**THE BIG ISSUE**

(a 30 minute stage play)

by Claire Booker

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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.

Actor 3 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 [M*ax 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 says he’s going stamp on his head.

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

Alice He won’t give Grumpy back unless I buy him a sherbet dip and let him 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 back the bear!

Alice Don’t hurt Max. 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 biting my bloody leg.

Max *[to Alice]* Get off, Alice. You’re ruining things.

Alice I’m not letting go.

Max Go home, will you?

Davy I’ve just seen her knickers!

Max Liar! *[redoubles his efforts]*

Alice I’m not going home.

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 Tescos.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 careful with money. I realised something tricky 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? How about some tea? Real cups, real saucers and a real sugar bowl with tongs. *[pours out ‘tea’]*

Max What didn’t Dad buy her? Whatever she wanted, she got.

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 yoyo.

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 *[peeved]* It won’t shut.

Max Dump something.

Alice I can’t.

Max *[pulls out nurses hat from case]* This, for starters.

Alice My nurse’s uniform?

Max Yes.

Alice But what if someone gets ill?

Max Alice. You’re meant to be in bed. If they come back and find you up, I’m in trouble.

Alice Don’t you think Mum looks lovely in her Ra Ra?

Max She’s all right.

Alice I wonder if they’re in love.

Max Who?

Alice Mum and Dad.

Max Don’t be daft. They’ve been married forever.

Alice Dad 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 Shut up and go to bed.

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

Max Of course she likes it. Who else is going to hold her hand at her age?

Alice *[pause]* Mr Emberton?

Max *[they both explode with laughter]* That false plastic hand of his! Ugh!

Alice Mum doesn’t seem to mind.

Max That’s ‘cos she’s too polite.

Alice Maybe she’ll shake his other hand one day. The real one. Maybe they’ll hold hands and kiss and . . .

Max Shut up, Alice.

Alice That would make them sinners.

Max He’s already a sinner.

Alice Is he?

Max Yes. He doesn’t believe in God. *[adult]* We prayed for Mr Emberton. *[kneels, and young Alice joins him]* We prayed for all atheists, especially those with prosthetic limbs and excessive 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. God had more important things to do. 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 whiskey or nothing.

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