

Closer to God

By Anna Jordan

Winner – Panel Award / Audience Award
Best Play
Off Cut Festival 2009
Old Red Lion Theatre

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He (79) and She (20) sit on chairs, her stage right and him stage left. They are either side of an imaginary partition wall, at the top of a tower block.

/In the text indicates coming in very promptly on cue, almost overlapping, but not quite.

HE: Small. Spiky. A tomboy /

SHE: / Grey. Shrivelled. Like a prune /

HE: / Got a mouth on her /

SHE: / Like an old baked potato that's been left in the oven too long /

HE: / Some of the words! /

SHE: / Crusty. Like he's, like he's, ah... what is it? /

HE: / "F this", "F that", little F-ing C"/

SHE: / Decaying!

HE: Acid tongue. /

SHE: / Smelling of piss and germolene. /

HE: / Acid tongue. Potty mouth. /

SHE: / A hundred and fucking two. /

HE: / No more than eighteen. A pup. /

SHE: / Nearly dead.

Beat

HE: She came a year ago. Was pleased at first. Good to have some life up here. I've been here 30 years. /

SHE: / He's been here since time began! /

HE: / Thirty years in the sky! /

SHE: /Sad. Old. Sad. Git.

HE: First it was Marie and Bob. Pretty lady. Barren. Something wrong with her fallopian tubes or what

not. And a decent chappie. Although I think he left her in the end. I lose track.

SHE: *(Calling to her baby)* Jayden!

HE: Then Derek. The batchelor. With his flashy waistcoats and his record player and his loose ladies.

SHE: *(Shouting)* Jayden!

HE: *(Chuckling To himself)* I liked Derek. /

SHE: / *(Shouting)* DO NOT PUT THAT IN YOUR MOUTH! /

HE:/ There she goes! /

SHE: / THAT IS DIRTY! /

HE: / There she blows! /

SHE: / *(Louder)* I'm gonna count to three! ONE. /

HE: / *(Hushed – mockingly)* Run and hide Jayden! /

SHE: / TWO/

HE: /Dive for cover old man! /

SHE: /THREE.

There is a suspended pause.

SHE: Good boy.

He crosses his chest in mock relief.

HE: Jayden. *(Snorts and shakes his head)*

Beat

Then for twelve years it was Sandra and Paul. Good English names. Round white faces. When England was all about roast beef and funfairs, Christmas and long summers and chips and football, women drinking cinzano and men in bookies, cars with smoke billowing from the exhaust and discos and the smell of petrol or toast or cut grass. Now it's all messed up. All blurred.

What have we got now eh? It's all global warming and Ramadan.

Beat

(A little louder, as though baiting her) No rights for whites!

SHE: (*Shouting*) Facist!

HE: (*Shouting*) Nationalist!

SHE: (*Shouting*) Racist!

HE: (*Shouting*) Realist!

SHE: (*To him*) Who do you think's gonna wipe your arse old man? Eh? Who do you think's gonna scoop mush into your dribbling gob, or change your shitty pants, or put up with your stinky stink as you draw your last fucking breath on some shitty NHS ward. Eh? I'll tell ya. The blacks, that's fucking who!

HE: NEVER!

SHE: Full of shit old man!

Beat

HE: (*Ignoring her*) These towers were the talk of the town at first. /

SHE: / FULL/

HE: High rise living, that little bit closer to God. /

SHE: / OF/

HE: / Each flat would take it in turns to clean the landing, and each floor would have a flower arrangement and there would be a prize for the best. /

SHE: / SHIT. /

HE: / Pride, that's called. /

SHE: / You get me? /

HE: / What's now eh? Last week someone did a turd in the lift. I got in and there it was, all curled up and brown and stinking in the corner, with some of it up the side. Looking at me. /

SHE: /It was you! It was your turd old man! /

HE: / (*Shouting suddenly*) Belt up!

Beat. She does.

It didn't end well. Paul died of cancer and Sandra threw herself off, but they were happy, while they were here. He used to build ships out of matches. And she collected china pigs. There's been a few. Jumpers, that is.

Since then it's been a sea of brown faces, foreign tongues, filthy cooking smells. Asads and Mohameds and Osamas. Six Somalians, living on top of each other in that tiny flat. Might as well be aliens.

Then....empty. Until

SHE: I/

HE: /She/

SHE: / Came to live/

HE: /Came along. /

SHE: /New start for me. /

HE: /With her "Jayden". /

SHE: / With my boy. /

HE: /Her little brown baby.

Beat

SHE: Chance for a bit of space. Just didn't think we'd be so high. No air up here. Gets muggy/

HE: /Close. /

SHE: / Walls paper thin. Can hear him fart /

HE:/ Hear her puke /

SHE: *(To him)* Can smell it sometimes too old man.

HE: Puked on the landing once. Drunk. Those alco-poppy things. Sweet sicky strawberry stink.

SHE: *(To him)* I cleaned it up!

HE: *(To her)* I slipped in it next day!

SHE: *(To him)* Whatever....

Beat

SHE: But the worst thing. The very worst thing is:

HE / SHE: The lifts.

HE: Out of action for days at a time.

SHE: *(To him)* At least we agree on one thing old man!

HE: They come to fix it, then two hours later /

SHE: / Broke again. Can't do nineteen floors with a pushchair /

HE:/ Can't do the stairs with this leg/

HE: So then we're /

SHE / HE: Trapped.

HE: In a shoebox in the sky.

Beat

SHE: If I sit around here for too long I start to get that feeling. That numb feeling. Its like I'm sitting here and it starts at my feet, up to my knees then right through my body, up across my chest and into my neck, face and the top of my head. I feel... dead. I feel that I'm dying, slowly. Dying and rotting up here. Like old Mr Stinky Stink. But we don't wanna be like Mr Stinky Stink, do we Jayden? So we have our music. Raggae, drum and bass, dance hall, grime, crank it up and blare it loud!

HE: The jungle drums. /

SHE: / Don't we Jayden!!/

HE: / The boom boom boom. /

SHE: /Our own little carnival hey baby?/

HE: /Makes me feel a sort of....dread. The boom boom boom. /

SHE:/ CAR-NI-VAL! Woo-hoo!/

HE: /Stupid... A grown man, but it makes me feel sort of afraid. /

SHE: / And I dance. I dance like I'm at the fucking Ministry of Sound, I dance and I sweat and then I know I'm alive. /

HE: Daft, really.

Beat

SHE: But you have your telly old man.

HE: It's true. My companion.

SHE: He does it all, all day, loves the quizzes /

HE: / *Fifteen to One. Countdown.* /

SHE: /And the DIY/

HE: / *Sixty-Minute-Makeover*/

SHE: / And most of all, and this makes me piss myself, most of all he loves the programmes where people pack up there pissy sorry little lives in England and head for a new one abroad, like *Place in the Sun* /

HE: /I don't /

SHE: / He does! And the really stupid fucking thing is that he never goes out, do you old man?

HE: (*Turning suddenly, standing*) And where the hell of *you* been?

SHE: I'm young! I've got time!

Beat.

SHE: (*His question bothers her*) I've got time. Only seen each other a few times, me and old man. In the lift, which he fills with his shit and medicine smell, or on the landing, where he puts out his rubbish. Sometimes it spills out. He seems to live on *Frey Bentos* pies. /

HE: /She doesn't eat, only smokes, thinks I don't know. /

SHE: /Knocked on him once. Slammed the door in my face.

HE: (*to her*) I didn't know who it was!

SHE: Wouldn't even take the chain off, just stuck his flabby grey face out the gap and said 'What you want?'/

HE: She was so – how do they say it – well, 'in your face'.

SHE: / (*To him*) Last time I offer to go shop for you, ungrateful fucker! /

HE:/ I've got everything I need, I don't need you! /

Beat

HE: Tins. They last forever, don't they? Stocked up like a nuclear bunker I am, in case leg or lift fail. Or both.

Beat

(Leans forward, quietly) I was sorry afterwards. But I don't think anyone had knocked on my door since 2006. And that was the Jehovah's. I told them where they could stick their *Watchtower*, but I admired their spirit, climbing nineteen floors just to save my sorry old soul.

SHE: We don't meet now, face to face. /

HE: / Just the noises and sounds. /

HE / SHE: / The everyday.

SHE: Up at 7. /

HE: /Up by 7, or 6, or whenever little one wakes up. /

SHE:/ Old people, nowhere to go, nothing to do, but still get up at the crack of fucking dawn! I love my bed.../

HE: / Doesn't have a structure for his meals /

SHE: / Then it's breakfast, telly, lunch, telly, dinner, telly /

HE: /They need structure, kiddies, don't they?/

SHE: / Then more telly. He does some cleaning, moving around the house slow, dragging that poor leg behind him.

HE: He plays. She smokes. She sings, sometimes.

SHE: / Leg dead already. Waiting for the rest of him to join. /

HE:/ Then its chats on the phone and bathtime for Jayden and the boom boom boom. /

SHE:/ Bath twice a week, dirty old git. /

HE: /Bedtime – again, no routine. /

SHE: Keeps his telly on all night. It annoyed me at first. But got used to it. Sort of a comfort now. Don't know if he's sleeping or staying up. But think he must be at least dozing cos sometimes he cries out /

HE: / Her laugh, that giggle, it reminds me of /

SHE: / 'EVIE!'/

HE:/ Evie. /

SHE: / His wife I guess. /

HE: / My daughter. /

SHE: / Sad. /

HE:/ If I listen hard enough, if she laughs for long enough, Evie's here. She's here in the room with me.

Beat

HE: Visitors: Mum. Friend. Health Visitor Thingy. /

SHE: / Visitors: None. /

HE: / And once, and only once, Jaydens dad.

Beat

HE: Came here with a white chap. I peeked through the door. They were talking, shouting, in English, but like no English I'd never heard. Made English sound like a foreign language. Didn't recognise the sounds, the vowels. They'd stolen it. They'd stolen English!

SHE: Here he goes!

HE: He was shouting. Something about 'My son, my boy' and about her being a whore, and then Jayden was crying. And then she started to cry.../

SHE: / Never wanted to see Jay before, turned up out of the blue, off his face on coke and booze. Started shouting the odds. Bought a mate. /

HE: / Could hear banging and smashing, breaking her things, throwing stuff at the wall. I heard her say /

SHE: / 'His toys. You're breaking his toys!'/

HE: /Started to escalate, get louder. I was trying to work out what was going on /

SHE: / I got a few knocks, you know /

HE: / Hitting her. Kicking her, I think /

SHE: / Took a beating. It happens, sometimes, I guess /

HE: / I winced with every bang /

SHE: / It's life.

HE: I jump up. Go to the bedroom, pull on a jumper and a pair of slacks. It's stupid, for a moment I just stand there, wondering which shoes to put on. Thing was, none of them seemed to fit, my feet must have swelled. It didn't seem right, going out there in my slippers. Anyway, I grab the baseball bat from

under the bed and go to the door. I open it an inch, and listen. I take a deep breath, and step out on to the landing. I walk towards her door, my heart pounding, I could hear it, hear my heart beating, and my mouth is dry. I get this close, and hear another crash, and more of the crazy stolen English, and she screams and I run back into the flat and sit in my chair and close my eyes.

And I think, you silly silly old man. And so I wait. I sit there, and I listen, and I wait.

Only the banging and crashing has stopped. And now it's a sort of rhythmical thud. And he's crying. And she's sort of whimpering. And there's a grunting. /

SHE: *(In real time, shouting at the baby)* JAYDEN! /

HE: /And that goes on for a while. /

SHE: /*(To Jayden)* What did I tell you, you little shit! /

HE: / And then it stops for a few seconds. And then it starts again, the thudding /

SHE: *(To Jayden)* STOP! /

HE: / And more crying /

SHE: / *(To Jayden)* PLEASE! /

HE: / And the grunting. But this time its a different grunt. A different voice. /

SHE: / *(To Jayden)* That is DIRTY. Put it DOWN! /

HE: / And then some laughter. And then the door slams. And then it's just us. Just the three of us again. /

Beat

HE: *(Quietly)*. She's quiet now. But I can *feel* where she is, in the flat. So I move my chair over to where I think she's lying and I put my hand on the wall and I talk to her. For hours. I tell her about when Evie was little, and the holidays we took, and I tell her what I'm going to have for tea and when I run out of my own stories I just tell her what's happening on the TV. I explain what's happening in the soaps and we play the quiz games, I ask the questions and I answer them too. She doesn't answer them. Jayden cries a little, and eventually he stops and then I stop talking and I'm just sitting there, with my hand on the wall.

Beat

SHE: *(Again, quietly)*. At some point I must have passed out. I come round and old man's talking away to himself and Jayden's crying a bit so I take him in my arms and give him a good cuddle and he cuddles me back. Eventually I pick myself up, give my face a good wash and then we go to mums. I carry Jayden down nineteen flights, and I start to panic, to spin out because I lose count of the number of flights and then it seems more than nineteen, more than twenty-five, and I start to wonder if it's ever going to end.

What happens if the staircase goes on forever and I can never reach the ground and never get back to the top again?

Pause

HE: There was a documentary on last night. /

SHE: / Tired now. It's late. /

HE: /BBC 2/

SHE: / Sometimes when it's late I hold Jayden and we stand at the window and look at the other tower /

HE: / "Life After People"/

SHE: / And we watch don't we Jay-Jay? We watch the lights going out. One by one. /

HE: / About how nature will eventually reclaim all the towns and cities, one by one /

SHE: /And we say 'There goes another one'. Don't we? /

HE / SHE: /There goes another one. /

SHE: / Imagining the people tucking down and drifting off /

HE: / All traces of humans will vanish and buildings will fade and crumble/

SHE: / We wait for them all to go out, blink blink, one by one, until the tower is completely dark.

HE: /And all that will remain of us is the pyramids and all of our plastic water bottles which will form a vast floating island bobbing on the sea for millions of years. /

SHE: /Completely at rest. /

HE: / And we will be gone.

SHE: But they never do. Time for bed Jayden.

HE: It's late. Lights off. Telly on.

Beat

SHE: Night.

Beat

HE: Night.