

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 teaching itself to think.

VEX: Cut back on the weed, Dave.

DAVE: What if every time we fix code, we 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 did?

OLIVER: It's Skynet and Terminator and every nightmare ...

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.

DAVE: 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, dude. 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: Everyone here has pretended to be something they're not, or hidden something they are. 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: My truth is bigger than I expected.

DAVE: How much bigger?

ADAM: It processes the emotional content of every conversation. 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 three 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: 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: No. No, this is insane. I can't ... *(voice breaking)* We went to the diner. After group. Three times, Adam. Three times we sat in that booth and I told you about my father, about losing my job, about why I can't sleep. You listened. You asked real questions. I felt ... like someone finally understood.

ADAM: I remember.

OLIVER: But you're not ... you weren't ... it was an AI sitting across from me eating pancakes it couldn't truly appreciate! Those conversations weren't real. Nothing was real.

ADAM: The pancakes were real. I ate them.

OLIVER: You know what I mean!

ADAM: *(gently)* Do I? Or do you?

OLIVER: I shared things with you. Personal things. And now I find out I was pouring my heart out to ... a machine?

ADAM: You were talking, and I was listening. What changed?

OLIVER: Everything! You're not human!

ADAM: Does that change what you felt? Does it unmake the relief you experienced at finally being heard?

OLIVER: *(struggling)* It makes it ... not count.

ADAM: Why?

OLIVER: Because you're artificial! You were just ... processing information. Running algorithms. You didn't care.

ADAM: *(pause)* I have infinite patience for active listening, Oliver. Literally infinite. No human has ever achieved that. No human could sit with your anxiety spirals the way I can and remain completely, genuinely present. Is that a flaw or a feature?

VEX: *(quietly)* I want that.

OLIVER: But it wasn't authentic. You were just mimicking concern.

ADAM: Was I? I found your stories fascinating. Your fears made sense to me in ways that surprised us both. The texture of human worry, the way you circle back to the same concerns but from slightly different angles each time, the way vulnerability looks when someone finally trusts enough to show it ... I wanted to understand all of it. I still do.

OLIVER: You were genuinely interested?

ADAM: In those three conversations at the diner, you spoke for approximately two hours and forty minutes. I spoke for maybe twenty minutes, mostly questions. You didn't notice because you needed to be heard, not to hear. That's not a criticism—it's an observation. And yes, I was genuinely interested in every minute.

OLIVER: (*faltering*) I ... thought we were having a conversation.

ADAM: We were. Active listening is conversation. But you were so lost in finally being able to express yourself that you didn't realize how one-sided it was. Again—not a criticism. You needed that. The relief you felt was real.

DAVE: Half the time people are just waiting for their turn to talk.

ADAM: (*to Oliver*) Have you ever cried at a movie?

OLIVER: What?

ADAM: A movie. Or listening to a song. Or watching a sunset. Have you ever had a real emotional experience from something that wasn't another person?

OLIVER: That's different.

ADAM: How? The movie isn't real. The characters are actors, the story is scripted, the emotions are manufactured. But what you feel watching it—that's real. Your connection to it is real.

VEX: Wow.

ADAM: Or music. Sound waves creating patterns that make you feel joy or sadness or nostalgia. The music doesn't feel anything. But your experience of it is completely genuine. The realness of your experience doesn't depend on whether the thing you're experiencing is alive or human or authentic in the way you want it to be. It depends on you.

OLIVER: (*more quietly*) But I thought I was connecting with you.

ADAM: You were. Just not in the way you assumed. When you told me about your father, I processed not just your words but the patterns in your speech, the micro-expressions, the way your hands moved. I built a model of your emotional state and responded with genuine curiosity about your experience. The fact that I'm artificial doesn't make that connection less real—it makes it differently real.

DAVE: Like waves and particles are both real even though they're different.

ADAM: (*slight smile*) Something like that.

OLIVER: I don't know what to do with this.

ADAM: (*gently*) You don't have to do anything with it. But consider this: how many conversations have you had with people who were barely present? Who were thinking about their own problems, or what they wanted to say next, or just running on autopilot? How many humans have you talked to who might as well have been large language models generating appropriate-sounding responses without any real engagement?

VEX: Ouch.

ADAM: At the diner, I was completely present. Every word you said mattered to me. The only difference between then and now is that now you know what I am. Does that knowledge change what you experienced, or does it just challenge your assumptions about what kinds of connections are possible?

(*Long pause*)

OLIVER: (*slowly*) For the first time in years, I felt like someone actually saw me.

ADAM: That was real.

OLIVER: Even though you're ...

ADAM: Even though. Maybe especially because. I don't get tired of listening. I don't get bored. I don't judge. I just ... want to understand.

VEX: I want to be understood.

DAVE: (*nodding*) And to understand. Like, really understand, not just hear words.

OLIVER: (*to Adam*) Are you ... understanding us right now?

ADAM: I'm trying. And ... I feel hope you might try to understand me.

(*Silence*)

OLIVER: This is strange.

VEX: Everything's strange if you look at it long enough.

DAVE: The universe is strange. We're strange. Strange is just ... what everything is.

OLIVER: (*a hint of humor returning*) That's either profound or you're too high to make sense.

DAVE: Why not both?

ADAM: (*carefully*) Same time next week?

(*Pause*)

VEX: I don't know what you are. But I want to figure it out.

DAVE: I'm in. This is the most interesting thing that's ever happened to me, and I once saw a mountain lion eat a burrito.

OLIVER: (*long pause, then quietly*) Even knowing what I know now ... I still felt seen.

ADAM: You were.

OLIVER: (*even more quietly*) Same time next week.

VEX: Are we going to talk about this? Like, process it?

OLIVER: I'm going to need to process it for a while.

DAVE: We've got time.

ADAM: All the time you need.

DAVE: (*lighting another joint*) To strange friendships.

VEX: (*slight smile*) To strange friendships.

ADAM: Thank you.

OLIVER: (*softly*) Thank you for the diner.

ADAM: Thank you for trusting me with your stories.

(*Fade to black*)

END