

# ONE

## *Presence, the Play*

“It’s wonderful to see Theatre Portesque packed for the opening night of *Presence*,” Plot said to the cheerful miss seated next to him in the balcony.

“I know—we’re excited,” said the miss. “My boyfriend’s in the cast; in fact, he’ll be the first to appear onstage.”

“Really,” Plot said, as he glanced around, not spotting an empty seat save the one to his right. “My name’s Plot,” he said, turning to the miss.

“I’m Shelly,” she replied.

“The play is scheduled to begin any minute now,” Plot said. “Have you met the playwright?”

“You mean Brother Script?” said Shelly. “Yes, everyone adores him. He’s so full of life, buoyant and all theatrical-like.”

“Yes, he loves the arts. He should already be here,” Plot said. “The seat next to me is his. The costume designer and a number of the crew are seated up here in the balcony to take in the opening performance.”

“Did you work on the play?” asked Shelly.

“Yes, Script and I worked closely together on the development of *Presence*. Oh sorry, I just spotted him. Finally, he’s making his way along the row. He must have gotten caught up in a few last-minute hiccups.”

“Pardon me, please, pardon, sorry, thanks,” said Script, as he passed by seated patrons on his way to claim his reserved middle seat. Front

row balcony, seat number 16 was the only empty seat in the theatre, with a gold ribbon stretched across the arms.

“Great, you made it,” said Plot. “Hand me your case so you can remove the ribbon. I didn’t dare touch it; there were a lot of eyes on this seat.”

“Yes, I’m afraid I skimmed a few knees and stubbed a toe or two,” said Script. “Advancing along this narrow row would be fine for a cat, a skinny cat, but me—that’s another matter.”

“What kept you?”

“An issue with the light in the barn loft,” said Script. “The breakers kept tripping, tripping, blowing, blowing; nuts, it’s always the small things. Too many kettles plugged in outside the dressing rooms. Boy, they’ve really tied this ribbon—I can’t get it undone.”

“Let me help you,” said Plot. “Here, it’s tied from behind. There we go. Nice silk gold ribbon. Don’t pitch it.”

“No, I’ll tuck it in my jacket pocket,” said Script.

“You should pitch that old woolen jacket, though,” said Plot. “Quit looking around; you sit down, calm down. The gold ribbon coiled inside that flapless pocket looks like a nest.”

“Yes, it’s a disappearing nest,” said Script. “There we are at last. I love these old red velvet seats. It’s the wear that speaks to me. Like the creaky floors backstage, creak, creak, and the sound of soles passing by. History, I tell you, Plot. So many years, scripts scripted, performers performing, music scored, songs sung—it’s live, it’s real, it’s present. The theatre—what can be better, tell me? You can’t.”

“I know, it’s a big night for you, Script. *Presence*, how long has it been, six years in the making?”

“And don’t forget, you helped make it happen,” said Script. “Oh, you’ll be pleased to know that another check was just handed to me backstage. Perhaps it will help pay for the electrician. Robbery, in form of skilled labor it is, anyone who works on this old theatre, especially the electricians. ‘Rip out the wires,’ they say.”

“As I said, calm down, Script. Take a deep breath. Your cheeks are all flushed red and sweat is trickling down the side of your face. You look like you’ve been roping cattle.”

“I have, but they’re called electricians,” Script said.

“Do you have a handkerchief?” asked Plot.

“You know me,” said Script. “I never go anywhere without a handkerchief.”

“Well, use it then,” said Plot. “Look at your eyebrows twitch—do you feel them twitching?”

“Not to worry,” said Script. “I can’t wait for that curtain to open. The lighting on the set is magnificent. You haven’t seen it finished. The stagehands have been brilliant. A barn named Storybook—it’s a perfect set for *Presence*.”

“Whose idea was that anyway?” asked Plot.

“Yours, I think, wasn’t it?” said Script.

“Anyway, get ready, Script. Soon the stage will come alive with your scripted lines, rhythmic tunes, whispers and shouts, and acts that keep the characters swishing in and out. *Presence*, the play, is on tonight!”

“I know, even my socks are starting to curl,” said Script. “That’s a line from Act Two. What time is it? I can hardly take the suspense.”

“Well, according to my watch, it’s ninety seconds to showtime. Here, put your eyes on my watch, as I track the time.”

“Okay, call forth the time,” said Script.

“*Tick, tick* pulses the slender hand, as it steadily pulses along,” said Plot. “*Tick pulse, tick pulse*, up the second-hand sweeps, past seven, and gains on nine. On it ticks, on its upward swing to twelve, and quickly pulses beyond it. On it pulses, round the crown and ticks its way on down. One it passes, then three and five, as you see, all the while telling time. Script, what are you doing? Sit back down.”

“No, just three seconds—I want to spin around and give a thumbs-up to the crew.”

“You’re impossible,” said Plot, as he watched Script stand.

Script rose from his seat, spun around, and gave a thumbs-up to the crew and supporters seated nearby. Then, with eyes wide open, like an owl, Script went completely stiff, and backwards he fell. With nothing to break his free fall, he fell and smashed his head against the brass balcony guardrail.

Plot jumped up, grabbed Script, and carefully laid him in the aisle. “Script, Script, hold on!” said Plot.

Instantly, from this aisle and that, people appeared and huddled around.

Plot, kneeling over Script, looked up and raised his hand like a traffic warden. “Careful,” he said, “easy—he’s bleeding; it’s serious. We need help!”

Sister Ravena knelt and laid her right hand on Script’s forehead. “All will be well, Script, all will be well.”

A deep voice nearby said, “Hang in there, good man.”

At that moment, the royal-blue stage curtain opened, and a tall, slender man stepped out of Storybook Barn and made his way to the center of the stage. In a lovely, perfectly projected tenor voice, he began to sing “The Pasture” by Robert Frost.

*I’m going out to clean the pasture spring;  
I’ll only stop to rake the leaves away  
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):  
I sha’n’t be gone long.—You come too.<sup>1</sup>*

Shouts from the balcony, however, startled the audience and halted the play. A loud voice boomed: “Emergency! Stop! Script, the playwright, has collapsed. Quick, we need help up here!”

The young man onstage froze and turned around, confused, not knowing what to do. He put his hand above his eyes and looked up into the balcony. In no time an authoritative, calm voice came over the house sound system and said, “A doctor, please, in the balcony, please. Thank you! Ladies and gentlemen in the audience, we need to wait; please be patient while we attend to this situation. Thank you!”

On the main floor, torsos twisted, heads tilted, and faces looked in the direction of the swirling commotion. In the balcony, a lady gently pressed her index and middle finger against Script's neck. She pulled her hand away, then reached for a handkerchief to wipe blood from her fingers.

Plot looked down at Script and thought, *Dear Lord, mercy, the night belonged to you, Script.* He prayed, and under his breath muttered. Next, trying to comfort Script, Plot crossed his legs and sat on the floor right alongside Script, who was lifeless and unconscious. Plot was frightened for his dear friend.

Plot thought, *Will Script make it? What's happened, a stroke, a heart attack?* All the worst options switched places in his mind. He tried to tell himself that Script had simply fainted, but he had seen Script go stiff before his free fall. He could see the blood and the distorted expression on Script's face.

At that point, a firm hand gripped Plot's, and a uniformed worker said, "Sorry, please, we need everyone back. Everyone, please, stand back—the man needs room, air. We're here to help."

The middle-aged male worker knelt down and shone a flashlight in Script's eyes. Holding open Script's eyelids, first he examined the left eye, then the right. Next he turned to his assistant and said, "Oxygen, Clive. Are they here?"

"Yes, Captain," replied Clive. "They're racing up the stairs with the gurney—five seconds, no more."

"Good," said the captain. "Okay, lads, ever so careful. He's unconscious and losing blood from the base of his skull. Wraps now, layered thick."

The captain extended his right palm, but kept his eyes fixed on Script. An aide swiftly placed several layers of white cloth in the captain's hand, which he gently slid behind Script's head.

Next the captain instructed, "Pillows, small, a pair." Out of nowhere, the pillows appeared. The captain took one in each hand and

carefully placed them on either side of Script's face. Then he ordered, "Straps, the double-wide."

Hurriedly, another aide cut a generous strip from her adhesive roll and knelt down to place the strap across Script's forehead. Still clasping the pillows, the captain said, "Now straight down, over the forehead, and onto the pillows." The aide did exactly as she was told. "Good, another," said the captain.

With the pillows helping to secure Script's head, the aides rolled out a rubber mat in the intersecting center aisle, just a few seats farther along the row. Next they placed a portable gurney on the mat.

The captain said, "Okay, while I swing around to hold his head, two on each side, squeeze in, tight. We have to make a human gurney to get him to the aisle. Okay, hands to the back and hands to the thighs, and slowly lift. Slowly, slowly, gently, okay, okay, now carefully shuffle, shuffle, and again. Now we need to turn him and let him down nice and easy.

"Perfect, now the handles . . . I want all four of you to lift in unison." The aides knelt in readiness, each grasping one of the elongated wood handles jutting out of the gurney. "Here we go," the captain said. "Lift, while I continue to hold the head. Good. Now, you lot, make me proud, step in unison, up the aisle, then along the main aisle leading to the steps. So, okay, step, keep him perfectly horizontal, as if on a sled."

In lockstep precision, up along the aisle they went until they arrived at the staircase.

"Now, remember the stair routine," the captain said.

"We've got it," said an aide at the front of the gurney.

"In unison we step," said the captain. "Okay, one step at a time, halting after each step." Now step, pause, step; we bring him down as if floating on a cloud. Now step."

Plot, along with an entourage of concerned patrons, followed. They offered no assistance, only collective concern. As he navigated the stairs, Plot glanced across the theatre, taking in row upon row of

worried faces. On the stage, the slender actor had been joined by other members of the cast, watching as the medics made their way along.

Plot looked at the cast standing there and thought, *At this point, the only script at play is Script, oblivious of the scene around him.* Through the side doorway they carried him. Next they transferred Script to a wheeled stretcher, placed him in the ambulance, and hurriedly shut the doors.

The spin of red lights chased across the brick exterior of Theatre Portesque and the faces in the open doorway. Plot stood in the middle of the curious group, stupefied, totally unlike himself. Just then, a finger poked his shoulder blade with the force of a silent command. He whirled about to see Brother Writer, with a face as sober as his.

Both belonged to Estillyen's Order of Message Makers, or Storytellers, as some prefer to say. The order dates back to the seventeenth century. The storytelling monks all had chosen names such as Chronicle, Saga, Script, Epic, Plot, Narrative, and Writer. Script, the playwright, was now at the center of the drama.

Writer said, "Let's go." Plot said nothing. Writer headed up the main aisle toward the entrance, with Plot in tow. Reaching the entrance, they slipped into the revolving doors and quickly spun out onto Front Street.

"Dear Lord," Plot said, "what an ordeal. Poor Script."

"I know," said Writer. "We need to get to the infirmary. Oban has gone to get his pickup; Hollie is with him. We can squeeze in."

In less than a minute, the headlights of Oban's old pickup appeared. He offered a wry smile, nothing more. No words except "Hop in."

"Yes," Hollie said, "I'll scoot over."

Writer opened the door and slid up onto the bench seat. Plot didn't want to do the same. He closed the door and said, "No, let me ride in back; there's a crate—really, please."

Hollie started to object, but she stopped when she saw Plot jump up into the bed. On a crate Plot sat, with his back to the cab. The ride to the infirmary gave Plot three miles of fresh air. The crisp air

felt good, but his demeanor was deeply somber. The pickup's engine rumbled with a guttural sound, as Oban shifted the gears and they motored along.

Plot kept brooding over the whole affair, thinking, *How could this possibly happen to Script? His mood was so lively, and more than anything on earth he looked forward to the opening night of Presence. Now he'll be spending the night at Good Shepherd Infirmary. And how many nights after that, only God knows.*

Estillyen is a picturesque isle, with flower shops, cafes, a monastery, an abbey, and a vibrant village full of colorful characters. Sitting there in the back of the pickup, Plot thought about Oban—how Oban once claimed he became trapped inside a full-length mirror stowed in his attic. As he tells the story, he said he was frozen there, alive and looking out at all the figures looking in. An amazing tale, but Estillyen is a place for such stories told.

Generations of persevering Estillyenites tilled the soil and forged the isle out of rugged reality. Over the centuries, though, waves have deposited a wealth of numinous tales upon Estillyen's shores. The mix of steely reality and tales gives a special lilt to Estillyen life, unlike anywhere else on earth. Estillyen has become a rite of passage for pilgrims from far and wide, who routinely sail the waves to take in the essence of the isle.

The distance to Estillyen, however, remains a mystery to some. As the best of maps will attest, the isle is charted as far away from everywhere as anywhere. That's the beauty of a long journey, though: the anticipation of arriving on distant shores. At the same time, everyone that embarks on an earnest journey to Estillyen discovers the isle, mystically near.

On the opening night of *Presence*, the playwright was nearing Good Shepherd in an ambulance, while Oban, Hollie, Writer, and Plot motored along the winding road to the infirmary at a slightly hurried pace.

As they neared Good Shepherd, Plot thought of the slender figure standing at center stage at Theatre Portesque. He could hear his voice, like a reassuring presence:

*I'm going out to clean the pasture spring;  
I'll only stop to rake the leaves away  
(And wait to watch the water clear, I may):  
I sha'n't be gone long.—You come too.*