

THE INCITING INCIDENT

A short play

by

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Character:

DALE, a man in his thirties.

Setting:

A living room in a small house in West
Los Angeles.

Time:

Now.

A stuffy living room. In the center of the room sits an old couch. Next to the couch, on a wall, is a huge foam core board upon which index cards are pinned displaying the outline of a movie script. There is an ugly chair, a gnarled coffee table with blank index cards, and a crooked table, with mismatched chairs, where a boombox rests. There's an entrance to the kitchen and one to a hallway which leads to a stairwell. The room has several windows. One to the street, one to the driveway, one to the backyard. DALE, a man in his thirties, with a pen and a notepad, paces. He nervously clicks the pen. He's trying to write, but he is frightened by the sporadic hand-clapping - and occasional dog bark (which sounds like a painful squeal - like someone is killing the animal) - from the backyard of his neighbors' house. Unnerved, desperate, and fearful, he turns downstage, towards the audience.

DALE

I'm convinced my next door neighbors are serial killers. One day, they're going to be in the news, I guarantee it. And I truly believe one of the bodies you'll see carried from the house will be mine. I tell all of you people this so you can bear witness, so you can go to the police when I disappear. You go to them with the following evidence:

DALE goes to the back wall, pointing, as if to his neighbors' house.

DALE (cont'd)

My neighbors. There's three of them. An elderly couple and their middle aged son. The old man...

He turns to the coffee table, drops his pen and notepad, and retrieves a Sharpie.

DALE (cont'd)

The old man.

He writes "OLD MAN" on an 8 X 11 piece of notepad paper and then pins the paper on the foam core board on the wall next to the couch as:

DALE (cont'd)

The old man is about 75, but he's scary fit. Always wears shorts, regardless of the weather. People think, oh, you're a mile from the beach, oh, Santa Monica is so gorgeous and warm. Let me tell you, most of the time, it's overcast and cool. Especially in the mornings. The westside gets this marine layer, and sometimes it can get, you know, chilly. I'm serious. But this guy, always in shorts, and always those old seventies tennis shorts, you know? The ones Bjorn Borg used to wear. The ones that hug your hips and ride up your ass. Why doesn't he buy new shorts? Doesn't he know what year this is? He likes to go surfing, and when he comes home, from the beach, he gets out, strips off his shirt, and does calisthenics in his front yard. Counts the reps out loud, huffing and puffing like it's boot camp. I mean, come on, that's somebody not well in the head, right?

He comes downstage.

DALE (cont'd)

OK, these issues may seem trivial, but, trust me, it's all part of a larger madness. And triviality, you know, can sometimes be symbolic or even represent a deeper meaning or subtext. I should know. I'm a writer. I write screenplays. I write screenplays no one buys.

He points to the foam core of index cards.

DALE (cont'd)

Here's an example of one. Like all the others, it's "smart." I write smart screenplays. This is what I tell myself. "The studios, they're stupid. They don't understand." This is what I tell myself.

He moves back to the street window.

DALE (cont'd)

So, the inciting incident. Our little page 17. Last July 12th, the old man comes back from surfing. He parks his white van...*his white van*...right in front of my house. Not in his driveway, which is empty, not on the street in front of his house, which is empty, but in front of my house. Look, I keep to myself, I don't want trouble, but every Wednesday now, I go out with my trash can, hoping to find a space, but, no, there is none. He's got his van right there. This isn't small town Iowa. I don't have miles of curb. This is L.A. It's a strip of pavement the size of cigarette butt out there. So I have to put the can between our houses. Isn't that nuts? I can't even put my own trash can in front of my own house. I've asked him 20 times to please, please, please not park his van there. But does he listen? No. He likes to spite me. It's an act of aggression.

He goes to a box in the kitchen as:

DALE (cont'd)

The first time I went over there, to discuss it, and he opened the door, I could see inside. I saw shadows...at first, I thought it was carcasses hung from hooks, you know, because it was so cold. I could feel a terrible draft. It was like a meat locker. But it wasn't bodies in there, it was clothes. *Clothes...* hanging from lines in the living room, like a dry cleaner. In the living room. Who does that? Why not hang the clothes outside? Or use a dryer? Isn't that a little psycho?

He retrieves a clothes hanger from the box. It's in a huge Ziploc baggie which says "EVIDENCE" written on one side.

DALE (cont'd)

We had a little argument. He called me a maggot. Waved his hand at me, like this.

He waves his hand in the two-finger "devil" symbol.

DALE (cont'd)

You know this sign? It isn't the old surfer "hang ten" sign. It's the sign for the devil. You know who famously held his hand in the air like this? Richard Ramirez. Remember him? "The Night Stalker." (beat) Then the old man threatened me. With this.

He shows the baggie to the audience.

DALE (cont'd)

A clothes hanger. Shoved it at me. Pricked my neck. I left the blood on it. *Evidence.*

He goes to the coffee table with the baggie and puts it down, then sits on the couch.

DALE (cont'd)

Sometimes, I wish I knew other writers. They would recognize the obvious pattern. Observing the human condition, and so forth, as we do. The French bakery down the street, the one on the corner of National and Barrington, it's crawling with writers. But, God, they're so...enthusiastic. I can't take all that endless, you know, pitching. "I'm working on this script...blah, blah, blah..." It wears me out. I just want egg and cheese on a croissant, so I can go home. (beat) OK, his wife.

He writes "WIFE" with the Sharpie on another piece of notepad paper and pins the paper on the foam core board on the wall as:

DALE (cont'd)

His wife smiles a lot. I'm always a little leery of people who smile a lot. She's this old, matronly type, in dresses like something out of *The Waltons*. She keeps her face ghost white, too. Lipstick red like blood. She's got long stringy hair. Teeth like scattered bowling pins. Walks all hunched over. As you can imagine, she scares the shit out of me. I see her from my kitchen all the time...

He goes to the entrance to the kitchen.

DALE (cont'd)

...in *her* kitchen, cooking, the smell of sauerkraut wafting into my house. It's positively penetrating. I smell it on my clothes. In the rug. I smell it when I shower, eat, try to sleep. It makes me sick. I can't live like this! All I have is this place. This place, which I rent, for an obscene amount of money which I do not have. Sometimes I see her spying on me. Like she's plotting. A couple of months ago, she brought over flowers.

He retrieves a baggie with a vase in it from the box. The baggie says "EVIDENCE."

DALE (cont'd)

She brought flowers when she heard my mother had passed. My mother, who never believed in my writing; my father, too, never believed. Never. Farmers they were. From day one they were unwilling to see beyond their own lives. They were hateful people. Venomous. I burned down one of our kiln houses which held most of the hung tobacco. Burned it down curing the crop. It was an accident. They threw me out. I was 17. (beat) So the wife brings over these flowers in this vase...

He shows the audience the baggie with the vase.

DALE (cont'd)

...to tranquilize my grief over a woman who turned her back on me, who called my writing aspirations "a great, shameful hunk of nothing." The flowers made me sneeze. There was ragweed in it. And lilies. I sneezed so much my nose bled. I had a migraine like you wouldn't believe. My throat swelled. I couldn't breathe. I went to the emergency room. I had to be hospitalized. The wife knew what those flowers would do to me. She *knew*. Now she wants her vase back, but I'm not giving it back. I need it. As evidence.

He puts the baggie down on the coffee table.

DALE (cont'd)

Their son.

He writes "SON" on another notepad paper and pins it on the foam core board on the wall as:

DALE (cont'd)

Their son is about 40, doesn't seem to work, although on occasional mornings I see him going to and fro in a black suit with a red carnation on the lapel. I don't know where he goes. Most of the time he's in jeans, walking down the alley here next to my house en route to the 7-11 on the corner.

He goes to the window to the driveway.

DALE (cont'd)

He always comes back with a Slurpee and an L.A. Times. Every single time. A 40-year old man, living at home, drinking a Slurpee? He's got a cast now, on his arm. Like Bundy, right? Isn't that what Ted Bundy did? Pretended he had a cast? Anyway, the son doesn't speak to me, won't even look at me. Blazing eyes staring straight ahead. Like one false move and he's going to...snap. I think there is something wrong with him. You know, mentally. Likes to cut across my lawn when he comes back from 7-11. But if I'm outside, watering the plants maybe, whatever, he goes to the other side of the street, around, and back to his house, like I'm a plague. Me! He listens to tapes in this ancient Walkman. One day he dropped one. In my yard.

He goes to the box and takes out a baggie with a tape in it. The baggie says "EVIDENCE."

DALE (cont'd)

This tape.

He pops it in the tape player on the table. Out comes Bing Crosby's "White Christmas." After a few lines, DALE stops the tape.

DALE (cont'd)

This cannot be good for his mind.

He takes the tape out of the boombox...

DALE (cont'd)

Evidence!

...and puts it back in the baggie and on the coffee table.

DALE (cont'd)

They have a dog, too.

He goes back and writes "DOG" on a notepad paper and pins it on the foam core board on the wall.

DALE (cont'd)

Spotted brown with this little tail. Once, I looked over the fence as this little Jack Russell bastard was barking at me, and I saw the best evidence of their true nature.

He goes to the window to the backyard.

DALE (cont'd)

Burnt grass. Trash, everywhere. A mattress, ripped open in the center, like with a knife, sits in the middle of the yard. There's a fire pit in the far corner, no longer used. An old fridge surrounded by dog toys and newspapers blowing around. It's like the place has been abandoned or something. A fridge! Like Dahmer! Anyway, they have a shed, too...sunken roof, broken boards, weeds all up around it. What's in that shed is what I'd like to know. (beat) I hear the old man sometimes, back there, in the yard, playing with the dog. Never calls the dog by any name. Never says anything. He just claps. Claps. At the dog. And the dog loves it. For hours they do this. You heard it, right? Earlier? The clapping? The occasional bark? That high pierced squeal? Sounds like he's murdering the dog! Every night I can hear them from my bedroom upstairs, when I'm trying to write. Do they care that I can't finish my screenplay?

He goes to the foam core wall of index cards.

DALE (cont'd)

Look at this thing. A mess! I'm out of ideas!

He grabs his notepad and pen.

DALE (cont'd)

Look! Blank!

He tosses the pad, paces, and clicks the pen.

DALE (cont'd)

Why should they care about my creepy little tale, right? It's not like real literature or anything. It's just a movie. But, you know, it's still complex.

It's still "smart." It takes concentration. I'm writing about a serial killer who's stalking a serial killer who's stalking a serial killer who's stalking a serial killer who's stalking a serial killer and so on. For infinity. Why should they care that I'm pacing all night long? Why should they care about me clicking my pen...

Aware that he is clicking his pen, he stops.

DALE (cont'd)

...endlessly clicking my pen, over an empty notepad, the 10 droning on and on over the apartment complexes down the street. Droning. I'm up at three a.m., it drones. I mean, why are people up at three a.m. driving on the freeway? Whatever...

He goes to the window to the backyard.

DALE (cont'd)

...so the dog barks at me when the old man is not around to clap. I threw a rancid pork chop over the fence one day just to shut the dog up, you know? I can't go into my own back yard without him getting nuts on me. He ate the pork chop. All off it. Didn't stop barking at me. Ungrateful. I think the old man found out about it.

He goes to the box. Holds up a magazine in a baggie, which says "EVIDENCE." He brings it downstage.

DALE (cont'd)

Mailmen don't make mistakes like this. *True Crime* magazine. I don't have to tell you what's inside these pages. Frightening stuff. One day, this was in my mailbox. The address label was peeled off. It's not mine. Whose do you think it is? And how do you think it got in my box? If you answered "the old man's" and "the old man put it there" you are correct! Why would he do this? Why else? To send me a message. And that message is "beware." Evidence!

He drops the baggie on the coffee table.

DALE (cont'd)

Serial killers kill types, though, right? Jack the Ripper loved prostitutes. Berkowitz loved to shoot young couples in cars. Ed Gein loved to kill and eat women who looked like his mother. I must fit the neighbors' type. Screenwriter. But what's the neighbors' motive? Sheer pleasure? Power and control? Or is it just that I'm a screenwriter? I'll bet the studios are in on this. More dead screenwriters the better, right? Is that so crazy? Have you been to the movies lately? *Our* fault, right?

Serial killers usually don't come in families, though, do they? Wait. What about the Manson family? But they weren't a real family...ah, so what?

He paces, clicking the pen again.

DALE (cont'd)

You want to know the worst thing? I think it's that my neighbors sometimes give off the impression they're good people. The oldest trick of all. "He was such a good boy." "We never suspected anything." "We're shocked." Example one. I had a roommate some time back. Worked at the school of medicine at UCLA, now there's a scary place. She worked with the rabbits that came in and I didn't want to know in what way, thank you. She was a pretty girl, but you know, spooky. Still, she admired what I did. She once told me the writer was the only true creator. Everyone else just interprets. I loved her. It was unrequited. She broke my heart. Whatever. Story of my life. Fine. Life goes on. She had a brother, a terrible alcoholic. The worst. He'd babble about his band and some song he was working on and how somebody down at the Whiskey was finding him a night to play and his breath...Jesus. He was constantly drunk. Anyway, he chokes his sister one time. I refused to let him in the house again. So, he broke in...

He goes to the entrance to the kitchen.

DALE (cont'd)

...and pissed on my kitchen floor. Soon after, the halfway house, the one down in Culver City on Sepulveda, where he was staying, kicked him out, and he slept in his pickup on the street.

He goes to the window to the street.

DALE (cont'd)

In front of my house. Where I like to put the trash can! Anyway, he defecated on my driveway. My neighbor, the old man, he made friends with this guy. Friends! With a guy who shit on my driveway! Who practically tried to kill the girl I love...d. Who makes friends with lunatics? *Other lunatics*. I would see them out there chatting away, like best buddies. "How are you?" "Good to see you!" "Nice day, isn't it?" I would sit in the living room here and listen to them. Sit right here.

He sits in a chair by the window to the street.

DALE (cont'd)

Turned out the old man was a movie extra. This is what he did for a living. Still does, I assume. He liked to talk about the actors, as if he were friends with them.

For hours those two would chat. He'd bring the guy food, too. What a samaritan. But that's not all. Example two. Across the street, one house down, a huge Mexican family lives. They love to play this ranchera stuff. All that "Ay! Ay! Ay! Ay!" It's so amped I can sing all the lyrics and I don't even know Spanish. They like to play video games in their living room. All of them. Together. I can hear them, narrating. It's a party all weekend, every weekend. The old man is always over there, bringing beer, like he has no idea their music is too loud and the video games go on too long for any person of reasonable mind to endure. I'm here all the time now. I lost my job as a copywriter at Burns, Burns, and Burns Ad Agency. Insubordination! Lack of dedication! Lunchtime intoxication! And a whole bunch of other ations! I'm heavily in debt. My credit cards have these little checks that come with the bill. It's how I pay rent. I need to get another roommate, but, you know, roommates...let's just say love can be very cruel. (beat) Oh, example three.

He goes to the window to the backyard.

DALE (cont'd)

Behind me, there's this couple, real fighters. I hardly ever hear him, just her screaming "no, no, that hurts!" "My hair!" Or she's just wailing or something. Then, every now and then you hear him yell "how could you do this to me?!" He calls her terrible names. I think she's cheating on him. It's a horror show. I can see them sometimes from my bedroom upstairs. Like shadows through the curtains. He likes to break things. I called the police one time and by the time they arrived, there's the old man over there, talking to them, like he's some do-gooder with a heart of gold. He can't fool me. Not him, his wife, or his son. Last week, I saw them in St. Monica's. Can you believe it? The three of them, sitting there, all pious. I wanted to sneak up behind them, grab them by the necks, and yell "liars!" (beat) I've started parking my car in the street. Now the old man's pulling up right behind me...

He goes to the window to the street.

DALE (cont'd)

...so I can't even put the can between our houses. I gotta put it in front of his house. Like today. So now our cans sit side-by-side. My can, his can. I don't like it. I find that I think too much about the can when I should be working, writing this script. But if it's not the can, it's that sauerkraut.

Turning towards the kitchen, he sniffs the air.

DALE (cont'd)

There it is again. Do you smell it? Oh, my God. What is she cooking over there? Maybe she's trying to smoke me out. You can't have the vase!

He cowers from the kitchen window, as if certain she's heard him yelling. Outside, the clapping again. Then a bark. It sounds horrible. And so on.

DALE (cont'd)

And the clapping. Endless clapping. He's clapping right now. Can you hear it? Listen to that dog! What is he doing to that dog? I can't take it. I sit here, clicking my pen, thinking only about the can and smelling the sauerkraut coming in through the kitchen window and listening to that incessant clapping. The clapping! Ugh!

He comes downstage.

DALE (cont'd)

Remember my name. Dale Herndon. That's H-e-r-n-d-o-n. Tell the police what happened. That it was my neighbors. OK? I'm going over there now. I have to tell him the clapping has got to stop. Tell the police to check under the floor boards for me. Isn't that where Gacy put his victims? OK, I'm going over there. I can't finish my script anyway. I'm just so stuck. I'm stuck. *I'm stuck.* (beat) I'm going to take my pen with me. I'm not going down easily. It's a big pen. A fat pen. A strong pen.

The clapping, again. A bark.

DALE (cont'd)

Why does he keep clapping? Here I go. If I don't come back, call the police. There's so much evidence!

He rushes to the coffee table.

DALE (cont'd)

A hanger, a vase, a tape, a magazine! (beat) Since my roommate moved out, I've never seen or heard from her again. Did I mention that? We got a new mailman two months ago. There's an abandoned pickup across the street. The Mexicans haven't had a party in forever. The couple behind me I haven't heard fighting in weeks. All right, I'm outta here. I'm leaving. Got my pen. Remember what I fucking said, OK? It was them. (beat) *It was them.*

DALE exits. Lights fade, stopping on the foam core board, highlighting "OLD MAN," "WIFE," "SON," and "DOG." On the table sits the evidence: the hanger, the vase, the tape, and the magazine.

Finally, everything goes black. The clapping rises again, the dog squeals, then the sounds slow. Stop. Silence.

The End.