

IT'S ONLY A TRICK

A short play
by Ezra Endamne-Wamba

CHARACTERS

VERA

30s. Comes off as a little sardonic before you get to know her.

SAMUEL

30s. The sort of person who can effortlessly strike up conversations with strangers.

SETTING

A bar. The energy is slowly winding down for the night.

VERA
You want the truth?

SAMUEL
Yes.

VERA
You wouldn't believe me.

SAMUEL
Aw, come on. I asked so nicely.

VERA
Okay. I'm a therapist.

SAMUEL
That's not so unbelievable.

VERA
Hypno therapist.

SAMUEL
No way.

VERA
What did I tell you?

SAMUEL
No, no, I believe you... but would you believe me if I told you that I'm a magician?

VERA makes a face.

VERA
Like "is this your card" magician?

SAMUEL
Yeah.

VERA
That's awful.

SAMUEL
Hey!

VERA

Sorry. I kind of hate magicians... present company excluded.

SAMUEL

It's okay. I do too.

VERA

Why is that?

SAMUEL laughs.

VERA

... What?

SAMUEL

No, it's just -- your tone shifted. Is that your therapy voice?

VERA

Shit, you're right. Do you have insurance?

SAMUEL laughs some more.

SAMUEL

I don't, actually, which is part of the reason why I hate my job.

VERA

Sorry.

SAMUEL

Don't worry about it, I don't do any of those crazy Vegas death-defying stunts. But I don't want to bore you with my tragic backstory. Tell me more about hypnotherapy... and tell me why you don't like magicians, because I do take it very personally.

VERA laughs.

VERA

Well, it's pretty much regular talk therapy except I put my patients into a more suggestible state first. Please don't ask me to demonstrate on you right now.

SAMUEL

As long as you promise to not ask me to do a card trick.

VERA

Trust me, I wouldn't dare. But yeah, it's a fascinating job. I feel like I'm peeling back people's skin and looking right at their inner machinery.

SAMUEL

Totally not a concerning thing to hear from your therapist.

VERA

Well, I try not to lead with that.

SAMUEL

Of course.

VERA

As for magicians-- sorry, I never imagined that I'd have to justify this position to an actual magician.

SAMUEL

Don't hold back, Vera. I want to hear it all.

VERA

Okay, but please don't be offended.

SAMUEL

I'll be strong. I can take it.

VERA rolls her eyes and giggles a little.

VERA

Well... there's the obvious fact that it's your job to lie, but I don't have the same level of investment in hating lawyers or salespeople.

As VERA works through explaining her thoughts, SAMUEL feigns being wounded in the chest each time she adds something on.

I just find the whole thing tacky. And obnoxious. It's like every magician is convinced that he's this sexy mysterious *illusionist* and that he's about to blow your mind by making a quarter appear behind your ear. It's just stupid.

VERA loses her composure and bursts out laughing.

SAMUEL

I've definitely met the guy you're describing several times over. I like to think that I don't take myself so seriously, though.

VERA

Yeah. I also appreciate that you haven't made any quarters, scarves, or small animals appear out of nowhere.

SAMUEL

Check underneath your napkin.

VERA

Are you fucking kidding me-- oh, there's nothing here. Well played.

SAMUEL

Thank you. I think it's interesting that you said it's my job to lie. Do you think that about actors too?

VERA

No, of course not. I just feel like magicians are more comfortable with allowing the audience to believe that they can do actual magic.

SAMUEL

Hm.

VERA

What?

SAMUEL

I mean, you're a hypnotist. Even if *you* don't think of that as magic, I bet at least a few of your patients do.

VERA

That's hardly my fault. There's a very detailed informed consent form.

SAMUEL

Still, though. A few hundred years ago we would have both burned at the stake.

VERA

No, I would have been a medicine woman, and you would have been in the traveling circus.

SAMUEL

Ha ha. But my point is, is it really lying if we both actually do the tricks we say we can do?

VERA

Well-- I think I just don't like being misled. Or *misdirected*, to speak your language. Not because I actually believe you can summon rabbits out of hats, but because you actually did manage to sneak a rabbit in there without me noticing. It's... I don't know. Disconcerting.

SAMUEL

Disconcerting... Vera, I've never met anyone like you before.

VERA smirks a little.

VERA

You aren't the first to use that line.

SAMUEL

Oh, I know.

He smiles his award-winning smile. VERA is charmed.

SAMUEL

You aren't a regular, are you? What brought you here?

VERA suddenly seems sort of uncomfortable, but only for a moment.

VERA

My office is a few blocks down that way. I wanted a drink. Here I am.

SAMUEL

Fair enough. Long day?

VERA

Without getting into patient details, yes. God. Incredibly long.

SAMUEL

Can you give me the gist without breaking the law?

VERA

Maybe if you buy me another drink.

SAMUEL

That can not be legal.

VERA smiles and shrugs. SAMUEL gestures toward the bartender.

SAMUEL

Another one for Vera.

VERA

Thanks.

She sips her drink. SAMUEL waits attentively. She finally finishes it.

VERA

You're right, it isn't legal.

SAMUEL bursts out laughing.

SAMUEL

Fair enough!

They both laugh.

SAMUEL

Hey Vera?

VERA

Yeah?

SAMUEL

You still owe me something for that drink.

VERA *(laughing)*

Like what?

SAMUEL

Oh, I don't know. A hypnosis demonstration, maybe.

VERA

Is that really what you want?

SAMUEL

It was my plan all along.

VERA laughs.

VERA

Sure, what the hell. Do you trust me?

SAMUEL

Well, now I'm getting nervous.

VERA

Just remember, I can't make you do anything you don't want to do. Close your eyes.

SAMUEL

Okay.

VERA

Get comfortable, let your body relax. Breathe with me.

They breathe together for a beat.

Focus on the sound of my voice. I'm going to count backward from ten. Imagine yourself taking a step deeper into an inky black lake with each number. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one.

With each number, the lights around them should dim until the only light is a blue spot on the two of them. SAMUEL's body slumps over slightly. He's still awake but visibly in a trance.

VERA

Can you hear me? Nod if you can.

SAMUEL nods.

VERA

How do you feel?

SAMUEL

Good...

VERA

Good. What's your full name?

SAMUEL

Samuel James Kovach.

VERA

Cool name. How old are you?

SAMUEL

Thirty-four.

VERA

Are you attracted to me?

SAMUEL

Yes.

VERA

What's the secret behind the trick where you saw a girl in half?

SAMUEL

Nice try.

VERA

Raise your right arm.

SAMUEL complies.

VERA

Slap yourself in the face.

He does it.

VERA

Really?

SAMUEL

I'm a performer.

VERA

Give me your hand.

She gently takes his hand in her own. Her eyes flutter closed.

VERA

Samuel...

SAMUEL

Yes?

VERA

Oh my god, I'm so sorry.

SAMUEL

About what?

VERA

Your sister...

SAMUEL snaps out of the trance, pulling his hand away. Lights snap back to normal.

SAMUEL

What the fuck? How do you know about that?

VERA

I- I don't know, it was just obvious.

SAMUEL

Obvious? Do I have "dead sister" tattooed on my forehead or something?

VERA

I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything.

SAMUEL *(losing his initial anger)*

No, really, how did you know that?

VERA *(genuinely unsure)*

Uh ... intuition?

SAMUEL

That's one hell of an intuition.

VERA

I'll get you a drink.

SAMUEL

... Okay.

VERA

Just a second.

She disappears into the back of the bar. We sit with SAMUEL for a while. VERA returns. They are both silent for a beat.

VERA

So how was your day?

SAMUEL

Uh... business as usual.

VERA

What's the usual for you?

SAMUEL

Children's birthday parties.

VERA laughs.

VERA

Oh, that's so cute! I can't hate on that.

SAMUEL smiles and drops his guard a little.

SAMUEL

Yeah, the kids are amazing. It's the adults who cause the problems.

VERA

Oh yeah?

SAMUEL

The inter-community drama is crazy. It's a free-for-all. Children's entertainment wild west.

VERA

For real?

SAMUEL

Every day I have to compete with clowns and princesses for territory.

VERA

What a nightmare.

SAMUEL

You don't know the half of it.

VERA

Are you a part of a troupe or are you a solo act?

SAMUEL

It's just me. But I am a card-carrying member of Starlight Talent Agency.

VERA

I actually didn't know we had a talent agency in this town.

SAMUEL

It is slightly run out of a basement.

VERA

Slightly?

SAMUEL
Slightly.

VERA
Do you have your sights set on a talent agency that is fully outside of a basement?

SAMUEL (*sighs*)
I don't know. Maybe. I think I used to.

VERA
What happened?

SAMUEL
Things got stagnant, I guess. You know how it is.

VERA
How is it?

SAMUEL
You wake up in the same bed, in the same town, in the same life, on yet another morning that's just like every other morning, and you wish for a little change, a little subverted expectation or something, but then you think: is it worth it? Because every single thing you've had that seemed shiny and new somehow managed to slip right out of your fingers. So, you know, best not to rock the boat.

VERA
Hmm. I'm sorry to hear that.

SAMUEL
Oh no, the therapy voice makes a return.

VERA laughs.

SAMUEL
Listen, I don't want to make you work when you're off the clock, and I'm starting to get sleepy. This was fun, Vera.

VERA (*smiling*)
Okay. It was very nice meeting you, Samuel.

SAMUEL
I'll see you around, yeah?

VERA

Sure.

SAMUEL exits. VERA sits pensively at the bar for awhile. SAMUEL re-enters.

VERA

Back so soon?

SAMUEL

I think I left my watch here.

VERA

Oh yeah, I didn't even notice. Here you go.

VERA picks up the watch to hand it to him but it slips out of her hands and shatters on the floor.

VERA

Shit, I'm so sorry!

SAMUEL is too stunned to speak. VERA picks the watch up and inspects it. Yep, it's done for.

VERA

I feel awful, Samuel.

SAMUEL

Man, that was a gift from my dad...

VERA

...

No it wasn't.

SAMUEL

What?

VERA

You're a liar.

SAMUEL

What the hell, Vera?

VERA

You have dozens of that same watch in a cardboard box under your bed.

SAMUEL (*hiss*)

How *the fuck* do you know that?

VERA

I-- I don't know. Hey, this watch is greasy! Were you trying to get me to pay for it?

SAMUEL

No! Well, yes.

VERA

I see.

SAMUEL

Can we get back to you divining things about me? What the hell is going on?

VERA

Honest to god, I don't know.

SAMUEL

What do you mean *you don't know*? Because it seems like you know a lot.

VERA

I just don't know! I don't even remember how I ended up at this bar!

SAMUEL

What do you mean?

VERA

I don't know... how much of this is real and how much is a dream. I was in the office, I think, then all of a sudden (*she makes a gesture*). Here. And I feel like I've been here before, but I can't tell? I know I've walked past this place before, but if I try to remember a time I stepped inside, everything just goes dark. I feel like I'm blinking in and out of reality, like I'm slipping between the cracks... and I see things there. Things I don't even know that I'm not supposed to know.

Last night I just kept asking myself, *am I crazy*? And then I thought *don't use such stigmatizing language, Vera*. So I pulled out my copy of the DSM even though the first thing they tell you in undergrad is that you just can't diagnose yourself and I flipped through it cover to cover again and again trying to understand what the hell is wrong with me but I just couldn't.

SAMUEL

Vera! You're not crazy, okay? I don't think you're crazy.

VERA

Thank you, Mr. Conman. Means a lot.

SAMUEL

Listen, I'm sorry. I'm behind on rent and I thought you would be an easy mark... but I did genuinely enjoy talking to you.

VERA

Okay.

SAMUEL

Have you considered that you might be psychic?

VERA (*exasperated*)

That's not real.

SAMUEL

Vera, I know a lot about what goes into a cold read, and I can tell that you don't. So unless what you just did was some crazy Sherlock shit, I think you should just call it what it is.

VERA

That's absurd. I would know if I was psychic. I'm a therapist.

SAMUEL

Maybe it's part of the reason why you make such a good therapist?

VERA

I think we're done here. Goodbye, Samuel.

She stands and moves to exit.

SAMUEL

Wait! Are you going to be okay?

VERA

I don't know. Maybe.

SAMUEL

Can I at least call you a cab or something?

VERA

You spent the last of your cash on my drink.

SAMUEL checks his pockets. It's true.

SAMUEL

I can't get anything past you, huh?

VERA (*smiling*)

Guess not.

SAMUEL

Vera, I like you a lot and I shouldn't have tried that trick on you. I'm sorry.

VERA

Yeah?

SAMUEL

That's the truth.

VERA

I really do need to go home.

SAMUEL

That's okay. Call me?

VERA

I don't have your--

She checks her pockets and produces one of SAMUEL's business cards. She laughs. End of play.