

MANDRAGORA

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

*ISSAC – about 25 years old*

*MOTHER - Isaac's Mum, caring, slightly worried.*

*MRS LUCAS – Nate's mother, devastated with grief.*

*PAULA – Isaac's counsellor.*

*The female roles should be played by the same actor.*

*Two clear plastic jars, labelled 'mine' and 'his'. ISAAC on stage, holding a bag of marbles.*

*The female characters move in and out of the scene gently, adding to the dream-like atmosphere.*

ISAAC           Um, it was late. It was dark. I was driving home from... somewhere. Footy practice, I think. Or maybe it was my girlfriend's house. Yes, it was my girlfriend's house. It must have been. I haven't played football for years. I don't know why I said that.

But anyway, it was dark, but it wasn't wet or anything. The conditions were safe. I'm driving along the highway. Speed limit, maybe, *maybe* five over. Ahead of me, I see the lights of a car, but they're veering all over the place. I only had time to register that, and then suddenly this white car is coming straight for me, sideways. I could see him, the driver, Nate. He was right in front of me. Don't ask me how his car got in that position, it was all too fast. He was struggling with the wheel, I just saw him look up at me... then there was this huge bang.

Right so that's number one. Let's use a red one for that. *(Puts red marble in the 'mine' jar)*

Then, I remember being cut out of the car. People shouting, telling me to concentrate, asking me where the pain was... *(Puts another marble in the 'mine' jar)*

I remember being in the ambulance, my head in this brace thing. They were pushing a mask down on my face. *(Puts another marble in the 'mine' jar)*

I woke up in bed, in the hospital. My parents were there. My throat was sore from the anaesthetic. *(Puts another marble in the 'mine' jar)*

There was one particular nurse, she was Chinese or Vietnamese, I think. She was pretty. *(Puts another marble in the 'mine' jar)* And there was the male nurse, he was funny, his name was Trevor. Pretty hard to forget the guy who has to wipe your arse for a fortnight. *(Puts another marble in the 'mine' jar)*.

And of course, there was the pain *(Puts another marble in the 'mine' jar)* and the morphine *(Puts another marble in the 'mine' jar)*.

OK. That's fine, that's all pretty clear. Not a huge amount for two weeks of your life, but it's a start. I remember coming home to Mum and Dad's. *(Puts another marble in the 'mine' jar)*

*(Takes a moment, closes his eyes, remembering. MOTHER appears gradually, as if out of the shadows)*

There's a dog. A huge yellow dog. It's friendly, but it's dumb and it's as big as me. It's playing with a ball. I call, Blacky! Blacky! It knocks me over and I'm crying.

MOTHER That would have been when you were about three. That dog wasn't big, you were small.

ISAAC But it's yellow. Why was it called Blacky?

MOTHER That's just what you called it. We all called him Colin. You were a strange child!

ISSAC Honestly, I can see it clear as day, but I've never remembered it before the accident. *(Puts another marble in the 'mine' jar)*

Can you smell peanut butter? *(MOTHER sniffs experimentally, but cannot)* It's driving me nuts.

I'm about 7 or 8. I fall off my bike. As I pick myself up off the concrete, I see blood and teeth.

MOTHER Oh yes, I remember that. I was meant to be at your cousin's christening and instead, I was in casualty waiting for you to have stitches.

ISAAC *(Puts another marble in the 'mine' jar)* I'm in year seven, and I'm at the movies on a school excursion. Darrell Cartwright throws a jaffa at my head, so I punch him in the ribs. We start fighting, and the kids are all cheering and then we get hauled out and we have to sit outside and we miss out on the film altogether. He was such a dickhead!

*(Mother shakes her head)*

Really? I can see it as if it was yesterday.

MOTHER I've never heard you talk of anyone called Darrell Cartwright. And you've never been in a fight in your life, you know that. It's just not you.

ISSAC Are you sure? *(She is. Puts another marble in the 'his' jar)*

Last year. We won the touch footy comp. I scored one of the tries. It

was the team we'd come second to the year before. We drank all night and ended up singing karaoke. I hurred in the gutter. I can still taste it in my mouth.

MOTHER You don't play football. Haven't since you were in primary school. You played hockey until year 12. And you were in the swim squad.

*(ISAAC puts another marble in the 'his' jar)*

ISAAC I'm in Paris. I'm at the top of the Eiffel tower. I can see for miles. *(MOTHER looks apologetic)* I've never been to Paris, have I?

MOTHER If you have, you haven't told me.

*(ISAAC puts another marble in the 'his' jar)*

It's been known. Trauma victims regaining memories that have lain dormant for years.

ISAAC Any of them remembered things that never happened to them?

*(MOTHER disappears back into the shadows).*

I used to tell people that I lost my virginity when I was 16 with the Moffatt twins, two gorgeous blonde sisters from a visiting volleyball team. *(Puts another marble in the 'mine' jar)*

In fact, I lost it when I was 19, first year of Uni, with a girl called Jacqui from Sociology, at a party thrown by this Engineering student we called Jellyhead. I never saw her again. *(Puts another marble in the 'mine' jar)*

But now there's something else. I'm 15, I'm in a room I don't recognize, but that still feels safe and familiar. There's a woman in her forties, sitting on the edge of a bed. She's wearing a black dress. She's mixing me a drink..., she's unbuttoning my jeans... well, after that it seems like intruding. *(Puts another marble in the 'his' jar. MRS LUCAS appears.)*

MRS LUCAS I just wanted to see you. To see how you were.

ISAAC Thank you. I'm better *(pause)*.

MRS LUCAS I'm Nate's mother – the other driver.

ISAAC Yes, I know who you are.

MRS LUCAS     *(Confused)* Have we met before?

ISAAC           *(Awkwardly)* No.

MRS LUCAS     Perhaps you knew my son. He was about your age.

ISAAC           I think I did. Not to speak to. I mean, I must have seen him around. He used to go out with... Tricia?

MRS LUCAS     Tania. Do you know her?

ISAAC           I think so. I used to go out with her. *(This doesn't seem right to either of them)* Or perhaps she was friends with someone... *(trails off)* I'm sorry, it's the medication. It makes me a little... *(makes a gesture)*

MRS LUCAS     Oh.

ISAAC           I was sorry I couldn't come to the funeral. I was still in hospital.

MRS LUCAS     I know. It's fine. You didn't know him really.

ISAAC           *(Unsure)* No.

MRS LUCAS     I really just came to look in on you. To let you know that there's no rancour on my part. *(She goes to leave, then returns)*

                  The police say...

                  They said that you said...

                  It was Nate's fault. I mean that's what they think.

ISAAC           It was an accident. I don't think it's anyone's fault.

MRS LUCAS     Someone's always at fault. They say it was Nate. Is that what you said?

ISAAC           I'm not sure...

MRS LUCAS     He was a good boy, he was careful. He would never...

ISAAC           It's like I said to the police. It was dark. I was driving home. The conditions were safe. I see the lights of a car, but they're veering all over the place. Suddenly this car is coming straight for me, sideways. I could see him - Nate. He was right in front of me. I'm sorry.

MRS LUCAS If you say so. I brought this for you. *(Hands him a book)*

ISAAC Thank you. That's very kind.

MRS LUCAS Have you read it?

ISAAC Yes, many times. It's my favourite. My old copy is in pieces.

MRS LUCAS So is Nate's. He loved it too. I... *(she breaks down)* I'm sorry, I have to... *(she leaves)*

ISAAC Poor woman. She was devastated. *(Puts another marble in the 'mine' jar).*

Have I read this book? I must have – I know what happens. The boy dies, the girl tracks down his killer. It's the postman. How do I know that? I... *(looks confused, then puts another marble in the 'his' jar. He becomes increasingly frustrated).*

My graduation from Uni. It took five hours and Dad fell asleep. *(Puts another marble in the 'mine' jar).*

No, I left Uni in second year. My marks were down, I got a job in IT and bought a car. *(Puts another marble in the 'his' jar).*

Last week. At a pub, I met a girl called Amber. I bought her a beer and we talked about politics and internet banking and the price of fresh limes. *(Puts another marble in the 'mine' jar).*

No, my girlfriend's name is Tania. She's a PhD student. She's smarter than me and her parents think I'm a loser. *(Puts another marble in the 'his' jar).*

My favourite color is blue, or my favourite colour is green. I eat Thai food every Friday, I never eat Thai food it makes me ill. My middle name is Tatum, my middle name is James. *(He vacillates between jars).*

They're his. They're *his*.

*(A counsellor, PAULA has appeared)*

PAULA Losing your marbles?

*(ISAAC looks at her in disdain)*

Sorry, bad joke. So do you remember what we talked about last time we met?

*(ISAAC puts another marble in the 'mine' jar)*

In many cases of head trauma, it's quite natural for old memories to resurface with remarkable clarity.

ISAAC But only some of them are mine. Some of them are his.

PAULA They may have been buried for so long that they might appear to be new or unfamiliar.

ISAAC They're not just unfamiliar, they are not mine. His memories in my head.

PAULA It's not possible.

ISAAC You said that last time too. *(Puts another marble in the 'mine' jar)*. But I'm evidence to the contrary.

*Pause*

PAULA Look...

ISAAC *(Knows what's coming)*. No, no, no...

PAULA Just hear me out... You're about the same age. You came from similar backgrounds. You may even vaguely know each other. Feelings of guilt may have led you to associate yourself with him – give you the impression that...

ISAAC I have an overwhelming desire to eat peanut butter and I'm allergic to peanuts. *(Puts another marble in the 'his' jar)*.

PAULA That doesn't mean anything.

ISAAC I keep looking for a scar on my left ankle. That's because he once had to have a rod inserted there after he broke it skiing. *(Puts another marble in the 'his' jar)*.

PAULA Maybe you overheard these things somewhere and you're just recalling them now.

ISAAC Where would I have overheard them? They're too specific for one

thing and too private.

He lied once to win a fifty dollar bet with his best mate Greg, and he's felt guilty about it ever since. *(Puts another marble in the 'his' jar).*

He's going out with this Tania chick, but there's this other girl at his work. They hooked up together a total of four times and he's wondering when it's going to happen again. *(Puts another marble in the 'his' jar).*

He has a slight tendency for domination. There's a stack of fetish magazines behind the wardrobe in his bedroom. *(Puts another marble in the 'his' jar).* Go and look if you want, that's where you'll find them.

*Pause.*

PAULA How much medication are you taking?

ISAAC *(Uncomfortable)* A little more than prescribed.

PAULA That's unwise.

ISAAC I have to. The pain. It's intolerable.

PAULA Look, I know how...

ISAAC Oh, no. Don't say it. I'm sorry, but you clearly do not know how I feel. You've clearly got no idea. Because obviously I'm drugged up or I've gone out in sympathy or something. If there's one thing I know for sure, it's how I feel. It's the only truth I know for sure right now.

*(He takes the 'his' jar, pours the marbles into the 'mine' jar, puts the lid on the 'mine' jar).*

This is how it feels.

*(He shakes the jar vigorously. The rattle is disturbingly loud)*

Now, please woman, if you really want to help, then fuck off and for Christ's sake, get me some FUCKING PEANUT BUTTER.

*Pause.*

PAULA You're right.

No, of course, you're right. I mean, I don't know anything, I'm only the trained professional here.

ISAAC Oh please.

PAULA No, really. I'm the clinical psych, years of practice and research behind me. But you know best.

ISAAC Look...

PAULA Oh no, I'm sure you've got it pegged. This dead boy's living inside your head – it's the only possible explanation. So tell me this. His name's Nate, right?

ISAAC Right.

PAULA So if Nate was here right now, and had an unlimited supply of peanut butter, what would he say?

*(ISAAC closes his eyes and thinks. PAULA gradually sinks back into the shadows and exits)*

ISAAC I think he'd say sorry. So many of his memories are about regret. Things he should have fixed up before he died. The fifty bucks. That girl at work.

He'd be sad. He loved his mother. He loved lots of things and people that he's never going to see again.

But mainly he'd be angry. At the injustice of it. He's furious. He's contemptuous.

What would he say? He'd say, 'You cock. What's so special about you? You get to live when I have to die. You who know all my secrets, you don't deserve them – you haven't earned them. I've lost them and I didn't do anything wrong. I did nothing wrong.'

He'd say, 'That car accident – it wasn't my fault'.

*(Revelation. He grabs the 'mine' jar, and digs for the red marble).*

It was dark. I was driving home. The conditions were safe. I see the lights of a car, but they're veering all over the place. Suddenly this car is coming straight for me, sideways...

No... no! *(Puts the red marble in the 'his jar'. He concentrates.)*

That's his. What's mine? Think!

I was coming down a ramp, and the ramp ended and fed into the freeway. It was late, after work, I wanted to get home. There was a car in front of me, it was waiting to merge onto the freeway, but I was looking over my shoulder, waiting to see where I could get on. It was stupid, I was going too fast. I turned back and the car in front of me hadn't moved. I could see I was going to hit it, I didn't have time to brake. So I – I can't believe I did this, so dangerous – I swerved to the right, into the lane of traffic. Why did I do that?

*(During this, MRS LUCAS returns. ISAAC's recollection becomes a tearful confession.)*

Then there was another car in front of me and I thought I was going to hit that, so I swerved to the left and then I lost control of the car. It was swinging all over the road, I couldn't get any control. It all happened so quickly and then I was sideways on the road, across the highway and – bang – the other car ran straight into me, driver's side door.

It was me. It's my fault.

*(He falls into MRS LUCAS's arms. She too is in tears.)*

MRS LUCAS      Thank you.

END