

THE WRONG SIDE OF THE DOOR

BY ELIJAH VASQUEZ

WHY I LIKE IT: *Drama Editor JANET EHRLICH COLSON writes...*

The Wrong Side of the Door, described by the playwright as an experimental tragicomedy. The comic element of this dark little gem is especially caustic in light of our recent lockdowns with the main character, Tug, recounting his own unique lockdown experience. The play is essentially a monologue that includes the audience as if we were locked up with Tug, bearing witness to his tedium and agony - and not just as flies on the wall (or savored as “dessert” in between the meager scraps he receives as sustenance), but as part of his psyche in the struggle to make meaning of his captivity. The severity of Tug’s circumstances could drive even the strongest of us to madness but for a certain boisterousness with which he faces his narrative, and the bizarre turn which gives us insight into his plight – and ours. I won’t say more than that, but here’s a tidbit from the holding cell:

Damn chain! Only if it was looser!...I swear something is trying to eat me...It was that stupid village...it was infested with pest and...AHHH! (He’s struggling. He grips it and tries to rip it off his neck. He rolls around and grunts loudly. His attempts are futile. He breathes heavily and plops himself onto the couch. He is exhausted.)

Spacing is playwright’s own.

THE WRONG SIDE OF THE DOOR

An experimental tragicomedy

by Elijah Vazquez

Character

TUG:

middle age, a prisoner

Place

A furnished holding cell

Time

The morning

A middle aged man, named Tug, lies on the floor. His clothes are plain, he's barefoot and he has a gray chain wrapped around his neck. There is a couch, torn with white fabric poking out. There is also a steel door, a window, a table, and a mug. Pause. The man gets up and starts pacing. He halts. Stares at a wall. Scratches an itch. Beat. He continues to pace.

TUG

I haven't eaten since the last time I ate. When I had food. Real food. *(He wilts. Beat)* It was wonderful. The sun came out and I was saved from my starvation. But, I need saving again. *(He paces)* I'll tell you, He is a merciful man. Everytime I open my eyes and walk on this cold ground with my bare feet, I am greeted with a pile of scraps near the steel door. It's good food and I am grateful. They hurt my one tooth, but they do fine. Yet, there is one problem . My scraps leave too quickly. They disappear. They disappear because my stomach really likes them. *(Small beat. He caresses his stomach)* I can't help it. I really can't. Now, His generosity is not to blame. A handful at best He supplies. I understand my predicament. I understand this room. His amount is the right amount and that's okay. When I see those scraps, I get happy, because I have food. Would I prefer more? Of course. But, apparently it has to do with digestion or something. Too much can clog you up and that'll be the end of me. Personally, I think my waste is fine, but whatever He wants. He knows best. *(Beat)* Things are different today though. When I finished my scraps, He didn't come and check on me afterwards. It's protocol here; to see if I haven't tried any funny business. I looked out my small window and saw Him leaving the grounds in daylight. He never leaves the grounds. He usually stays until his shift ends at night. A small part of me winced in pain because I actually liked this one. He would actually say words to me unlike

the others who would attack me with harsh sounds and wagging fingers. Conversations even. *(Beat)* I hope He comes back. *(Pause. He starts pacing. Itches his leg. Yawns a bit. Then sighs)* Maybe, just maybe, if I lay down, close my eyes again, open them, and walk across the cold floor, the day will start over. And then everything would be back to normal. *(He does this. Afterwards, he sits and stares at the floor)* Nothing. That's odd. Let me try again. *(He does so again)* Mmph. Interesting. Still nothing. *(Small beat)* Maybe I have to actually sleep. But, that's impossible when I'm hungry and He's not guarding my door. It's too dangerous. I can't risk it. One day my people will need me again. *(Beat)* Oh, did I forget to mention that I am a prince? I know, it's hard to tell. Only on special occasions do I wear my crown. But, yes, He told me that I was the son of a king and queen from a magical distant land. Apparently some raiders killed them and kidnapped me when I was a boy. Then, they sold me away to a village full of orphans not so far from here. That was my first home. Then I grew up, got into some trouble, and ended up here. It's not as bad as it looks. What more can you want? A couch, a table, and a mug of water. It's a living fit for royalty. *(Pause. He itches. He looks out the window. Then he holds his stomach in hunger)* I have water at least. That will hold me down. *(He grabs the mug from the table and starts drinking)* Maybe this is some trick. This facility does that sometimes. Watching people beg for food is enjoyable. The groans of starvation sounds like music to them. But, I can't do that. I won't beg. I'm too blessed. Blessed people have to be grateful. The scraps, the water, the room, the...suffering? No, no, this has to be some misunderstanding. It's his duty to check if I'm alive. How can He just abandon his post? If I slice my throat or hang myself, then He will be discharged immediately. During these times, that wouldn't be ideal. They're fooling me. They have to be. *(Beat. His itching is increasing)* But, what if they replaced Him? Anyone else wouldn't know what to do. The job is tough. My hunger is constant. My fatigue is constant. What if they forget to feed me? Or forget to bang on the steel door to check if I'm alive? *(Beat. Trying to itch his neck)* Damn chain! Only if it was looser!...I swear something is trying to eat me...It was that stupid village...it was infested with pest and...AHHH! *(He's struggling. He grips it and tries to rip it off his neck. He rolls around and grunts loudly. His attempts are futile. He breathes heavily and plops himself onto the couch. He is exhausted)* Only if He was here. He would toss me a nice jagged stick from outside and I would use it as a scratcher...*(Pause. He notices something out the window)* Speaking of outside...*(He looks out a small window with a piercing stare. He cracks his knuckles)* They're back. *(Small beat. Softly)* Do you ever get the urge to kill a spider? *(He is statue-like, unmovable and intimidating)* I do. They visit me frequently. They sometimes eat my desserts in this room. If I'm lucky, I will be blessed with beetles or dead flies for dessert. But, the spiders will take that away from me. They will steal from a prince without thought. And for that, they should all perish and die. *(He punches the window with rage. Nothing happens)* That was shallow of me. These windows are indestructible. *(He notices something again)* Wait! There is a fly! Upside down and gnarled, just how I like them. *(He licks his lips, picks up the dead fly, and eats it. Beat. He begins to gag. It's not a pretty sight. Eventually he pukes on the floor)* Well, would you look at that? That happens sometimes. My intestines don't always agree with me. No worries, the puddle should be gone soon. Maintenance is pretty good

around here. Now, let me get this stench out of my mouth. *(He grabs his water again and drinks it)* Ahh, hydration is nice *(Small beat)* Hydration is mandatory, especially here. Ventilation sucks here. Like sweaty-anus-sucks. AC barely works, and hot air loves to linger. It could make one quite...*(Big yawn)*...quite sleepy... *(He yawns again, and gets comfy on the couch. Very sleepily)* Should I sleep? In such a crisis like this? Yes, yes that's what He would want. He would want me to shut up and go to sleep. Empty stomach or not. Yeah...yeah...I'll do that...I'll sleep. *(Whisper babble)* This...couch...is...fantastic...How on earth was I approved for such luxury? The facility must have been under the impression that I've been behaving well. Hah...He keeps on surprising me...I can't wait to see him soon...*(His eyes lids descend and he is asleep snoring loudly. He sleeps for about thirty seconds. He then awakes, stretches his back and heads over to the steel door and looks at the floor)* Mmm no food. *(Thinks)* Well, do I have any flowers? Flowers are good to eat too. Every week I am sent flowers by an anonymous person. And every week He checks them. You know contraband and stuff. But, those days are over. I am a reformed man. A blessed one. I behave. I eat, sleep, and behave. Even when I'm starving I behave. You have to, or punishments like this will occur. Maybe even worse. *(He surveys the room)* Well, I have to eat something. If I don't I'll surely die. *(He directs his focus at the table then starts chewing at the table. Beat)* It's not steak. *(Beat)* Ughhh! This is borderline cruelty. It's been too long since He's been gone. Since food has appeared. These conditions are not suitable for anyone. If He was here, this wouldn't be the case, but He's not. He left. Like, how can he just leave the grounds during the day like that? I'm sorry, the blood is rising. I need to take a moment *(He goes and sits down facing a wall, and starts whispering to it)* God, I adore you so much and I don't even know why. *(Small beat)* Walls just understand, you know? *(He rubs his head against the wall in an affectionate way)* Yes, I agree. Thank you. I owe you my life. *(Beat)* Mmm, I need something more though. I need...I need to be invisible right now. *(He scurries behind the couch. Silence. After a while, he slowly pokes his head up, only to eye level)* Ragdoll to Maine, I see the target and I am closing in. *(Beat. He poorly flips over the couch)* Hah, oh, war. What a time. *(Small beat)* Yes, I am also a certified murderer. They always said I had the best hands in the business. I used to trudge through mucky, treacherous forests with my legion of mercenaries and give the enemy the ol' one-two buckle my shoe. *(He poorly demonstrates)* Then we would flee because we were merciful and didn't believe in utter annihilation. We wanted to keep fighting. If we killed our enemies, our fun would be over. *(Beat)* Man, what a time to not feel...acknowledge. Yeah, I had my clan of wild bush bandits, but it wasn't enough. Most of the time, I felt...well, unseen and invisible. Like right now. *(Beat)* Luckily, life was merciful to me, because when He is here, I don't have to worry about feeling invisible. *(He rolls off the couch and ends up on his back looking at the ceiling. He sighs heavily. Small pause)* Is mercy an arbitrary trait? Like, do you do it when you feel like it? Do you wake up and say, "Hey I'm going to be merciful today. I'm going to ease up on the protocol for today. I'm going to give more food to the prisoner. I'm going to watch the prisoner more. I'm going to spare his deprivation for a little." Just a thought. If you know, tell me. I think it's important for me as a prince to know. *(He looks at the floor again, realizing otherwise. Frustration sets in. He*

screams. He knocks on the floor three times) I know he hears. This is my emergency call. He has to answer this if I'm in trouble. That's just common sense. He should be here. *(He bangs at the steel door)* Hello! Hello! It's eating time, you know? Handful of scraps every morning, remember? Remember? You must know! You must be there! *(Beat)* ANSWER ME! *(Long beat. His tummy rumbles badly)* Oh no, oh no. It's hole time. One moment. *(He briskly walks offstage. Beat. You hear farting noises. Shoveling noises. Then with a rush of adrenaline, he storms back on, jumps over the table, jumps from one end of the couch to the other, and then finishes it off by plopping onto the floor)* Don't you just feel like a new man afterwards? I know I do. Oh, I almost forgot to wash my hands. *(He spits on his hands and rubs them together thoroughly)* Much better. As you figured, no plumbing, people tend to escape that way, so my toilet is a tiny tiny hole. But, in like three days my excrement is gone. Some poor sap scoops and bags it up. It's my own little stinky paradise. *(Beat)* Do you hear that? It's singing to me now? My stomach...my stomach has nothing in it now. All my scraps, beetles and flies are gone floating down in some man-made-reservoir. I need...no...it's Okay. Okay? It's fine. It'll be okay. Everything is going to be okay. It will arrive. He will arrive. *(He starts to pace. He sniffs the air aggressively)* Seriously! Of course, Of course! It's the cheesy chip signal. It's a signal the other inmates use whenever they are treated with cheesy chips for good behavior. They place the chips in the vent so we can sniff the glory. But, it's not glory now, it's mockery. Mockery of the time when He used to slip cheesy chips under the steel door...*(His sniffing is getting worse. He can't help it. He found a trace)* Right here...on this ...spot. *(He's fighting himself)* Don't. Don't. Don't. The cheesy dust is gone. Repeat yourself Tug. The. Cheesy. Dust. is. gone. No more. *(He licks the floor. He spits)* No. NO! I told you Tug! It was mostly dirt. You don't deserve dirt Tug. You deserve more. You deserve a pool of cheesy chips! Don't let them do this to you! *(Pacing intensifies. He's messing with his chain)* Is it hard to breathe in here? Or is it just me? *(He looks out the window)* NO! Turn off the sun. This is not my day! It's false! My belly is supposed to be filled, I'm supposed to sleep like a baby, He's supposed to take care of me! It's damn protocol! This tease needs to stop! It's not fun! I don't find this fun! It's evil. This facility is evil. I know he won't leave me like that. I just know! *(His words are feeling weighty)* How can you just leave a person like that? Especially one who you share sixteen hours of the day with. To...to starve all alone. I mean, it's a tough job, but you...you make it so effortless and easy. You don't mess it up. When I don't have any food, you feed me. It's indisputable logic. That's how it's done here. That's how this life works. Eat, replenish, eat, replenish, eat, replenish, until the day I die. You can't achieve this if there isn't any food to begin with. *(Small beat. He kicks the table. He then pulls at his hair, and is itching more. Crying is developing)* What am I going to do? It's been months, years, ions since He left! There is no way I am going to survive! Nothing will be the same. *(Small beat)* Wait...is...is my heart stopping? I think it's stopping! My heart is going to stop! I'll never sleep again! I'll never eat again! I'll never see him again! How is anyone okay with this?! Who is in charge here? *(He starts banging on the steel door)* You're back there right? Standing guard right? Right?! If so, answer me. Your shift is not done. The night is not even near...Hello?... Hello! Answer me damn you! Answer the prince! This is a famine right now! A

crime! A sick game! They can't do this to me. You can't do this to me I refuse. I REFUSE!
(Pause. He sinks onto the floor completely broken. He knocks three times on the floor) I don't want to die alone. Please, bring Him back. Someone...anyone...he's...he's all I have. He's my friend. I love Him. (Beat. He suddenly explodes and starts tearing at the couch, crying pathetically. He does this for a while until he becomes so exhausted and falls asleep behind the couch. Pause. We hear key jangles and a door open. A man walks in with a work suit, takes off his jacket, and lays his keys on the table. He is carrying a small bag with him. He notices the vomit and cleans it up. Beat. He sits on the couch and lounges back. He opens the bag, looks around and says-)

Man: Pspspspspspspspspsp.

(A cat jumps from behind the couch, purrs loudly, and lays next to the man. The man feeds it the snacks from the bag and smiles. Blackout)

End

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS...

I was inspired by my cat. And when I leave or when he runs out of food, they are the embodiment of suffering. They wail, they cry, they pace, they flip, they scratch things etc. The whole shebang. So, I decided to write some weird allegory about my cat and his everyday "torments."

Disclaimer:

I love my kitty very much, and he is a healthy, happy fur ball. He's just a drama queen when things don't go his way.

AUHTOR BIO: See 'Our Beautiful Home'.