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. Denis 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 WANNADES, 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
deeper.

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