones, they are brittle, clumsy, stiff. And, like any machine, certain unsuitable fuels can decay our workings, freeze the gears, eat through the pipes,

DOCTOR (continued)

throw the machine off course. Now, Dr. Keeley was a man who understood what a terrible thing a machine can be when it has lost control of itself. He knew that certain fuels lead to the it's quick and chaotic breakdown. He's dead now, of course. No machine can run forever. But we continue to learn from his methods.

Silence, but for the music drifting in through the window.

DOCTOR

Let me speak frankly, Señor. I don't like clowns. I don't like chaos or confusion. The world is ordered and those places which are not should be paved and painted over. I realize that many of the so-called great artists of history are called, and call themselves, champions of Nature, revelling in the delights of the seething chaos of this world. But we, as modern men, we have discovered a far greater beauty in Science, a finer art in the plane and the line, a more sublime poetry in the formula and the equation, far more beauty than any half-mad scribbler might have found a hundred years ago in the festering whore Nature. We bear the image of order, stamped on our bodies in precise design. Our components so carefully arrayed within. Here, the heart laid to rest between the lungs. Here, the muscles sheath these delicacies, interlaced with a framework of ivory bone. All of this overlaid by our fine, embossed skin. Do these wonders we carry within us boast less artistry than the masterworks of the Renaissance? No, we bear the fingerprints of order. Created to battle chaos, the chaos in the world and the chaos in our souls. And so we, like God, we create. We create in our own image. Automobiles, ships, locomotives, gears, pumps, springs, cranks, clockwork. Everything made with integrity, precision, and order. Integrity: Each part a function, each function a part. Precision: Each working together. God. Society. Chemistry. Psychology. Biology. Medicine. Education. Growth. Decay. Nature. Religion. Art. Order. Order. ¿Comprende? Do you understand? Dr. Keely, he understood the machine. He understood how it worked and, more importantly, he understood how to make repairs when it broke down.

Silence.

DOCTOR

Excuse me for a moment, please.

He goes to the door and knocks once, calling out.

DOCTOR

Estamos listos.

We hear the sound of a key in the lock and the door opens. The orderly enters, stopping just inside the door.

DOCTOR

Por favor.

The orderly shifts on his feet and exits.

The doctor smiles at Buster.

The orderly reenters, carrying a large chair. Heavy leather straps dangling from the arms and legs.

Buster looks at it.

He blinks once: Eyes open, eyes closed, eyes open.

DOCTOR

Gracias.

The orderly moves forward. Halfway across the cell he bumps his head against the lightbulb.

He stops.

He looks up, cocking his head to one side.

The doctor closes the door, locking it.

The orderly shifts on his feet and moves on, setting the chair down at the table.

DOCTOR

Es bastante.

He lights another cigarette as the orderly moves to the cot.

Buster does not look up or move.

DOCTOR

Por favor.

The orderly shifts on his feet and hefts Buster easily, lifting him up and carrying him across the cell to the table.

DOCTOR

I must admit that in many ways I admire you, Señor. I admire the ease with which you adapt and adjust in your films, relying upon your wits to find the solution, the order, in the chaos around you. This famous silence of yours has always struck me as being perhaps the only answer to the absurd chaos which is forced upon us. Silence.

The orderly stands, Buster in his arms, staring down at the chair pushed in at the table.

Silence.

The doctor sighs and slides the chair out.

The orderly sets Buster down in the chair.

DOCTOR

However, I am also disturbed by your films. So often your struggle is ultimately doomed. At the end you are always defeated, lost, set adrift. In some of your films, you even surrender to chaos. I assume that this is a conscious decision you have made as a, as what, as an artist? Perhaps it is better box office? Perhaps order is not comic, perhaps failure is funny? Well, perhaps. And perhaps your own failure is no longer funny. Is this why you have come to us?

Buster ignores him, eyes fixed upon the bottle before him.

He blinks once: Eyes open, eyes closed, eyes open.

The orderly reaches down to strap him in, but the doctor stops him with a gesture.

DOCTOR

Es bastante.

The orderly steps back.

DOCTOR

Forgive me for all my lecturing. My wife tells me I like the sound of my own voice too much. Would you care to join me in a drink, Señor? Sirva las bebidas, por favor.

The orderly uncorks the bottle and slowly pours the liquor until the glasses are nearly brimming over.

DOCTOR

Thank you.

He raises his glass in a toast.

Pause.

Buster takes up his glass.

DOCTOR

To order, order and the Keeley Cure.

Buster drinks but the doctor does not. Buster finishes, sets his glass down, and looks up at the doctor standing over him.

DOCTOR

Ah. I am not thirsty.

He sets his glass back down on the table.

Buster stares at it.

He blinks once: Eyes open, eyes closed, eyes open.

DOCTOR

Please. I am on duty.

Buster leans forward and drains the glass.

The doctor gestures and the orderly steps forward to refill the remaining glass. The orderly takes the empty glass from Buster and places the newly filled one in front of him. The orderly fills the second glass and stops. He stands there, poised, with the bottle half-tipped, his eyes fixed on the glasses, waiting.

DOCTOR

Sujételo con la correa.

The orderly sets the bottle down and tries to strap Buster in. Buster struggles, writhing in his chair. Every time the orderly secures one arm, Buster worms it free while the orderly struggles with the other. Finally, the orderly steps back with a glance at the doctor.

The doctor casually lights another cigarette.

DOCTOR

Puede hacerle daño si es necesario.

The orderly steps forward and raps Buster with the blade of his hand, just behind the ear. Buster's head lolls forward, a low shuddering moan trickles from between his lips.

The orderly straps him in.

DOCTOR

Bueno.

The orderly steps back.

The doctor rummages in his pocket, produces a small vial and snaps it beneath Buster's nose.

Buster coughs a few times, his head rolling from side to side.

The doctor returns to his seat.

Buster sits, unmoving.

The doctor leans forward, waving the vial again. No response. Gently, he sets his burning cigarette against the back of Buster's hand. With a gasp, Buster jerks his head up.

DOCTOR

Allow me.

He lifts the glass to Buster's lips, helping him drink. Buster gulps at the liquor, eyes on the doctor.

At the doctor's gesture, the orderly refills the glasses.

DOCTOR

¿Ayudaras al Señor Keaton con su bebida, por favor?

The orderly lifts the glass to Buster's mouth, but Buster mashes his lips together and twists his head away.

The doctor gestures again, and the orderly pries Buster's mouth open. But now he is at a loss. He stands there, holding Buster's mouth open with both of his hands.

He looks at the glasses on the table and considers.

He looks down at Buster. He looks at the glasses again.

Pause.

He casts a plaintive look to the doctor.

The doctor rises, picking up the glass. Slowly, he empties it into Buster's open mouth. Buster gurgles weakly in the back of his throat.

DOCTOR

Señor Keaton, if you do not swallow, you will most certainly drown.

Buster swallows with a thick noise, snuffling and choking on the liquor.

The doctor refills the glass.

Buster, watching this, struggles against his straps, shaking his head violently back and forth. But another glass is poured down his throat like slow, dark rain. His body hitches, and he gags and coughs against the liquor.

The doctor reaches for the bottle, but it is empty.

Buster relaxes back into the chair.

The doctor motions to the orderly who goes to the door, unlocks it, and exits. The doctor smiles thinly at Buster.

DOCTOR

¿Nos disculpas un instante, por favor?

The orderly reenters, carrying bottles of liquor, three in each massive hand. He sets them on the table and pries Buster's jaws apart once again.

The doctor picks up one of the bottles and inspects the label. He stands there a moment, looking at Buster.

DOCTOR

Mm. I suppose we don't really need the glasses anymore, do we?

He moves closer and begins to pour.

As the lights fade, Buster begins to choke, kicking his feet against the floor. The sound of his stamping rises in the darkness, melting over and into the sound of cards being shuffled.

Black.

Act I: The Machine
Scene Two

There is a low sound in the darkness, staccato and harsh: Someone shuffling a deck of cards. This repeats a number of times, flowing over and into the noise of feet frantically pounding in syncopation.

The lights rise on the cell.

Music drifts in through the open window.

Buster is in motion, a shuffling dance. His face unreadable, his body a twirling tornado of energy.

After a moment or two, there is a sharp sound from the door and Buster abruptly stops, frozen in mid-step.

The slit in the door opens.

Just under the music, muted voices can be heard from behind the door.

The slit closes.

Buster does not move.

Outside, the music trails off.

The door opens and the orderly enters carrying a large crate in front of him. Halfway across the cell he bumps his head against the lightbulb.

He stops.

Long pause.

He continues on, setting down the crate and turning to exit, ducking under the bulb.

After a moment, he reenters, carrying the table on his back.

He sets it down next to the crate and leaves.

On his third time in, the orderly delivers a large electronic console with switches and dials and buttons. An impressive but unrecognizable machine.

He sets it down on the table and exits again as the doctor enters, carrying his chair.

DOCTOR

What a lovely, lovely day, yes? Ah, smell that air? You know, you are one of the lucky ones, Señor. Lucky to be up here in the fresh air and the light and the pretty music instead of down there in the lower wards. No windows there. No warm sunlight. No cool breezes or music. No. Just darkness and cold floors. There are spiders and, I believe, sometimes rats. Even the occasional scorpion or two has put in an appearance. We have far too many patients down there, these days. Too many who have chosen chaos over order. But, what can you do when they fight treatment, like a drowning man fights the lifeguard? What can you do? What can I do, but keep them down there with the other lunatics? Extreme? Perhaps, perhaps. Yet how are they to be cured of their extremities without an extreme method? It is fortunate you have not chosen such a path for yourself.

The orderly brings in the chair with the straps and sets it down near the table.

DOCTOR

Gracias.

The orderly exits, closing the door behind him.

As the doctor speaks, he takes equipment from the crate, assembling a machine on the table. Tubes and coils and copper wire, all jumbled together like something from a mad scientist's laboratory.

DOCTOR

Ah, what a day. I must tell you Señor, there are very few men who have been so successful in resisting the Keeley Cure, but it has been done. It has been done, yes. But don't worry. I have discovered a way to ensure the success of the treatment. I admit, by themselves, Dr. Keely's methods are not completely reliable. I have found in my work that the Keeley Cure by itself produces little more than a watered down aversion. Aversion. And what is that, what is aversion? Quite simply, it is fear without reason. Fear without reason. And fear without reason is weak, immature. It is the fear of the child lying terrified in the dark, afraid of the unknown. The child lies there, paralyzed, immobile, eyes staring out into the shadows surrounding their bed. And yet, slowly they become acclimated to and perhaps even comfortable with, in, their fear. And, eventually, they fall asleep. But the unseen dread is still there the next night and the next. Eventually, they cannot sleep peacefully without passing through this ritualistic cycle of fear night after night. Now, I have found that the cure to this is obvious, really. Lux fiat! Let there be light. Illumination. Action. Energy. At these times, we must shock the machine out of its sleepy paralysis and back into motion once again.

His equipment assembled, he steps back and flicks a switch. The bulb overhead flickers slightly. A soft hum rises from the machine.

DOCTOR

Please excuse me for a moment.

He goes to the door and knocks once. It opens quickly and he motions the orderly in.

DOCTOR

Ya estamos con usted.

The orderly enters and moves toward Buster. Halfway across the cell he bumps his head against the lightbulb.

He stops.

Pause.

He moves forward and grasps Buster's arms. Buster struggles in an exaggerated tug-of-war. The orderly stands there, dazed by Buster's antics.

After this has gone on long enough, the doctor gestures sharply to the orderly who drags Buster to the chair and straps him in.

Buster stares at the two of them, silent as stone.

As the doctor speaks, he attaches wires from the machine to Buster's chair. He attaches the wires to Buster's body as well, to the fingertips, the temples, the chest.

DOCTOR

Think of your brain as an electrical system, sending out complex signals to the other components in the machine. We convert fuel to energy, the energy becomes action, the action gives us life. But like when it is polluted by improper fuels, the machine must be purged. And then? Shock the machine, that's what we must do. Flood it with power, that it may have enough energy to burn away any remaining impurities.

He returns to the table, resting his hand lightly on the machine.

DOCTOR

Do not be afraid. This will hurt only slightly.

He makes a small gesture and the hum from the machine rises in pitch. The bulb flickers overhead and Buster strains suddenly against the straps, teeth clenched, every muscle taught like wire . . . and yet he remains silent.

Silence, but for the humming of the machine.

With a click of the switch, Buster sags back into the chair and the hum falls away, the bulb flickering back to full strength.

The doctor makes his small gesture again, and the hum rises. The bulb flickers once again, Buster strains silently in his seat.

Silence, but for the machine.

Again, with a quiet click from the switch, the bulb steadies out and Buster sinks back.

Pause.

The gesture, the hum, the flickering light once again. Buster throws his body against the straps, his entire body jerking with syncopated fire.

The doctor steps away from the machine, lighting another cigarette as Buster burns.

Finally, he steps back to the machine and releases the switch.

Buster sags in the chair, a low keening sob rising in the back of his throat.

DOCTOR

Now. Are you listening? Can you hear me?

He moves his hand to the machine and Buster silences, watching him.

Pause.

The doctor dismantles the machine.

DOCTOR

First, using Dr. Keely's methods, the machine is purified of the poisonous fuels which have corroded its parts. Then we provide power to burn away the impurities and shock the machine back into motion. And finally, we are ready to resume our journey.

He goes to the door and opens it, beckoning for the orderly to enter. The orderly carts out the table and components, clearing the cell.

Buster is crying softly, silent sobs shaking his body.

The orderly releases him from the straps, tumbling him to the floor. The doctor goes on one knee next to him, speaking quietly.

DOCTOR

Remember, all this pain is merely physical, a slight mechanical discomfort as we get the machine running again. It will pass. It will pass. One day you will leave this place, I will see to that. You will be free of this place . . . as will I, as will I.

He pats Buster on the shoulder and steps back, gesturing to the orderly. The orderly lifts Buster, laying him on the cot. As the doctor stubs out his cigarette, the orderly exits the cell.

DOCTOR

Goodbye Señor Keaton.

He turns to go, tossing the cigarette butt into the pail in the corner.

The door closes, locking behind him.

Silence, but for the bedsprings creaking beneath Buster's sobs. The sound slowly melting over into darkness and the sound of shuffling cards.

Black.

Act II: The Accident

There is a low sound in the darkness, staccato and harsh: Someone shuffling a deck of cards. This repeats a number of times, flowing over and into the sound of ripping fabric.

The lights rise on the cell.

Buster is sitting on the cot, muttering to himself. The words spill out of him. Incoherent, low and guttural. He is clutching the sheets in his hands, tearing them into long ragged strips.

Soft music drifts in through the window.

Buster closes his eyes, cocking his head slightly. His hands stop working, his body relaxes, and the muttering tapers off as the music plays.

Silence, but for the music.

Buster stands up on the cot and turns to the window, stretching his hands out between the bars, reaching. Voice full of gravel, he begins to sing.

BUSTER

In my solitude
You haunt me
With reveries of days gone by
In my solitude
You taunt me
With memories that never die
I sit in my chair
Filled with despair
There's no one who could be so sad
With gloom everywhere
I sit and I stare
I know that I'll soon go mad...*

...the music fades and he sags against the barred window.

Long silence.

With a harsh sound, the slit on the door opens.

Buster raises his head.

The slit closes and he turns, hopping off the cot and stuffing the torn sheets under the mattress. He sits down on the edge of the cot, staring into space.

Long pause.

The door opens and the orderly lumbers in, stopping just short of the lightbulb.

He glances up, cocking his head.

The nurse enters with fresh sheets clutched to her chest.

NURSE

Buenos días, Señor. Es un día muy lindo, ¿no? ¿Por qué no me permite...

...the doctor enters behind her, chair over one shoulder and a small leather case in the other hand.

DOCTOR

¿Se puede?

NURSE

¡Ay! Doctor.

DOCTOR

Buenos días, Maria. ¿Cómo estás?

NURSE

Bien. ¿Y usted?

DOCTOR
Estoy maravillosamente. ¿Y cómo está nuestro enfermo favorito hoy?

NURSE
¿Cómo está hoy, Señor?

Silence.

DOCTOR
Supongo que él no puede quejarse ¿eh María?

NURSE
No, Doctor.

DOCTOR
No. No lo supongo. Maria ¿Me harías un favor? ¿Es posible que cambies su rutina por una hora o más para que yo realice mi exploración al Señor Keaton?

The nurse is distracted, glancing under the cot and around the cell.

DOCTOR
¿María?

She picks up a strip of sheet from the floor beneath the cot.

NURSE
¿Doctor...?

DOCTOR
...María, por favor. ¿Puedes regresar más tarde?

NURSE
Pero...

DOCTOR
...gracias, María.

NURSE
Pero Doctor...

DOCTOR

...no me permites preventarte de visitarando pacientes otros.

NURSE

Pero...

DOCTOR

...gracias, María.

She leaves.

With a chuckle, the doctor lights a cigarette. The orderly leaves, closing the door behind him.

DOCTOR

Good morning, Señor. I trust you slept well?

Silence.

DOCTOR

This isn't one of your pictures, Señor. You will speak to me, sooner or later. I promise you. Sooner or later. Why not begin now? I have brought some things today for you to see, to look at. Tests of a sort. You see, to help you I must know more about certain things. Your past, your childhood, your parents, your life, and so on.

He opens his case and sets a stack of large pasteboard cards on his knees.

DOCTOR

Now, these are pictures, paintings really. Random splashes of ink on cards. A man named Rorschach developed this as a kind of mirror to reflect our mind back at us. Clever, yes? Using chaos as a path to order. See this one here? What do you, what does it make you think of?

Buster stares at it, his face blank.

He blinks once – eyes open, eyes closed, eyes open.

DOCTOR

No? Another then? Perhaps this one?

He holds up another card.

Buster does not look.

With a sigh, the doctor puts the cards away.

DOCTOR

Why don't we try something else. I will say a word. Please tell me the first word that comes into your mind. Ready? Señor?

Buster looks back at him.

DOCTOR

"Father."

Silence.

DOCTOR

"Father."

Silence.

DOCTOR

No? Nothing? No words come to mind? What about "Failure"?

Pause.

DOCTOR

Nothing? Well, if you won't me anything about him, I will tell you what I know about your father. Joseph Keaton. An acrobat, a vaudeville performer, a drunkard. As the firstborn, you inherited his name. That is, until you fell down a flight of stairs and were christened "Buster" by your godfather. By the time you were three years old, you were performing with your family. Your primary role in the act was as a punching bag, a prop. Your father would throw you through walls, twist your head in circles, and pound you mercilessly with whatever he found available, onstage and off. All part of the act. Your father spent the good majority of his time drunk, offstage and on. The beatings became worse as the years went by. And by the time you were twenty-one, you had had enough and broke up the act...

...Buster stands up on his cot and turns to look out the window.

DOCTOR

Joseph Keaton. Your father. Died in 1945. Died a failure, a fool, and a drunkard. Joseph Keaton. Rest in peace.

Long silence.

DOCTOR

Ebrii gignunt ebrios. You understand? of course not. From Plutarch: "Drunkards beget drunkards."

Pause.

DOCTOR

I had hoped that you might be more receptive today, Señor. Still, your fame is a silent one. You are much like your father, yes? Yet you have lost so much more. Your fame, your fortune, your wife and family. You are a father as well, yes? You have two sons?

The doctor takes a folded newspaper from out of his case and tosses it on the cot.

DOCTOR

Or rather, you did.

Buster looks down at the paper at his feet.

He blinks once – eyes open, eyes closed, eyes open.

DOCTOR

Los Angeles Times. Last Thursday.

Buster takes up the paper and opens it, reading.

DOCTOR

Page eighteen.

Buster searches through the pages and stops, reading.

DOCTOR

She's taken them from you, your wife. Your ex-wife, rather. The courts have given your sons to her. She has changed her name, the name of your sons, from Keaton to Talmadge. Even your boys are lost to you now.

Buster folds the paper and hands it back to the doctor.

DOCTOR

Thank you.

Buster turns back to the window.

DOCTOR

You know, like you, I grew up very poor. Very little food, cast-off clothes, a drunken father. Very poor. My family barely had, we lived hand to mouth for nine, ten months of the year. I didn't see my first movie until I was eleven years old. 1925. Summer. The mercury had been well over one hundred degrees for days, weeks. Animals were falling down dead in the street. Men walking about in the heat with wild eyes. And I was eleven years old, sitting in a moviehouse jammed full of sweating, stinking people. Each of us braving the heat to see your latest picture. I was there, in the front row, a hundred people sweating and laughing behind me. My first movie. One of yours, as a matter of fact. We were there to see you, children and fools braving the heat, we were there to see Pamplifias. The Great Stone Face. To see you. Why? Why sit there and sweat? Why squander money on a cheap illusion of light and shadow thrown up against a bedsheet strung up on a clothesline? It must have been some magic that drew us in, packed two to a seat. Why were we there? Why was I there? It was summer, it was hot, and I was hungry. But I was curious. I was curious about this magic. And so I went, I went to see what this magic was. But whatever it was, whatever magic you had, it was something that I did not, and do not to this day, understand. Tell me. Tell me, what was it? What compelled us to crowd ourselves into a sweltering theater in the middle of summer? Can you tell me? Do you know? Do you even know what you had, what you have lost? Answer me!

Buster turns to look at him.

He blinks once: Eyes open, eyes closed, eyes open.

Silence.

Rising, the doctor stubs out his cigarette and tosses it in the pail in the corner.

DOCTOR

Perhaps you will have something to say to me when we resume your treatment again tomorrow. Perhaps you will finally find your voice, when you move down into a cell on the lower wards, away from the distractions of fresh air and pleasant music and warm sunlight. Perhaps you will have something to say to me then.

He leaves, locking the door behind him.

Long pause.

Buster springs up, digging beneath the mattress and drawing out his sheets. He resumes tearing them into long strips.

Finished, he quickly braids them together, fashioning a crude rope.

And as he works, he mutters.

Music drifts in through the window.

He ignores it. Once the rope is finished, he tests it with his hands, drawing it tight. He stops for a moment, staring at the door.

Pause.

Quickly, he stuffs the makeshift rope back beneath his mattress and sits facing the door, his face blank.

The slit opens.

Murmuring from the hallway.

The slit closes.

Buster relaxes, retrieves his rope, and tests it again, drawing it tight in his hands, straining, knuckles white.

Satisfied, he winds it about itself again and again, making a noose.

He pushes the cot away from the window and ties the end of the rope to the bars.

He stands, staring at the noose hanging down against the wall.

He takes the rope in his hands and pulls the noose over his head, drawing it tight against his throat. He stands a moment, back to the window, facing the door, flexing his knees, bouncing against the weight of the rope.

Music drifts in through the window. He cocks his head and closes his eyes, swaying slightly.

The door opens and the nurse enters, clean sheets pressed to her chest.

Buster freezes, eyes wide.

NURSE

Regresare de nuevo, Señor.

...she stops when sees him.

Tableau.

Buster drops, his legs collapsing under him and drawing the noose tight, hanging just a few inches from the floor.

The nurse runs forward, spilling the sheets on the floor, screaming back over her shoulder.

NURSE

¡Doctor, Doctor!

She reaches Buster and tries to hold him up, struggling against his weight.

The orderly lumbers into the cell, moving forward to help.

Halfway across, he raps his head against the bare bulb hanging from the ceiling, shattering it. He falls to his knees, hands to his face.

The doctor rushes in. He immediately turns and leaves.

The nurse has wedged her body beneath Buster, barely supporting his twitching body.

A bell sounds in the hall outside and, as if on cue, the rope snaps. Both Buster and the nurse crash to the floor. There is a sharp sound, a snap of bone, and she screams.

The doctor returns to see Buster sprawled atop the screaming nurse, flailing and gasping.

DOCTOR

¡Quítalo de ella, idota!

With a roar, the orderly manages to rise and goes to Buster, lifting him off the nurse and slamming him down on the floor.

The doctor half-draws, half-carries the nurse out of the cell. She is whimpering, her dress is torn and her arm dangles limply.

Buster tries to rise.

The orderly grasps the loose end of the rope and jerks it tight, throwing him back down.

Buster falls, hands clawing at the noose, choking.

The orderly puts his foot on the back of Buster's neck, pressing his face to the floor.

Buster kicks weakly against the floor.

The orderly flexes his leg, pinning Buster's jerking body beneath his heel.

The orderly lifts him up, shaking him, savagely slaps him once on each side of his face, snapping his head back and forth. The orderly throws him down again.

The doctor reenters with a bundle of canvas under his arm. He shakes it out in a flurry of buckles and belts: A straightjacket.

DOCTOR

¡Levántalo!

The orderly lifts Buster again, this time by his hair.

Buster screams.

DOCTOR

¡Cállalo!

The orderly shakes Buster, drawing more screams from him.

BUSTER

...it was an accident...!

...the doctor stops, the jacket open in his hands...

BUSTER

...a goddamn accident..!

DOCTOR

...¡le has callado!

The orderly raps Buster across the side of his neck and he falls limp in his hands.

DOCTOR

Gracias.

He moves forward, fastening the jacket about Buster.

Finishing, the doctor draws the straps tight, wringing a screech from Buster.

The doctor slaps him.

DOCTOR

¡Silencio!

He gestures, and the orderly flings Buster into the corner. Buster lands heavily, spilling the bucket, tumbling like a doll.

The orderly moves the cot back to its spot beneath the window and then exits.

The doctor stands a moment, staring at Buster.

The orderly reenters.

DOCTOR

Una bombilla nueva, por favor. Y una escoba. Y límpiete ésa mierda de la cara.

The orderly leaves the cell.

The doctor lights a cigarette, blowing smoke out the open door.

After a long moment, the orderly returns, his face wiped, but still smeared with blood. He carries a broom in one hand and a dustpan in the other. Both hands full, he is holding the lightbulb between his teeth.

The doctor looks up as he enters and rolls his eyes.

Despite himself, Buster lets out a quick bark of laughter.

DOCTOR

¡Silencio! ¿Podrías dármelo por favor?

The orderly gives him the broom.

Long pause.

The doctor looks at him.

The orderly, bulb in his mouth, raises his eyebrows.

Longer pause.

The doctor offers him the broom.

The orderly takes it back.

The doctor raises his hand slowly, lightly gripping the bulb in his fingertips.

DOCTOR

¿Por favor?

The orderly surrenders the bulb.

DOCTOR

Gracias.

Taking the bulb from him, the doctor carefully wipes it off and replaces the broken bulb while the orderly sweeps up the glass.

As he works, the doctor speaks to Buster over his shoulder.

DOCTOR

I don't like accidents, Pamplinas. I don't like comedy, slapstick, or clowns. Maybe out there people smile at your antics and shrug and say "Accidents happen." But here? No. Here, accidents do not happen. Not here.

The orderly finishes sweeping up and leaves.

Buster mutters under his breath.

DOCTOR

What's that? What did you say?

BUSTER

It was an...

DOCTOR

...an accident? An accident? Was it?

He strides forward and grabs the rope around Buster's neck, jerking on it, dragging him across the rough floor...

DOCTOR

...an accident? This was an accident, was it?

The orderly enters quickly and roughly lifts Buster, carries him across the cell and tosses him on the bare cot.

The doctor composes himself and points to the spilled bucket.

DOCTOR

Limpielo por favor.

The orderly nods and retrieves the bucket, placing it back in the corner.

He returns to stand by the door.

DOCTOR

It was not an accident, Señor Keaton. It was a foolish and cruel moment. You have a family, you have sons. You have shamed yourself and them. You would bring shame to the name of your father as well, if he had not already died a shameful drunken...

BUSTER

...go to hell.

DOCTOR

And thus the Great Stone Face crumbles, revealing the pathetic excuse of a man huddled beneath. Yes. You are your father's son.

Buster turns his face away.

DOCTOR

I have no sympathies, Señor. Not for you and your type of man. Poisoning your body and your mind, squandering your talents, fighting everyone around you, hurting your family, your friends, preying upon women . . . incidentally, you had best hope that Maria is not too badly hurt. Although, you know, I believe her arm is almost certainly broken. How fortunate for you that we know how to be discreet. If news of your "accident" were to somehow reach the outside world, the papers . . . well, the papers have not been so forgiving of you and your friends. This sick and shameless behavior may be the norm for that diseased pack you run with, Señor. No one has forgotten what happened to that obese obscenity Arbuckle, no one has forgotten what he did. Not the papers, not your audience. They know your kind too well. If they were to hear of this? Very bad for you. It is very probably broken, her arm, I think. I thank God we got here before you did worse...

BUSTER

...it was an accid...

DOCTOR

...how dare you, how dare you? Obviously I have been too cautious with your treatment, Señor. Too cautious and too kind. Please, forgive me. I know you are in pain. I know you are sick. You will be cured. There is no door that cannot be opened. Whatever it requires, whatever it takes, I will cure you, Señor. I will. And don't be afraid, I promise that I will keep this little "accident" out of the newspapers. Your wife, your sons, they need never know. That is, if you promise you will try to...

...Buster turns away.

Long silence.

The doctor gestures and the orderly exits.

DOCTOR

Get a good night's sleep, Señor. This is your last night with a window. Violent and disruptive patients such as yourself are confined to the lower wards with the others. There, tomorrow, we can approach your treatment in earnest, without disruption, without distraction. Adios, Pamplinas.

He smiles and turns, tossing his cigarette butt into the bucket. He exits, closing the door behind him.

Buster lies prone on the cot, staring at the door.

Long pause.

Smoke begins to rise from the bucket, pouring out into the room. A figure appears within stepping forward.

Buster leaps up, coughing. He moves through the smoke towards the door, stumbling at the feet of the dark figure in the center of the room.

Buster raises his eyes.

It is a man, dark hair and electric eyes. He is dressed in a simple but elegant suit and he holds a deck of cards in his hand.

Buster smiles up at him.

HARRY

That was sure a buster you took there.

BUSTER

Hello, Harry.

Harry smiles in return as the lights fade, shuffling his cards once again.

Black.

Act III: The Miracle

There is a low sound in the darkness, staccato and harsh: Someone shuffling a deck of cards. This repeats a number of times, flowing over and into itself.

The lights rise upon the cell, as before.

Buster, still in his straightjacket, is kneeling at the feet of Harry.

Harry is shuffling a deck of cards.

Silence, but for the sound of the cards.

Buster tries to rise, falters.

Harry stows his cards and helps him up.

BUSTER

Thanks.

HARRY

Certainly.

Buster walks about the cell, shaking his legs and stomping his feet.

HARRY

Stiff?

BUSTER

Pins and needles.

HARRY

In many countries, when you want to gain power over an enemy, you fashion his likeness, an image, a doll. The common practice is to stick needles in it, to hurt them.

As he speaks, he draws out silver needles from his pockets and swallows them one by one.

HARRY

You see, each place you stick a needle – the leg, for instance – is said to produce a pain within the leg of your enemy. Maybe someone somewhere has a little doll with slapshoes and greasepaint.

BUSTER

Maybe.

HARRY

I've seen it done, this trick. Someone tried it on me once, in fact. I was touring in Europe, performing to sold out shows every night. One day I was walking along a street in some small town or other, when I was accosted by this ragged old man, a voodoo, a local magician. I tried to pass on by, but he blocked my way. He was chanting, waving a little doll in my face. The doll was meant to be me, my image. It was stuck full of brass needles. They don't take kindly to rival magic in foreign places. He was terribly upset that I didn't have the common courtesy to fall over in agony.

BUSTER

What happened?

HARRY

A crowd gathered. He was quite old. I waited until the mamzer ran out of breath and needles, I took his little doll from him, picked out all the needles, and swallowed them...

...he has swallowed all of his needles and spreads his hands wide. Then, carefully, slowly, he draws them from his throat, strung together on scarlet thread...

HARRY

...and then I brought them back up, strung together on silk thread. Audiences hate losers. The people started booing and I left him there, insane with rage. His magic had failed him. I could hear the crowd taunting him all the way down the street. I shouldn't be surprised if he didn't end his days in a madhouse.

BUSTER

He has my sympathies.

HARRY

He shouldn't. He held the people of that little town in a snare of superstition and fear for years. Preying on their belief and their terror, stealing scraps of faith from them with his magic pin cushions and his bad breath curses. He did have power, as much as those fools gave to him. His magic was real enough, but only because someone believed in it. It's a superstitious place, this world. When you travel in foreign lands, be careful of local magic, watch that it doesn't ensnare you. This place here, this place has its own charlatan, that doctor, that quack. He has his own magic cards and spells and needles, and he has his own prisoners as well.

BUSTER

Uh huh.

HARRY

Names, images, pictures. They give you power over people. In many places, no one tells a stranger their true name for fear of enchantment. For if you know the true name of something, you have power over it.

BUSTER

You're talking about movies.

HARRY

I'm speaking of charlatans and captives in general. Even in our own civilized world, most people rarely differentiate between the image and the person.

BUSTER

Hollywood.

HARRY

There's a town, a city built on magic. A place founded on The First Law. The First Law, you remember? I must have taught you all this years ago.

BUSTER

I must've forgotten it years ago.

HARRY

"Like produces like." When you were just this tall, I told you all this. You never listened.

BUSTER

I'm not a goddamn kid anymore, Harry.

HARRY

And I'm not a cheap medicine show con man anymore either, Buster. Language.

BUSTER

Sorry.

HARRY

Fine. You're sorry. I'm sorry. "Like produces like." Show me my efforts weren't in vain.

Long pause.

BUSTER

Similarity.

HARRY

Very good. Yes. Similarity. See, you do remember. And The Second Law?

BUSTER

I don't know. I'm not a magician.

HARRY

You were. He's right you know, the doctor. It's shameful. You used to be so curious, so full of wonder. Crawling around backstage while your father and mother performed. You used to watch the shows, eyes wide, enchanted. Time was, you knew all my tricks by heart. Cards, the handcuffs and chains and straightjackets, the escapes, all of it. You were there, you had it but you drowned it...

BUSTER

...I didn't...

HARRY

...you did. You did. You washed it away, drowned your magic and your soul in booze and...

BUSTER

...Harry. I've just had a little bad luck.

HARRY

Luck. And the Second Law?

Pause.

BUSTER

Contact.

HARRY

That's right. Contact. Contagion. Power through proximity and ownership. Like a lucky rabbit's foot, or choosing a card from the deck.

The deck of cards is in his hands once again and he fans them out for Buster.

With this gesture, the lights shift into a garish theatrical glare of color.

Music drifts in through the window.

*Harry turns and faces the audience.**

HARRY

Ladies and Gentlemen, please allow me to introduce myself. I am Harry Houdini, the greatest magician of this world or any other. My assistant and I have a very special evening planned for you tonight. But before I begin, I would like to ask for some assistance from one of you out there. Could I have a volunteer, please? Anyone?

He gazes out into the seats, shading his eyes against the light.

HARRY

You there, please. Yes, you. Would you be amenable to offering us your assistance. Well then, step right up and let's begin. Thank you.

The volunteer is guided onstage to the faint sound of applause.

Harry, turns to the volunteer.

HARRY

Now, if you would be so kind as to step forward please.
Thank you.

*He shuffles the deck, pacing in between Buster
and the volunteer, speaking to the audience.*

HARRY

Now, ladies and gentlemen, tonight with the assistance of
one of your own, I will demonstrate The First and Second
Laws of Magic.

*He pauses a moment, eyes flashing, directly
behind Buster.*

Silence, but for the sound of the cards.

HARRY

And now, The First Law.

*He passes behind Buster and thrusts his hands
through Buster's arms, creating the illusion
that his hands are Buster's.*

Harry shuffles the cards.

HARRY

Magic. Magic is, like any other force of nature...

BUSTER

...gravity, electricity, magnetism...

HARRY

...like any of these, Magic is governed by laws...

BUSTER

...by principles...

HARRY

...which both bind and free the power they describe. The
First of the Laws is The Law of Similarity.

*He stops shuffling and flourishes the cards out
in a wide fan.*

HARRY

From the most complex of magical effects to the simplest card trick, the Law of Similarity holds sway. Similarity tells us something we've always known, back to the days when men in animal skins painted the walls of their caves with images of the hunter and the prey. Images bear power, the power of that which they depict.

BUSTER

And vice versa.

HARRY

Similarity.

BUSTER

Imitation.

HARRY

Homeopathic Magic.

He hands the deck to the volunteer.

HARRY

Now, please take the deck and draw out the four Aces. Please show them to the audience.

The volunteer does so.

HARRY

The four Aces, ladies and gentlemen. Legendary cards, to say the least, hotly sought by every gambler...

BUSTER

...hustler...

HARRY

...and card cheat. There may be better hands to catch in an all night poker game but no hand is quite so impressive to see laid out on the table...

BUSTER

...one by one...

HARRY

...as the four Aces. Thank you. Please, replace the Aces anywhere in the deck. Now, please shuffle the cards until you feel completely certain that the Aces are entirely separated and lost once again among their fellows.

As the volunteer shuffles, Harry and Buster continue.

HARRY

Ladies and gentlemen, despite their appeal, despite their popularity, the four Aces are a remarkably difficult group to assemble. At least, by any honest means.

BUSTER

However...

HARRY

...however, as we know, The First Law of Magic describes the principle of Similarity, and even the fabled Aces must bow to Magic.

He takes the cards from the volunteer and begins to shuffle them further.

HARRY

With a simple shuffle...

BUSTER

...and a nod to The First Law...

HARRY

...you will find that the four Aces have, through their similarity, they have been drawn back to each other yet again.

Harry hands the deck back to the volunteer.

HARRY

Would you be so kind as to find the Aces again..?

...the volunteer searches through the deck...

HARRY

...I believe you may find them gathered together, drawn to one another by their similarity.

The volunteer continues to look.

Silence, but for the sound of the cards.

HARRY

Have you found them yet? No? They're not there? Let me see.

He takes the deck back and riffles through it, scanning for the aces.

Silence, but for the sound of the cards.

HARRY

Ladies and gentlemen, The Second Law of Magic describes the influence of objects upon one another through Contact. It is with astonishment that I report that in demonstrating The First Law, we have stumbled upon The Second as well.

BUSTER

Watch very carefully.

HARRY

It appears that our four Aces have not only assembled together once again, they have been drawn back to the one who selected them, drawn back by the memory of that brief Contact with you.

Harry reaches out to the volunteer.

HARRY

Please, please check your pockets.

The volunteer does so. In a moment, the four Aces are discovered. Harry takes them, displaying them for the audience.

HARRY

The four Aces, ladies and gentlemen.

BUSTER

The First Law of Magic.

Faintly, there is the sound of applause and Buster and Harry take their bows.

Harry shakes hands with the volunteer, guiding them back to their seat.

BUSTER

Thank you very much, mind the step...

...once the volunteer is seated, Harry continues.

HARRY

Now, for the suspicious in our audience, any of you out there who might be sneering behind your applause, I will offer a further demonstration of The Second Law.

BUSTER

Make sure you get your money's worth.

HARRY

For this we will need a second volunteer.

BUSTER

Anyone game?

HARRY

Anyone at all?

A volunteer comes forward and is guided up to the stage.

HARRY

Thank you. The Second Law of Magic, like the first, operates within certain principles. In the case of The Second Law, the principle of Contact holds sway.

BUSTER

Contact.

HARRY

Contact. In which an object...

BUSTER

...in this case, a card...

HARRY

...gains association with a person...

...he indicates the volunteer...

BUSTER

...in this case, you...

HARRY

...through the power of proximity, the power of Contact.

BUSTER

For example...

HARRY

...for example, when we want our true love to reciprocate our affections, we steal a lock of their hair, hoping the one will draw the other to us...

BUSTER

...like a magnet...

HARRY

...like a magnet, turning to the poles...

BUSTER

...like our heart to our homeland...

HARRY

...Contagion...

BUSTER

...Gesundheit.

HARRY

A comic genius, ladies and gentlemen.

BUSTER

Magically Contagious, if you will.

HARRY

Contact. The Second Law of Magic. Now, please, pick a card...

BUSTER

...any card.

The volunteer does so.

HARRY

Thank you. Now, look at your card. Don't show it to me, don't show it to me.

BUSTER

Haven't you ever done this before? You've heard of it, at least?

HARRY

Look at your card and remember it, please. I am now going to turn away. Please show your card to the audience as well.

The volunteer does so.

BUSTER

Contact.

HARRY

Remember your card. Think on it, continue to hold it in your mind after you replace it anywhere the deck.

The volunteer returns the card to the deck.

HARRY

Now, I am going to shuffle. Please tell me when you are comfortable with the deck, certain your card is lost. And while I shuffle, hold the card in your mind. Visualize it, hold your hand up and see it there between your fingers...

BUSTER

...hold your hand up. You can do it...

...Harry finishes shuffling and fans the deck out for the volunteer.

HARRY

Now, holding your card in your mind, please draw any four cards from the deck...

BUSTER

...but don't look at them...

HARRY

...and be certain to use the same hand with which you chose the first card.

BUSTER

The same hand.

HARRY

Now, please hold your hand out like this...

BUSTER

...fist closed, fingers out, thumb up...

HARRY

Very good. Now, may I have the cards you chose?

He takes the four cards from the volunteer and begins to lightly shuffle them together.

HARRY

I do not know which of these cards is yours...

BUSTER

...however...

HARRY

...however, I believe in The Laws of Magic, and The Second Law tells me that one of these cards is the one you chose, drawn back to you by that brief moment of Contact.

Harry holds the four cards out, squared and stacked.

BUSTER

Please, hold still...

HARRY

...and keep your card in your mind, hold it there. Visualize it, picture it between your fingers.

Carefully, Harry places the cards between the first and second fingers of the volunteer's raised hand.

HARRY

Now, hold them very tightly, and concentrate...

BUSTER

...concentrate...

HARRY

...remember your card, call to it...

BUSTER

...not out loud...

HARRY

...call to it as it is calling to you...

...long pause.

BUSTER

Are you calling?

HARRY

Concentrate...

...with a sharp movement, Harry strikes the cards from the volunteer's hand. Three of them flutter to the floor, the fourth remains clutched in their fist.

HARRY

There is your card, yes? Drawn back to your hand by the power of Contact.

They turn to the audience.

HARRY

The Second Law of Magic, ladies and gentlemen.

To whatever faint applause that might rise, they bow.

Harry gestures the volunteer back to their seat.

BUSTER

Thanks...

HARRY

...thank you very much...

BUSTER

...Harry Houdini, ladies and gentlemen...

HARRY

...thank you...

BUSTER

...the greatest magician of this world or any other...

*...they bow one final time and the lights shift
back to the bare cell.*

HARRY

You do remember.

BUSTER

Good to see you again, Harry.

HARRY

And you as well.

BUSTER

How have you been?

HARRY

Dead. And you?

BUSTER

Nearly so.

HARRY

So I gathered.

BUSTER

Uh huh.

HARRY

Nice necktie you have there, Buster.

BUSTER

This old thing?

HARRY

Goes well with the jacket. Matched set, are they?

BUSTER

It's what every fashionable lunatic is wearing these days.

HARRY

"Lunatic". From Luna, the moon goddess. A powerful symbol, the moon. Often associated with madness and insanity. Did you know that hospitals, asylums, and prisons all flood during a full moon? More murders are committed, more violence and insanity. And yet they say more babies are born as well, under the still cold face of the moon.

BUSTER

Uh huh.

HARRY

Of course, it's also a symbol of magic and the supernatural. The ancient Greeks associated it with Dionysus, their god of wine. Other cultures believed it was where the lost souls journeyed after their life ebbed away, the Land of the Dead.

BUSTER

And is it?

HARRY

Ah, well, now, that would be telling. Who knows where the dead go? But regardless, the moon's a powerful thing, a powerful place, a powerful symbol. We knew this, we knew it long before Mr. Draper drew back the veil and captured her pale face on silver paper.

He draws a card from the deck in his hands and shows it to Buster.

HARRY

See this? In the Tarot, The Moon symbolizes the deep subconscious, the extremities of nature and art, the well-travelled paths we take in life. It is the eighteenth card, linked to the ninth, The Hermit, linked to guidance and magic. It is generally believed that in the ancient of days, navigation and time calculations were done by the moon and not the sun.

BUSTER

Why?

HARRY

Who knows? It's a place of change and rebirth, a symbol of tides and lost souls. Madness and mirrors, maternity, murders, magic, and wine. All from the moon. What do you think of that?

BUSTER

I think you made it up.

HARRY

Oh no, we know that the cold eye of Luna draws the tides and the waters. They say we came from the sea and someday we will return. Our bodies are nearly all water. Our blood flows within us as powerful as any ocean. Even more so, perhaps. And who knows what tides may ebb and flow within us? You might be interested to know that in some countries of the world they call you Moon-Face. Did you know that?

BUSTER

I thought I was finished with all of this.

HARRY

I'm sorry?

BUSTER

Nightmares, bad dreams, hallucinations that won't shut the hell up and leave me alone.

HARRY

You want me to leave you alone, Buster?

BUSTER

Hallucinating.

HARRY

Are you? Maybe I'm just a dream, a ghost...

BUSTER

...not a ghost.

HARRY

No?

BUSTER

If you were a ghost, if you were a ghost, you wouldn't be here.

HARRY

Pray tell...

BUSTER

...Houdini is dead, he died...

HARRY

...I died on October 31st, 1926 with my dear sweet Bess by my side. I died because of pride and vanity. I died because of my folly and my fame. I died because of a punch in the stomach.

Music drifts in through the window.

HARRY

This is what happened, this is how it goes. In 1926, a few weeks before Halloween, my fame caught up with me at last, in Montreal of all places. One afternoon, I was relaxing in my dressing room before the evening performance. There were a few visitors there, a couple of fellows from the university. One was an art student and the other was a football star. While the artist sketched my portrait, the other fellow, his name was Whitehead the fellow quizzed me about my physical abilities. He had seen the show the night before and was especially impressed by one of my routines. Volunteers from the audience come onstage and strike me in the stomach with sledgehammers. You see, it was a simple trick to compress the muscles in my stomach, making them like stone. The volunteers, we always chose the strongest men we could find in the house, they would pound away until they were exhausted. After which I would rise unharmed and thank them for their troubles. As I said, one of the more popular moments in the show. This had impressed the young athlete from Montreal. More than swallowing needles, card manipulations, and death-defying escapes. The fellow, Whitehead - white head, white face, moon face - he asked me if it was true, or was it all a sham? I assured him that it was true, that I could withstand even the most brutal blows to my stomach through the power of concentration and will. And, while I lay there, completely relaxed, he punched me, four or five times. I didn't have any warning, any time to prepare, any time to think.

Pause.

HARRY

A doctor was called, but he didn't arrive until the house was already starting to fill with people for the evening show. A few minutes before the curtain was to rise, I was looked over hastily and told to get to a hospital for a more thorough examination. My gut was ablaze with pain and I could barely stand upright, but the show must go on. Another standby from the old days, I might add. And so I went on with the show, despite the pain. The show was difficult and I barely made it through the...

BUSTER

...I remember all this.

HARRY

Indulge me, you know so much. Do you remember the Water Coffin? I do.

...slowly, the music rises...

HARRY

...then, at the close of the performance I am bound in a straightjacket, wrapped in chains, and lowered upside down into an upright glass coffin filled with icy water. In life I could, in addition to my many other abilities, hold my breath for well over five minutes, you know.

BUSTER

I know.

HARRY

Behind the screen, underwater, I work my escape while the clock ticks off the minutes until my impending doom. The band plays lighthearted numbers to while away the time. The Water Coffin. My most difficult escape. A show stopper. The grand finale. And that night it's where all my skill finally gives out. My stomach full of fire, hanging upside down, holding my breath in an glass coffin banded in iron. I feel my muscles turning to stone as the chill waters draw the warmth from me. There is a hum, a rush in my ears, and a whispering shadow circles me. It circles again. I can hear the orchestra playing. The eerie, submerged music comes to me through the waters like the mingled voices of a choir of

HARRY (continued)

retarded children. Then the music drops away, and the shadow falls full upon me at last.

Pause.

HARRY

Imagine my disappointment to wake up in a hospital, bound not by chains but tubes and being pricked with needles day and night, my body full of poison from a ruptured appendix. The punch, you remember. When I wake, I know there is only one escape left for me. I have seen the shadow, it came too close to escape. The curtain was falling, slowly . . . but it was falling. When I wake, Bess is by my side. I can only imagine what it must have been like for her onstage. The stopwatch ticking away, the moments stretching out, growing longer and longer. The band falling away to random notes, panic in the audience when they tear the screen away to reveal me hanging there upside down, blue and cold and still. Women screaming and men crying out for someone to help. The stagehands smash my glass coffin with an axe. I lie there on the soaked stage, stretched out, drenched, unmoving. The world famous Houdini, the greatest magician of this world or any other, brought down by his fame, his vanity, and a punch in the stomach

Silence.

BUSTER

You, Houdini, he didn't believe in this sort of thing.

HARRY

This sort of..?

BUSTER

...oh for chrissakes, Harry...

HARRY

...language!

Pause.

BUSTER

Ghosts.

HARRY

What about them?

BUSTER

He, you, you didn't believe in them

HARRY

No. No, I didn't. But I wanted to, I wanted to. The mediums, the seances, the crystal balls and messages from The Great Beyond. Swindlers, crooks, and con men all out to make a buck off the ignorant. They ruined belief for me with their knocking spirits and ersatz ectoplasmic emissions. So I set out to expose them.

BUSTER

Why bother?

HARRY

Because.

BUSTER

Because you hated them.

HARRY

Because they were amateurs. Not one of them had enough skill to earn my hatred. I hated their victims, their willing audiences. The imbeciles who gave them their belief and fear and money. Wise, educated men and women who gave up their confidence and faith for a few cheap parlor tricks.

BUSTER

At least they believed.

HARRY

That's why I hated them. They believed. I could not. I wanted to, but I couldn't, I wouldn't allow myself to believe, to be deceived. Not the Great Houdini. My pride wouldn't stomach the lie. I wouldn't believe. I wouldn't lie to myself.

BUSTER

Neither will I.

HARRY

Son, you've been living a lie for years. You've lost your birthright, your fame, your talent. It was all stolen, years ago, by a cheap little tramp.

BUSTER

Go to hell.

HARRY

I'm already there, Buster. This is what Hell is, for a reformed ghostbreaker, at least...

BUSTER

...I don't believe any of this.

HARRY

Believe, Buster. Believe. Do you need proof? Would another card trick convince you? What should I do?

BUSTER

Do some goddamn thing, spook.

HARRY

Mind the language..!

...he flings the deck of cards at Buster with a snap of his wrist.

Buster ducks and the deck strikes the wall behind him.

BUSTER

Jesus, Harry..!

HARRY

...I've got no stomach for this, Buster. And you've got no time. I can't make you believe in me...

...silence.

HARRY

Alright, then. One card trick before I go. Hand me the deck, please.

Buster looks at him.

HARRY

Aha...

...he retrieves the cards and shuffles – once, twice, three times.

HARRY

The Tarot. One of the oldest known artifacts of ancient magic. Some believe it was originally a book, disguised as a pack of cards so as to preserve it from the burning of the Library in Alexandria. Seventy-eight pages of Ageless Wisdom, shuffled beyond all hope or understanding. Face cards and minor trumps showing us reflections of our fate. Look here, see these emblems? Wands or scepters, cups, swords, coins or stars. You see? These are the godparents of our modern deck of cards. Clubs, hearts, spades, and diamonds. Some practitioners believe that the cards hold the secret path, or paths, to God. Others use them to map the life of Man. Past, present, and future. Three cards, Buster.

BUSTER

You gonna tell me my fortune?

HARRY

Three cards. One for your past, one for the present, and one for your future.

He sets the deck on the floor of the cell and stands back.

Long pause.

HARRY

Only you can draw the cards, Buster.

Buster sits a moment. Then he drops to his knees in front of the deck, lean forward, licks the top card, and lightly blows on it.

He leans forward again, pressing his forehead down on the top card. He leans back, the card stuck to his face.

He presents it to Harry.

Once again, he repeats the process and gives the card to Harry.

He draws a third and final card.

Harry takes it from him.

Buster leans back and Harry lays out the cards one by one.

HARRY

There is The Fool. Here's The Hanged Man. And then there is Death. Drunken dancer, hanging image, and the final cut. Accidents, Machines, and Miracles. Three men, three fathers. Three major trumps, with no inversions. All of one and one for all. Your choice now. So choose.

BUSTER

Choose?

HARRY

Past, present, or future? What do you want to know?

BUSTER

Past.

HARRY

Always a wise choice when confronted by a fortune teller. If they can't tell your past with accuracy, don't put any faith in whatever glimpse of the future they offer you.

One by one, he turns the cards over.

HARRY

Your past: the drunken son of a drunkard dancing alone at the very edge of the world, blindfolded, listening to the rush of the hungry waves beneath, thinking it is applause. A little fool dancing for copper pennies. One city to the next, one town after another, completing the circuit. You fly from one stage to the next, thrown by your reckless father. Somewhere along the way, you learn not to smile for the audience, and they love you for it. And, one day, the copper pennies change to gold. Thrown through brighter lights than those at your feet and, lured by their music, you turn your back on the pennies for a new kind of stage

HARRY (continued)

and sell your image away, stretched thin across the world, flickering in front of a million hungry eyes, stretching thinner and thinner until finally there's but a husk left swinging in the empty breeze. Hanging up there hollow, unloved, and alone. Then comes the harvest, stolen fruit in threadbare pockets. A hobo, a tramp, stealing your fame. Winter. Hunting through the wastes for scraps, the cold music of tarnished copper haunting your memory as the circle closes and the snare draws tight. The final cut, a thousand faces, all yours, fading, left to decay in back rooms and the dusty corners of the cutting room floor. Forgotten.

BUSTER

Forgotten?

HARRY

Forgotten.

BUSTER

All of it?

HARRY

Virtually.

BUSTER

All of my..?

HARRY

...yes.

BUSTER

How?

HARRY

How? It was and is and will be. None of you are spared.

BUSTER

None of who?

HARRY

You. The silents. The Quiet Idols.

BUSTER

None of us?

HARRY

Nearly so. We always smash our idols sooner or later,
Buster. Hollywood destroys its memories. No one is spared.

BUSTER

None of us?

HARRY

A handful. One of you.

BUSTER

Who?

HARRY

Who? You have to ask?

BUSTER

I have to ask.

HARRY

It matters?

BUSTER

It matters.

HARRY

You have to ask. It matters. Charlie, Buster, only Charlie
is revered in more than footnotes. In fact, a certain pagan
tribe raises him up as a god. Believe it or not. He is
worshipped far and wide.

BUSTER

What about Roscoe?

HARRY

Roscoe? Roscoe's a blight, Buster, a horror story. Less than
a memory.

Buster bows his head.

HARRY

You cry for him still, Buster? Not for yourself?

BUSTER

Of course. He made us all followers. He didn't deserve it, what they did to him. But you'd look at him and you'd see it there in his eyes, yeah? Like he saw it coming, was waiting for it to happen.

Silence.

BUSTER

Christ, I need a drink.

HARRY

You are your father's son.

BUSTER

You're saying what?

HARRY

I'm saying you said you needed a drink.

BUSTER

What're you saying?

HARRY

I'm saying that you are your father's son.

BUSTER

I made my own way.

HARRY

Your path was different, but the same snare was waiting for you. and you stepped into it. Can't you feel it there, around your neck, tightening, tightening?

BUSTER

What are you..?

HARRY

...you feel it there, there? The wire's round your neck, son, tight and bright, lifting you up, twisting, hanging there, waiting for death to come...

BUSTER

...this, this goddamn place, this goddamn place.

He rises with difficulty and goes to the window, gasping for air.

HARRY

There's nothing left for you out there. What he said, the doctor, what he told you is true. It's in all the papers and everyone knows. You're ruined.

BUSTER

I'm going anyway.

HARRY

Where?

BUSTER

Anywhere.

He stands a moment longer and then turns back to Harry.

BUSTER

Alright, ghost. You're the escape artist. You got an escape for me?

HARRY

You know, a rabbit caught in a snare will struggle against the pull of the wire...

BUSTER

...can't you leave out the goddamn lecture for once?

HARRY

One last lesson, Buster. Before I go. Then you'll be on your way. In the old country, it was considered bad luck to leave a place by a different door than the one you entered through. If you did, you could get lost, never find your way back to where you started. Outside that door, Buster, out there is everything you left behind. All your failure, all the disappointment, all the heartache . . . it's all waiting for you to come back and pick up where you left off. Your family, your pain, your past, your present, and your future. It's all waiting for you. All you have to do is walk out the way you came and you'll step in the snare again. And you'll never get free. But there are other doors. They'll take you someplace else, maybe someplace better...

BUSTER

...maybe someplace worse?

HARRY

Maybe.

BUSTER

It doesn't matter. Either way, it'll be different.

Softly, music drifts in through the window.

HARRY

Yes, Buster, I have an escape for you. One from the old days, from the circuit. Remember that? Being on the road, travelling from town to town? You were always after me for my secrets and tricks, my escapes. My cards and handcuffs, my packing crates and chains, my jailbreaks and my straightjackets. And I taught all of them to you. Remember? A rabbit fights the snare, son. And the rabbit dies. You won't get free that way.

He squeezes Buster's shoulder for a moment.

HARRY

One shoulder up, the other down. Remember? Then you're on your way. There will be some pain, but you'll be free. And when you are, don't go by way of the same door.

From outside, the music rises.

Buster paces the floor, twisting inside the straightjacket, muttering to himself.

Harry moves out of his way, into the corner. There is a low sound, below Buster's efforts and the music: A hum, a rush, a shuffle.

Buster's gyrations increase, his body twisting within the jacket. He begins to trot around the cell, picking up speed.

The music rises and the sound follows suit.

At the height of this frenzy, Buster runs straight for the door, slamming his shoulder against it.

He collapses to his knees, his arm hanging at a strange angle...

BUSTER

...Jesus God..!

...silence, but for the music and the sound rising beneath it.

Slowly, Buster wriggles out of the jacket, his face sheathed with sweat and pain.

And, by the time the slit on the door opens, he is free.

The music is rising from outside, as well as the rushing familiar now, perhaps the sound of the sea?

Buster rises, his arm limp.

The door swings open and the orderly lumbers in, stopping just inside the door.

Tableau.

Buster breaks the moment by swinging his useless arm up and around, over his shoulder. It falls back into joint with a sickening, liquid sound.

The orderly slams the door behind him and rushes forward.

Halfway across the cell, he raps his forehead against the bare bulb and stumbles.

The bulb spins, flickering wildly on its wire, throwing staccato flashes of light and dark around the room.

The music rises, the sound beneath building to a roar.

In the corner, Harry fades into the shadows.

Buster grapples with the orderly in a knockabout battle. The orderly dives and bellows while Buster spins and dodges with the grace of a ballet dancer.

Each miss sends the orderly deeper in a rage. The angrier he is, the easier it is for Buster to evade his clumsy strikes. And all the more comic as well.

After a few moments, they face off: Buster at the window, the orderly at the door.

Tableau, again.

This time, the orderly shatters the moment with a roar, lunging forward through the flickering light, his huge hands outstretched to lay hold of Buster.

Buster dives over the orderly's charge, over his lowered head, landing with a graceful spin and flourish.

The orderly's momentum carries him straight into the wall, his hands shooting out between the bars. He hangs there a moment, stunned.

Buster darts forward and, pulling the rope from around his neck, he lashes the dazed orderly's hands to the bars.

This accomplished, he moves to the corner and returns with the steel pail.

The music is louder now, and we can hear voices below. Laughter, cheers, and applause. Still rising.

Shaking his head, the orderly straightens, peering stupidly out at his hands. He tries to turn around, looking back over his shoulder.

Buster moves into his line of vision, carrying the pail

The orderly growls.

As the music rises and the applause reaches a crescendo, the orderly pulls at the bars with all of his strength. Every muscle in his body taugt and heaving.

There is a cracking, a splintering, and dust flies as he pulls the entire window, bars and all, from the wall.

He spins from the momentum, and his hands (still tied to the bars) slam to the floor from the weight of the twisted concrete and metal. He looks up.

Buster gently places the bucket over the orderly's head and smiles. He winds up, the bucket becomes a gong under his fist. He chimes midnight on it.

The orderly crumples.

Buster turns to the door. He stops a moment, glancing to the deepening shadows in the corner.

He blinks once: Eyes open, eyes closed, eyes open.

Sounds from the corridor break the moment and force him into action. He climbs out of the jagged hole where the window used to be.

Long silence, but for the sound of the music and whatever it is that's rushing below.

The bulb slowly stops swinging, evens out.

The flickering light slows. Dark and light, dark and light, finally leveling out.

The music plays on and from the window a shadow is cast against the wall where Harry vanished.

The silhouette of a man hanging by one leg, upside down, the other leg folded at the knee, his arms stretched out at right angles to the body.

By now, the applause has turned to screams.

The lights fade sharply. The bulb flickers a final time, in the darkness, like a movie projector running down.

Nothing now. Nothing but darkness and the sound of screams and disjointed music, melting over and into itself, finally becoming the shuffling of cards which may, or may not, mingle once again with the sound of applause.

Darkness.