

THE SWITCH ROOM

by: Jason Lenz

CHARACTERS

GUS, early 60's, short and stocky, slightly overweight, high strung.

SAM, mid-40's, thin, tall, calm demeanor.

SETTING: The Switch Room TIME: Ten Seconds to Go

(Lights up center stage, which is set with a GREY WALL that stands about six feet high, ten feet long, and appears to be made of cement. Mounted to the center of the wall is THE SWITCH, a monstrously oversized lever, currently in the "UP" position. The bigger and more ridiculous the switch looks, the better. Two men, GUS and SAM, enter the stage from opposite ends, wearing generic uniforms: blue button up shirts, khaki's, belt, dress shoes, hats, etc. In addition, Gus has a holstered GUN strapped to his belt. Both simultaneously punch cards using their own TIME CLOCKS, one at each end of the wall. Hidden by shadows is a BIG RED PHONE. Gus readies himself SL, carefully eyes his STOPWATCH as Sam positions himself center stage, raises his arm to the switch, and waits. A DRUMROLL echoes throughout the theater as Gus raises his hand into the air, and starts with five fingers as he does a gestured countdown every second from five down to one. The drum roll finishes as Gus gives a hand signal to Sam. Sam doesn't move. Gus gives the signal again. Still, Sam does nothing, frozen in his repose. Gus emphatically signals and points at his watch. Finally, Gus storms over to Sam.)

GUS: Sam!

SAM: Yeah.

GUS: I gave you the signal.

SAM: I know.

GUS: Well, what in--

SAM: I can't do it.

GUS: What? Why?

SAM: I don't know.

GUS: Something wrong with your shoulder? Just use the other arm for Christ-sakes.

SAM: It's not that.

GUS: You need some motivation? Okay... uh... Oh! Pull it like you're one spin away from hitting the

jackpot in slots.

SAM: It's not going to work this time.

GUS: Pull it like you're casting the deciding vote in the upcoming Presidential election.

SAM: Gus, I've done it ninety-nine times. I know how--

GUS: This is your centennial? That means you're about to tie the record. Big moment. No wonder

you've got the jitters. Okay, I'll stand back and give you some room... Take a deep breath... Now, pull

it down like a pair of panties on prom night!

SAM: I don't want to.

(Gus checks his watch)

GUS: We're a minute past here. Just pull the switch.

SAM: I don't think so.

GUS: PULL IT!

SAM: No!

GUS: It's your job.

SAM: I know.

GUS: You're refusing to pull?

SAM: I think so.

GUS: Do you know what they're going to do when they find out about this?

SAM: Move me off the switch?

GUS: Fire you.

SAM: Oh.
GUS: It's a good paying job.
SAM: I know.
GUS: Great benefits.
SAM: Yeah.
GUS: It's not hard.
SAM: Not physically.
GUS: You want to give up all that?
SAM: I just want to know.
GUS: You shouldn't be thinking about it.
SAM: I can't help myself.
GUS: Your job is to pull the switch. That's all it is.
SAM: Yes, but what's--
GUS: It doesn't matter.
SAM: It could be--
GUS: Something.
SAM: Or maybe it's--
GUS: Nothing.
SAM: Why wouldn't they tell us if it were nothing?
GUS: (*checks watch*) Two minutes, Sam. TWO!
SAM: Gus, I need to know.
GUS: Why? Does it somehow bring more or less purpose to your life?
SAM: Maybe.
GUS: Will it put more food on the plate to know? Will it make your sex life better? Will it allow you to send your kids to college and give you a secure retirement?
SAM: Well... Why can't we know? What does it do? What's the big secret? How does it even work?
Where does it lead to? Does it make something? Does it even do anything at all? What reasons could they possibly have for doing something like this? Why does a living person even need to pull it? Why can't something else activate it? Like a machine or something that doesn't have a... You know...
GUS: A soul? Is that what this is about?
SAM: It'd crossed my mind.
GUS: Do you believe you have a soul, Sam?
SAM: Perhaps.
GUS: Do believe in heaven? The devil? Demons dancing around half-naked with pitchforks turning you like a rotisserie over an eternal flame?
SAM: I don't know about all that.
GUS: What do you know?
SAM: What do you mean?
GUS: You know that there's a switch ready to be pulled here and a family waiting for you at home.
SAM: But what if it does something--
GUS: Horrible? Repulsive? Disgusting? Evil?
SAM: Yeah.
GUS: What if it does something good? Did you ever stop to think about that?
SAM: What could be good about it?
GUS: Maybe there are thirsty children in Africa who get the water they so desperately need based on your pull.
SAM: Or maybe food!
GUS: It brings food to our tables, Sam. We know that much.
SAM: I don't know, Gus. I have a bad feeling about it... I'm the one who pulls it... And if it is something bad... in the eyes of a higher being... You know...

GUS: In order for you to be doing something wrong, you have to know what you're doing.
SAM: But what if I suspect I may be doing something wrong?
GUS: You've pulled that switch ninety-nine times. If you had a soul, you'd have known by now.
Do you
 think stopping now is going to change those other pulls?
SAM: You've got to start somewhere.
GUS: *(checks watch)* Four minutes.
SAM: I guess the older you get, the more thinking you do about... You know...
GUS: You were doing so well. Ninety-nine times... I mean, that's almost as many as...
SAM: Yeah.
GUS: Oh. Well...
SAM: You don't have to say anything.
GUS: He was the best.
SAM: I know.
GUS: I mean, he could pull it down like a lonely trucker honking his horn at a Mercedes full of
beautiful
 women.
SAM: I've been thinking a lot about him lately. He pulled it one hundred times without
question. One
 hundred icy fingered tugs that showed no sign indecision or regret afterwards.
GUS: One hundred perfectly timed switches.
SAM: Then it happened. He had to know. Something in him snapped and he couldn't take it
anymore.
 The more he tried not to think about it, the worse it got. What? When? Why? Where?
How? All
 the questions that lead to madness worming their way through his mind. And then... and
then...
GUS: He could pull no more.
SAM: The same thing is happening to me.
GUS: Don't say that! There's still time. It's only been *(checks watch)* six minutes. Nobody's
even--
(A spotlight fades up on the red phone as it begins to ring. Gus and Sam look at each other, wide-
eyed.)
SAM: It's them.
GUS: What?
SAM: The phone. It's them.
GUS: How do you know?
SAM: It's in the employee manual. You need to answer it.
GUS: I can't answer it!
SAM: You have to.
GUS: No!
SAM: It's your job.
GUS: I don't know what to say.
SAM: Just tell them the truth.
GUS: I don't think--
SAM: ANSWER IT!
GUS: Okay.
(Gus quickly rushes over to the phone and picks it up, his hands shaky and nervous as he lifts it to his
ear.)
GUS: Hello... Sir... Yes, sir... Uhm... Well, not exactly, sir... There's, well, there's been some
technical
 issues... I don't know... Uh-huh... Okay... I see... Yes sir...
(Gus hangs up, moves back to Sam. The light over the phone fades out.)
SAM: Why didn't you tell them?
GUS: I'm not going to let you do this to yourself. You've got a wife and child.
SAM: Won't you be fired, too?
GUS: Probably.
SAM: But you're only three months from retirement.
GUS: I know.

SAM: You won't get any of your benefits.
GUS: I won't?
SAM: No.
GUS: How do you know that?
SAM: It's in the employee manual.
GUS: I never--
SAM: Gus, you need those benefits.
GUS: Yeah.
SAM: Just tell them, Gus. It's okay.
GUS: No. We're going to figure a way out of this.
SAM: You're a good man, Gus. If only...
GUS: If only what?
SAM: Nothing. Forget it.
GUS: If only HE had done something differently that night? Is that what you were about to say?
SAM: Never mind.
GUS: Hey, HE was just doing his job! HE was a good man that knew family was the number one priority in life. If you don't have that, you're nothing. The switchman is the one to blame... almost ruined everything with his nosy questions. What else could HE do?
SAM: What else can we do?
GUS: I don't know.
SAM: You pull it.
GUS: What? No, I can't pull it. It's not my job. I'm not the switchman.
SAM: I'll say that I pulled it.
GUS: But what if they find out?
SAM: How would they?
GUS: I don't know. Maybe this lever is physiologically linked to recognize the switchman's fingerprints or DNA cells...
SAM: That's stupid.
GUS: How do you know?
SAM: Okay, well... Even if that's true, what's the worst that could happen, given that ridiculous scenario?
GUS: We'd be fired.
SAM: Exactly.
GUS: Well, I suppose it's worth a shot. If they found out that I did pull the switch, maybe I could say that the lever was somehow--
SAM: Stuck.
GUS: And when I tried it--
SAM: It worked.
GUS: Then you could get a transfer and I could keep my benefits.
SAM: Everybody wins!
GUS: Okay, I'll do it.
(Gus positions himself and puts his arm on the switch.)
SAM: Want me to do a countdown?
GUS: Yeah... That might help.
(Gus removes his watch, hands it to Sam.)
SAM: Okay. Ready?
GUS: I think so.
(For each of the following countdowns, the drum roll begins and ends the same as it did before.)
SAM: In five... Four... Three...
GUS: Wait!
SAM: What?
GUS: I'm left handed.
(Gus turns to the other side, now using his left hand. He is now facing away from Sam.)
SAM: Ready?

GUS: Ready.
SAM: Okay. In five... Four... Three...
GUS: Wait!
SAM: What?
GUS: Uhm... maybe you should be over here... So I can see you.
(Sam moves to the other side.)
SAM: Okay. This is it. In five... Four... Three... two... One...
(Sam gives Gus the signal. Gus freezes.)
SAM: Gus, that's the signal.
GUS: I know the signal!
SAM: Then why aren't you pulling it?
GUS: I've never done this before.
SAM: It's easy. Just a quick motion, straight down. Pull it like a professional arm wrestler delivering the
final blow to win the tournament.
GUS: No. I mean... if I've never done it before, then that means my soul is cleaner than yours.
SAM: Who said that my soul isn't clean?
GUS: You did.
SAM: No, I didn't.
GUS: Well... what if it is true?
SAM: What?
GUS: You know...
SAM: What are you saying? You can't do it?
GUS: I don't think I can.
SAM: You have to!
GUS: No, I don't.
SAM: What else is there?
(Gus un-holsters his gun and aims it at Sam.)
GUS: Pull the switch.
SAM: You're going to shoot me?
GUS: If you don't pull it.
SAM: Gus--
GUS: There's no other way out.
SAM: After all this time--
GUS: I don't want to do it, Sam. Please don't make me.
SAM: Like father, like son.
GUS: He was a simple watchman. He just wanted to work and go home and retire with his wife... watch
his kids marry and have grandchildren to spoil. Your father tried to take that, his reason for living,
away from him. My father had to decide what was really important. An answer to some stupid
question or his entire world.
SAM: What about--
GUS: What about the switch? Your family? Your soul? You have to decide what's most important.
Right now. Please, just pull the switch Sam. Pull it down like your life depends on it.
SAM: Okay, Gus. I'll pull it.
(Sam positions himself at the switch.)
GUS: Thank you, Sam.
SAM: Could I get a countdown?
GUS: Of course. *(The drum roll begins.)* Where's my watch? Hey!
(Sam tosses the watch at Gus and rushes him at the same time, hitting Gus square in the midsection. Sam and Gus begin to wrestle with the gun.)
SAM: I need to know!
GUS: You'll ruin everything!
(Sam and Gus eventually lose balance and tumble to the floor. The drum roll ends as the gun goes off with a

BANG.
SAM & GUS: *(simultaneously)* You shot me!
(Suddenly, a part of the ceiling falls from above the stage and collapses onto the switch. With a loud creak, the switch shifts into the "DOWN" position. Sam stares at the switch as Gus writhes in placebo pain.)
GUS: You bastard! Now, I'll never get to see my grandchildren... Their little wide-eyed faces as they blow out birthday candles... Mabel and I will never go to Paris like we'd planned... Tell her I loved her...
SAM: Gus!
GUS: Tell her, Sam. Please... I see the unknown... It's just like they say... a beautiful bright light... It's comforting... It's drawing me into it... I'm going toward it, Sam... Tell her...
SAM: Gus, look!
(Gus looks over at the switch.)
GUS: The switch!
SAM: Neither one of us pulled it.
(Gus looks himself over.)
GUS: I'm not shot!
SAM: Neither of us are.
GUS: Our souls are clean!
SAM: Our families are safe.
(Spotlight up as the big red phone starts to ring. Gus rises and stumbles over to it, still short of breath.)
GUS: Hello... Sir... Yes, sir... Uhm... It's all taken care of, sir... I don't know... Uh-huh... Okay... I see...
Yes, sir... thank you, sir...
(Gus hangs up. Spotlight fades.)
SAM: What did they say?
GUS: They congratulated us on our one hundredth successful pull together. You're getting a raise and I'm getting a bonus.
SAM: Huh.
GUS: Listen, Sam--
SAM: Forget it.
GUS: So... what now?
SAM: I don't know.
GUS: Well, maybe I should--
SAM: Yeah.
GUS: Mabel's cooking her famous pot roast tonight.
SAM: I'm sure there's something waiting for me, too.
(They both punch their cards and walk to the opposite ends of the stage from which they entered.)
GUS: Sam.
SAM: Yeah, Gus.
GUS: Your father... He was a good man at heart.
SAM: I'm sure, at the end of the day, yours was too.
(They both nod to each other.)
GUS: Goodnight, Sam.
(Gus exits.)
SAM: Goodbye, Gus.
(Lights fade with Sam left staring at the switch.)