

PTHE BIG ISSUE

(a 45 minute stage play)

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CHARACTERS

Max Johnson	A 30 year old Big Issue seller and aspiring journalist. Also plays himself aged 12 to 14.
Alice Johnson	His sister, a 25 year old novelist. Also plays herself aged 7 to 9.
Male actor 2	Plays various characters, including a social worker, an editor, an older neighbour and a 12 year old school boy.

SET

The play is set in the present day, with flash-backs. There is an open set to allow for multiple scene changes, which are conveyed through acting and lighting.

SCENE ONE

Sound of children singing Christmas carols. Lights rise on Max, dressed in warm winter coat and woollen hat, holding a pile of Big Issue newspapers.

Max Big Issue! Get your Big Issue! Christmas edition. Only two pounds. *[a snowball hits him in the back from stage right]* Ow! *[to kids off stage]* Piss off, you little buggers! That hurt! *[off stage children laugh and shriek]*

Alice *[Alice, aged 7, in winter clothes, runs on from stage left as if trying to catch up with someone. She holds a large teddy bear under her arm]* Wait for me! Mummy, says I can come too.

Max *[As if seeing a ghost]* Alice? *[the girl appears totally oblivious and carries on running across the stage, seemingly from another world]*

Alice Max! *[exits stage right]*

Max *[Max stands deep in thought. then rummages in his pocket and takes out a bottle of medicine. He addresses audience]* I have to take this stuff. Helps, you know. *[takes a swig]* Yugh.

Alice *[off stage]* Max? Davy Anderson's taken Teddy Grump Bucket hostage.

Max *[smiles to himself]* Teddy Grump Bucket. He went everywhere with her.

Alice *[enters, aged 7, in summer dress]* He won't let me have him back.

Max *[tenderly holds his hands out to her]* Alice.

Alice He won't let me have Grumpy back unless I give him a sherbet dip and a look at my knickers.

Max *[to audience]* The sherbet dip we could negotiate. But the knickers . . .that was war.

Davy *[hurtles on stage and rugby tackles Max from behind. They tumble about on the ground]* Banzai !

Max *[aged 12]* Give him back, give the bear back!

Alice Don't hurt my brother. Don't hurt him! *[jumps on top of the two boys, and tries to bite Davy's leg]*

Max Alice! Get out the way.

Davy She's bitten my bloody leg.

Max *[to Alice]* We can't fight with you on top of us.

Alice I'm not letting go.

Max Alice, go home.

Davy I've just seen her knickers!

Max Liar! *[redoubles his efforts]*

Alice I'm not letting go.

Davy They're blue. She's got blue knickers.

Max Bloody liar! *[semi throttles him]*

Davy *[chants]* Alice Johnson's wearing blue knickers!

Max Shut up!

Davy Alice 'knickers' Johnson. Alice 'knickers' Johnson.

Alice I'm not letting go, Max. I'm not letting go!

Max *[all three collapse in an exhausted pile. Alice remains prone until she next speaks. Max sits up as an adult]* Alice was a liability. Like one of those holy places everyone's always fighting over.

Davy *[to Max]* There's only one way to settle this, Johnson Fart contest. Tomorrow, after school, back of Tesco's. Longest fart, wins. *[exits]*

Max *[pause]* I was strangely fond of that bear. He arrived the week before she was born. Dad took me into Manchester. It was the first time I'd been anywhere big without Mum. We went all round the toy shops. £12 he cost. That was a lot in those days. Dad was usually so careful with money. I realised something new must be coming into our lives.

Alice *[sits up on the floor rocking her teddy bear]* Rockabye baby on the tree top . . . If you don't eat your cabbage, you'll never grow. Do you want to stay that size for ever? Now for some tea. Real cups, real saucers and a real sugar bowl with tongs. *[pours out 'tea']*

Max What didn't Daddy buy her? She had everything.

Alice *[reciting a list]* A Barbie with blonde hair, a Cindy, a bridal outfit and a pony, a bike with proper wheels, some pink kickers with badges on, red leggings, a magnetic pen that hovers, Blue Peter Annual, make-up bag with opal nail varnish...

Max It was just the same when we went on holiday. My stuff got shoved in with Mum and Dad's, but Alice - she had her own little vanity case. She never got a wink of sleep the night before we left. In and out of my room like a yo-yo.

Alice *[rushes up with a small, bulging vanity case]* Max.

Max *[aged 11]* I'm reading.

Alice My case won't shut.

Max I'm reading.

Alice *[peevish]* It won't shut.

Max Dump something.

Alice I don't want to dump anything.

Max *[pulls out nurse's hat]* This, for starters.

Alice My nurse's uniform?

Max Why not?

Alice Someone might get ill.

Max Alice. You're supposed to be in bed. I promised Mum and Dad. If they find you up, what am I going to say?

Alice I think Mum looks lovely in her Ra Ra.

Max *[puts his book down defeated]* Mum's all right.

Alice Do you think they're in love?

Max Who?

Alice Mum and Dad.

Max Don't be daft.

Alice Dad loves her.

Max How do you know?

Alice He holds her hand when he doesn't have to.

Max That's what married people do when they're too old to . . . *[stops himself]*

Alice Too old to?

Max You know . . . for . . .

Alice Too old for what, Max?

Max Never mind.

Alice I want to know.

Max Alice, you're too young to understand. Now shut up. And go to bed.

Alice *[pause]* You can see Mum likes it. When he holds her hand.

Max Of course she does. She's nearly forty. Who else is going to hold her hand?

Alice *[pause]* Mr Emberton?

Max *[they both explode with laughter]* With his false hand!

Alice Mum doesn't seem to mind.

Max That's 'cos she's polite.

Alice Maybe she holds his other hand sometimes. The real one.

Max That would be a sin.

Alice Really?

Max *[adult]* We prayed for Mr Emberton. *[kneels, and young Alice joins him]* We prayed for all sinners, even atheists with prosthetic limbs and abundant nose hair.

Emberton *[walks across stage, very upright. He wears a black glove on one hand]* If you believe in God, young Max, make him lift that table. Send up a prayer, and move that table – now. *[triumphant pause]* You can't, can you? *[walks to extreme stage right]* I guarantee you that table won't move. You have my word on it.

Max The table never did move. I knew God had more important things to do, but in my book Emberton needed taking down a peg. Always helping Mum in the study with her accounts and then afterwards a small sherry between those great fat fingers of his. Sherry! Our Dad wouldn't have been seen dead with a sherry. It was John Smiths or nothing.

Emberton All things are accountable through number, young Max. You can set your compass by it. *[to Alice]* I've brought you some jelly babies, poppet.

Alice Really?

Emberton *[pulls out a packet, she reaches for them and he holds them out of reach]* Ah ah. First you've got to tell me which number is the most fascinating number of all?

Alice *[pause]* Six?

Emberton No.

Alice Twenty three?

Emberton No.

Alice Twenty three million?

Emberton It's zero, Alice. Zero is the most fascinating number of all. *[he eats one of the jelly babies. Alice sinks down by his feet, crest fallen]* Invented by the Arabs. Clever people the Arabs. Strictly speaking, of course, zero isn't a number. But it performs an extraordinary function in the mathematical universe. *[takes out a second jelly baby]* Observe this jelly baby. It's a lovely red colour, isn't it?

Alice *[yearningly]* Yes.

Emberton Forget the colour, Alice. Divided by zero, this jelly baby becomes infinite. *[dry laughter]* A little like a communion wafer, I believe. *[holds the sweet up]* Ready? *[Alice puts out her tongue and he places the sweet onto it. She crosses herself]* Just like your Mummy. *[exits]*

Max *[adult]* Alice loved praying.

Alice Mummy, can we go and make communion? Father Russell says prayers count double today. I might get someone out of purgatory.

Max She was a great one for confession too. Father Russell must have winced at the sound of her footsteps. She'd be in there for hours

Alice *[kneeling by the chair]* . . . and I let Davy Anderson see my knickers so now my brother's got to fight him with a . . . is it blasphemy to say the word fart, father?

Davy *[rushes on stage, aged 12]* Ready, Johnson?

Max *[aged 12]* Firing on all cylinders.

Davy Are we agreed on the categories?

Max Length of fart. Loudness of fart. Artistic merit.

Davy Tune?

Max 'When the Saints Go Marching In'.

Davy Take up positions. *[they turn their backs to the audience and squat]* Bombs away. *[loud raspberry sounds]*

Max *[Straightens up. As adult]* My secret technique was a squeezy bottle. I got the idea off Blue Peter. *[explanatory]* The squeezy bottle, not the farts. It would pump you up a treat. *[Davy exits. pause]* Alice was the real fire cracker, though. She was bursting at the seams.

Alice *[sings and tap dances across stage towards Max]* One, two, three, four, five, once I caught a fish alive. Six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Then I put it back again. *[she looks wistfully towards Max and continues singing, dancing backwards into the wings with her hands held out towards him]* Then I put it back again . . .

Max *[Actor 2 walks by as an adult. Max immediately tries to sell him a copy]* Big Issue, sir! Christmas Edition! Only two pounds! *[Actor 2 puts his head down evasively]* Great article on Amy Winehouse. Wrote it myself. Look, there's my by-line. *[Actor 2 exits rapidly. Max spots a potential customer in the audience]* Big Issue, sir? Madam? *[tired pause]* Eye contact. That's the trick. You've got to catch their eye and hold it . . . hold it . . . *[eye-contact with member of*

audience] in whatever way you can . . . until they crack. Lots of rummaging in handbags. [*demonstrates*] ‘Ooh my purse is in here somewhere, all tangled up in the lining of my capacious Mulberry.’ But every now and then the heavens open and you’ve got a sale. Sometimes they’re friendly, chatty even. But more often than not they don’t look at you. They just let the money ‘dock’ into your hand. [*demonstrates gingerly retracting fingers from his own palm*] It’s mucky stuff, someone else’s need. You’re well shot of it for the price of a Cappuccino.

[*Black Out*]

SCENE TWO

Radio [*Sound of a Radio Three Arts programme fades up*] “As controversy rages around the Orange Prize short list this year, I’m joined by novelist Alice Johnson.” [*lights slowly rise on Alice, extreme stage right, who sits on a stool wearing a sound mic and headphones. Max sits upstage at a word processor, listening intently. A large poster for The Big Issue is on the wall. The Editor sits at a desk flicking through a hard back book, entitled ‘Two Way Mirror’.*] “Less than a year ago, she was an unknown. Today, her Orange nominated ‘Two Way Mirror’ is giving literary punters a run for their money. Alice, good evening to you.”

Alice Hello.

Interv.Radio “‘Two Way Mirror’. Rape, murder, incest. Strong stuff for a first novel.”

Alice It’s how I write.

Interv.Radio “Some are hailing you the new Angela Carter. Others claim ‘Two Way Mirror’ is, and I quote, ‘psycho babble at its most pretentious.’”

Alice Well, we’re all pretending in a way, aren’t we?

Interv.Radio “Some of the narrative appears to echo your own life. Your brother, for example?”

Editor [*walks casually over to Max, holding the book*] How’s it going, Max?

Alice “Yes. My brother . . . was a huge influence.”

Editor [*Max switches off the recording. The Editor gives Max the book*] She’s a big fan of The Big Issue, apparently. Get her to write us a short story and waive the fee if you can. Here’s her number. [*hands him a sheet of paper*]

Max I . . . I can’t.

Editor Jacinta’ll sort out your traveling expenses.

Max I can’t do it, Rob.

Editor Of course you can.

Max Put someone else on the job.

Editor Bollocks. This'll be a piece of piss after Amy Winehouse.

Max This is different.

Editor She's happy to talk. She needs the publicity. Great angle about her brother. Where's your problem?

Max Great angle about her brother. That's my problem.

Editor If I didn't think you could do it, I wouldn't ask you, Max. You're a good writer. You've got flare. Do you want to stand on street corners for the rest of your life? I think not.

Max Just think about my name, Rob. Have a little think about my name. And while you're at it, listen to the interview. *[he switches back the recording on his computer]*

Alice My brother was a big part of my life . . . and then it all started to go wrong. He got ill, and then he went missing at sixteen. We got one postcard from Earls Court, just one. *[pause]* That's when I started to write. *[the Editor switches it off]*

Editor Alice Johnson. She's your sister?

Max Yes. *[ironic]* Great angle about the brother.

Editor Max, this is fucking scoop!

Max I know.

Editor The Guardian will kill for this sort of thing.

Max I know. But I'm not ready. Not after fourteen years. *[pause]* What would I say to her?

Editor Max. Don't fuck it up. I know what I'm talking about. I've been there. Trust me. This is your big break. You can't escape the past. But you can use it. *[indicates Alice]* She has.

[Black Out]

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