

A SECOND CHANCE

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SCENE 1

A windowless room with the walls covered in white drapes, except for one doorway, to the back and to the side of the stage. There are eight chairs, more or less in a row. Facing them is a notice board on a stand. The room is bathed in a pale, orange glow. Ben and Roy enter and casually walk over to the chairs. Ben is wearing a well-worn suit and Roy, a sports jacket and grey trousers.

Ben Well, I'm sure I saw you run at Crystal Palace. Members of Hackney Boys Club sometimes used that track.

Roy You might well have seen me. I ran there many times in my youth.

Ben We seem to be the first, may as well sit down.

Roy I don't really know why we've been asked to come here, do you?

Ben No. Perhaps we're going to meet the governor.

Roy looks apprehensive. From behind the drapes, near to the notice board, Afra enters. She is wearing a long, flowing, white dress and is carrying a poster size chart in her hands which she starts to attach to the board. She notices the two men, who are now seated.

Afra Ah, you're nice and early.

Ben Well, we haven't got much to keep us.

Afra *(Smiles)* Then we will see what we can do.

The notice Afra has attached to the board reads in bold letters;

1905 - TSAR NICHOLAS 11, 1914 - SARAJEVO, WAR.
1917 – RUSSIA. 1919 - LEAGUE OF NATIONS.
1938 – AUSTRIA. 1912 – TITANIC,

Whilst Afra is at the board, Mary, an elegant, elderly woman enters. She is wearing smart clothes and a pearl necklace. She glances at the board and sits down one seat away from Ben and Roy. Another, younger woman, Jane enters. She is wearing a uniform, a tunic and trousers. Entering with her is Charles, who wears a smart suit.

Charles This place is a warren, worse than the Houses of Parliament.

Jane I'm still confused, not sure where I am.

Charles Let us sit down and perhaps this young lady will elucidate.

Afra moves from the board to address the group.

Afra Welcome everyone, we are just waiting for three more then we can begin.
(She glances towards door) Ah, I think they are coming.

A couple of seconds later, Jim comes into view and enters. He wears a suit, but doesn't look comfortable in it. He is followed by Edward and Gordon. Edward wears smart casual clothes, Gordon, a blazer and grey trousers.

Afra *(To Jim)* If you'd like to take a seat *(She indicates the one between Ben and Mary)* There are another two here.

Edward and Gordon take the seats next to Roy.

Afra I think we are all here now. Please relax. My name is Afra, and I have been Appointed, to tell you of a unique opportunity you have been given, which, if Successful, could change the face of the world.

The group, nervously glance at on another. Some look apprehensive.

Afra Would I be right in assuming that some of you are not sure of the state that you are in?

Roy *(After a pause)* We're dead, aren't we?

Gordon I wondered if that was it.

Mary *(Slowly)* So, this is heaven then?

Afra *(Nodding head)* It is God's kingdom. But your journey has been interrupted, as you have been selected to take part in this experiment.

Ben Are you saying we are going back to live on earth again?

Afra I will explain in a moment, but first I would like each one of you to introduce yourselves, your name, what you did, I mean your occupation, and the cause of your death. We will start with the gentleman on my left.

Edward *(He stands up)* I am Sir Edward Grant. I was a senior Civil Servant until I retired a few years ago. Oh, I had a heart attack.

Afra Thank you, Sir Edward. *(To others)* There is no need to stand up. *(She looks towards Gordon).*

Gordon *(Standing up)* Gordon Holmes, officer in the Royal Navy, I also had a heart attack, whilst on leave.

Afra nods and turns to Roy.

Roy *(Stands)* Roy Edmunds, best known as an athlete. I was an Olympic Gold medallist, a long time ago. I had Parkinson's disease.

Afra Thank you. *(She looks to next in line, Ben).*

Ben Ben Goodman, I was a London taxi driver before dying of cancer. Reckon it was the pollution that killed me.

Afra smiles and looks towards Jim.

Jim Jim Parsons, trade union official. I met my end, so to speak, in a car accident on the Motorway.

Afra turns to Mary.

Mary Lady Mary Cavendish, I was in an executive position with the British Red- Cross. I suffered an accident in my home. *(Afra starts to turn away)* May I, at this stage, ask a question?

Afra Of course.

Mary Why is it that we *(She glances at Jane, beside her)* are we the only two women to be given this opportunity, as you put it? This was the last place I would have expected to find discrimination.

Afra And you will not find discrimination here. The reason there are only two of you, is because, in the times we are concerned with, women were not in the positions that we will require them to be in.

Mary I see, I understand.

Afra turns to Jane, who doesn't respond immediately.

Jane I'm Jane Burton, I was a prison officer. *(Pause)* I was murdered whilst on duty.

There is a slightly, shocked, reaction from some of the group.

Afra And, you Sir?

Charles Charles Goddon, Member of Parliament until cancer forced me to resign my seat *(Slight embarrassment)* and to take my life. *(Looks at Afra)* Does that count against me here?

Afra Not, necessarily. Though it is something of which we disapprove.

Charles I was in dreadful pain, I di.....

Afra *(Interrupting)* Circumstances are taken into consideration. But let us leave that subject for now. *(She turns to address them all)* Thank you all, I thought it would be nice for everyone to know a little about each other, even though you will not necessarily be working together. *(Afra's smile fades. She takes in a deep breath)* The Almighty, *(Pause)* The Almighty has been very disappointed with the 20th Century. Although many wonderful advances have been made in medicine, and numerous inventions made to make working life easier, there has been great carnage. Two, so called, World Wars, and dozens of smaller encounters, together with increased religious intolerance and greed for material things. These have cast a blight on this century.

Edward Can't agree with you more.

Afra Now, in these early days of the second millennium, our creator has decided to give the world a second chance. All of you have been chosen to return to the 20th century, to assist in this task.

Gordon You refer to the second millennium, I understood that it doesn't begin until next year.

Afra That is of no consequence, time has no meaning here. We only use earthly time, years, months, days, to help you make the adjustment.

Ben *(Slowly)* You mean we have to go back and live through all that misery again?

Afra No, no *(Shaking her head)* that is not our intention at all. We wish you to try to influence people and thus change situations. That is your brief.

Ben I really don't know how we could do that.

Charles No, it was bad enough trying to get something done when I was in government.

Afra If you will all be patient for just one second, I will explain. I'm sure you have noticed that these dates pinpoint some of the key moments in the 20th century. *(She goes over to the notice board)* In 1905, the Tsar, Nicholas the second of Russia, invested the Duma with legislative powers. We all know that it was ineffective, and didn't work. But, if it had been successful, the Russian Revolution might have been avoided. *(She pauses, then turns to Charles)* You will become a member of the Duma, and your task will be to try to make it into a democratic body. Your past career as an MP may be of help to you.

Charles *(After a moment to take it all in)* I have French and German, but I speak no Russian at all.

Afra You will, because you will be of Russian nationality.

Charles If, as you say, I am going to be Russian, how will I have memories of my British parliamentary work?

Afra You won't have memories. Perhaps I should have explained, none of you will remember who you are now, or rather, what you were. Yet somewhere, within your subconscious, this information will exist. It may help influence your thinking and the decisions you have to make.

Charles does not look happy with this information.

Roy Is what you are saying rather like "déjà vu" when people feel they've met someone previously, yet know they haven't. Or, when a person has a premonition of having been in a certain place before?

Afra *(Smiling)* Something like that.

Jane I always thought that was a lot of nonsense.

Afra You must believe as you wish *(She turns and points to the board)*
 Number two on our list; 1914, the assassination of Arch-Duke Franze-Ferdinand at Sarajevo, the event that sparked off the first World War. *(She turns to Roy)* This is something for you.

A smile of incredulity comes over Roy's face.

Afra As a former athlete, fitness is in your blood, and also a determination to win. Your instruction is to prevent Gavrilo Princip from assassinating the Arch-Duke.

Roy How will my fitness help me in attempting this task?

Afra You will be at the spot where the assassination took place. We know Princip ran out of a café and over to the Arch-Duke's carriage. Your reaction, and the speed at which you try to stop him, are essential.

Roy Do you mean, I'm supposed to throw myself between the assassin and the Arch-Duke?

Afra Not necessarily, I don't know what opportunities, if any, will present itself.

Roy So, I could die in the attempt?

Afra *(Pause)* It is possible.

Roy I, *(short pause)* I take it that I will not be doing it at my present age?

Afra No, all of you will be at the prime age for the task required.

Roy Well then, I shall do my best.

Afra Thank you. Now, presuming war has not been avoided. Ben and Jane have been chosen for the next assignment.

Ben reacts with a smile. Jane seems disturbed, she stands up.

Jane Do we have a choice about accepting these assignments?

Afra Yes, of course, all of you do. However, the eight of you were chosen because you seemed to be the right subjects for this enterprise. But anyone wishing not to take part, has only to say.

Jane In that case, I don't wish to be included. *(She lowers her head)* I feel I've had my fill of society. You're not appreciated in what you do. I'm glad to be out of it. I don't want to go back.

Afra Then you are free to leave.

Jane *(Mumbling)* I'm sorry.

Jane quickly leaves the room.

Ben I don't usually have that effect on people.

The group smile. Afra turns to face them.

Afra I hope I haven't miscalculated on the rest of you.

Ben I'm anxious to know what you have lined up for me.

Afra I'm pleased to see you are eager. We are still concentrating on 1914, and this, will only be required if it has been unable to stop the outcome of war.

Ben (*Jokingly*) I know, you want me to have a go at the Kaiser.

Afra (*Laughs*) No. Although we do want you to join his army on the Western Front, and to befriend one of his soldiers. (*Pauses for a moment*) The soldier's name is Adolf Hirler.

Ben (*Shocked*) You must be joking. I could never be a friend to that bastard, I'm Jewish.

Afra It is precisely because you are Jewish, and because in your occupation, you had, what is commonly called, 'the gift of the gab' that we consider you right for the job.

Ben Ooh, I don't know about that.

Afra We know you are a good man. Oh, I am sorry, I didn't mean to make a pun of your name.

Ben (*Quietly*) No offence taken.

Afra It has been suggested that if you became a friend of Hitler, it might help to change his opinion of your race.

Ben That's a tall order.

Afra I know it is. Hitler joined up in 1914 with the 16th Bavarian Reserve Infantry. You will also be in that regiment. He was wounded in 1916. It would be useful if were there to attend him, before he is taken to hospital.

Ben Well, I'll do what I can.

Afra I'm sure you will. (*She starts to turn away*)

Ben Excuse me, you mentioned Jane along with my name when introducing this assignment. What was she going to do?

Afra She would have taken over from you, she was to have been a nurse at the hospital.

Ben And will there be a replacement now?

Afra No, I don't think so. Now the next task, which also takes place during the First World-War, is in Russia. Now, if we presume that Charles was unable to influence the Duma. We know the revolution is brewing, and the Tsar is away, visiting the Front. In effect, Alexandria, the Tsarina, is running the country under the influence of the pseudo-religious, so called, Holy Man, Rasputin.

Gordon And as a naval officer, you'd like me to deal with him before he reaches his end in the river.

Afra (*Smiling*) That, is not what we have in mind for you. This assignment is for Lady Mary.

Mary (*Surprised at hearing her name*) Me!

Afra Yes, we are calling on you to be a member of the Romanov family.

Mary (*Chuckles*) That is flattering, but I am not sure I have anything in common with them.

Afra Your administrative experience with the Red Cross and your work in the field, such as in Uganda, should be very useful. Your job, as a relative of Alexandria, will be to persuade her not to meddle in politics, and to try to make her listen to what her friends, and also the secret police, are saying about Rasputin.