

A Playwright's Catharsis

By Jeremey Ludwig

Act 1

Scene 1

July 4th, 2007. Two weeks since the NHL Entry Draft. Four days into the much anticipated Unrestricted Free Agency season. Toronto Maple Leaf General Manager John Ferguson Junior's popularity is at an all time low.

The set is your typical basement Canadian wreck room – fake wood panelling, a small bar on the backstage wall. Hockey posters from their youth (Gilmour, Clark, Burns) are tacked to the walls. As well a selection of hockey sticks are hung on the wall. The furniture is garage-sale-ish – nothing stylish, nothing from IKEA.

Jacob Do you really think we should do it?

Wally I see no reason why not. If anything after today – he is basically inviting us to do it.

Jacob Yeah but, I mean we'd be breaking the law.

Wally It would be immoral not to. He must be shown the errors of his ways. Remember, he started off good. You, yourself said it two years ago. *Imitates Jacob* "Oh Wally, he's not doing that bad. Many would do worse." And now, he is doing worse than many.

Jacob But still, we'd be breaking into the guy's house.

Wally The nation is depending on us to do it.

Jacob Well, if it is for the good of the nation than okay.

The two twenty-something men grabbed their gear from the table and run out the door. Lights darken.

Scene 2

The two men arrive carrying a third man. The third man is dressed in a pinstripe suit, with slicked back gelled hair. He is blindfolded. The two men sit the blindfolded man on a table in the centre of the room. They tie his forearms to the arms of the chair. They tie his ankles to the legs of the chairs. The two men are excited.

Jacob I told you we could do it.

Wally I know, I know. Wasn't it exhilarating? I mean, I still sort of pumped up by it.

Jacob Yeah, it reminds me of Nikolai Borschevsky's OT goal at Detroit in '92. I was pumped for days after that.

Wally With Mike Foligno jumping all over the place!

Jacob And the trainer spraying the water bottle into the camera!

Wally Those were good times.

Jacob Very much so. But it seems like ages since then.

Wally It has been ages since then... because of this guy. *(Wally kicks the chair)* Isn't that right John Ferguson Junior?

JFJ tries to talk but is muffled by the blindfold.

Jacob Maybe we should get him a pencil and paper?

Wally Good idea. After all he's got a lot of explaining to do.

Jacob fetches a clip board of paper. On the back of the clipboard is a giant Toronto Maple Leaf logo. JFJ calmly scribbles on the pad.

Jacob *(reading the scribble)* I can't confirm or deny that.

Wally You've got to be joking me. You're giving us your classic "I can't confirm or deny that" quote - in handwriting no less.

Jacob Can't you see we are trying to help you.

Wally It's true Junior. My friend here was actually a big fan of yours for awhile. Now here he is, kidnapping you.

Jacob No, not kidnapping. Borrowing you to help you see your failures. Guidance really.

Wally Forced guidance.

A twenty-something man walks through the back door. Jacob and Wally just stare as the new man notices nothing. He just hangs up his coat and carries his beer to the fridge.

Bryan Why is there a used car salesman tied up to a chair in our wreck room?

Jacob He's not a used car salesman.

Wally Yeah, a used car salesman sells beat up cars. This guy buys beat up things.

Bryan Wait, I know him. Who is he?

Jacob and Wally look at each other. Their excitement in their deed is too much. They blurt it out.

Jacob & Wally It's John Ferguson Junior!

Bryan Not John Ferguson Junior, General Manager of the Toronto Maple Leafs?

Jacob & Wally For sure!

Bryan You mean my cousin John?

Wally What?

Bryan My long lost cousin. Remember my Mom was researching her genealogy? It turns out I'm the cousin to the wife of John Ferguson Senior of Montreal and Winnipeg fame. Thus John Ferguson Junior is my cousin too!

Wally Are you serious?

Bryan No, I'm just messing with you. I'm not related to this deadbeat GM.

Wally No joking around. This is serious. Anything Maple Leaf related is serious.

Bryan So Jacob, Wally - Why is he tied up in our wreck room?

Wally Don't use our real names! Now he knows who we are. No, I mean – that's right use our fake names of Jacob and Wally.

Jacob The gig's up there Wally. It's obvious, even to him, that our names are Wally and Jacob.

Wally All right Jacob, all right BRYAN. Have it your way.

Bryan shakes the hand of John Ferguson Junior.

Wally Ah, don't do that. Now you have to wash your hand.

Bryan I just want to thank you sir. Without you as GM, my Ottawa Senators would never had made this far in the playoffs. Since you took over, they've never had to face Toronto in the playoffs! When was the last time you made the playoffs?

Jacob Two years ago!

Wally Anyway there is no treating Junior nice and no more shaking his hands. Bryan you interrupted me just as I was going to explain the rules.

Bryan Why by all means - please continue.

Wally As I was saying, this is a guidance counsellor session. Peaceful and educational. But if you force our hand we will have no choice but to... (*retrieves a stick from the wall*).

Bryan Not a Bobby Clarke stick.

Wally THE BOBBY CLARKE STICK. This stick was used by Bobby Clarke in the '72 summit series. He used it in Game 6 to break the ankle of Russia's sniper - Valeri Kharlamov.

This ain't your modern day graphite shaft – disintegrate in your hands stick. This is a real hockey stick. Feel here Junior. Just a little knick from where he broke the ankle.

This stick shattered the ankle of a soviet army sniper. Think of what it would do to you and your jellyfish body.

Jacob That's right jellyfish – because jellyfish don't have a spine!"

Wally and Jacob high-five each other.

Jacob You know that Kharlamov would have made a great Leaf. Kharlamov on left, MacDonald on right and Sittler at centre. Best line in hockey.

Bryan Give me a break. Besides Kharamov played right wing.

Jacob He'd switch to left to play for the Blue and White.

Bryan shakes his head.

Jacob You know who else would have made a good Leaf? Tretiak. We was a good goalie.

Wally Would have made a decent back up to Mike Palmateer.

Bryan Are you kidding me? Tretiak, the greatest goalie of all time and you think he would be "a decent back up to Mike Palmateer"? You're both delusional. Then again all Leaf fans are delusional.

Wally Tonight isn't about us. It's about Junior here and his inability to get the job done. Where do we start?

JFJ scribbles on the pad

Wally "How much do want for my release?" What is this?

Jacob I think he is trying to buy his way out.

JFJ scribbles on the pad

Wally "I can get you a million dollars."

Bryan You were right Wally. You always said JFJ overpaid by an average of a million dollars. He's offering you a million when you are worth nothing."

Jacob Overpaid by a million - that reminds me of Kubina! Let's start with him.

Wally Pavel Kubina. 4 years, 20 million dollars. About a million too much per year.

Jacob 21 points. His lowest output since his rookie year.

Wally What were you thinking? You have to trade him. Need room under the cap to resign Michael Peca.

Jacob Yep, you've used too much of your salary cap. Time to cut back.

Bryan Why not trade McCabbe? He has the bigger contract.

Wally Can't trade Bryan McCabbe can we Jacob?

Jacob Nope.

Wally Because someone (*looks at JFJ*) gave him a no-trade clause. You can't overpaid someone and then give them a no trade clause.

Jacob Nope, you can't.

Wally It makes no sense.

Jacob Senseless. Like Antropov.

Wally Nik Antropov. Or as Don Cherry calls him "An-Drop-Ov". In the big game this guy always disappears. Remember game seven a few years ago?

Jacob -2

Wally You see Junior. Game Seven's prove if a player really wants to win. Everything, life and death of a season is on the line – and your boy Antropov was minus 2.

 So what do you do? Even though you are close to the cap, you give him a two year extension worth 4 million dollars. That's two million dollars per year for that bum.

Jacob And he only made a million the year before.

Wally So you gave him a million dollar raise! And Jacob, how many goals did Antropov score last year?

Jacob 18.

Wally 18. But it wasn't like he got a lot of ice time. I mean he wasn't on the top line or anything. Oh wait a minute, that's right, he was on the top line and only scored 18 goals!

 How many did he score last year?

Jacob 13... and he wasn't on the top line.

Wally So let me understand this. 13 goals on the fourth line gets you a million dollars but 18 goals on the top line gets you 2 million dollars! What were you thinking?

Wally kicks the chair. JFJ scribbles on the pad.

Wally "Go easy on Antropov. He has a fragile confidence." Yes he does. It goes along nicely with his fragile left knee, his fragile right knee.

Jacob His fragile left shoulder, his fragile right shoulder.

- Wally His fragile left ankle, his fragile right ankle.
- Bryan True the Antropov signing was stupid. I mean the guy was a restricted free agent. The good restricted free agents never get an outside contract offer, let alone the bad ones like Antropov.
- But what about draft day? Tosakla and Mark Bell was a good pick up? Nothing from your roster.
- Wally Are you joking? Nothing from our roster! How about Angelo Esposito? We could have had him but NO, someone trades our first round pick, again by the way, for a San Jose backup goalie. And Mark Bell...
- Jacob Is just an overpaid Chad Kilger.
- Wally Exactly. An overpaid fourth line checker. But Esposito is the real sore spot. At 13th overall we could have landed an impact player. Imagine Sundin and Esposito playing together. Oh yes, I can see it now. Two 50 goal scorers on the Leafs! But we never had a chance did we? Someone traded away our first pick before the draft even started! (*Kicks chair*)
- Why not hold on to it until it was your turn to pick? If nothing looks good, then trade it to San Jose. They obviously wanted the 13th pick.
- Bryan Esposito a fifty goal scorer! Give me a break. Last week you said Toronto needs a power forward to work with Sundin. Esposito is anything but a power forward.
- Jacob But power forwards are so expensive.
- Wally Except Owen Nolan. We could have had Owen Nolan back but NO, he signs with Calgary for 1.9 million. That's less than Mark Bell. Why couldn't you have handled the Owen Nolan situation better? Yes, I know he was injured and wasn't worth the money under the new NHL but couldn't you have treated him better? Made him want to come back? Instead you basically sued him.
- Jacob Maybe we can still get him. After all, Johnny Junior here tends to make a lot of bad deadline deals. Leetch. Housley. Johannson. Yanic Perrault.
- Wally Oh, Yanic Perrault. I can't believe you made that trade. You traded Brendan Bell, a good young defenceman for Yanic Perrault – an old, one-dimensional player who was going to be a free agent.
- Jacob Don't forget that second round pick too!
- Wally I forgot about that pick. Is that how we lost it? We've traded so many picks, I can't keep it straight. He trades picks so quickly that it's as if he doesn't believe in the draft. You'd think a former scout of the St. Louis Blues would be in favour of draft picks. I wonder where he scouted that gave him such a disgust for the young player?
- Jacob (*sarcastically*) Probably along the hockey hotbed of Route 66. I'm sure there is enough bad hockey players there.

- Wally Where was I? Yanic Perrault! You could have signed him up until a month into the season as Phoenix didn't sign him until Halloween. What made him so valuable that after 4 months you were willing to part with a top prospect?
- Jacob 5 points in 17 games. Hope he won a lot of face-offs for you.
- Wally One of the worst trades in Leaf history.
- Bryan What is the worse trade in Toronto Maple Leafs history?
- Wally Well's there so many. There is obviously the Russ Courtnall for John Kordic debacle of 1989. Even Wikepedia states it was a bad trade.
- Jacob Owen Nolan to Toronto
- Bryan Hey, you guys were just bragging about how good he is.
- Wally Yes but we gave up way too much to get him.
- Jacob Raycroft.
- Wally *(a kick to the chair)* True.
- Jacob Jason Smith for a Jonathon Zion and Kris Vernarsky.
- Wally Freddy Modin for Cory Cross.
- Jacob Steve Sullivan on waivers!
- Wally Lanny McDonald and Joel Quenneville to Colorado in exchange for Pat Hickey and Wilf Paiement.
- Jacob Tom Kurvers!
- Wally Yes, Tom Kurvers is the one. Tom Kurvers for a first round pick who turned out to be Scott Niedermayer – future hall of famer.
- Jacob Who would go on to be Memorial Cup Champion. Memorial Cup MVP. World Junior Champion. World Champion. Olympic Champion. Norris Trophy. Conn Smythe Trophy. Stanley Cup Champion.
- Wally He's won everything.
- Jacob Let's reflect what we could have won if the Leafs have drafted him.
- Wally and Jacob stare into space reflecting on the nineties if Scott Niedermayer had wore the blue and white.*
- Wally How many Stanley Cups Jacob?
- Jacob I'm reflecting on '99. We would have beaten Buffalo then Dallas. How about you?
- Wally I'm still in reflecting in '96 and we haven't lost the cup yet!

Bryan Oh please. I think that is quite enough. Reflecting on imaginary Leaf Six-Peats! Please. Anyway the way the two of you have been carrying on the past week I would have thought Toskala might be the worse trade of them all.

Jacob CBC Sports said it might haunt the franchise for years.

Wally And you gave him an extension at 4 million per year! Did you learn nothing from Raycroft. Don't sign goalies to long term deals until they play at least one year for you. Common sense.

Jacob Yep. Everybody knows that.

Wally The problem is you are always buying when you should be selling.

Jacob Yep, buying when you should be selling.

Wally Take last year's trade deadline. You weren't going to make the playoffs. You could have traded a few guys, got some decent picks, cleared some payroll and tried to make a run at someone good – maybe Paul Kariya.

Jacob Paul Kariya would be a good Leaf.

Wally Atlanta and Nashville were trading away everything for players. We could have gotten Brayden Colburn or Scottie Upshall.

Jacob Brayden Colburn will be a keeper.

Wally O'Neil might have been hard to trade but Sundin would have brought in a lot.

Jacob I like Sundin.

Wally Me too, but you could always resign him. After all he would have been an unrestricted free agent.

Jacob Do the old Mark Recchi in Pittsburgh.

Wally Sure. Trade the guy for half the season then get him back. The ultimate Rent-A-Player.

Jacob Colburn would have looked awfully nice in the blue and white.

Wally And you could have traded McCabe too! The Islanders were desperate. Look at what they gave up for Ryan Smyth. Plus they had just lost Sean Hill to a drug test. They desperately needed a D man.

Jacob And McCabe wanted to go to Long Island.

Wally We could have rebuilt like Philadelphia.

Jacob They're looking awfully good.

Wally And its because they threw in the towel at the All Star break.. They knew they weren't going to make the playoffs so they traded all their good assets of Zhitnik and Forsberg for lots of young prospects. Then at the trade deadline – they acquired Matt Biron – an amazing goalie.

Jacob No Toskala though.

Wally Darn right no Toskala. Biron is the real deal. By the trade deadline they had traded away the fat and replaced it with good young talent.

Jacob Cheap talent too.

Wally Yes, cheap, putting them in the position to sign free agents like Brierre and Hartnell. Trade for Lopul and Jason Smith.

Jacob Jason Smith would be a good Leaf.

Wally Jason Smith was a good Leaf.

Jacob All we are saying is stop trying to squeak into the playoffs. It hurts just the same if we exit in the first round or don't make it to the dance at all.

Wally Because neither one brings Stanley home.

Jacob No.

They pause, remembering past playoff failures. They have a look of sadness in their eyes.

Jacob Of course Stanley might leave every summer to be shared by the Cup champions but every winter it returns to its home.

Wally That's right, Toronto.

Bryan And more specifically the Hockey Hall of Fame.

Wally Which is in Toronto! Stanley comes home after all.

Bryan That's sad.

Wally What's sad is the Yanic trade. Why did you try to sneak into the playoffs? (*a kick to the chair*).

JFJ writes on the pad.

Wally "I cannot confirm or deny."

Jacob It wasn't a yes or no question. It was a WHY question. It's not good grammar to confirm or deny a yes or no question.

Bryan I can answer your question.

Wally Go ahead then Sens fan.

Bryan It's simple. Your pal here is entering the last year of his contract. And he knows if he doesn't make the playoffs in at least one of those three years he won't get his contract renewed.

Wally So?

Bryan I bet he figured if he sneaked in last year, then he still had a little room to manoeuvre when negotiating his extension.

Wally Extension? There's no way he's getting an extension.

Bryan But if he sneaked into the playoffs he might have. Now he has to make the playoffs this year. That's why he's trading all those draft picks. What's a draft pick to a guy who might not be around when the player develops? He's desperate to keep his job. And you know what they say about desperate people?

Jacob *(eyes JFJ, waist area)* I thought they only said that about your shoe size. Is it desperation too?

Bryan What? No. Desperate people do desperate things.

Jacob So what you are saying is that John Ferguson Junior's ambition has lead him to desperation?

Bryan Thus Toskala

Wally And Bell. And Antropov. And Yanic.

Jacob *(looks at JFJ)* Ambition to the point of delusion.

Wally How else can you explain Toskala?

Jacob Is this true John Ferguson Junior?

JFJ writes on pad

Wally "I can't confirm or deny this."

Bryan So you see, no matter what you say, you can't help him. He is his own demise. You might as well get him out here now. It's pointless. Isn't that right John Ferguson Junior?

JFJ writes on pad

Wally "I can't confirm or deny this."

Bryan So what now? How are you getting him out of here?"

Wally I'm... not... sure.

Jacob We sort of thought he'd be so happy with our ideas that we could just let him go.

Bryan I don't think that's feasible.

Wally and Jacob stare dumbfounded at each other. The door is kicked in startling Bryan, Wally and Jacob. A man quickly enters and closes the door. He's a shorter man, in his fifties – wearing a humphrey-bogart-casablanca-ish wardrobe.

Mike Gentlemen

Wally Who are you?

Mike My name is Mike from the Ontario Teacher's Pension Plan.

Jacob Owner of our beloved Toronto Maple Leafs?

Mike The very same.

Wally We were going to give him back.

Jacob We weren't going to do anything bad to him. Honest.

Mike You boys have done a great job. You have served Leaf Nation well. We too at the Pension don't care for John Ferguson Junior either.

Wally Really? Why not just fire him?

Mike Because if we did, we would still have to pay him for the year. We don't like paying people for doing no work. After all we are teachers – the most overworked profession in town.

Jacob I thought prostitution was the most overworked profession in town. Especially when A-Rod is in town.

Mike Silence!

A pause

Mike As I said we don't like spending money on people who are just sitting at home collecting a cheque. It goes against the motto of the Teacher's Pension Plan: "Make as much money as possible".

 So you see, we are forced to pay him for next year no matter where he is employed. However there is a loop hole.

Wally Use the loophole then.

Mike We don't have to pay him if he is dead. Dead bodies don't receive a paycheque. Besides we need that money to complete the Bell Canada purchase. Can't let Telus have it. Teachers deserve more money. They put up with a lot of suffering over the years.

Jacob Try being a Leaf fan. That's what suffering is all about.

Mike removes a gun from his overcoat.

Mike Gentlemen who would like to do the honour?

Neither man steps forward

Mike Wouldn't you like to give him two-in-the-head for all the pain and sufferer he gave you this winter. Giving McCabe his no-trade clause. Trading a top prospect for Raycroft. Trading for Yanic Perrault. Signing Antropov to an outrageous deal. Missing out on Esposito by trading for a 4th liner and a backup goalie. An overpaid 4th liner to boot. Then today, giving the backup goalie 4 million dollars per year!

 Come'on just a little point and click. Just like Nintendo Duck Hunt. Point and click.

Neither man accepts

Mike Gentlemen you disappoint me. You've gone to all of this trouble of kidnapping the general manager of the Toronto Maple Leafs yet you won't complete your destined mission. No worries. I'll just have to do it myself. Then kill each of you next.

A scrum ensues between Mike, Wally and Jacob. A shot is heard. Wally and Jacob step back. Mike drops his gun. He has been shot. They all look back stage to see Bryan holding a smoking gun. Mike has been shot in the chest yet his isn't dead. He staggers towards the door. Bryan shoots again. This time in the bum. Mike drops to the ground dead.

Wally You shot him in the chest and it didn't kill him. You shoot him in the bum and he drops dead. I don't get it.

Jacob First shot was at his heart but the Ontario Teacher's Pension Plan doesn't have a heart.

Remember after the lockout when all the teams wanted to lower ticket prices - they wanted to raise Leaf ticket prices to recover some of the lost revenue from the lockout. No heart.

Wally Pure greed too.

Jacob That's why the next shot worked. It went through his wallet. That will kill them every time.

Bryan is untying JFJ

Wally Why, why do have a gun?

Bryan I'm a Senators fan living in Toronto. I need protection.

Wally looks down at the body.

Wally Good aim.

Bryan Actually I closed my eyes and shot.

Jacob Just like Alfredsson!

Wally And if he had closed his eyes and caught the bullet?

Jacob He'd be like Lalime!

Wally Remember that horrible Game 7 he had?

Jacob That was great.

Wally and Jacob laugh but quickly realise the dead body in the room problem. JFJ is untied and stands.

JFJ You saved my life. I had a feeling they were after me – with the Bell merger and everything. Thank you. Is there anything I can do for you? Autographs, tickets, money? Just name it.

All three look scared.

JFJ Don't worry I'm not going to press charges. You saved my life. Seriously, name it and it is yours.

Wally Please don't tell anyone.

JFJ Don't worry like I said, no charges.

Wally No I mean don't tell anyone period. If word spread that we saved your life, we'd end up like Mike here.

Jacob For sure.

JFJ Deal. And you?

Bryan Can you help me not go to jail for this?

JFJ I am every bit comfortable that this never happened. *(He picks up his cell phone and makes a call)*. Yep it's JFJ, it's happened again.

He hands the phone to Bryan.

JFJ Just tell him your address. He'll be here shortly to dispose of the body. *(Bryan obeys)*.

Wally But how will it work?

JFJ Boys, I didn't become General Manager of the Toronto Maple Leafs by my ability to build a contender. I think you've outlined that pretty well tonight.

Jacob and Wally stare dumbfounded

JFJ Let me ask you this. When did you find out about Tie Domi's affair with Belinda Stronach? After he retired right?

They nod their heads.

JFJ Yeah, exactly.

JFJ grabs his cell phone and makes a call.

JFJ It's John Ferguson Junior here.

Wally Are you saying you covered up the affair?

JFJ I can't confirm or deny that.

Walks over body and towards door.

JFJ How much is Yashin asking? 4 million? LA is interested too? How about if I offer five, would that do it? No, don't worry about the cap. *(starts leaving)* I'm working on a trade. McCabe? No. Kubina? *(exits stage)* No. I think I can get Eric Lindros from Dallas for Thomas Kaberle and all of my 2010 picks. That will shed the salary for Yashin to play here. What? I can't confirm or deny that.

Wally Why didn't we kill him when we had the chance?

Bryan Why didn't you take the million dollars?

Jacob What's the point? With a million dollars we couldn't even afford Leaf season tickets.

Wally Better start saving for a Yashin jersey.

Curtain Falls

END OF PLAY