

IN THE TANK

by

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Published by Dramatic Publishing
Woodstock, IL 60098
USA

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CHARACTERS

HARRY (or) LIZ

A down-to-earth, pragmatic sort, of no particular age. A creature inclined to action rather than introspection, one who ekes out a living as best he or she can, dealing with the realities of the moment. Happens to be a lobster.

STU (or) ANGELA

A fairly philosophical type who observes much and ponders even more. Though moving through a world that is well beyond his or her control, this individual manages to maintain a positive outlook on life. Also a lobster.

NOTES: The two roles can be played by: two males....

or two females....

or one male and one female.

Costuming can be minimal or elaborate. The one requirement: prominent bands around the hands of both actors like the rubber bands on a lobster's claws in a tank.

TIME

The present.

SETTING

Interior of a lobster tank at a seafood restaurant.

IN THE TANK

(LIGHTS UP ON HARRY, WHO IS HOLDING A "DEAD" POSE, COMPLETE WITH A BLANK EXPRESSION. STU ENTERS, OBSERVES HARRY FOR A MOMENT, A PAUSE, THEN.....)

STU

How are you doing?

HARRY

(HARRY SPEAKS OUT OF THE SIDE OF HIS MOUTH)

All right. How goes it with you?

STU

Very well, thank you.

(PAUSE)

Anything happening?

HARRY

(SAME AS ABOVE)

Lots of close calls so far tonight. That's all I can say.

STU

Yes, well, c'est la vie.

HARRY

(SAME AS ABOVE)

Huh? My advice, bub, is for you to practise up.

STU

Practise?

HARRY

(BREAKS HIS "DEAD" POSE, SPEAKS NORMALLY)

Yeah. Stop looking so lively and practise the act. You know?

STU

I'm not quite sure that I---

HARRY

Looking dead. Get the drift?

(HARRY STRIKES HIS "DEAD" POSE AGAIN, THEN BREAKS IT)

See? Now you try it.

STU

Oh, I don't know if I can---

HARRY

Come on! It's Friday night. Get with the program.

STU

Well, if you think it'll be of some value, I'll give it a try. I do like to think of myself as a team player, someone who's accomodating---

HARRY

So, get with it, then.

STU

Okay. Here goes.

(STU STRIKES A "DEAD" POSE, BUT MAINTAINS AN UPBEAT GRIN)

HARRY

What have you got, a death wish or something? Do you understand what's going on here? The idea, my friend, is to look un-appealing. If you had some kind of defect, now that would help.

STU

Defect?

HARRY

Yeah. Like this one guy, Max. See, Max has this major kind of growth thing here.

(HARRY TOUCHES HIS SHOULDER)

It's pretty gross when you get right down to it, but the good news is nobody wants to see that sitting on their plate. I mean, the guy is home free.

STU

What happened to him?

HARRY

Oh, they got tired of lookin' at him here, shipped him off to another tank. Last I heard he's still toughin' it out. Yeah, old Max 'll probably live forever. Not much luck with the ladies, of course. That thing on his shoulder is a real turnoff, but hey, you can't have everything. Anyway, my point is, we are in a serious situation here and you've gotta---

STU

Friend, may I call you friend?

HARRY

Call me anything you want, just---

STU

I thank you for sharing all of this with me, I really do. It demonstrates a real generosity of spirit, a true comrade-in-arms approach that is most refreshing. But you must understand that my view is, well, as I see it, providence is in the fall of every sparrow.

(PAUSE)

HARRY

Oh, great. This week's tankmate is a religious nut.

STU

Pardon? I'm afraid I don't---

HARRY

Nut! N-U-T-T. Nut! We're playing the major endgame here and you're talking about sparrows.

(TRYING A DIFFERENT APPROACH, CONSPIRATORIALLY)

Look, one of those characters walking around out there takes a shine to the way you swing your claw, and it's into the pot. Am I getting through?

STU

We are talking about life and death, correct? That is the metaphysical question at issue here?

HARRY

The meta-what?

STU

You know, I suspect we got off on the wrong claw. My name is Stuart, though my friends call me Stu. And you would be?

HARRY

Harry. Harry's the name. But---

STU

Delighted to make your acquaintance, Harry. Now, about this situation you posit---

HARRY

I'm positing nothing! And you won't be neither unless you stop looking so damn perky!

STU

Let's be sure we understand one another. You want me to alter my demeanor, is that it? Change my appearance?

HARRY

Yeah! That's what I want! Or Stu, as he's known to his friends, is going to end up in the stewpot. Look, it's Friday night, the big seafood night of the week. See those menus over there? You know what's on 'em? LOBSTER Thermidor, LOBSTER Newburg, LOBSTER Bisque, WHOLE lobster, lobster TAIL, lobster LUMPS, lobster SAUTE. They're talking about us! We're not here because they like watching us stroll around the tank. Any minute now somebody's gonna come up and say "gimme that one!"

(PAUSE)

STU

You know, there's something very puzzling about what you're saying.

HARRY

It's puzzlin' all right, because you ain't gettin' it!

STU

I mean, on the one hand, it's clear that you have a true understanding of destiny and the fates. But then, I have this strong sense that while you have the awareness, you totally lack the acceptance of reality.

HARRY

Oh, I get it. You WANT to be beet-red, lying next to a sprig of parsley and a tub of melted butter. Is that it?

STU

Harry, Harry, my friend, take a minute here. Smell the plankton. What are you?

HARRY

What do you mean, what am I?

STU

You are a lobster, correct? As am I.

HARRY

Well, give him a big blue ribbon! Your point?

STU

And the destiny of a lobster would be...

(HARRY SHRUGS)

As the galaxies spin through the universe, as the planets orbit the sun within those galaxies, as the earth spins on its axis---

HARRY

All right, already.

STU

It is the destiny of a lobster, the very essence of lobster-ness, I might say, to enrich the firmament in the only way in which we are able. We don't play musical instruments or write compositions. We don't grow plants or harness the power of the wind and sea. No. Our task, pure and simple, is, to make the world a better place by---

HARRY

Being the priciest thing on the menu?

STU

I would say, in our own way, we enrich the earth.

HARRY

And I say you're nuts! What do you mean, enrich? Who's getting rich around here? You? Me? The guy that pulled us out of the drink, maybe. Yeah, and the character who owns this joint. They're getting rich. Not you and me. We end up on the business end of a fork.

STU

You really do have a them-against-us mentality.

HARRY

Because it's THEM against US!

STU

But they're human, remember? They've got dominion. You know, birds of the air, fish of the sea?

HARRY

And that makes it okay? What am I supposed to do, hold my claws out and say "cook me"? Where's your will to live? Your fighting spirit? Or are you the kind that doesn't have any?

STU

I've got plenty of spirit. I simply will not stoop to pretending to be dead.

HARRY

Well, I'll stoop. I'll stoop all right. Makes more sense than what you're doing. Why don't you just hang a sign on that claw: "Good eatin' starts here!"

STU

Well, it does. Are you aware we have the tastiest meat in the---

HARRY

Whoa! Do not refer to my insides as "meat"! Enough's enough. You want to be the blue plate special, that's up to you. Me? I got other plans.

(HARRY RESUMES HIS "DEAD" POSE. A PAUSE. STU STUDIES HARRY FOR A MOMENT. THEN, STU SHRUGS AND BEGINS TO HUM BEETHOVEN'S "ODE TO JOY". GRADUALLY HE GETS MORE INTO THE MUSIC, GROWING MORE AND MORE ANIMATED. AS HE DOES, HARRY BEGINS TO FUME. THEN...)

HARRY

(HOLDING THE "DEAD" POSE, TALKS OUT OF THE SIDE OF HIS MOUTH)

Will you knock it off?

STU

Why? Am I bothering you?

HARRY

(SAME AS ABOVE)

Yes, you're bothering me! I am trying to go on living over here. Can you get that?

STU

Oh. Call that living, do you?

HARRY

(SAME AS ABOVE)

What do you---

(BREAKS HIS "DEAD" POSE, SPEAKS NORMALLY)

Yes! I call it living.

STU

Forgive me, but it doesn't look like what one would do, IF one actually had a life.

HARRY

You're saying I got no life?

STU

I'm saying, what kind of a life is it, if it looks like a death? Or, to put it another way, if you spend all your time acting like you're dead, what's the point of being alive?

(PAUSE)

HARRY

That's...that's too much for somebody like me to figure out. I don't know why I...I...

STU

Then, if you don't know why you're doing it, why do you do it?

HARRY

Will you stop with the questions? I do it because, because...because if I don't...

(HARRY POINTS TO THE AUDIENCE)

They're going to bring an end to me. See? There. That's why I do it. They're holding all the cards.

STU

Cards?

HARRY

All right, tongs, then. Anytime they want to, they can pick 'em up and then I'm dead meat.

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STU

I thought you didn't like that word.

HARRY

I am trying to make a point. Which you don't seem to get. They are in charge. And they can do anything they---

STU

Take it easy, my friend. Haven't you heard the theory?

HARRY

What?

STU

The theory. About them. Once you accept it, our situation becomes easier to take.

HARRY

What are you talking about? What theory?

STU

Why don't you listen and I'll explain it to you? Just hear me out.

HARRY

Okay, okay. I'll listen to your cockamamy theory but only because I'm tired of---

STU

(CONSPIRATORIALLY)

They're in a tank, too.

HARRY

What?

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STU

They're in a tank. Just like we are.

HARRY

No!

STU

Oh, yes.

HARRY

Where is it? I don't see anything out there.

STU

Of course you don't. It's much bigger than this thing.

HARRY

But how does it work? What's the setup like?

STU

Well, as I said, it's quite sizeable. The strange thing is, we know we're in a tank. They don't.

HARRY

But---

STU

That's not all. We know we have a limited amount of time, right?

HARRY

Well, sure. Any minute now, it could be sayonara, Harry.

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STU

Get this. They behave as if they're going to be around forever, and then one day, zap.

HARRY

Zap?

STU

And no matter how many times they see it happen, they're never ready.

HARRY

Come on! They're supposed to be smart.

STU

I know. It's bizarre, but they always think it's someone else's turn.

HARRY

Wow! That's dumb. So, do they get tossed into boiling water and eaten with little forks?

STU

No. The end result is the same, though. Mostly they carry within them the seeds of their own destruction.

HARRY

Huh?

STU

They do stupid things. Sometimes they invent stupid things.

HARRY

Like what?

STU

Oh, like, plastic explosives, 357 magnums, unbuckled seat belts, frozen margaritas, atom bombs, lucky strikes, breast implants, separating tire treads, thick steaks, toxic waste, crack cocaine, too much aerosol, not enough sunblock, six-packs of lager in twenty-ounce cans---

HARRY

How come they never figure all that stuff out?

STU

That's easy. See, you and I and every other living thing, we all have something they haven't got.

HARRY

What?

STU

(VERY FAST)

An inherited, basically unalterable tendency to make a complex, yet very specific response to environmental stimuli without involving reason.

(PAUSE)

HARRY

Could you try using little words?

STU

Sorry. Instinct. We have lots and lots of instincts.

HARRY

And they don't?

STU

Uh-huh. Just brains. Lots of brains. The way I see it, there wasn't any room left for instincts after they put in all the brains. See, instincts automatically tell you many things.

HARRY

You mean, like something bigger than us is in charge?

STU

Exactly. We just naturally get that.

HARRY

Hey! I'll bet because they got that brain thing going, they think they're in charge.

STU

Correct.

HARRY

Hmmh. So, they've got no instincts at all?

STU

Well, there is one major exception. The basic plan had to be altered to make sure there would be enough of them to go around. They did get the mating instinct but it was wedged in, sort of, added on at the last minute? And feature this. When that kicks in, their brains shut down completely.

HARRY

Huh. So they can't mate and think at the same time?

STU

It's a physical impossibility. They get to do one or the other. Never both simultaneously.

HARRY

Whoa! The screwups that must lead to! And I always thought they had it made.

STU

The seaweed always looks greener in the other tank.

HARRY

But why do they end up with the forks and we end up on the plates? Why do humans always get to pick and choose?

STU

My friend, you put your claw right on it. They choose. Not just us. They choose everything. They have to decide what to do every day.

HARRY

So? How hard can that be?

STU

Some of them are careless about it and they choose the wrong things. Some of them are too careful and they don't choose enough. Some of them get so hung up on choosing, they end up doing nothing at all. And some of them, well, some of them are just...afraid.

HARRY

Come on!

STU

No, really. Frankly, I'm not sure I'd like to make all those decisions. With instinct, all we do is--

HARRY

Go with our gut?

STU

You express yourself very directly.

HARRY

That's me. But I still don't buy that they're afraid. Look at that giant in the plaid jacket over there. What's he afraid of?

STU

The unknown, the uncertain...

HARRY

Whoa---you don't think---hey! What if they know that we're moving up the food chain, and they're afraid of us!

STU

You mean...we're evolving to a higher life form?

HARRY

And maybe they're evolving down?

STU

I believe the word is devolving. I hadn't considered that.

HARRY

Maybe that's why they put these rubber bands on us.

STU

You may have a point.

HARRY

I got lots of points.

STU

If that were true, why, since the world is more water than land, and it's our natural environment, then---

HARRY

We could go anywhere.

STU

We've got antennae---

HARRY

Built-in armor---

STU

Tails that propel us twenty-five feet per second!

HARRY

We don't need cars, or wheels, or even shoes!

STU

Without these rubber bands, we could do anything!

HARRY

The strong, the invincible---

HARRY AND STU

(IN UNISON)

The lobsters!

(PAUSE)

STU

Well, that was rather fun.

HARRY

Yeah, I thought so. Will you tell me something? Did you come out of the same ocean I did? Because I don't know how you can look like me and know all this stuff.

STU

Oh, the same ocean. But for a long time I lived in a tank in a talking books production studio.

HARRY

Books talk?

STU

No, but people came in and read them out loud.

HARRY

What kind of books?

STU

Oh, Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, How to Organize your Closets, Rudiments of Elementary Logic, the King James Bible, How to Get Fit in Five Minutes a Day. People were reading books out loud around the clock.

HARRY

So what happened?

STU

It was such a thriving business, it got swallowed up by a major corporation in a leveraged buyout.

HARRY

What's a leveraged buy---oh, forget it.

STU

Yes, unfortunately pour moi, it was adieu, talking books, bonjour seafood brasserie.

HARRY

Tough break, buddy.

STU

Oh, it's just another turn in life's endless maze. "None there be can rehearse the whole tale."

HARRY

What's that?

STU

Those words were found on a scroll buried in a jar in a cave near the Dead Sea.

HARRY

Well, all I can say is, I've never met a lobster like you before. You know, when I said you were a...a...

STU

A nut?

HARRY

Yeah, just because you wouldn't play my "dead" game. I didn't really mean it.

STU

That's very gratifying to hear. Before anything else transpires, I'd like you to know that I've truly savored our time together. You're quite a superlative benthic creature.

HARRY

Gee, thanks.

(PAUSE)

What the hell is a benthic creature?

STU

Sorry. A bottom-dweller.

HARRY

Well, you're a pretty terrific benthic creature yourself. And I still say it's crazy.

STU

What, precisely?

HARRY

That humans are the cream of creation. Check out him over there under the baseball cap. You think he's going to conquer the world anytime soon? And what about her with all that hair? I'll bet you've got more brains in your swimmeret than she's got in her whole body.

STU

I must admit it's something to contemplate.

HARRY

Speakin' of contemplatin'....do you think we ever will...you know...

STU

Evolve?

HARRY

Yeah. What was that thing you said before?

STU

You mean...none there be can rehearse the whole tale?

HARRY

And that means?

STU

I think it means...our beginnings are unknown, our endings are uncertain. Most creatures know the present dangers but none can see clearly what came before and what lies ahead.

HARRY

I think....I think I get it.

(PAUSE, THEN HARRY CHUCKLES)

STU

What is it, my friend?

HARRY

I'll tell you one thing, the day ever comes when we turn the tables on them, we're gonna need an awful lot of rubber bands.

(LIGHTS DOWN)