

TOO LATE

By Jeff Dunne

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CHARACTERS

JESS	A woman recently deceased.
ARTHUR	A man who was in love with Jess, but too shy to let her know.
NORA	Jess's self-absorbed, shallow mother.
BENJAMIN	Jess's weak-willed, spineless father.
ALEX	An uncomfortable guest pressured into being at the viewing.

SETTING

A funeral viewing.

This play was written in reaction to this piece of artwork by Jasmine Khamphanthirath:



SCENE

(It is a funeral home. There's a casket in the center. On one side of the room is a small table with an animal skull and a small statue of a bird. Nora and Benjamin are milling about, presumably waiting to talk to guests, or perhaps walking off stage to talk to people who are unseen. Alex enters uncomfortably, and Nora walks over to greet him. Jess follows and gets within hearing range.)

NORA

How nice of you to come. I'm Nora. Jess's mother. That's Ben over there. He's her father.

ALEX

Oh. Um, hi. I'm Alex Freeman.

NORA

Oh yes. I remember.

JESS

Wait. You remember?

NORA

And how did you know Jessie?

ALEX

We had some classes together in college.

NORA

Isn't that lovely.

JESS

No.

NORA

So you were friends?

JESS

Not really.

ALEX

Well, I guess. She lived in the apartment above me junior year.

NORA

I really appreciate you coming all this way.

ALEX

Sure. Although I actually only live about eight minutes from here.

JESS

Nora, I swear...

ALEX

After the call from the funeral director, it just seemed...

NORA

Yes, wasn't he a dear to reach out to the people we invited?

JESS

Did you just go through my address book and invite everyone? I bet that's exactly what you did.

ALEX

He sounded so... worried.

NORA

We invited everyone in Jess's address book, but...

JESS

And there it is.

NORA

A lot people just couldn't make it.

ALEX

Well, I can't stay long either, Mrs. Harris.

NORA

Please, call me Nora. And at least have some of the teacakes before you go.

ALEX

Thank you.

(Alex walks away to get some cakes. Nora wanders back to Benjamin, and Jess meanders over to a small table with the skull and statue.)

JESS

What in the world... These? Really? An entire bookshelf filled with things that actually meant something to me, and this is what they saved? I don't even know where I got that stupid bird.

(Arthur enters, then walks over to consider the table.)

ARTHUR

Wow.

JESS

I don't even know *you*. They must have really been scraping the barrel. You know what, I bet you work for the funeral home or something...

ARTHUR

(Picking up the bird...)

I don't believe it.

JESS

Wait. You know the bird?

ARTHUR

This was... Oh my god. Stupid stupid stupid...

(He puts the bird back down, and starts to walk away.)

JESS

Wait! Wait!

(Arthur stops. We might almost wonder if he heard her.)

Who are you?

(He turns, but is looking at the table, not her.)

What do you know about the bird?

(Arthur walks back to the table.)

ARTHUR

Well, I guess I'm glad it meant something to you.

JESS
What? What did it mean?

ARTHUR
I just wish you had said something.

JESS
Said something? About—

ARTHUR
I always figured you...

JESS
What?

ARTHUR
Isn't that just... Well, I guess it doesn't matter now, does it?

JESS
Great. Just great.

(Nora and Benjamin approach the table.)

Oh, oh. Here's my chance. Ask him his name, Nora. You always—

NORA
Look, Ben. They brought that... that thing. What is it? A cow or something.

BENJAMIN
I don't know.

NORA
I don't know, I don't know. Is that all you can ever say?

BENJAMIN
I don't know what it is. What do you want me to—

NORA
Well why not? It was obviously important to your daughter.

BENJAMIN
You don't know what it is either.

NORA

Just what are you trying to—

ARTHUR

I think it's from a horse.

(There's a stunned, awkward silence amongst the three of them as Jess says...)

JESS

A horse? Oh gross. I thought it was a deer.

ARTHUR

Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt.

JESS

Yes you did, and good for you.

BENJAMIN

No, no. It's fine. I'm, uh...

JESS

That's it. Introd—

BENJAMIN

Glad you came.

JESS

Damn. Could you not let me down even once?

ARTHUR

Of course. You must be Jess's parents.

NORA

Yes. I'm Nora, and this is Ben.

ARTHUR

I'm so sorry for your loss.

NORA

Thank you.

(More awkward silence between the living.)

JESS

Seriously, *mother*? The one time you don't ask—

ARTHUR

Well, I should...

BENJAMIN

Were you a friend of Jess's?

JESS

There you go, Ben. Finally did something useful.

ARTHUR

Well, I... I guess. Sort of.

JESS

Sort of? What does—

ARTHUR

I knew her through work.

JESS

What? I don't remember—

NORA

Oh, of course. Do you work at the cafe where she...

ARTHUR

No. I... uh... Sorry. Where are my manners?

JESS

Finally!

ARTHUR

My name's Arthur.

JESS

Shit.

ARTHUR

Arthur Pillman.

JESS

I don't remember anyone named Arthur.

NORA

I don't remember your name from the invitations.

ARTHUR

I'm a driver with FedEx. Jess's bookstore was on my Thursday route, and...

NORA

That's nice. Isn't that nice, Ben?

BENJAMIN

What bookstore?

JESS

Bookstore?

ARTHUR

Barnes and Noble.

JESS

That was like...

BENJAMIN

When did Jessie work at a bookstore?

NORA

Oh, Benjamin. Don't you ever remember anything? Jess worked there when she was living in Hoboken.

BENJAMIN

In New Jersey?

NORA

Yes, in New Jersey. You just never pay attention, do you?

JESS

That was...

ARTHUR

It's okay. It was a while ago.

JESS

That was *eight years* ago.

NORA

Well, that's nice. And are you living here in Delaware now?

ARTHUR

No. Still in Hoboken.

JESS

What?

NORA

Well, it's so nice of you to have come all this way. As you can see, Jess didn't have a lot of friends.

ARTHUR

I... Yeah, I guess. I'll admit I was kind of surprised. I expected there to be a lot of people here.

NORA

Well, we're not surprised, are we, Ben?

JESS

There she is. My *loving* mother.

ARTHUR

I'm sorry, what?

NORA

We didn't expect a lot of people. I mean, Jessie didn't even finish college. Not like her sister. Kathy, now she'll have a lot of people at her funeral, won't she, Ben?

(Arthur just stares at Nora, trying to comprehend that her mother is talking like this.)

JESS

What about the bird? I'm sure I would have remembered...

NORA

Well, it's very nice of you to—

(Through a growing anger, Arthur has finally screwed up his courage to confront an injustice.)

ARTHUR

What's wrong with you? How can you talk about your own daughter like that? And at her funeral?

NORA

Excuse me?

(Arthur gets a little louder. Jess is stunned.)

ARTHUR

She was your daughter. And a pretty damn amazing woman. You act like it's no big loss that she's gone.

NORA

Now see here, Mr. Pullman.

ARTHUR

Pillman.

(Arthur turns and walks away.)

NORA

Are you going to let him get away with that, Benjamin?

BENJAMIN

What do you want me to do?

NORA

You're the man. Go... confront him! Make him apologize!

BENJAMIN

For what? He's right.

(Nora gasps, completely affronted.)

You always preferred Kathy. It's no secret.

NORA

Well at least I liked one of them. *You* didn't notice either if you could avoid it!

BENJAMIN

Don't start shouting at me. And I noticed them.

NORA

Well you kept it a real secret then.

(Jess has gone over to be next to Arthur, and with intensity borne of insatiable curiosity...)

JESS

Who *are* you?

NORA

Now go tell that Albert fellow that he needs to apologize.

(Benjamin grows surly, and then goes over to Arthur.)

BENJAMIN

Arthur...

(Arthur turns to look at him.)

Nora sent me over. *(No response.)* She thinks you should apologize.

ARTHUR

I wouldn't hold your—

BENJAMIN

But then she thinks lots of people should apologize to her.

(Arthur looks utterly confused.)

I wouldn't, though. She'd just feel vindicated.

JESS

Wow. Is it possible you actually have a tiny little backbone hidden in there somewhere?

BENJAMIN

If you don't mind, could I ask you a question?

ARTHUR

I suppose.

BENJAMIN

Jess never mentioned you. Not that that's much of a surprise. She never really told us anything that was going on in her life.

JESS

Not like you deserved it.

BENJAMIN

Not that we deserved to know, I suppose. But... were you and Jess close?

ARTHUR

(Hesitating, then...)

No. I wouldn't say that.

BENJAMIN

You must have been, at least a little.

ARTHUR

Not rea—

BENJAMIN

I mean, you drove, what? Three hours to get here?

ARTHUR

More like two and half.

BENJAMIN

Well, that's still quite a trip. I'm not trying to pry. You probably already know this, but Jess and I were never really... close. I'd appreciate the chance to know her better. Even a little.

JESS

Fine time to start feeling—

ARTHUR

Really, Mr. Harris. I don't think I can help you.

BENJAMIN

Did she ever... mention us? Did she ever talk about her family at all?

ARTHUR

Look, Mr. Harris—

BENJAMIN

Ben, please.

ARTHUR

Ben, I... If you must know, I didn't talk to Jess all that much. Hardly at all, really. Not much more than asking her to sign for packages.

BENJAMIN

I don't understand.

JESS

You don't understand? How about me?

ARTHUR

I wanted to. I really wanted to, but I just... I could never get up the courage to talk to her. She was just so beautiful... so smart... so....

JESS

So what?

ARTHUR

So intimidating.

JESS

You gotta be kidding me. I couldn't intimidate a squirrel!

BENJAMIN

I can understand that.

JESS

You've *got* to be kidding. I'm serious. I literally couldn't get squirrels to run away from me.

BENJAMIN

When she was little, I could never figure out what to say to her.

ARTHUR

Oh, I never had that problem. I could think of a million things to talk about. Or at least ask. Jess was so smart about so many things.

BENJAMIN

She was?

JESS

I was?

ARTHUR

Oh yeah. I swear she must have read every book in that store, and whenever anyone asked her about one, she always knew. Right off the top of her head. But somehow whenever I thought I would go in and ask her something, I just... choked up. I must have driven to that store a hundred times without ever actually walking in. And then a few years ago...

(Arthur shrugs, and looks like he is about to turn away.)

BENJAMIN

Did you ever see her after she moved back here?

ARTHUR

No. I thought about it. Thought about finding an excuse to run into her or something, but it felt... creepy. Like stalking. Besides, if she wanted to see me, she would have let me know.

JESS

What?

(Benjamin looks confused.)

ARTHUR

A couple of months after I first met Jess, I...

JESS AND BENJAMIN

What?

ARTHUR

I wanted to tell her that I liked her, but I was always so tongue-tied around her. I could never seem to get any words out. So... you saw that little bird statue over there? I left that for her at work one day.

JESS

Oh my god.

ARTHUR

Left it on the counter.

JESS

I remember.

ARTHUR

Just after she went on break.

JESS

I remember now.

ARTHUR

And I put a little card with it.

Wait a minute.

JESS

ARTHUR

I put my number, and said if she wanted to...

JESS

There was no card!

ARTHUR

You know, get together maybe...

JESS

There was no card!

ARTHUR

But she never called.

JESS

There wasn't a card, damn it!

ARTHUR

Honestly, I was so surprised when I saw it on that table...

JESS

No!

ARTHUR

I mean, I never imagined that she'd hold on to it all these years.

JESS

I would've called...

ARTHUR

That's something, I guess.

JESS

God damn it! I would've called!

BENJAMIN

Thank you.

ARTHUR

For what?

BENJAMIN

For caring. She deserved to have someone care.

ARTHUR

Yeah. Yes, she did.

BENJAMIN

I know what you're thinking. And you're right. I failed her.

ARTHUR

You failed yourself, too.

BENJAMIN

You're right.

ARTHUR

A damn shame. You really missed out.

BENJAMIN

Yeah.

ARTHUR

But I suppose you had your reasons.

BENJAMIN

I guess. Not good ones, though. Like I said, I never knew what to say to her when she was little. I was never good with kids. And especially little girls. And then, as she got older...

JESS AND ARTHUR

What?

BENJAMIN

Not saying anything became the norm. And then she started to look more and more like her mother... And as the years went by, another Nora was the last thing I wanted to be around.

ARTHUR

She was nothing like that woman. Nothing at all.

BENJAMIN

I just...

ARTHUR

You really lost out.

BENJAMIN

I know. Now. I just wish I had known before.

ARTHUR

Me too. I think she could have used a father.

(They stare at each other for a long moment.)

Well, I should get going. It's a long drive back.

BENJAMIN

Thank you, Arthur. You...

ARTHUR

Sure.

(Arthur turns to leave, but then...)

BENJAMIN

Wait.

(Arthur turns back. Benjamin goes over to the table and returns with the little bird statue.)

Will you take this? Keep it someplace special? To remember my little girl.

(Benjamin holds it out.)

ARTHUR

That's the part of my heart I gave to her. I wouldn't want to take it back. You keep it. I won't need any help remembering her, or the cost of not trying until it's already too late.

(Arthur turns and exits as Benjamin and Jess watch him leave, both with tears in their eyes. Lights out.)