

I CAN DO THIS

By

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FADE IN:

EXT. HOLLYWOOD CLUB - MILWAUKEE, WISCONSIN - NIGHT

The gray skies of a Milwaukee evening fade into the gray urban sprawl.

The Hollywood Club, a rundown building outlined in pink and blue neon lighting, offers a splash of color at the corner of 26th and State Street.

Cars dot the patched parking lot.

TWO MEN sit in an old rusted car.

INT. PARKED CAR

MARK JACKSON (late 20s), serious beer gut, sits cramped behind the wheel. Beer in hand. A perpetual sneer mars his face.

DENNIS "DWEEB" CARSON (late 20s), a tall, thin man with wide glasses, sits shotgun. A plastic bottle of water cradles on his lap.

MARK

Not many people here. You ready?

DENNIS

It's early. Another minute. Okay?

MARK

Hey man. How are you gonna hold it together?

DENNIS

I can do this.

Dennis fidgets. An OLD DRUNK slams the hood and screams unintelligible insults. Dennis and Mark watch him run off.

MARK

Nice neighborhood.

EXT. HOLLYWOOD CLUB - NIGHT

Mark and Dennis exit the car and head across the littered parking lot.

The club door has a handwritten sign taped to it:

SCREENWRITER OPEN MIC NIGHT

DENNIS

I can do this. My script is
good. My best friend is here.
I'm all good.

Mark holds the door. With a bow and a sweep of his arm, he motions for Dennis to enter the club.

INT. HOLLYWOOD CLUB - NIGHT

Dennis and Mark walk in the club and stop to survey.

MARK

You ever see a club like
this?

DENNIS

Just like an old Miami Vice
poster.

MARK

My eyes hurt from all the
pink and blue. Let's get a
beer.

DENNIS

That looks like where I'll be
reading.

Dennis points at the old wooden riser in a dark corner of the club. Another handwritten sign is taped to the microphone:

SCREENWRITERS REGISTER AT BAR

Mark and Dennis head to the bar.

INT. HOLLYWOOD CLUB - THE BAR

JOE (40s), a stocky bartender, waits to take their order.

MARK

Damn. This bar top is sticky.
I like it. Hey Joe, I'll have
a tapper.

DENNIS

And I'll have ice and diet water. Clean glass please.

JOE

Bottled water "diet" enough for you?

Dennis nods.

MARK

What can you tell us about the lady screenwriters?

DENNIS

Maarrk.

MARK

What? A guy likes to look even if they won't let him touch.

JOE

(to Dennis)

Name and script title. No fee, no prizes.

DENNIS

So how long can I read?

JOE

Beth will explain it all when she starts up around 11 pm.

DENNIS

Thanks man. Name's Dennis Carson. My script is called Deader.

JOE

Yeah I got it.

The boys sit on their bar stools. From the rear, they look like a modern version of Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy.

MARK

Dweeb, are you sure you're gonna hold it together?

DENNIS

I can do this.

MARK

So you keep saying.

DENNIS

I wanted to be an artist...

Mark sighs. He's probably heard it before.

DENNIS

But my college professor told me I was long on technique and short on... talent.

MARK

So now you're an accountant. Making big money. Quit whining.

DENNIS

The nicest thing anybody ever said was "At least that doesn't totally suck."

MARK

So this is like payback, right?

DENNIS

Yes. I mean no. I don't know. I am just afraid I'll suck at this too.

INT. HOLLYWOOD CLUB - OFFSTAGE

Several PEOPLE enter and sit at the small tables and chairs offstage. Mark sits calmly. Dennis fidgets in his chair.

MARK

It's almost show time. I count ten other wannabes here.

DENNIS

I can do this.

MARK

You know, Dennis, you have been my best friend since the fourth grade. But I gotta tell you... Your short scripts suck!

Mark gulps his beer and places the empty glass on the table top. At the other tables, a head or two lean closer towards Mark and Dennis.

DENNIS

No they don't.

MARK

How can you be so sure?

DENNIS

I checked off the Big Seven!

MARK

And they are...

Mark counts on his fingers.

MARK (CONT'D)

Dopey, Sleepy, Grumpy--

DENNIS

--Oh, very funny Snow White.
The seven deadly sins of
screenwriting are:

Dennis starts moving from the waist up. A chair dance.
Dennis sways to an imaginary beat.

DENNIS (CONT'D)

(singsong)

Don't annoy with ambiguity.

Don't cramp the characters.

Don't dis the dialogue.

Don't forget the format.

Don't grate the grammar.

Don't stifle the story.

The chair dance stops. Dennis takes a deep drink of his diet water for dramatic pause. Mark flips Dennis the finger. Mark smiles but doesn't mean it.

DENNIS

And lastly, don't asphyxiate
the audience.

DENNIS (CONT'D)

(mocking)

And thank you for noting the nearly flawless alliteration. Thank you. No. Thank you.

Mark pats Dennis on the back.

MARK

Nervous anymore?

DENNIS

(smiling)

You know, you've been an ass your entire life.

MARK

(unconvinced)

And you're a wannabe. Don't add loser to it.

Mark watches Dennis head for the stage.

One of the WANNABES, DEXTER (late teens), lanky and wearing a pullover hat, gets up from a nearby table and walks over to Mark.

DEXTER

Hi. I'm Dexter. Your guy seemed kind of nervous.

MARK

He'll do fine. He's pumped up now.

Mark glances around. No one else to talk to.

DEXTER

That chair dance was max funny! Those seven deadly things he sang to you, are they like official or anything?

MARK

I think they are. It's just how he remembers them.

DEXTER

Your guy is in for a real roast for his first read.

MARK

Yeah, I'll tell my guy you asked.

INT. HOLLYWOOD CLUB - STAGE

Discarded scripts and empty beer cans clutter the corners of the stage. Dennis waits for his introduction.

BETH (early 20s), rail thin, slouches as she stands with the mic in hand. Beth walks slowly and barely acknowledges Dennis before stepping into the pink spotlight.

Mark notices Beth is not unattractive. He smiles then tries a drunken wave at her. She can't see him because the spotlight shines in her eyes.

BETH

(deadpan)

Hello everyone. I'm Beth. There are three rules for tonight. Rule number one is...

WANNABE #1

You can read for five minutes.

BETH

And rule number two is...

WANNABE #2

Two people give feedback. One pro, one con.

BETH

And rule number three is... All together now.

AUDIENCE

Be respectful!

BETH

Wonderful.

The small crowd settles down.

DENNIS

I can do this.

BETH

Our first SW tonight is
Dennis Carson, reading from
his short screenplay Deader.

(softly)

Like this place could be any
deader.

Dennis steps into the pink spotlight. Beth nods at Dennis before listlessly walking offstage. Dennis pulls at his collar and reads his script.

DENNIS

(quavering)

Fade in. Exterior, Old West
Graveyard, dusk. The
gravedigger, DIGGER (20s)...

Almost five minutes later.

(stronger)

...Father Mack's odd looking
ring reflects in the candle's
light. Fade out. The end.

Nothing from the audience. Dennis looks hopeful and can't see Mark. Broken, Dennis starts the walk of shame back to his seat.

Then a single clap for a few moments. Gradually, more claps until everyone near the stage claps. A confused Dennis finds Mark.

MARK

Dweeb, they were hazing you!

Dennis finally gets it and flashes a smile so wide it threatens to cut his thin face in half. His smile fades as he sits down.

DENNIS

This isn't over yet.

BETH

Anybody want to do the con
review?

CLIFF (30s), an immaculately dressed man with a pointed beard, stands at his table and walks to the stage. The audience makes some noise for Cliff.

BETH

What a surprise. It's Cliff.

CLIFF

I must say, I'm glad your
short was really short.

The audience chuckles. Cliff smiles with overly white teeth before resuming.

CLIFF (CONT'D)

You have a terrible flashback
and flat characters that play
ping pong with clunky
dialogue. And just how many
times can you say deader?

The audience laughs a little bit louder now.

DEXTER

Oh man! Cliff you radically
ripped him a new one!

DENNIS

I wonder if throwing up would
be against rule number three.

Cliff smiles again, waves and leaves the stage. The crowd makes some more noise. Mark and Dennis cross their arms in protest.

BETH

Anybody want do the pro
review?

Again, silence from the audience.

DEXTER

Hey man, I'll do the goody
two shoes review.

Dexter leaps on stage and grabs the mic. When he speaks, Dexter bobs his head and moves his arms in rhythm to his phrasing.

DEXTER

Hey everybody. It's me
Dexter. My next script is
called Better Than Deader.

The wannabes hoot for one of their own.

DENNIS

Oh, please. Let it be something positive.

Mark arches an eyebrow at Dennis.

DEXTER

Well, Dennis. I found your script to be one of a great potential not fully realized. I am totally intrigued by your premise. Rewrite and bring it back so we can grok on it again.

Dexter reflects for a moment.

DEXTER (CONT'D)

Screw that, fellow screen writer. Just follow your own List of Seven and you'll be golden my man.

Dexter holds up his hand and does a feeble impression of Mr. Spock.

DEXTER (CONT'D)

Read scripts and prosper.
Dexter out.

Dexter scrambles offstage.

INT. HOLLYWOOD CLUB - OFFSTAGE

DENNIS

What?

MARK

Yeah. He overheard your list earlier. Seems to like it.

DENNIS

No, I mean what was that venom spewing out of Cliff's mouth?

Dennis shakes with indignation.

DENNIS (CONT'D)

Where's the love? The handy tips. The camaraderie. Cliff sure isn't giving it up.

Everyone in the bar looks at the defiant Dennis as his shoulders gradually drop.

MARK

We most definitely need another brewski.

A defeated Dennis follows as his comrade Mark waddles back to the bar.

INT. HOLLYWOOD CLUB - THE BAR

After returning to their bar stools, Joe serves the duo up refills. In the background, the SWs chant and laugh.

MARK

What are they saying? Sounds like "shitter" to me.

DENNIS

I don't care.

MARK

Look, I am sorry your feelings are hurt--

DENNIS

--Ishtar. It's Ishtar!

Cliff walks back from the little screenwriter's room and veers toward Dennis.

MARK

Here comes Cliffy! Joe you got some stones we can throw?

Joe smirks and holds up his empty hands.

CLIFF

Dennis. Please, don't take what I said personally. It was feedback to help not hinder.

Mark gets up in Cliff's face.

MARK

You know pal... You're an arrogant ass. Lay off already!

Dennis puts a restraining hand on Mark's shoulder. Mark shakes it off. Mark sits down but still looks pissed.

CLIFF

Well. OK then. Which review helped you the most? My venomous spewing or Dexter's rambling "so we can grok again"?

DENNIS

Venomous spewage.

CLIFF

Tell you what. Dexter told me about your List of Seven. Why not stick around and tell us about them?

Cliff scratches his beard as if he can't wait to get home and trim it. Mark ignores him as Cliff heads back to the stage.

DENNIS

Nice guy. Kind of.

MARK

Yeah right. What does "grok" mean anyhow?

DENNIS

Ask Dexter. He's on his way over here.

DEXTER

So your guy did fine tonight?

MARK

And he's gonna do better next month. Right Dweeb?

DENNIS

I'll be back with a rewrite but I'll let all the suggestions "grok" in my brain first.

Mark sits heavily on the bar stool. Quite drunk.

MARK

Where's Beth? I want to meet her.

DENNIS

Not tonight she doesn't.

Mark accepts the advice then focuses on Dennis through bleary eyes.

MARK

So. Dweeb. Was your art professor right about you?

DENNIS

Yes. Yes she was.

A thoughtful look crosses Dennis's face. His eyes open wide. Dennis slaps his open palm on the bar.

Startled, Mark and Joe watch Dennis with renewed interest.

DENNIS

I could write something more aspiring than skits. Perhaps ladder up to a full feature?

MARK

Ladder up?

DENNIS

Yeah. Write scripts of increasing length.

MARK

Your scripts will still suck.

DENNIS

You know Mark, sometimes you can really be an ass.

Mark blows a drunk "screw you" kiss at Dennis.

Dennis's expression changes from annoyance to satisfaction. He holds up his glass to make a toast.

DENNIS

I will write what I write until it's right. I--

MARK

--Don't say it. I'm begging
you.

DENNIS

I can do this.

FADE OUT.

THE END