

"Locked Room Misery"

A one-act play by Jason Half

Inspired by a radio script by Willis Cooper

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Locked Room Misery - a one-act play

By Jason Half, inspired by a radio script by Willis Cooper

CAST: (2M, 1F)

FRANK, a writer under pressure

LILY, a well-intentioned wife

KERRIGAN, a menacing intruder

SETTING: Frank's attic office. Stifling, cluttered.

TIME: Sunday morning, present day.

Locked Room Misery - a one-act play by Jason Half

A writer's office. Desk, typewriter, chair and telephone of an older generation. One entrance/doorway to the side and one shut window (suggested - downstage on the fourth wall).

Along with the general clutter -- sheets and balls of paper lying about, the wastebasket close to brimming -- there's a sense of claustrophobia too. The room is small and two people need to stand close out of necessity.

At rise, FRANK CHASE paces uncomfortably in the room, reading aloud from a sheet of paper. He looks bedraggled and appears to have slept in his clothes.

FRANK

(reading to himself)

Devereux stared at the man across the desk. The man stared back. "We hardly need introductions," the stranger replied. "I think you know who I am, Detective Devereux." Devereux knew all right. He knew he was looking into the eyes of a merciless killer.

(making notes with a pencil)

Merciless... Remorseless killer. The eyes of an intense and remorseless killer. An intense and remorseless indiscriminate killer.

(crossing out the notes)

No, what're you doing? The killer and his eyes are merciless, just leave it at that.

Frank moves back to the typewriter, feeds in the paper, lines it up, and gets ready to write.

FRANK

Okay. All right. Okay. "Devereux knew all right. He knew he was looking into the eyes of a merciless killer."

(typing; reciting)

But he stayed calm and he said..... He stayed calm and he said.....

Frank struggles, sounding out and dismissing a number of possibilities.

FRANK

He said, “Mmmm-- “No, he said, he said “I uh, I oughta--” No, he stayed calm and he said “Heeee,” he said “Hhhhhello, Kerrigan.”

Frank types, then reads it. He grimaces.

FRANK

“Hello, Kerrigan?” Is that the best you can do? So then what? Come on, Frank! Hero and villain are finally in the same room, make ‘em talk! Come on come on come on! And then Kerrigan says.... He says back to him, he says..... Auugh!

Frank slumps in his chair.

LILY (O.S.)

Frank? I’m coming up. I’ve got my hands full so if you could get the door... I’m at the door now. Open the door, Frank. Be a sport.

Frank doesn’t move.

LILY (O.S.)

Fraaaaank? I’m staring at a closed door, Frank. I’m considering walking away. Aw, who am I kidding? I do like a challenge.

Sounds of a clinking tea set and the jiggling of a door knob and LILY enters. She holds a tray with a coffee pot, creamer and sugar bowl, spoons and two cups.

LILY

Made it, with everything intact! Some fresh coffee for my not-so-fresh writer. It’s very stuffy in here, Frank. How long have you been up here? Frank? Are you asleep?

FRANK

No.

LILY

Are you pouting? Are you stuck again?

FRANK

I'm so close. It's the last scene. Kerrigan finally confronts Devereux at his office. The detective is suddenly face to face with his worst nightmare. If he doesn't play his hand just right, Devereux could wind up as Victim Number Five.

LILY

Strangled like the rest? With a jump-rope?

FRANK

Yeah. But I've been stuck at the same spot for two days now!

LILY

Have some coffee.

FRANK

I don't deserve coffee. I can't get past "Hello, Kerrigan."

LILY

Honey, you always do this. You know what you need?

FRANK

I need a witty reply to "Hello, Kerrigan."

LILY

You need some fresh air and a shower and some sunshine. Do you know it's a beautiful Sunday morning out there?

FRANK

(Pityingly, to himself)

I've been writing all night... Stuck on the same scene.... LILY, STOP!

Lily, who has crossed downstage to open a window, stops in her motions.

LILY

What?

FRANK

Don't open that window. Don't even put the blinds up.

LILY

Frank, you need air and sunlight! This isn't healthy.

FRANK

I want it this way. I work better this way.

LILY

Honey, take a break. Come away from the office.

FRANK

I'm not leaving here until I get this scene figured out.

LILY

Think of the ducks, Frank. The cute little ducks, splashing about, quacking merrily.

FRANK

I don't-- What? Ducks?

LILY

Every Sunday morning we would take what's left of the bread and we would go down to the park and we'd feed the ducks.

FRANK

This isn't helping my crime story.

LILY

And then you started writing every weekend--which is fine, I'm very proud of you--but it means that I hardly see you anymore. And I miss you, Frank.

FRANK

I know. Me too.

LILY

So drink some coffee, take a shower, and spend some time with me. Let's go to the park.

FRANK

You're right. Maybe I need some time away from this room, away from this story.

Frank grabs Lily's hand and leads her to the door. Lily giggles happily in response.

Near the door, Frank freezes and looks back at the desk. Lily, still moving and holding his hand, is pulled back.

LILY

What's the matter?

FRANK

I just can't leave it now! If I just keep going, I bet I can figure it out.

LILY

(Irritated)

Frank. If you don't come with me, you're going to have one frustrated girlfriend and a lake of disappointed ducks.

FRANK

Look. Lily: just let me finish this scene and then we'll go out. I promise.

LILY

How long will that take?

No reply; Frank doesn't know.

LILY

(Exasperated)

Oh Frank! All right, fine! Let's figure it out.

FRANK

Sweetie, it's writing. I'm the writer. It's a solitary process.

LILY

Well maybe that's your problem. You need to collaborate more. Give me what you got.

FRANK

Lily...

LILY

Give me!

FRANK

(Reading from the paper)

Okay: Devereux stared at the man across the desk. The man stared back. “We hardly need introductions,” the stranger replied. “I think you know who I am, Detective Devereux.” Devereux knew all right. He knew he was looking into the eyes of a merciless killer.

LILY

Ooh, merciless. That’s good.

FRANK

But he stayed calm and he said, “Hello, Kerrigan.”

A beat as Lily waits.

LILY

And?

FRANK

And that’s it.

LILY

Oh. So now what?

FRANK

I don’t know. But I need to figure this out alone.

LILY

So Kerrigan can say, “Hello, Devereux.”

FRANK

Great.

LILY

(Voicing the characters)

“Would you like some coffee, Kerrigan?” “Only if you join me, Devereux.” “Cream or sugar, Kerrigan?” “Sugar. You know I have a sweet tooth, Devereux.”

FRANK

Okay, honey That’s not helping. I need to figure out what happens next.

LILY

Okay. So what needs to happen?

FRANK

After some talking, then the killer tries to kill Devereux and then the killer dies.

LILY

How does he die?

FRANK

I don't know.

LILY

The detective shoots him.

FRANK

No, his gun was taken away by the cops in Chapter Four.

LILY

Something on his desk, then. A letter-opener.

FRANK

Kerrigan's too clever for that.

LILY

Pair of scissors.

FRANK

No.

LILY

He bashes him over the head with a typewriter.

FRANK

Just, stop. It's gotta be unexpected yet inevitable. I need to figure this out.

LILY

I'm just trying to help.

FRANK

I know, but you're not helping. You're not a writer.

LILY

(A little hurt by this)

Well, I'm sorry. I try to be supportive. You know what? Never mind. Obviously you'd rather spend more time with your characters than with me. So I'm going to the park with the rest of my bread. At least the ducks will be happy to see me.

Lily moves to the door. She stops, waits.

LILY

Frank. I'm going.

FRANK

It's just the last scene.

LILY

So figure it out.

Lily exits. Frank frowns, frustrated at how poorly he handled the moment. He paces again.

FRANK

(Talking to himself)

All right, you can fix the damage later. Go back to work. Just get this done.

Frank sits, reads again.

FRANK

Eyes of a merciless killer.... He stayed calm and he said, "Hello Kerrigan."

A pause. Misery for Frank.

FRANK

Oh, God. Is Lily right? Do I need someone to collaborate with? Or is my problem something else? Something worse?

A noise at the door. Frank turns to look.

FRANK

Lily?

A man enters and the two look at each other.
The man is KERRIGAN.

He wears a dark overcoat. Kerrigan looks at Frank from across the desk. The stranger is disturbingly calm.

FRANK

Oh, what--? Who are you? How did you get in here?

(No response)

Did you hear me? I'm talking to you. Who are you?

KERRIGAN

We hardly need introductions.

FRANK

Well, I think we do! You can't just waltz into someone's attic office uninvited! I'm not gonna have a complete stranger stare at me from across the desk when I'm trying to work. A complete stranger...

(Slowly realizing)

Wait a minute. There's something familiar here... I recognize that face. We've met before, but where? Your face, those eyes. Wait a minute, don't tell me...

KERRIGAN

I think you know who I am, Detective Devereux.

Frank jumps excitedly as his mind works through the implications. He has the physical energy of a writer working through an exciting idea.

FRANK

Oh wow! This is great. This is gonna help so much, okay, concentrate! Back to work.

Frank takes his position behind his desk, stares back, playing his role.

FRANK

Hello, Kerrigan.

The men stare at each other. Stuck. After a long beat:

FRANK

Now what? Aren't you gonna say something?

KERRIGAN

You tell me.

FRANK

You're here now. You can tell me.

KERRIGAN

Devereux, I don't think you understand the situation.

FRANK

You can call me Frank.

KERRIGAN

You're trapped inside a tiny room with a killer and no one to help you. The only person who could help, you sent away.

FRANK

I can handle this by myself.

KERRIGAN

You think so? Go ahead, Detective. Handle the situation.

FRANK

Okay, I will. Here we go.

(Locking eyes again)

Hello, Kerrigan.

Another pause. Frank squirms.

FRANK

So.... Finally. We meet.

Frank winces: bad line.

FRANK

Wait. Wait. I can figure this out.

Kerrigan smiles coldly.

KERRIGAN

I don't think you understand the danger you're in.

Kerrigan takes a single purposeful step towards Frank at the desk.

FRANK

Shhh! Just be quiet! Stay over there, let me think. Okay, okay. Would you, um, would you.... Like some coffee, Kerrigan?

Kerrigan stops.

KERRIGAN

Only if you join me, Devereux.

Frank abstractedly pours out two cups of coffee. As he does so:

FRANK

(Talking to himself)

Yeah, I suppose that'll work. "As Devereux poured out the coffee, his mind was racing furiously. He needed to be ready to defend himself against the killer who was less than a jump-rope's length away. How could he get out of this situation? For now, he'd stall for time."

(To Kerrigan)

Cream or sugar, Kerrigan?

KERRIGAN

Sugar. You know I have a sweet tooth, Devereux.

Frank pushes over the sugar bowl and Kerrigan spoons sugar into his coffee. (Frank drinks his coffee black.) The two men lock eyes again and drink from their cups at the same time.

Another awkward pause. Kerrigan waits.

FRANK

So. What brings you by, Kerrigan?

KERRIGAN

You know what brings me by.

FRANK

Tell me anyway .

KERRIGAN

You're the only person in the world who's built a case against me. Everyone else is still in the dark. But you've got all the evidence right there, and you're getting ready to wrap it up and make it public. And I don't like it when it's made public. Then the cops get involved. And I go away. While you get all the credit. And I don't want that.

FRANK

You don't have a choice.

KERRIGAN

Sure I do. It's simple. I need to stop you, Frank.

FRANK

(Weakly; correcting)

Devereux.

KERRIGAN

Frank.

FRANK

Okay, stop. You wanna know why you're here? Because I invented you. You're a part of me, my creation. And you're here to help me, not to stop me.

KERRIGAN

You sure about that?

FRANK

Of course! I control you; you can't hurt me. Now stand over there and help me build up these pages.

Frank adjusts the typewriter page and gets ready to write. Kerrigan smiles again.

KERRIGAN

When I came in, you said you recognized me.

FRANK

Why shouldn't I? I made you. The unforgiving smile, the merciless eyes. You're Kerrigan.

KERRIGAN

You don't know the danger you're in.

FRANK

You keep saying that. All right then, let's put it down.

(Typing)

"You don't know... the danger you're in... sneered Kerrigan."

KERRIGAN

I think you should look closer.

FRANK

At what? The sentence?

KERRIGAN

At me.

FRANK

Cut it out. I'm trying to think.

KERRIGAN

You don't want to look. Because you know who I am.

FRANK

Kerrigan, just stop it.

KERRIGAN

You know who's in the room with you. And you're scared. Because you've faced me before. Many times.

FRANK

(Looking at Kerrigan)

What is it with you? There's something familiar... Unsettling...

KERRIGAN

And here's the tragedy, Frank. You and me? We're nemeses. We need each other. You want to create, and I want to destroy.

FRANK

(Fighting; denying)

No. You're here to help me finish the scene. You're Double-Dutch Kerrigan, the Jump-Rope Killer. That's all.

KERRIGAN

No more pages for you, Frank. You're out of inspiration.

FRANK

Stop it! Don't say that.

KERRIGAN

You know it's true. You recognize me now?

FRANK

All too well.

KERRIGAN

Still think I can't hurt you? Frank?

No response.

KERRIGAN

You'll never finish this story. Not if I can help it.

From his coat pocket, Kerrigan takes out a jump rope and lets it dangle to the floor. Then he runs the rope over his palm and pulls it taut.

Frank watches, transfixed.

KERRIGAN

Only one of us can win, Frank. You had a good run. Nearly 200 pages. Too bad...

Frank watches, frozen, as Kerrigan slowly stalks him.

As Kerrigan lifts the rope above Frank's head, Frank finally breaks out of his paralysis.

FRANK

WAIT! Stop! Now listen to me, you-- you-- destructive force. You need to give me one more chance at this scene.

KERRIGAN

Time's up.

FRANK

No. One more pass, right from the top. You owe me that!

KERRIGAN

I owe you nothin'.

FRANK

So what're you afraid of? You said yourself my inspiration's gone. I'm no threat to you.

KERRIGAN

(Deciding)

Okay. One more pass. Because I love seeing writers in agony.

FRANK

Then stand over there and get ready.

Kerrigan puts the rope back in his pocket and moves to the other side of the desk. Frank gets ready at the typewriter.

FRANK

Okay. Okay, here I go.

KERRIGAN

Last chance.

The men lock eyes. The following lines and actions are covered speedily, as they've already been determined.

KERRIGAN

"We hardly need introductions. I think you know who I am, Detective Devereux."

FRANK

Merciless eyes.... "Hello, Kerrigan. So finally we meet."

KERRIGAN

You cut that.

FRANK

Oh right...

Frank crosses out a line on the paper.

FRANK

“Would you like some coffee, Kerrigan?”

KERRIGAN

“Only if you join me, Devereux.”

FRANK

“Cream or sugar, Kerrigan?”

KERRIGAN

“Sugar. You know I have a sweet tooth, Devereux.”

Repeated motions of the coffee pouring and sugar spooning. They drink, then stare at each other.

KERRIGAN

So here you are.

FRANK

Quiet.

KERRIGAN

What are you going to do, Frank? How are you going to kill me?

FRANK

(Doing as stated)

Um... Well, Devereux sits down his coffee cup and pulls at the top drawer of his desk. Inside is his .38 Special.

Frank fumbles in the drawer.

KERRIGAN

No it isn't. Devereux surrendered his gun to the cops in Chapter Four. You gotta do better than that.

FRANK

Okay. So the detective notices something on his desk. A letter opener. Scissors. He reaches slowly for it. Kerrigan never notices.

KERRIGAN

Kerrigan always notices. He'd grab the knife first and Devereux would pull his hand back with fingers missing.

Frank pulls his creeping hand away from the desk. He is getting desperate.

FRANK

In a fit of desperation, Devereux lifts his typewriter to throw at his nemesis!

KERRIGAN

Remember how agile you made Kerrigan? If he went for the typewriter, that rope would be around your hero's neck before you could say Smith-Corona.

FRANK

Devereux started to scream.

KERRIGAN

No good. A closed attic office with the window shut. You know what your problem is, Frank?

Kerrigan begins to advance with the rope.

FRANK

(Thinking frantically)

Wait! Okay He... Um.. He escapes, runs out the door.

KERRIGAN

And turns his back on a strangler? Here's your problem. You chose this uninspiring, locked room for yourself.

FRANK

It's not locked.

KERRIGAN

It might as well be. You shut yourself off from the world, pulled the blinds down, shut the door tight. The one person who wanted to help, you sent away.

FRANK

Lily

(Deep in thought; then seeing the rope)

Please don't.

KERRIGAN

It's the world around you that gives you inspiration. That's what drives creativity. And you turned your back on it.

FRANK

I didn't know... Please...

KERRIGAN

And now you're locked in this room with me. You had your chance. Now it's my turn to win. Goodbye, writer.

FRANK

No... No....!

Kerrigan goes behind Frank and catches his neck with the rope. Seated, Frank clutches at the rope, struggling and trying to breathe. Kerrigan is in control and efficiently strangling Frank.

A moment of this agony, and then Lily enters with energy. She wears a light jacket and carries a partial loaf of bread in a plastic bag. Lily moves to the other side of the desk.

[Note: through this, Lily doesn't react in any way to the presence of Kerrigan or the strangling. In reality, she is just talking to a depressed Frank.]

LILY

Frank? Frank! Listen to me! The coffee.

Kerrigan and Frank stop struggling and look at Lily. [Lily only addresses Frank.]

FRANK

(A hoarse voice)

What about the coffee?

LILY

That's how Devereux kills Kerrigan with no weapons around. The coffee is poisoned!

Kerrigan, listening, releases the rope and moves to the desk, where he looks at the coffee pot.

KERRIGAN

Poisoned?

FRANK

Wait a minute. Honey....

LILY

It's poisoned!

KERRIGAN

It can't be.

FRANK

I don't-- Let me think.

KERRIGAN

That's why I say, "Only if you join me." We both drink the coffee.

FRANK

(Overlapping)

They both drink the coffee, both of them.

LILY

Yeah, but only Kerrigan chooses the sugar.

All three of them look down at the sugar bowl.

LILY

And the detective always takes his coffee black, you established that in Chapter One.

KERRIGAN

There's poison in the sugar?

Kerrigan moves DS, starts to wobble and sway.
He is not feeling well. He falls to the ground and collapses.

FRANK

Wait, wait....

LILY

It's a good idea?

FRANK

Yes! Absolutely. But we need to ride this out.

LILY

“We?”

FRANK

Yes. So tell me what you think. It's not poison in the sugar--

Kerrigan sits up on the floor, waiting.

FRANK

It's knockout drops, like a dilution of chloroform.

Kerrigan falls over again.

LILY

That's good! It's slow acting so it gives the killer time to confess.

FRANK

And it means that Devereux isn't a murderer himself. He's just brought a killer to justice and now he can call the cops in with a clear conscience.

Frank begins typing to finish the page.

LILY

I like that. Frank?

FRANK

Hmmm.

LILY

I've been waiting for you. I miss you. Can we go to the park?

FRANK

(Still typing, distracted)

In a minute.

Frank stops typing, realizing what he said.

FRANK

No. Not in a minute. In a sentence.

He finishes typing a sentence-- just a few more clicks and a period-- and gets up from his desk.

Frank and Lily share a smile. Then Lily crosses DS to the "window," cleanly stepping over Kerrigan on the floor. She opens the window. (Perhaps a lighting change or audio of outside nature.)

LILY

There. Get some fresh air in here. Is that okay?

FRANK

(Handing her the bread bag)

Perfect. Now let's go feed the ducks. Lily? Thanks for helping.

Lily smiles, steps back over Kerrigan. Frank meets her in the middle.

LILY

Frank? Are you sure it shouldn't be poison? If you don't kill off the bad guy, he could come back later and do more damage.

FRANK

He could. But the hero needs someone to fight. Even if it's only himself.

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Lily and Frank exit the room, hand in hand. A beat, then audible SNORING is heard coming from Kerrigan. He sleeps. The LIGHTS FADE.

THE END