

NOT FOR COFFEE

A Play in One Act

NOT FOR COFFEE

(The stage is bare except for a metal table and two chairs at C. The chairs face the front. It has the character of and is in fact an interrogation room. On the table are a small bank of computer monitors and consoles. There is a door up C. Seated at the table are MARISSA, an ambitious, businesslike woman in her 20s, at L, and ERIC, an experienced and calm supervisor type in his 50s, at R. They are government bureaucrats. While MARISSA can't help the occasional show of emotion, ERIC is conservative, stable, and as set in his ways as a low-speed locomotive. They are watching an interrogation suspect as though through mirrored glass.)

MARISSA

(Rises and comes front C) Why do they do it?

ERIC

Why does who do what?

MARISSA

Why?

ERIC

Our job is not to determine why they do it – only to build a database.

MARISSA

For what?

ERIC

For the future.

MARISSA

Yes, but in this case the suspect may have been unaware he was committing an offense. By the time he gets in that room, hooked up to heart monitors, under heat lamps and cameras, of course he's going to be ...

ERIC

Look, Marissa ... you're putting too much thought into this. We're techs. We are here to record data and to ensure the equipment runs properly. If we fail in our duties, that's it. We move on to the human element.

MARISSA

Not really – he would still be ours to ...

(TERRY, a large armed man in his 30s, in SWAT team uniform, bursts into the room.)

TERRY

The director is here!

ERIC

The director of what, Terry?

TERRY

(Frantic) Our department! *(He bursts out of the room.)*

ERIC

I admit the human element fails us a lot. *(Pause)* It seems Washington has taken in interest in the proceedings.

MARISSA

Oh my!

ERIC

No, there's no "oh my." There are only offenses against the state. Now quiet – they're bringing him in. *(Pause)* Here he is. Remember your training.

MARISSA

Study your subject. Heart rate, changes in body chemistry. Pupil dilation. Sweat. Establish a baseline. Breathe. One two three.

ERIC

Easy. Remember what these people are capable of. We are the guardians of the republic, the extractors of state secrets. But we're still just techs.

(THE DIRECTOR *and* TERRY *enter.* THE DIRECTOR, *in his late 50s, is a suited man of no small importance.*)

THE DIRECTOR

What do we have?

ERIC

(Stiffens slightly upon the entrance of THE DIRECTOR, clears throat, yet remains professional.) This interview subject is charged with violations of sections nine and forty-six sub five of the Patriot Act, with a repeat on section 506, sub a, two, big C, three small I's, attempting to illegally enter and remain in the territorial United States with unlicensed and uninspected consumer products.

THE DIRECTOR

Show him no mercy. *(Pause)* Who's that in there with him, gesticulating and telling our tech what to do?

ERIC

He asked for representation, sir. It's his right under the Act, sir.

THE DIRECTOR

Will this coddling of common thugs never cease?

ERIC

Yes sir. I think the pocket square is a bit over the top myself, sir.

THE DIRECTOR

Yes – well, let's get him in here.

TERRY

Yes sir. (*Exits*)

THE DIRECTOR

Every agency head should have a staff of trained mutts. Ours are called U.S. Marshals. (*He has a private laugh while ERIC and MARISSA remain stone silent.*)

Ms. Myers – is this your first detention interview?

MARISSA

Yes ... sir.

THE DIRECTOR

Then I will de-brief you personally in my office. At four-thirty. (*He exits*)

MARISSA

He's rather direct, isn't he?

ERIC

That's why he was named bureaucrat of the year. He doesn't have a thought in his head that doesn't involve the orderly preservation of our republic.

MARISSA

He even beat the guy from the I.R.S.?

ERIC

Yes.

MARISSA

Wow – that's impressive.

ERIC

It's not about impressing people so much as it is about blind adherence to laws, rules, regulation, memos, circulars, non-codified directives, executive orders, and proposed regulations still subject to the thirty-day public comment period but which for all intents and purposes already carry the weight of settled law (*takes a breath*) etcetera. (*Into microphone*) Is he hooked up? Good.

MARISSA

Where did The Director go?

ERIC

I don't know.

MARISSA

Eric?

ERIC

Yes?

MARISSA

Are we sure all this really necessary?

ERIC

Is all what really necessary?

MARISSA

I mean, the elaborate setup, the polygraph ... Wasn't this suspect already detained here and he just needs to be extradited back? Haven't we been through the legality on this? I mean ... he's guilty, right?

ERIC

Maybe you're not clear about what we do here.

MARISSA

But ...

ERIC

Maybe we should hook you up to the polygraph.

MARISSA

No – that’s not what I mean.

ERIC

Look, Marissa – we’re not a jury. We’re techs. We make sure the system runs properly and fix it when it doesn’t. We’re bureaucrats. You like it, you don’t like it – there’s a form for it. Make copies. (*He smiles thinly, as THE DIRECTOR enters.*)

MARISSA

Why the vocal distortion?

ERIC

As per agency directive. At the interrogation interview, voices are manipulated to prevent empathy and identification.

THE DIRECTOR

(*From up C*) We want to hear him say it.

MARISSA

I’m sorry, sir?

ERIC

Yes ...

THE DIRECTOR

(*Moves down C, between them.*) We want to hear him say it. We want him to break down. Effective interrogation is

not all about getting the confession. The subject may not know he's guilty. We want him to be aware he's in the system. When I was a young clerk toiling away in a field office for Justice like you, Marissa, I handled a big, high publicity case like this one once. I'm sure if I told you, you'd remember it from the news. We had the subject in the room for days – in his face, sweating him out, bamboo shoots under the fingernails, iron maiden, good cop bad cop, waterboarding, you name it – he wouldn't talk. We couldn't get a blip on the polygraph, no vocal quaver, no uptick in the pulse rate, nothing. Finally this young clerk whispers in the ear of the field agent in charge, "ask him if he knows why he's here." And the field agent did. That night, we celebrated, with a steak dinner. Red meat.

MARISSA

You broke him with that one question?

THE DIRECTOR

No – we threatened his wife and kids. But the asshole ended up confessing and pleading guilty.

ERIC

Saved the government the cost of a trial.

THE DIRECTOR

Well, it doesn't cost us anything. But, yes – somebody in the attorney general's office would have been seriously put out for like six months. We'd like to avoid the same thing here. Ask the questions.

MARISSA

Yes sir.

THE DIRECTOR

Wait ... get his representative in here. Where's that marshal who was here?

(TERRY enters holding several Dixie cups.)

TERRY

Have you seen the coffee cups?

ERIC

Now, Terry – I thought I told everybody that the coffee cups are over in the classroom. (*He points.*)

TERRY

(*Bewildered*) Oh yeah ... I suppose we can just use these.

ERIC

Those are no good, Terry – not for coffee.

(*TERRY starts to exit.*)

Wait ... bring the representative in here.

TERRY

Yes sir. (*He exits.*)

THE DIRECTOR

Marshals ... one wonders how he finds his way to the field office every morning.

ERIC

He's good with the prisoners, sir.

THE DIRECTOR

Any cop with a gun and handcuffs can do what he does. So ... what? He drives a van a few miles to the federal pen while a cocaine dealer and a fence jumper are cuffed in the back? He flips a switch and turns on the metal detector? So what? Let me tell you two something. Our government is full of ...

(*TERRY enters with FURILLO, 40s, obese. He is wearing a three-piece pinstriped suit.*)

TERRY

Here he is, sir.

FURILLO

What is going on in here? (*He sees THE DIRECTOR*) Wait – I know who you are – you’re the director. What are you doing here?

THE DIRECTOR

This case has generated a good deal of publicity. It *is* OK with you if I oversee my department?

FURILLO

Of course, but ...

THE DIRECTOR

Goody ...

FURILLO

When the director comes in from Washington for a mere extradition interrogation, I view this as troubling. I call for an immediate stay of execution.

THE DIRECTOR

Back off, Clemenza. What is it? Is there a buffet at Golden Corral you’re missing?

(*FURILLO takes a step toward THE DIRECTOR. TERRY draws a handgun and points it at his head.*)

FURILLO

(*Angry*) My name is Furillo.

TERRY

Freeze!

THE DIRECTOR

It's all right – put your gun away.

ERIC

He called you in here as a courtesy.

FURILLO

I'll make sure the court knows about this sham interrogation. I'll make sure they know your man pulled a gun on me.

THE DIRECTOR

Do you really want to do that? Do you really want to play politics with me? I represent the most popular administration since Jesus Christ. Do you think anyone will believe you over me? I'll make it so the only job you'll get is making pizzas. Capisce?

FURILLO

I've handled high profile federal cases before and I'm not intimidated ...

THE DIRECTOR

Well, you should be.

FURILLO

I call for a stay of execution. I demand to see a district magistrate ...

THE DIRECTOR

That individual in there is a federal prisoner and we have the right to interrogate him.

FURILLO

This is an illegal ex parte ...

THE DIRECTOR

No ...

FURILLO

extradition ...

THE DIRECTOR

No ...

FURILLO

interrogation ...

THE DIRECTOR

No ... Your client is a threat to national security. Now I suggest you get back in there and represent him.

FURILLO

You can't do this ...

THE DIRECTOR

I can and I will.

FURILLO

I am a lawyer in good standing in this court.

THE DIRECTOR

Not anymore. How would you like me to revoke your certificate? Or disbar you? I can prevent you from getting on a plane.

FURILLO

I don't see what that has to do with ...

THE DIRECTOR

Mr. Schwartz – put this man on the no fly list.

ERIC

Yes sir. (*He starts typing.*) It's done.

FURILLO

(*Pause*) I can't believe you would ...

THE DIRECTOR

(*Calm throughout*) You heard him – it's done. Now I suggest you get back in there and represent your client or I'll bring the wrath of God down on your head. Do you have something to hide?

FURILLO

(*Composes himself*) I'm going to tell the media about this circus you're running.

THE DIRECTOR

Good. It's an election year.

(*FURILLO exits on his own.*)

ERIC

Nicely done, sir. He's been a bane to this field office for years.

THE DIRECTOR

That? I was just scrambling his brain a bit – that's all. Just having some fun.

ERIC

Should I take him off the no fly list?

THE DIRECTOR

No – keep the son of a bitch on there.

ERIC

Yes sir.

THE DIRECTOR

(*To* MARISSA) Ask the questions.

MARISSA

(*Into microphone*) Mr. Rodriguez? Can you hear me?

Is your name Arturo Rodriguez?

ERIC

Pulse is 95. Pupils point eight eight centimeter.

THE DIRECTOR

Doesn't that seem a bit high? That's high, isn't it?

ERIC

It may be the new surroundings, the circumstances of the detention. Unless he's lying about his name, sir.

THE DIRECTOR

That's possible.

ERIC

Anyway, it's a baseline.

MARISSA

What is your date of birth?

THE DIRECTOR

It would be hard to lie about this one. Seems truthful within a year or two.

ERIC

Vitals are holding steady.

THE DIRECTOR

He's just a nervous kid. (*To TERRY*) What do you make of all this, General Patton?

TERRY

It's really exciting, sir.

ERIC

It's the government. It doesn't get exciting.

MARISSA

Do you read, write, speak and understand the English language?

ERIC

Slight blip on that response, sir.

THE DIRECTOR

Arrest the little bastard.

TERRY

Yes sir. (*Starts to exit.*)

ERIC

The changes to BP, pulse and dilation are all within standard deviations.

THE DIRECTOR

Lieutenant, wait. (*TERRY halts in his tracks.*) Get me coffee. Hold off on arresting the little bastard. For now.

TERRY

Yes sir. (*Exits*)

MARISSA

Shall I continue, sir?

ERIC

We have a baseline.

THE DIRECTOR

Go ahead – ask another one. Little bastard ...

MARISSA

Yes sir. (*Into microphone*) Do you live at 3631 Meridian Road Southwest, Miami, Florida?

ERIC

Again, sir – he responded in the affirmative; but this time we measure four millimeters of pupil dilation, along with a marked increase in his pulse rate, and ... he's sweating.

THE DIRECTOR

Four millimeters! Then we got him! He's lying about where he lives! (*He lifts MARISSA out of her chair and dances her around the stage. TERRY enters and can't help being drawn into THE DIRECTOR's revelry, and spills most of the coffee. ERIC just watches.*) Lieutenant – arrest the little bastard! (*TERRY exits. THE DIRECTOR spins MARISSA back into her chair. He begins rubbing her shoulders.*) Four millimeters and perspiration! (*Pauses, sighs.*) You two did a great service for your country today. How does a week in Vegas sound? We'll fly out the whole field office.

ERIC

That sounds great, sir.

(TERRY enters with ARTURO, a frightened boy, 8.
TERRY is holding an automatic weapon at his head.)

THE DIRECTOR

(With barely restrained glee) Arturo Rodriguez – you are being detained. You’ll be held in a cold, dirty cell with smelly adults until it’s time to deport you. Cool? (To TERRY) Get him out of here. (TERRY forces ARTURO offstage at gunpoint. ARTURO is crying loudly.)

That was delicious.

ERIC

(Rises) If you’ll excuse me, sir – national security always makes me move my bowels.

THE DIRECTOR

By all means, Mr. Schwartz. A big victory always gives me an appetite. What’s good for lunch here? I’m thinking South Beach. Ms. Myers?

MARISSA

That’s above my pay grade, sir. (ERIC exits.)

THE DIRECTOR

He’s a good team leader, isn’t he?

MARISSA

Yes sir.

THE DIRECTOR

You’ll have his job someday.

MARISSA

(She considers this.) I was hoping to work in the district.

THE DIRECTOR

Well, that takes more than just a high turnover rate. Do you think you have what it takes to survive on the big stage? At Justice?

MARISSA

Sir, this office has one of the highest conviction rates in the country. Drug interdiction, illegal immigration, surveillance – all among the best. I think what Eric and I do has a lot to do with that success.

THE DIRECTOR

Do you know what makes him so good at what he does?

MARISSA

I don't want to sound presumptuous ...

THE DIRECTOR

It's OK – we're all friends here.

MARISSA

When you're working on a project, and everybody is under pressure, running around, crazy ... you value somebody like Eric who stays calm and on point.

THE DIRECTOR

Yet he's still in a field office at his age. He should be the one clamoring to work in the district, going home to his house in Virginia every night. Instead he's ... what? Shaking down taco eaters, smugglers and refugees from behind glass, reading e-mail. There's no pressure here.

MARISSA

I would think his family has ...

THE DIRECTOR

Fuck family. You want to get ahead? You want the big job in DC? You've got to step over him, and move on.

MARISSA

(She rises, vaguely excited by this prospect.) I had no idea there was so much office politics at the higher levels.

THE DIRECTOR

It's all politics. Office politics, high diplomacy – we got it all. Just what an up and comer like you wants. Tell you what – we'll go out to lunch. Hell, we'll even take that idiot from the marshal's service. You take the rest of the day off. Later, you come up to my suite at the Fountainbleau and we'll discuss your future.

MARISSA

(She advances toward him.) I'd like that, sir – I'd like that very much. But what about all the surveillance? Most of it is from this office.

THE DIRECTOR

Right ...

(ERIC enters.)

Hey, there he is. We were just singing your praises. Nice work on this file, Schwartz.

ERIC

Thank you, sir.

THE DIRECTOR

In fact, you're due for a bump, aren't you?

ERIC

I am, sir – but the department's frozen pay increases, hasn't it?

THE DIRECTOR

Right ...

THE END