

Merlot Drama

The season was over. The play had been another roaring success for Harold Jensen, his cast and crew. His critics had said it wouldn't work; a musical version of Shakespeare's 'Hamlet', but it won everyone's praise. More to the point, there was never a vacant seat for the entire three week season.

A party was in order. Some serious drinking, smoking and joking was definitely on the cards. Everyone was on a high but some were ready for the aimless, empty come-down that followed after such an event. Harold was buzzing about the gang like a bee pollinating a garden. Commending everyone involved and lapping up their reciprocations. He thrived on two things, theatre and parties.

The flamboyant, forty-six year old director gave each of the members of his cast and crew a very tasty bottle of merlot. On each of the bottles was a tiny, typed label thanking them for their effort and talents. The bottles were wrapped in book scrim and tied off with a royal blue ribbon.

David Smith, the tall, dark and handsome, nineteen year old leading part player, was not a red wine drinker, he wasn't a big drinker at all, let alone red wine but he accepted his gift with a gracious thank you. David was also not present when the gang were told to read their labels tomorrow. He was in the bathroom splashing water over his face and complimenting himself on his fantastic performance. So he was completely unaware of the label altogether.

He left the party early because he knew how these things usually ended. The sexually charged cast members usually took each other home drunk and finally get their way and the old winos stick around to the end until they could barely talk crap about the 'good ole' days' anymore. He also liked to leave mysteriously, when the time was right, that way he'd keep a good memory of the occasion.

When he got home, he made himself a camomile tea, placed the bottle in the cupboard above his fridge, (the place where things can almost disappear) then went to sleep. He dreamt his commonly recurring dream, being in the West End production of 'Les Miserables'.

Three weeks floated by, a few unsuccessful auditions, some average workshops and plenty of double shifts at the café. Then his cousin James' eighteenth birthday arose. It was going to be a huge party. Turning eighteen meant that James was of an age that he could legally drink alcohol. It also meant that he could vote, go for his full licence and do other things but for James, drinking was the best part by far. Having not had much warning and even less money, David decided that he would give his cousin the bottle of red that he had stashed above his fridge. It was alcohol. It would do just fine. He pulled out the bottle, not noticing the note on the label, as it was obscured by the creases in the scrim, placed it in a bottle bag and went off to the party.

And what a party it was, triple layered shots of all colours, tequila lay-backs on the bar and of course the dodgy birthday message delivered by a guy in a hotdog costume. His friend's band 'Sloth' played their first gig of distorted rock covers for only one hundred dollars. It was the best party an eighteen year old could ask for.

James acquired a decent pile of gifts, mainly varying forms of alcohol and alcoholic paraphernalia. There stood the bottle from David. James was not big on red wine. He preferred beer to wine and white wine to red. So he placed the red wine and the cognac his grandfather gave him, in a cupboard next to his TV cabinet for a purpose he was not yet all too sure of.

There it sat for two and a half months, while James went out with his new Uni' friends, getting riotously smashed on cheap beers at the closest bar to campus. He wasn't working much at that stage so when he needed a gift for his friend Steve, who was soon to be turning twenty-one, he decided that he'd give him the bottle of cognac that he had stashed. As he pulled out the cognac he saw the bottle of wine he had forgotten about entirely and figured that the wine would be more appropriate. Steve was so difficult to buy for that he decided the bottle of red wine would save him the hassle and pain of trying to find something, plus he couldn't just cop out again and give him a music voucher because that's what he'd done for the last four years and besides, he didn't really have the cash right now. James was fairly certain that his friend Steve was into red wine anyway so it would suffice.

The party was absolutely crazy as most twenty-firsts are, key to the city and all. People danced topless on the tables to crappy pop songs they hated when sober, everyone got it on with who-ever and things of little value were broken all over the place. Steve drank enough to anaesthetise twelve large horses and blacked out halfway through the night like so many twenty-first hosts do.

Steve had been such a great host and party boy, he woke up the next day with a brain that didn't seem to fit in his head and a girl in his bed.

He sifted through his pile of presents; a chrome hip flask (he's always wanted one of those, but he was not sure why, probably because tough guys in the movies use them), a toaster, (always useful), jewellery, a subscription to a nudie magazine and such a plethora of alcohols he could almost have opened his own bar; Bourbon, (his favourite), Vodka-from Poland, Chocolate liqueurs, plenty of Champagnes (actually from there) and one lonely little bottle of Red wine.

Steve had recently gone off red wine because he found it made his head feel stuffy and usually gave him severe hangovers like the one he was now experiencing. He put all the alcohols in a cabinet, the red wine at the back and his favourites in the frontline.

As a computer programmer for a large electrical goods company, 'Bright-Sparks' Steve made very good money. If he wanted something, he could usually afford it. So his stocks of liquor didn't decline for quite some time.

Almost a year later, Steve had to go to the thirtieth birthday of his girl-friend's older brother Dylan. He didn't really like Dylan all that much, he was always giving Steve the computer geek ribbing, which is okay if you're another geek but got annoying quickly if you're not.

Although his girlfriend Lisa had already bought Dylan a present, (a phone in the shape of a hamburger) Steve decided that it would be uncool not to give him a present of his own. He didn't really want to spend any money on him because he was saving for a trip to South America and he did want to get rid of that bottle of red wine that had been hanging out in his cabinet, finally. That would be the go.

He had no idea if Dylan actually liked red wine, but he didn't really care. He printed out a card from his archive of funny pre-designed numbers, wrote in it and put it all in a funky-patterned little bottle-bag that he bought from his local bottle-shop.

"Thanks man, that's so kind of you. We'll have to get you over for dinner sometime and all drink it together," said Dylan, thinking that he could possibly get out of drinking it because he secretly hated red wine. Dylan's favourite thing was Chocolate. He didn't really drink very often and when he did it was never red wine. The anti-histamines the wine-makers usually used as preservatives gave him splitting migraines.

He stored the bottle in his little bar area which he used for socialising, along with his unopened Muscat, half drunk Vodka, almost full bottle of Gin and some various, dubious liqueurs.

The dinner, as plenty of well-meaning invitations do, never eventuated. There the bottle sat for two whole years, gathering dust as the volumes of the other alcohols, even the dubious liqueurs, dropped steadily. The wine stood unwrapped.

Dylan was invited to an engagement party of his work-colleagues. He didn't know the colleague incredibly well but was obviously liked a lot by the guy. Terry, the co-worker, had always been fun to chat to and bitch with. They both knew that their boss was a wanker but the pay was good. It was somewhat of a surprise to receive the invite, but not a complete shock.

Being bogged down with presentations to clients, trying to get them to invest in the company's new photo-text messaging service, Dylan forgot all about the up and coming event and found him-self without a present to give when the day arrived. Then he tweaked - the bottle of red! He was certain he'd heard Terry waffle a tale or two about cosy nights with a bottle of red, so the wine it would be. Perfect.

Terry's fiancée, the delightful Janet, was the red drinker in the couple, Terry simply used the 'over a bottle of red', line as poetic colour for his Monday tales.

Although she *could* enjoy red wine, Janet preferred vodka cranberry, but over alcohol she was a smoker. They both were.

The bottle, now familiar with its role in life, sat neatly in their wine rack, awaiting its day of purpose. Consumption day.

Janet's good friend Harold, was turning fifty in a few days. The invite to his party/theatrical event had been magnetised to their fridge for a few weeks now. Almost long enough to have become invisible. They had noticed it for the first few days then it just started to blend into all the other crap, lost in a sea of medical centre magnets and pizza menus.

Janet was great at selecting presents for people. She loved it. She was one of those rare humans who actually tried to buy the person something they would like, not something she would like for herself.

She found a great book on staging and direction, which she knew Harold would absolutely love and didn't already have.

To make the gift even more awesome, she joined it with the bottle of red from their wine rack so that he could drink it as he enjoyed reading his fine book. Masterful!

She made a small swing-tag with a dramatic silhouetted figure in a spotlight and wrote her most heart-felt congratulations inside.

Harold was ecstatic about the book and hailed her as;

“The most amazing present giver in the known Universe! And wine, how fantastic!”
Thanks were poured all over her (and Terry) and she relished them.

Later on, after the show had gone on, the final curtain had been drawn and the last audience left, very drunk, Harold Jensen sat down for a bit of a night cap and read of his fabulous new book. As he peeled the somewhat familiar book scrim off the bottle, he was struck dumb by the sight of his own typed sentiments, there on the label.

A few years had passed, maybe five or so, since he'd given David his bottle of wrap-red, with the note on it, so it was not in the forefront of his lobes.

“Well done my star, it's been tough work getting here, but with your skill and belief you've made it happen. You are brilliant. Enjoy it. Once again, well done, have a drink and remember the good times. Sincerely, Harold Jensen.”

With that he uncorked the five-year old matured Merlot and poured himself a healthy challis. It was a bit peppery but it went down finely, having numbed his palette previously.

“Not bad,” he said to his new fifty-year old self.

He scanned his book for a while until he realised that he couldn't really focus, then sang one last quick rendition of ‘Maria’ from ‘West Side Story’ over another big glass of the red and promptly passed out on his own couch.

The next day, fifty-year old Harold Jensen woke up with a head-splitting migraine from the anti-histamines that the wine-makers had used as preservatives in their Merlot.

“Damned Champagne,” he said as he plopped two fizzing tablets into a glass of water and made himself his first of many cups of coffee.