

THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KEN

by Mark Bellusci

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by Mark Bellusci
104 Hemlock Drive
Stamford, CT 06902
(203) 363-0070 (Voice)
(203) 363-0072 (Fax)
mark@markbellusci.com

CHARACTERS

TED - a whiny hypochondriac who loves to tell of his many woes to anyone who will listen. Even though he's only in his middle age, he acts and moves like an old man. He also imposes on anyone who can do him any kind of favor.

TOMMY - a workoutaholic who tries to make up for his lack of blue collar skills by doing reckless mountain climbing, bunjee jumping and other daredevil stunts. Always moving, he does calisthenics throughout the play. He should not look overly intimidating; it's more his actions than bulked up muscles that apply here.

KIT - a powerful corporate lawyer. Cool as a cucumber, natural manager, keeps control and tends to overuse marketing speak. However, her tone and manner change to sultry and seductive around KEN.

KEN - a blue-collar guy who acts regal around the others. He could be wearing a plumbing uniform shirt, and look like he's just come from a plumbing job.

TIME

Evening in the present.

SCENE

An upscale living room in TOMMY's house. There are drinks and food throughout the room.

AT RISE

TED, TOMMY, and KIT are nervously looking at their watches and pacing. TOMMY is also doing calisthenics such as push-ups and jumping jacks. TED is frequently checking himself for fever, taking his pulse, testing his knee reflexes and anything else a hypochondriac might do. KIT is checking her electronic organizer and making cell phone calls.

KIT

What time was he supposed to be--?

TED

Half an hour ago.

KIT

Unacceptable. I've got a board meeting in--

TOMMY

No one's forcing you to stay.

TED

Go run your company.

TOMMY

We'll take care of Ken.

KIT

If you think -- stop that incessant exercising! It's not conducive to an effective meeting.

TOMMY

It's conducive to my being ready to kick ass. Got to be able to take care of yourself on the street.

KIT

On the street? The biggest crime on these streets is a poodle pooping on your lawn.

TOMMY

Well, if one of those curly-haired carnivores craps on my chrysanthemums, it'll be the last movement he ever makes.
(He shadow boxes.)

KIT

Thank you for that chilling display of poodle-protective prowess.
(Looks at her watch.)
Ken is disrupting my entire schedule--

TED

So why are you bothering ?

KIT

You know why--

TED

Why not just delegate one of your many underlings to-

KIT

Don't you think I've tried to uncover Ken alternatives? I've received sub-satisfactory responses to the multiple

RFP's I've dispursed in the event of a downturn in Ken productivity, vis a vis, his capability to provide cutting-edge service within a paradigm of just-in-time delivery A-S-A-P.

TOMMY

(To TED.)

You get any of that?

TED

She can't find any other Kens, so she's in the same boat we are.

TOMMY

Well, maybe if you acted a little more like me, Ken would--

KIT

You? Ken has no particular affinity for your persona.

TOMMY

What? Ken and Me, we're like brothers.

KIT

Ha!

TOMMY

The same interests, the--

KIT

Like what?

TOMMY

Like manly things. Outdoor things. Putting-it-on-the-line things.

KIT

Wait a minute, don't compare your childish bunjee jumping antics with Ken's--

TOMMY

It's all real-man, get-your-hands-dirty, curse-and-sweat things--

(TED chuckles.)

TOMMY

(To TED.)

Things you have no idea about.

TED

And what do you mean by that?

TOMMY

Oh, I don't know. Just that, Ken and me, we're more of the rugged outdoor types. While you, you're of the -- how do I say? -- the soft, indoor-plant variety.

TED

I'd make you eat those words if I wasn't--

TOMMY

And, uh, what ailments are we talking about this week?

KIT

Tommy!--

TED

Well ... if you must know, I now have insomnia.

TOMMY

Ahhh.

TED

It's miserable. I see doctor after doctor--

KIT

(Sotto voce to TOMMY.)

See what you started?

TOMMY

(Sotto voce to KIT.)

Sorry, heat of the moment.

TED

But none of them can tell me why.

TOMMY

Okay, so the ailment of the week is--

TED

Oh, that's the least of it. You've heard of lyme disease?

TOMMY

Yeah--

TED

Well I've got lemon-lyme disease. Makes you hyper-allergic to citrus. I'm in the same room with a grapefruit, I start looking like one.

KIT

(Sotto voce to TOMMY.)

You had to open this can of worms?

TED

And doctors? Phhh. Morons. Can't find anything -- say it's all in my head.

TOMMY

Well--

TED

But you wait: one of these days, I'm gonna drop dead. Then I'll show them.

KIT

(Looking at her watch.)

Look, we need to finalize an agreement on Ken allocation --

(Doorbell rings.)

Oh well, let's at least try to maintain the pretense of cooperation.

TOMMY

(Sarcastically.)

We're one big, happy family.

(KIT approaches the door to let KEN in, but before she does so, she lets her hair down, unbuttons the top button of her blouse and transforms from a corporate to a sultry demeanor.)

TED

Hard to compete with that.

TOMMY

Nothing a guy like Ken hasn't seen a million times before.

(KIT opens the door for KEN, who is holding a pocket dictionary, which he consults before speaking.)

KEN

Sa-loo-tuh-tions, all.

(He holds his hand in a regal greeting, like the Pope.)

TED

What?

KEN

(He shows book to TED.)

Sa-loo-tuh-tions. It means "how ya doin?"

TED

Ohh, right, and

(He provides the proper pronunciation.)

"salutations" to you, too.

(KEN takes his coat off and holds it out for TED to take.)

KIT

(Now with a suddenly sultry and seductive tone, which she'll use on KEN throughout.)

You're looking even better than the last time I saw you, if that's possible.

KEN

(Chuckling.)

Heyyyy, Kit. Is it really possible for me to look any better?

(Forced laughter from the group. TOMMY then approaches KEN. He has taken a friendly shadow boxing stance, throwing a few friendly fake punches.)

TOMMY

The Kenster! The big guy! What are you, working out? You look huuuge.

KEN

Nah, just buffed from doing the job that so few can do.

TED

Well it's good to see--

(TED shakes KEN's hand, then withdraws it quickly.)

Owww!

(Rubbing his hand.)

KEN

Gotta work on that handshake.

TED

It's this phantom carpal tunnel syndrome.

KEN

My deepest condescensions.

(The others pause to recognize the malaprop, but say nothing about it.)

TOMMY

You don't have to apologize to him. You're a strong guy, you should be proud of it.

KEN

(Defensively.)

Smart, too. Don't forget smart.

KIT

Who's smarter than you at what you do?

(KEN shows regal boredom at the expected fawning.)

TOMMY

All right, let's not fawn all over him. The man just wants to relax.

(They all sit down, then uncomfortable silence as the three just sigh and stare at KEN.)

KEN

Okay ... so what do you need?

TED

Need? We don't *need* anything. Just wanted to get together.

TOMMY

Hey, we're neighbors, right?

KEN

(Skeptically.)

Right.

KIT

And neighbors should be close.

TED

We just wanted to see how you were doing.

TOMMY

How your life is going.

TED

How your business is going.

TOMMY

The greatest business on Earth

KIT

Done by the greatest man on Earth.

KEN

(Chuckling with false humility.)

Please, please, please. The pope's right up there, too.

TOMMY

So tell us, oh great one: how is the plumbing business?

KEN

Well, tell you the truth--

TED

And speaking of plumbing--

(KEN gives a resigned sigh.)

KIT

Ted--

TED

See, I was just wondering--

KIT

You know the rules--

TED

When I use my toilet--

TOMMY

You're jumping the gun--

TED

Sometimes the tank doesn't fill up--

KIT

We're talking about Ken's life, not yours.

TED

We're talking plumbing, which is what I'm doing--

KEN

(With a sigh, as if bored with always imparting great wisdom.)
Is water running?

TED

What?

KEN

In your tank. Is water running?

TED

Uhhh, yeah.

KEN

Jiggle the handle.

TED

Jiggle the handle?

KEN

Jiggle the handle. Probably just the trap not catching.

TED

Jiggle the handle ... of course! It's genius!
(Murmurs of agreement from KIT and TOMMY.)
Only problem is, this arthritis in my wrist --

TOMMY

Now don't--

TED

Makes it tough to jiggle.

TOMMY

Here he goes.

TED

So I'm just wondering if -- you know, maybe you could just drop by
and--

KEN

Uhhh--

TED

And while you jiggle, I'll hold the flashlight. I'm good at that.

KEN

I don't need--

TED

(Holds out his hand.)
Here, what do you see?

KEN

A hand.

TED

Now, what don't you see?

TOMMY

I hate magic tricks.

TED

What you don't see is a shake. Steadiest hand in the business.

KIT

Look, Ken doesn't--

TED

A laser, when I'm holding a light. No movement, nothing.

KIT

Okay, so you can hold--

TED

And it's not just flashlights. Extension cords, nuts and bolts, duct tape -- you name it, I hold it.

KEN

That's ... that's good to know, but I --

TOMMY

But Ken's got a little thing called a life. And just because you're too wimpy to jiggle your own handle--

TED

(Half-heartedly tries to get up from his chair.)

If I didn't have this unrecognized chronic fatigue syndrome, I'd-

(He then settles down from exhaustion.)

KEN

(Pompous reflection.)

Even with all my skills, it's impossible to help so many.

TOMMY

(To KEN.)

Hey, we're lucky for any time you spare us -- and most of us know it. I mean, we could all be asking favors. Like me: I've got this backed-up sink, you know? But I don't need you to jiggle for me.

TED

(A loud prayer.)

Just one day of health, so I can kick his--

TOMMY

I'll plunge my own sink, for as long as these pythons hold out.

(He flexes, then caresses his arms.)

KEN

Good--

TOMMY

(To KEN.)

But ... while we're talking about it ... there is one little thing I wanted to run by you.

TED

Here it comes--

TOMMY

Just curious, if ... maybe ... you know, when you get a chance -- you could stop by and, uh, kind of coach me a little on the plunging--

TED

I knew it--

TOMMY

I mean, I'll do the dirty work. You could be kind of a ... a personal plumber trainer.

TED

(To TOMMY.)

Why should Ken do your plumbing before mine?

KEN

Either way, I don't have--

TOMMY

(To TED.)

Because I'm not abusing--

KEN

Look, fellas--

TED

Abusing? How can you call--

KEN

(Beginning to rise.)

All right, that's it! I ain't wasting--

KIT

Please stay.

KEN

I got a paper due.

TED

A paper?

TOMMY

(With a chuckle.)

You know, for a second there, you sounded like a student.

TED

What is it, wall paper for a job?

KEN

No, it's --

TOMMY

Sand paper for a pipe fitting?

KEN

It's a paper on some Russian composer: Tchaikovsky. Guy's got a "T" in his name, but he don't pronounce it. Me, I'm thinking, I got a "T" in my name, I'm pronouncing it: "Tee-chaikovsky." Otherwise, why have it there?

TOMMY

Tchaikovsky's not plumbing.

KEN

Tchaikovsky's high school equivalency.

TED

Oh no.

KEN

Going at night.

TED

Why, Ken? Why?

KEN

Time to move on to greener passions.

KIT

(Whispering to KEN.)

"Greener pastures."

KEN

Them too.

TOMMY

Who got to you, man?

KEN

No one got to me. Just wanted a taste of the easy suit life you all have.

TED

Ken Ken Ken. Why demean yourself to--

KEN

Who knows, maybe I'll run one of those Forfeit Five Hundred companies.

KIT

(Whispering to KEN.)

Fortune Five Hundred.

KEN

Them too. I mean, how hard can it be compared to fixing a plug valve?

KIT

Why would you want to be like us, when we don't want to be like us?

KEN

Don't condescend to me.

KIT

"Condescend."

KEN

You think I'm gonna spend the rest of my life coming to these get-togethers to do plumbing favors?

KIT

Wait a minute: we're not-- we have these get-togethers to be close neighbors, not to ask you favors.

KEN

Ha!--

KIT

In fact, the last get-together, we never even talked about favors.

KEN

(To TOMMY.)

You want to tell 'em, or should I?

TED

Tell us what?

TOMMY

Uhhhh.

KEN

(To TED.)

That piece of paper you slipped me, about your faucet?

KIT

I can't believe--

TOMMY

It was just a quickie.

TED

You hypocritical Ken hog.

KEN

Now on, there ain't no more Ken to hog.

KIT

Ken, Ken, think about what you're doing. Suits like us are a dime a dozen.

TED

And not one of us can turn a screwdriver.

TOMMY

Well actually, I've been practicing--

KIT

Shut up, Tommy. This whole neighborhood is mechanically retarded.

TOMMY

Do you know what that does to you?

TED

To come home from work, wondering what you've accomplished after fourteen hours of corporate bluster, butt-sucking and band-aiding?

KIT

While you -- you can watch a toilet flush smoothly and think, "I did that."

TED

You can watch an elbow joint hold its water and think: "no drip there."

(Beat.)

KEN

And that's all you think my life is: flushing toilets and fixing elbow joints?

TED

What else is there?

KEN

There's the homering of the mind.

KIT

(Sotto voce to KEN.)

"Honing."

KEN

The expectorant of one's horizons.

(TED and TOMMY look at KIT in confusion.)

KIT

(Sotto voce, to TED and TOMMY)

Could be "Expectation" ... or maybe "Expansion."

KEN

And hey, why shouldn't I grab a few of those expense account lunches at the fancy joints?

KIT

You mean, the ones that come with unpaid overtime?

KEN

Why shouldn't I be wearing those cool-looking business suits?

TED

That are always at the cleaners?

KEN

Stop treating me like the proliterature.

KIT

(Sotto voce to KEN.)

"Proletariat."

KEN

You got it good, and you don't want me getting in on it.

KIT

Getting in on what? We're three miserable people.

KEN

Because you ain't doing it right. There's a great suit life out there somewhere, and I'm gonna find it.

KIT

And Don Quixote will keep searching for the fountain of youth.

KEN

Key-oldie? He some new guy in the neighborhood?

KIT

No, he's--

KEN

Well, you tell him to fix his own fountain, 'cause from now on, I'm a suit.

(Pause. Sighs from TOMMY, TED and KIT.)

TED

Well, that's the end of our meager lives.

TOMMY

Wait till those toilets start backing up.

TOMMY

Anarchy in the streets.

KEN

Come on, there are other plumbers.

TOMMY

Not within a hundred miles of this neighborhood.

TED

Should we tell the others?

KIT

Maybe in phases. Don't want riots.

KEN

(Sighing.)

All right, here's what you's does--

KIT

Better have a town meeting.

KEN

You's all--

KIT

Call Reverend Jones. Religion can have a soothing effect during disasters.

KEN

Just fix--

KIT

Bill the shrink can give trauma therapy.

KEN

The plumbing yourselves!

(Pause. Then laughter from everyone but KEN.)

TED

Fix it ourselves.

TOMMY

That's good.

TED

Thanks. We needed a break from the tension.

KEN

I'm serious.

TOMMY

Ken, you're an artist, a craftsman. You've trained a lifetime to acquire the rare skills--

KEN

I know, I know.

TED

So how can you expect us to replace you?

KEN

The only hope is to take your plumbing head on, as a team.

TED

A team?

TOMMY

Brother, when you leave, it's every man for himself.

KEN

Talk like that could have you drowning in your own cesspools.

TOMMY

Well, what else can we--

KEN

How many people in this neighborhood?

TOMMY

I don't know, a few hundred.

KEN

Share the plumbing among that many, you's could bring your survival rate to almost sixty percent.

TOMMY

But plumbing's so complicated.

KEN

For an undeveloped suit mind like yours. That's why you have to break it down to bite-sized pieces. For example,

(To TED.)

you could learn how to ... thread a pipe.

TED

But I don't--

KEN

And Tommy could put it in place.

TOMMY

Me?

KEN

Takes a little muscle.

TOMMY

(Preening like a peacock.)

Well, yeah, that I could do.

(Beat.)

KIT

You know, it could work.

TOMMY

You're forgetting one thing: maybe we could do the physical tasks, but how would we ever replace Ken's genius plumber mind?

KEN

(Philosophically.)
Time ... life.

TED

But we don't have time to--

KEN

(Now said as a normal phrase.)
Time Life. The Time Life Series on Home Plumbing.

TED

You can't expect us to--

KEN

Has everything you need.

TOMMY

No way we'll--

KIT

It can work.

(Beat.)

TOMMY

How do you know?

KIT

Because I've ... I've ordered the entire set on installment -- I'm on letter M.

TED

Why would you?--

KEN

Because I already talked to her.

TOMMY

So you're the one turned Ken against us--

KIT

Stop talking jibberish. Don't you think I've tried -- and continue to try -- to dissuade him?

I confided--

KEN

"Confided."

KIT

KEN

-- in Kit because she's the best person to di-flush information to.

KIT

(Sotto voce to KEN.)

"Divulge."

KEN

See, Kit, she don't have macho blindness.

TED

Macho what?

KEN

Macho blindness. It's when you talk to a guy suit about a plumbing problem, and he ain't listening 'cause he's thinking of macho excuses about why he didn't know what you was talking about.

TOMMY

(Looking uncomfortable and embarrassed, since this applies to him.)

Wait a minute --

KEN

It's always something a suit says he knew, or used to know or shouldda known. And he always curses a lot to male bond with me. "Son of bitch, of course it's the damned stopflow valve. How the hell did I miss that?"

TOMMY

I don't--

KEN

Sometimes, I have a little fun with it, you know? Make up something, like the pipe-o-rama is leaking.

TOMMY

Wait a minute, I --

KEN

"Son of a bitch!" he'll tell me. I replaced that last month."

TOMMY

Well, I replaced something, and it certainly sounded like a pipe-o-rama.

KEN

With Kit, there's no macho blindness, so she actually listens to what I say.

KIT

Once the lessons are over, I'll schedule a debriefing.

TOMMY

Damnit. I should've been the one to--

KEN

You got a problem, get someone else--

KIT

No no no. You keep teaching, and we'll keep learning.

TED

I'll be the flashlight holder!

KIT

It's all yours.

(Beat. Then to KEN.)

So, where do you go from here?

KEN

Well, first I get my high school equivalency, so I could use all them fancy words like the rest of you's.

KIT

Then?

KEN

Then, my nice little business idea starts making me millions.

KIT

And that is?

KEN

Plumbing.

TOMMY

You're leaving us for another neighborhood!

KEN

Not doing. Teaching.

Ahhh.

KIT

KEN

See, you's ain't the only suits desperate for help. There's rich areas all over America applying for plumbing disaster funds.

TED

And you would--

KEN

Give seminars: "Plumb today, live another day." Thousand bucks a head.

TED

(Philosophical.)

"It takes a village to fix a toilet."

(Beat.)

KIT

Ken?

KEN

Hmm?

KIT

Take me with you.

KEN

Sorry babe, running solo on this.

KIT

No, I can help.

KEN

Since when do I need help with plumbing?

KIT

Not with plumbing. With the business side -- setting up your gigs. I could be your advance booking agent.

KEN

But what about your company? Your home?

KIT

Screw it all! I'd do anything to get out of this white collar hell.

KEN

Hmm ... Well ... with you doing the grunt work, the world would get more of my plumbing genius.

TOMMY

Wait a minute, if she's going, I'm going too.

KEN

Now hold it, I can't take--

TOMMY

I could be your personal trainer--so you don't get that soft, white-collar look.

TED

And I could hold the laser pointer when you make presentations.

KEN

But--

KIT

Think of it: the white collar perks you want, the suck-up staff you deserve.

(Beat.)

KEN

Annnnddd ... what's in it for you's?

KIT

Well, I'd need a ten percent agent's fee.

TOMMY

There's my personal trainer fee.

TED

I'd need a minimal lighting fee.

KEN

No way I'm paying--

TED

It's only a small percentage of the millions you'd make.

(Beat.)

Well ...

KEN

Can we leave tonight?

TED

Yeah!

TOMMY

Geez, are you's really that desperate?

KEN

Nooo. We can wait till tomorrow.

KIT

Look, these are plans for down the road -- after the high school thing.

KEN

And what are we supposed to do till then?

TED

Well, you want to keep indoor plumbing, better start your plumbing team.

KEN

(He gets up to leave.)

Ken? If we -- the team, that is -- if we have any plumbing questions, can we --

TED

(Sighing.)
Call me.

KEN

Thank God.

TED

Hey, we still neighbors, right?

KEN

Right, neighbor!

TED

(KEN leaves, they pause to stare at the door.)

TOMMY

(Reflectively.)
The last of a breed.

TED

Yeah.

(Beat.)

KIT

(She pulls out a notebook and pen, and starts a list.)
Okay, who wants bolt screwing?

TOMMY

I'm better at unscrewing.

TED

If my arthritis lets me, I'll give it a shot.

KIT

Great. Now, adjusting the monkey wrench: who's up?

(Conversation continues as lights dim.)

END