

Nickle for Six

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A short play

By Jacques Manjarrez

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

BILL, a confident, calm individual.

PETER, a cowardly individual with a weak demeanor.

GAUNT MAN, a gaunt man.

SCENE 1

*Open to two chairs adjacent each other center stage. PETER sits opposite Arnold looking distraught. BILL leans backwards in his chair, eyes closed, smoking a cigarette.*

BILL

(singing)

Fishmonger, fishmonger, sell me a fish! Penny for one and a nickle for six! Fishmonger, fishmonger, lend me your wears! Grant me a dagger and char -

PETER dips his head into his lap. He moans in agony. BILL ignores him.

BILL

- To compare! Fishmonger, fishmonger, give me a fin - gutted and torn, fed to hounds and craven. Know that the day -

PETER screams louder. BILL continues to ignore him.

BILL

- of their rot comes quick, so fishmonger, fishmonger, sell me your fish.

BILL is silent. He takes a deep pull from his cigarette while PETER shudders.

BILL

Peter. Pe-ter. Peter, peter, peter.. You feel him coming, don't you? It's a tingling underneath your skin - like a thousand spiders dancing in your veins. The closer he gets, the faster their waltz. Do you fear him?

PETER is silent.

BILL

I don't. I know him too well. He's like an old friend to me.

PETER

(softly)

How much longer?

BILL

Two or three minutes.

BILL offers PETER his cigarette.

PETER shakes his head no. BILL shrugs and takes another pull.

PETER

Do you - do you ever long for the days we had before him?

BILL looks pensive for a moment.

BILL

No, no I do not.

PETER

I remember those days. On those more foggy I used to run down to the pier, strip myself nude, and leap into the ocean unforgiving. I would stand defiantly against every wave - meeting it at the moment the crest collided against the sea's surface. Every crash would throw me deeper and deeper into its murky depths, taunting me with the promise of sharp rocks and sharks lurking underneath. I would leave before hypothermia set in, but not before I was so cold I lost all conscious attachment to my mortal body. My ethereal spirit would leave and await my fleshy host by the hot springs half a mile away. That sensation of re-connection with my body upon entering the hot springs was euphoric like nothing else.

BILL

Like nothing else.

PETER

Did you grow up along the coast?

BILL

Deeper inland. My mother feared the sea.

PETER

Do you?

BILL

We have nothing to fear now.

A brief moment of contemplation is shared by the two. BILL puts out the cigarette under his foot.

PETER

How much longer?

BILL

It won't do you any good thinking about it.

PETER

Should I have prepared something?

BILL

Like what? A welcome basket?

PETER

A prayer.

BILL

To whom? Our God approaches.

PETER shudders.

BILL

He's near. Careful not to shit yourself.

PETER chokes, holding back tears.

A GAUNT MAN enters rolling from stage left. PETER looks on with terrified awe. BILL couldn't care less.

The GAUNT MAN stops rolling between the two chairs. He stands to his feet with surprising efficiency in an unconventional, almost alien manner.

GAUNT MAN

I have brought snacks.

The GAUNT MAN reaches behind him to pull out two candy bars. He awkwardly hands them off to BILL and PETER. PETER begins to cry softly.

GAUNT MAN

Don't cry, eat.

BILL begins to slowly eat the candy bar - careful not to show any sign of weakness. PETER nibbles through a stream of tears. The GAUNT MAN stands idly by.

GAUNT MAN

Are the snacks satisfactory?

Both nod slowly.

GAUNT MAN

I have also brought drinks.

The GAUNT MAN reaches behind him to retrieve three juice boxes. He offers one to BILL and one to PETER. Again, both take theirs and hesitantly before proceeding to consume them with slight suspicion.

The GAUNT MAN takes his own juice box and proceeds to slurp it dry in one sip. PETER starts breaking down adjacent him.

PETER

(softly)

Have mercy.

The GAUNT MAN procures a waste bag. He offers it to both men. Both cautiously toss their wrappers and waste into the bag.

GAUNT MAN

I hope those too were satisfactory. I would now like to share an anecdote. Would you permit me to share with you an anecdote?

BILL

(softly)

Please.

GAUNT MAN

Thank you. The anecdote is as follows: I once happened across a man with green skin in a dining facility along the coast. (beat) That was a lie. You will soon find that it was a necessary lie for the sake of the anecdote.

PETER whimpers.

GAUNT MAN

Fraught with curiosity for I what obviously perceived to be some genetic abomination or horrid mutation of skin pigmentation, I inquisitively approached the anomaly.

"How, pray tell, did your skin turn that putrid green?", I asked the man. The man was eating during my inquiry - what he was eating is irrelevant as his very existence is based on a lie. Hearing me, he leaned his utensil against the plate, masticated, and swallowed before answering in a decisive tone: "It is because I am envious". "Envious?", I asked, "Envious of what, precisely?". He responded: "Of your most human skin".

A brief pause is shared by the three as PETER and BILL share confused glances.

GAUNT MAN

Now you see the reason for my deception. That was a joke disguised as an anecdote. Was it amusing?

BILL

It was funny.

The GAUNT MAN turns to BILL.

GAUNT MAN

What about it did you find so funny?

PETER, panicked, looks over to  
BILL.

BILL

I - I thought that was intention of the joke, it being a joke  
and all.

GAUNT MAN

It was, I suppose, the intention. Have you been to any  
dinning facilities along the coast?

BILL

I've never been to the coast.

GAUNT MAN

Would you if the given the chance?

BILL shrugs. The GAUNT MAN nods  
solemnly. He then tilts his head to  
face a shuddering PETER.

GAUNT MAN

And you? Have you ever been to the coast?

PETER hesitates before nodding  
slowly.

GAUNT MAN

Would you return?

PETER

(softly)

If given the chance.

GAUNT MAN

If given the chance...

The GAUNT MAN walks behind the two  
seated characters - their bodies  
frozen in anxious anticipation. The  
GAUNT MAN, standing between them,  
grabs the two of their chairs.  
PETER whimpers.

GAUNT MAN

Where are you both sent from?



BILL

Facility 8.

GAUNT MAN  
(facing PETER)

You too?

PETER nods.

GAUNT MAN  
I've never before had anybody offered to me from Facility 8.  
Tell me: how exactly would you describe the character of  
Facility 8?

PETER  
The character?

BILL  
Honest. Loyal. Pragmatic. Dedicated. Faithful. Three mornings  
of the week we attend mass. The other four we work sunrise to  
sunset with thirty minutes at noon reserved for lunch and  
recreation.

GAUNT MAN  
Do you find joy in those thirty minutes?

BILL  
Most think it a distraction.

GAUNT MAN  
(turns to PETER)  
What about you? How do you spend your break?

PETER  
Sorry?

GAUNT MAN  
... Do you indulge in lunch or recreation?

PETER  
I don't know.

GAUNT MAN  
What do you do for recreation?

PETER

Nothing.

GAUNT MAN

Nothing?

PETER hesitates, shivering with anticipation.

PETER

Why do you do this?

GAUNT MAN

I'm sorry?

BILL

Pe-ter. Peter, Peter, Peter..

PETER

No. No more beating around the bush. No more stalling. You're going to kill us, right? That's why we're here, isn't it? To disappear by your hand? To suffer for the sake of the world? The council chose us to give to you, and in exchange the city, our facility, our families, are saved; but only because you will it! There's nobody else - it's just death, taxes, and you.

The GAUNT MAN nods understandingly. He inhales deeply and releases the chairs.

GAUNT MAN

Seems we are out of snacks. I'll go for additional snacks. I will return shortly with more snacks so that we may continue our conversation when we're all perhaps more acquainted with the conventions regarding this kind of dialogue.

BILL

Thank you.

GAUNT MAN

How were the chips?

BILL

Good.

GAUNT MAN

But not great?

BILL

Maybe a little salty.

GAUNT MAN

I'll acquire something sweeter, then.

The GAUNT MAN lowers himself to the ground and rolls of stage left. BILL lets out a sigh of relief. PETER begins crying softly.

PETER

I'm so sorry.

BILL

He's not stalling.

BILL reaches into his pocket to pull out a small tube of cotton fiber and a string.

PETER

He's not? What then? What is he doing? You said you knew him, didn't you? Like an old friend?

BILL

A friend in a metaphorical sense.

BILL ties the string tightly around his index finger.

PETER

What's that supposed to mean?

BILL fastens the knot with his teeth.

BILL

(through gritted teeth)

You have any family, Peter?

PETER

Some - some nephews I suppose.

BILL  
They on the coast?

PETER  
Facility 9.

BILL  
That's on the coast. Any children of your own?

PETER  
I've never wed.

BILL begins tugging lightly on the  
nail attached to his index finger.

BILL  
Have you ever been in love?

PETER  
Maybe, I don't know.

BILL seems to be struggling with  
his nail. PETER looks over with  
mild concern.

BILL  
You said you had nephews. So does that mean you had any  
siblings?

PETER  
I'd imagine that's the implication, yes.

BILL  
How many siblings?

PETER  
Three - I'm sorry, what are you doing?

BILL  
Making conversation.

PETER  
I mean with the nail.

BILL sighs.

BILL

Pete, Pe-ter, Peter Piper... I'm going to need your help now, okay buddy? Now, I've loosened it up a little for you, but I don't have the grip strength to get the rest -

PETER

Wait, what are you...

BILL

I need you to -- here -

BILL takes PETER's hands and puts his fingers against his nail.

PETER

I don't know, I'm sorry -

BILL

Listen. Hey, Peter! Listen: He's going to be back any second now, you understand? I need you to grab my, hey! I'm going to need you to grab my nail with both hands...

PETER

What? I'm sorry, what?

BILL

I'm going to need you to grab my nail with both hands, okay? And I'm going to need you to pull as hard as you can.

PETER yanks at BILL's nail without hesitation.

BILL

(in pain)

Hey, hey, hey, hey! Ow, ow, ow! Wait! Wait!

BILL rolls up the cotton tube and places it between his jaws.

BILL

(giving thumbs up)

Okay, go!

PETER yanks the nail with all his might.

BILL lets out a prolonged, muffled scream through the cotton roll. After several seconds of sheer agony, he motions for PETER to stop, then pointing at his teeth.

PETER

Are you insane?

BILL insists. PETER bites BILL's nail with his teeth and begins pulling backwards. BILL's screams become all the more ear-piercing. Finally, after much pulling, PETER extracts a small knife dug into BILL's finger. Blood is spilling over BILL. He releases the cotton tube - heaving in pain.

PETER

(holding knife)

What - what is this?

BILL unites the string.

BILL

That, Petey, is your one-way ticket back to the coast. Hand it over.

PETER

(hands knife over)

What - what do you intend to do with this?

BILL

To see if the man is really as indestructible as advertised.

PETER

Surely you don't mean to -

BILL

You saw him. Don't tell me a guy like that isn't made of common flesh and blood.

PETER

I would expect as much. He might as well be the Patron Saint of flesh and blood. That certainly doesn't make him vulnerable, much less kill-able.

BILL

Oh, stop it. Where's your faith in me?

PETER

I don't even know your name.

BILL

(extending bloody hand)

Bill. The pleasure's all mine.

PETER hesitantly shakes his hand.

PETER

Bill.

BILL

(jokingly)

Hey, look! Now the blood's on both our hands!

BILL begins laughing wildly while PETER looks mildly frustrated. Suddenly, BILL's expression shifts to one of panicked concern.

BILL

Shit - he's coming back.

PETER

What - what do we do about the blood?

BILL

Let me handle it. Trust me.

PETER

I want no part in this.

BILL

Shh.

BILL hides the knife in the palm of his hand. PETER anxiously awaits the impending murder.

The GAUNT MAN rolls in as before, just this time with a suit of plate mail, totally impenetrability from the front. BILL and PETER are noticeably confused by this. He stands up between them before walking back from where he came, returning with a handful of sweet snacks.

GAUNT MAN

I have brought more snacks.

The GAUNT MAN hands several packs to both of the men, who accept them with theatrical graciousness.

GAUNT MAN

I hope you wont find these to be as salty.

The GAUNT MAN takes notice at the blood stains surrounding BILL. He looks over to PETER, who hastily hides his bloodied hand under him.

BILL

Uh, what - if I may be so bold - is the armor for?

GAUNT MAN

(turning back)

Do you like it?

The GAUNT MAN gives an awkward spin like a princess showing off her gown for the ball.

GAUNT MAN

Most of the time it just hangs on my wall. I thought this would be a more proper fashion to entertain company, don't you think?



BILL

Yes. It suits you.

The GAUNT MAN looks over to PETER.

PETER

I agree.

The GAUNT MAN turns to BILL.

GAUNT MAN

You're bleeding.

BILL

- Of joy, yes. The capillaries in my fingers tend rupture when I'm... glad.

GAUNT MAN

You're glad now?

BILL

Only thanks to your kind hospitality. More specifically, your snacks and, um, funny jokes.

GAUNT MAN

Funny jokes?

BILL

Oh, most definitely.

GAUNT MAN

I've prepared another joke, since you both found my first one to be so funny. Would you like to hear it?

BILL coughs.

BILL

Sure.

GAUNT MAN

The joke will retain the anecdote format, although since you are already familiar with the format, I won't waste any effort convincing you that this is a true anecdote. Again, it is in fact a lie.

BILL

Thank you.

GAUNT MAN

Or is it?

BILL

I don't know.

GAUNT MAN

During the Great War of Nations Torn, I was drafted into the B-Medcamp unit as recovery infantry. Our purpose was to venture deep into no-man's-land post fire-fight and rescue the wounded allies incapable of making their way back to their stations due to the wounds they had sustained during battle. More often than not I would be carrying the torso of a man I once called whole under my right arm while their limbs were lugged in a large burlap sack that hung over my left shoulder. I'd deliver the torso and the lost appendages to the Medcamp where the appendages would often not match the torso. Fortunately, I carried in my burlap sack a myriad of options for replacement limbs that inspired a creative fervor in the victim. They called me the "Leg Santa". They took great excitement in mixing-and-matching different skin tones and sizes and whatnot.

While the GAUNT MAN continues to speak, BILL can be seen adjacent him handing an open bag of candy to PETER. The GAUNT MAN notices this and looks towards him inquisitively.

BILL

I just want my friend here to try some of these sweets. They're quite good.

GAUNT MAN

Then why aren't your hands rupturing?

BILL

I'm deathly allergic to peanut butter.

BILL hands the bag off to PETER as the GAUNT MAN continues with his joke.

## GAUNT MAN

As I was saying -

The GAUNT MAN turns to face PETER. PETER has an expression of sheer panic when he looks into the bag. PETER, noticing the GAUNT MAN's gaze, dips his hand into the bag and pulls out a small piece of candy. He eats it, giving the GAUNT MAN a thumbs-up of approval. The GAUNT MAN, satisfied, continues.

## GAUNT MAN

One day we were fighting over the decrepid ruins of Facility 4 when I came across a wounded soldier of Latin descent.

While the GAUNT MAN tells his joke, unbenknownst to him, PETER slowly retracts BILL's nail knife from the candy bag. He exchanges a furious glance with BILL who makes a stabbing motion directed towards the GAUNT MAN.

## GAUNT MAN

This soldier had stupidly stepped on an active land mine that was cleverly slipped into one of our trenches. Fortunately, thanks to his armor and sheer force of will, he had managed to keep all his limbs attached, save one toe. The toe he had used to step on the land-mine. It had been totally obliterated in the explosion, and although I scoured the battlefield relentlessly, I was unable to find a suitable replacement. I knew I had to think of an alternative, or he would surely die toe-less. Back at the Medcamp, I come up with an idea. Say we were to replace the missing toe with a cheap polymer look-alike? So I took a small mass of gelatine and molded it best I could with my combat knife before sticking it over his open wound, securing it with a pin through the middle. It was only then it occurred to me I had never asked the man his name, so I inquired. Do you know what he told me his name was?

The GAUNT MAN looks over to BILL.

BILL

No.

The GAUNT MAN looks over to PETER.  
PETER hides the knife in his palm.

PETER

Uh... No.

GAUNT MAN

Roberto. (beat) He succumbed to related infections the next day.

PETER

Did that actually happen?

GAUNT MAN

No. Like I said, it was a joke.

BILL

(diverting attention from  
PETER)

What a terrific joke.

The GAUNT MAN glances down at  
BILL's hands - stained with dry  
blood.

BILL

It takes a while to build up again. Excuse me, might ask a question of sorts?

The GAUNT MAN looks over to BILL,  
leaving his back exposed to PETER.  
PETER begins shaking violently.

GAUNT MAN

Yes?

BILL

Well, I was just wondering what inspired you to come up with such a... funny joke?

GAUNT MAN

I read it in a book.

BILL

A book? How very interesting. I once - If you'll permit me -  
I once read a book myself.

GAUNT MAN

Really?

BILL

Oh yes, it was quite engaging. It was a book of Human  
anatomy.

GAUNT MAN

Human anatomy?

BILL

Oh yes. The book taught me many things. For example: did you  
know that the carotid arteries, if cut - can lead to death by  
bleeding in just under ten seconds of pure agony.

GAUNT MAN

Wow. Sucks to be Human.

BILL

Indeed sucks to be Human. Sucks even more that these arteries  
are CONVENIENTLY ACCESSIBLE from the LEFT and RIGHT flanks of  
THE THROAT.

GAUNT MAN

Right.

BILL

With a FINE BLADE.

GAUNT MAN

Ah.

BILL

About the SIZE of a NAIL.

GAUNT MAN

A nail?

BILL

Yes, a HUMAN NAIL - but only in an UNARMORED zone. Ideally  
from BEHIND.

PETER looks at BILL with an expression of mild confusion and distress. The GAUNT MAN turns around to face a terrified PETER. He then turns back around to face BILL.

GAUNT MAN

Kind of like the one he's holding?

PETER lets out a primal shout. He flings himself atop the GAUNT MAN, plunging the blade deep into his side. He releases the blade and steps back. The GAUNT MAN collapses.

PETER

Oh my God. Oh my God.

GAUNT MAN

(sputtering)

He... He was real.

BILL

I'm sorry, what did you say?

GAUNT MAN

The green man. It was no joke - I really saw him.

The GAUNT MAN lies motionless on the ground. PETER looks at a satisfied BILL with an exasperated expression of disbelief.

BILL

Well.

PETER

I... I killed him.

BILL

You really did.

PETER

How did you know my name?

BILL

Hm?

PETER

I never introduced myself.

BILL retracts the knife from the  
GAUNT MAN.

BILL

Right. Well, it's your turn.

PETER

What? My turn? My turn to do what?

BILL takes out a little music-  
playing-device from his pocket. A  
symphony playing for a graduation  
plays.

BILL

Peter of Facility 8: It is your honor and your burden to take  
up the mantle of the man atop the mountain. Congratulations,  
and may your rain be long and prosperous.

PETER looks stunned. BILL quits the  
music.

BILL

Cool. Well, see you next week.

BILL exits stage right. PETER  
kneels next to the corpse of the  
GAUNT MAN. The sound of waves  
crashing can be heard playing  
overhead.

End.

BILL

PETER

What - what do you mean? Fine? What's fine? We're his sacrifices, damn it! He's - he's going to terminate us. He's going to terminate us both because that's what we're here for! We're not here to eat snacks or drink whatever this is or listen to any jokes - we are here to be terminated! He's going to... Oh shit! Shit!

PETER weeps in desperation. BILL  
sighs.

BILL

How about the coast, Peter?

PETER

(sniffling)

What?

BILL

How is it this time of year?



PETER

Hot. Hot as hell.

BILL

So hot a dip in the water feels like all kinds of bliss, right?

PETER

You get charred feet from just running across the sand. You have to remember to duck for seagulls falling like Ichorous.

BILL

But once you're in the water? Good, right?

PETER

It's a cruel thing, the ocean. It taunts you with how utterly vast it is, and to think you only get a taste of the most insignificant stretch of shallow water offered to us. Sometimes I'd wade just above the surface for hours, hoping a stray riptide would suck me deep into the salty bosom of it's depths.

BILL

Sounds nice. What say we go?

PETER

Go?

BILL

(Don't cry, eat)

BILL

Well, that's all the dialogue I have, but I'm sure the writer will use this template and finish this play. Hopefully you'll still think I'm sweet by the end.

JANE

I guess we'll have to wait and see, but this template should get the writer on its way.

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BILL

Good God, you're an idiot. You are perhaps the most idiotic thing that's ever crawled out of the primeval ocean of absolute stupidity onto incompetent Pangaea. But don't worry, idiot Peter, because that's okay. We're fine.

GAUNT MAN

What toys?

PETER

I have some coins that I flick into a bowl - and some chalk.

GAUNT MAN

What about lunch?

PETER

I don't eat much.

The GAUNT MAN leans closer to  
PETER. A look of panic overcomes  
BILL.

GAUNT MAN

That's unhealthy. Understand food provides nutrition... and  
sustenance.

PETER

(softly)

I'm sorry.

GAUNT MAN

- The energy to keep on moving.

PETER

I'm sorry.

GAUNT MAN

You don't lose that energy, you keep moving.

PETER

I'm sorry.