

# **One by One: A Community Theater Murder Mystery**

By

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## Characters:

Tim: A 40-45 year old plant manager

Ron: A 35-40 year old English professor

Gwen: A 50 year old community theater director

Pam: A 20 something year old college student and community theater actress

Joy: A secretary at a law firm and community theater member

Paul: A 20 something year old student and community theater member

Bob: A large man, sometimes actor and always technical director for the company. He appears masked in the dream sequence and doubles as the mugger.

Bill: A middle aged business man/accountant and community theater member. He doubles as the police officer.

Setting: The stage of a community theater somewhere in the Midwest

Time: The present

## Synopsis:

A community theater stalwart and blue collar worker, Tim, becomes jealous of a newcomer, Ron, a professor at the local university who is cast in all the leading roles he used to receive. The two are cast in a new play under development, *One by One*. In the play within the play the characters are killed off one by one while Ron experiences a variety of accidents that threaten his life during rehearsals. The surprise ending reveals an unexpected theatrical reality.

Act 1: Scene 1: Tryouts for Presumed Guilty

Act 1: Scene 2: Set Strike for Presumed Guilty

Act 1: Scene 3: Set Construction

Act 1: Scene 4: Tryouts for One by One

Act 1: Scene 5: A Darkened Stage

Act 2: Scene 1: The Mugging Incident

Act 2: Scene 2: Two Near Misses

Act 2: Scene 3: The Accident

Act 2: Scene 4: The Grand Finale

Sample Dialogue from:

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*Act II, Scene 3: The Accident*

*(Pam, Paul, Ron, Joy and Bill are on stage. More of the set should be complete, although it need not be finished.)*

GWEN:

Since we're stopped anyway, why don't we take a potty break? Joy, you can leave if you want. We won't need you because we'll start with the lines leading up to the gun shot and you're not in that part.

JOY:

Thanks. I can use the time off.

GWEN:

And tonight we'll try it with the starting pistol to see how it works. I've got it here. (She takes it out of her bag.)

PAUL:

Wow. *(He takes it.)* That really looks good, authentic. I hope no one ever fakes a robbery with one of these. They might get shot by someone who thinks it's real.

JOY:

That really does look real. Are you sure it isn't?

GWEN:

It's not real. It just uses blanks. *(She takes it back.)* Real bullets don't even fit in the chambers.

RON:

I just love a woman who knows her guns, especially if they're fully loaded.

GWEN:

I think there's something else fully loaded here and we aren't talking bullets.

RON:

Alas, rebuffed again. I'm just going to take my break then.

GWEN:

Everybody—back in five minutes and only five minutes. We still have a lot to do.

JOY:

Do you mind if I stay and watch?

GWEN:

I thought you wanted the time off.

JOY:

I should, but I really want to see how it's going to look.

GWEN:

Suit yourself. But let's take a break first.

*(Gwen places the gun on an end table and the whole group leaves upstage left (or through the audience if possible) for a few moments. After they are gone, Tim steps out from behind the front curtain. He is wearing gloves. He looks around to make sure no one sees and then switches the guns. After that, he exits very quietly up stage right to where the outside door is located. A few moments later, Pam and Paul return. Paul picks up the gun.)*

PAM:

This is going to be so cool with the starting pistol, don't you think?

PAUL:

It sure beats having sound effects and trying to time it so it looks like it happened when he pulls the trigger. That never works right.

PAM:

Can I see it? *(She takes it.)*

PAUL

It really is authentic. It even feels like it's the right weight.

PAM:

Can I fire it once, just for fun?

PAUL:

No. You'd better not.

PAM:

Why not?

PAUL:

Well, for one it might catch everybody off guard and for two, I don't know how many blanks we have. We might need them all for rehearsal.

PAM:

Alright. I don't know why you get to have all the fun.

PAUL:

Just destiny, I guess.

*(She gives Paul the gun. Joy and Ron return followed by Gwen. They are all laughing.)*

GWEN:

Ron, please stop it. We need to be serious here.

RON:

They say three good laughs a day helps you live longer. I'm just trying to do my part to increase life expectancies.

JOY:

And we appreciate it.

*(Tim reenters from upstage right, no longer wearing gloves.)*

PAM:

Tim, what are you doing here?

TIM:

You said tonight was the first night to use the gun and I just wanted to see how it looked. I couldn't wait until tech rehearsal.

GWEN:

I guess Joy isn't the only one who thinks a little pistol shooting is so exciting. Well, your timing is perfect. We were just about to start that part. So you and Joy can watch from the seats and tell us what you think.

TIM:

We'll be the test audience. I'll take this side and Joy, you take the other side.

*(They both go into the audience and either sits in an empty seat or in an aisle. They watch and speak from there during the following.)*

GWEN:

Now, before we do this, a couple things. Even though it's only a starting pistol, we need to be very careful. So don't point it right at him.

PAM:

What difference does it make? You said it was blanks.

GWEN:

I know. It doesn't make any sense, but it's just good to . . . we don't want to get in the habit of pointing guns at people, that's all.

PAUL:

Shouldn't I at least point it at his shoulder or something so it looks real from the audience? I mean it has to look like I shoot him.

GWEN:

I suppose so.

TIM:

Why don't you try aiming it and we'll tell you how it looks?

PAUL:

Good idea. Ron, why don't you take your place and we'll try it?

RON:

How about I pretend to put an apple on my head and you be William Tell and aim at it? I'd feel safer.

PAUL:

Like this? *(He aims obviously high.)*

GWEN:

How does that look, you guys?

TIM:

It looks like you'd miss him by about three feet, that's how it looks.

JOY:

I agree. It looks fake from here.

RON:

Oh, well. It was worth at try.

TIM:

Aim just over his shoulder instead. Let's see how that looks.

GWEN:

How does that look?

TIM:

Better, although it still looks a little off.

GWEN:

Joy?

JOY:

Better, but not great. Maybe it'll happen so fast that no one will really see it.

PAUL:

That's right. I mean, I have to grab the gun from under the cushion, aim and shoot.

GWEN:

That might work. Let's try that, only don't shoot this time. Just see how it looks.

PAUL:

Okay. Here we go. *(He places the gun under the cushion on the couch. After a pause.)* I forgot my line.

GWEN:

You liar. Now just do it.

PAUL:

You thought you'd get away with this only you didn't count on this. *(He grabs the gun and aims.)*

GWEN:

Cut. Great. I think that's right. How did that look?

TIM:

It looked pretty good. Just remember the closer you aim the more real it looks.

GWEN:

Joy?

JOY:

I agree. The closer the better.

RON:

And the more panicked I get.

GWEN:

Did that bother you?

RON:

Not really. I'm really just bracing myself for the noise. I hate loud noises.

GWEN:

Let's do it one more time without shooting it and then we'll try it for real.

*(Paul puts the gun under the cushion again.)*

RON:

Alright. I can wait to panic until the next time.

GWEN:

Ready, Paul?

PAUL:

Yes, it's ready.

GWEN:

Okay, go.

PAUL:

You thought you'd get away with this only you didn't count on this. *(He grabs the gun and aims.)*  
How did that look?

JOY:

Perfect from here.

TIM:

Yeah, that looked great. Did you do anything different?

RON:

He aimed closer.

PAUL:

How could you tell?

RON:

You forget. I'm at the other end of the barrel. I can tell where you're aiming.

PAM:

I could tell, too. It looked better from here.

TIM:

Whatever it was, it looked better. It looked like he was aiming right for his heart.

GWEN:

Good. Then let's go with that.

PAUL:

Can do. It's easier to aim close anyway. More natural.

GWEN:

Okay. Let's try it one more time, only really fire the gun this time.

*(Paul puts the gun back again.)*

RON:

I'd really prefer you'd say starting pistol. It sounds safer.

GWEN:

Sorry, Ron. Fire the starting pistol this time, Paul.

PAUL:

Okay. It's ready. I'm ready.

RON:

And I'll try not to wet my pants when it goes off.

GWEN:

If you do, we have another pair in the costume closet.

RON:

Oh, that's a relief.

GWEN:

Okay. Everybody ready? Go.

PAUL:

You thought you'd get away with this only you didn't count on this. *(He grabs the gun and aims and fires. The gun goes off and Ron is hit in the shoulder.)*

RON:

*(He screams as he falls and then.)* I've been hit.

GWEN:

Great acting, Ron, only that's not the line.

RON:

No, I really have been hit. I'm bleeding.

*(Paul stand stunned. Everyone else runs to Ron, including Joy and Tim from the audience. Ron lets out periodic groans during the following.)*

PAUL:

What happened?

PAM:

It must have been a real gun. You gave Paul a real gun.

GWEN:

No, I didn't. I shot it this afternoon. It's a starting pistol

TIM:

*(He goes to Paul, takes out a handkerchief and takes the gun from Paul.)* This is a real gun, Gwen, not a starting pistol. Somebody changed guns on you.

GWEN:

That's not possible.

PAM:

Should I call 911 for an ambulance?

JOY:

If this isn't an emergency, what is?

*(Pam goes to get her phone from her purse while Joy comforts Ron.)*

PAUL:

Can we move you, Ron?

GWEN:

No, we better wait for an ambulance unless, how bad is it, Ron?

RON *(overly dramatic Shakespearian):*

'Tis not so deep as a well, nor so wide as a church door. But 'tis enough, 'twill serve: ask for me tomorrow and you will find me a grave man.

JOY:

Ron, don't joke at time like this. This is serious.

RON:

It's barely bleeding, or at least it's not too bad.

GWEN:

Call an ambulance. You've got your phone?

PAM:

Yes. I'm already dialing.

PAUL:

It's not my fault. I didn't know. It was suppose to be. . .

GWEN:

You're right it's not your fault. It's, it's. . . I don't know whose fault it is.

PAM:

*(Into the phone)* This is an emergency. Someone's been shot. Send an ambulance to the Stables Community Theater building on Yeager.

TIM:

It was an accident. Somebody must have switched guns.

PAM:

*(Into the phone)* It was an accident. We were rehearsing. It was supposed to be a starting pistol and it wasn't. It was a real gun.

GWEN:

How could that happen? I had it with me the whole time.

PAM:

*(Into the phone)* I don't know what a bad gun shot wound is. I've never seen one before.

PAUL:

I could have sworn it was the same one you showed us yesterday.

PAM:

*(Into the phone)* In the arm. It's not bleeding much.

PAUL:

God, I'm sorry, Ron. I didn't know. It's not. . .

RON:

*(Slowly sitting up.)* It's not your fault. It's just another "accident."

PAM:

*(Into the phone)* We'll be waiting for you at the door.

RON:

You know, I always thought it was ridiculous in movies when people get shot and then they keep going. Well. . . . *(He starts to try to stand.)*

JOY:

Don't get up. Wait for the ambulance.

RON:

*(Ignoring her he finishes getting up)* I actually don't feel much pain any more. I think I could go

on at least a little. I feel like, I've survived this. It's not that bad. I've felt worse.

PAM:

Just sit. They said they'd be here in two minutes.

RON:

I'm not ready to run a marathon, but I think I could probably finish rehearsal.

GWEN:

We are not finishing rehearsal. You're going to the hospital. You're going to get x-rays. They're going to remove the bullet. And that's final. God, I feel so responsible.

TIM:

It wasn't your fault, Gwen. Everyone knows you didn't do this.

PAUL:

I feel like it was my fault. I'm the one who aimed and fired.

JOY:

Maybe it's my fault for insisting you make it look real for the audience.

TIM:

Don't blame yourself. We didn't know. Nobody knew.

RON:

Come on. None of you are responsible. It has to be someone else. I don't know, maybe the mugger thinks I've identified him or something.

PAM:

Are you going to be able to do the show?

RON:

I don't know. I hope so.

GWEN:

I am not letting you do the show after this. You could have been killed.

RON:

The show must go on! It's the first rule of theater. And the second is you don't miss a performance unless there's a funeral and it's your own.

PAM:

Who told you that?

RON:

My college director.

GWEN:

Six inches to the left and it would be your funeral.

JOY:

Don't say that. I don't want to think about that.

*(We hear the sirens approaching from the distance.)*

PAUL:  
They're coming. God, I'm sorry, Ron. I, I.

RON:  
It's not your fault, Paul. And I'm going to be okay. . . I think.

GWEN:  
I'm thinking we should cancel the show.

TIM:  
What?

RON:  
No, you can't cancel the show.

GWEN:  
No show is worth risking a life. This is too much.

RON:  
I'll be back and if not me, then someone else can do the part. You've got 10 days. I mean the show must go on.

TIM:  
All our work.

PAUL:  
I, I don't know. Can we still do it, I mean without Ron?

GWEN:  
I just think we should cancel the show.

RON:  
No, no, no. Don't do that. It's bad enough I get shot. I'll feel even worse if the show gets canceled.

PAM:  
That's so brave of you, Ron.

RON:  
I'm just a regular Braveheart.

JOY:  
I think I see a little Mel Gibson in you.

GWEN:  
I don't know. Don't you think we should cancel?

TIM:

I don't think we have to. I mean, I think we can all pick up the pieces.

*(The sound indicates the ambulance has arrived.)*

GWEN:

I'll think about it. Right now, let's get Ron to the hospital.

*(The lights fade as the scene ends.)*

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