

The Scorpion Dance

A ten minute play

by
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CAST:

ZADIE

Female, 30s-40s, preferably a POC.

EVAN

Male, 40s-60s, any race.

RELENTLESS

A rehearsal studio in the not-too-distant future.

A table, a glass pitcher full of water, two glasses.

Zadie walks around the room making a rhythmic clicking sound with her tongue.

Evan enters in a slick, tailored three-piece suit.

EVAN

Miss Freeman? Evan Sharv. Pleasure to meet you.

ZADIE

Hello. Did you find the place alright?

EVAN

I haven't been to this part of town in a while. It's really, uh...

ZADIE

Changed?

EVAN

Third fucking world. Outside I saw a woman shitting in the street. I've seen men do that in the street. Dogs, of course. The occasional horse. But a grown woman?!

ZADIE

Would you like a glass of water?

EVAN

(A beat. He looks at her.) Have we met before?

ZADIE

No.

EVAN

You sure? You seem...

ZADIE

I'm told I have one of those faces. Shall we get started?

EVAN

Terry says you're topnotch. And if Terry says that, it means you're good. And expensive.

ZADIE

He's right on both counts, I'm afraid.

EVAN

I wasn't sure what to wear. The email said comfortable clothing.

ZADIE

A suit is a little unorthodox.

EVAN

If people see me in sweatpants they'll think I've given up.

ZADIE

It'll work for today. Do you have any questions before --

EVAN

How exactly does someone like you get into this line of work?

ZADIE

Someone like me?

EVAN

Beautiful young woman. How did you become a, uh... I don't know what to call you.

ZADIE

Witness Preparation Coach. I used to be an actress.

EVAN

Ah. That's it. I must've seen you in something. Something my company maybe--

ZADIE

Nothing lately.

EVAN

This is a tough town. (Looking around) Is this your whole setup? I was expecting cameras, computers, facial analysis software.

ZADIE

There are other coaches who use those, but I prefer a more internal approach.

EVAN

Old school.

ZADIE

Something like that.

EVAN

You're not going to ask me about my childhood, are you? Peek into the cupboards?

ZADIE

I'm not a psychologist, Mr. Sharv.

EVAN

Evan. I'll call you Zadie.

ZADIE

Sure. Now if you don't mind taking a seat, I'd like to start with a breathing exercise.

EVAN

I need to pace. Stimulates the mind. You exercise?

ZADIE

I run.

EVAN

If I lived in this neighborhood, I'd run, too.

ZADIE

I don't live here. Terry suggested we work somewhere... discreet.

EVAN

How'd you go from actress to witness coach?

ZADIE

Mr. Sharv, we don't have much time together. I'd prefer to focus on you.

EVAN

I'm paying you. (He smiles.) Indulge me.

ZADIE

(A beat.) A few years ago my brother got arrested for robbery. He was innocent. Wrong place, wrong time. A white woman picked him out of a lineup. Probably because of his face. He has an angry face. His crap lawyer couldn't convince him to cop a plea, the case went to trial, and I knew no jury was going to look at Stephen and believe he was innocent. So I used the only weapon we had. My training.

EVAN

You got him to *act* innocent?

ZADIE

Hung the jury. His crap lawyer was so impressed he asked me to coach another client. And another. I never saw it as a career, but by then, a lot of acting jobs had been... replaced.

EVAN

(A beat.) Do I have an angry face?

ZADIE

It's not an innocent one, Mr. Sharv.

EVAN

I told you to call me Evan.

ZADIE

I'd like you to take a seat now. Terry sent over some questions for us, questions the jury will most likely hear in cross--

EVAN

How did you get him to act innocent? Your brother.

ZADIE

You ever take a theater class in school?

EVAN

They frowned upon that at Harvard Law.

ZADIE

If you're going to talk to the jury, maybe don't mention Harvard.

EVAN

Terry said I shouldn't mention my yacht either.

ZADIE

It's good advice.

EVAN

Don't you think some jurors might look up to me?

ZADIE

You don't need them to look up to you. You need them to believe you.

EVAN

How did you get Stephen to look innocent?

ZADIE

We're skipping ahead.

EVAN

You're a runner. Catch up.

ZADIE

(A beat.) Animal work. It's a theater game.

EVAN

Oh god.

ZADIE

You pick an animal -- monkey, cow, leopard -- and walk around the room as that animal.

EVAN

If you think I'm paying you a small fortune to have me mewl like a kitten --

ZADIE

Animal work is good to loosen your body, but what it actually reveals is the animal you already are. Every person -- if you look close, their mannerisms, how they move their eyes, how they walk -- already has an inner animal. Stevie was a chicken. Skinny, shifty, darty movements. Avoided eye contact. He looked untrustworthy. So I worked with him. Every day.

EVAN

You got him to become a different animal. Which one?

ZADIE

We're here to work on you.

EVAN

Owl? Kangaroo? Komodo fucking dragon?

ZADIE

A sloth.

EVAN

Why? Slow and inept?

ZADIE

Harmless and innocent.

Evan sits, scratches at his arm.

EVAN

So, Zadie, what's my inner animal?

ZADIE

We're kind of speeding through my process here. I'd like to start--

EVAN

--with a breathing exercise, I know. But my trial is in a month. So let's skip past the yoga bullshit and get to the part where you tell me a courtroom is like a zoo and I'm the animal in the cage everyone is there to watch.

ZADIE

You're right. They will be examining you. How you blink, how you yawn... (Evan checks his watch) How you check your watch.

EVAN

You think I'm guilty.

ZADIE

What makes you say that?

EVAN

Why would Terry hire someone who already thinks I'm guilty?

ZADIE

Maybe he knows what I know -- if you can get me to believe you, maybe you can get the jury, too.

EVAN

I swear I recognize you.

ZADIE

Can we start with a breathing exercise?

EVAN

I know we didn't fuck. I would've remembered that.

ZADIE

(A beat.) I was in *Super Bugs*. I was Scorpion Girl.

EVAN

No! What? Wait, that show was entirely AI. There were no actors. In fact, that was the first slate of our shows to... Oh. You were in the live action one.

ZADIE

The first one. The one you shelved.

EVAN

I didn't shelve it. I was running the company. Someone ten steps below me shelved it.

ZADIE

Well, someone at your company kept it from airing to save money on taxes. Then used our faces for the CGI show.

EVAN

I hate to break it to you, but--

ZADIE

Our bodies, too.

EVAN

Show business. People always forget about the "business" part.

ZADIE

I didn't forget. (A beat) After the strike, after your company's legal... maneuvering, I was tending bar and the show was on in the background. My friends who were on it had agreed we'd never watch the sim-version, but I couldn't look away. It was the love scene with Scorpion Girl and Cicada Man. And just before they kiss, Scorpion Girl does this little dance. This... (She demonstrates). I know that move because I created it. When I was researching the role, I read that scorpions dance before mating, so I added that little move when we filmed our version. A couple years later it's an algorithm of pixels on a TV in a bar in a bad part of town. You know what it's like trying to make rent and see an avatar steal your move? Whoever made that show, *whatever* made that show, took it from me. That's not show business... Evan. It's piracy.

Evan pours himself a glass of water.

EVAN

You should have some water. You must be exhausted from grinding that axe.

ZADIE

Snake.

EVAN

Excuse me?

ZADIE

You asked what your inner animal is. It's a snake. A boa constrictor.

EVAN

Hm. I figured a shark. Maybe a lion. Something with teeth.

ZADIE

You appear large and threatening, but you're a simple predator. You have only one weapon. Slowly suffocate something that's already there.

EVAN

Oh, is the money I'm paying you right now suffocating?

ZADIE

You need to know what you are before I can turn you into something else.

EVAN

And what do you want to turn me into?

ZADIE

I need to ask you a question the jury will want to hear.

EVAN

Then get to it.

ZADIE

It's a little delicate. Something I'd planned for our next session--

EVAN

Ask the fucking question, Sadie.

ZADIE

Did you murder your wife?

EVAN

(A beat.) Now who's skipping ahead?

ZADIE

Did you --

EVAN

No.

ZADIE

(A beat.) That is how a snake answers. Try saying it aloud.

EVAN

Is this how you coach people?

ZADIE
Can you even say it?

EVAN
I didn't murder my wife.

ZADIE
Again.

EVAN
How many times do you want me to--

ZADIE
Close your eyes. Say it again.

EVAN
(A beat. He closes his eyes.) I did not--

ZADIE
Quietly. You're not a snake anymore. You're something else. Your body is shifting.

EVAN
Okay, sure, my body is shifting.

ZADIE
You're a dog.

EVAN
I'm a... dog?

ZADIE
A golden retriever.

EVAN
Fucking Lassie?

Zadie makes a sudden loud noise, startling Evan.

ZADIE
If we're doing this, if we're really doing this, you can't be a snake with me. When your driver brings you over the hill, when you cross into the third world, past women shitting in the street, and walk into this room, you shed that skin and become an attentive, loyal, loving dog. You don't bark, you don't bare your teeth. You wait for my command.

EVAN
(A beat. Then, in a cartoonish dog voice) "I didn't murder my wife."

ZADIE

Funny. And Lassie was a border collie.

EVAN

Well, this was a spectacular waste of my time. Terry can pay you for the rest of the week.

As Evan heads to the door, Zadie picks up his chair and positions it in the center of the room.

ZADIE

A courtroom isn't like a zoo. It's more like a stage. The walk to the witness stand is your grand entrance. It should be smooth, direct, purposeful. (She demonstrates) As you sit, gently smooth your tie. (She demonstrates.) You want to look professional, but not vain. Slowly look at the jury first, then the prosecutor, then Terry. Do not smile. Keep your chin up. This isn't an interrogation, it's an aria. When the questions come, you soften your eyes. (She demonstrates.) You slow your breath. (She demonstrates.) Make one small movement with your hand. (She demonstrates.) And embellish. "I did not murder my wife. I love my wife. I'd never hurt her. She was the world to me. I need you all to know this. She was the world to me. The world."

A beat. Evan is impressed.

Zadie stands and pours herself a glass of water.

EVAN

Where did you learn to do that?

ZADIE

Show business. You forgot about the "show."

EVAN

Shall we start again?

He holds his hand out to shake. Zadie looks at it.

BLACKOUT