

INSIDE THE COMA OF WAYNE MORSE

A Fantasy Inspired by Real Events

© 2008 by Steven A Lyons
revision 4/08/2009

980 Middlefield Road • Berkeley • CA • 94708
510-704-8855 • salyons@playcafe.org

It will devastate two countries.

It will topple the president of the United States.

It will kill two million people.

And one man will try to stop it before it begins.

INSIDE THE COMA OF WAYNE MORSE

Characters: Wayne Morse Male, 65 - 75 yo
Daniel Doyle Male, 20 - 30 yo
Nurse Female, black, 40 - 50 yo
Mrs. Morse Female, 60 - 70 yo
Jessie Doyle Female 25 - 35 yo
William Fulbright Male, 40 - 45 yo
Lyndon Johnson Male, 60 yo
Robert McNamara Male, 40 - 45 yo
Doris Female, 30 - 40 yo
Voice #1 Male, 25 - 45 yo
Voice #2 Female, black, 40 - 50 yo
The Dead:
Non-speaking parts for four, cast from doubling (see below).

Note: For production - minimum cast of 9. 6 males, 3 females.
Doubling for production:
Nurse / Voice #2
Doris / Mrs. Morse / dead
Lyndon Johnson / dead
William Fulbright / dead
Voice #1 / dead

For reading – minimum cast of 7.
Doubling for reading (No “dead” are required.):
Mrs. Morse / Jessie Doyle / Doris
Nurse / Voice #2
Lyndon Johnson / William Fulbright.

The voices come out on stage when speaking. The characters interact with these voices not as physical beings, but strictly as voices. Sometimes the voices are indicated in the script as “Voice.” Other times, the name of the person that the voice is speaking for is used.

Synopsis: Wayne Morse was one of two Senators to vote against the Gulf of Tonkin resolution in 1964, which gave Lyndon Johnson the authority to invade Vietnam. Now, 1974, Wayne Morse is close to death. He and a newborn baby struggle with life and death as the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident invades the coma of Wayne Morse. The senate hearing in the play is based on highly edited transcripts from the August 6, 1964 senate hearing on the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution. Other source material includes speeches taken from the Congressional Record, recordings of phone presidential conversations, a televised speech of LBJ, and a television interview with Wayne Morse.

Date: July 22, 1974
Time: 10 am
Setting: The ICU of Good Samaritan Hospital in Portland, Oregon. Medical equipment. Wayne Morse, barely visible under sheets, is in hospital bed. Mrs. Morse is at his side, asleep in a chair.

(moment)

(NURSE enters)

NURSE

Mrs. Morse. Mrs. Morse?

MRS. MORSE

(awakening) Oh, oh, Yes?

NURSE

I'm sorry. We're bringing in another patient. Would you mind stepping out for a while?

MRS. MORSE

Of course.

NURSE

It will just be a few minutes.

(NURSE helps MRS. MORSE)

You must be exhausted dear. Why not go home and get some rest for a few hours? We'll call if his condition changes.

MRS. MORSE

Thank you. You're right. I'll go home for a bit. Thank you.

(MRS. MORSE exits)

NURSE

(to Wayne Morse, while preparing room)

You are one lucky duck to have such a woman. You don't deserve her, and she sure as hell don't deserve the likes of you.

If you survive this thing, which you won't, but if you do, I'm voting for Packwood. And I'm telling everyone I know to do the same. Defeat your ass. Why drag that sweet lady to Washington again? That's no life. Freezing cold. Back stabbing people. Give her a home life for once.

(NURSE brings in gurney with Mrs. Doyle on it)

There we go Mrs. Doyle. Hope the ride down wasn't too rough.

MRS. DOYLE

I'm okay.

NURSE

You a little groggy?

MRS. DOYLE

I'm okay.

NURSE

That will wear off shortly, then I'll be back to give you something to help with the pain.

MRS. DOYLE

My baby?

NURSE

He's fine. He's great. Such a doll. We'll bring him in soon.

MRS. DOYLE

So he's okay?

NURSE

Everything went fine. They just have him under the UV lights down at the nursery. Standard procedure.

MRS. DOYLE

I want to see him.

NURSE

Of course dear. Real soon.

And from your chart it seems that Mr. Doyle...

MRS. DOYLE

Doesn't exist.

NURSE

Right. Never hurts to ask. You'll be getting a private room later today. But for now afraid you'll have to share a room with Wayne Morse.

MRS. DOYLE

The senator?

NURSE

The former senator, yes. But don't worry, he's in a coma.

MRS. DOYLE

A coma? But I'm voting for him in November.

NURSE

I really think you should reconsider. Packwood's a much better choice.

MRS. DOYLE

Bob Packwood? I've never voted for a Republican in my life.

NURSE

Mrs. Morse doesn't want to go back to Washington, DC. She needs a rest.

MRS. DOYLE

Oh, I see. Okay, I'll vote for Packwood.

NURSE

Thanks, dear.

MRS. DOYLE

Is he going to be all right? Gee, I would love to talk with him when he comes out of it.

NURSE

That might be difficult. First, I have seen this thing before, and no one comes out of it. Second, you don't exactly talk "with" Wayne Morse. It's more like he talks and you listen.

MRS. DOYLE

(yawns)

NURSE

There now. Get some rest. You and... what's your baby's name?

MRS DOYLE

Daniel.

NURSE

You and Daniel have had a rough 20 hour labor. C Section is hard on both the mommy and baby.

(DANIEL, played by male, 20-30yo, falls down from the sky (if flyspace allows) or otherwise magically appears. He is dressed in a parachuter's outfit, complete with parachute pack on his back and goggles. He is on a raised platform or a harness. He swings around on the harness about ten feet above the floor. Perhaps a fan blows up at him to suggest falling through the air. He is slightly behind the beds, so the occupants of the beds can not see him without turning around.)

DANIEL

EEEEOWWWWW!! BABY!

NURSE

You both need your rest.

DANIEL

Rest hell, I been resting for eight months !!

NURSE

A premature baby like Daniel needs to be watched carefully. But we'll bring him down in a bit and see if he'll take a breast.

DANIEL

I'll take three or four, thanks. I'm starving.

NURSE

Try to get some sleep, Mrs. Doyle. We'll wake you.

DANIEL

Sleep? What about chow time?

(NURSE exits)

Mom? Mom?

(MRS. DOYLE gets comfortable and closes her eyes. She does not hear Daniel.)

Mom, come and get me out of this incubator down here in the nursery.

(pause)

I've got some questions for you about this whole thing. Mom?

I liked the womb. A lot. Mom, can you hear me?

Could we go back to the womb part? That was just fine, but this...

Mom, up here. We gotta talk. I feel like I'm falling. It's scary.

(Notices other bed and patient. Turns his attention to Wayne Morse. He swings close to Morse.)

Hello?

(MORSE leaps from bed, startled)

MORSE

What!?!

DANIEL

Can we talk?

MORSE

Who are you?

DANIEL

I'm Daniel. I was born this morning at 5 AM. That is my mother, Jessie Doyle.

MORSE

What! I'm not in a private room?

DANIEL

We're all in this private room together.

So, the scuttlebutt in the nursery is that this is it. No more womb. That true?

MORSE

I really should be in a private room. Where's Midge?

Who's Midge? DANIEL

My wife. MORSE

Haven't seen her. DANIEL

What they say there in the nursery... MORSE

Yes? DANIEL

It's true. No more womb. This is it. MORSE

And this feeling like I'm falling. What's that? DANIEL

Life. MORSE

I really get this sense that I'm falling! DANIEL

You are. MORSE

This is life? Falling? DANIEL

Yes. MORSE

Gives me a crazy feeling in my tummy. I'm not sure if I like this. Will I get use to it? DANIEL

No. Yes. Maybe. MORSE

Wooooah! Does this falling ever stop? DANIEL

Yes. MORSE

When? DANIEL

When you hit the ground. MORSE

DANIEL

That's it? That's life? Falling and falling and then you hit the ground?

MORSE

Yes.

DANIEL

Oh.

Are you sure?

MORSE

Yes.

DANIEL

Is there... anything...

MORSE

You can do about it? Sure. See that cord?

DANIEL

This cord?

MORSE

Yes. That's called a rip cord. It releases a parachute. It will stop your fall.

DANIEL

Great - thanks.

(DANIEL begins to pull cord)

MORSE

NO! Wait! Not now. When you need it. It may be decades before you need to pull that cord. Just leave that be for now.

DANIEL

Okay.

So, who are you?

MORSE

My name is Wayne Morse. I was Oregon's Senator for many years. Lost my senate seat in '68 but I'm running for reelection. Or I was. This coma is really messing up my plans.

DANIEL

What are you doing here?

MORSE

Hitting the ground, I think.

DANIEL

Oh.

May I ask you something?

Certainly. MORSE

Is it worth it? DANIEL

Is what worth it? MORSE

Life. DANIEL

Ummmm. What are your other options at this point? MORSE

Well, let's say you had other options. Would you do it again? Life, I mean. DANIEL

Never thought about it. But, well, I'm not sure. Maybe. MORSE

You aren't sure? DANIEL

Well, life isn't always fair. People aren't always kind. And frankly, lots of things don't make sense. MORSE

So you wouldn't do it over again? DANIEL

No, guess not. But that's not the same as saying I'm sour on the first go round, I'm just saying I would have to think hard before doing it all over again. If some angel said, "I'm giving you another 75 years," I probably wouldn't sign up. MORSE

Is that why you don't pull your cord? DANIEL

Cord? MORSE

On your parachute. DANIEL

Oh. Oh that. Well, I guess I already pulled the cord. In 1951. MORSE
I'll tell you something. In 1951 I was kicked in the head by a horse. I came close to dying. It was a very serious injury. But I pulled the cord. I fought. I fought for life, I needed to live. I wanted to live. Why? I'm not afraid of dying now. I wasn't afraid of dying back then. But I was afraid of

all the stuff I would miss. I had three little girls at home, and I wanted to see how things would turn out for them. And I would have missed Midge something horrible. I'll still miss her.

But in 1951, you know what I was going to miss the most? The future! I didn't want to die because World War II had just ended and a new age was dawning. This is what we had been fighting for!

We were on the threshold of a new era in nearly every facet of our lives. I'll tell you, 1951 was no time to die.

DANIEL

What's World War II?

MORSE

Well, "war" is when--

DANIEL

No. I know what war is. I wasn't born yesterday.

MORSE

(pause) You made a joke.

DANIEL

I did?

MORSE

Yes! Did you do that on purpose?

DANIEL

A joke requires an element of the unexpected. For something to be unexpected, one needs a history with what is expected. Since I just got here, I have no history. *Ergo* I cannot make a joke.

I mean, that wouldn't make sense.

MORSE

(long pause as he stares at Daniel and takes this in)

World War II was a war that involved nearly the entire world during the 1940s.

DANIEL

Oh.

So if you had the option of being born or not, you would suggest that a person not be born right now?

MORSE

Look, these are very difficult questions. You really should be talking to your mother.

DANIEL

I tried, but...

MORSE

But what?

DANIEL

She's not in a coma.

MORSE

Comas do open the input channels, I admit.

Oh, that's ridiculous. You've got to be able to wake her.

DANIEL

I tried.

MORSE

Well, let me have a go at it.

(MORSE approaches Mrs. Doyle)

Excuse me... Ah...

DANIEL

Mrs. Doyle

MORSE

Excuse me Mrs. Doyle. Your son Daniel is here and wants to ask you questions about life.

(pause)

Mrs. Doyle?... What's her first name again?

DANIEL

Jessie.

MORSE

Really? That was my mother's name too.

Jessie? Hello?

Oh, it's no use. No one listens to you if you're in a coma.

DANIEL

Well, thanks for trying. I don't know if I can talk to her anyway. I need the straight poop. She might be too emotionally involved. She'd just tell me everything is swell. I need you to tell me the real story.

MORSE

Look, I'll try.

DANIEL

So sounds like 1951 was really a much better time.

MORSE

The anticipation of what the future held was certainly more joyous.

In 1960, *Time Magazine* predicted that by the 1976 bicentennial, pollution would be a thing of the past because of the elaborate public transportation system.

Hunger? Bah! I remember *Time* predicted that improvements in agriculture would make food so plentiful and cheap that hunger would be unheard of by 1968.

It was American ingenuity that won World War II. So after the war we were going to make education a top priority. From now on we were going to fund education with the same fervor that we had funded the military. Free education - kindergarten through college. Imagine the excitement. We were gonna create a country of unheard of intellectual wealth.

DANIEL

Did any of this...?

MORSE

(shakes his head "no")