

Vodka

By Doak Bloss

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

Doak Bloss' acerbic one act is just about as close as you can get to the experience of recovering from a lifetime of alcoholism without having to drink yourself - or get chlamydia from your toxic ex. The play is a dream, but not in the "it was all a dream" cop-out way, rather, as a rare spin on the time/space continuum in relation to 12-Step meetings, where the line to recovery isn't necessarily a straight one. With razor sharp dialogue that cuts through the bullshit of any haze, alcohol-induced or otherwise, the play uses the idea of dreams as a way to frame clips from the past and distill them into the sober reality of the present.

Tanner, the alcoholic protagonist doesn't know whether he's been sober for three months or nineteen years. He's struggling to reconcile himself with the responsibilities of adulthood as well as (surprise!) parenthood. He's afraid of drinking. He's afraid of dreaming about drinking. His dream drink of choice?

TANNER: Vodka tonic, usually. Smirnoff usually, sometimes Stoli. Yeah, I'm just out somewhere, at a reception or a party or a bar with friends, or with you, and I just...have one, or several. And I wake up cursing myself that I was so stupid, I blew all those weeks of sobriety. And after a minute I realize, no, I didn't blow anything. It was a dream. I'm still okay.

Vodka, is a multi-faceted retrospective with the cast of Tanner's dream serving as narrators and participants through tightly a tightly woven fabric of ex-capades and sexcapades. The conscience of the play lies in the paradox between dreams and reality, between taking a vow of anonymity and divulging secrets as a mandate, and in making amends for the past in order to survive the present. Five Stars.

SARA: Oh, Christ. You're amendsing me. I honestly didn't see this coming.

(Spacing and format are playwright's own.)

Vodka

A play in five scenes

by Doak Bloss

CHARACTERS:

Tanner, 42, an alcoholic

Sara, 42, a woman he once fell for, hard

Robert, 39, his friend

Erin, 19, his biological daughter, a surprise

SETTING: Various places in Tanner's mind and memory. June 17, 2018, or thenabouts.

Scene 1

A dream. Lights up on Tanner walking across the front of the stage, speaking to the audience. He might be a cheerful master-of-ceremonies at a community fundraiser. The other characters are also positioned around the stage, not in full light.

TANNER: *(walking)* This is the entire story of my involvement with Alcoholics Anonymous!

(beat) I'm not sure if I'm an alcoholic, and I'm not sure whether my talking about AA with you all, here like this, violates the Anonymous part.

(beat) That's it, that's the whole story.

SARA: *(at a table in a restaurant, holding a martini)* Cute. Tricky, but cute.

TANNER: It's not the whole story.

SARA: I know that. So do they.

TANNER: *(in a restaurant with her)* You came. Thank you. Hi, Sara.

SARA: You said you were paying. I had to come, for the novelty alone. Hi, Tanner.

ROBERT, ERIN, and SOME OFFSTAGE VOICES: *(perfect unison)* "Hi, Tanner!"

TANNER: *(drawn into an AA meeting; to the audience)* Right. I mean, "My name is Tanner. I'm an alcoholic."

He waits.

ROBERT, ERIN, SARA and SOME OFFSTAGE VOICES: *(out of sync this time, some mumbling, randomly overlapping)* "Hi, Tanner"... "Hi, Timmer"... "Hi, Tom"... "Hi"... "Welcome"... "Hi"... "Hi, Andrew"... "Hi, Tanner..." "Hi"...

TANNER: Seventeen months sober.

Everyone applauds. Someone whistles.

TANNER: Thank you!

ROBERT *(with a golf club)* Ah, no...Three.

TANNER: Excuse me?

ROBERT: It's been three months. Your esophagus blew up on March 17th. You've been sober three months, not seventeen.

TANNER: No...wait... Nineteen.

ERIN: *(with a phone in her hand)* I'm nineteen.

ROBERT: You're mixing the numbers up. It's been three months since you last had a drink. On March 17th. Today is...

ERIN: *(checking her phone)* June 17th.

TANNER: *(to Sara)* I haven't had a drink in three months. Three months, no alcohol.

SARA: That's serious. So you, like, do the meetings and everything?

TANNER: Yes. Every...week. Or more. They have this thing, 90 in 90. You commit to going to 90 meetings in 90 days. *That's* serious.

SARA: And no one minds that you're actually not an alcoholic.

TANNER: I am, though. I think I am. It's been 17 months, no alcohol—

ROBERT: Three!

TANNER: —I mean three.

SARA: Three months, seventeen months, who cares? That doesn't prove you're an alcoholic. You could never taste vodka again and still not be an alcoholic.

TANNER: Never?

SARA: Theoretically.

TANNER: But, see, I couldn't. Not "never". I could never do that. To never feel that...release...relief... that cold wash with the sweet undercurrent of heat—warmth—as it goes down. I could never do never.

ROBERT: But you can. Three months... why not seventeen months, why *not* nineteen—?

ERIN: Years.

ROBERT: What?

ERIN: I'm nineteen *years* old, not months.

ROBERT: (*lost*) Okay...

TANNER: Nineteen years, I could never do that. (*to Sara*) Hell, I could be *dead* in nineteen years.

SARA: Alcoholic or not.

ROBERT: She makes a good point.

Robert sets an imaginary ball on an imaginary tee, prepares to swing.

TANNER: (*to Sara*) But it's the dreams. I want to talk about the dreams. (*beat; he stares at her*) My god, you're beautiful. I forgot... No, I never forgot, but when I saw you again after five years. It was so real.

SARA: It's been *five years*? That just doesn't seem possible.

TANNER: It was just so unreal. It wasn't a dream, but it felt like a dream. Just like...being at my first meeting. Saying what I... wondering what I should say. Robert set it up.

Robert swings.

ROBERT: Sweet. I didn't set it up. I told you when and where it was. I offered to go with you.

TANNER: But I wanted to go alone. Without a crutch.

Suddenly a waiter, Erin carries a tray full of stuff to a downstage table and gradually sets out: a glass, tray of ice cubes, a lime, a knife, a bottle of Stolichnaya and a bottle of tonic water.

ROBERT: It's not a crutch to take a friend to your first AA meeting.

SARA: You called them vodka dreams, in your message. I thought you meant dreams you had after *drinking* vodka.

TANNER: No. Dreams I have *of* drinking vodka, since I quit. I have them every night.

ERIN: (*swinging by Sara and Tanner's table*) Can I start you off with something, Mr....?

TANNER: I'm Tanner. I'm an alcoholic.

ROBERT, ERIN, SARA and SOME VOICES OFFSTAGE: "Hi, Tanner!"

TANNER: And I'm three months pregnant. I mean—

Everyone laughs. Erin moves upstage and pulls out her phone.

TANNER: I mean three months sober.

SARA: So what does a dream like that look like? You're just sitting around, sipping a martini?

TANNER: Vodka tonic, usually. Smirnoff usually, sometimes Stoli. Yeah, I'm just out somewhere, at a reception or a party or a bar with friends, or with you, and I just...have one, or several. And I wake up cursing myself that I was so stupid, I blew all those weeks of sobriety. And after a minute I realize, no, I didn't blow anything. It was a dream. I'm still okay.

SARA: You are okay. You'd be okay if you had a martini, too.

TANNER: Did you notice that I said you're in the dreams, sometimes?

SARA: It's practically the only thing I heard.

TANNER: Yeah, well. It's more than sometimes.

A phone rings in Robert's pocket. He pulls it out, looks at it, sighs.

ROBERT: Sorry, I gotta take this.

TANNER: Is it...?

ROBERT: Yes. We might wanta let these next guys play through.

TANNER: They're a foursome! No, wait. *(He counts)* Oh my god, there's twelve of them!

SARA: Oh, wait. I get it. This is one of those step things. You're doing one of your—oh, crap, what do they call it?

ROBERT: Amends.

TANNER: No.

SARA: Oh, Christ. You're amendsing me. I honestly didn't see this coming.

TANNER: You're not coming—! I mean, *I'm* not coming. Nothing's coming. The amends are like six or seven steps away still. I haven't got past the one that says you're powerless to alcohol, that only God has the power to keep you sober.

ROBERT: This is only the second hole, a par-five dogleg to the left.

SARA: What are you doing golfing when you should be working on your character flaws?

TANNER: You gave me chlamydia.

SARA: *(beat)* I did? *(she thinks)* Oh. Sorry. *(beat)* I'm the only one you've...?

TANNER: Since then, yeah. Since we broke up. Or, I mean. Since you told me you never wanted to see me again.

SARA: I said that? You know I didn't mean it.

TANNER: You were seeing five other guys—at least—during those six months you said there was no one like me, that no one could ever be to you what I was.

SARA: Tanner—

TANNER: And I believed it, because that's how I saw you, too. I couldn't believe I was so lucky, finding someone so perfect, who wanted me as much as I wanted her. You.

SARA: Tanner—

TANNER: And in the dreams, you're always there. There's always you, there, with the hot and cold feeling of the vodka down my throat, and it's like a waterfall. You're the waterfall. In the dream.

SARA: I don't know what to say.

ERIN: *(on the phone with Robert, but pausing to cover it)* Which is not true, because you just said that.

TANNER: You said that a lot. That, and...

SARA: *(almost crying, suddenly)* I never meant to hurt you!

TANNER: Yes! And you'd always almost-cry like that. That stupid, trembly Katherine Hepburn... "I never...wanted...to *hurt* you! *(He moves from the restaurant table to the vodka table. He is back in the AA meeting.)* You know what I said, at that first meeting, when it was finally my turn to share?

ROBERT: (*emerging from the phone call*) Like it was yesterday.

TANNER: But you weren't there.

ROBERT: But you told me. At our next session. (*His phone rings. He answers it*)

TANNER: Session? You're not my therapist. I don't pay you. You're my friend. Right?

ERIN: (*both she and Robert are back on their phones; to Tanner*) He's busy.

TANNER: (*to the audience*) That first meeting. No friend, no crutch. Trial by fire. It was crowded. Maybe 35 people crammed into this little conference room where the table seated 12. They all knew each other. One at a time they took a turn, telling who they were...

SARA: I'm Sara, and I broke his heart.

OTHERS: Hi, Sara.

ROBERT: I'm Robert, and I'm the reason he's sober.

OTHERS: (*more enthusiastically*) Hi, Robert!

ERIN: I'm Erin. I'm his daughter.

Dead silence.

ERIN: (*setting aside her phone, taking a seat*) Relax! Biological. And no, he wasn't a donor. It wasn't like that.

ROBERT: (*continuing, to the audience*) ...and what they were addicted to, and everybody did the 'Hi, Fran,' 'Hi, Bruce' thing and then they'd tell what was going on with them today, usually with a lot of zingy catch phrases like... It works if you work it... Let go and let God... You're only as sick as your secrets... And a lot of them—a LOT—talked about the STEPS, which was all foreign to me because I hadn't read the Big Book yet.

I still haven't.

ROBERT: (*abandoning his phone and the golf club, moving closer to Tanner*) I'm the first to admit it's not for everyone. The Big Book was written nearly a century ago, for Christ's sake.

TANNER: It's arrogant. It's sexist. And so *Christian*.

ROBERT: You're not comfortable with God.

TANNER: No one should be comfortable with God. That's why he's God. If she exists.

ROBERT: Look. I'm not your therapist. If I were, there would be boundaries, and we'd have a mutual agreement not to cross them. Or at least notice it when we do.

TANNER: He's the friend who decided I'm an alcoholic just because I was finishing off a fifth of Smirnoff a day for five years.

ROBERT: That was an important first step. You chose to tell me you were doing that. I was honored.

TANNER: He's not an addiction therapist. Mostly the broken home, broken marriage kind. I think he's gay. I think he hopes I am, too. I think he hopes sobriety will shine a radiant light on my latent longing to caress a cock, and that the lucky cock that catches my eye will be his.

I'm *not*, by the way.

ROBERT: Not what? Alcoholic?

TANNER: I don't know.

ROBERT: You were pretty sure, a month ago. It's only since you talked to Sara that you've—

TANNER: Don't bring Sara into this.

ROBERT: She abused you. She cheated on you and she broke your heart. She's in it, brother, whether you want her there or not.

TANNER: I know that. And I want her there. She was the first person who ever made me feel...

ROBERT: It was just social drinking before that. I watched it happen. You started spiking your orange juice at breakfast. You started making Red Bull cocktails in the middle of the afternoon because you figured the energy boost would disguise the effects of your old friend, Vodka.

TANNER: Who, it so happens, fucking kept me alive. *Brother. (long pause)* I don't know if I would have followed through with it, or if I *could*, even... God. Some people say it's cowardly to take your own... It's not. And after a year of her coming back, then leaving me again, and coming back, and making me think it was *my* doing, all the crazy shit in my life.

SARA: Yeah, it was all me. I'm responsible for every bad choice you ever—

TANNER: You know what it was like. The shouting. The crazy. Sometimes you kicked me out... in the middle of sex, sometimes, or right after...

SARA: And sometimes you just left, all proud and empowered, and usually with an ultimatum.

TANNER: That fucking word! Ultimatum? I tried to set some rules, some...

ROBERT: Boundaries.

TANNER: Thank you. (*Robert gives a "thumbs up".*)

SARA: Boundaries? Are you kidding me? You wanted no boundaries, none. You said you hated your own skin, and mine, because they kept us from losing ourselves completely inside each other.

ROBERT: Did you say that?

TANNER: Probably. I was drunk. Oh, fuck. I need to talk about these dreams. I don't get it, I'm clear now, no vodka, three months. Why do I still have these fucking dreams every night?

SARA: What's the problem? They're reassuring, right? You wake up scared but you remember it was just a dream and you're still sober, and you feel relieved.

TANNER: They aren't all like that.

SARA: Now we're talkin'. They're about me, aren't they? The sick ones. The violent ones.

ROBERT: You're right, I am gay. And you are, too.

SARA: He is?

ROBERT: Just a smidge. I think.

TANNER: Bullshit. It's all bullshit. You're all just figments of my sobriety. You're all bullshit!

Pause. Erin takes the stage.

ERIN: I'm not.

Tanner stares at her a moment, then retreats to a chair.

ERIN: (*to whomever*) He fucked my Mom on some nature retreat in Oregon when they were in their twenties. They were there to take pictures of nature. Birds. To hear my mom tell it, they took more pictures of each other, high on weed in his tent.

SARA: I didn't see this coming.

ROBERT: Neither did he. Look at him.

ERIN: I found the pictures when I was twelve. My mom didn't freak. Before that, she told me she'd gone to a sperm bank, and knew nothing about the guy, and neither could I because there was this confidentiality thing.

TANNER: Jesus.

ERIN: "Well, what's his name?" I asked, looking at his half naked body in the creepy light of that tent. He had a good body then, and it was freakin' weird being turned on by a picture of...*(deep breath)*... my dad!

TANNER: Bio.

ERIN: My bio dad! Mom didn't want me to contact him. She said that *she* would, and then maybe, if it was okay with him, it'd be okay with her. But she never did. So I did the research and DM'd him and told him who I was, and who he was in relation to me. I DM'd him eleven times before he responded.

TANNER: *(texting furiously)* "Cut this...shit...out!"

ERIN: Then I told him stuff he knew I couldn't possibly know if I was just some random kid pranking him. Then I took a picture of the picture of him half-naked in the tent and sent it to him in a text and said, "Is this you?"

TANNER: Haaaa....

ERIN: And a few weeks later, I asked him if I could come to Michigan and meet him.

TANNER: Ha haaaaaa.....

ERIN: He offered to pay for the ticket

TANNER: The least I could do?

ERIN: But I wasn't gonna let him buy off his guilt that easy. He was a lot older than I expected.

TANNER: I'm forty-two.

ERIN: You were 39 then.

TANNER: You seemed so angry. So harsh. I wasn't expecting that.

ERIN: Am I in them? The dreams?

TANNER: *(beat)* No.

ERIN: Liar.

TANNER: Okay. You're in some of them. The hard ones. The scary ones.

ERIN: You're scared of me.

TANNER: Yes. No. I'm scared *for* you. You're in danger, and I'm driving, and I've been drinking.

ERIN: I'm in the car?

TANNER: No. Not usually. But I'm trying to get to this house, and I'm blitzed, and running into parked cars and mailboxes left and right, and I figure the two cops that have stopped me three times already are on their way again, but this time, no, damn it, they're not going to let me off even though I'm white.

It's your mother's house, which I've never seen before, and you're inside. And I either crash into the house or I crash into you, running from the house, and I see you tumbling down this sloping lawn, and it's winter, and windy, and if I don't do something you're gonna fall into this really deep snow and never be found again...

ERIN: *(waits, then)* You don't rescue me?

TANNER: Don't sound so disappointed. It's a dream. And it's horrible. I wake up and I can't breathe.

ERIN: *(beat)* Is this really the dream, or just your tragic hero spin on it, to impress the audience?

TANNER: It's my fucking dream, stay out of it. I barely know you.

ERIN: Is that my fault?

TANNER: *(prying ice cubes into the glass, cutting the lime, squeezing the lime over the ice)* At the meeting, I didn't want to say anything, I almost passed. But all of them went on and on about what Step they were on, and how hard it was, and the helpful affirmation they'd read that morning, all this self-indulgent, touchy-feely psychobabble, and so what am I gonna say? The same kind of shit?

ROBERT: *(easing him away from the alcohol)* They knew what you were going through. They'd all been there. They weren't judging you...

TANNER: Hell they weren't. They'd all talked about their "character flaws" and "shortcomings" and I knew *they* knew what I was supposed to say. That Alcohol is a villain—this cunning, sleazy trickster that only GOD and his Twelve Steps could protect you from...

ROBERT: "However you choose to conceive him..."

ERIN: *(approaching the vodka table)* I have your genes. That means I'm probably predisposed to alcoholism, too.

TANNER: No! No one in my family drank. If it's in the genes, I started the bloodline. That's why I thought, no. Not me. I can't be an alcoholic.

ERIN: *(during this, she pours a little Stolli into the glass, then she stops and reaches for the tonic water)* You were drunk when I showed up at your door. I couldn't believe that. You knew I was coming.

TANNER: *(during this, he stops her from pouring the tonic water, and pours more vodka into the glass instead)* I wasn't drunk! I was drinking.

ERIN: But why would you *do* that if you knew I was coming?

TANNER: Some questions answer themselves.

SARA: That's so true.

Needing to finish making the drink, Sara picks up the bottle of tonic water. Tanner stops her, sets down the tonic water, and pours another inch of vodka into the glass.

ROBERT: Oh Christ, just finish your damn story!

Tanner sets down the Stolli, caps it. He fills the glass with tonic water, although there's hardly any room for it.

TANNER: I decided to tell them the truth. I told them I didn't think I was powerless and I didn't believe in God. *(The vodka is waiting.)* And I didn't think alcohol was a cunning bastard waiting around every corner, ready to ambush me. I told them vodka was my friend. Cuz that's what I said the first time I tasted it, right after she left me...

SARA: See? All about me. I'm always the scapegoat!

TANNER: *(lifts the glass)* I sipped that Bloody Mary the morning after. You were there, Robert. You invited me to lunch.

ROBERT: Brunch. I could tell you needed someone.

TANNER: And I sipped it, and this sweet, warm feeling wafted up inside me as the liquid flowed down, and... Oh, I said. I have a new friend. *(To Erin)* The friend that saved my life.

SARA: You would have killed yourself over me.

TANNER: Go away.

Sara retreats upstage.

ROBERT: I know why you dream about vodka. You want to know why you dream about vodka?

TANNER: Yes, tell me, please.

ROBERT: Because you're a drunk. Like her. Like me.

ERIN: That's dumb.

TANNER: No, it isn't. Thank you, Robert.

Robert retreats upstage. Tanner holds out the glass, regarding it.

ERIN: I'm glad you didn't kill yourself.

TANNER: Really?

ERIN: Yes. *(Robert starts to set down the drink.)* But...

Robert stops setting down the glass, holds it, stares at it

ERIN: This is a dream, remember. This isn't really happening *(beat)* Are you going to drink that?

TANNER: *(maybe a small laugh)* I don't know. Three months. *(He sets the glass down on the table.)* I don't know.

Lights fade.

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: *A few months after I entered sobriety on April 17, 2019, after suddenly vomiting a gallon or so of blood, I started to have frequent dreams in which I would be in a social setting and nonchalantly imbibing. I would wake up from these dreams wildly*

disappointed and deflated because I thought they had really happened, and that I had to start the sobriety clock over again (which in turn meant that I was probably not ever really going to quit drinking). Within a few minutes, I was filled with the gush of relief that it had just been a dream. I was still sober.

But was I an alcoholic? Would an alcoholic have such dreams? Were these unconscious creations really a message that I was a normal drinker, just one who needed to moderate my intake in order to protect my health? The contrary view, held by anyone in a formal twelve-step or clinical program, was that these thoughts were instead the machinations of that cunning villain, the usurper Alcohol.

I decided to try to work out this tension as a quick play set in an artificial dreamlike setting: our hero Tanner presenting himself to an undefined public audience, a table of recovering alcoholics, and three characters representing the major forces impinging on the question of whether he should drink or not: Passion and Rejection (Sarah), Friendship (Robert), and Responsibility (Erin). I wrote a first draft that took place in a kind of TED talk setting, built around a broken narrative of self-justification. After a reading with some bright friends providing feedback, I trashed that idea and focused on the dream itself, jumbled and surreal, with the three supporting characters weaving in and out, interacting and disagreeing with each other.

After writing the version presented here, I realized that Vodka probably needs to be a full length (one hour-ish) play with the dream as the prologue, another dream as a denouement, and separate (undreamed) scenes with Sarah, Robert, and Erin respectively in between. In these scenes, we will see them presented as real people, not Tanner's reductive versions, so that they can apply real pressure to his self-delusion and force him to make a choice.

I'm not yet sure whether, in the full-length version, he takes a drink at the end, or rejects it. But I'm having a blast writing the three interior scenes.

Who has influenced my style? Probably the playwrights I most admire: Arthur Miller, Lanford Wilson, Yasmina Reza, and the lyrics of Stephen Sondheim.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Doak Bloss is a writer, actor, facilitator, and public health advocate from Lansing, Michigan. He has written many plays and novels but made very little attempt to get them published or performed. Recently he appeared in a recorded performance of his own hourlong play, *Pass the Ducks*, available on YouTube if you send him your email address. Much of his career in public health was dedicated to reorienting public health workers to a social justice framework, recognizing racism and racial privilege as a determinant of health and illness.