

TwO ClOnes (TwO ClOnes) in a (1!) ROOm

By Dustin Grinnell (Dustin Grinnell)

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

Have you ever worried about being cloned against your will? Maybe you wonder if you will ever be truly satisfied. Or you have an inordinate fear of holes. Well, have I got a play for you! Two Clones in a Room by Dustin Grinnell is a thought-provoking play indeed. It has an expansive feel, yet it goes by in a flash. It's sci-fi, philosophy, psychology, and more than that – it's plum good storytelling. The story centers around two men of science, great minds, who have experienced a "consciousness transfer" (it makes perfect sense in the play) and find themselves held captive until they solve a previously unsolvable problem. They're given all the tools they need to conduct their research, but can they truly be forced to find the answers in a life they haven't chosen for themselves? Can we?

WILLIAM

Then again, there's something . . . freeing about imprisonment, don't you think? No responsibilities, no obligations. Only time to think. Read. Write!

Proceed to the research room.

Five stars.

(Spacing is playwright's own.)

Two Clones in a Room

“I have always imagined that paradise will be a kind of library.”

– Jorge Luis Borges

Act One

Year 2053. Afternoon.

A small, cozy room with several bookcases and a round mahogany table in the center.

WILLIAM and VICTOR, in separate beds, rise and rub their eyes, surprised by their surroundings.

WILLIAM

Where—where am I? What is this?

VICTOR

I don't know.

WILLIAM

Who are you?

VICTOR

My name's Victor.

WILLIAM

William.

VICTOR

How did we get here?

WILLIAM

I don't know. This might sound crazy, but, well . . . I died. I remember the day of my passing quite well.

VICTOR

As I do mine.

WILLIAM

Yet here we are.

A loud “whoosh” sounds. A cylindrical container drops down a chute. Victor retrieves the container from the end of the chute to discover a typed letter. He opens it.

WILLIAM

What does it say?

VICTOR

(chuckling)

That we are . . . clones.

WILLIAM

Clones?

VICTOR

Says something here about a “consciousness transfer.” Our minds were uploaded into these artificial bodies.

WILLIAM

So we feel like our old selves, then?

VICTOR

Well, we’re not blank slates.

WILLIAM

When I died, I was seventy-nine. You?

VICTOR

Seventy-three.

WILLIAM

William looks himself over.

Yet we look as if we're only about thirty.

VICTOR

With the minds of old men.

WILLIAM

So who brought us back to life? And why?

VICTOR

(finishing the letter)

This says our work as psychologists was widely respected and that we've been brought back to cure our creator's phobia.

WILLIAM

What phobia?

VICTOR

Trypophobia.

WILLIAM

Holes?

VICTOR

Says here, "A fear or disgust of closely packed holes."

WILLIAM

Well, I'm a bit confused.

VICTOR

The letter says our creator finds the sight of closely packed holes repulsive. He feels queasy when he looks at surfaces with small holes gathered closely together, like a strawberry or honeycomb.

WILLIAM

And what happens if we somehow manage to cure this silly man's phobia?

VICTOR

Apparently, those steel doors will open, and we'll be free to go.

WILLIAM

William examines the room.

Well, at least the space is cozy. Nice furniture. Full of books.

A vent in the steel door opens. Two trays of food appear. Victor runs to the door and bangs on it desperately.

VICTOR

Hey! Let us out of here, you psycho!

WILLIAM

William sits at the mahogany table.

Victor, come. Bring the food over, and let's eat. I don't know about you, but this new body is starving.

Victor reluctantly joins William at the table with the trays, and they eat a salmon dinner with potatoes and broccoli.

After he finishes eating, Victor notices a box on the table, and he opens it.

VICTOR

Look, William! Cigars.

WILLIAM

I don't much care for smoking.

VICTOR

Well, I happen to think better with a cigar.

WILLIAM

Aren't you aware that Freud died of mouth cancer?

VICTOR

Victor lights a cigar and puffs.

Well, I suppose they could just bring back another clone when I die.

WILLIAM

Victor, with regard to the matter at hand, do you think we even have a chance at finding a cure for trypophobia?

VICTOR

I have a limited understanding of phobias. I don't know any treatments for this particular phobia. Or any others, for that matter.

WILLIAM

I, too, have had little training in phobias. As a psychoanalyst, I do have to wonder if this fear of holes serves any important psychological functions.

VICTOR

Like how a fear of snakes would have kept someone safe when humans roamed the savannah, you mean?

WILLIAM

Yes. But even if we could manage a treatment, who would we study?

VICTOR

The letter says we'll be provided with clones who have a great fear of holes. We should receive the first one tomorrow morning.

WILLIAM

In the meantime, I suppose we could educate ourselves about phobias. It looks like that bookshelf holds quite a few books on psychology.

VICTOR

Some of which bear our names, I've noticed.

WILLIAM

Victor, do you have any idea what year it is?

VICTOR

The letter doesn't indicate a time period. We could be ten years in our future, or a hundred, or even a thousand. Who knows?

WILLIAM

And there are no windows, no natural light. I wish this creator of ours could have given us a skylight—so we could see the moon, the stars. Give it enough time, and we could lose our minds in here.

VICTOR

Not unlike solitary confinement, I agree.

WILLIAM

Then again, there's something . . . freeing about imprisonment, don't you think? No responsibilities, no obligations. Only time to think. Read. Write!

VICTOR

Well, I don't share your enthusiasm. I'd rather not sleep behind a locked door. Do you suppose this maker of ours will ever show himself?

WILLIAM

I really don't know.

William walks to his bed.

All this food has made me tired. I think I'll sleep now.

VICTOR

Indeed. Good night.

Lights dim.

VOICE OVER

Over the next month, William and Victor worked tirelessly to try to find a cure for tryphobia. They used every intervention and therapy in their psychological tool boxes. And yet, none of their clones had lost their disgust of holes.

A month later, William sits at the table, looking defeated.

WILLIAM

You know, I thought we'd be out of here in a week or two.

VICTOR

It's a tough nut to crack, this tryphobia.

WILLIAM

I was surprised when exposure therapy proved ineffective.

VICTOR

I've never seen so much vomit in all my life.

WILLIAM

There must be something in an individual's past driving this fear.

VICTOR

Perhaps there's some undiscovered trauma in these clones' lives. Maybe when they were young, they fell into a hole. A ditch, perhaps? Or a well?

WILLIAM

Yet we haven't uncovered anything like that with traditional talk therapy.

VICTOR

Perhaps it's an archetype. A symbol embedded in the collective unconsciousness?

WILLIAM

If it were in the collective, surely a larger percentage of the population would be more afraid of holes.

VICTOR

I suppose we're stumped, then.

WILLIAM

Indeed.

Food arrives through the door. William and Victor sit to eat.

VICTOR

Do you enjoy this work?

WILLIAM

It has its merits. I find it stimulating. We are fortunate to have so many books and other reading material available. It would take a lifetime to read them all.

VICTOR

Surely it would be more appealing to chat at a bookstore, a pub, or even a coffee shop?

WILLIAM

I suppose I can't disagree with you there.

VICTOR

And wouldn't you prefer to read for pleasure for a change?

WILLIAM

I don't know. I rather like reading textbooks and expanding my knowledge of my field.

VICTOR

Yes, yes, I do as well. In my first life, that's all I ever did. Every article or book I read was aligned with some scholarly project. If I was writing about dreams, I was reading Freud. If I was trying to understand how my patients could have more meaning in their lives, I was reading Frankl. I rarely took breaks from my work. Very few vacations. But don't you want to read for leisure for once? Pick up those books you always wanted to read but never had the time for?

WILLIAM

Such as?

VICTOR

I don't know. Literature? The classics? *War and Peace*, *Moby Dick*, *Middlemarch*. Don't you find this constant studying, well, exhausting? Always working? Always striving?

And we are young again! Sure, our minds are aged, but look at these strong arms. We have stamina again. If we left here, we could hike to the base camp of Mount Everest. We could ride motorcycles great distances. We could have wonderful, lustful romances.

WILLIAM

You're talking like an adolescent, Victor. As appealing as those things may be, we're both thinkers. My greatest love affair was with my work. After spending time with you, I know you're the same.

VICTOR

But that was us as old men! The new me is finding itself rather bored with this project. Wouldn't you rather work on something other than the fear of holes? Before you passed away, I'm sure you were working on some grand project, something out of reach—and you might have solved it had you only had more time. Well, William, now you have time!

WILLIAM

I think every man of science had a problem like that, yes.

VICTOR

In my first life, if we can call it that, I made my contributions to the world. In this second life, I might choose to, well, lounge around.

WILLIAM

Now, surely you don't believe that. You would be bored to tears! You and I are the same. We're explorers, scientists. We can't *not* be engaged in intellectual work.

VICTOR

A gloomy existence! Like you, I was mostly a loner. I had few friends. I neglected my partners. I didn't know my children well. My life was about work. Obsession. Don't you see? Our first lives were about work; our second could be about *living*.

WILLIAM

A life of pleasure? Without purpose, meaning? Victor, you of all people should be able to acknowledge that man cannot live a meaningless life.

VICTOR

And why must we compare our current selves to our former ‘human’ selves, hm? I don’t consider myself human anymore. Maybe clones want different things than their originals.

WILLIAM

What does it mean to be human? Alive? We have heartbeats, do we not? Our lungs convert oxygen into carbon dioxide, just like human’s. We sweat; we cry. An orange still makes me salivate. Our waking lives still find their way into our dreams. We’re as real—*as human*—as we once were.

VICTOR

But what if this cloning process has resulted in genetic errors that will cut our lives short? What if we’re now more prone to diseases like cancer or heart disease?

WILLIAM

Say you were to leave. You don’t know what awaits you out there. A virus could have wiped out humanity. Climate change could have created a toxic earth. Earth could be a wasteland, for all we know. Maybe we’re the safest we could ever be right here.

VICTOR

In captivity.

WILLIAM

What’s so wrong with this new home we were born into? We have food, water, shelter. A great problem to which we can apply ourselves. As intellectuals, we have been given the greatest gift: the time and the means to live a life of the mind—to think, to theorize, to write and contribute something useful to humanity.

VICTOR

But for how long? We don’t know if it’ll be for five years or another seventy-five.

WILLIAM

What does it matter? That time is uninterrupted. We have the time to do as we please. Time we didn’t have in our first lives. Everything is taken care of: Our clothes are cleaned and freshly pressed. Our food is delivered like clockwork. Sure, we dress the same every day—jeans and black turtlenecks—but who would we try to impress?

VICTOR

William, we just talk all day!

WILLIAM

So? What's wrong with filling our days with conversation? I'm beginning to think it's my favorite hobby. Life would be an impoverished existence without it. Anyway, if you want out of here so bad, let's cure this phobia. What a boon to humanity our efforts will be!

VICTOR

I just think this is a project for another generation of psychologists. I've seen how much a project like this requires of its scientists. And in this second life, I intend to keep this brown hair. In this life, I just want to relax and enjoy myself.

WILLIAM

Why do you speak of our efforts with such misery when this project enlivens you? I've seen you interact with the clones with great interest. And surely you derived satisfaction from the many books you wrote in your former life?

VICTOR

Satisfaction, yes. It's gratifying to work toward the completion of a large project, but I wouldn't call such efforts enjoyable. I was glad to write my books, but each one was a rather miserable, lonely experience.

WILLIAM

And would you rather experience the misery of toiling on a challenging project or suffer the misery of never having a meaningful project to devote yourself to?

VICTOR

I was fortunate enough to discover my purpose, develop it, and try to realize my potential. I dare say, both you and I lived up to Nietzsche's concept of the Ubermench. We were self-actualized; we lived and worked in accordance with our own values and self-determined goals. But there's a clear distinction here, William. I chose that purpose. This new project? It was forced upon me—upon you.

WILLIAM

Does that make it any less significant?

VICTOR

Maybe not. But it makes it someone else's purpose, not mine.

WILLIAM

So you refuse the challenge?

VICTOR

We've been hard at work, have we not?

WILLIAM

Then we should continue.

VICTOR

Victor looks at the steel door.

Fine. Begrudgingly.

Act Two

VOICEOVER

And so it went for another couple of months. Every day, the two psychologists received their daily clone and every day they failed to rid it of its tryphobia.

WILLIAM

William paces the stage, weary.

It's been months, and still no answers.

VICTOR

Victor looks frustrates, too. His clothes are rumpled, his hair is frazzled.

Maybe it's the clones. Maybe they're not "human" enough. Perhaps they don't represent the phobia well enough.

WILLIAM

Have you considered that we might be the problem?

VICTOR

I have wondered if we have the intelligence of our former selves.

WILLIAM

In any case, we're no closer to curing the human the fear of holes.

VICTOR

William, I had a dream last night that I left this place. Or a nightmare, rather. I escaped and returned to my home to see my family, but they were horrified by my story. When they discovered I was a clone, a mutant, they called me names, ran me out, and called the police. I ended up sleeping on the streets with the homeless.

WILLIAM

I'm sorry to hear that. I too have thought that we would have trouble reintegrating into society as clones. How would one get a social security number? A driver's license? How does the society out there regard clones? Are they mutants, as you say?

VICTOR

And when I returned to my university, my old colleagues, students, and administrators all laughed at me.

WILLIAM

I sometimes wonder about my family. I had the fortune of seeing my daughter marry. She was pregnant when I died. I never got the chance to see my grandchild.

VICTOR

If your daughter were still alive, would she even want to see you? Surely she's grieved, moved on. Your coming back might be too overwhelming for her. For everyone.

WILLIAM

Even more reason stay put, then, and try to solve this phobia.

VICTOR

William, don't you think this phobia is . . . well, a bit insignificant? I don't mean to trivialize the malady, but I had a friend with tryphobia, and she was in no way debilitated. She had a career, built a family, had a fine life. I only even learned she had this phobia after a year of knowing her.

WILLIAM

I *would* think there would be more pressing problems in the world, yes.

VICTOR

Seems a bit selfish of this creator, don't you think? Surely humanity hasn't cured cancer yet. Why not bring back doctors and scientists to work on that problem?

WILLIAM

You sound tired, Victor.

VICTOR

I am tired, William. Tired of this place.

Victor looks up at the vent in the ceiling. He looks suspiciously around the room, knowing that the walls have eyes. He lowers his voice.

Listen, I've spent some time studying the engineering here. That vent in the ceiling is not as secure as it appears. One night while you were sleeping, I pried it open and crawled through the ceiling space for a bit. There was an opening. To the outside.

WILLIAM

William steps back in shock.

You're planning to escape?

VICTOR

Victor raises a finger to his lips to shush William.

I will not live this life—*my second life*—in a prison cell, toiling away to try to cure some silly fear. I want to leave and do things I didn't get a chance to do the first time around. Don't you see, William? I don't know how many other clone exists, but how many people get second chances like this? Yes, I am planning to escape. I want to ramble, travel. I want to work odd jobs, making only what I need to get from place to place. We don't know where we are, but let's assume we're in the United States, if it still exists. If I can manage to get to Nepal, I'll go there. I've always wanted to see the Himalayas. Don't you see the gift we have before us?

WILLIAM

But why would you willingly choose such a rootless existence? Don't you see that we have everything we need right here? Our books, our discussions, our company. Say you do have all these adventures. What about companions? You'd have no one to share your time with. To talk to.

VICTOR

I'll meet people in my travels.

WILLIAM

Yes, but they would be transient companions. Not like us. We stimulate each other's minds. We talk for hours. We develop each other's ideas, edit each other's work. Who else would read your manuscripts aloud, page by page? Yes, you would have these great adventures—I too have always wanted to see Mount Everest—but you'd be alone, Victor. And your friend would be here, reading and writing quietly by himself.

VICTOR

You make me not want to leave.

WILLIAM

Then don't! Stay. We can work on the task that's been assigned to us. Maybe we'll crack it, maybe we won't, but the pleasure is in the exploration, is it not?

VICTOR

I have come to value your friendship, and I'll be sad to lose such a dear friend, but I am a prisoner here. You are too! I don't know why you cannot admit that. Yes, maybe I would be lonely on the road, but I would be free.

WILLIAM

Imprisoned, sure, but we're not being tortured. We live quite well, under the circumstances. I may have the energy of a thirty-something, but I have the mind of an old man, and your talk of adventures overwhelms me.

VICTOR

Then you decline my invitation? Fine. I will go alone.

WILLIAM

You, sir, don't know how good you have it. You have everything you need here, yet you want more? The road calls you off to faraway lands? For what purpose? You are chronically dissatisfied, always moving, restless. You finally have time for leisure, true friendship, for *boredom*—you have time, delicious, beautiful time—and you're leaving it all behind for silly dreams of tramping across the mountains?

VICTOR

Tomorrow, I will escape.

WILLIAM

But we haven't cured this phobia.

VICTOR

I don't care. I never cared.

WILLIAM

Don't say that. Don't you feel like we've been making progress?

VICTOR

Perhaps there's a reason phobias weren't cured in our lifetime. We've been given an impossible task. Maybe we were doomed to fail. Who does this creator think he is, anyway? We're not unfeeling androids. We are as human as he is. This creator is a monster for bringing us back, only to lock us up.

WILLIAM

Well, I don't know how else to say it but that I'll miss you.

William and Victor prepare for bed. Early in the morning, Victor waits for William to fall asleep. He packs a bag and watches the rise and fall of William's chest, looking conflicted. After a quiet contemplation, he rises and pushes a bookcase into the middle of the room. Standing on top of it, he opens the vent in the ceiling. Before climbing out, Victor looks back at his friend once more, then disappears.

The next day, William awakes and looks at Victor's empty bed in despair. A letter comes down the chute.

WILLIAM

(reading aloud)

The ceiling vent Victor used to escape has been reinforced with security, so please do not attempt to escape. Today, you will receive a new cloned psychologist with whom to continue your work.

William lowers the letter, melancholic. The door opens, and a new clone, MELANIE, enters.

WILLIAM

And what is your name?

MELANIE

My name is MELANIE.

WILLIAM

William.

MELANIE

(with delight)

I was a psychologist back in the day. A good one, I think. What an interesting riddle we've been given. Shall we try exposure therapy?

WILLIAM

(with a sigh)

We tried that.

MELANIE

Cognitive behavioral therapy?

WILLIAM

Many unsuccessful rounds.

MELANIE

Psychoanalysis?

WILLIAM

Months of it, without success.

MELANIE

I'm sorry. I realize it might be difficult to adjust to having someone new in your space, especially after being alone for so long.

WILLIAM

I wasn't alone.

MELANIE

Oh, I see. You worked with another psychologist? Where is he now?

WILLIAM

He escaped.

MELANIE

Oh goodness, why would he do such a thing? We seem to have everything we need here: books, food, clothes. Did you consider leaving too?

WILLIAM

(unconvincingly)

No, I'm quite happy here. Anyway, the route my old roommate used to leave has been patched up.

MELANIE

Well, I'm happy to be here as well. I look forward to pursuing new directions in an effort to solve this puzzle that's been put before us.

WILLIAM

We'd best get to work, then. Why don't you sit? I'll tell you what we've tried so far.

VOICEOVER

William told MELANIE about all of the failed attempts to cure trypophobia. After, they threw tried every treatment approach they could think of, but after several weeks, they were no further along than they had when they started. And then, one day, a letter came.

A letter arrives down the chute.

MELANIE

William, we've received a letter.

WILLIAM

What does he want now?

MELANIE

No, it's from someone else. A man named Victor.

William snatches the letter from MELANIE's hands.

WILLIAM

(reading aloud)

Dear William, if you are reading this, the man who has created us graciously passed along the letter I mailed to this location. I have reached the Himalayas. I purchased a motorcycle, and I ride it to work on old, dusty roads. I run a bookshop, and I've met a beautiful woman. I wish you were here, dear friend. If you ever get out, please visit.

Moved by the letter, William tilts his head toward the ground, he becomes lost in thought. And then, an idea...

WILLIAM

MELANIE!

MELANIE

Yes?

WILLIAM

It strikes me that we've tried to cure this phobia using mostly conventional means. Perhaps we could try less conventional measures.

MELANIE

What do you have in mind?

WILLIAM

In my career, one experience always bugged me.

MELANIE

Bugged you how?

WILLIAM

My mother had smoked cigarettes for most of her adult life, one pack a day, and she'd tried everything to quit, but nothing ever worked. Yet one day, she went to a hypnotist and after a single session, completely rids herself of the habit.

MELANIE

After hypnosis session, how did your mother feel about cigarettes?

WILLIAM

Everything about cigarettes repulsed her. The smell. The taste. She could barely look at a cigarette without disgust.

MELANIE

The hypnotist no doubt put your mother into a deeply relaxed state, in which she would have been highly impressionable. The hypnosis likely helped your mother associate cigarettes with something that revolted her.

WILLIAM

Funny enough, I believe it was the sight and smell of asparagus.

MELANIE

So are you suggesting we try a similar experiment with our clones?

WILLIAM

Yes, but what if we did the opposite?

MELANIE

I don't follow.

WILLIAM

My mother was addicted to cigarettes and repulsed by asparagus. But the clones are disgusted by closely packed holes. So what if we associate those holes with something the clones love?

MELANIE

Interesting hypothesis.

WILLIAM

We will test it when the clone arrives tomorrow.

MELANIE

What shall we do in the meantime?

William thinks for a moment and then walks to a bookcase. He pulls the bookcase off the wall and inspects the back. Then he yanks on the soft backing, pulling off a large piece.

MELANIE

What in God's name are you doing?

William points to the other bookcase.

WILLIAM

Go to the other bookcase and pull off the backing.

MELANIE does so.

MELANIE

Are you going to tell me what we're doing?

WILLIAM

I'll show you tomorrow. In the meantime, do we have a screwdriver?

The lights fade.

The next day, William and MELANIE stand next to another clone, ROLLO, who is sitting in a chair, looking nervous.

MELANIE

Today, Rollo, we're going to perform a hypnosis. Don't worry. It's a safe procedure. In fact, you'll be quite calm and rested by the end of it. Right now, I just want you to relax.

Rollo shifts in his seat, his shoulders slump, and his eyelids droop.

I want you to breathe deeply, Rollo. In. Out. Deeply. Good. Let your eyes close now. Starting at the top of your head, I want you to relax the muscles of your scalp, then move down to your face and around your mouth. Relax all the muscles of your face. Breathe

deeply. Relax your shoulders. Relax your chest. Your belly. Down to your legs. Your whole body, Rollo. Breathe. Deeper and deeper, more relaxed.

MELANIE turns to William and nods.

He's under.

WILLIAM

Rollo, can you hear me?

Rollo nods lazily.

I want you to picture a beautiful place in your mind's eye. It could be a garden, a tropical beach, whatever. Are you there?

ROLLO

(in a relaxed tone)

I am.

WILLIAM

Tell me where you are, please.

ROLLO

I'm standing at the end of a dock at the lake house where I used to spend summers with my family.

WILLIAM

Tell me about your family, Rollo.

ROLLO

(smiling)

My daughter is eight years old; my son is ten. They're about thirty feet off shore, running and jumping off of a floating dock. My wife is beside me. We have our arms around each other.

WILLIAM

You love your family.

ROLLO

With all my heart.

WILLIAM

Rollo, I want you to hold onto this image of you and your family.

ROLLO

All right.

WILLIAM

Now, stay with me. I want you to turn around on that dock in your mind's eye. In your imagination, I want you to picture that dock, from end to end, filled with holes.

Rollo squirms in his seat.

WILLIAM

Hold on, Rollo. Now, I want you to call to your children and bring them to your side. I want you to pull your wife close to you. Can you do that for me?

Rollo nods hesitantly.

WILLIAM

Pull them close and close your eyes in your mind. Then, take a step forward on the dock.

ROLLO

Onto the holes?

WILLIAM

With your family, Rollo.

ROLLO

Okay, okay. I'll try.

WILLIAM

Good. Take one step. Then breathe deeply. Take another step. Good.

MELANIE

Are you sure this is a good idea, William? We could traumatize him.

WILLIAM

(staying focused)

Now, I want you open your eyes in your mind's eye. Where are you?

ROLLO

(in disgust)

I'm in the middle of the dock, standing on so many holes!

WILLIAM

But your family is with you, Rollo. You are safe. Now, I want you to hold onto this image. From now on, whenever you see a surface with holes, picture your family with you. Can you do that for me?

ROLLO

I can try, yes.

William nods at MELANIE.

MELANIE

Okay, Rollo. I want you to start coming back, slowly. Feel yourself starting to become more awake. When I snap my fingers, you will return to the room, fully conscious.

MELANIE snaps her fingers, and Rollo awakes. William lays down about ten feet of cardboard riddled with holes. William and MELANIE stand on each side of Rollo, who stands at the front of the boxes.

WILLIAM

Okay, Rollo, I want you to step onto the board.

ROLLO

(biting his lip)

I . . . I don't know.

WILLIAM

Close your eyes and picture your family: your daughter and son, your wife. At your lake house. Can you get there?

ROLLO

(closing his eyes)

Okay, yes, I'm there. They're here with me.

WILLIAM

Now, take a step.

Rollo steps one foot onto the board. Then he takes another. Realizing what he's doing, he excitedly takes another step, and another, until he's come to the end of the cardboard.

A letter appears in the chute. William retrieves the letter and hesitates, afraid to read it.

MELANIE

William, what does it say?

WILLIAM

It says we're free. It says we're free to go.

William hangs his head, and tears come to his eyes.

WILLIAM

I can't believe it. Where will we go first, MELANIE?

MELANIE

(hesitating)

Not we, William. You.

WILLIAM

What do you mean?

MELANIE

I'd like to stay here. Someone will need to hypnotize our creator to rid him of his condition. After that, I suppose there are other phobias to cure. Anyway, I rather like it here, and I think I have everything I need for the time being.

WILLIAM

William hugs MELANIE.

It was a real pleasure to work with you, kind sir.

MELANIE

Adventure awaits you, William. Go find your friend. Go find Victor.

The lights dim.

VOICEOVER

When William stepped outside, he realized the world hadn't changed that much. It was not overrun by zombies. The clouds weren't full of acid rain. The earth below his feet was not dry or hot as the sun. In fact, the world seemed quite similar since he'd died.

Cars still clung to roadways, planes still hurtled through the clouds and people still seemed just as confused as they had been when they'd say in his office. He guessed it was perhaps fifty years into the future. He worked in a restaurant for a few months and made enough to buy a plane ticket. He hadn't done any serious travel in decades, but he found it invigorating to be on the move, flying toward a far-flung land to find a long-lost friend.

The lights come up on a vast, mountainous region. The Himalayas.

William enters a charming establishment, Books & Bar. At the bar stands Victor, a cigar in his mouth, pouring a beer from the tap.

WILLIAM

Hi there, I was wondering if you might have any books on phobias.

VICTOR

(recognizing William)

Actually, we have quite a nice selection, young man.

WILLIAM

William hugs Victor.

It's good to see you! What have you been doing with yourself?

Victor gazes out the window at the majestic Mount Everest.

VICTOR

Well, I manage this place during the day. I hope to own it someday. Every morning, I sip coffee at that window. At night, I drink a cold beer and read in that chair.

WILLIAM

A life of leisure. You, sir, got your wish.

VICTOR

Well, you were right. After a few months of doing very little with myself, I got bored. It turns out I don't have much tolerance for boredom.

WILLIAM

What do you do with your ideas?

VICTOR

I'm back to doing a lot of scholarly work. Research, writing, submitting papers to journals.

WILLIAM

Under your name?

VICTOR

A pseudonym. It turns out I don't have the same lust for prestige that I had in my first life.

WILLIAM

So, here we are, Victor. Free. What shall we do with our time?

VICTOR

I think we're doing it, William.

WILLIAM

Conversation. Yes.

VICTOR

It's good to see you, my friend.

WILLIAM

You as well.

Victor pours William a beer.

You know, in all that time we spent together, I never did ask you what you were afraid of.

Victor glances at Everest through the window.

VICTOR

(chuckling)

I don't much care for heights.

WILLIAM

(smiling)

We can work on that.

The End

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS... *The idea of living a life of the mind versus engaging in leisure and living a life of pleasure has always interested me. In this play, two characters personify these two approaches to living. William wants to work hard and solve the problem he's been given. Victor has worked for many years and would rather spend his time in leisure. I wanted to lock these two characters in a room to see what would happen.*

The play's premise is pure Theater of the Absurd. The consciousness of two deceased men, former psychologists, are uploaded into two clones, William and Victor. Confined in a room, the clones can win their freedom if they solve their captor's phobia. The anonymous captor has tryphobia, the fear or disgust of holes. I selected this disorder because it's somewhat benign compared to phobias that can dominate a person's life. I have a friend with tryphobia. She considers it annoying, and we often laugh about it, but it doesn't debilitate her.

To attempt to cure the phobia, the captor provides the psychologists with clones. William and Victor try many therapies. Eventually, they use hypnosis to deploy a treatment that exposes the clones to the holes they fear most. This idea came from Victor Frankl, a psychologist who founded logotherapy and pioneered a therapeutic technique known as paradoxical intention. The method asks the individual to engage in a neurotic habit to rid themselves of it. By exposing a person to what they fear most, they might realize its irrationality.

Throughout this play, I explore the question: How should we use the freedom we have? And what consequences come along with our choices? Working hard may provide your life with meaning, but it might squeeze the joy out of life. On the other hand, one can engage in as much leisure as possible, but too much comfort may lead to boredom and a sense of futility. William and Victor represent two sides of the same coin, and they can inspire us to strike a balance between their approaches to living.

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