

THE LIFE AHEAD

by John Hudson

A, female, and B, male, both mid-twenties, both wearing coats over smart office dress, meet at the lift in the foyer of an office block, circa 1973.

There are two chairs only on stage. The setting is created solely by light and sound effects.

B

After you.

A

Thank you, most kind.

B

Don't mention it.

*They enter the lift.*

Fifth floor, isn't it? Same as me.

*She nods. He appears to press a button. Lights and sound suggest lift doors closing, lift moving.*

Nice to see you again. How are things?

*They clutch each other passionately, kissing madly, unbuttoning coats, hands running up and down each other's bodies, continuing during the following.*

A

Good, thanks. You?

B

Yeah, great. Right gradely, as my old Dad says.

A

Lovely.

B

Though it's foul, of course, all the rubbish piled up everywhere.

A

Awful.

B

And the weather's not that wonderful.

A

I know. I can't wait for it to be sunny again.

B

You like the sun, then?

A

I worship it. Don't you?

B

I do. I do, indeed. How are you finding these shorter weeks?

A

It's all right. Plenty to do, at least.

B

I know what you mean. Good to be kept busy.

A

And everyone in my department's really friendly.

B

That's what it's all about. Pulling together in a crisis.

A

You're so right.

B

It's a nightmare, if you don't.

A

Yes. For sure.

B

But when other folk stay cheerful...

A

That's it.

B

Even when beset by problems, you can still be happy in your job.

A

I agree.

B

Come in each day, smile on your face.

A

Looking forward...

B

With confidence.

A

...to the life ahead.

*The lift stops and doors open. Immediately, they spring apart, straightening clothes and hair.*

*They leave the lift. A trips on something as she steps out.*

B

Oops, mind how you go.

A

Oh, heck. I can be so clumsy at times. New shoes.

B

Safety first, that's what I always say.

A

Many a slip, eh?

B

Between cup and lip. Oh, yes.

*C, female, forties, enters, carrying a clipboard.*

C

Excuse me, sir, may I have a word?

B

With me? What for?

C

Won't take a second. Could you step in here? Just for a moment.

*An area of light indicates a room.*

B

Oh, well, yes, I suppose so.

A

Bye, then. Good to natter. Maybe see you later.

B

Yes, yes. Let's do that. (To C) In here?

C

That's it, sir. Thank you. (To A) Would you mind waiting out here, please, miss? I'll need to speak to you after, if you don't mind.

A

Oh? Yes, okay, then. If it's not too long.

*Lights down on A, who stands waiting. B and C step into the light. There are the two chairs.*

B

So, what's this about?

C

Just a few questions, sir. Take a seat.

B

I'd rather stand, thanks.

C

I will need you to sit down for me.

B

This won't take long, will it? You said -

C

*(Calm but authoritative)* Sit down, sir. Please.

B

All right, all right. Keep your hair on.

*He sits. She does, too.*

C

Thank you. Now, would you mind telling me, how well do you know that young woman you were just speaking to?

B

Hardly at all. Why? We bump into each other in the corridor, the lift, every now and then. Say hello and that.

C

Do you know where she was born?

B

No, of course I don't. How would I?

C

Or where her parents are from? What school she attended? What's her favourite colour, music, book?

B

Don't be daft.

C

Would it surprise you if I said you will come to know her as well as you know anyone? In time.

B

I should think it would, yes.

C

You'll invite her for a drink soon.

B

Will I, now? Says who?

C

After you've met for a drink a couple of times, you'll suggest the cinema. You'll choose a romantic picture, although you prefer action films. Afterwards, you'll invite her to your flat. One thing leads to another.

B

Oh, bloody hell...

C

Two months later, you take her to meet your father. It isn't an entirely successful visit, as he wishes you were still with your last girlfriend, who expected to become his daughter-in-law.

B

How the flip do you know that? That can't be in my file.

C

You begin to see much less of your father. When he unexpectedly dies, you go to his funeral alone. By this point, you've stopped listening to heavy metal because she doesn't like it. She prefers musicals. You buy expensive tickets for lavish West End shows, which you previously would never have gone near. You pretend to enjoy them.

B

This must be a prank of some sort? Is it?

C

After you and she have lived together for three years, your daughter is born. She has brown eyes, like her mother and, initially, a calm and sunny disposition. During her teenage years, however, she becomes moody and difficult, perhaps because of the growing tensions between you and her mother.

B

Where's the camera?

C

You meet a woman by chance in a car park who shares your love of Black Sabbath and takes you to her bed. You have a brief and ultimately unhappy interlude which you come to regret, especially when your daughter stops talking to you because of it.

B

I don't think this is funny, you know.

C

One rainy day in a town on the south coast forty-odd years from now, you find yourself lying in bed in a damp basement flat with no friends and no job, not having seen your daughter or her mother for over ten years. You have contracted a serious illness and realise that, like your father, you are going to die alone. At that point for the very first time, you remember this conversation, which until then you had entirely forgotten. That will be your final memory before you pass away.

B

Is that right? I'll be sure to remember your face, then.

C

Thank you, that will be all.

B

*(Standing)* It will, will it? You think you've heard the last of this? Think again. I'm going straight to management. You won't get away with this, no bloody way.

C

You may leave. Please ask the young woman to join me.

B

Do it yourself, I've had enough. I'll be seeing you again, depend on it. In an industrial tribunal. You psychopathic maniac.

*B exits, hurrying past A, ignoring her. After standing puzzled for a moment, A enters the room.*

A

Did you want to speak to me?

C

Thank you. Take a seat, please.

A

He didn't look very happy. Charged past without a word.

C

Do you like him?

A

Him? He's all right, I suppose. Always very perky. Well, usually, anyway. Why? Has he done something?

C

Not yet.

A

God, that's worrying. Is he a criminal or something?

*She sits.*

C

Does he seem like one to you?

A

I don't know. I don't meet that many.

C

You never can be sure.

A

Well, yes. True. What's this all about? Oh, it's not Ireland, is it? He isn't going to plant a bomb?

C

That's classified. I can't say, I'm afraid.

A

What, are you from the police? Or MI5? I mean, I don't know him at all, really. He talks to me in the lift, that's all. I know nothing about him.

C

You could always choose to keep it that way. If you wanted.

A

You bet. I'll avoid him like the plague from now on.

C

Tell me, would you describe yourself as maternal?

A

Not especially. That's an odd thing to ask. Would you?

C

If I said you would give birth to a daughter in a few years' time, what would be your reaction?

A

I'd say, what makes you think that?

C

Can you see yourself doting on her? So much that you begin to resent time spent with anyone else? All you want to do is watch her grow, listen to her speak, brush her hair. You go back to work when she starts school but only part-time so you can take her in and pick her up every day.

A

Bor-ing. Doesn't sound like me at all.

C

Which is why, when she starts to rebel as a teenager, it comes as such a blow. When she speaks unkindly to you, it's hard to bear. You want to tell her how much she means to you but you can't find the right words and she always walks away. She starts staying out late at night. She won't tell you what she's been doing or who she's been with.

A

I'm a rotten Mum, aren't I? What is all this?

C

When you split up from her father, she elects to live with him. Then, a few months later, she suddenly turns up at your home in tears. She won't tell you why.

A

This is like one of those plays on telly, isn't it?

C

She moves back in with you. The bond between you is re-established. You start doing things together, going to the pictures, shopping, taking holidays abroad. When she graduates from university you are almost unbearably proud of her.

A

University? Clever girl.

C

She leaves home to set up on her own and you start a new job, which is particularly fulfilling. You bump into someone you knew when you were at school, who always liked you. You start a relationship.

A

Oh? Which boy was this?

C

After a while, you move in with him. You redecorate his house but it still doesn't feel like your home. You suggest getting a new place together, he agrees and once there, you are the happiest you've ever been. You discover he's not nearly as dull as you used to think he was. In fact, he might just be the best thing that's ever happened to you. Your daughter says you seem to have recovered your old optimistic self.

A

Blimey, it's like a musical. And you reckon all this is going to happen?

C

Not necessarily, no. It depends.

A

I thought as much. On what?

C

You need to watch your step going home tonight. All that uncleared garbage makes it treacherous in the rain. And with the power cuts, it's hard for drivers to stop if a pedestrian slips off the kerb.

A

Are you threatening me?

C

It could be dangerous. When you run for your bus.

A

Don't be silly. I never run, especially in these shoes.

C

Good. Don't.

A

All right, I won't.

C

Well, that's all. Thank you, we're through here.

A

Phew! You've given me the collywobblers. Who are you?

C

I'm nobody. My name is Cassandra. Goodbye.

A

That's a nice name. You know, if I ever do have a little girl, I might even call her that. Bye.

*C exits. A shivers.*

*After a moment, B re-enters.*

B

Oh. Where is she? That woman.

A

She went.

B

She's a nutter.

A

Yes. That's what I was thinking.

B

Fancy a drink? After work?

A

Oh. I was going to get the bus home. Early night.

B

Quick one? Pub round the corner? I could give you a lift home, if it's wet.

A

Ask me later. I'll see how I feel.

B

Ok. I'll keep you to that. Back to work, then. Nose to the grindstone.

A

Yes. Same old routine. Nothing ever changes, does it?

*They exit.*

*Lights out.*