

HOWARD THE DOLLMAKER

By
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HOWARD THE DOLLMAKER

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HOWARD THE DOLLMAKER

CAST OF CHARACTERS

HOWARD – A dollmaker dedicated to his craft...

VICTIM – One of Howard’s “friends”

CYRUS – General Manager at *Hillary’s*

SYLVIA – One of Howard’s new “friends”

DEBORAH – A customer at *Hillary’s*

GRAYSON – A sales associate at *Hillary’s*

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ACT 1
SCENE 1

Lights up on VICTIM tied up and gagged in a room. Their gender does not matter. HOWARD does not care so we shouldn't either. Victim is located at center stage, cheating out slightly to stage right. They appear to be asleep, unconscious.

Light flares as though interrogation lights are being flashed in Victim's eyes. Victim awakens with a jolt and begins struggling against the rope and mumbling incoherently with the gag restricting their vocal cords. Howard likes it tight.

A footstep is heard. Victim pauses to listen.

Nothing...

A second footstep, closer, tip taps on the hard floor. Victim ecstatically begins screaming through the gag in an attempt to get the person's attention, whoever it is. The footsteps continue, increasing in volume slightly with every step. Victim eventually gets the message that the footsteps are not a welcome sign.

A door creaks open slowly. Victim's eyes go wide with fear as a man ambles onstage. He simultaneously has the energy of a young man and the constitution of a very old one. He walks as though he's probing the ground for fossils or quarters with an old metal detector. His age is indistinguishable, but his smile is unmistakable. His face is neutral and hides all intents behind a façade.

HOWARD. Hello, my friend. Welcome to my little abode.

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Silence as Howard walks toward Victim and begins checking the rope and gag. Victim remains quiet. Howard nonchalantly carries a blade at his waist.

HOWARD. I hope the trip here wasn't too rough. I usually don't have much trouble, but you proved to be a little...problematic. Nasty bit of work getting someone like you here. The hoops I had to go through, the planning, the godforsaken planning. Can you imagine? It's like scheduling a date with someone who doesn't know they're going on a date. It is hellish.

Pause

HOWARD. Oh, right. Sorry. I get so caught up in the moment meeting someone for the first time, I sometimes forget to introduce myself. I'm Howard. I live...well, I live here. I'm yada yada years old. Not to be a stickler but I don't like mentioning my age. Some people say I look good for it, but I always detect a hint of...malice in their voices. Like it's an accomplishment to look as good as I do at...

Pause

HOWARD. Oh, you little sneak. You almost got me to tell you. I knew you were tricky after I met you out there but gee, I didn't realize we'd have so much in common. Do you really want to know how old I am? Yes? Ok, fine. But just 'cuz you've been such a good sport about this whole thing. I'm thirty-three years, fourteen months, thirty-six days, and yada hours old. I look good for it, right?

Pause

HOWARD. You're just saying that. Or at least you're trying to. I wouldn't try too hard to get those gags off. I consider myself a pro at knot-tying. I was a cub scout. Made it up to wildebeest or whatever the rank is they give you after you're a bear. I think it was a bear. Could've been a wildebeest. How do you even spell wildebeest? Like, I'm sure if I saw it written out, I'd say "of course it's spelled like that" but right now, I don't

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know. What even is a wildebeest? Sounds like some fairytale creature. Like a gryphon.

Pause

HOWARD. Not much for talkin', huh? I getcha. I'm not a big talker myself. I mean, I am now because I kinda have to be for this transaction to work, but back in the day, you couldn't pay me to talk in front of strangers. I'd be in class, the teacher, I think his name was Mr. Smithson, would ask a question and he'd call on me. He'd say "Howard, can you please explain to us what you'd like to be when you grow up?" And you know what I said? I said, "Well gee, Mr. Smithson, I don't know. I've always liked the idea of making things for people". Mr. Smithson lit up at that. He was kinda queer if you know what I mean. Not queer like gay. Queer as in kinda weird. Gay people aren't weird. Hell, my best friend was gay. Anyway, Mr. Smithson had this way about him. He'd get really excited whenever a student gave a good answer and he'd start jumping up and down. Well, he got to jumping and asked what I wanted to make. He asked if I wanted to be a factory worker and make stuff like washing machines and cars, and I said nah. I'd never have the patience for something some mundane. He said he understood. I don't think he did. He asked if I wanted to make cool stuff like rockets and planes. I said, closer, but not quite. I wanted to make something real. Well, that got him thinking. "Real?" he asked, "What could be realer than a rocket?". I said "dolls".

Pause

HOWARD. Dolls, he said, as in dolls for little kids? I said, nope. Dolls for adults. He said, Howard, adults don't play with dolls. My dad does, I said. Well, you can imagine the color left Mr. Smithson's face. I was in the second grade and I was talking about *that* in front of a bunch of kids still struggling with tying their shoes with their nondominant hand. Mr. Smithson pretty quickly changed the subject and sent a message or something to the principal because pretty soon, a group of "good Samaritans" came over with a fruit basket and asked if they could come in. My dad said sure and started wolfing down the oranges and peaches in the basket. While his back was turned, Mrs. Garric, the P.E. teacher, I always

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hated P.E., found my dad's private room. He'd left it unlocked. Or maybe he just didn't care. I'd never been in there myself. Wasn't the place for a kid. Well, they found it and they reported what they found to the authorities. Turns out you can't have kids in the same house as...that stuff...so someone came and picked me up. Put me in a foster home and sent my dad to some psychiatric place. No clue where he is now.

Victim has been slowly shifting with the restraints and has been dividing their attention between Howard's story and their attempts at escape. Howard slams his blade against the floor and startles Victim into silence.

HOWARD. Where was I...? Right, *dolls*. Ever since I was a kid, I've been fixated on dolls, puppets, toys, marionettes, anything that would play with me. Wasn't exactly popular with the ladies or the gentlemen. All they cared about was sex and money and all I wanted was a friend that would be with me.

Pause

HOWARD. Forever. You may wonder why I brought you here. Well, I am what you call an artist. Had they had a say in the matter, I'd say my foster parents would've wanted me to go into business or medicine. I certainly had a knack for surgery. Got into dissecting when I was in middle school. They brought out those formaldehyde-coated bad boys and just gave us tools to work. I always saw a scalpel as a kind of an inverted paintbrush. The paint is within the painting and I must use my brush to bring it out of the canvas. My subjects were manifold. Frogs were by far the most common. I've dissected probably a hundred and fifty frogs. They were all dead, mind you. I couldn't stomach the idea of a vivisection. I mean, imagine if that was you being cut open and played with while you still drew breath. Monstrous. Anyway, my other subjects included chickens, squirrels, cats, a dog or two, and on one occasion, a very disappointing goldfish. And I thought squirrels had small intestines, pun intended. I sliced one ventricle to harshly and the goldfish just *ceased* to be. It was kinda awesome, but utterly useless for my purposes. What am I supposed to do with a ripped canvas? I have no use for ruined canvases so

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I must constantly search out new and exciting subjects to document and explore. That, my friend, is where you come in.

Victim begins freaking out, understandably, and jerks back and forth in the chair. They actually manage to flip the chair onto its side, but the ropes remain firm and the gag stays in place. Howard jumps to the rescue and brings Victim back to a sitting position.

HOWARD. Woah, woah, woah. Hold on there, friend. No reason to get excited. I'm just leveling with you. I don't want anyone entering into this process faintly. I want you to *know* what you're getting into. I believe in utter transparency in both professional and social situations, and I feel we've transcended the realm of professional etiquette and surfaced as...fair-weather friends. Under different circumstances, I suspect we'd be the best of friends. I'm a beer man myself. We could head over to the bar on Broadway, you know the one. I go there every couple days and grab a drink. I think I may write a book eventually and the bar atmosphere really speaks to me.

Pause

HOWARD. Phew...ok. I'm going to tell you what's going to happen, and I need you to be an adult about this. Ok? Can ya do that for me?

Victim has started to cry.

HOWARD. Hey, hey hey hey. No no. No need for tears. I'm just being honest. You need to hear this and I need to say it. Please, don't make this harder than it needs to be. Ok, here goes. I am going to turn you into a human doll.

Victim stops crying and just stares ahead in fear.

HOWARD. See? That wasn't so bad, right. The process is really simple. All you have to do is drink this simple little drink I'm gonna whip up for you. I've heard it tastes super gross, but don't worry, you won't taste it for very long. The mixture is...do you want to hear what's in the mixture? Thing is, I want to tell you but I don't want you thinking about it. I know you. If you think about it too much, you'll worry and then you'll get inside

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your head. Eh, ok. I'll tell you but I need you to be an adult about this. It's a simple solution of chemicals meant to rid the body of waste. It just so happens to melt the internal organs into a waste-like substance. I've taken to calling it ick. Anyway, the ick makes its way out of your body by way of the...you know...that part and leaves all the good hard bone still intact. By this point, you are done as a doornail so you can just sit back and relax. After that, I cut your body open and find out if any stragglers were left out of the ick party. I've had some weird stuff stay behind. One time, this guy's heart was just kinda still there. Like the rest of him was gone but the heart looked unfazed. Guess he had a heart of gold. Ha. Bad joke. Another time, I found a quarter. I remember I was having a pretty rough day so that made me feel a bit better. Next step is the heat drying portion of the project. After I cut ya open and see all the gooey fun stuff still inside, I put you in my state-of-the-art husker. You may be asking what a husker is. It's kinda like a tanning bed, but much more powerful. Basically, what it does is dry out your body so that nothing can really rot. You have no idea how much time it saves me. Before I got that installed, I had to use a hairdryer and it'd take like four or five hours just to get the abdomen to a suitable dryness. This process takes like twenty minutes for the whole body. The next part is my favorite. Stuffing! You've felt a doll before, right? Typically stuffed with cotton. Well, I figured if it ain't broke, I'd try it with my work and guess what? It worked a treat! At this point, I have you sliced open like a Thanksgiving turkey so it's really easy to get everything stuffed tight with cotton. The stuff's super cheap if you buy in bulk too. I got a ton for like nothing over at the depot down the road. Anyway, I stuff you till you're nice and taut then I take a needle and some sensitive thread and sew ya up. I can't use anything too coarse or it'll cause your body to tear. You've no idea how fragile the human body is after its been dissected, deep-fried, and stuffed full of sweet, sweet cotton. Fun fact: I thought I'd try cotton candy one time. Didn't work. Even without the moisture of the body, it just caused a sticky mess and *that* was a pain to clean up. What a waste too. Finally, after I suture you up, I use a wet rag and makeup to hide the signs of entry, find you a suitable set of clothes, then you're ready for playtime. Simple right?

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Victim is screaming in agony as Howard holds their chair in place.

HOWARD. I feel like you're still hung up on my dad having a sex doll. I have no interest in fornicating with you. Honestly, you're not my type. Too lively. I just really like you as a person and I want to keep that person near me. And don't worry, I host lots of parties for the important people in my life. We'll sit together and talk for hours on end about nothing in particular. Once a week I even host a movie night where we all sit around and watch the newest films out on DVD. I even got a Blu-ray player last week so things are about to get real up in this shizness. Sorry. Shizness is just something one of my friends used the other day and I'm trying to expand my vocabulary.

Pause

HOWARD. Shall we get started? *(Blackout.)*

SCENE 2

The next day. Howard is cleaning his knife. Again, it can be any kind of knife: butterfly knife, butter knife, skewer. He uses a wet rag to rinse blood off of it. He's very meticulous about it. He hums softly to himself a song with a nice melody. He has a good voice. Poking out of stage left are a pair of legs that belong to Victim. They do not appear bloody, but you can imagine that this person is now dead. Howard occasionally looks up from his task and stares with satisfaction at the "doll". It is one of his finest. When he finishes cleaning the blade, he'll blow on it almost as though he's cleaning a pair of glasses, wipe it one final time with the rag, and put it back in his belt. The whole process is extremely methodical and precise. As cruel and immoral as he is, the man is an artist in the least pure sense of the word. He stands up, pops his back, pops his neck, and jumps up and down a number of times to loosen his stiff limbs. He walks over to stage right and disappears in the wing. This would be a good time to mention his clothing. He's wearing clothing. Blood-spattered clothing. His hands are blood-spattered. His face is blood-spattered. As clean as his blade is, his body is the exact opposite. Once he wanders offstage, he hums louder. A

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sink can be heard turning on. He starts scating as he washes the blood off his hands...or at least tries to wash. When he comes back on stage, he's wiping his bloodied face with the same towel he cleaned his knife with. His knife has been left offstage. At this point, the towel is ruined by the utter gore of the Howard's visage. Even so, he runs it through his hair with the nonchalance of a man drying his hair after a particularly invigorating shower. He wraps the towel around his neck and begins dancing along to his nonsensical singing façade. He is dancing to his own music.

HOWARD. Man, it is going to be hard to top that little game, isn't it? *(No answer.)*

HOWARD. Oh, come on. You're not still mad at me because I told you what I was gonna do, are you? Look, I'm sorry I ruined the surprise. How was I supposed to know you didn't want to know? I saw it like an early Christmas Eve present opening except I was the one opening the present. Think of it like this: your presence was my presence. No. Wait. Your presence was my present. There we go! I am one clever boy. *(Howard tosses the towel casually to the ground and walks over to his new friend. He looks down on his creation like a painter looking upon a water-color masterpiece.)*

HOWARD. Holy wow. I really do think you are my finest of the bunch. And I'm not just saying that because you're still here. I would never lie to your face. I honestly think you were the best I've had. You were just so intense. So aggressive in the process. You screamed and railed like you didn't want me to enter you, but I knew, I knew deep down that you wanted it. You're a dirty, dirty little...little friend. Sorry, phew. I really don't speak my mind very often. It's like a faucet, you know? I can open it just a little, but I can't let it all go. I don't want people judging me. I'd never judge you just because you're a few inches taller than I would've liked. Three inches to be exact. But hey, you can't be picky about friends when you're so lonely. So...so lonely. *(Howard stares off into the distance. The middle distance to be exact. His words trail off. He stops talking and for a few seconds, the stage is completely dead. For just a*

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second, Howard is just as much a corpse as the fresh corpse he's made. Suddenly, he speaks.)

HOWARD. Alone. I'm alone. Being alone isn't fun. Alone, alone, alone, alone. I cannot be alone. I won't allow myself to be alone. I can't be alone. I have friends. So many friends, and they enjoy my company. My company is good. I'm great company. I'm a delight to be around. I love me. That's the first thing my Dr. Arbuckle taught me. To get past the depression, you first have to love yourself. And I love myself a great deal. I'm amazing. *(Howard shifts his focus to his creation.)*

HOWARD. Don't you think so— *(Howard shifts from a self-righteous speaker of utter calm to a raging lunatic capable of great violence.)*

HOWARD. You fucking *rat!* Get away from my friend before I bite your tail off with my own greasy canines! Get *out!* I don't *want* you here! My *friend* hates you! *I hate you!*

Offstage, a rat or some pesky rodent has begun gnawing on the body of the creation. Much like a true friend, Howard will defend his friends with tooth and nail. Mostly tooth. Suddenly, he calms down.

HOWARD. I'm so sorry for scaring you, my friend. I'd never want to scare you. I just don't want you hurt by any annoying vermin. Rats are the worst. Little disgusting creatures with disgusting habits. Their tails are the worst. Long, slimy things capable of spreading God-knows-what. I bet you'd get rabies if you got bit by one of those things like you just did. Luckily for you, rabies aren't a problem for you anymore. You're welcome. *(Howard bows,)*

HOWARD. That's what I love about art. It's not just that it saves lives. But that's probably my favorite thing. I would've killed myself years ago had it not been for my art. I had my favorite rope picked out and everything. I had the smallest detail planned out. I was going to tie the noose around my neck, tie it to the tree outside, you remember the one I bumped into getting you in here, and tie my food down on the accelerator in my car. Lot of knot-tying involved. Like I said. Ex-pert. Basically, the car was going to pull me forward while the rope snapped my neck. And I

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made sure the rope held fast so no one would be hurt probably. I had a very conscientious suicide in mind. But I didn't have to do it, and that's partially thanks to you. Thank you! (*Howard kneels down and hugs the creation tightly. It is an intimate moment. An intimate and horrifying moment.*)

HOWARD. You give good hugs. Some of my friends are really bad at giving hugs. That doesn't make me think any less of them, but you can't help but have a favorite for certain things. For instance, you're my favorite for hugs. Gloria is my favorite for good vibes. She has a positive energy that's just impossible to get around. Even when she was resisting the art, which I still don't understand, she had a smile on her face. It was her time though. Gloria was my grandmother by the way. Wonderful woman all around. Haha. She's all 'round as it is. Chubby I mean. She really liked pudding. Sometimes, I feed her some when she's not in a bad mood, which isn't very often. I will say she's lost a tremendous amount of weight since I helped her out. That's *another* thing that my little transaction helps with. In no time, you're going to be losing all those Thanksgiving pounds and will be giving all your thanks to your ol' buddy Howard. What were we talking about? Right, right. Favorite friends. Well, you're my favorite for cuddles and hugs, Grandma Gloria is my favorite for a positive aura. Alex is my favorite friend to look at. He's a gorgeous man. Not in sexual way. Just in a beautiful way, you know? Chiseled jawline, straight white teeth as bleached as a white supremacist's...well, you know... and eyes you could just stare into forever. I did stare into them for a good long while. I even held off on my little chemical concoction for a good six hours or so just so I could enjoy those beautiful spheres. He peed himself a few times, but I didn't care. Didn't ruin his eyes. Point is, I like beauty, and I find beauty in all of my friends but especially in Alex. (*Howard holds the creation's hand and kisses it.*)

HOWARD. You've no idea how much it means to me that you're here right now. When we met, you could've walked away, but you didn't. You trusted me. You looked into these deep hazel eyes and said, "Sure, why not?". Did you think you'd be here when you said that? Probably not, but life has a way of surprising you in the most unexpected ways. Think of it

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like this, I've given you immortality. That's what so many people want in their lives. They want to exist forever. That's what I've given you. I take care of all of my friends. I restitch you when need be, I'll replace your cotton if it ever gets stale or crunchy, and I'll even seal you in a glass box when you've been played out. Only one of my friends is like that. His name is Douglas. He's a good guy, but gee, he's been here a long time. Almost a decade, and you can certainly tell. You remember that scene in that one cartoon where the toys were like "is it better to be played with and destroyed or sealed away and safe"? Well, I agree with both mindsets. A doll is meant to be played with, but you need to take care of it. If you don't, you'll ruin the gift you've been given. Eventually, all things will be fall apart so I use a sealed glass box to keep Douglas safe and perfect forever. Forever. Forever is a funny word. We say forever like there's such a thing as forever. Like it's possible to transcend the concept of time that we ourselves created for the sake of "salvation" or "torment", but I know the truth. Everything will be desiccated in time. Even I will, as hard as that is for me to stomach. Who will look after my friends when I'm gone? What will happen to me when I'm gone? *(Pause)*

HOWARD. Can't think like that! We'll be fine, you and I. Pals for life, through thick and thin. *(Howard forces his creation to give him a high five and attempts to get a fist bump. When he gets the fist to stay situated, he sighs good-naturedly and hugs the creation once more.)*

HOWARD. You're tired. I get that. I'm a bit tired too. How about this: we'll go to bed, get a good night's rest, then I'll get started on my new adventure tomorrow. Got a big day ahead of me. I have a new job interview at a store down the road in the morning. Gotta get up bright and early, put on my realest fake face to "wow" the interviewer. If I don't get this job, how am I going to continue my projects. Money doesn't grow on trees. Now that I think about it, not much that I value grows on trees. I wish people grew on trees. I'd love that. Just ripe and full of life, and you could pluck 'em right off and get to know them. Go through the whole song and dance again and then bush, bang, boom: we're off to the races on another project. But all that grows on trees are fruit. Yuck. I prefer vegetables. Anyway, my interview tomorrow is as a shift manager at a new

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department store down the street. It's called *Hillary's*. It's not just a department store either. They also have a boutique, a bar, and a runway. They host modeling shows once a month to show off the latest fashion trends. Never was one for fashion, but I heard they pay out the gourd so I'm willing to humble myself a bit before the mighty god of fashion, Aphrodite. I'm hoping to meet a lot of fun and interesting people there too. I know it sounds like a really girly store, but like I said, there's a bar so it attracts all kinds: men, women, transgender people, non-binary folks. I haven't played with a non-binary person yet. It's on my bucket list before I shuffle off this mortal coil. Then, after I get home, I'm cooking chicken pesto with garlic flakes and cheesy bread: Alex's favorite. Super fattening though. I only let him have half a portion and I only eat three-quarters of mine. Gloria eats a full portion, but that's small compared to her usual three; plus, she'll eat the rest of mine if I'm not hungry enough. How much would you want? (*Howard is met with no response.*)

HOWARD. (*Whispering.*) Oh, you're asleep. I'm sorry. Come on, let's get you to bed. I'm going to take a shower then I'll be right there. I won't be long. (*Howard stands up, pops his back, and drags the creation offstage. Sounds of things shifting offstage can be heard followed by a shower and more humming and scattinng courtesy of Howard. The shower is heard for about thirty seconds followed by it being turned off. More shifting can be heard.*)

HOWARD. (*Louder whispering.*) Goodnight, everyone! I love you all! Sleep well! (*Two swift claps are heard. Blackout.*)

SCENE 3

Lights up on Howard sitting across from a middle-aged man doomed to the reality of middle-management. The man is CYRUS, the general manager of Hillary's, a department store transformed from a simple depot for fashionable clothing and accessories to a full-scale shopping center complete with a bar, hair and makeup boutique, and a runway. The office Cyrus sits in is very chic, but he feels uncomfortable for some reason.

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Oddly enough, it isn't Howard that makes him uncomfortable; it's the chicness of his own office. He reviews Howard's paperwork, resume, and the like and occasionally "hrms" and "hmms" to the steady ticking of a clock. Howard, in all of this, is the picture of middle-class confidence and zeal. He wears a very well-groomed maroon turtleneck, and a pair of dress shoes that complement his outfit very well. He sits in a stolid, immovable position with a calm yet mildly unsettling grin on his face. The grin is not a façade; that's his normal face. Suddenly, Cyrus looks up from the papers and gives Howard a thoughtful look.

CYRUS. Well, Mr. Howard, I'm very pleased with your credentials. You seem like a very stand-up gentleman.

HOWARD. Thank you, sir. I aim to please, and I consider myself a pretty good shot. *(Howard winks at Cyrus. The two share a good-natured, if a bit artificial, laugh with one another before the conversation continues.)*

CYRUS. Now, I do have a number of questions I'd like to ask regarding your resume if you'd grant me the ability.

HOWARD. By all means.

CYRUS. In your education, you stated you went to a trade school instead of a traditional university. A place called *Filtner's Fashion and Décor*, is that correct?

HOWARD. *(Beaming.)* Yessir.

CYRUS. I don't believe I've heard of them. Can you tell me a bit about the company and their area of business?

HOWARD. Certainly. You said, "trade school", but it was more like a paid internship. They specialize in interior décor and are responsible for some of the most recent trends in interior design. Think *Vogue*, but for interior design.

CYRUS. Now, I've heard of *Vogue*. Why haven't I heard of this place?

HOWARD. They're independently owned and like to keep to themselves mostly. I can write down their website if you'd like. It's just www.filtnerfashion.com. Takes you straight to the site. Anyway, I learned everything I know about design and fashion from them. In lieu of a grading procedure, their trainers exercise the right to dismiss students at

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any time if they don't exhibit the appropriate skill or mentality to accomplish the reclusive company's goals.

CYRUS. Sounds rigorous.

HOWARD. Oh, it is. You have to be able to juggle a lot of fish if you're going to make it in their industry. Their focuses include current fashion ranging from evening wear, summer-wear, swimwear, though that one is targeted more toward a feminine demographic, and casual wear. There are other "wear"s, but I don't want to waste your time. Where was I? Hehe, "where". Sounds like "wear". Hehehe.

CYRUS. Mr. Howard, you were saying...

HOWARD. Right right. Not only do they focus on fashion, they focus on makeup as well to complement their female-centric clientele. Powders, creams, foundations for all skin tones, lipstick, eyeliner, primarily liquid eyeliner, blush. *Filtner's* also has a heavy focus on interior design as I said. They teach and sell all manner of furniture and décor. Sofas, ottomans, decorative mannequins to display fanciful outfits and other *Filtner*-brand merchandise, taxidermy, desks, blinds, tapestries, etc. etc.

CYRUS. Wow.

HOWARD. Did I talk too much? I apologize. Normally, you couldn't pay me to talk this much in front of strangers, but I have to for this little transaction to work.

CYRUS. No, no. I understand. While we don't sell furniture here at *Hillary's*, I do feel your background will be sufficient to streamline the sales of our seasonal brands. Could you email me a reference letter from one of your trainers? What I'm seeing is good stuff, but I want to hear it from someone other than the source.

HOWARD. Of course. I'll try to get that to you by the end of the day. Jensen was a great trainer.

CYRUS. Right. Next question, for someone to be an effective shift manager we believe that person must be all of the following. They must be reliable, punctual, disciplined, joyful, respectful, and courteous to our clientele. Of those, what do you think would be the least applicable to you and why? And what of those would be the most applicable and why?

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HOWARD. Hmm. Probably punctual *if* I had to choose one, but as you saw today, I have no difficulty arriving well before I'm required to clock in. Honestly, it's hard to pick just one because I strive for all of those things in my daily life anyway. At *Filtner's Fashion and Décor*, I was always the person they'd find to open or close the store if a higher-up wasn't available, so I'd say I'm reliable. Regarding discipline, I may not work out as much as I'd like, but I feel I'm a disciplined person with a very clear code of conduct. I just hope that code of conduct aligns with *Hillary's*. The last thing I want to do is offend anyone.

CYRUS. That's reliability and discipline. How about joyful?

HOWARD. I don't mean to boast, but I'm one of the most joyful people you'll ever meet. I absolutely love what I do whether it's at work, by myself, or with friends. I adore life and all it has to offer. Sometimes, I think about people who consider work a chore or life a drudging misery, and I just weep into my pillow at home. How can we be granted all of *this* for free and still consider it a challenge to get out of bed. I didn't ask to be born, but I still got to be. I didn't ask to be where I am today, but I am. I didn't ask for the people in my life, but I have them. They love me and I love them, and I will love the clientele just as much as I cherish my own loved ones. That is a Howard guarantee.

CYRUS. Alright, kid. No need to get all mushy. I care about my friends too, but I wouldn't say I love them.

HOWARD. But I do. How could we be anywhere without our circle of supportive and trusted friends? Six feet under is where, haha. After years of painstaking fear and anxiety giving me the runaround, I've developed my friend circle into something we can all be happy to be a part of.

CYRUS. Sure. Ok, let's just put a checkmark next to that box. You're a bit overwhelming I must say, but honestly, that's something that's a bit hard to find in a shift manager these days. Even rarer in a regular salesperson. Hopefully you can inspire these dime a dozen kiddos to actually *care* about the job so they'll last more than a week tops. Think you can do that.

HOWARD. Yessir, I—

CYRUS. (*Cutting him off.*) Good! Second to last question. A customer comes up to you. She's a young woman, spring in her step, looking to find

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a new outfit to complement her summer ensemble...or actually, let's say she's looking for a prom dress. The big dance is coming up at the high school, and she needs something to really sell her popularity and clout to the other girls on campus. How would you sell to her?

HOWARD. May I stand up?

CYRUS. Of course. Feel free to talk to that mannequin in the corner as though it were the customer. May help with the methodology and visualization of your objective. *(While Cyrus is talking, Howard rises from his chair and approaches a mannequin positioned stage left. It is important to note that the mannequin is in roughly the same place the creation was in the previous scene. Howard immediately jumps into character. But his character is strikingly similar to his own personality...)*

HOWARD. Hello, ma'am. How are you today? Can I help you find something? *(Pause)* Just browsing. Alright, is there anything in particular you're browsing for? *(Pause)* Prom? Prom already? Is it the end of the school year? Seems like yesterday it was Christmas. My friend got me this amazing turtleneck sweater. *(Pause)* She got it here actually. Heard it was for a very affordable price. I'd say we have more, but I heard they flew off the shelves. My friend got one of the last ones. The color is really nice though, isn't it? Nice maroon. Very intimate. If I may ask, are you attending prom with a partner or going solo? Maybe with a group of well-dressed friends? *(Pause)* I figured as much. You're much too pretty to not have someone knocking on your door begging to be seen with you. Boy or girl? *(Pause)* Boy. Got it. Got any idea what he's wearing? Ah, better question: when is prom? *(Pause. Frantically.)* This Saturday! Why did you wait until *now*?! And he doesn't know what he's wearing. Oh, we can't wait on him! This is going to be your night! Doesn't matter who you are. Prom is a night to show your best self, and we'll do just that. Let's go with something that brings out those icy blue eyes. How about this? *(Howard pantomimes a dress. Pause.)* See. This light blue brings out the blue of your eyes but doesn't distract from the main event. *(Pause)* Not that one, huh? What color were you thinking? *(Pause)* Pink? No, no, no, no. No. With the color of your eyes, your complexion, and the rosiness of your cheeks, you'd look like a scone of inverted cotton candy, especially if it

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fanned out at the hips. That's not going to work. How about this? Nice black with glistening speckles. You'd look like the evening sky dotted with a million stars. The star wearing stars, haha. *(Pause)* Not a fan of black. Okay, well I have one more I think you may be interested in. Not everyone can wear it, but I think it may look breathtaking on you. I recommend the look to all of my friends. *(Pause)* Then again, I may have the wrong idea. If you find something else, please let me know and I'll be happy to ring it up for you. *(Cyrus chimes in as Howard walks away from the mannequin.)*

CYRUS. Howard! What are you doing?! You almost made the sale!

HOWARD. Sh, shh. Wait for it. *(Pause)*

HOWARD. What was that, ma'am? You did want to see it? Are you sure? I don't want to waste your— Oh, ok. Right this way. Here it is. Yes ma'am. That's it. *(Pause)*

HOWARD. Ma'am...? *(Pause. Smiling.)* Yes ma'am. I'll ring it up for you. You'll look amazing, I guarantee it. *(Howard bows and Cyrus claps despite his own serious demeanor.)*

CYRUS. Very good. Mr. Howard, that was a splendid sales tactic. Suggesting items that would likely not work but steadily getting closer to your "secret weapon" as it were to build a rising level of suspense, almost desperation in the client. A bit condescending, but you have to be with some of these children. I'm impressed to say the least.

HOWARD. Thank you, sir.

CYRUS. One question though: what was the "secret weapon"?

HOWARD. Ah. Trade secret. Different for every person, but I just have an eye for aesthetics. Some of my friends are just incapable of making choices when it comes to what they want to wear, so it's become my job to basically clothe them each and every day. That along with my time at *Filtner's Fashion and Décor* has combined to form a relatively strong objectivity toward style and appearance.

CYRUS. Well, your friends are lucky to have you. My wife helps me pick out my suits and ties. Imagine. I work as the GM of a successful fashion store, and I'm unable to match a green plaid with anything other than matte black. Ok. Final question: you've come across an employee leaving

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early, clocking in late consistently, stealing, whatever you need to imagine to formulate that this person is acting antagonistic and contrary to the vision *Hillary's* has for its own reputation and its respectable clientele.

What is your response to the situation *in detail*?

HOWARD. Oh, I'm good with details.

CYRUS. I've noticed.

HOWARD. The first step would be to determine what the problem is. For this example, let's say one of the gentleman associates has made off with a designer belt worth upwards of fifty dollars. First off, theft of any kind is unacceptable. After I've gathered proof, either from associate witnesses, cameras, or whatever we use, I'd isolate the culprit and bring the reality of his crime to his attention. If he attempted to talk his way out of the situation, I'd place the evidence before him. He's wrong and needs to know it. *That being said*, I don't like the idea of firing someone skilled in the art of subterfuge. That can be used to our advantage in the business world. Used it at my other stores. Why not here? I'd offer him a choice: he can either submit a letter of resignation, can be fired, *or* he can shift his shifty talents from a damaging angle to one that benefits everyone. Instead of nicking a belt or two for his own use, why doesn't he use those same subtle skills to subvert the reality of our customers, leading them toward our way of thinking. He's already good at misdirection. Let's use it to make a profit.

CYRUS. Are you suggesting we take advantage of our customers' ignorance to make a profit through dishonesty?

HOWARD. Of course not. I'm merely suggesting we use the skills we collectively have at our disposal to lead our customers toward an economic and convenient purchase at *Hillary's*.

CYRUS. (*Slamming the desk.*) You're hired! Come in tomorrow at 3:30pm for orientation plus you'll get to meet the associates you'll be working above.

HOWARD. The first day is probably my favorite part of a new job: getting to meet new friends.

HOWARD THE DOLLMAKER

SCENE 4

The scene opens with a middle-aged woman looking at all the merchandise available on the Hillary's shopping floor. There can be any number of items displayed. Primarily, there will be mannequins strewn across the stage with clothing items on them. Dresses, capris, blouses, maybe a small section devoted to men's clothing. The woman is DEBORAH. She is a new shopper at Hillary's and is trying to find an item of interest. She's a diminutive woman with a bit of an attitude. She likes to drink wine on Tuesday nights and rum on Friday nights. She's been married twice and is looking for husband number three. Her hair can be in any number of styles but needs to emphasize her utter specificity in doing things. She is a woman on a mission.

She stumbles across an item of interest, a small necklace on a jewelry rack and tries it on. The rack is situated on a display table of significant size. It's impossible to see directly behind it.

As Deborah puts the necklace on, she pulls a small hand mirror out of her purse and admires herself in the reflection. It complements her features well. She takes it off, looks at the stand, realizes the price, and makes a noise that indicates she does not plan on paying that much for a simple piece of jewelry. She takes a moment to look at the necklace and another to glance at the price. She shifts her eyes back and forth before looking above discretely to check for cameras. Seeing none, she attempts to put the necklace in her bag.

As she does so, Howard, dressed in a fine button-down shirt and a crimson bowtie struts onstage from her blind spot sporting a chilling smile. The shark has caught the diver.

HOWARD. Good day, madam. It is a fine necklace, is it not? *(Deborah yelps in fear and embarrassment and places the necklace haphazardly onto the mannequin.)*

HOWARD. I'm sorry. Did I startle you?

DEBORAH. Oh, no! Not at all. I was just looking at this beautiful necklace. What is it? Diamond?

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HOWARD. White sapphire.

DEBORAH. (*Feigning intrigue.*) Hmm, hmm. That was my second guess. Wonderful selection. Do you have any more in the back?

HOWARD. No ma'am. (*A chilling silence splits the air. Howard is still smiling in a way that suggests he's friendly...too friendly.*)

DEBORAH. Oh, shoot. Well, that's alright. I'm just browsing.

HOWARD. (*Leaping at the opportunity.*) Anything in particular that you're browsing for?

DEBORAH. Not that I can think of. Just some jewelry.

HOWARD. What kind? We have necklaces, rings, earrings, cufflinks, any manner of piercings and gauges back in this corner of the store. A bit niche, but we like to service a wide range of customers.

DEBORAH. (*Tiring of the tenacity of this over-friendly associate.*) Just a necklace.

HOWARD. Delightful! We have a wonderful selection of necklaces ranging anywhere from a paltry twenty dollars to several thousands of dollars. The make can be anywhere from a simple chain to a diamond necklace on a gilded chain. What's your price range?

DEBORAH. No more than two hundred.

HOWARD. Oh alright—

DEBORAH. I really appreciate the help, sir, but I'd really like to look on my own if you wouldn't mind. I've been shopping here for months. I'd like to think I know where to look for what I'm interested in.

HOWARD. I'm sorry. Just be aware we do have cameras at every angle and don't take kindly to shoplifting. Have a super day!

(Howard gives her a broad grin and saunters to a nearby mannequin to begin replacing the clothing on it for another outfit he pulls from behind the display. Deborah looks scared of the unnerving friendliness displayed, gathers her senses, and gets out of dodge. She tries to anyway. She bumps into another employee, a young woman by the name of SYLVIA. She's a quiet girl with her hair falling neatly onto her shoulders and beyond. She screams wholesome energy. Deborah yelps.)

SYLVIA. Oh, my— I'm so sorry! I didn't mean to scare you.

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DEBORAH. Sylvia, Sylvia! Oh, goodness. I'm sorry. I didn't expect someone to run into me. How are you? (*Howard looks up and notices Sylvia.*)

SYLVIA. I'm wonderful, Deb. Just got Justin into daycare so I can finally spend more time working and less time stressing over him. Can you believe how expensive daycare has gotten?

DEBORAH. I know! I'm just glad my kids are old enough to stay home by themselves.

SYLVIA. How old are they now?

DEBORAH. Daniel is thirteen and Jessica is eleven. They look after each other. Told them to make sandwiches for themselves for lunches so they don't accidentally burn the house down.

SYLVIA. Is Jessica really eleven already? What, so she's in fifth grade now?

DEBORAH. Yep. She's in love with her teacher. Mr. Tillard. Apparently he looks just like Prince Charming. Haven't met the man yet, but I guarantee he looks better than Steve does nowadays. He's put on thirty-five pounds in the last year.

SYLVIA. No...

DEBORAH. Yep.

SYLVIA. What do you think's caused it?

DEBORAH. Stress. The firm let a lot of people go and he's stressed he's going to be next. He's started picking up a burger or two extra on the way home from work on top of eating dinner and lunch. It's just added up over time.

SYLVIA. I'm so sorry. If there's anything I can do, please let me know.

DEBORAH. (*In a whisper.*) You can tell me who that new guy is. I've been in here once a week for the past few months, and I've never met him before. Gives me the creeps. (*Sylvia glances over at Howard. He looks up from his mannequin task and waves good-naturedly at her.*)

SYLVIA. (*In a whisper.*) I've no idea. Cyrus, you know Cyrus I think, he mentioned we were getting a new shift manager. I guess that's him.

DEBORAH. (*In a whisper.*) I don't know how I feel about him.

SYLVIA. (*In a whisper.*) Cyrus can be a bit difficult sometimes.

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DEBORAH. *(In a whisper.)* No, no. Not Cyrus. I've met him. He's very polite. I'm talking about the new guy. He seems...odd. Peculiar, if you catch my meaning.

SYLVIA. *(In a whisper.)* I don't understand. *(While the women are busy whispering amongst themselves, they don't notice a very chipper Howard bounce toward them with the energy of a man several years younger. He's finished his task and moved onto his next assignment: making new friends.)*

HOWARD. If you were looking for a team member to help you, why didn't you just say so? *(Howard laughs. Deborah forces a laugh. Sylvia is confused.)*

DEBORAH. Oh, hi...Mr... *(Deborah looks quickly for a nametag.)*

HOWARD. Howard, ma'am. I take it you're Mrs. Deb?

DEBORAH. How did you—

HOWARD. You were speaking awfully loudly. I'm sorry for eavesdropping, but it was hard to not listen in when I was changing Dominique.

SYLVIA. You mean the mannequin?

HOWARD. Ok, yes, haha. But it's so much easier to care about them when you give them names. How are we supposed to tell who wears what clothing? They can't *all* be the same person. If they were, why would they be wearing different clothes? *(Awkward silence followed by...)*

DEBORAH. I just realized I left Daniel in the food court. I'll see you later, Sylvia! Have a good day, Mr. Howard. *(With the agility of a university gymnast, Deborah gathers her senses and bolts from the store as casually as possible.)*

HOWARD. Well, that was interesting.

SYLVIA. That was something to say the least.

HOWARD. Are you new here?

SYLVIA. No, no. I transferred from the old store. Started the day we opened.

HOWARD. And your name is Sylvia?

SYLVIA. That's right. *(The conversation is casual yet mildly uncomfortable, like a bit of chaffing after a day at the beach.)*

HOWARD THE DOLLMAKER

HOWARD. Well, I'm Howard. Today's my first day officially on the floor. I'm one of your new managers. Shift manager to be exact.

SYLVIA. Oh, it's nice to meet you. I'm just a sales associate. Hoping to eventually get to be a manager at some point, but Mr. Cyrus said I don't have the drive or the assertiveness to be a manager.

HOWARD. I honestly don't know what he's talking about. You seem delightful, and I could see you running this store someday. Mrs. Sylvia, General Manager!

SYLVIA. Ms...

HOWARD. Pardon?

SYLVIA. It's just Ms. Sylvia.

HOWARD. What? Too bad.

SYLVIA. What do you mean?

HOWARD. I don't want to overstep my bounds as your manager, but I simply find it hard to believe you aren't married or at least attached. Let's move on from this though. Bit uncouth to be exchanging personal details so soon after meeting. Now, I'm very pleased with the layout of the store. Lots of room for exploring, very clear divisions between nightwear, the men's section, etc. etc. I will say though that I'm a bit disgruntled with the level of integrity a number of our customers have. I've almost caught three people stealing *today!*

SYLVIA. Oh yeah. That happens a lot. I think its because of how expensive some of our stuff is. Did you know we sell a bottle premium perfume at a rate ten percent more expensive than other local department stores.

HOWARD. I assume it's because of the distributor brand.

SYLVIA. That's what I thought too! *(A voice can be heard over the intercom. It is the pre-recorded message telling the shoppers the store will be closing in fifteen minutes. Sylvia originally recorded it so her voice echoes through the store.)*

SYLVIA. *(Recorded.)* The time is now seven forty-five and *Hillary's* will be closing in fifteen minutes. Please make your final selections and make your way to the front of the store to any available checkout counter. Please note the Central Square Mall is open until ten so don't cut your shopping

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experience short just yet. We'll see you tomorrow and remember: *Hillary's* Makes it Happen!

HOWARD. That you?

SYLVIA. (*A bit embarrassed.*) Yeah...

HOWARD. Good voice. Anyway, I'm going to do a walkthrough of the store, make sure we don't have any sticky-pawed customers like Deb taking advantage of our final stretch then call it a night. Do you work tomorrow?

SYLVIA. No. I'm off tomorrow. Spending time with my son.

HOWARD. Justin, right? Sorry. Again, I overheard earlier.

SYLVIA. That's right.

HOWARD. Well, I hope you have a wonderful day with Justin tomorrow. He have many friends?

SYLVIA. A few. He just started daycare but he's made a few that are as obsessed with robots as he is. (*The two share a laugh.*)

SYLVIA. He's having a birthday next week. First birthday he's having a big party. He's so excited. (*Sylvia can't help but let out a bit of motherly pride at the thought of her son having a fun birthday party for the first time in his life.*)

HOWARD. I know I said I was going to do a walkthrough, but now I'm intrigued. What all's going to be at the party.

SYLVIA. Cake. Chocolate is his favorite.

HOWARD. I prefer vanilla but fair.

SYLVIA. Decorations I could buy secondhand at the thrift store. Party stores are really expensive.

HOWARD. Understandable.

SYLVIA. And, we're trying to find a way to have some sort of entertainment, but most of the magicians and comedy shows are either too expensive, too cheesy, or not appropriate for kids.

HOWARD. Does Justin like clowns?

SYLVIA. Haven't asked. Do you know someone?

HOWARD. Sure, I do. He's really affordable. He's me!

SYLVIA. You do a clown routine?

HOWARD. Well, if you ask me, I *am* a clown routine.

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SYLVIA. I don't know. Clowns scared me as a kid.

HOWARD. I guarantee this'll be a once in a lifetime experience. Look, a friend of mine recorded me the other day when I was practicing for another party. Just watch and see what you think. *(Howard pulls out his phone and puts one of the earbuds in Sylvia's hand so she can put it in her ear. He presses play on the video. She starts laughing about midway through.)*

SYLVIA. *(Taking the earbud out.)* Ok, that's pretty good. You said a friend of yours recorded that?

HOWARD. Yup. My friend Hailey.

SYLVIA. Wow. She has a really steady hand to not move at all during all of that.

HOWARD. *(As though bragging about himself.)* Yeah, my friends are pretty great hehe. *(He then breaks into a sudden fit of giggles.)*

SYLVIA. So, what are your rates?

HOWARD. Hundred bucks per party. *(Sylvia looks defeated. She doesn't have that much money for a clown show. She can hardly afford the small cake. Howard notices this.)*

HOWARD. But... *(Sylvia looks up.)*

HOWARD. I have a friends-only discount that lowers the price to twenty bucks. What do you say to that?

SYLVIA. Deal!

HOWARD. Great! Gosh, it feels nice to be out of the house meeting new people.

SYLVIA. Honestly, same. I can hardly get out nowadays if it's not work or running Justin to daycare.

HOWARD. Well, if you ever want to hang out, *friend*, here's my number. *(He writes his number on a little slip of paper on a nearby display table and gives it to her.)*

SYLVIA. *(Suddenly unnerved by the way he says friend.)* Yeah...yeah! I'll text you the details about the party. Do you mind if you could send me a full video of your routine to make sure it's something Justin will like?

HOWARD. *(Suddenly hurt.)* I...I mean...it's all like what I showed you. I don't believe in offending people.

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SYLVIA. (*Afraid she's offended him.*) Oh, oh I'm sorry, Mr. Howard. I'm sure your routine is fine.

HOWARD. Thank you, Sylvia. I try to present a good role model for children especially. They are our next generation. (*Another announcement chimes.*)

SYLVIA. (*Recorded.*) The time is now eight o'clock pm and your local *Hillary's* is now closed. Have a wonderful day.

HOWARD. (*Gesturing to the intercom voice.*) What she said, haha. (*Howard walks away and stops before he moves offstage. He turns around.*) And call me Howard. We're friends now. No need for formalities. (*He grins broadly and walks offstage leaving Sylvia alone. Blackout.*)

SCENE 5

Lights up on Victim posed very elegantly in a chair. Victim has a party hat on and is sitting at a table with a faux cake on it. Tableware is set out for them. They do not move at all. They are dead but treated as though they are alive and kicking. Not literally kicking, though. Howard is not a fan of violence. Victim is dressed in relatively nice clothing and has multiple stitches all over their body to indicate the sewing of the doll making process. A bit of cake icing is smeared on Victim's face. Victim sits in absolute silence for about thirty seconds until...

Party music can be heard faintly in the distance followed by the telltale thumping of dancing or prancing. The party music is not pop music, but music one would hear accompanying a clown parading through a fairground. Possibly carnival music.

The thumping gets louder and louder as Howard bursts onstage. The music has been playing long enough for him to get into costume. He wears a clown suit, a clown hat, a red nose, and big shoes to indicate he's a clown. During an actual performance, he'd have greasepaint or makeup on his face accentuating his features, but for this "practice", he's only going to use simple costume pieces. This also helps the actor get in

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and out of the costume more quickly than putting on an entire outfit and makeup.

His dancing doesn't need to be particularly good or choreographed. He's a clown simply feeling the energy of the music and shimmying and shaking his body with vicious ferocity. The dancing is joyful in nature but erratic in execution. As Howard dances near the victim, he bumps Victim and causes the lifeless corpse to KA-THUNK onto the hard table. Howard stops as the music continues playing.

HOWARD. *(Yelling.)* Gloria! Stop the music! *(Howard turns to Victim and rearranges them in the same position they started in albeit more stolid. Notably, the music does not stop.)* I'm so sorry, my friend. Are you ok? *(Silence)* Oh, don't be such a drama queen. *(Howard thumps Victim on the back, causing them to sprawl forward again. Howard catches them.)* Woah, woah, woah. You're not going back to sleep. We agreed last night that you were going to watch my routine so that it'll be perfect for little Justin and Sylvia. Remember? *(Silence)* Of course, you remember. You're just trying to get out of it so you can go watch *America's Next Top Sports Guy* or whatever. No, no, no. You're going to sit right here, and you're going to bask in the glory that is Klutzo the Clown! *(With that, Howard once again begins dancing along with the music. As he begins speaking while he dances, he speaks in his normal speaking voice. Typically, clowns put on some sort of dialect or vocal nuance to add an exaggerated quality to their performances, but Howard doesn't do that.)* Howdy, boys and girls! I'm K-K-Klutzo the Clown and I sure don't wanna drop anything... *(As he says this, his clown trousers (his clousers) drop to his ankles and he's wearing bright polka-dot "underwear". In reality, they are shorts, but they do the job of looking like underwear.)* Oooops. Guh-huh-huh, hahaha! *(Howard bursts out laughing at his own ill-timed misfortune.)* A little rabbit told me someone was having a birthday today. A special little boy full of specialness and cheer. Is it...you? *(Howard points at the air a few feet away from Victim. The invisible child shakes their head.)* Oh, hotdog raisins. I was sure it was you. You have the birthday face and everything. Is it you? *(Howard has turned to the air a couple inches from Victim. The*

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second invisible child shakes their head.) Gosh darn goopy doopy! I done did it again. I really let the cockroach out of the couch cushion this time. It couldn't possibly be you, could it, little feller? *(Howard points at Victim. Victim does not move a millimeter.)* Really? You're not just saying that, so I won't feel like such a crunch muncher? *(Yet again, Victim remains motionless. Howard yelps in delight, dances even more to the music playing around him, and heel clicks once matching the beat of the song.)* Happy, happy birthday, you're the birthday boy! Happy, happy birthday, would you like a toy? Your birthday is so special, it's recognized by all! Happy, happy birthday, I will make you a doll! Hey! *(As he says "Hey!", he jumps into a dance break where he puts every single fiber of his body into dancing like an absolute madman. He can do whatever dance would be appropriate for a child's birthday party. Eventually, he tires and removes his nose if it wasn't already flung off during his routine.)* Klutzo isn't as young as he used to be ha ha. But you're a whole year older! What's your name? *(Silence)* Justin? *(Silence)* Well, this just-in! Justin is my favorite person in the whole wide world! Even more than Klutzo's own family! Klutzo's family doesn't really like him, haha. But that's ok! Klutzo doesn't like them either. They all called Klutzo mean names like dum-dum head and psychopath. All these mean names that Klutzo doesn't even really understand. But Klutzo would never call Justin any names like that. I want to call you the greatest thing Klutzo can call you. Are you ready or it? You're...Klutzo's...best friend! *(Silence. Howard leaps at Victim and gently uses a rope from under the table to tie their arms behind them.)* This is really a special day for you, Justin. Today, you woke up a year older, a year closer to your own mortality. Tomorrow, you'll be beyond all of that. You'll be beyond mortality! Beyond death itself. You will be immortal, Justin, and I can give that to you: immortality. Can you imagine, Justin! You and your mother spending the rest of eternity going to the park, packing peanuts and sandwiches to eat, loading a loaf of old bread into the trunk to feed the ducks at the pond. You'd be able to spend forever with Klutzo! Klutzo can't buy you a toy truck or a pair of fun socks...well, Klutzo could but

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Klutzo would rather give you someone no one else can. *(Howard pulls a vile of green liquid out of his pocket and forces it into Victim's mouth. Since the mouth is stitched shut, the vile liquid dribbles down their mouth onto their birthday best.)* Justin, you are my bestest friend, and I want you to know that I take good, *good* care of my friends. Imagine how much care and attention I'll give to you. Your mom? You want your mom? Your mom is with Klutzo now! Everyone you will ever need is with Klutzo now. We are all going to face eternity together, all sharing a great big hug as we enter the void not as lonely shepherds missing their sheep but as bountiful flowers creating a meadow for the great beyond to prance through! And I will be there holding your hand every step of the way. *(Howard grabs the cake and pulls it up. As he does so, it shakes the table and causes Victim to slam down face first after Howard delivers his line.)* Now, who wants cake?! *(Thunk. Blackout.)*

END OF ACT 1

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