

S.W.I.M.
Someone Who Isn't Me

written by

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Fade up to a dimly lit hotel room, Cannes Film Festival. In the distance we hear the sound of seagulls followed by splashing waves. As the lights keep rising, PENN ULSTER is finally seen standing center stage dressed in nothing but a pair of tight underwear. His arms are now clasped across his chest with each arm gripping the opposite shoulder, as though his fit body is being exposed. He faces the audience, staring out into the ocean of faces, as if looking out to sea. In the background is an opened carry-on luggage filled with unfolded clothes laying on the hotel bed. A multi-layered voice over and projection mapping flash throughout the stage. Penn occasionally holds his head in agony as he listens to the voices:

(ALPHA V.O.)

You're a loser. Pervert. You can't do anything right. You're fat, you need to lose weight. You're such an idiot. Dumb. Your career is dying. You should get laid. You look old. You ain't got no real friends.

The voice over and video images are interrupted by the sound of crashing waves. PENN steps forward as we hear gentle waves and PENN's voice as the next voiceover.

PENN (PENN'S V.O.)

(reflective)

A body of water occupying two-thirds of a world made for a man who has no gills - eventually drowns. At least that's what Alpha would say. And I say, what's the point of jumping into the water at all? Why bother, just let it submerge you to a quiet death. After all we've been thrown into a world we didn't ask for. Demanding us to sink or swim...

The sound of the soft bay waves continue.

PENN (PENN'S V.O.) (CONT'D)

...and then to have a consciousness who watches our demise... it's just-

ALPHA

(off stage)

-Penn!

PENN stops and listens with scrutiny. There is no response. Then kneels down placing his forearm on his knee still looking outward.

PENN (PENN'S V.O.)

Imagine you're stuck in a shrinking boat, while everyone you care about lives outside of it. You want to get out, you wanna even stand up, but can't seem to move.

Then your mind tells you to do nothing, what's the point its all closing in on you anyway. I'll go out to the bay, step in slowly, until it covers my throat, my face, inhale the water as deeply as I can. This, they say, will drown you fairly quickly and with a lot less anguish than just holding your breath until the very last moment.

There is the sound of a thump off stage. The sound of the waves begin to subside. Penn is startled, and speaks in his own words.

Ian? Is that you, Ian?

Silence. Penn goes back to contemplation.

PENN (PENN'S V.O.) (CONT'D)

(distant)

I guess Alpha's right, I'm consciously unconscious -living in my head where even the silence speaks, loud and clear-

ALPHA (IN THE WINGS)

Penn Ulster!

PENN (PENN'S V.O.)

It's never humble, it's sometimes honest, always harsh- bordering on persecution:

(mocking)

You can't, you should, you won't, you ain't shit-

ALPHA walks in wearing a towel. He somewhat dances about looking for something at the same time getting dressed.

ALPHA

Yo, Penn! You ready yet?

PENN (PENN'S V.O.)

(pensive)

It's mental masochism.

ALPHA hears PENN's thoughts.

ALPHA

Masochism? Like being choked out and gagged speechless?

PENN continues to be reflective.

PENN (PENN'S V.O.)

And when I do open my mouth I just wanna scream. But, to what end?

ALPHA

Dayuum, that's hot man! But, ain't it great to be alive, though? I'm bout to git it in, while I still can -cuz the endgame is near bruh-

PENN snaps out of his gaze and speaks to Alpha.

PENN

-Oh, sorry Alpha, -I spaced out a bit -I uh, thought I heard Ian coming in the door earlier. -I'm moving so damn slow today, while life's fast forwarding-

ALPHA

-Kinda like we inna a simulation or somethin'-

PENN

-But in real time-

ALPHA

-Decisions made in real time are not always perfect. -Every secok'd-Imma be k-i-l-l-i-n' it tonight though-

PENN

-And they're out there killing themselves thinking that I'm a damn murderer-

ALPHA

-Sshii... wha-chu think they'd think of me?-

PENN

-I don't want to think about it-

PENN tries to get dressed, while ALPHA fumbles through the same luggage.

ALPHA

-Yeah, too much thinking can really kill the moment. Sometimes the worst place to be is in your head... feel me?.

PENN

Or here at this film festival.

ALPHA

-Whaa, you know you wanna hear: *And the winner for best director goes to... Penn Ulster.* And the crowd goes wild... rrrraahhhrrrr! Gettin' invited to all the hot parties, with all dem hot, sexy-

PENN

-From your mouth to God's ear.

ALPHA

Don't confuse fake accolades with your moral responsibility.

PENN

Oh I'm not. These awards mean nothing, I don't deserve it. After all these years, it still seems like life's closing in on me.

ALPHA

-And the years are showin' all over your face- look at-chu man- you getting old-

PENN

Oh, thanks Alpha ... well...

ALPHA (CONT'D)

Well.. you know, I'm just sayin...

PENN (CONT'D)

The thought of it always bothers me, especially today, it still eats away at me like... maggots on my decaying flesh.

ALPHA stealthily pulls out a phone from the luggage.

ALPHA

And you got away with it.

PENN

Did I really?

ALPHA

Oh, please, you're alive... right?

PENN

Barely-

ALPHA

-Barely? C'mon man, if the tables were turned it'll be a different story-

ALPHA attempts to conceal the phone while positioning it to record.

PENN

-Alpha, if the thoughts don't strangle me to death, the guilt will-

ALPHA

-Nobody can send you on a guilt trip without your permission, as long as you keep it to yourself, you-good.

PENN

Oh yeah, no, I mean, I could never talk to anybody freely about this...

ALPHA

Cuz you ain't got no real friends, man. Real talk-

PENN

-I have Ian-

ALPHA

-And you trust him?-

PENN

-Of course! And he was with me when it happened-

ALPHA

Yo man, Ian's out here living his best life, he ain't even thinkin' bout it -unlike you-

Alpha wears his most provocative outfit.

ALPHA (CONT'D)

I'm definitely gonna get some tonight with this on...

ALPHA pops the belt.

...or maybe I should wear the snakeskin belt.

PENN

Right.

ALPHA

Why you say it like that?

ALPHA wraps the belt around his own neck.

Snakeskin belt reminding you of somethin'?

PENN

Come on man! Don't be an asshole!

ALPHA

Whaa? I'm just sayin'

PENN

Oh um, yeah...I guess you're right- Ian's not thinking about what happened at all. Unlike me, where it's a slow death.

ALPHA

Hmm, but...

Snaps his fingers.

ALPHA (CONT'D)

...just like that... another black man is dead.

Sound of gun cocking. PENN stammers to maintain stability holding the gun under his chin.

Oh shit, yo!... Wha' da hella you doin' man... Penn, yo-

PENN
 -It was 10 years ago! -I was
 in college and it was an
 accident-

ALPHA (CONT'D)
 -Ok, ok, look, I feel you
 man, easy...just give me the
 gun-

PENN (CONT'D)
 I didn't mean to kill him-

ALPHA (CONT'D)
 -Ok, ok, I hear you...c'mon
 man.

ALPHA gets closer and PENN manages to shove him away.

PENN (CONT'D)
 Those bastards are all out to get me. You're right, I don't
 have any real friends. After graduation I gave to every one
 of their campaigns, every cause, every damn crusade possible,
 and now I'm left out in the wind, -because it doesn't fit
 their political image? One slip up from the cult of power,
 and you're pushed to the margins, demonized. I paid my dues
 to society-I did my time man. I'm off probation and all of
 that shit's behind me now. And who knows if this film will
 ever get me in good standings again, anyway. But what I do
 know is...(pause) -Look, me and the guy, Jamar, we'd, you
 know... PNP, party and play... you know, slave play, piss
 play, Daddy-son,-whatever. But it was our like... special
 thing we did, you know, together.

PENN points the gun at ALPHA.

PENN (CONT'D)
 I guess, you gravitate toward
 people who've got something
 to give you and you've got
 something they need. Right?
 And now everyone has turned
 this whole thing into a race
 thing.

ALPHA
 Hey! Yo...
 -Ok
 -hey ok...
 -Ok.

PENN aims the gun back at himself.

PENN (CONT'D)
 And so what if he -made a
 little money on the side
 while doing it -completely
 not what it was all about
 though.

ALPHA (CONT'D)
 Oh...iight...iight... Ok... I
 git it, I git it, ok, you
 made your point man. C'mon.

PENN (CONT'D)
 He saw me for me! -I'm so damn tired of all the finger
 pointing...

PENN looks away and mumbles to himself.

*ALPHA grabs PENN's hand with the gun in it. They fall,
 then roll onto the floor. The gun falls and slides.*

They wrestle with each other, then they dash for the gun. ALPHA gets there first and grabs the gun. They are disheveled and out of breath.

ALPHA

You're a fuckin' loser...

ALPHA stands up. PENN remains on his knees.

PENN

Go ahead...

ALPHA

Why is it, I gotta always be the one tryin' to get the jump on being killed first in this world, man?

PENN

Go on, do it while you still can.

ALPHA

Murderer of the innocent, huh? And then you go suicidal to get the jump on being judged... that's deep'...I look at it like this -suicide is somethin' that...

ALPHA places the gun in PENN's mouth.

ALPHA (CONT'D)

...somebody can commit in the same way somebody, - linguistically speaking, commits a crime. Nam I'm sayin'. So you a basic bitch ass criminal, part of a long list of basic bitch ass muthafuckas that get away with murder, and shit.

PENN attempts to mouth the words with the barrel in his mouth.

PENN

(inaudible)

Go on, please just pull the trigger, Alpha.

ALPHA

Ga'head, try to speak clearly when a gun's shoved between your damn lips, every second of the day, bruh! Cuz all I hear right now is moans and groans, nigga. So, check it, suicide ain't nothin' but self-murder. And you da real enemy, cuz there ain't none outside of yourself in this whole thing, feel me?

ALPHA pulls the gun out of PENN's mouth and walks to the bed. He shoves the gun into the luggage.

PENN manages to get up.

PENN

I realize I'm not really afraid of dying. -Actually, I'm afraid I haven't been alive at all.

ALPHA

Ah man, nothin' you do seems to have any real consequences.

PENN

Do you know I'm in pain every time I breathe, do you Alpha, -do you?

ALPHA

For about 10-years, now.

PENN

Swim.

ALPHA

More random thoughts. What are mumbling about now?

PENN

Swim is an acronym for someone who isn't me.

ALPHA

Someone who isn't me?... That's like doin' dirt and then throwing' the shit under the rug by sayin' well someone who isn't me did it. Swim.

PENN

No, swim is a declaration. A way to understand I can be better than I am. Look...I have a habit of living in my art and never in my life. So I'm always looking for the best version of myself, and when I fall short, which is more times than I can count, I push it off on swim. Someone who isn't me.

ALPHA

Well... who ever the hell you are right now bruh, that's the one that needs to git yo ass up outta of here early before the press comes banging' on this door. -Plus I get to pick and choose what's on my sexual menu tonight-

PENN

-Someone who isn't me is what these damn protesters-

ALPHA

-Oh c'mon man wit all that shit...

PENN

I am not who these crazy ass protesters painted me out to be: A racist monster that they can attack every single day...Stopping me in my tracks like a deer in headlights, I can't even move, can't breathe, just 3 seconds away from my death. Counting down three, two-

ALPHA

-Yeah well, you managed to make it here though. The Cannes Island Film Festival. Ooolala.

PENN (PENN'S V.O.)

Sure, what does that really mean anyway...

ALPHA

Well, it means you've finally outside, connecting with real people for once. And you ain't had none in years- sshii - which I think is another form of suicide. -But tonight, you gonna get lucky yo- I know it'-I feel it -you have to...let's go!

PENN

Alpha, sex is the last thing on my mind.

ALPHA

Are you serious right now?

PENN (PENN'S V.O.)

-There's a war going on inside me, and there's no sign of cease fire.

PENN attempts to drink a glass of Vodka on ice. ALPHA removes the glass from PENN's hand and heard ALPHA's thoughts.

ALPHA

Hey! Hey!... And yet, Someone who isn't me or SWIM as you call it -is another reason why we can't have a realistic conversation...

Alternates holding up two and three fingers.

ALPHA (CONT'D)

...How many fingers am I holding up-

PENN

-I'm sorry I can't see without my...

PENN takes the glass of vodka back.

PENN (CONT'D)

...glass-es... You know that's the only thing keeping me going. -Or killing us both.

ALPHA

Say what bruh? Look, how are we supposed to get to those deep underlying issues?

PENN

I bury myself in work and somehow hope for the best.

ALPHA

Hope is another fantasy yo. But since you like living in make believe, image this: you're waking up to someone that makes you feel blissful, liberated. Looking into his eyes and feelin' so vulnerable that he can lift you up outta the depths of hell. Being so deeply into him, real deep and watchin' 'em from his own eyes? Feelin' every single emotion all at once- even the way his hair brushes against your lips, can turn total chaos into complete order...

PENN

(hesitant)

Yeah, well that sounds way too intimate.

ALPHA

That's the point. I had that once, and I lost it... I'm sure you remember.

PENN

They, that's not my experience... the guy was a hustler, ok... we both had an understanding. And for sex to really be exciting for us sometimes there was drugs, risks...

ALPHA

Yeah... But the guy is dead. That's a perversion, man. He sounded more like a social worker than a sex worker.

PENN

He was good at what he did ok, that's it... -Look, it wasn't my intention-

ALPHA

-When you stop victim shaming the marginalized, we can actually use your voice for somethin', but until then just stop and let's go!

He heads toward the door.

PENN

I said it was an accident.

ALPHA

But you did it, right?

PENN

This is unreal. Are you listening to me? I said it was a fucking accident!

ALPHA

Wait... who'da hell you think you're talkin' too like that, man?

ALPHA opens the door to the distant sounds of an angry mob.

ALPHA (CONT'D)

...Ya hear that?

Protesters in the distance shout to cancel Penn Ulster. "Oh no, hell no, Penn Ulster has got to go" "He's part of a system that allows the murder of sex workers to go free!"

ALPHA (CONT'D)

You can save all that noise for the crowd of protesters out there tryin' to stop your movie, your career and your life.

PENN rushes over and closes the door.

PENN

I can't do this- I just can't face another firing squad. These people are trigging the fuck outta me, right now.

ALPHA

Ya know the Mexican film director, Emilio Fernandez? He used to kill da critics that didn't like his movies. I'm sure ya can find some thrill in that too. Let's get outta here, now.

PENN glances at the luggage, where the gun is hidden.

PENN

Are you suggesting?-

ALPHA

I'm not suggesting shit, man... But what I am sayin' is you got less than 5 minutes to git-cho ass up outta this hotel room, git yo little fancy award, get your rocks off, hopefully, and pray to yo' God, your career is not completely over.

Phone rings. PENN looks around for it and notices the phone positioned with the camera recording. PENN walks over and declines the call. They stare at each like two gunfighters ready to draw.

ALPHA rushes and grabs the phone out of PENN's hand.

PENN

Wait, were you recording me?

ALPHA stares in disbelief.

ALPHA

No...wha...I...I mean... Yo you crazy man.

PENN

You were recording me?

ALPHA

I was just trynna ...you know... make a point.

PENN

What point would you be making by recording our conversation?

ALPHA

-Oh, I dunno... capture the essence of the moment...you know, just in case you ever decided to record me too, without my permission, drug me, tie me up, fuck, and strangle me - it would all be right here-

PENN

-Alpha, I deleted all those videos-

ALPHA

-All except this one. -Showin' how clearly mentally stable you are and with a confessional no less-

PENN

-What the, why... what are doin'?-

ALPHA

-Oh, I dunno... maybe I'll edit the footage into a short film and submit it to next year's Cannes Film Festival, who knows...

PENN chases ALPHA.

PENN

Give me my phone.

ALPHA

I'm sorry Penn I can't-

PENN

-Alpha give me the damn phone!

ALPHA

Why should I give you anything? You' ain't give me nothin' but grief, and guilt, and shame.

PENN

(to self)

-Fuck!... Why am I doing this to myself, especially on this day? Why all the fucking head games? Do I despise myself that much?

ALPHA

Well, it started out kinda like a moral crusade and shit, but now, I'm not really sure 'cept for the fact that you don't want me to- Wait- that might be even hotter.

PENN and ALPHA continues the cat and mouse pursuit around the room and across the bed.

PENN

All you want to do is hook up... please, a moral crusade?...guess you've found God?/huh?-

ALPHA

-Nah we found each other.

PENN

-So you're religious now?-

ALPHA

-I ain't gotta be religious to have morals and shit, nam mean.-

PENN

-Didn't you once say God was dead?

ALPHA

-God knows. Plus, this was spontaneous and I didn't wanna waste time on God.

PENN

-Stop fuckin' playing with me-

ALPHA

-Who's playin'?

PENN

This is not real. -Its not real. -So this is what you do on the biggest fuckin' day of my life?

ALPHA

Oh shit... my bad, wait -should I hold on to the phone, hide it for another 10 years or whaa...?

PENN

I did my time you piece of shit! -Wait - calling you that - what's that say about me? If you're like...consciousness, or what ever you call it, what's wrong with me then?

ALPHA

C'mon Penn, we gravitate toward people who got somethin' to give you, and we've got somethin' they need, right?/That is what you said earlier, right?

PENN

Ah, this is not happening right now. I feel like crawling back into this damn hotel bed and sleeping for the next 10 years.

ALPHA

Besides gettin' an astronomical bill, maybe you'll wake up and see that its all bullshit anyway.

PENN

You forgot I can't see without my fuckin' glass-es? Give me my-

Phone rings. ALPHA accidentally drops the phone. They both charge for it. PENN gets it first.

ALPHA

As your consciousness -I'm suggesting... -say hello!

PENN

...Hello?

ALPHA

What.

PENN

What?

ALPHA

No. How?

PENN

Noooo. Oh no. How?

ALPHA

I'm sorry.

PENN

I'm so sorry.

PENN's face is in shock and starts to crumble. After a beat ALPHA eventually speaks.

ALPHA

Hang up.

PENN tosses the phone on the bed, defeated.

ALPHA (CONT'D)

That phone call was about Ian, right? Hung himself on a snakeskin belt tied to the door hinge. Didn't you use a snakeskin belt with?...

Noooo!
 Hey...
 Why?... Why do we need to live this way?
 Hey man, I'm...
 -I just can't ... I don't even know what to say.
 I'm sorry.
 The death of the-
 -Innocent.
 I see we still have the same-
 -Thoughts at the same time.
 Like one can't do without the other.
 Like God and the devil?
 Like the lie and the truth, all at the same time.
 And livin' together in this world made mostly of water, we eventually will drown.
 Or we can swim. I have to... for Ian, because he couldn't...
 You know what I think?
 -I don't want to hear it, anymore.
 You get off trying to be a life guard -the rescuer.

PENN

No, I've become addicted to being rescued.—My crime was my shame for just loving...in secret. First Jamar, now Ian..

ALPHA

Do you mind if I make another comment?

PENN

Yes I would mind actually. What I would like to hear from you is an apology.

ALPHA

Apology? I said sorry earlier.

PENN

Earlier you offered condolences. This is an apology recognizing all my flaws and issues and yet allowing me to heal in my on time. A sincere apology saying: *I'm sorry, My bad, I thought this was my spiritual journey. As my conscience-*

ALPHA

Consciousness, there's a differece.

PENN

Consciousness, awareness, whatever... watching, observing my demise! Or my growth, or whatever you guys do. Why do you just leave me the fuck alone. Kink is my thing. It makes me feel free. I persecuted myself for years not wanting people to find that out. Then when I found someone who truly appreciated me for me, that was everything. Then I killed him. And I just couldn't connect with anyone else. Maybe they'd die too. Or worse, I'd somehow love again. You know, when I had sex with anyone else, it was SWIM. It was just someone who wasn't me...a zombie, caught between my heart and the image of what others would say.

PENN begins to undressed. ALPHA becomes suspicious while slowly removing his own clothes too.

ALPHA

Yo, man. What da hell are you doing? I thought we were going...

PENN

-Stop talking. Please just stop talking and judging, and dragging me through life and blaming me for every God damn thing! -How about saying I'm so sorry Penn for pretending to be beyond things and believing I'm so damn woke! Know who you are on this journey and yeah...sometimes I'll 'swim' and learn in my own time. Until then you continue to live in your own truth and power. And let me fucking live, Ok?

Ok. Swim. Do you. ALPHA

-I will. PENN

-Ok. ALPHA

-Ok. PENN

Radical Freedom. ALPHA

An opportunity. PENN

Fine. ALPHA

-Fine. PENN

I loved him. ALPHA

Wait, I really don't want to- PENN

The same way you loved Ian, that's the same way I loved- ALPHA

This is my- PENN

-I know, I know, this is your journey and your process. But my process is different. I didn't see him as a hustler at all. Behind the drugs and the other shit going on with him, I really saw *him*. ALPHA

Hey, when I said earlier that he saw me, I'm saying the same thing...I loved-,...you know... -I thought I could never say this out loud, based on how society views, you know...ah, whatever...I guess, survivors remorse. PENN

Yo...behind his eyes, I knew him too. It was like meeting 'someone who's actually me'. But as I became more edu-ma-cated, I was taught not to see, but to imagine. ALPHA

ALPHA (CONT'D)
 And through all that imaging,
 all I saw was fear. And fear
 of what I thought I knew, and
 couldn't recognize any more.
 But now, I saw right through
 all the bullshit.
 (adjusts)

PENN
 And through all that imaging,
 all I saw was fear. And fear
 of what I thought I knew, and
 couldn't recognize any more.
 But now, I saw right through
 all the bullshit.
 (adjusts)

*The phone rings. They look in the direction of the bed
 and don't move toward it. PENN takes off his underwear
 and puts on swimming trunks.*

PENN (CONT'D)
 Why were filming me earlier?

ALPHA
 So we can watch the bullshit together.

PENN
 We both need to get the hell outta here... and actually swim.

*ALPHA hesitates but removes his underwear then puts on
 swim trunks.*

ALPHA
 I'm not that good at it.

PENN
 Being 'someone who isn't me' or physically swimming?

ALPHA
 Both.

PENN
 It's ok, neither am I. But I gotchu bro.

ALPHA
 Bro, huh?

PENN
 Well, I'm trying to be myself.

ALPHA
 Baby steps, bro, baby steps. We got each other.

PENN
 That's all we got. Let's go.

PENN slams the luggage shut. He carries the luggage, and opens the door to the sound of protesters and ocean waves. They exit together. The phone continues to ring. Lights fade.

END.