

HERETIC

A Play in Four Scenes

by

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HERETIC

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HERETIC

Scene 1

SETTING:

A room with a queen-size bed at centre. The front door is down right. Door to bathroom up left. A suitcase stands near the front door. There is a telephone and a cloth bag on the night table.

AT FADE IN:

LISA sits on the bed, wearing jeans, a muslin blouse and sandals. Dressed in a dark suit and tie, MEL sits in a chair by the door.

MEL

The cold was what most people complained about. But it never bothered me that much, because you could do something about it--wear long-johns and an extra pair of socks. The dark was what I had a problem with. God, I used to hate night watch! Midnight to four. I used to get it all the time. The sergeant had it in for me--I never knew why. You're out there half the night and you're supposed to watch for movement and you can't see a thing. Or rather, you see things, but you don't know what they are. All you do know is that there are people on the other side with rifles, probably as nervous as you are. And nervous people tend to be trigger-happy.

LISA

Were we at war then?

MEL

Well, yes and no. There was an agreement, but only for a cease-fire. That was as far as they'd go, because they insisted the south belonged to them. There hadn't been any shooting for years, but then there was an incident. One of our patrol boats strayed into their territorial waters and they seized it. Things were pretty tense at the time.

LISA

I see.

MEL

And that's a bad combination: darkness and tension. I think the more imaginative people are, the more the dark

HERETIC

bothers them, and I had a wild imagination then.

LISA

You did?

MEL

Oh yeah.

LISA

That surprises me.

MEL

Why?

LISA

You seem so... controlled.

MEL

This was quite a while ago. I was 19. I thought I was gonna go crazy. The sounds... I grew up in the city and there I am in the mountains, in Asia for God's sake, hearing things I've got no idea what they are. And there were mists up there. They looked like shadows moving through the dark. And it was hard to keep from thinking, Suppose it's not just mist? Suppose it's someone creeping up on you? And it was all you could do sometimes to keep from firing off a burst just to make sure. Anyhow, that's how I started. It was easy to score and fairly cheap, and it was the only thing that could keep my nerves in check. I knew I'd have a habit when I got back, but I didn't care. All I cared about was getting through my tour.

LISA

Can I see them?... The tracks.

MEL

All right.

(rolling up his sleeve)

They're not that visible anymore.

LISA

Yes, they are... What's this?

MEL

I had an abscess there.

LISA

And this?

MEL

HERETIC

A tattoo.

LISA

Yes, but what—

MEL

Synanon.

LISA

What's—

MEL

A gang of thieves and rapists who passed themselves off as social workers. I was gonna have it removed, but then I decided to leave it there as a reminder.

LISA

"Reminder"?

MEL

Of what can happen when you put yourself in other people's hands.

LISA

I see. You had a bad experience.

MEL

That's one way of putting it. They fucked us over six ways from Sunday.

LISA

"Us"?

MEL

I was married when I got called up. When I came back with a habit, she tried to help me quit, but I couldn't. So she started using herself. That way, she thought, it wouldn't come between us.

LISA

I see...

MEL

Hmm?

LISA

She loved you.

MEL

That's a hell of a thing to say!

HERETIC

LISA

Well, what would you say about it?

MEL

I'd say she was stupid... Anyhow, pretty soon we hit bottom. Then we heard about this clinic that was supposed to be getting good results. We heard they used radical methods, but you reach a point where you're willing to try anything. So we put ourselves in their hands. And they took everything we had--our house, our car, what little savings we had left. Finally, one of the counselors took her. And strange to say, that's what saved me--woke me up to the fact that there was only one person I could count on. Myself. Getting clean was the hardest thing I've ever done, but I did it. And of course I couldn't help asking myself why I hadn't been able to do it before. But the answer's pretty plain. What they'd done to us gave me a reason I didn't have before.

LISA

To get your wife back.

MEL

By then she was long gone. No, the goal was a lot simpler. To get clean and hold a job long enough to save the money to buy a gun, then go back there and kill him.

LISA

Did you?

MEL

If I did, I'd have to be pretty stupid to tell you, wouldn't I?... Your turn.

LISA

My experience was a lot different.

MEL

Uh-huh.

LISA

You want to hear it?

MEL

That's what this is--an exchange of views.

LISA

Is it?

HERETIC

MEL

Yes... I'm listening.

LISA

Well...he saved my life. Literally.

MEL

Uh-huh.

LISA

I mean it. There were a lot of parties out at the lakes, the semester I was there. And one night three girls on their way back drove off the road and rolled over into a ditch. They were all killed. One of them had lived on my floor. I remember the RA letting her parents into her room so they could take her stuff. A couple of us were sitting in the lounge, wondering if we should go up to them and say something, and not knowing what we could say. And I remember thinking, Why couldn't it have been me? A couple of seconds of terror and it would all be over with. It was a lucky thing I didn't have a car. Except of course, there's no such thing as luck.

MEL

No?

LISA

Everything happens for a reason.

MEL

Sure would be nice to think so.

LISA

It does. This, too.

MEL

Oh yeah? What do you suppose it is?

LISA

It's hard to say.

MEL

But if you had to take a wild guess...

LISA

I wouldn't, at this point. I'd wait.

MEL

For what?

LISA

HERETIC

A sign. Something may be working through you to test me—
-or through me to test you.

MEL

Could be... But you were saying...

LISA

Hmm?

MEL

About how your life was saved.

LISA

Well, that's the story in a nutshell. After I met him, I
stopped having those thoughts.

MEL

How did you meet him?

LISA

I took his class.

MEL

Don't tell me he taught there!

LISA

No. This was a class he taught in town. There was a
studio on First Street called Things of the Spirit. I
went there for transcendental meditation and his class
was right after. We started talking and he talked me
into taking it. He can be very persuasive.

MEL

I believe it.

LISA

But I was glad I did. It was a great class. We
petitioned the university to give us credit for it. It
was ridiculous that they wouldn't. The professor who
teaches the Eastern Religions course is a flinty old
Lutheran who doesn't believe in any of it, and Jules is a
chela.

MEL

Chela?

LISA

A disciple. He studied in Nepal with a holy man and
afterward—

MEL

HERETIC

By the way, that's not true.

LISA

What isn't?

MEL

That he studied in Nepal.

LISA

How do you know?

MEL

Friend of mine works at the State Department. He's never been out of the country. He doesn't have a passport.

LISA

Sorry, but I don't believe you.

MEL

It's true, Lisa.

LISA

Why should I take your word for it against his?

MEL

Anyhow, you were saying...

LISA

Is that how it works? You get me to tell you everything that's happened, everything I believe in, and then you punch holes in it.

MEL

I'm trying to correct some misinformation you may have. Misinformation and misconceptions.

LISA

About my religion.

MEL

If that's what you want to call it.

LISA

That's what it is.

MEL

Anyhow, go on.

LISA

I don't think I want to do this.

HERETIC

MEL

You haven't given it a chance.

LISA

(reaches for the phone)

What happened to it?

MEL

It's out of order.

LISA

I can see that. A piece is missing--the part you speak through. Where is it?

(Pause.)

Listen, my friends are gonna be worried about me, wondering where I am.

MEL

Afraid that can't be helped.

LISA

I never should have agreed to this!... I just thought I'd meet with you so my mother could stop worrying, but I can see--

MEL

Is that really why?

LISA

Huh?

MEL

You agreed to meet with me.

LISA

Yes!

MEL

Did you really think coming here would get her to stop worrying?

LISA

I hoped it would...

MEL

But you had to know there wasn't much chance of that. I wonder if you had another reason.

HERETIC

LISA

Like what?

MEL

Maybe you want out.

LISA

That's so far off base it's not even worth an answer!

MEL

I'm just wondering if-

LISA

This whole thing is a waste!

MEL

It's a little too soon to judge, I'd say. You need to give it more time.

LISA

How much?

MEL

The process usually takes several days.

LISA

"Process"? Then it's not really an exchange of views. More like a program.

MEL

No, the opposite: a deprogramming.

LISA

That's insulting! I'm not a computer. What I believe is based on conclusions I've come to.

MEL

On your own--or with someone's "guidance"?

LISA

What's wrong with that? Isn't that always the case when you learn something new? You have a guide--a teacher, a coach, some kind of instructor.

MEL

That's where the problem comes in, though--doesn't it? When they start steering you in a certain direction.

LISA

Not if it's the way you want to go.

HERETIC

But is it?

MEL

Yes!

LISA

I wonder...

MEL

Wonder all you want. I could care less what you think.

LISA

Well, you should.

MEL

Why?

LISA

Because you're not going anywhere until I say so.

MEL

(LIGHTS OUT. END OF SCENE.)