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Street People

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CREATIVE WRITING

In this issue the Journal inaugurates a new section of creative writing, in which we hope to encourage the artistic expression of psychiatric residents. We welcome original material of any nature: poems, short stories, or otherwise. The following one act play is meant to dramatize the often complex issues that surround the evaluation and care of "street people."

STREET PEOPLE

JOHN MATT DORN, M.D.

Street People is a one act play about a Philadelphia crisis center. The characters are *Mr. Alright*, a young man who is actively hallucinating; *Dr. Serota*, the crisis center psychiatrist; *Janet*, the crisis center nurse; *Officer Plansky*, a local policeman; *Madam Carpark*, a rich woman from Rittenhouse Square; and *Frank*, a street person. The entire play takes place in a crisis center, which should be represented by two chairs which face each other at an angle; behind the chairs is a portable screen of the type typically seen in doctors' offices. Lighting should be fluorescent in nature, as would be typical of a hospital at night. As the curtain rises, Mr. Alright and Dr. Serota are sitting down talking to each other.

Alright: Pigs! Hundreds of them!

Serota: Where?!

Alright: Market Street! I could hardly cross the street there was so many of them.

Serota: On Market Street??

Alright: Yep. Hundreds of them, just milling around. I guess they was angry cause the mall, uh, whadda ya call it—

Serota: The Gallery?

Alright: Yeah, that's it. The Gallery ain't open at an hour like this. Terrible fix, I suppose, if you're a pig in the city and the Gallery ain't open.

Serota: Uh, huh. (*leans forward in disbelief, then sits back unsure of himself*) Nurse! (*looks Stage Left*) Janet?!

Janet: Yes, doctor. (*enters Stage Left*)

Serota: (*gets up and walks Janet towards the front of Stage Left; Mr. Alright ignores them—he is busy looking around the room suspiciously*) Janet, you, uh, take the train into the Reading Terminal, don't you?

Janet: Every day. Why?

Serota: Today?

Janet: Sure. Why?

Serota: Well, on your way to work today did you see anything, well, unusual?

Janet: How did you know?!

Serota: Know what? What did you see? (*glances at Mr. Alright nervously*)

Janet: Never seen anything like it! Wouldn't of believed it if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes!

Serota: What? What?

Dr. Dorn is a fourth-year resident.

- Janet: A 1936 penny. (*takes coin from pocket*) Right in the middle of Market Street. I mean, I know people throw pennies away and all, but I never expected to find a '36 penny. Can you imagine?
- Serota: Is that all?
- Janet: What did you expect, a bunny rabbit parade?
- Serota: No, not quite. Thanks anyway. (*shaking her head, Janet exists Stage Left; Serota walks back and sits down facing Mr. Alright, who is now staring under the chairs suspiciously*) What's wrong, Mr. Alright?
- Alright: Somebody let them in.
- Serota: (*bemused*) You mean, the pigs?
- Alright: Nope. Hogs. Meaner than pigs.
- Serota: Uh, huh. And just what do these hogs want, Mr. Alright?
- Alright: Food.
- Serota: Food?
- Alright: That's right, food. Middle of the winter, you know. Snow on the ground. Terrible fix if you're a hog in the city and there ain't no food.
- Serota: What kind of food do hogs like to eat?
- Alright: Protein mostly. Like that one there, nippin' at your garbanzos. (*points at Serota's crotch*)
- Serota: (*jumps up onto his chair reflexively*)
- Alright: Only one way to fight them off. Got to call in the pigs to help. Hogs and pigs don't mix, you know. Goes way back. Sooeey! Sooeey! Sooeey! (*starts marching around the stage giving pig calls*)
- Serota: Nurse! Nurse!
- Janet: (*runs in Stage Left*) Doctor, what's wrong?
- Alright: Sooeey! Sooeey!
- Serota: It's Alright!
- Janet: Doesn't look all right to me.
- Serota: No, not me. The patient, Mr. Alright. He thinks there are hogs in the room who want to eat our, our . . .
- Janet: Yes?
- Alright: Sooeey! Sooeey!
- Serota: Oh, never mind. Anyway, he thinks there are hogs in the room.
- Janet: (*pauses, looks up at Serota*) If he thinks there are hogs in the room, what do you think?
- Alright: Sooeey! Sooeey!
- Serota: (*gets down from chair embarrassedly*) Psychodrama, Janet. I was just trying to get to the root of the patient's conflict.
- Janet: You mean like the time you pretended to be a Buick for the man who thought he was a used car salesman? Look out!
- Alright: (*has fallen on all fours and is moving around the room, making grunting noises; he approaches Serota—who jumps back onto his chair—and starts nipping at his heels*)
- Serota: Janet, I think we're going to have to admit Mr. Alright.
- Janet: Really. You think so. (*hesitates, enjoying Serota's discomfort*) You mean, you think he's acting odd?
- Serota: Janet!
- Janet: Oh, okay. (*taps Mr. Alright on the shoulder*) Excuse me, Mr. Alright?
- Alright: (*sanelly*) I am; he's not. (*points at Serota*)
- Janet: You're going to have to come with me. (*Mr. Alright stands up sanelly and starts to exit Stage Left with Janet*) You're going to be all right.
- Alright: Of course I am. I already am Alright.
- Janet: (*soothingly*) Of course you are. (*exits with Mr. Alright Stage Left; a few moments later, she reenters Stage Left; Serota is still standing on his chair*) Do you want him to have any medicine?
- Serota: Uh, yeah. Fifty milligrams of Thorazine.
- Janet: (*starts to exist, then hesitates*) Do get down off that chair. (*exists Stage Left*)

- Serota: (*blushes, gets down from chair again and sits down; reaches behind the chair and picks up a clipboard that he starts writing on; a few moments later a policeman enters Stage Left and begins pretending he is a batter, hitting imaginary pitches with an imaginary bat; Serota watches for a few moments, then speaks up*) Excuse me, can I help you?
- Plansky: Got any rosin? (*laughs nervously*) Just kidding, Doc. Getting in shape, you know. Spring training's only a couple months away.
- Serota: Lot of off season work, huh?
- Plansky: Boy, don't you know it! Weights, road work . . .
- Serota: The diet.
- Plansky: (*laughs embarrassedly, rubs his pot belly*) Yeah, well; like I said, still a couple months till spring training. Say, Doc, you a baseball fan?
- Serota: Some . . .
- Plansky: Maybe you heard of me. Phenomenal Ph-lansky they used to call me. I was the only man to ever hit a ball out of the old ballpark. Why, I remember a time when . . .
- Serota: Excuse me, Officer. Is there something we can do for you?
- Plansky: Huh? (*looks angry, then embarrassed*) Oh yeah. (*tugs at his belt*) Got a patient for you.
- Serota: Who?
- Plansky: (*mumbles incoherently*)
- Serota: What?
- Plansky: Got a case for you, I said. Out in the waiting room.
- Serota: Oh. (*pauses*) What's wrong with him?
- Plansky: Well, uh (*mumbles incoherently*)
- Serota: What?
- Plansky: A street person, I said! Out in the waiting room.
- Serota: A street person?!
- Plansky: It's not my fault. He took a swing at some rich lady. Said she'd have my badge if I didn't bring him in. What was I gonna do, take him to jail?
- Serota: So you brought him here? I guess you think he's crazy.
- Plansky: Well, no, I mean, yeah. Anyway, that's why I put down. Here (*hands Serota a sheaf of papers*), you figure it out.
- Serota: (*takes papers*) Thanks a lot.
- Plansky: (*starts to exit Stage Left, then hesitates*) Say, Doc, you ain't really a baseball fan, are you?
- Serota: (*flatly, without looking up*) Phenomenal Ph-lansky. Third base. Bats left, fields right. Hit .362 one year at Norfolk. Considered best pro prospect since Gehrig until (*looks up*) you broke your leg.
- Plansky: Yeah (*sadly, but gratefully; limps off Stage Left*)
- Serota: (*begins leafing through commitment papers with a look of disgust on his face; a few moments later a woman enters and walks to the front of Stage Left; she is wearing a fur hat, fur coat, and fur boots; she begins fixing her makeup in an imaginary mirror, oblivious to Serota and her surroundings*) Excuse me, can I help you?
- Carpark: Yes. (*still doing her makeup*) Are you the doctor? Good. My name is Gloria Stinson Albrecht Haverford Carpark.
- Serota: The Third?
- Carpark: Don't be silly. It's a family name. Now, about this man. (*puts up her makeup*)
- Serota: You mean, the street person?
- Carpark: That's right.
- Serota: So you're the one.
- Carpark: (*walks over to Serota and puts a hand on his shoulder*) I do hope you'll be able to help him. It's such a pity. (*puts free hand over her heart*) All those fine young men going to waste!
- Serota: (*angrily*) So he took a swing at you, huh?
- Carpark: Yes! Can you imagine! (*moves hand from heart to forehead*)
- Serota: What did you say?

- Carpark: (*flustered*) Why, I was just trying to explain the many opportunities that are available to young men today.
- Serota: Like what?
- Carpark: Well, like technical school.
- Serota: Technical school?
- Carpark: You know, like in those ads they have in the back of magazines: become an electrical engineer in thirty days. You can even pay for your tuition with an American Express card.
- Serota: (*raises fist*) Was that when he hit you?
- Carpark: Yes! How'd you know? There was nothing I could do to calm him down. He was quite obviously out of his mind.
- Serota: Quite obviously.
- Carpark: So I hailed a policeman and insisted he be brought in for a proper examination. Do you know, that policeman almost refused to do his duty!
- Serota: No!!
- Carpark: Can't blame him, though. He's just a cog in this silly capitalistic system that gives a privileged few power over the defenseless masses.
- Serota: Here?! In America?
- Carpark: That's right. Why, if this man wasn't so obviously crazy, I'd take him home myself. Feed him. Bathe him. Even let him spend the night.
- Serota: You're too kind.
- Carpark: Yes, well, it runs in the family. (*puts on fur gloves*) You will take good care of him, won't you?
- Serota: Of course, Madam. Is there any other way we can be of service?
- Carpark: No, I don't think so. Not today. What's that? (*looks Stage Left, where a man can be heard making high pitched noises*)
- Serota: Sounds like the mating call of the brown bellied, displaced street person. Madam, if I were you, I'd consider leaving through the rear.
- Carpark: (*looks anxiously Stage Left*) Yes, I suppose I should. (*exists hurriedly Stage Right, waving goodbye*) Well, toodles! (*exits Stage Right*)
- Serota: (*waving*) Toodles.
- Plansky: (*a moment later Plansky enters Stage Left with a dirty and dishevelled street person; as soon as he sees Serota, the street person wrestles himself loose from Plansky's grasp and makes a mock dignified attempt to make himself presentable*) Well, here he is. Where do you want him?
- Serota: Over there's fine. (*points to chair where Mr. Alright sat*)
- Plansky: (*walks the street person over to the chair and makes him sit down*) Name's Frank. That's all I could get out of him. If I were you, I'd give him a shower. (*scratches himself*) Make sure you throw in some of that stuff for lice. (*tugs at his belt*) Well, good night. (*limps off Stage Left*)
- Serota: (*hesitates, then sits down*) Hello. I'm Dr. Serota. I'm here to help you.
- Frank: And I'm the Easter Bunny!
- Serota: Do you really think you're the Easter Bunny?
- Frank: Naw, what do you think I am, nuts? (*crosses arms angrily*) It's all that rich bitch's fault. She's the one you should be examining!
- Serota: (*writing*) She said you took a swing at her.
- Frank: Swing?! Naw. I was just trying to give her a few *haute couture* tips, that's all.
- Serota: Ever seen a psychiatrist before?
- Frank: Sure. Lots of them. They're easy to spot: heads down, noses up, hands out. Can't miss 'em.
- Serota: (*irritated*) No, I mean, have you ever been treated by a psychiatrist before?
- Frank: Naw, not really. I considered going into analysis once, but I didn't have the money.
- Serota: Ever feel that people are out to hurt you?
- Frank: Sure. Especially when they step on me.
- Serota: When you see people walking down the street you don't know, do you ever feel that they're talking about or laughing at you?
- Frank: All the time.
- Serota: Ever hear voices or see visions?

- Frank: Once.
- Serota: (*looks up*) Yeah? What was that?
- Frank: Kim Novac. In the movie "Picnic." You know, with William Holden. I never knew a woman could look so good.
- Serota: (*starts writing again*) Drink?
- Frank: Sometimes.
- Serota: How much?
- Frank: Depends.
- Serota: On what?
- Frank: On how much money I got. (*looks up and counts on his fingers*) Let's see . . . put down . . . (*points to clipboard*) one to one-and-a-half quarts a week. Yeah, that's about right, one to one-and-a-half quarts a week. (*indignantly*) No hard stuff, though. Just wine.
- Serota: (*irritated*) Frank, why do you live on the street?
- Frank: Well . . . I got this little devil living inside of me.
- Serota: Little devil?! (*scribbles excitedly*) You think there's a little devil living inside of you?
- Frank: Calm down, Doc. Don't get so excited! It's not good for your mental health.
- Serota: But you said . . .
- Frank: I know. I said I thought there was a little devil living inside of me. But not the kind you're thinkin' of.
- Serota: What kind, then?
- Frank: The kind . . . that don't let you forget. (*pauses*) You really want to know?
- Serota: Sure I do. Go on.
- Frank: Well, all right. Say, Doc, you got a cigarette?
- Serota: Sure. (*takes pack of cigarettes from pocket and gives one to Frank*)
- Frank: Thanks. (*takes cigarette and pats pockets embarrassedly*) Say, Doc, you got a light?
- Serota: (*smiles, lights Frank's cigarette*)
- Frank: (*takes long contented draw on cigarette*) Well, it all started in the Navy.
- Serota: The Navy?
- Frank: Yeah, you know. (*starts singing*) Anchors away, me boys. Anchors away! (*begins humming Navy anthem, becoming progressively more animated.*)
- Serota: Frank. Frank!
- Frank: (*stops humming*) Oh yeah. (*laughs*) Well, anyway, I was in Hawaii on shore leave. Near the end of the war. Met a girl named Mawi who gave me something to remember her by. Didn't even know I had the drip till we was out to sea. Couldn't turn back then. Not just for one man. Not for the drip.
- Serota: What'd they do, give you penicillin?
- Frank: Nope. Didn't have any. Lots of shortages near the end of the war, you know. (*takes long draw on cigarette, then blows out smoke for affect*) They put me in the boiler room.
- Serota: The boiler room?! Why'd they do that?
- Frank: Don't know. Never could figure it out.
- Serota: How long did they keep you there?
- Frank: Thirty-three, thirty-four days. Can't remember exactly. By the time I came up, the war was over.
- Serota: And nobody checked you out after that?
- Frank: Nope. Too busy celebrating, I guess.
- Serota: What happened then?
- Frank: Came home—eventually. By the time I got home, my wife was dead.
- Serota: I'm sorry. Who told you?
- Frank: She did, that is, I found her. Right inside the front door. Must've been going to the mailbox. Had a letter in her hand telling me she didn't feel well.
- Serota: What'd you do?
- Frank: Buried her, of course. (*smiles*) Betcha can't guess where I learned to do that. Bury people, that is.

- Serota: (*shrugs*)
- Frank: The Navy! You think they just dump dead sailors into the sea?! There's a lot of work that goes into those bodies.
- Serota: Gee, I never knew that. You mean you actually buried your wife?
- Frank: (*proudly*) Buried all of them. (*puts out cigarette on floor*)
- Serota: How many were there?
- Frank: Three. Four really. I wouldn't marry the last one.
- Serota: What happened?
- Frank: Well, let's see. (*looks up and count on his fingers*) Heart attack, stroke, car wreck, and . . . (*sadly*) fire.
- Serota: You mean your last wife, I mean, girlfriend, died in a fire?
- Frank: Yeah.
- Serota: That's awful. What happened?
- Frank: We was living in the back of the mortuary. Small place, you know. The personal touch. Anyway, some drunk visitor left a lit cigarette in the hand of one of the deceased. Trying to be sentimental, I guess. Problem is, coffins ain't meant to be fireproof 'cause nobody figures they'll be going to hell. Next thing I know all the coffins was on fire. It was a strange thing to see. Looked like Satan was having an organizational meeting. (*pauses*) Firemen got there ten minutes too late. Fire burned down everything: the house, the mortuary, and . . .
- Serota: Your wife, I mean, girlfriend.
- Frank: (*nods sadly*)
- Serota: (*after a pause*) Let me guess. You don't believe in banks. So the fire burned up all your money, too.
- Frank: That's right. Kept it in the lining of my most expensive coffin. Never thought I'd sell it, and generally speaking, most crooks won't go near a coffin.
- Serota: What happened to you after that?
- Frank: Moved around for a while. From friend to friend. Got old pretty quick, though. People'll tell you they like you living with 'em, but you know it ain't true.
- Serota: No family?
- Frank: Nope. All dead and buried. (*smiles weakly*) I guess I'm pretty hard on family, too.
- Serota: Maybe it's a good thing you never knew any psychiatrists. (*pauses*) Is that when you started living on the street?
- Frank: Not all at once. I always was a weekend drinker. One weekend I went off and didn't come back, that's all. Nobody noticed.
- Serota: Nobody noticed?
- Frank: Oh sure, they said things like, "Poor Frankie" and "What a shame." But did any of them offer you any real help, like a job or a meal or a place to stay? Not likely.
- Serota: But why didn't you ever get another job?
- Frank: Second mate to some monkey in the boiler room again? No thanks.
- Serota: But Frank. There are always things you can do. Like, like . . .
- Frank: (*sarcastically*) Technical school?! (*laughs*) So I can fix that rich lady's wiring. No thanks.
- Serota: What about welfare, the shelters?
- Frank: Are you crazy? I'd have to leave town. Besides, have you ever seen them shelters?
- Serota: No, I can't say that . . .
- Frank: Besides. I got something you don't have.
- Serota: What?
- Frank: The luxury of idleness. Time to dream. (*proudly*) Bert Russell, 1962.
- Serota: Frank. Don't bullshit me. I know it's no fun living on the street.
- Frank: Beats being up all night taking care of street people, don't it?
- Serota: (*hesitates*) That's not the point. Anyway, I don't like it, and if you don't let me give you a shower, a change of clothes, a good meal, and a place to stay—at least for one night—I'll put you in the hospital and call you crazy.
- Frank: You can do that?

Serota: Yep. Can, and will.

Frank: *(after a pause)* Well, all right. You're the skipper.

Serota: Good. *(looks Stage Left)* Janet! *(looks back at Frank)* By the way, Frank, I meant to ask you. You never had any children because of . . .

Frank: The drip.

Serota: *(nods)*

Janet: *(enters Stage Left)* Yes, doctor?

Serota: Mister . . . uh, Mister . . .

Frank: Bustop. Frank Bustop.

Serota: Mr. Bustop will be needing a shower. Could you show him where the bathroom is, please? Then come back for a minute, would you?

Janet: Sure. Mr. Bustop? *(escorts Frank Stage Left; Frank stops before they exit)*

Frank: Uh, Doc, what kind of place are you puttin' me up in?

Serota: A real nice place, Frank. Kind of a bed and breakfast place, you know.

Frank: Oh. *(exits with Janet)*

Serota: *(starts writing; after several moments, Janet comes back onto Stage Left)* How's he doing?

Janet: Oh, all right. Says the soap's too harsh for his skin, though. What's his problem, anyway?

Frank: War neurosis. Say, Janet, do we have the number of that woman who was here earlier? You know, the one with Bloomingdale's psychosis.

Janet: Oh yeah. The mink dressed up as a person. Why?

Serota: Give her a call and tell her to get a room ready. We've got a guest for her.

Janet: You mean, Mr. Bustop?!

Serota: That's right. Tell her to keep her distance, though. He's tough on women.