

THE LAST ROW

A one-act play by Digital Ascend Arts Production

Preview Script — Scenes 1–4

THE LAST ROW SCENE 1 THE EMPTY DRESSING ROOM

SETTING:

A cramped dressing room backstage at a small fringe theatre. A mirror ringed with bare bulbs. A clothes rack with a few costumes. A small table cluttered with a coffee cup, a script, and a phone. The walls are thin — we can faintly hear the murmur of an arriving audience.

TIME:

Eighty minutes before curtain.

AT RISE:

MARTIN VALE sits in a folding chair, reading his script. He mouths words silently, making small pencil marks in the margins. He wears a comfortable but neat jacket — the uniform of a man who attends opening nights without being part of them. A knock at the door.

KEIRA *(offstage)*

Martin.

MARTIN

It's open.

KEIRA enters. She's in her thirties, dressed in black, carrying a clipboard and a headset around her neck. She's the stage manager — efficient, unflappable, and currently hiding something large behind her professionalism. She closes the door gently.

MARTIN *(not looking up)*

I told Jamal the lights could wait until sound check. I'm still blocking the opening.

KEIRA

It's not about the lights.

MARTIN *(still reading)*

Good. Then it can wait until after.

KEIRA

No. It can't.

A pause. MARTIN looks up. KEIRA meets his eyes. Something in her tone makes him set the script down.

MARTIN

What's happened?

KEIRA

The cast. They've left.

MARTIN

Left the building? Left for dinner? We have a show in eighty minutes, Keira, please be specific.

KEIRA

They've quit, Martin. All of them. Except Leo — Leo's still here. But the others handed in their costumes twenty minutes ago. I tried to stop them.

MARTIN stares at her. A beat. Then he laughs — not out of amusement, but because it's the only defence he has.

MARTIN

That's not funny.

KEIRA

I'm not a comedienne.

MARTIN

They can't quit. This is my play. They *wanted* to do it. They auditioned. We had a read-through. We had — *(he searches for the word)* — we had momentum.

KEIRA

They said you gave them notes.

MARTIN

I'm the playwright. Playwrights give notes.

KEIRA

They said you gave them notes during the warm-up. While they were stretching. While they were finding their headspace. You told Jenna her diaphragmatic breathing was "rhythmically distracting."

MARTIN opens his mouth. Closes it.

MARTIN

I was being helpful.

KEIRA

You told Raj that his interpretation of the Stranger was "aggressively wrong."

MARTIN

It *was*. The character is haunted. He's not angry. There's a difference between anger and —

KEIRA

Martin. They're gone.

The weight of it finally lands. MARTIN's hands go still on the script. The faint murmur of the arriving audience seems louder now, like a tide rising.

MARTIN *(quietly)*

All of them.

KEIRA

Leo's still here. He's in the green room. He said he didn't want to let you down. I think he's also terrified of you, but the two aren't mutually exclusive.

MARTIN

Leo's an understudy. He's barely off book.

KEIRA

He's the only actor you've got.

MARTIN stands. He moves to the mirror, staring at his reflection — a man who has spent three decades watching other people perform, now facing the possibility of being watched himself.

MARTIN

What do we do?

KEIRA *(a beat, then carefully)*

You know the lines.

MARTIN turns sharply.

MARTIN

No.

KEIRA

You wrote every word.

MARTIN

Writing is not performing. I am a critic. I sit in the back row. I have a notebook. I have *distance*. That's the entire point of me.

KEIRA

Maybe the point of you needs to change.

She says it without cruelty. MARTIN stares at her. Behind them, through the thin wall, a burst of muffled laughter from the audience — someone finding their seat, someone making a joke. The sound of people gathering to watch something.

MARTIN (*almost to himself*)

832. That's how many productions I've reviewed. Do you know how many times I've stood on a stage this side of the curtain?

KEIRA

Tell me.

MARTIN (*a flicker of a smile that doesn't reach his eyes*)

Including right now? Once.

KEIRA waits. MARTIN looks at the script in his hands — his own words, suddenly foreign. The lights in the mirror buzz softly.

MARTIN

Where's Leo?

KEIRA

I'll get him.

She turns to go, then stops at the door.

KEIRA (*without turning back*)

For what it's worth — I've read your reviews for years. You were always harder on the ones that mattered. The ones that took risks. You didn't know how to say "I was moved" without hiding behind a paragraph.

MARTIN (*softly*)

That's not a compliment.

KEIRA

It's not an insult either.

She exits. MARTIN stands alone with his reflection, his script, and the sound of an audience beginning to fill the theatre. He turns to the mirror and, after a long beat, places the script down on the table. He straightens his jacket. He looks at his own face.

MARTIN *(to his reflection)*

"Act well your part; there all the honour lies."

A pause. He almost smiles.

MARTIN

I quoted that once in a review. Alexander Pope. The actor hated it. Said I was telling him to stay in his lane. *(beat)* I probably was.

He reaches up and switches off the mirror lights. The dressing room is suddenly dimmer. He stands in the half-dark, a man on the wrong side of the glass.

MARTIN

Right. Let's go meet Leo.

He exits. The stage remains empty for a moment. The murmur of the audience rises, then fades.

THE LAST ROW SCENE 2 THE PROPOSITION

SETTING:

The stage of the fringe theatre. The working lights are up — a cold, functional wash. The set is sparse: six chairs facing upstage, away from the audience, as if watching an invisible performance on the back wall. A scrim hangs at the rear. Cables snake across the floor. A ghost light stands centre stage.

TIME:

Seventy minutes before curtain.

AT RISE:

JAMAL, early twenties, sits in the front row of the audience seating, a laptop open beside him. He wears a headset and a hoodie with the theatre's logo. He's running light cues, but his attention keeps drifting to the stage. LEO, also early twenties, sits on the edge of the stage, legs dangling, holding a script that's been highlighted to within an inch of its life. He mouths lines silently, occasionally gesturing with one hand as if summoning the right emotion.

KEIRA enters from the wings, clipboard still in hand. She's been running — not physically, but emotionally, the kind of sprint that comes from managing a crisis.

KEIRA

Jamal, hold the cues for now. We're not running anything until I say so.

JAMAL *(looking up)*

Is it true? The whole cast?

KEIRA

The whole cast. Except Leo.

JAMAL glances at LEO, who is still mouthing lines, oblivious or pretending to be. JAMAL lowers his voice.

JAMAL

What are we going to do?

KEIRA

I'm working on it.

MARTIN enters from the wings, opposite side. He's carrying his script but holding it differently now — less like a reference, more like a lifeline. He stops at the edge of the light, hesitant, as if the stage itself might reject him.

JAMAL *(noticing him)*

Oh. Wow. Martin Vale. I mean — I knew you were here. I've seen you. Obviously. But we haven't — I'm Jamal. Lights and sound. I've read all your —

MARTIN

Not now, Jamal.

JAMAL

Right. Yeah. Not now. Totally.

JAMAL shrinks back into his seat, mortified. LEO finally looks up from his script.

LEO

Martin. Hi. I'm Leo. I play — I was going to play — the second understudy for the Stranger. But I know all the lines. I mean, I know most of them. I know the shape of them. The feeling.

MARTIN *(dry)*

The feeling.

LEO

Yeah. The — *(he gestures vaguely)* — the hauntedness. The way he talks around what he means instead of saying it. I've been practising in my flat. My flatmate thinks I've joined a cult.

MARTIN stares at LEO. There's something disarming about his earnestness — a quality Martin has spent decades dismissing in reviews as "untrained enthusiasm." But tonight, it's the only thing holding the room together.

KEIRA *(to Martin)*

You wanted to see Leo. Here he is.

MARTIN

I didn't say I wanted to see him. I asked where he was.

KEIRA

Same thing.

She gestures to the stage — a sweeping motion that takes in the chairs, the scrim, the ghost light, the whole impossible situation.

KEIRA

Go on. Talk to him.

MARTIN hesitates, then steps fully onto the stage. The working lights seem to find him, isolate him. He looks uncomfortable in his own posture.

MARTIN *(to Leo)*

How much of the play do you actually know?

LEO *(brightening)*

All of it. Well — Act I, solid. Act II, maybe seventy percent. There's a monologue about the basement that I keep tripping on because the syntax is really —

MARTIN

The syntax is deliberate. It's meant to convey a fractured mental state.

LEO

Right! That's what I thought. But then I wondered if maybe it was just — *(he falters)* — you know. Hard to say out loud.

MARTIN blinks. No one has ever described his writing as "hard to say out loud" to his face.

MARTIN

It's meant to be performed, not recited.

LEO

I know. I just — I'm trying to find the music in it. Your language has music. It's like a jazz piece where the time signature keeps changing but it all holds together if you trust it.

JAMAL nods vigorously from the front row, then stops when he realises he's visible.

MARTIN *(after a beat)*

That's not an inaccurate observation.

LEO *(grinning)*

Thank you.

KEIRA steps forward, drawing their attention.

KEIRA

Martin, we need to make a decision. We have house seats sold. We have reviewers in the audience —

MARTIN (*sharply*)

Reviewers? Who?

KEIRA

Harriet Dunn from the Standard. Possibly someone from the Stage. They're not going to wait while we negotiate with ourselves.

MARTIN turns away. He walks to the row of chairs facing upstage and stares at them — the backs of the chairs, the implied audience. The image of theatre turned inside out.

MARTIN (*quietly*)

Harriet Dunn once called a production I directed — the only one I ever directed, twenty years ago — "competent but cowardly." She wrote that I "seemed afraid of my own material." That review followed me for a decade.

KEIRA

So prove her wrong.

MARTIN (*turning*)

By going on stage with one understudy, no rehearsal, and an audience full of people who would love to watch me fail? That's not proving her wrong. That's handing her the headline.

LEO (*standing, stepping toward Martin*)

What if it's not about proving anything?

MARTIN looks at him.

LEO

I mean — I'm just the understudy. I don't have a career to lose. But I read your play, and it made me feel something I don't have a word for. It's about a man who builds a theatre for himself because the real one won't have him. That's — (*he falters, then pushes through*) — that's how I feel every time I audition. Like I'm building a little theatre in my head that no one will ever see.

Silence. JAMAL has stopped breathing.

MARTIN (*softly*)

You're twenty-two.

LEO

Twenty-three. Last month.

MARTIN

When I was twenty-three, I watched a play from the back row that changed my life. I thought, "I want to be part of this." And then I spent thirty years making sure I never had to be.

He walks to centre stage. The ghost light glows beside him. He looks out at the empty seats — the seats that will soon be full.

MARTIN *(to the empty auditorium)*

If we do this — if I do this — it won't be good. It won't be polished. It may be the worst thing any of those people have ever seen.

KEIRA *(firmly)*

It will be alive. That's more than most theatre manages.

MARTIN looks at her. Then at LEO. Then at JAMAL, who gives a tiny, terrified thumbs-up. MARTIN takes a breath — the kind that actors take before a difficult line, though he wouldn't recognise it as such.

MARTIN

I need ten minutes.

KEIRA

You had ten minutes in the dressing room.

MARTIN

I need ten more.

He walks offstage, into the wings. He doesn't look back. LEO watches him go, then turns to KEIRA.

LEO

Is that a yes?

KEIRA *(watching the space where Martin disappeared)*

It's not a no.

JAMAL turns back to his laptop, scrolling through light cues with trembling hands. The ghost light glows. The chairs face the back wall. The theatre waits.

THE LAST ROW SCENE 3 THE MIRROR

SETTING: A narrow backstage corridor. Unpainted brick walls. A single full-length mirror hangs on the wall, its frame chipped, its glass slightly warped — the kind of mirror that makes everyone look just a little wrong. A bare bulb glows above it. The distant, muffled hum of the audience settling into their seats.

TIME: Sixty minutes before curtain.

AT RISE: MARTIN stands in front of the mirror. He is alone. His script is tucked under his arm. He has been staring at his reflection for some time — long enough that the initial discomfort has given way to something quieter, more dangerous: recognition.

He sets the script down on the floor. He doesn't need it for this.

MARTIN *(to his reflection)* You look ridiculous. You know that. You look like a man who wandered backstage at the wrong theatre and is too embarrassed to admit it.

A beat. He tilts his head, studying his own face as if it belongs to a stranger.

MARTIN 832 productions. *(a small, incredulous laugh)* I counted them. In the dressing room. I actually counted them. As if the number would protect me. As if a CV could be a shield.

He reaches up and touches the mirror, one finger against his reflected jawline.

MARTIN The first play I ever reviewed was *The Seagull*. Chekhov. It was at a community theatre in Leeds. The actress playing Nina was so nervous she dropped a glass on stage and it shattered, and she picked up every piece with her bare hands while still delivering her lines. The audience held its breath. I wrote that she was "uneven but committed." Three words. For a moment of raw, terrified beauty that I still remember thirty years later. Three words.

He drops his hand.

MARTIN I sat in the back row that night. The seat was cramped. I could barely see the stage because the man in front of me had a head like a boulder. And I felt — *(he searches for the word)* — safe. Invisible. Powerful, even. I could judge and not be judged. I could watch and not be watched. I built a career on that distance. I built a *life* on it.

He turns slightly, addressing the reflection in profile now — a different angle, a different man.

MARTIN Do you know what my ex-wife said when I told her I was writing a play? She said, "At last." And then she paused — she always knew how to place a pause — and added, "I hope you finish it. I hope you let someone see it." I told her I wasn't writing it to be seen. I was writing it to prove I could. She said, "That's the saddest thing you've ever said to me."

He turns back, square to the mirror.

MARTIN She was right. Of course she was right. She was always right about the things I didn't want to hear.

He takes a step closer to the mirror. His breath fogs the glass, just slightly.

MARTIN There's a review I wrote. Fifteen years ago. A young actor — God, what was his name. Daniel. Daniel something. He was playing Hamlet. He was too young, too raw, too everything. But there was a moment in the "To be or not to be" where he stopped. Right in the middle. Not because he forgot the line — because the line had forgotten *him*. He stood there, silent, and you could feel the entire audience leaning forward. I wrote that he had "lost control of the text" and that the production suffered from "a lack of discipline."

He closes his eyes.

MARTIN What I meant was: he made me feel something I couldn't explain. What I meant was: I was jealous. I was jealous of a twenty-four-year-old who had the courage to stand on a stage and be lost in front of strangers. And I punished him for it. In print. In public. With words that will follow him forever, because that's what words do.

He opens his eyes. His reflection stares back, unforgiving.

MARTIN I have never once apologised to any of them. Not to Daniel. Not to Jenna, or Raj, or any of the actors who walked out of this theatre tonight. They didn't leave because I gave notes during warm-up. They left because I have spent thirty years telling people like them — people who *do* the thing instead of just watching it — that they aren't good enough. And then I asked them to perform my words. My small, careful, frightened words.

He places his palm flat against the glass. The reflection's palm meets his.

MARTIN (*quieter*) I am afraid. I am afraid of being bad at this. I am afraid of being good at this. I am afraid that if I step on that stage, I will have to apologise — not just to the actors I've hurt, but to myself, for hiding. For thirty years of hiding.

He pulls his hand back. The fog of his breath is fading from the glass. His reflection clears.

MARTIN (*straightening his jacket*) Keira said something to me. She said I never knew how to say "I was moved" without hiding behind a paragraph. (*a small, sad smile*) She's been reading my reviews. God help her.

He reaches down and picks up the script. He holds it, not as a lifeline this time, but as something else — something that might, in the right light, be an offering.

MARTIN I wrote a line. In the play. The character — the man who builds the theatre in his basement — he looks at his mannequin audience and says, "I made you because I couldn't face them. And now I can't face you either." (*pause*) I didn't realise I was writing about myself until just now.

He looks at his reflection one last time. The mirror warps him slightly — a crooked nose, a tired eye — but he no longer flinches from it.

MARTIN Right. Let's go face them.

He turns and walks off down the corridor, toward the sound of the audience. The mirror holds the empty space where he stood. After a beat, the bare bulb flickers once, then steadies.

THE LAST ROW SCENE 4 THE NOTES

SETTING: The stage. Working lights are harsh and unflattering. The six chairs still face upstage. A small folding table has been dragged into the wings, holding a jug of water and three mismatched cups. Cables snake everywhere. JAMAL sits in the front row with his laptop, a small lighting board, and an expression of mounting anxiety. LEO stands centre stage, script in hand, wearing a rehearsal costume — a too-large coat meant for the actor who quit. KEIRA sits in the audience, clipboard on her lap, watching. MARTIN stands downstage left, also holding a script, but his is open to page one. He's stalling.

TIME: Fifty minutes before curtain.

AT RISE: LEO is mid-line, delivering a speech from the play within the play. He's trying. He's trying very hard. MARTIN stops him with a raised finger.

MARTIN No. Stop. Stop there.

LEO freezes, mouth still open.

LEO I didn't even finish the sentence.

MARTIN You didn't need to. The sentence was already wrong.

LEO "Wrong" how? I said the words you wrote. In the order you wrote them.

MARTIN You said them like a question. "I built this place for you" — you went up at the end, like you were asking permission. The Stranger isn't asking. He's confessing. He's confessing to a room full of people who aren't real. The stakes are different.

LEO *(trying to keep his voice steady)* Okay. Confessing. I can do confessing. Let me try again.

MARTIN Also, your hands.

LEO My hands.

MARTIN You're doing — *(he gestures vaguely)* — a thing. A fluttering thing. Like you're trying to conduct an orchestra that isn't there. Keep them still. The Stranger doesn't flutter.

LEO looks down at his hands as if they've betrayed him. JAMAL raises a tentative hand from the front row.

JAMAL Should I bring up the cue for this section, or —

MARTIN (*not looking at him*) No. We're not running lights yet. We're barely running words.

JAMAL lowers his hand, wounded. KEIRA writes something on her clipboard. The scratch of her pen is the loudest sound in the room.

LEO (*taking a breath*) Okay. Hands still. Confessing. From the top.

He resets. MARTIN watches. LEO begins the speech again, and this time there's something different — he's trying to give Martin exactly what he asked for. His hands are rigid at his sides. His voice stays flat, declarative, every line delivered like a fact. It's terrible. It's lifeless. MARTIN winces.

MARTIN Stop.

LEO You said hands still! My hands are still!

MARTIN Now you sound like a hostage reading a ransom note.

LEO I don't know what you want from me.

MARTIN I want you to be still and also alive. I want you to confess and also listen. I want you to — (*he struggles*) — I want you to perform. That's the job. That's the entire job.

LEO (*voice cracking*) I know that's the job. I've been trying to get this job for four years. I've auditioned for 47 productions and been cast in three. I know what the job is. I just don't know how to do it the way you want, because the way you want changes every thirty seconds.

Silence. LEO is breathing hard. He didn't mean to say all that. MARTIN stares at him.

MARTIN (*quieter*) Forty-seven.

LEO Forty-seven auditions. I counted.

MARTIN (*almost to himself*) You count too.

JAMAL, who has been shrinking further into his seat with every exchange, accidentally hits a key on his laptop. A deafening thunderclap sound effect blasts through the theatre speakers. Everyone jumps. LEO drops his script. JAMAL scrambles to stop it, hitting keys frantically until the sound cuts out. The silence that follows is worse than the noise.

MARTIN (*deadly calm*) What was that.

JAMAL I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I was trying to — I hit the wrong — it's the storm cue from Act II, I didn't mean —

MARTIN We don't need storm cues. We need the opening lighting sequence. Which I asked for twenty minutes ago. Which you said you'd have ready.

JAMAL I did have it ready. And then you changed the blocking three times, and I had to re-cue everything, and I'm trying to keep up, but you keep — you keep —

MARTIN I keep what?

JAMAL (*fracturing*) You keep talking to us like we should already know what you mean without you saying it. Like we're mind-readers. Like we're the actors who quit, except we're not, we're the ones who stayed, and you're still treating us like we're failing you.

The words land. MARTIN doesn't respond. He looks at JAMAL, then at LEO — two young men, terrified and committed and completely unarmed. Then he looks at KEIRA, who has been silent through all of this. She sets her clipboard down.

KEIRA Martin.

MARTIN Don't.

KEIRA They need to hear it. And so do you.

She stands. She doesn't raise her voice, but the room tightens around her words.

KEIRA The cast didn't leave because of the script. The script is good. Better than good. The cast left because of you. Because you don't know how to be in a room with people who are trying. Because every note you give comes wrapped in a verdict. Because you've spent thirty years telling actors what they got wrong, and you've forgotten how to tell anyone what they're getting right.

MARTIN stares at her. He doesn't move.

KEIRA Jenna told me she cried in her car after the first read-through. Not because the play was bad — because it was beautiful, and she was terrified of ruining it, and you never once told her she wasn't ruining it. You just kept correcting her diaphragmatic breathing.

MARTIN (*hoarsely*) That's not —

KEIRA Raj said you made him feel like an intruder in his own role. Like the part was yours and you were only letting him borrow it, and badly. He told me he almost quit after the second rehearsal. He stayed for three more weeks because he hoped you'd change. You didn't change.

LEO has picked up his script and is holding it against his chest like armour. JAMAL's hands are frozen above his keyboard. The theatre is so quiet you can hear the ghost light humming.

KEIRA *(softer now)* I'm not saying this to hurt you. I'm saying it because you're about to walk on this stage in front of Harriet Dunn and a hundred other people, and if you don't understand why the room is empty, you'll never fill it.

She picks up her clipboard. She doesn't leave. She just waits. MARTIN stands at the edge of the stage, looking at the three people who stayed — a stage manager who won't flatter him, a tech who can't please him, and an understudy who deserves better than he's getting. The silence stretches.

MARTIN *(at last, barely audible)* I don't know how to do this.

He says it like a confession — the first true one he's made all night.

LEO *(gently)* None of us do. That's why we're here.

MARTIN looks at LEO. Something passes between them — not understanding yet, but the possibility of it. JAMAL slowly, carefully, brings up a light cue. It's not the right one. It's a warm wash, the kind meant for a moment of grace. But it lands on Martin's face, and for the first time, he doesn't look away.

MARTIN *(to Leo)* Try the speech again. I won't stop you this time.

LEO *(hesitant)* What about my hands?

MARTIN Let them flutter.

LEO almost smiles. He takes his position. JAMAL's hands find the correct cue. KEIRA sits back down. The rehearsal begins again — not better, not polished, but alive.