

EXTRACT

DARKROOM

A.F Lall

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CHARACTERS

RICHARD, aged 28 - A photographer

ARTHUR, aged 65 - his father

MAGENTA, aged 55 - his mother

DANIEL, aged 32 - his friend

ACT I

Scene 1:

Richard's flat: against a black backdrop two blown-up photographs. One is of a young man striding along a beach towards the camera, the other is of the same man looking gaunt, seated at a table. There is a doorframe to the right of the photographs. Sealed cartons are scattered around and one item of furniture, a shabby armchair. A telephone with answering machine is perched on one of the cartons. RICHARD sits on the floor nursing a cup of coffee. He slides over to the answering machine and turns it on. The voice on the machine is not his.

MACHINE: Hi, and thanks for having the good taste to call Joel and Richard, who can't respond right now. But please say something sensible after the beep and we'll get back to you faster than Fox Mulder on a mission. Because we, like the truth, are out there somewhere.

(RICHARD switches off the machine, sips his coffee. After a beat he rises, switches it on again, moves around the room while he listens. DANIEL appears in the doorframe, slightly older than Richard and dressed in a business suit. He rings the doorbell, which is ignored by RICHARD. DANIEL starts to pound on the door.)

DANIEL: Richard, it's me. (Pause) Come on, I know you're in there.

(Pause, more pounding)

I won't go away. (Pause) Ricky?

(RICHARD moves slowly to the door. DANIEL enters. RICHARD turns away, drinks his coffee.)

This is no way to treat a boss. You're fired.

(RICHARD looks up sharply.)

Shock tactics, sorry. Listen, I've got a couple of non-taxing, easy as pie photo shoots I could use you on, if you're interested.

(RICHARD shakes his head. DANIEL tests a carton for strength, sits on it. RICHARD moves a carton to one side which had been awkwardly positioned.)

So. (Pause) What are you doing - rearranging deck-chairs on the Titanic?

(RICHARD offers a rueful smile.)

I smell coffee.

(RICHARD picks up a smaller carton, shakes it, opens the top and produces a mug to DANIEL.)

DANIEL: Thanks. Settled in nicely, I see. (He raises his cup) Follow my nose, shall I?

RICHARD: Sorry, I'll do it.

(DANIEL rises and examines the photographs whilst RICHARD goes to get coffee.)

DANIEL: I've really come to give you a warning of sorts. About your dad. He could be on his way over here as we speak.

(RICHARD stops in his tracks, turns back.)

RICHARD: What are you talking about?

DANIEL: He's just paid a visit to the studio.

RICHARD: My father?

DANIEL: He's right here in town, I promise you.

RICHARD: Arthur - here?

DANIEL: He's worried, Richard. He wrote to you at the old address and his letter got returned. So he simply pulled up stakes and came looking for you.

RICHARD: That's Arthur for you: John fucking Wayne. Bull at a gate, Mum always used to say.

(Pause)

Why would he write all of a sudden? I never told him about...

DANIEL: Joel carking it? Sorry, you know me - insensitive pig. But someone passed on the word obviously, and when his letter of condolence boomeranged back to Sydney he wondered what the hell had happened to you. The studio was the only contact point he had.

RICHARD: He never even knew Joel's name. (Pause) It was you, wasn't it?

DANIEL: Why would you think that?

(Pause, RICHARD stares at him.)

Yes, all right - guilty as hell.

RICHARD: (Softly) Fuck you.

(He slams a carton with his fist.)

Fuck you, Daniel!

(Pause)

DANIEL: Just get my own coffee then, shall I?

RICHARD: What were you thinking? Why would I want to be confronted with him of all people, when - when...

DANIEL: When you don't return your calls? When you don't even want to confront daylight?

(Pause)

He's your father, Richard. Blood's thicker than water, so I've always been told.

RICHARD: Yep, that's what they tell us, all right. (Pause) One of the great myths of the modern world, Danny boy.

DANIEL: Oh, brother. I just thought it might help.

RICHARD: I don't need any help.

DANIEL: So I see. Taken any good pictures lately?

RICHARD: I'll get you that coffee.

(He moves into the kitchen but is still within hearing range.)

DANIEL: So how are you managing to pay the rent on this place?

RICHARD: (Off) Rainy day money.

DANIEL: When it starts dwindling to a puddle, let me know.

(RICHARD returns with coffee.)

RICHARD: Haven't thought that far ahead. (Pause) Have I ever told you what a stupid...

DANIEL: Meddling bastard I am? (Pause) Never.

RICHARD: Couldn't help yourself, could you?

(He kicks a carton across the room.)

Just couldn't fucking help yourself!

(ARTHUR appears in the doorframe. He is a large, well-built man of 65, good looking in a rough-hewn kind of way. He carries luggage including a fibreglass pet carrying case, which he sets down and knocks at the door. A pause, then a series of knocks. RICHARD doesn't move and DANIEL lets him in)

DANIEL: Mister Hutchins, come on in.

ARTHUR: Er, Daniel. G'day again.

(He moves in with his luggage, assisted by DANIEL, sees RICHARD, sets his bags down and extends his hand.)

Hello, son. Been a long time...

RICHARD: That's right, Dad. Not since Mum's funeral.

ARTHUR: Ah, yes. That is a long time.

(RICHARD relieves the awkward moment by finally shaking his father's hand.)

DANIEL: Listen, I must dash. Deadlines, y'know.

ARTHUR: Of course. Seems like a thriving little business you've got there, Daniel.

DANIEL: We have our ups and downs. But we've built up a good, solid client base I'm happy to say.

ARTHUR: That's what it's all about, isn't it? A satisfied customer'll keep coming back. Ran my butcher's shop that way for nearly thirty years...

DANIEL: You were a legend in your own locality, sir.

ARTHUR: Too right. If the steak turned out tough I'd blame my supplier, not their cooking, and give 'em the choicest cut in the shop. If they said the change was short I'd take their word for it, no argy-bargy. Keeping everybody happy by not putting yourself first, that's the secret of good service. But I daresay you'd know all about that, Daniel.

DANIEL: Absolutely. Of course it helps to have a first class photographer on the job.

ARTHUR: Yeah - bought his very first camera for him when he was nine, one of those instamatic whatsits, and the lad never looked back. And to think I once had hopes of Ricky taking over the shop: a butcher just like his old man. Funny to think of now, isn't it?

DANIEL: Hilarious. (To RICHARD) Rob Snyder was asking after you. He's keen to get some new head shots done. He said: "The Richard Hutchins portrait is the face they never forget."

RICHARD: Oh, sure.

DANIEL: No, truly. I left a message on your machine two days ago. Actually I've left quite a few messages. Maybe we should play some back so you can see what you're missing out on.

(RICHARD stands in front of the machine.)

RICHARD: Leave it.

(ARTHUR, embarrassed, looks around the room, taking in the photographs and the cartons.)

DANIEL: Okay, I'll follow those up with you later. But time waits for no man. Eh, Mister Hutchins?

ARTHUR: Arthur, please. You're not that shy young lad that used to walk little Ricky home from school any more. You're a man of the world now, Daniel.

DANIEL: Arthur, right. Oh, I told your dad you can put him up in the spare room, no worries.

RICHARD: That's my darkroom.

DANIEL: Enjoy your stay in Melbourne, Arthur. Catch you later, Richard.

(ARTHUR gestures goodbye and DANIEL leaves.)

ARTHUR: Well, son...

(RICHARD stares at ARTHUR who grows uneasy under scrutiny.)

I, er, think I'll just get unpacked¹ and organised for starters. The car's parked down by the letter-boxes. Should I shift it?

RICHARD: The car's fine. Only I don't have a spare bed so I don't see how...

ARTHUR: No problem. Brought me trusty camp bed. Can I set it up in the, er, darkroom?

RICHARD: Potential darkroom. (Pause) You seem to have come well prepared.

ARTHUR: Brought every blessed thing I thought I might need. Even the blessed cat. Got a separate laundry?

RICHARD: Ah, yes. Sorry, what....?

ARTHUR: Good, good. Then I'll just get Merlin settled. He's been cooped up for a helluva long time.

RICHARD: Who's Merlin?

ARTHUR: I told you: the blessed cat.

(Shocked pause.)

Look, I wasn't sure how long I'd be gone and the neighbours aren't that reliable. I was worried he might fret. So - have cat, will travel.

RICHARD: Great. So now we've got Harry and Tonto.

ARTHUR: Eh?

RICHARD: I can't have an animal here.

ARTHUR: Dead right, son. Not in a palace like this - be a crime.

RICHARD: As you can see, I'm not exactly equipped for house guests.

ARTHUR: Looks like you've just moved in. How long have you been living like this?

RICHARD: I don't know. (Pause) A while. (Pause) Time flies.

(ARTHUR points to the Joel portraits.)

ARTHUR: Since - since he....?

RICHARD: His name's Joel.

ARTHUR: I know what it is to lose someone close, son. Your mother and I...

RICHARD: No, you don't know!

(Pause)

You shouldn't have come, Dad. It was a really bad idea.

(Pause)

This isn't something we can share. Not like when Mum died. (Pause) I know you've come charging down here with the best intentions, but I don't want to dredge up the past. I don't want to make conversation. I don't want to have to put on a clean shirt and go out somewhere for dinner. I'm not up to any of it. Do you understand? (Pause) Do you?

ARTHUR: I believe so, son.

RICHARD: Then the best thing you could do for me is to turn around and go back out that door. Sorry, I'm not up to being diplomatic either.

(Pause)

ARTHUR: You've got it wrong, Ricky. I'm doing something for me, not you. Now I'm just going to settle Merlin in the laundry. You needn't worry, I've brought his

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