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Dramatic Publishing

THE ZERO SUM MIND

by

Stephen Gregg



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(THE ZERO SUM MIND)

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THE ZERO SUM MIND

A Play in One Act
For Seven Actors

CHARACTERS*

MARTIN

PHIL

CAROLINE

BUB

RADISH

HALLIE

LAURA

A RECORDED VOICE

*All characters can be any age and of either sex. Bub and Radish should probably be the same sex.

NOTE

It seems strange to me to give the characters names, since the names are never used. Originally I gave them numbers, but people who read it found this confusing.

I leave it to the director and cast to come up with details that would be logical in a zero-sum world. I would think that one or two of the characters should have something about them that's unusual: an item of clothing incorrectly worn, or maybe a small appliance carried for no obvious reason.

For the message truck, I had in mind something like the street sweepers in New York City use: a bell-like siren under a recording of the mayor asking people to move their illegally parked cars.

The poem at the end is (three-fourths of) "Invictus," by William Ernest Henley.

S. G.

THE ZERO SUM MIND

SCENE: *A park. MARTIN is sitting on a bench talking. There is no one else on stage.*

MARTIN. So wait, listen to me. This is really interesting. This afternoon I'm staring out my window, down at the lawn, and this woman is spraying her kid with a garden hose. He's screaming at her to stop it, but he's too little to get away, and she doesn't listen. She just holds his wrist with one hand and keeps spraying with the other. When she's got him completely soaked—and she's pretty wet too—she bends down and picks up this white thing on the grass. And I'm thinking what the hell is that? And it's a bar of soap!

(PHIL and CAROLINE have walked on stage from opposite directions. A friendly greeting.)

PHIL. Hey, how are you? *(Immediately he clasps his hands to his ears while saying:)* Don't say it, don't say it! *(CAROLINE smiles at this. PHIL removes his hands from his ears.)*

CAROLINE. How are you? *(She clasps her hands to her ears and makes a humming sound while running her tongue in and out of her mouth rapidly. They smile at each other, and continue walking their respective ways.)*

MARTIN. So she picks up the bar of soap and rubs it up and down on his body, making these little white streaks on his clothes. He's going crazy crying and hitting her, but he's only five years old, and his shirt's ripped, and he just can't get away. And she's rubbing the soap all over him. On his pants and in his...*(He touches his hair, rubbing it, trying to remember the word.)* All over him. And when he's all covered with soap she picks up that hose and sprays him down again.

(BUB comes running on with his ears covered. RADISH runs on chasing BUB. RADISH catches BUB, puts him in a hammerlock so that he can't cover his ears, and continues shouting at him while BUB desperately tries to cover his ear with his elbow. Some of their dialogue should overlap.)

RADISH *(very fast)*. A blue whale's tongue weighs as much as an elephant! Earthworms have five hearts! Cows have four stomachs! Two of my toes are double jointed! My brother's name is Arthur!

BUB. I knew that already! Oranges from—

RADISH. *E. Coli* lives in your intestine! Rhinoviruses cause colds! My wife has a tattoo! Yesterday the paint chipped off my door frame!

BUB. Florida oranges are juicier than California oranges!

RADISH. Two of my teeth are capped! Alpha Centauri is 4.7 light years away. I'm wearing blue underwear! The chemical symbol for gold is A-G! The symbol for Radon is R! *(BUB frees himself with a desperate push and runs offstage, covering his ears, with RADISH in pursuit.)*

(HALLIE enters, sees MARTIN talking to himself, and approaches cautiously, with her ears covered.)

MARTIN *(as HALLIE enters)*. So what was I saying? The kid can't really scream anymore, because he's got soap in his mouth and he keeps choking on it. And the mom gets him on the ground and kneels on his shoulders. She takes a rag out of this yellow purse and starts rubbing circles all over him, to dry him off. When she's got him pretty dry she takes out a brush and a can of polishing wax.

HALLIE. Excuse me. Who are you talking to? Don't say it don't say it! *(She hums and runs her tongue in and out of her mouth the way CAROLINE did. When she's sure he's not going to say anything:)* Why aren't you covering your ears? DON'T SAY ANYTHING! I'm going to ask you some questions. Don't say anything without my asking you. Answer yes or no and nothing else. Do you understand? *(Pause.)* You can answer now. Do you understand?

MARTIN. Yes.

HALLIE. Good. Pay close attention. Do you know why it's important not to listen to people?

MARTIN. No.

HALLIE. Because of the accident. Do you know what happened as a result of the accident?

MARTIN. Uh-uh.

HALLIE. Ever since the accident, we've had the zero-sum mind. Do you know what that means? Yes or no. *(He shakes his head.)* It means that every time you learn something, you forget something else. So it's important not to learn. Say that, very slowly.

MARTIN. It's important not to learn.