

countenance

by Josh Hartwell

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The play takes place in an apartment building in Denver, CO, 2017. The action is in two adjacent apartments, separated by a hallway. All three of these spaces are onstage. A | indicates when the focus shifts from apartment to apartment to hallway. The shift can be achieved with light shifts, incomplete or suggested walls, or a revolve, whatever makes sense.

CHARACTERS

TONY, early 30s. Loves life, loves people, loves Morrissey. Mexican American from LA. Lyft driver--between full-time gigs, but perfectly at ease with that. A genuinely good soul.

DALE, early 40s. An avid (rabid?) fan of the original '80s *Friday the 13* movies--but for greater reasons than just that he enjoys them. Lives with prosopagnosia and substantial social anxiety.

KRISTIN, 30s. An increasingly darkening soul and reluctant elementary school teacher. Emotionally self-destructive. Losing her patience with most things.

BLAIR, early 30s. A hipsterish know-it-all who works as both a chef, and a parking attendant. Some sociopathic behaviors in this guy.

NATALIE, same age as Blair, early 30s. She doesn't exactly spread sunshine the way Tony does, but goes with the flow. A laid-back tattoo artist, loves peculiarity.

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Act 1

The stage is divided into three areas: two basement/garden level apartments (we only see the living room of a smaller one) and the building's modest hallway that separates them.

Lights come up on the smaller apartment. It is late morning in the Capitol Hill neighborhood of Denver. Tony, a handsome Latino guy in his 30s, stares curiously at four human-sized mannequins, all dressed and made to look just like Jason Voorhees from Friday the 13th movies (Parts 2, 3, 4, and 6). Tony tenderly holds his own left elbow.

Dale, early 40s, enters from his kitchen and hands Tony an ice pack.

Tony has a bright and positive spirit. Dale is a little off but ultimately gentle.

TONY

Quit apologizing. Thanks. You seriously don't need to worry about me.

DALE

I wish you'd let me take you to Urgent Care.

TONY

Look. I don't even think there'll be a hematoma.

DALE

It's my fault, though. And it looked like you hit your head.

TONY

Dale, I didn't hit my head.

DALE

It looked like you hit your head.

TONY

And it's not your fault, I should watch where I step, you know?

DALE

It's my job to keep this building tidy. And it's my job to salt that walkway.

TONY

Looked salty to me.

DALE

Not enough on the patch of ice that you slipped on.

TONY

It didn't even hurt. Just my pride.

He can't keep his eyes off the Jason mannequins. But still from a distance.

DALE

I know, I told you they'd make you think I was cuckoo .

TONY

I don't. We used to watch those movies, too. Sometimes.

DALE

Watching them is one thing.

TONY

True. But hey, these pop-fascinations stick with us, I get it. My brother is like almost your age and still has all his He-Man action figures. We all got our things.

They both look back at the figures for a beat.

TONY

I mean, one could profess that a Jason thing is different, but who am I to judge you for being a fan.

DALE

More than just a fan. He was oddly comforting to me growing up.

TONY

Comforting, even though he hacked up, what like a thousand people over the course of ten movies?

Dale laughs. Maybe a touch condescendingly.

DALE

More like fifty-something. The number is debatable, but I only really consider parts--

(pointing them out)

--2, 3, 4, and 6. They lost their magic after that.

TONY

Still. Lotta hacking. These days, I . . . cringe away from violence in movies. I'm in a "spread-the-love" kinda zone.

DALE

But the *Friday* violence is so obviously not real. And most of it ended up on the cutting room floor so we had to imagine it.

TONY

I don't like imagining it. I can't handle the real stuff, either--and I've seen . . . But we're not supposed to *like* it like it. That would make us all . . .

DALE

Of course. Is your elbow . . . ?

TONY

Already better.

DALE

I'm such a crappy host. I don't have much to offer you, but I have a couple beers, or . . .

TONY

I would but I have to get some driving hours in. Just that form, I guess.

DALE

Right.

(retrieving a release form from a desk drawer)

It's a formality. If you think you're actually injured, you don't have to sign it.

Tony barely skims the form and rapidly signs it.

TONY

Pow. Tony. That's me.

That's how he always signs stuff. Dale takes it from him.

TONY

I'm glad we got to . . . to finally get the chance to really chat, you know?

DALE

Pshh. You are?

TONY

Why not? Cross-the-hall neighbors should be better at . . . being cross-the-hall neighborly.

DALE

Honoring the walls and halls between apartments is pretty neighborly, if you ask me.

Tony is deciding whether it's a good moment to leave or not.

DALE

It all started because my mom died. And *his* mother died at essentially the same time.

TONY

Ummm???

DALE

Jason.

TONY

Oh, ok. Wow. That's gotta be, yeah . . . So you . . .

DALE

We were in this major car accident. And I. Saw her die right in front of me.

TONY

Holy shit, dude.

DALE

I ruptured my spleen, broke my collar bone, rattled my brain.

TONY

That must have been fucking awful.

DALE

It was fucking awful.

DALE

Around thirty years ago, but . . .

TONY

Dale, I'm so sorry. So there was some abstract connection, then? In your young mind, sort of in . . . in grief?

DALE

It wasn't exactly the same time. But within a couple months of when I first saw the first movie.

TONY

But what . . . and I'm not saying . . . But what gave you the notion that this made-up character was grieving? Jason wasn't even in it until the very end. And even that was just a dream, right?

DALE

That's ambiguous. His presence was felt throughout the movie. And of course he was grieving. How could he not be? I sure was. His grief was the catalyst for the rest of the series.

TONY

Man, no little kid should have to go through that.

DALE

I was ten, but I knew that he actually was there. In the world of the movie. All cold and lonely at the lake. Terrified of any kind of interaction, maybe finally working up the courage to reach out to his mother, maybe in part to stop her from hurting anyone else? Watching that final struggle on the shore by the rowboat. Then, like, just as he's about to call out to her . . .

(mimicking Alice's machete swipe)

. . . chop.

(then mimicking Mrs. Voorhees' hand movements after being decapitated)

Thud. Then it was actually confirmed in the 1987 novelization that he *had* been there, and I realize that could be an after-the-fact manipulation by the author. But. He had to have watched it all happen.

TONY

Except, come on. It's completely . . . Your mom's death was *real*, and . . .

DALE

I'm aware of that.

TONY

No, look, I didn't mean to imply--

DALE

I didn't say it was logical. One's on a big screen with fake Savini blood, and one's sitting right next to me in the driver's seat, choking and . . . it was the warped beginning of my relationship with it, with him. If you can call it that.

TONY

Nothing wrong with being warped, long as nobody gets hurt.

DALE

Then later. Much later, a few years ago, I put together these statues of him. Marking how he changed in the movies. Minus parts one or five.

TONY

Why not part five?

DALE

Because he wasn't in part five. A paramedic named Roy was the killer. And it wasn't a true representation of his cinematic journey. Same reason I stopped at part six. And I didn't do part one because he was a kid. It would be extra creepy to have a kid statue, you now?

TONY

And if a dude with four Jason mannequins in his apartment calls something creepy, you'd better listen up, right?

Tony moves closer, and tries to peek under one of the masks.

DALE

Actually, I'd really prefer it if you wouldn't touch those.

TONY

I wasn't. Is there like makeup or sculpture under the masks?

DALE

Only the masks, I never take them off. That's the beauty of it, no faces for me to have to try and focus on.

TONY

His masks *are* sorta faceless and face-like.

DALE

It always timed out so perfectly. Like in Part Two, 1981, he was acting out in reaction to the death of his mother? And coincidentally so was I.

TONY

Only your acting out didn't get people dead.

DALE

The symbolism wasn't lost on me, even at eleven years old. I got into some scuffles.

TONY

Shit, you shoulda seen my neighborhood.

DALE

It was all self defense, though. I took a lot of heat. Kids would pretend they were someone else so I didn't even know who I was fighting.

TONY

I woulda let you know whose asses we should kick.

DALE

But strangely, I *could* recognize Jason.

TONY

Aw, man. We're back to that.

DALE

There was a simplicity to the story that I could follow even without being able to necessarily distinguish *who* he was killing. And he was anonymous until that final *Part Two* scene when he yanks Ginny through the window?

TONY

I swear they all kind of blend together in my memory.

DALE

(Quickly, more animated)

They quite frankly blew it after *Part 6*. Fighting a telekinetic girl? Then he *Takes Manhattan*, although he didn't even do that, just stowed away on a riverboat in British Columbia. In the 90s, he *Goes to Hell*, which was where the producers of that movie deserved to go. And he actually went to space and later fought Freddy because new young audiences couldn't appreciate anything in a straightforward slasher genre. I could go on and on.

TONY

Yeah, no shit. I'm . . . beginning to see that. Look. Dale, I respect the hell outta you. And your story, seriously rips my heart out. But this conversation just got too much . . . Anyone ever tell you that you need to get out?

DALE

(Scowling)

And do what?

TONY

Interact. Mingle with the people.

DALE

I'm pretty terrible at mingling, Tony.

TONY

My girlfriend and I, we can give you a hand with that. When was the last time you had like a date?

DALE

I'm pretty terrible at dating.

TONY

(A sudden idea)

Aw, no, I got this.

DALE

I don't like the sound of that.

TONY

No, we're gonna do this.

DALE

Do what? Why do you all of a sudden want to do stuff that involves me?

TONY

That's what we'll do. We'll hook you up, socialize you.

DALE

Like a pet bird? Please, in the name of all that's sacred, tell me you're kidding.

TONY

No, Dale. It'll be perfect. Turn you into a social dragonfly. And that's better than a butterfly because it's named after a dragon. Share your colossal knowledge on all things Jason.

DALE

Nobody wants to hear about . . .

TONY

I just listened, and I know people who would actually *like* it. I mean, I'm no doctor, but it seems like there should be a way for you to be around genuine living people without feeling all scratchy.

DALE

I get lonely. Who cares? That's what I'm used to.

TONY

You talk to your statues, don't you? You know what? Forget it. Come over. Kristin and I can cook us a dinner. Have some friends over. Nothing snazzy or crowded.

DALE

I appreciate the hell outta that, but I'm sure I wouldn't be comfortable.

TONY

Don't let loneliness "stop you from doing all the things in life you'd like to." We'll make it perfectly sane and comfy. Nothing dickish.

DALE

Small talk makes me want to set myself on fire.

TONY

So we won't have any. That's why we wouldn't invite any dicks.

DALE

Everyone always thinks I'm loony, like I'm gonna go off.

TONY

We're all a little loony. You picked me up off the ground out there. Let us do something for you.

DALE

Why can't you draw me a picture or something?

TONY

See, that's about the coolest response ever. Bad news is *I* can't draw, but I know someone who *can*, and I can cook Italian shit like a motherfucker. I have to go food-hunting today after I drive anyway.

DALE

Jeez, fine. But this is why I don't . . . Everyone's always trying to get you to . . .

TONY

No one's trying to get you to do anything that you won't end up digging. For real. I'm a thousand percent right.

DALE

Fine. It's a kind gesture. Fine.

Lights transition with music that's reminiscent of The Smiths, but not quite identifiable.

|
Lights up on Tony's apartment across the hall. It is the evening of the same day, and Tony wears an apron in the midst of his cooking duties, which he loves. Kristin, 30s, is leaning against a counter, wearing her day. She's has a bright but tired energy.

KRISTIN

I could smell your garlic all the way down the hall. What can I do?

TONY

Nada. Just kick back.

KRISTIN

I told you I always thought the guy was just a little off.

TONY

Well, he is. *Very* a little off. But admittedly so, so that makes him a little less off, doesn't it? How'd the school treat you?

KRISTIN

The kids are still all right, but now there's another brutal cold going around, or the same one that just keeps getting handed around. All the other teachers are at that mid-semester pissiness.

TONY

But not you.

KRISTIN

Fuck right off. How'd you make out today?

TONY

Three airport trips, and four more solid hours of little rides. So pretty excellent.

KRISTIN

I envy your daily variety.

TONY

I envy your health benefits. So, June--and your freedom--are just a few months away. Keep holding onto that. Plus spring break in twenty-something days?

KRISTIN

I can feel the pollen waiting to try and murder me.

TONY

But that little trip we were thinking about? We can knock that out in a week, easy. And California pollen isn't as brutal on you.

KRISTIN

I mean, if we could afford it.

TONY

We can make it seem almost free.

KRISTIN

I swear it's not that I don't want to. But I'd hate to be on a vacation thinking about every cent we spent.

TONY

I'll grab some extra driving hours and we can see how we are as we get closer.

KRISTIN

Ok, yeah.

(Beat)

So your buddy Dale-Across-the-Hall. He literally cannot see people's faces?

TONY

No, he *sees* them, but he can never remember them.

KRISTIN

How is that different?

TONY

There's some misfire in his brain computer that keeps him from being able to make out a person's face. But he's developed little tricks to help him recognize people.

KRISTIN

And how do you say it?

TONY

Um. It's like proso- (?)

(Looking at his phone, where he's been researching)

Yeah, "prosopagnosia."

KRISTIN

I was completely listening, but I still don't know how you say it.

TONY

I'm not positive I say it right. Face blindness.

(Showing her his phone)

I Wickapediaed it. He was helping me up from the sidewalk and had no idea who I was.

KRISTIN

Freaky.

TONY

I see it more like raw kindness. To help someone up who, as far as he knew, was a complete stranger? Oh, and he does not like to explain his condition.

KRISTIN

Then how do you know about it?

TONY

Because he explained it to me, but he didn't like it.

KRISTIN

Must be why he never seems to know me.

TONY

It also contributes to his relentless social anxiety. His "shyness that is criminally vulgar."

KRISTIN

Then why are we having this guy over tonight?

TONY

Because we're badass. And to help him out.

KRISTIN

What if he doesn't want to be helped in that way?

TONY

He caved. Eventually.

KRISTIN

Raw kindness. I'm gonna change.

(Making a move to exit to the bedroom)

Tony, you shouldn't have to twist a guy's arm to get him to come to dinner.

TONY

Can't help it; it's in my nature. He's a recluse. They showed us this film in elementary school, *Cipher in the Snow* . . . ?

KRISTIN

I know you're a professional helper. But I meant if someone says no thank you, that should be that. Check that box and take credit for trying.

TONY

Other than carrying a few drunks up to their front doors here and there, I haven't really had that helpful feeling since I lost the social services gig.

KRISTIN

You cannot help someone in the way you want to help them regardless of whether or not they want to be helped that way. It's presumptuous and self-centered.

TONY

Yeah, the reverse Ebenezer Scrooge story. It's self-centered to want to do some good for a guy who panics at the thought of a dinner party?

KRISTIN

Self-centered that you're not considering his wants and anxieties.

TONY

Sometimes folks don't know what their own true wants are.

KRISTIN

And you think having Feline-Natalie and Ego-Maniac-Blair here will usher Dale-Across-the-Hall through his suppressed true interests?

TONY

We owe them dinner. And they're the only couple I thought would wanna come with short notice.

KRISTIN

Eeiw. They're not a couple.

TONY

Eeiw. You know what I mean. Duo.

KRISTIN

Not that we know of, anyway.

TONY

If you and Blair are at each other's throats all night . . .

KRISTIN

I have no beef with Blair personally. It's just his shitty personality.

TONY

Plus Natalie is all into horror movies.

KRISTIN

What, Dale-Across-the-Hall is a horror movie guy?

TONY

Wow. Uh, you could say that.

KRISTIN

Jeffrey Dahmer loved horror movies and kept to himself. This will be a blast.

TONY

A, our neighbor isn't a serial killer--I woulda smelled the formaldehyde. B, Blair has mellowed a lot since he quit drinking.

(Handing her a drink)

And C, I'm making ziti so you'll be in such culinary ecstasy that you won't even notice him.

KRISTIN

As long as Blair doesn't bring up religion or money or our crippled education system.

TONY

That's some heavy restrictions for Blair.

KRISTIN

Or the de-evolution of independent music. Or any kind of politics.

TONY

Now you've jinxed us again and he's guaranteed to bring up everything you just mentioned.

KRISTIN

It's acceptable to get blackout drunk around a recent non-drinker, right?

TONY

Go change into something less cynical.

|
Switch focus and Dale is alone, right outside their door in the hallway. Tony keeps working.

DALE

Nothing to be such a freak show about. It's a handful of people. We'll get better acquainted, gobble up a tasty dinner--probably better food than you've had in months. It'll be awkward for *everyone* at first because nobody really knows each other.

(He checks his watch)

That's stupid. Absolutely not true. They all know each other crazy well; it's just you who nobody knows. And who knows nobody. But isn't the point to change that? Once you're in there and, like, talking for a while, then everyone will get to know . . . And then drinking will make stuff all squishy, and you'll contribute to the conversations like a normal appreciative party guest. Not even a party. A little dinner with a handful of people. And you won't bring up anything stupid or boring. Unless I *do*, and then I'll just . . .

|
Focus to back inside Tony and Kristin's apartment where Tony has been setting a small table, at which there are four matching chairs and one that is completely different.

TONY

(Calling out towards the other room)

But don't you think San Fran is perfect for spring break? Mike and them said they'll be outta town, and we can crash at their place. And I have a shit-ton of bonus miles on United.

(He listens, but there's not a response)

You know I wasn't serious about you changing.

Tony opens it and Dale is there.

TONY

I thought I heard you. Did you knock?

DALE

No. Am I early?

TONY

On the dot, actually.

DALE

Yeah, I know. I was waiting outside your door until my watch clicked over to 7:30. I was just about to.

TONY

Congrats on your precision. Shit, you better enter before it hits 7:31.

He enters. Only a little bit apprehensively.

TONY

Our home, no surprises.

DALE

I've been in all sixteen apartments in this building. Some of them way too many times. The efficiencies are all the same, and the one-bedrooms are all the same. Sorry, I try to be punctual. I get invited to stuff so infrequently. I went and got wine. And if we run out, I can march across the hall and get more. How's your elbow?

Kristin re-enters from the bedroom, spruced up just a bit.

TONY

Fine, see?

(He bends his elbow a few times to demonstrate)

I'll crack this bottle open now.

KRISTIN

I thought I heard you . . . Hi, Dale-Across-the-Hall. That's what I call you now. I'm . . . Kristin.

DALE

Yes, of course. Like your scarf.

KRISTIN

Thanks. It's new.

DALE

Yep. Your other people aren't here yet? You can wait and open it when they get here.

TONY

It's not a problem. Blair doesn't drink anymore.

DALE

More for us. What, is she pregnant or something?

KRISTIN

Blair's the guy. Natalie is his sister.

DALE

Goddammit. I'm glad I didn't say anything like that while they were . . . sorry. Do you have siblings?

KRISTIN

A sister.

TONY

I have a pretty huge family.

DALE

Of course you do. The Italian thing?

KRISTIN

Italian?

DALE

Oh. Nothing. Shut up, Dale.

TONY

I don't have a drop of Italian in me. Just a fertile mom and dad from Central Mexico.

KRISTIN

That could be the title of your autobiography.

DALE

I have zero real brothers and sisters. As you probably could have surmised.

Quick awkwardness.

TONY

You switching to wine, girlfriend?

KRISTIN

Definitely, for now.

DALE

So you guys might go to San Francisco?