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20 MINUTES

A short play

by

H. K. Nicklin

h.k.nicklin@gmail.com
07834958418

CHARACTERS :

ALEX. 29, M. DARK, ABOUT 6'2"

JONAH. 32, M. SLIGHT, SHORTER THAN ALEX. WEARS GLASSES.

KATE. 30, F. DARK HAIR, SIZE 12/14, PRETTY. QUITE TALL.

JONAH IS STANDING CENTRE STAGE, HE IS STARING OUT INTO THE DISTANCE. WE HEAR THE REMOTE SOUNDS OF A BUSY CITY; SIRENS, CAR HORNS, TRAFFIC AND THE ODD SCREAM. THERE IS ALSO THE SOUND OF RUSHING WIND. **JONAH** IS WEARING QUITE SCRUFFY CLOTHES, QUITE 'STUDENTY', BUT MISMATCHED, WITH SCUFFED TRAINERS. HE ALSO HAS A PAIR OF CHEAP 'FANCY DRESS' WINGS ON.

ABOUT THIRTY SECONDS PASS. **JONAH** SIGHS BUT DOES NOT MOVE.

ANOTHER FEW SECONDS PASS. WE HEAR THE SLAM OF A HEAVY FIRE DOOR CLOSING AND **ALEX** COMES ONSTAGE - STAGGERING A LITTLE AS THOUGH IT WERE WINDY. HE IS A LITTLE DRUNK, DRESSED IN A CHEAPISH SUIT, TRYING TO TEXT. **JONAH** REMAINS LOOKING AHEAD. **ALEX** IS FINDING IT HARDER TO TEXT AS HE MEANDERS OVER TO **JONAH**. IT ALL BECOMES TOO MUCH AND **ALEX** SCREAMS AT HIS PHONE, THROWS IT TO THE FLOOR. IT SMASHES.

ALEX: shit.

HE STARES AT THE PHONE.

So much for last words.

HE SUDDENLY WALKS BRISKLY TOWARDS WHERE **JONAH** STANDS, HEAD DOWN TO THE FLOOR, AS THOUGH TAKING A RUN UP. HE ONLY LOOKS UP JUST AS HE REACHES **JONAH**, HE STUMBLES TO A HALT.

Shit.

(PAUSE)

Sorry.

(PAUSE) HE TAKES IN THE WINGS.

You here for Angela's party?

(PAUSE)

Sorry, I'll find another spot.

(PAUSE) HE HESITATES

Sorry, but do I know you?

JONAH: what?

ALEX: sorry, sorry, it's just I'm sure I recognise you-

JONAH: I don't think so.

ALEX: no, it's just. I'm sure I've seen you somewhere before.

(PAUSE)

It's really bugging me.

(PAUSE)

You don't work in the Amicus building do you?

JONAH: no.

ALEX: mmm... no, no I think I'd be able to place you then, how about Uni; you didn't go to Kent did you?

JONAH: no.

ALEX: what about school - Bedford Modern?

JONAH: no.

ALEX: I s'pose not. You look state schooled.

(PAUSE)

I've got it! You're mates with Big Mike right?

JONAH: no.

(PAUSE) THEY BOTH STARE OUT

ALEX: oh well.

(PAUSE) THEN **ALEX** HITS HIS FOREHEAD

Oh shit!

JONAH LOOKS AT **ALEX** FOR THE FIRST TIME

JONAH: what.

ALEX: my mobile! Fuck!

HE RUNS OVER TO THE MESS OF WIRES AND
CASING AND BRINGS IT OVER

Shit, you could have phoned me - if you were in my
phonebook, that would have done it!

HE BEGINS TO FIDDLE WITH THE REMNANTS
OF THE PHONE.

JONAH: I haven't got a phone.

ALEX: I think if I could just sorta hook these two wires
back together -

JONAH: please-

ALEX: hm?

JONAH: I haven't got a phone.

(PAUSE)

ALEX: you what?

JONAH: no phone.

ALEX LOOKS DOWN AT HIS PHONE. THEN
DROPS IT.

ALEX: right then.

(LONG PAUSE)

I suppose I'll just be - (going) How come?

JONAH: pardon?

ALEX: are you an anarchist or something?

JONAH: what?

ALEX: how come you don't have a phone?

JONAH: I just don't

ALEX: can't you afford it?

JONAH: what?

ALEX: you not got the money?

JONAH: I just don't want one.

ALEX: I broke my phone once (glances at the one on the floor) before that one I mean. Fucking Swiss-Matt, knocked me. Dropped it in my pint. Took me two days to get a replacement, off eBay like, I nearly went mad! Like I was on a desert island. Don't know how you do it.

(PAUSE) A GUST OF WIND, **ALEX** SHIVERS.

It'll save you the brain cancer though

(PAUSE)

It's the next thalidomide I reckon.

JONAH: what?

ALEX: mobile phones- we're all gonna have deformed brains and tumours in our arses from where we keep phones in our pockets.

(PAUSE)

JONAH: right.

ALEX: except that women won't 'cause of them always having bags.

(PAUSE)

I suppose they could get under-arm cancer.

(PAUSE)

JONAH: look-

ALEX: can you get under-arm cancer?

JONAH: please-

ALEX: I had a lump in my armpit a while back, fucking scared the life out of me, I was scratching away, and I found this lump, I thought, shit, I've got under-arm cancer, spent weeks worrying about it, nervous wreck, my girlfriend was all like 'go to the doctor about it' but it's not the kinda thing you do is it?

(BRIEF PAUSE) **JONAH** OPENS HIS MOUTH TO SPEAK.

'Hello doctor, nice to see you, I was just wondering if you could tell me whether or not I have under-arm cancer'

JONAH SHUTS HIS MOUTH

But then I sort of forgot about it, and it went away.

(LONG PAUSE) **ALEX** LOOKS AT **JONAH'S** WINGS.

You know those are girl's wings don't you?

NO REPLY.

Is there another fancy dress party going on then?

JONAH: hm?

ALEX: you said you weren't here for Angela's

JONAH: no.

ALEX: fucking James Bond theme. Hence the suit.

(PAUSE)

Don't know where my bow tie has gone though

(PAUSE)

I liked the idea of that. Going over in a three piece.

(PAUSE)

It's hired too. Don't reckon the deposit's going to be enough to get the blood out.

(PAUSE)

I suppose you do bleed right? You must do. This high up. Fucking mince meat.

(PAUSE) HE GLANCES DOWN AT HIS PHONE

No last words.

(PAUSE)

S'pose I could have brought some paper.

(PAUSE)

So why're you here then?

JONAH: what?

ALEX: You're not here to admire the view.

(PAUSE)

JONAH: no.

ALEX: it's all right. You don't have to tell me. Though it's definitely nice to have some company. I have to be honest; I thought they employed a kind of suicide watch up here these days.

JONAH: only during working hours.

ALEX: ah. That's useful then.

(PAUSE)

So what are you supposed to be?

JONAH: hm?

ALEX: the costume?

JONAH: oh, I don't know.

ALEX: ... right.

JONAH: I don't suppose you could leave me alone could you?

ALEX: you're not some crazy druggy who thinks the wings are gonna help you fly are you?

JONAH: no.

ALEX: not been watching too much *Heroes*, too much Peter Petrelli?

JONAH: what?

ALEX: look, I'm sorry, I supposed I should leave you be, I just feel, feel a bit

JONAH: outdone?

ALEX: what?

JONAH: wanted this to be all about you?

ALEX: excuse me?

JONAH: annoyed that there might be someone trying to steal your limelight?

ALEX: fuck off!

JONAH: didn't want to share the headline?

ALEX: Whatever. I don't need this (he begins to leave)

JONAH: no you don't need anything do you.

ALEX: (stops, turns) what the fuck is that supposed to mean?

JONAH: you've got everything you need and you still want more

ALEX: (walks back over) listen you cunt (grabs hold of him and turns him away from the edge for the first time) you don't know a fucking thing about me so you'd better fucking shut your mouth or I'll fucking-

JONAH: what? You'll what? Kill me? Be my guest.

ALEX: (loosens his grip and takes a step away) I don't know what your problem is mate.

JONAH: no, you don't really 'get' problems do you.

ALEX: fucking carol singer aren't you, ghost of Christmas fucking past, for your information I felt like I should... I was considering talking you down.

JONAH: oh how very noble of you.

ALEX: moralising little fuck. You don't know a thing about me.

JONAH: don't I?

ALEX: no you fucking don't.

JONAH: white, male, middle class, private schooled, what in heaven's name could possibly be troubling you?

ALEX: lucky guess.

JONAH: You have absolutely nothing holding you back. You struck the genetic and environmental jackpot. So what's wrong, too lazy to sort things out? Life not already handed to you on enough of a dinner plate?

ALEX: Hey, you're fucking standing up here too, mate.

JONAH: Sexual inadequacy? Mounting debts?

ALEX: Some bleeding heart fucking working class sob story

JONAH: Shares not looking so good?

ALEX: 'oh my parents were fucking Pikeys so I never had a chance' never heard of scholarships, mate?

THEY BOTH STAND, GLARING AT EACH OTHER.

JONAH: (calmer, though still angry) You just don't care do you - everything that everyone has put into you, the time and money, people looking over you every second of your life and you're happy to just throw it all away.

ALEX: That's right, I'm a bit disappointment. (He turns and begins to walk away)

JONAH: (walking a little after him) it would just take a second, one second to say thank you-

ALEX: (doesn't look back) just hurry up and jump mate, I haven't got all day.

JONAH: and I bet your last-words text would have been all blame, all about you-

ALEX: fuck you.

JONAH: if you took a second to think about that, maybe you'd find a way to be happy. You'd realise that-

ALEX: look fuck off, fuck off talking to me like it's easy

JONAH: so what is it, why are you here?

ALEX: (storms back up) oh it's so simple isn't it, I've had an easy life, there's not reason for me to be unhappy- isn't that reason enough? The fact that I should be and I'm not?

(BEAT)

Do you know what I spend my time doing? While I'm staring at the water cooler, or my PC, or in a meeting at work? I fantasise about this. About dying. Or about being diagnosed with some terminal fucking illness, so I wouldn't have to worry, about all of this (gestures: the world) to have that weight lifted, to have *certainty*, the kind that you have when you're a kid. When someone asks you what you want to be when you grow up, and you know, you just *know* that you're going to be a spaceman, or a fireman, not some fucked up nobody, sat behind a desk, with no girlfriend, no mates that you could actually talk to, nothing.

(LONG PAUSE)

Argh.

JONAH: indeed.

(PAUSE)

ALEX: it's just- look, I- fuck it.

(LONG PAUSE) **ALEX** SUDDENLY SCOOPS UP HIS MOBILE, BEGINS TO TRY AND PUT IT BACK TOGETHER AGAIN.

Do you live here then? In the building?

JONAH: hm?

ALEX: you in these flats?

JONAH: oh. No.

(PAUSE)

ALEX: here for a party?

JONAH: what do you think?

ALEX: (looks) oh. The wings. Yeah.

(PAUSE)

what was the theme?

JONAH: why did you leave your party?

ALEX: my party?

JONAH: The world not enough?

ALEX: I see what you did there.

JONAH: hm?

ALEX: never mind.

(PAUSE)

I couldn't stand it.

JONAH: ah.

ALEX: it was like I sort of... woke up. Like I stared around at everyone, wearing their stupid shoes and hired suits, getting wasted, doing coke off this drunk chick's back, I just sort of saw the fucking...inanity of it, right?

JONAH: right.

(PAUSE)

what about your girlfriend?

ALEX: what?

JONAH: you said you had a girlfriend

ALEX: no I didn't

JONAH: earlier on - you know, with the arm-pits.

ALEX: right. Yeah. Well, 's all fucked up.

JONAH: why?

ALEX: She'd brought some guy with her. Some dick with a Hawaiian shirt and hairy chest.

JONAH: you wish you were a bit more hirsute?

ALEX: you what?

JONAH: that bothered you?

ALEX: (looks as if he's going to come out with a smart comment, but then sags) dunno.

(PAUSE)

JONAH: she dump you?

ALEX: sort of

JONAH: what do you mean?

ALEX: she said I was selfish.

JONAH: was she right?

ALEX: she was just pissed off. She asked me to move in with her, I said I wanted to think about it.

JONAH: three magic words

ALEX: what?

JONAH: 'think about it'

ALEX: yeah, right

JONAH: everyone knows they mean 'no', when you're little and you want some toy or whatever, 'I'll think about it', you know they mean no.

ALEX: it's all so fucking complicated; I mean she's really cool and stuff.

JONAH: yes.

ALEX: and the sex is really good

JONAH: glad to hear it.

ALEX: but moving in- that's a big step- and y'know, I like her and stuff

JONAH: but you're not sure if you like her enough?

ALEX: yeah

JONAH: things were easier when you could beat them over the head with a club?

ALEX: yeah. I mean no. fuck.

(PAUSE)

JONAH: is that really a good enough reason to jump?

ALEX: look, when you say it like that- but it's not that- it's fucking hard - there's so much expected of you, you have to think about so much, you have to be, be a million things at once, and you have to feel so much... stuff. And I never have, it's never been like fucking- Hugh Grant- so I figure there must be something wrong with me.

JONAH: so you're going to give up?

ALEX: fucking hypocrite

JONAH: I'm just curious.

ALEX: with your stupid costume. Bloody queer

JONAH: oh, yes.

ALEX: (BEAT) not that I have anything against queers

JONAH: you do look good in that suit

ALEX LOOKS UP, A LITTLE SCARED. **JONAH**
LAUGHS.

Relax. You're not my type.

ALEX: very funny.

(LONG PAUSE) **ALEX** GETS FED UP WITH THE
PHONE, THROWS IT BACK DOWN. SILENCE.

JONAH: you've got glands, under your arms.

ALEX: what?

JONAH: like you have in your neck- you've got glands in
your arm-pits- if you'd hurt yourself, cut yourself
on your arm or something and were healing, your
glands would have swollen up.

ALEX: right...

JONAH: so, no cancer.

ALEX: oh. Cool. (PAUSE) you a doctor or something?

JONAH: hm?

ALEX: you a doctor?

JONAH: no.

ALEX: do biology at Uni?

JONAH: I didn't go to Uni.

ALEX: Oh. Right.

(PAUSE)

So how do you-

JONAH: not going to university doesn't mean I'm an idiot

ALEX: I didn't say th-

JONAH: you didn't need to, you're all the same-

ALEX: but I didn't-

JONAH: people like you

ALEX: listen, I-

JONAH: what's so special about wasting your parents' money, making friends you don't really like, buying laptops and bragging about how little work you do, sleeping in and sleeping around, scraping through, does that make you a better person? More intelligent, more hardworking? Builds up your DVD collection no doubt, think you're so much better-

ALEX: I didn't say any of that!

JONAH: you didn't have to

ALEX: a degree isn't all pissing around.

JONAH: no? So how did your 2:2 help you?

ALEX: how the fuck did you know that?

JONAH: lucky guess.

ALEX: you don't know what you're talking about

JONAH: no, because I didn't have the luxury of it. Answer my question.

ALEX: what question?

JONAH: how did Uni help you?

ALEX: well it-

JONAH: still working in the job you started temping in-?

ALEX: I temped in a few places after I left.

JONAH: still kidding yourself it's a temporary measure?

ALEX: look mate, I work fucking hard.

JONAH: no you don't, you never have, and that's why life doesn't mean anything

ALEX: I have bills to pay

JONAH: ran up your credit cards and overdrafts?

ALEX: (laughs) you're just jealous.

JONAH: oh yes. I so wanted to be indoctrinated into the monetary system, tempted into debt, another drone that likes the same movies and albums, shops at H&M and thinks they look 'individual'.

ALEX: I knew it - you're an anarchist!

JONAH: (sighs) sure, whatever you like.

(LONG PAUSE)

ALEX: suffering isn't, like, relative you know

JONAH LOOKS SURPRISED

And y'know, what if you've just made a good point? That's even less of a reason for me to be around.

(PAUSE)

Because who's going to miss me, really?

(PAUSE)

I mean yeah, my parents and stuff, but the world? It'd just slot another guy in my place, in fact I've not even got a place, not really, the world gives me nothing.

JONAH: how much do you give it?

ALEX: it doesn't work like that.

JONAH: it works how you want it. Maybe if you thought about other people they'd think about you.

ALEX: wah wah. People are dying, disease, famine. Fuck 'em. Doesn't mean my problems aren't problems. What about you?

JONAH: what about me?

ALEX: you're standing here too

JONAH: so?

ALEX: so, people are dying, there's AIDS and rape, what's your life to that?

JONAH: insignificant

ALEX: right.

(PAUSE) **JONAH** LAUGHS.

What? (PAUSE) what is it?

JONAH: for a second I thought you were going to ask about me.

ALEX: well why are you standing here?

JONAH: hm?

ALEX: what's so big and wrong in your life?

JONAH: everything. Nothing much.

ALEX: exactly.

JONAH: but who says I was going to jump.

ALEX: ah fuck off, you here for the fresh air?

JONAH: no, to think.

ALEX: think?

JONAH: alien concept?

ALEX: fucking hippy.

(PAUSE) **JONAH** SIGHS

JONAH: So, it's your girlfriend, your job?

ALEX: ex.

JONAH: your feeling of never quite being, doing, or saying, everything you think you should, in a life without god

ALEX: Oh I see, fucking Christian, well that's 10 times worse than hippy if you ask me

JONAH: a life without anything more, anything higher up, where you have to make your own meaning

ALEX: fuck off

JONAH: you've come up here, from a James Bond party, in your suit, aged 29, to end your life.

(PAUSE)

ALEX: yes.

JONAH: Well, takes some courage.

ALEX: what?

JONAH: to jump, when the rest of your life you've never taken a leap, always towed the line.

ALEX: I s'pose.

JONAH: it's a start.

ALEX: yeah.

JONAH: at least right up until you hit the ground it is.

(LONG PAUSE)

ALEX: when you put it like that-

JONAH: I hate it when people ask 'what's the point?'

ALEX: you what?

JONAH: but I seem to find myself asking it.

ALEX: right...

JONAH: the point is you make your own point, write your own endings, and sometimes, try and reach out

ALEX: this isn't more god-stuff is it?

JONAH: but so frequently I find myself wondering 'what's the point'

ALEX: yeah.

JONAH: if you choose to live without stories, you'd never live. You need it. Like people needed God, now you have... Romantic Comedy, the Story of University, or Marriage... affairs... divorce.

ALEX: you're freaking me out

JONAH: but to really live, sometimes you have to reach out. I once read a book that suggested that we should call ourselves *Pan Narratus*

ALEX: you what?

JONAH: we call ourselves *Homo Sapiens - the Wise Man*, but that's all wrong, we don't think, we mimic, *the Story Telling Ape*.

(BEAT)

ALEX: shit. It's starting to rain

(PAUSE)

JONAH: you'll lose the deposit, if you get it too wet.

ALEX: shit.

JONAH: what is it? 10, 20?

ALEX: 25 quid

JONAH: and you've already lost the bow tie.

ALEX: some slut took it.

THE SOUND OF HEAVY RAIN NOW.

JONAH: right

ALEX: (sheltering himself with his arm) shit, I should, should.

JONAH: it's not worth 25 quid is it?

ALEX: I'll just, just

JONAH: if you think about it

ALEX: right

PAUSE, HE HESITATES, HE THEN RUNS BACK TO THE FIRE DOOR, HE GLANCES BACK ONCE, CONFUSED, THEN RUNS OFF. WE HEAR THE FIRE DOOR SLAM, AND FOOTSTEPS.

JONAH IS LEFT ALONE. HE CLOSES HIS EYES, BREATHE IN AND LOOKS UP, LETS THE RAIN FALL ON HIS FACE.

HE THEN CROUCHS DOWN, SITS WITH HIS KNEES UP AN COVERS HIS FACE, ABOUT 5 SECONDS.

WE HEAR FOOTSTEPS AGAIN, COMING UP, THE FIRE DOOR OPENS, IS GENTLY CLOSED.

KATE ENTERS, HESITANTLY, SHE IS COVERING HER FACE FROM THE RAIN. SHE IS DRESSED IN UNIMAGINATIVE 'TRENDY' CLOTHES - JEANS, NICE TOP, FAKE 'UGG' BOOTS ETC. HER HAIR IS DONE UP, IN STRAIGHTENER-CURLS, BUT IS COMING AWAY A LITTLE, HER MASCARA HAS RUN.

KATE: **ALEX?**

JONAH LOOKS UP

KATE RUSHES OVER TO HIM AND **JONAH** STANDS, TURNS, **KATE** STOPS IN HER TRACKS. RAISED VOICES ABOVE THE RAIN:

Oh. I'm sorry.

SHE DOESN'T MOVE.

You're all wet.

(PAUSE)

I'm sorry to, to bother you, you haven't seen, seen a guy have you? About 6'2", dark hair, suit.

(PAUSE)

JONAH: he just went.

KATE: right.

SHE DOESN'T MOVE

It's just; I got this half finished text. He said he was up here, he sounded a bit-

JONAH: he'll be fine.

KATE: right

THEY BOTH STAND LOOKING AT EACH OTHER AS THE RAIN BEATS DOWN

I've seen you up here before.

JONAH: yes?

KATE: you come up here a lot, right? You're one of those guys, who hangs around and talks people down.

JONAH: (BEAT) that's right.

KATE: do you get paid for it?

JONAH: no, we don't.

KATE: but you still do it?

JONAH: yes.

(PAUSE)

KATE: why?

JONAH: why?

KATE: yes.

JONAH: (opens his mouth, doesn't really know what to say)
I think, think it's important.

KATE: have many of them jumped?

JONAH: I-

KATE: sorry, I shouldn't have asked that. I'm a bit drunk.

JONAH: no- no it's ok

(PAUSE)

They say, they say you've got 20 minutes. 20 minutes to get them down, from the moment they decide 'I'm going to jump' if you keep them away for 20 minutes, you've usually got them, it's ok.

(PAUSE)

KATE: are you religious or something?

JONAH: no. no I'm not.

(PAUSE)

He went in; he was never really going to jump.

KATE: he needs to wake up.

JONAH: maybe.

(PAUSE) **KATE** LOOKS HESITANT

KATE: are you ok?

JONAH: me?

KATE: yeah. Are you ok?

(PAUSE)

It must be tough.

(PAUSE)

Hard not to give up.

(PAUSE)

JONAH: I'm ok.

(PAUSE)

Thanks.

KATE GIVES A QUICK SMILE, THEN RUNS BACK. WE HEAR THE DOOR SLAM, FOOTSTEPS DESCEND.

JONAH CONTINUES TO LOOK AFTER HER FOR A SECOND OR TWO. THEN TURNS BACK. HE TAKES A STEP FORWARD, CAUTIOUSLY, AS IF HE'S ON THE VERY EDGE.

HE CAREFULLY SPREADS HIS ARMS AND RAISES HIS HEAD. EYES CLOSED, A SMILE CREEPS ACROSS HIS FACE.

LIGHTS CUT.

THE END.