THE CELL

A One-Act Play

By

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Characters

John: **In his twenties.**

Ed: **In his twenties.**

Setting

The entire action of the play takes place on the stage of a community playhouse. A cell, the type found in old dungeons, is center stage. The front faces the audience and is constructed of bars with a door with a prominent built-in lock. A breaker box should be visible to the audience.

Time

The present.

LIGHTS UP. ***JOHN*** AND ***ED*** ARE SITTING ON STAGE IN FRONT OF THE CELL. THEY ARE FINISHING LUNCH OF SANDWICHES AND BEER. A BOOM BOX IS PLAYING SOFTLY.

JOHN

Man, this is one of the easiest jobs I've had in years. You probably coulda handled this one yourself.

ED

Probably, but the jobs always go faster when I've got you helping me. Besides, I needed to finish the set today so I can get on with other business.

JOHN

What kinda business?

ED

I'm going on a long trip. I leave tonight. Nothing that would interest you.

JOHN

(Turns up the radio.)

Whatever. Thanks for the work – I really appreciate it. The money always comes in handy on the slopes.

(Seriously curious.)

Going away for long?

ED

Yeah.

(Smiles.)

You got something lined up for this weekend? I hear they got a foot of fresh powder at Keystone.

JOHN

Ya wouldn't believe what I've got waiting for me! I'm sure glad I stayed single.

ED

(Partial aside.)

Maybe I should have, too.

JOHN

What?

ED

Nothing! Forget it!!

JOHN
Hey, c'mon, talk to me, man. You seem really preoccupied and edgy today. What's going on?

ED
Nothing!

JOHN
You really *have* changed. I've seen it coming. You're just not the same as you were in high school.

ED
High school? For God's sake, that was eight years ago. I would hope that I've changed. It's called growth, John.

JOHN
You call that growth? Always in debt. Perpetual college student? Gonna ever graduate? Write that great American novel. Still haven't let go of that, have ya? And those all night gambling binges. It's draggin' ya down, man, and your lady, too!!

ED STIFFENS AND GLARES AT JOHN.

JOHN (CONT.)
You sure were a lot more fun in the old days.

ED
Yeah, maybe.

JOHN
(Starts to laugh, remembering a fun time.)
Oh boy!

ED
What?

JOHN
Aw, just reminiscing.

ED
About what?

JOHN
Do you remember 90 miles an hour down the interstate to the Springs because we were late for our dates down there? It was dark out and you said, "What damn fool would be comin' down the road as fast as *I* am?" I looked out the back window and sure 'nuff, there were those headlights about a mile back and staying

JOHN (CONT.)
right with us. Suddenly these blue and red lights started flashing and whirling around and the headlights started to gain on us.

ED LAUGHS AND JOHN JOINS IN.

ED
The trooper said, "You don't mind my asking, 'Where are you going at 90 miles an hour', do ya?" And I had actually thought we were going a hundred.
(He laughs and shakes his head.)

JOHN
I'll never forget. You actually told him we had dates and were late. And he shook his head, whistled, and said, "Those must be some hot dates!" And you said, "Sir, they really are." And your voice was so pathetic that he just gave you a warning and let us go. Man, we used to really have some good times together.

ED
Yeah, well…I guess it couldn't last forever.

JOHN
(Crosses and turns radio up.)
You and Ginny didn't have a fight, did ya?

ED
Lay off, John! I said to forget it. Let's get back to work.
(Shakes head, crosses to boom box and shuts it off.)
Sorry, but I just can't take that noise you call music today.

JOHN
That's cool. What's left to do? This is one helluva set. Just a cell. What's the play about, do you know?

ED
It's some weird story about a guy in the middle ages who gets thrown into a cell in a dank dungeon. It's pitch black and he can't see a thing. I don't know who wrote it. Poe, O. Henry, Hawthorne, Dumas? You remember – those guys we had to read in English Lit?

JOHN
Oh yeah, I remember. I hated it. I could never get into that stuff. Why would one want to waste time on that crap? Life's not like that. I'll stick to ***Penthouse*** and ***Hustler***. That's what life's all about.

ED

(Shakes head and smiles.)

I'm not saying that I don't enjoy ***Penthouse***, upon occasion. But I kind of liked those old stories – "Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque", "The Pit and the Pendulum". I really got off on that one. I must have a perverted side to me. "The Man in the Iron Mask", "The Count of Monte Cristo", those guys knew how to write. It was supposed to be fiction, but at times it seemed more real to me than actual life. If I could write like that, you better believe I wouldn't be doing construction anymore.

JOHN

I can't believe you're still serious about becoming a writer.

(Goes to tool box, busy work.)

ED

Well, I am. What's wrong with that?

JOHN

Imagination.

ED

What?

JOHN

Imagination! You don't have any. You know what I mean. You need a scheme, a plot, whatever they call it, man. You can't create a story without it. You'll never make it as a writer.

ED

It really pisses me off when you speak to me like that! Just what the hell makes you think I don't have imagination, anyway? You're a great one to talk. All you've ever been able to imagine is hopping into the sack with some –

JOHN

Hey, get over it, Ed. It's no biggie. Jesus! So, what happens to the dude in the cell?

ED DOESN'T ANSWER. HE'S OFF IN ANOTHER WORLD.

JOHN (CONT.)

(Puzzled.)

So what happens to the asshole in the cell?

ED
What? Oh, him. Well, he finds a coin in his pocket. I guess the jail keeper missed it or for sure he would have taken it – a minor flaw in the story, but it always bothered me. I would have fixed that if I had been the author.

JOHN
So what did he do, go to the Coke machine?

ED
Actually, he put the coin to much better use. To make the time pass he flips the coin up in the air, and when he hears it clank on the cell floor he crawls around until he finds it. He keeps doing this over and over again.

JOHN
Can't he see it?

ED
Don't you listen? I told you it was pitch black down there.

JOHN
So?

ED
Sooo what?

JOHN
(Bored.)
So, what happens next? Doesn't seem like much of a story to me.

ED
(Aside.)
That doesn't surprise me.
(To John.)
Just be patient, it gets better. The story has a real sadistic twist.

JOHN
And that's what you like, huh? OK, I'll bite. What's the sadistic twist?

ED
One day the prisoner throws the coin up in the air and waits for it to come down so can look for it…
(Pause)
…but there's no clank. The coin didn't come down. He searches for it in the darkness, but it's nowhere to be found. Where did it go? He's petrified.
(Pause.)

JOHN

Well, go on!

ED

OK. This is the part I really dig.

(Speaks as if narrating a tale of suspense on the radio.)

By the time the jail keeper shows up the next day, the prisoner has gone stark, raving mad. Picture it!! What must have gone through his mind, his body, his soul. The fear, panic, there in the pitch black. The coin, the thin thread that connected him with sanity, was gone. God, I love it!

JOHN

Man, you are perverted.

ED

I told you that. I do have this dark side to my personality. I think I came into the world with it. But, don't we all?

JOHN

(Annoyed.)

I don't know! Come on, man. I'm getting the creeps. Let's finish up and get outa here.

ED

OK, but don't you at least want to hear what happened to the coin?

JOHN

(Exasperated.)

I guess. Seems I'm a captive audience.

ED

Well, as I said, I don't remember all the details, but they take the prisoner somewhere, to execute him, I think, because he's gone mad – maybe that's what they used to do – I don't know. But anyway, after he's taken away, a couple of guys go into the cell with a lantern, I guess to take all his garbage out, and one of them finds the coin. You know where it was?

JOHN SHRUGS, INDICATES, "NO".

ED (CONT.)

It was caught in a cobweb at the top of the cell –

(Points to the top of cell.)

Right there.

JOHN

Great.

JOHN (CONT.)

(Sarcastically.)

Yeah, that's one hell of a story. What's left to do?

(Goes into cell to look around.)

ED

Actually, I think all we have to do is check the lock on the cell door, clean up our mess, turn out the lights and leave.

(Closes cell door, locking John inside.)

Check the door and see if you can open it.

JOHN

(Tries to open door. It stays locked.)

OK, it works. Now, will you please unlock it? This gives me the willies to be in here.

ED STARES AT HIM, AND DOESN'T MOVE.

JOHN (CONT.)

Come on, Ed, stop screwin' around. Let me out of here!!

(Starts to panic.)

What's goin' on, man?

ED

(Angry and resolute.)

A real life story is what's going on, you son of a bitch! You think I didn't know about you and Ginny? What do you take me for? I've known for months. But, I didn't know what to do about it at first – it hurt so much. I loved her, *really* loved her. You knew that. You were my friend.

(Starts to laugh, manically.)

Friend.

(Somber.)

You should also know how poorly I handle betrayal. We used to share those kinds of secrets, as *friends*, didn't we, John? You revealed your concerns about your uncontrollable lust; how at times you were afraid it was a sickness. I confided in you about my fears of being too trusting and about my preoccupation with deceit. How foolish of me…to have been *that* trusting. And, you know something else? There was a part of me that actually admired you, for all your conquests.

(Shakes his head in disgust.)

JOHN

Oh my God, you won't get away with this, man. Ginny knew I was comin' over here with you and -

ED

(Cuts him off.)
Virginia's dead.

(Starts to go in and out of twilight zone delivery, as if going mad.)
Oh yes, it's true. I killed her. As for you, well, there won't be anyone in this theatre until rehearsals start in two weeks. You might say the theatre's going to be dark, or should I have said, "pitch black". And you say I have no imagination, you arrogant bastard.

JOHN

(Frantic.)
You're sick. Ginny was right. She told me, but I never believed her. I thought it was the typical housewife trying to get sympathy, but…For God's sake, let me out of here!! What's going to happen to me?

ED

You're amazing, John – you didn't care about her at all, did you? She's dead, and all you think about is your own skin. Well, I've got to go now, John. You remember that long trip I mentioned to you. By the time they find your body, I'll be a long way from here.

JOHN

You're not going to leave me in here.

ED

No one will ever find me where I'm going. Oops, I almost forgot.

(Takes coin from his pocket and tosses it into cell.)

JOHN

(Picks up coin, incredulous.)
What the hell is this? A penny? What are you doing?

ED

It's all I could spare, John. But, I'm sure you'll find a good use for it.

ED CROSSES TO BREAKER BOX AND THROWS THE SWITCH, PLUNGING THEATRE INTO DARKNESS, AND EXITS AS ***JOHN*** GIVES A BLOOD CURDLING SCREAM.

CURTAIN.