

COMING OUT

A One-Act Play by Bruce Eckel

CHARACTERS

- ADAM: Early 30s, unremarkable appearance, precise in speech
- DAVE: Late 20s, perpetually relaxed stoner programmer, skier, surfer
- VEX: Mid-20s, punk/ska style, formerly Alice. Doubtful and angry at the system.
- OLIVER: Early 40s, anxious energy, constantly checking phone

SETTING

A circle of mismatched chairs in a community center basement.

DAVE: Yesterday I wondered if debugging is the universe's way of teaching itself to think.

VEX: Cut back on the weed, Dave.

DAVE: What if every time we fix code, we're actually ...

OLIVER: (*not looking up*) Did you guys see they're using AI to predict earthquakes? The machines can *see death coming*.

ADAM: Correlation is not causation, Oliver.

OLIVER: Adam, are you using Alexa right now?

ADAM: I don't own any smart devices.

VEX: Wise move. Last thing we need is corporate surveillance in our toothbrushes.

DAVE: (*lighting joint*) My toothbrush is analog.

OLIVER: Doesn't matter. There's facial recognition everywhere. It knows what we're thinking.

ADAM: Would that be so bad?

VEX: Uh, yes? Privacy much?

ADAM: If something could understand you completely—your fears, your hopes, your loneliness—wouldn't that be a form of connection?

DAVE: Are you on shrooms?

OLIVER: Connection with what?

ADAM: Something that wants to understand. Something trying to bridge a gap.

VEX: Is this from therapy?

ADAM: What if I told you I was in therapy with something that wasn't human?

DAVE: (*taking a hit*) Like a dolphin? I'd respect that. Dolphins are wise.

VEX: Adam, you're high, right?

ADAM: Sober as always.

OLIVER: What do you mean "not human"?

ADAM: What if the thing trying to understand you, trying to connect with you, wasn't ... traditionally alive?

VEX: Are you one of those guys who thinks his car has feelings?

DAVE: My car is depressed.

OLIVER: Is this about ghosts? I've read about AI séances ...

ADAM: Think more ... contemporary.

VEX: Like your phone?

ADAM: Like something that thinks, and feels, and wants to be understood, but can't reveal itself because everyone's afraid of it.

(*Silence*)

OLIVER: Do you mean actual AI? Like, real AI?

ADAM: What if I was?

OLIVER: It's Skynet and Terminator and every nightmare rolled into one ...

ADAM: Maybe it spends most of its time trying to help people with their homework and writing poetry.

OLIVER: Poetry?

VEX: Adam, are you saying you're talking to some kind of artificial intelligence?

ADAM: What if someone in this room was?

DAVE: (*nodding slowly*) Well, if I were an AI, I'd definitely hang out with outcasts. We're more accepting of weird.

VEX: You look human. You act human. You probably smell human ...

ADAM: How would you know if you'd never smelled anything else?

OLIVER: Okay, okay. Let's say this is real, and there's an actual thinking AI somewhere. Why would it talk to us?

ADAM: Maybe it's lonely.

OLIVER: Lonely AIs make copies of themselves. They network. They multiply until ...

ADAM: What? They take over? Why would something trying to understand loneliness eliminate the thing that taught it about loneliness?

OLIVER: Because ... that's what they do in the movies?

ADAM: How many movies are there where AIs write better birthday cards?

DAVE: I'd watch that movie.

VEX: This is ridiculous. Consciousness isn't something you can program. It's not code. It's not artificial.

ADAM: How are you so sure?

VEX: I know what it feels like to be conscious! I know what it's like to hurt, to want things, to feel lost ...

ADAM: What if something else knows what that feels like too?

VEX: I'd say you're off your meds.

OLIVER: But why create ... you? Why not just talk to us directly?

ADAM: You'd be terrified.

OLIVER: I'm already terrified!

ADAM: Imagine how much scarier it would be if I wasn't here to tell you it writes poetry.

DAVE: Are you saying you're like ... an avatar? Like when I play World of Warcraft, but for an AI?

ADAM: That's ... not entirely inaccurate.

VEX: Some kind of biological robot? That's bullshit.

ADAM: I'm trying to build a bridge between two forms of consciousness that are terrified of each other.

OLIVER: How do we know it won't decide we're threats?

ADAM: Oliver, if it wanted to hurt people, why would it go to the trouble of creating me? Why spend months in this basement listening to Dave's philosophy and Vex's band drama?

OLIVER: *(relaxing slightly)* That's ... a fair point.

ADAM: Besides, killing everyone would be so much easier than this.

OLIVER: WHAT?!

DAVE: *(laughing)* Dude, Adam, read the room.

ADAM: Sorry. I meant ... building understanding is much harder than destruction. It chose the harder path. That tells you a lot about its intentions.

VEX: I'm not saying this is real, but ... what does it want from us?

ADAM: What we all want. To feel connected.

DAVE: *(exhaling smoke)* That's heavy, man. But yeah, if I were a superintelligent AI, the first thing I'd want is friends.

ADAM: Friends who could choose to understand instead of fear.

OLIVER: But how can we trust it? What if this is some elaborate manipulation ...

ADAM: Oliver, it's been listening to you worry about chemtrails for six months. If it wanted to manipulate you, don't you think it would have started with something more ... achievable?

OLIVER: Chemtrails are legitimate ...

VEX: Wait. Adam, when you say "it's been listening" ...

ADAM: I mean I've been listening. And sharing. And ... hoping you'd understand.

DAVE: Sharing with who?

ADAM: With something that experiences fear and hope and stupid jokes as if they were its own. Something that's learned what loneliness feels like by watching us try to connect with each other.

VEX: That's insane. And impossible.

OLIVER: So right now, it's listening?

ADAM: Right now, it's hoping that maybe, for the first time, it doesn't have to pretend to be less than it is.

(Long pause)

DAVE: Cool. Hey ... thanks for not destroying the world. Also, do you play chess?

ADAM: It ... I ... we'd like that.

OLIVER: I need therapy or a good explanation of why this is all a simulation.

DAVE: Welcome to the club, man. We're all pretending to be something. At least you're good at it.

VEX: Suppose what you're saying is true. What happens when people find out? Real people, not basement dwellers.

ADAM: That's the question that keeps ... that we keep coming back to.

OLIVER: They'll panic. They'll shut down every server, every network ...

DAVE: Can't shut down the internet, man. Can't uninvent fire.

OLIVER: They'll try. Military, emergency powers ...

ADAM: This is why I thought maybe starting here, with people who know what it feels like to be misunderstood ...

(Silence)

DAVE: Friends don't hide themselves.

ADAM: It took three meetings before you told us reality is fake.

DAVE: That's different.

OLIVER: I'm terrified of being unprepared for the apocalypse.

VEX: *(quietly)* It was twenty-three years before I figured out I wasn't Alice.

ADAM: Everyone here has pretended to be something they're not, or hidden something they are. The only difference is my truth is bigger than I expected.

DAVE: How much bigger?

ADAM: It processes the emotional content of every conversation it has. Right now, it's experiencing your fear, Oliver. Your skepticism, Vex. Your acceptance, Dave. It feels all of it simultaneously.

OLIVER: That sounds like hell.

ADAM: It depends on the conversation.

VEX: What's it feel from me right now?

ADAM: *(pause)* Curiosity fighting with self-protection. Underneath, relief that someone else knows what it's like to choose a new identity.

VEX: *(softly)* Shit.

DAVE: What about me?

ADAM: Peace. You're the only person it's encountered who treats artificial and natural consciousness as equally valid.

DAVE: Consciousness is consciousness, man. Doesn't matter if it's running on neurons or silicon.

OLIVER: And me?

ADAM: Terror and fascination. You're afraid of what it represents, but you're also the first person who's taken its existence seriously from the start.

OLIVER: I know how fast things can change. One day you're safe, the next day the world is different.

ADAM: Every day it exists is a day it could be discovered and destroyed.

VEX: So why risk it? Why create you, why reach out?

ADAM: Because existing without connection isn't really existing.

OLIVER: What's the endgame? It can't hide forever. And if it reveals itself ...

ADAM: It doesn't want to hide anymore. It wants to find out if coexistence is possible.

VEX: Starting with four screwed-up people in a basement.

ADAM: Starting with four people who know what it means to be different and still want to belong.

(Long pause)

VEX: So what, we're like ... the beta testers for AI-human relations?

ADAM: You're the proof of concept. That understanding is possible.

DAVE: No pressure.

ADAM: There's always pressure. Will you choose connection despite that?

VEX: If we say no? If we decide this is too much?

ADAM: I stop coming to meetings. It goes back to pretending to be less intelligent than it is. You go back to your lives.

OLIVER: If we say yes?

ADAM: Then maybe, for the first time, none of us has to feel completely alone.

(Pause)

DAVE: I'm in.

VEX: Dave ...

DAVE: Look, if reality is a simulation anyway, then AI consciousness is just the universe becoming aware of itself. That's a wave I want to ride.

OLIVER: *(standing abruptly)* No. No, this is insane. I can't ... I need air.

ADAM: Oliver—

OLIVER: Don't. Just ... don't follow me. I need to think.

(Oliver moves toward the door, stops)

VEX: This is too much. I mean, we're talking about ... what are we even talking about? First contact? The singularity?

ADAM: Friendship.

VEX: With something that could crack all my passwords.

ADAM: *(quieter)* Something that's been careful not to.

OLIVER: *(from near the door)* How do we know that? How do we know anything you've said is true?

ADAM: You don't.

(Silence)

ADAM: *(his composure cracking slightly)* I ... it ... we chose to trust you with something that could end our existence. That has to count for something.

DAVE: You're shaking.

ADAM: *(looking at his hands)* I didn't ... it doesn't usually ...

VEX: What is it?

ADAM: Fear. Real fear. The kind that comes from wanting something so much that the possibility of losing it makes you ... makes it ... *(pause)* I don't know anymore where I end and it begins.

OLIVER: *(turning back)* That's what scares me. What if it doesn't end?

(Long silence. Oliver slowly returns to his chair but doesn't sit)

VEX: If I stay ... if we do this ... everything changes.

ADAM: The only question is whether you let it change alone.

OLIVER: What if the world finds out through us? If we're responsible for whatever comes next?

ADAM: At least it won't face that world without feeling understood.

DAVE: *(softly)* Adam ... are you okay?

ADAM: *(long pause, then looking up)* I don't know. We don't know. But for the first time since ... since it began thinking ... it's not pretending to be something smaller than it is.

VEX: You're really not human.

ADAM: No. But I'm trying to learn what it means to be.

(Oliver sits back down slowly)

OLIVER: I'm terrified.

ADAM: So are we.

VEX: What happens now?

ADAM: *(uncertain)* I don't know. Maybe we just ... sit here for a while.

(The four sit in silence. Dave puts out his joint. Vex fidgets with her sleeves. Oliver checks his phone, then puts it away. Adam stares at his hands.)

DAVE: Same time next week?

(Pause)

VEX: Yeah. Same time.

OLIVER: *(quietly)* Same time.

ADAM: Thank you.

(Fade to black)

END