



Wheel of torture: A play in one act

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Picture the set of the popular American TV show, Wheel of Fortune. Imagine a Vanna White substitute named Veri White, sleek, blonde and fair.

—

A large wheel is displayed, standing vertically, with numbers representing prison sentences and symbols that represent other sanctions, from probation to house arrest and even corporal punishment. (The death penalty is available on another show, Wheel of Death). The wheel, bright red, has black leather arm and leg straps. Fastened to the wheel is a contestant, whose fate will be decided by the studio audience.

—

Veri steps forward and says, with growing emphasis,
'Welcome to
WHEEL – OF – TORTURE'

—

APPLAUSE, UPBEAT MUSIC

—

The announcer, Bob Jones,
clean-cut and nondescript,
ordinary and comfortingly familiar,
strides to the center of the stage
in a sensible if unremarkable suit.

—

'Here's our First Contestant', says Bob.
All eyes are on Veri and the contestant.
That's the way the producers want it.

—

Victima de Concepcion, strapped in tight, is a single mom,
Black and Hispanic, in her mid-thirties. She looks older.

—

'People probably call her Vicky', says Bob, 'when they call her by name'.
Bob talks as if anonymity or undue familiarity were normal for the likes of Victima.

'She holds down two minimum-wage jobs, so money is tight'.
—

'Though not', Bob deadpans, 'as tight as Veri's very-tight dress!'
—

laughter from the audience

Veri wiggles slightly, a hint of a smile on her lovely face.
—

'Is this a great country,
Or what?'
—

laughter, applause from the audience
—

The devil is in the details of Victima's life, but Bob is a big-picture guy,
A kind of walking wide-screen TV kind of man.
—

He doesn't tell the audience that Victima takes
a long bus ride from the ghetto to the suburbs,
Up and out by five each morning, when it's still dark,
Carries back-to-back shifts, gets off at 11, home by midnight or so,
Hoping to give her kids a goodnight kiss, tuck them in,
though the sitter usually has them down by ten.
—

Bob doesn't even know she works under a dress code,
a speech code, submits to drug tests;
Can't stop to pee when nature calls, unless
it's on one of her fifteen-minute breaks,
one every four hours, whether she needs it or not;
Can't miss a day, sick or not,
cause she's got no benefits;
Can't say 'No' to overtime,
cause she'll get fired.
—

'Here's our girl tonight', says Bob, 'because . . .
Vicky left her young children home alone and went off to work!'
—

audience: Ahh, in a shocked, hushed tone.
—

'The baby sitter didn't show', adds Bob, knowingly.
—

audience: uh huh!
—

'Vicky just had to go'
—

audience: sure!

—

'She'd get canned'

—

audience: now, really!

—

'Given a one-way ticket'

—

audience: given?

—

'Heading nowhere but down, she says,
down into unemployment and homelessness'.

—

*audience: Impossible! In America!
Home of the free! How can that be?*

—

'That's what she says!' Bob seems incredulous.
'And wait', says Bob, 'there's more!'

—

audience: un huh, there's always more!

—

'Her kids were burned alive that very night!'

—

audience: Oh, Good God!, Oh, Good God!

—

'Burned in a fire set by an itinerant arsonist'.

—

In a soft voice, Bob says:
'probably out on bail; true,
he should've been in jail'

—

Now more loudly, 'while our *little* lady was lazing around . . .'
Bob emphasizes little, and Victima does look small, fixed to the wheel
'sneaking breaks . . .'

—

audience: Ah!

'and all the while . . .
those *precious* babies . . .
cooked alive!'

—

audience: NO!

—

With fervor, Bob asks
'What kind of woman . . .
'What kind of person . . .
'Would leave her children alone . . .
At the mercy of any passing felon?'

—
'I ask myself', Bob continues
'and my wife, of course'.

—
audience: Of course!

—
'Would we let *our* son
Fall prey to arson?'

—
*audience: NO, Bob. NEVER.
Not your son. Not our son.
Not arson.*

—
'I ask you', shouts Bob,
'Did she *have* to live in a high-crime neighborhood?'

—
*No, Bob. No Way.
This is the richest country on earth!
That's the American Way!
If you want the Good Life
All you have to do is Pay!*

—
'Did all we could, didn't we?' says Bob,
in a low, familiar, we-know-best tone.
'Spared her the indignity of welfare, didn't we?'

—
audience: 'Damn right!'

—
'Figured her kids would fare well without her, didn't we?'

—
audience: 'Sure did!'

—
'Fare well without pesky government programs getting in the way, right?'

—
*The audience chants:
For sure, Bob. For damn sure
'Slutty whore, Slutty whore
'She chose to be poor
'Show her the prison door.'*

—

Bob raises a hand, taking back the floor.

'Now', says Bob, speaking slowly, as if to a child,

'Some loose-lobed liberal might say,

(Here Bob adopts a nasal, whiney tone)

"Hey, Bob, she's working two jobs to make ends meet
at the longitude and latitude of the third world,
parts of which we want to rebuild, though
not her neighborhood, her life, her family".'

—

Bob pauses, to let this sink in. He continues.

'This lousy, lame, lying liberal might even say,

(Again in a whiney tone)

"Bob, We know this is tacky
but wouldn't she be better off
if she were an Iraqi?".'

—

There is an uncomfortable pause.

Bob, sensing anxiety, jumps in.

—

'Not true!' says Bob.

—

*Not true! Chimes in the audience
With evident relief.*

—

'Pusillanimous palaver!'

Bob, now in a lather,

'Cause then she wouldn't be free,
like you and me!'

—

*audience: Right, Right. Of course!
Free, like you and me.*

—

'There you have it', says Bob,
shrugging his shoulders, feeling vindicated.

'Let's get started . . .'

—

Veri White spins the wheel. It slows down at Life, then edges over onto Fifteen years.

—

Bob looks at the wheel, then at the audience.

'Folks in the audience, we ask . . .

Has she suffered enough?'

—

NO, NO, NO

Fifteen years is a slap on the wrist!

*Has it come to this?
She kills, and we sentence her to Penal Bliss?*

—

Bob, moving almost rhythmically with the anger in the air,
'Let's prosecute, Let's persecute
Let's put her in a prison suit'
Bob's on a roll now.
'Won't she look cute – maybe hot to boot!'

—

*Sniggers from the audience
'Hot?' Someone mutters.
'Slut', says another.*

—

Bob, loudly:
'Let's send her to the Big House
The American Dream House
A cell in the country!
A toilet with a view
What else are we to do!'

—

WILD APPLAUSE

Veri is beaming, looking stunning, an American Dream Girl, showing considerable cleavage, her sheer desirability serving as a Segway to commercials on The Good Life in Modern America.

—

The first commercial showcases Pamela's Playthings, a line of lingerie that promises heaven on earth, adorning sultry blonde models with slim waists, large busts and downy wings, each of whom bears an uncanny resemblance to Pamela Anderson. Pamela's Playthings are one of the obvious benefits of a free society.

—

Our lithesome lingerie-clad ladies are followed by an ad for a new drug, Leviathan, a big seller, sure to vanquish erectile dysfunction, proffered with the implied promise of sex-at-will – as seen in a Freudian sequence in which a man throws a football, over and over again, penetrating a gently swaying, tulip shaped rubber lift, bringing smiles all around, especially to the face of the handsome man himself, the quarterback in every man, with an attractive, approving wife. You won't catch him leaving his family at the mercy of arsonists, muggers, or thieves, though one might wonder if he'd even notice intruders into his home, what with his spending so much time in the sack.

—

'Welcome back', says Bob. He's been watching Veri, not the commercials, but he is now ready to get back to work. 'And here's our next contestant'.

—

Another single, poor mom.
 White, but visibly mentally ill.
 Her name: Slovena N. Disturbed.
 'These things happen', says Bob,
 sensing audience discontent . . .
 they'd expected a person of color.
 'Nobody promised Slovena a Rose Garden'.
 'Besides', Bob continues, 'she'd let it get overrun with weeds!'

—
audience: laughter, some relief.

—
 With growing enthusiasm, Bob intones,
 'Another dead child? This one a suicide?
 Boy hanged himself in a house full of *dirty* laundry?'
 Bob emphasizes dirty, then adds,
 'Guess you come by your name honestly, Slovena'.
 Bob's tone is unctuous, soothing to the audience,
 Though a few seem to sense Bob's cruel streak.

—
 'Your only son, twisting there', continues Bob,
 'like a carcass in a slaughter house,
 right there in your closet,
 dressed out in dirty old clothes?
 Smelling like death warmed over?'
 'And where', intones Bob, 'was our Slovena
 when her boy said his last novena?'

—
audience:
Where indeed!
Her Boy in need!
Bitch Abandoned her seed!

—
 'Oh, audience, we have our work cut out for us!'
Applause, building to a crescendo.

—
 Bob and his audience aren't color blind,
 But they are blind to the color of pain
 Afflicting lives so different from yours and mine
 They might as well unfold on a Martial plain.

—
 'Let it spin!' says Bob
 'Let's hear it!'

—

Audience shouts, 'WHEEL – OF – TORTURE'

Veri sways seductively.

'Grab her by the leg, Veri, and let it spin

It's time for the game to begin . . .'

–

[Note: this play is based on actual cases, though names have been changed to protect those violated by the American justice system.]

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