

WHO KILLED THE TAX MAN?

By Thomas Hischak

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WHO KILLED THE TAX MAN?

A One Act Comedy

Loosely based on a tale from the Arabian Nights

By Thomas Hischak

SYNOPSIS: When the Woodcutter and his wife accidentally poison the Tax Man who has come to their cottage to collect, the couple panics and leaves the body outside the Doctor's house. The Doctor, thinking it is a patient who has died waiting for him, dumps the body in the garden of the blind Widow who thinks the man died after falling and hitting his head on a rock. The Widow has the body removed where it is discovered by a Thief. The Sheriff comes upon the scene and arrest the Thief but it will take some doing to find out who really killed the Tax Man.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

(5 females, 6 males, 1 either; 0-20 extras; gender flexible)

THIEF (m/f).....	Frustrated, naive. (31 lines)
TAX MAN (m).....	An imposing man. Mean, gruff, insulting. (18 lines)
WOODCUTTER (m).....	Big and strong, not too bright. (51 lines)
WOODCUTTER'S WIFE (f).....	Practical, shrill. (59 lines)
SON (m).....	Son to Woodcutter and Woodcutter's Wife. Curious, eager. (13 lines)
DOCTOR (m).....	Pompous, impatient. (49 lines)
DOCTOR'S WIFE (f).....	Frantic, equally impatient. (50 lines)
DAUGHTER (f).....	Daughter to Doctor's and Doctor's Wife. Haughty, self-centered. (18 lines)
WIDOW (f).....	Old, feeble but feisty. She can't see well. (34 lines)
BOY (m).....	Widow's son, not very bright. (28 lines)

GIRL (f)	Widow's daughter, smart. (29 lines)
SHERIFF (m).....	Self-important, verbose, likes the sound of his voice. Enjoys his exalted position and does his job with a flare. (49 lines)
TOWNSPEOPLE (m/f).....	Optional extras. (Non-Speaking)

DURATION: 30 minutes.

PRODUCTION NOTES

The play takes the form of a fairy tale with medieval costumes or clothes with a similarly “once upon a time” style. An open stage is used with a few furniture pieces and a movable door frame with a practical door that is used in different locations. The tone of the play is sarcastic and anachronistic.

SETTING

WOODCUTTER'S HOUSE – The kitchen consist of a rough-hewn table with three stools and the door leading to the outside.

DOCTOR'S HOUSE – The front yard represented by a bench is placed outside the door.

WIDOWS COTTAGE – The backyard represented by the door leading outside.

PATH TO GRAVEYARD & TOWN COURTYARD – Bare stage.

SOUND EFFECTS

- Loud Pounding at the Door
- Lively Music
- Rooster Crowing

PROPS

- Wooden Mug (WOODCUTTER'S WIFE)
- Two Bowls (WOODCUTTER'S WIFE)
- Various Ingredients (WOODCUTTER'S WIFE)
- Axe (WOODCUTTER)
- Gold and Silver Coins (TAX MAN)
- Fancy Sword (SHERIFF)
- Pair of Manacles with a Key (SHERIFF)
- Practical Door in a Movable Doorframe

COSTUMES

THIEF – Tattered beige shirt and pants, brown jacket and frayed hat, boots with toes sticking out.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE – Worn green dress, dirty white apron, black shoes; add faded green bonnet for last scene.

DOCTOR'S WIFE – Elaborate orange and black dress, black shoes; add orange and black bonnet for last scene.

DAUGHTER – Ridiculously fancy pink dress with frills, large pink bow in her hair, pink shoes.

WIDOW – Simple black dress (worn or patched) with white apron, black bonnet, black shoes.

GIRL – Worn but attractive yellow and brown dress, brown shoes.

TAX MAN – Fancy maroon coat and breeches, black cape, feathered hat, high boots. Sack of coins tied to his belt.

WOODCUTTER – Dark green worn tunic shirt, patched brown pants, worn brown boots.

SON – Light green tunic shirt, patched brown pants, barefoot.

DOCTOR – Elaborate black and gold jacket and matching breeches, black boots.

BOY – Worn white shirt, black pants with suspenders, silly red hat, barefoot.

SHERIFF – Fancy purple and gold jacket with matching breeches, wide thick belt, purple hat with feathers, high black boots.

TOWNSPEOPLE – Peasant clothes.

AT RISE: *The WOODCUTTER'S house, set up on one side of the stage. WOODCUTTER'S WIFE, sits at the table with a large wooden mug and various ingredients, putting them into the mug. On the opposite side of the stage, THIEF enters weary from walking.*

THIEF: *(To audience.)* Six miles! That's what the sign said. Six miles! Feels more like sixteen. And uphill most of the way. *(Flops down on the ground.)* Well, I hope I have better luck in this town than the last one. I'm starting to think I need vocational counseling. Here I've been a thief for nearly a month and I can't seem to make it pay. Everywhere I go people lock their doors at night. Maybe I should have been a locksmith. And no one seems to carry hard cash with them these days. It's all credit at the market, credit at the shops, credit everywhere. Even feeble old ladies don't carry cash. And gentlemen's watches now have chains on them! What's a poor thief to do? *(Gets up.)* Well, no use grousing about it. I've got to get to work. Maybe folks are different in this town. If not, I'll have to turn to highway robbery. Which will be difficult because I can't afford a pistol.

THIEF exits as WOODCUTTER enters with his axe and joins WOODCUTTER'S WIFE.

WOODCUTTER: What are you up to now, woman? What's all that stuff?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Ingredients, you big ape!

WOODCUTTER: Ingredients for what? There ain't no food in the house. As usual.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: It's to kill rats. I got a sack of cornmeal yesterday from the abbey and last night the rats ate it all. This will fix them!

WOODCUTTER: It smells something awful. What's in it?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: It's my grandmother's recipe. I'm trying to remember it. I should have wrote it down.

WOODCUTTER: What for? You can't read.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Neither can you, you giant lug. I know the leaf of hemlock is right but I can't remember if it's root of hickory or stem of burdock.

WOODCUTTER: Put them both in. The rats won't know the difference.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: I wish I had more barley. That's what attracts them, you see.

WOODCUTTER: I just see a foolish woman pretending she's an apothecary.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: None of your stupidity this morning! Get to work.

WOODCUTTER: Where's Junior? I want him to come with me today so he can learn woodcutting.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: What's to learn? You just cut wood.

WOODCUTTER: That's a woman for you. No business sense at all.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: With your woodcutting and your business sense we are starving to death!

SFX: A loud pounding at the door.

WOODCUTTER: What's that there?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Sounds like someone at the door, you genius you. Maybe it's the prince come asking to buy kindling for the palace.

SFX: A loud pounding at the door.

WOODCUTTER: What should we do?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: If you was smart, you might go and see who it is.

SFX: A loud pounding at the door.

TAX MAN: (*Offstage.*) Open up in the name of the Sheriff!

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: The Sheriff? Now what have you done?

WOODCUTTER: Me?

TAX MAN: (*Offstage.*) Open this door or I'll have to break it down!

WOODCUTTER: I better open the door.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Brilliant!

WOODCUTTER opens the door and the TAX MAN enters.

WOODCUTTER: Why you're the . . . !

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: It's the . . . !

TAX MAN: The Tax Man. How astute. It's that time of year again. Let's see . . . tax on one cottage –

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: It ain't a cottage. It's a hovel.

TAX MAN: One table. Three stools. Quite excessive, if you want my opinion. Two people . . . three stools . . . very excessive.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: We have a son.

TAX MAN: A son! Cottage for three occupants. That puts you in the middle class and a higher tax rate.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: But we've no money! We are, thanks to him (*Points to WOODCUTTER.*), starving to death.

TAX MAN: They all say that. Tax on one axe . . . more excess . . .

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: He needs an axe. He's a woodcutter! (*To WOODCUTTER.*) Say something, you fool!

WOODCUTTER: I'm a woodcutter. And this is my axe.

TAX MAN: Nice little income, woodcutters make these days.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Now the way he does it.

TAX MAN: Any livestock?

WOODCUTTER and WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: No.

TAX MAN: Any agriculturally propitious land?

WOODCUTTER: What?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: No.

TAX MAN: Pity. That puts you back in the lower class.

WOODCUTTER: Is that good?

TAX MAN: What about jewelry? Valuable art? Antique furniture?

WOODCUTTER and WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: No.

TAX MAN: That table looks late Dark Ages to me. Has it been appraised?

WOODCUTTER: I made it myself.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Can't you tell?

TAX MAN: I estimate your taxes to be seven gold coins, two silver pieces, and a brass farthing.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: But we have nothing!

TAX MAN: They all say that.

WOODCUTTER: (*To WOODCUTTER'S WIFE.*) What are we to do?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: We are ruined!

WOODCUTTER: I know. Let's bribe him with money.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: If we had money we wouldn't need to bribe him, idiot!

TAX MAN: It's been a tiring day. (*Sits on a stool.*) I hope you two aren't going to give me any trouble.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: We have nothing! Can't you understand that?

TAX MAN: I'm thirsty. You understand that? Have you any beer? Grog? Root beer even?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: No. We drink rain water. When it's not too muddy.

TAX MAN: What's that I smell? (*Sees mug.*) Ah! Holding out on me, are you? (*Takes mug and sniffs it.*) Grog! And by the smell of it, pretty powerful stuff. (*Starts to drink.*)

WOODCUTTER and WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: No!

TAX MAN: You two are starting to annoy me. (*Drinks the whole mug in a long series of gulps.*) Ahhh! (*Puts down the mug with a bang.*) Terrific stuff. If you two had half a brain you'd give up the woodcutting business and open a tavern –

TAX MAN stops, freezes, and dies without moving a muscle; a pause.

WOODCUTTER: Mr. Tax Man, sir . . . ?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Now look what you've done!

WOODCUTTER: Me? Whose grandmother's recipe was it?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: I guess I got it right.

WOODCUTTER: Do you think he'll be . . . all right?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Drank it all and left nothing for the rats.

WOODCUTTER: You mean he's . . . dead?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: This ain't no cat nap. Grandma's recipe always leaves them dead.

WOODCUTTER: We've killed the Tax Man!

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Now don't get carried away. We didn't kill anyone.

WOODCUTTER: You mean he's going to be all right?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: No, he's dead. But it was an accident.

WOODCUTTER: Accident? Who's going to believe that? The Tax Man comes to our house and gets poisoned to death. We'll be arrested! We'll be hung!

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: I wonder how much money he has on him.
(*Unties the coin sack from TAX MAN'S belt.*) Heavy.

WOODCUTTER: Murderers! And now thieves!

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Stop over reacting. (*Opening sack.*) Look at all these gold pieces!

SON enters.

SON: What's all the shouting about?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Your father is getting hysterical. Just a little accident.

SON: Who's this?

SON walks over and looks carefully at TAX MAN'S body.

WOODCUTTER: The Tax Man!

SON: He's out like a light. (*Shakes TAX MAN'S body a bit.*) And stiff as a board.

WOODCUTTER: He's dead! Poisoned by your mother's rat potion!

SON: (*To WOODCUTTER'S WIFE.*) Mom, you killed the Tax Man?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Do I look like a murderer?

WOODCUTTER: We'll be arrested! The Sheriff will hang us all!

SON: Me too?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Stop upsetting the boy! (*To SON.*) No one is going to hang anybody.

WOODCUTTER: Then what do we tell the Sheriff?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Since when are we on chatting terms with the Sheriff? We won't have to tell him anything because we had nothing to do with it.

SON: We didn't?

WOODCUTTER: The Tax Man is dead and he's sitting in our cottage!

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Hovel.

SON: We could bury him somewhere. If we owned a shovel.

WOODCUTTER: And what about all that money? The Sheriff will want to know what happened to the money.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Will you stop with the Sheriff! Now this is what we are going to do.

SON: Yes?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: As soon as it gets dark, you and your idiot father will bring the Tax Man to the doctor's house.

WOODCUTTER: Doctor? No doctor is going to help the Tax Man now!

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Shut up and listen to me! You'll leave the body right outside the doctor's door. In the morning the doctor will discover the Tax Man, figure out that he's dead, and call the Sheriff. And we are not involved at all.

WOODCUTTER: What about the money?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: The money remains with the Tax Man. Well, most of it.

SON: Can I have some of it, Mom? You're behind on my allowance by about six years!

WOODCUTTER: They'll trace the money to us in a second! When have we ever had gold pieces?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: We'll be discreet. No one knows how much money the Tax Man was carrying. If there is plenty in his sack, the Sheriff won't think there's been a robbery.

WOODCUTTER: We're all going to hang!

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: (To SON.) Ignore your father. Everyone will assume that the Tax Man was going to the doctor's to be treated for –

WOODCUTTER: Rat potion?

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Some illness and he died before he could see the doctor. It happens all the time.

SON: Let's do it! What an adventure! I'll take his feet and, Dad, you take his arms –

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: Not yet, Junior. You have to wait until it's quite dark.

SON: Oh. Right.

WOODCUTTER'S WIFE: In the meantime I'll go through the money and figure out how much we keep. Think of it as a . . .

WOODCUTTER: A tax rebate?

Lights down on the Woodcutter's house. WOODCUTTER'S WIFE exits as SFX: Lively Music plays. The door frame is moved to the opposite side of the stage to serve as the front door to the Doctor's house. A bench is placed outside the house. WOODCUTTER and SON carry TAX MAN'S body across the stage and place it sitting up on the bench.

WOODCUTTER and SON exit and the lights come up on the outside of the Doctor's house. It is now dawn. SFX: Lively Music stops. Optional SFX: a rooster crowing. DOCTOR opens the door and enters, from his house, leaving the door open.

DOCTOR: *(Taking a big breath.)* Ahhhh! A beautiful morning!

DOCTOR'S WIFE enters from her house closing the door behind her.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: What are you doing up so early?

DOCTOR: It's such a glorious morning! Smell that fresh air. *(Takes a deep breath.)*

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Do it quietly. I don't want you waking up our daughter. You know how impossible she can be if she gets out of bed too early.

DOCTOR: Too nice a day to be cooped up inside with a bunch of sick people. I think I'll play golf.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: And leave me to tell your patients to go home? No, thank you.

DOCTOR: I'll just put a sign on the door. "No patients today."

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Lot of good that will do. Most of your patients can't read.

DOCTOR: Lock the door then. I want to get on the golf course before it gets too hot.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: *(Sees TAX MAN'S body.)* Too late. Here's a patient already. I didn't see him at first. He must have come very early.

DOCTOR: Send him away!

DOCTOR'S WIFE: You send him away. I'm not the one who wants to play golf.

DOCTOR: Tell him that the doctor is indisposed.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: He won't know what that means. I'm not even sure I know what that means.

DOCTOR: Tell him I'm sick. No one wants to see a sick doctor.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: You tell him. I'm going in and eat breakfast.

DOCTOR: Tell him I have the plague. That will keep him away.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: And every other person in town. Do you want to start a panic?

DOCTOR: Tell him the truth then. The doctor is so overworked and his nerves are so much on edge that he cannot see any patients today.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: The truth?

DOCTOR: *(Starts walking toward the door.)* Where are my golf clubs . . . ?

DOCTOR'S WIFE: I want my breakfast. You tell him. *(Opens the door and exits into her house.)*

DOCTOR: Oh, very well! *(Walks over to TAX MAN'S body.)* My good fellow, I regret that I will not be able to see you this morning. Come back this afternoon. That's a fine fellow. *(Starts walking toward the door then stops.)* Did you hear what I said? *(Pause.)* Asleep! *(Walks back over to TAX MAN'S body and shakes him.)* Wake up! This is a physician's office. Not a motel. Wake, I say!

DOCTOR shakes TAX MAN'S body again, this time more vigorous and TAX MAN'S body falls off the bench and onto the ground.

DOCTOR: What's all this?

Rigor mortis has set in, and TAX MAN's feet stick up in the air.

DOCTOR: What are you up to now? *(Kneels, puts his ear against TAX MAN'S chest and listens.)* Not a sound! Dead as can be. And rigor mortis has already set in. *(Rises; to TAX MAN'S body.)* I'm a doctor. Not the undertaker.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: *(Enters from the house.)* Did you want any breakfast – ? *(Sees TAX MAN'S body.)* Is he still here?

DOCTOR: He's dead!

DOCTOR'S WIFE: What? Out here? Your patients usually die in the examining room.

DOCTOR: He's been dead for hours! Look!

DOCTOR presses down on TAX MAN'S legs and TAX MAN'S stiff body sits up.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: What did he die of?

DOCTOR: I can't say. Not yet. He must have been sitting here since

—

DOCTOR'S WIFE: What will people say? A patient dying while waiting to see the doctor!

DOCTOR: It's not my fault!

DOCTOR'S WIFE: I smell a malpractice lawsuit. Who is it?

DOCTOR: Don't you recognize him?

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Not like that, I don't.

DOCTOR: It's the Tax Man! I treated him just last week for lumbago.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Oh oh. A *huge* malpractice lawsuit!

DOCTOR: What will I tell the Sheriff?

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Say he died of lumbago.

DOCTOR: No one dies of lumbago. You're just grouchy for the rest of your life.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Say he froze to death during the night.

DOCTOR: In summer?

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Then say it was his heart. No one in town knows anything about heart failure except you.

DOCTOR: It doesn't matter what he died of! The scandal will ruin me!

DAUGHTER enters from her house.

DAUGHTER: I'm hungry! I want my breakfast!

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Good morning, darling! Did you sleep well?

DAUGHTER: I'm hungry! (*Sees TAX MAN'S body.*) Who's that?

DOCTOR: The Tax Man.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: One of Daddy's patients.

DOCTOR: No he's not!

DOCTOR'S WIFE: You were treating him for lumbago!

DOCTOR: That was last week!

DAUGHTER: Why is he so . . . stiff?

DOCTOR'S WIFE: He froze to death. (*Starts towards door.*) Come inside, darling, and have some breakfast.

DAUGHTER: Froze to death? In summer? (*Walking over to TAX MAN'S body.*) How come his legs are all funny?

DOCTOR: Rigor mortis.

DAUGHTER: I thought you said he was the Tax Man.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Leave Daddy with his patient, dear, and come in to breakfast.

DOCTOR: Forget breakfast! What are we going to do about him?

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Call the Sheriff.

DOCTOR: And ruin my practice?

DOCTOR'S WIFE: You're the only doctor in town. What will it matter?

DOCTOR: There will be a scandal! I will lose my high position in the community!

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Ha!

DAUGHTER: I'm hungry!

DOCTOR: We've got to get the Tax Man out of here before someone sees him!

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Wait a minute! (*Walks over to TAX MAN'S body.*) If he's the Tax Man he must have some money on him. (*Kneels down and unties coin sack from the belt.*) I'll say he does! (*Shakes sack.*)

DAUGHTER: Let me see!

DAUGHTER walks over to DOCTOR'S WIFE and the two of them go through the coins.

DOCTOR: Of course he's got a few coins on him. He's the Tax Man!

DOCTOR'S WIFE: There's more here than a few coins.

DAUGHTER: I'll say!

DOCTOR: What are we to do with the body!

DOCTOR'S WIFE: There's enough here for your dowry, darling, and a few trinkets for myself –

DOCTOR: Will you stop robbing the dead and listen to me!

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Don't get yourself into a panic. (*Gets up and walks over to DOCTOR.*) We simply move the Tax Man before anyone sees him here. It's early still. No one is about yet.

DOCTOR: Where do we move him to?

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Let me think . . .

DAUGHTER: I'm going to be rich!

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Hush, dear. You already are rich. And spoiled.

DOCTOR: How about the war memorial in the square? He might be a veteran.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: The town square! Don't be daft. You'll be spotted by all the merchants opening shop.

DAUGHTER: I'm not spoiled. I'm just very particular.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: I've got it. Behind the tavern. There are always a few patrons lying about who passed out the night before. He'll fit right in. They'll say he drank himself to death.

DOCTOR: The tavern! Good idea. You two drag the body to the back of the tavern –

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Not so fast, Doc. You drag him to the tavern. (*To DAUGHTER.*) And you help your father.

DAUGHTER: What!

DOCTOR: What if I'm seen?

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Take the back alley and no one will see you. And if you do run into anybody, say . . . say something medical.

DAUGHTER: I won't do it!

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Here.

DOCTOR'S WIFE gives DAUGHTER a gold coin.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Now shut up and drag.

DOCTOR: What about the rest of the money?

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Most of it is still there. (*Ties coin sack to the TAX MAN'S belt.*) We don't want to make it look like robbery. The Sheriff will go after the money. No one cares about a Tax Man.

DOCTOR: I hope this works. (*Takes hold of one of TAX MAN'S arms.*) Take the other arm, dearie, and help Daddy out.

DAUGHTER: What about my pretty and ridiculously overpriced dress? (*Takes ahold of TAX MAN'S other arm.*)

DOCTOR'S WIFE: Drag!

DOCTOR and DAUGHTER begin dragging TAX MAN off the stage.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: That's right . . . two blocks down and the first alley on your right . . .

DOCTOR, DAUGHTER, TAX MAN'S BODY exit.

DOCTOR'S WIFE: *(Looks at the coins in her hands.)* Thank you, Tax Man. Probably the first good deed of your life. And the last.

DOCTOR'S WIFE exits into her house as SFX: Lively Music plays. The bench is removed. The door frame is moved to center stage and serves as the back door to the Widow's Cottage. DOCTOR and DAUGHTER enter dragging TAX MAN'S body. When they get to the center of the stage the door opens. SFX: Lively Music stops.

DOCTOR: Someone's coming out!

DAUGHTER: Run for it!

DOCTOR and DAUGHTER drop TAX MAN'S body and exit running offstage as the WIDOW enters from her house.

WIDOW: Another day of widowhood. How many has it been? Hard to count that much. Well, at least I have my two children for consolation. *(Moves downstage.)* And how is my garden today? The onions? The cauliflower? My eyes are not so good as to see you clearly but I can smell you all. Ah, what a good thing for a penniless widow to have a garden. Otherwise we would all starve to death. *(Steps on TAX MAN'S body.)* What's this? Something in my garden? It must be that pile of manure that my son brought in yesterday. *(Smells.)* Hmmmm. Doesn't smell like manure. Or is my sense of smell going as well?

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