



WHAT YOU LEFT BEHIND

A SOLO STAGE PLAY

Written by Kay Hart

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CHARACTER

JASPER WALTON: Twenty-seven. An emerging painter. Messy hair, rectangular glasses, paint-splattered clothes. Quick-talking, physical and funny when he wants to be. He uses humour to charm, deflect and keep control of a story. As the play progresses, the gap between the husband Jasper believes himself to have been and the husband his memories reveal becomes impossible for him to ignore.

SETTING

A flat in Stockport, Greater Manchester. Present day. The sitting room is in the final stages of being packed. Old furniture sits beneath dust sheets. An empty bookcase, stacked boxes, several framed paintings and one small circular table remain. On the table: a single measure of whisky. A sealed envelope in MAIA'S handwriting is visible somewhere in the room from the beginning. JASPER avoids it.

STAGING NOTE

This is a solo performance. MAIA, OWEN, MAIA'S FATHER and all other remembered characters are voiced and embodied by JASPER. Changes of physicality and vocal placement should make the transitions clear without turning the absent characters into caricatures. The audience is JASPER'S confidant. He wants their agreement.

ACT I SCENE 1

A HALF-PACKED SITTING ROOM IN A FLAT IN STOCKPORT. LATE AFTERNOON.

JASPER WALTON WRESTLES A BOX TOWARDS CENTRE STAGE. IT IS HEAVIER THAN HE EXPECTED. HE GETS THREE DETERMINED STEPS, LOSES HIS GRIP AND DROPS IT.

HE STARES AT THE BOX.

JASPER: Must be nice, having to work only when you feel like it, isn't it?

HE WAITS AS THOUGH SOMEBODY HAS ACTUALLY SAID THIS TO HIM.

JASPER: When I feel like it?

A laugh.

JASPER: It's never when I feel like it. See that painting over there? Didn't float down from God's own sky one Tuesday morning and land in a gallery. I painted that. Took me four months. Three canvases. Two minor breakdowns and one very expensive brush I snapped because apparently I am a grown man with emotional regulation.

HE INDICATES ANOTHER PAINTING.

JASPER: That one? Six weeks. The blue nearly killed me. You ever tried getting the right blue? Course you haven't. You look at blue and think, blue. Painters look at blue and think, cobalt, ultramarine, Prussian, cerulean, phthalo, existential crisis.

HE SMILES.

JASPER: You've probably seen my work around town. I'm not saying I'm famous. I'm saying if you've got taste, disposable income and access to a moderately pretentious gallery, there's a chance.

HE STRAIGHTENS HIS SHIRT, ENJOYING HIMSELF NOW.

JASPER: Grand unveilings, champagne, little plaques with my name on them. People look at me and think, that lad's got everything. Successful career. Nice place. Hair that says tortured artist but still photographs well.

HE NOTICES HIS WEDDING RING.

JASPER: And look. Ring on his finger. Taken. Sorry, ladies.

A BEAT.

JASPER: Was.

HE TURNS THE RING ONCE, THEN IMMEDIATELY RETURNS TO PACKING.

JASPER: Anyway. Point is, one good look at a picture doesn't tell you everything. People think it does. They see the finished thing and decide they understand it. They don't see what got painted over.

HE LOOKS AT THE AUDIENCE.

JASPER: Same with people.

HE LIFTS A FRAMED PAINTING, WRAPS IT.

JASPER: Same with marriages.

HE ALMOST LOOKS TOWARDS THE SEALED ENVELOPE. DOESN'T.

JASPER: Maia used to say I couldn't leave a blank wall alone. She was right. Blank wall, blank canvas, awkward silence - give me five minutes and I'll put something on it.

HE PACKS THE PAINTING.

JASPER: She's been gone two years.

A shrug, too casual.

JASPER: I'm fine.

HE TAKES THE WHISKY, CONSIDERS IT, PUTS IT BACK UNTOUCHED.

JASPER: Better than fine, actually. New flat. New commissions. Mrs Blackwell wants a landscape the size of a small nation. Mr Godding wants a portrait of his wife that apparently makes her look 'timeless' but not 'old', so that'll be easy.

HE SEARCHES THROUGH PAINTINGS.

JASPER: I should've sent these days ago.

HE FINDS A WEDDING PHOTOGRAPH.

JASPER: Ah.

HE STUDIES IT.

JASPER: You should've seen her.

THE ROOM CHANGES FOR HIM.

JASPER: Wedding day. I'm standing at the end of the aisle with my heart trying to escape through my throat. Owen's behind me, fiddling with my hair.

(AS OWEN) You sure about this, mate?

JASPER: Billionth time he'd asked.

(AS OWEN) One woman for the rest of your life. Why choose one fish when there's thousands in the sea?

JASPER: I told him-

(AS HIS YOUNGER SELF) I love her, all right? She's the love of my life. No other girl matters. Now stop faffing with my hair and smile. People are watching.

JASPER: And they were. Friends, family, Maia's dad sitting there like he'd paid six hundred quid for roses specifically so he could beat me to death with them.

(AS MAIA'S FATHER, LOWER) You're proper thick if you think marrying my daughter means I trust you.

JASPER: Lovely man.

HE GRINS.

JASPER: Then the music doesn't start.

THE GRIN FADES SLIGHTLY.

JASPER: Five minutes. Ten. Somebody whispers to somebody else. Bridesmaids start doing that thing where they pretend everything's fine while looking like they've just discovered a body.

HE RECREATES THE OFFICIANT'S STRAINED SMILE.

JASPER: 'There appears to be a small delay.'

BEAT.

JASPER: I knew.

HE CATCHES HIMSELF.

JASPER: Well. I knew something was wrong.

HE MOVES ACROSS THE ROOM, RELIVING IT.

JASPER: I get upstairs. Bang on the door.

(AS YOUNGER JASPER) Maia? Babe?

JASPER: Nothing.

HE KNOCKS HARDER ON AN IMAGINARY DOOR.

JASPER: Maia?

BEAT.

JASPER: Too quiet.

HE OPENS THE IMAGINARY DOOR.

JASPER: And there she is. Wedding dress on. Suitcase open.

HE SMILES AT THE MEMORY OF HER BEFORE REMEMBERING THE SUITCASE.

JASPER: Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful. And packing.

(AS YOUNGER JASPER) What the bloody hell is going on? You've got me waiting up there. Your dad is about thirty seconds from whipping me with the centrepieces.

(AS MAIA, QUIETER) I can't do this.

JASPER: Gobsmacked. Caterers downstairs. Band on the motorway. My toes bleeding in shoes I hate.

(AS MAIA) I put the dress on and realised I don't know what I want my life to be.

JASPER: So I tell her we'll figure it out.

(AS MAIA) Jasper, move.

JASPER: She grabs the suitcase. Heads for the door.

HE MOVES INSTINCTIVELY INTO ITS PATH.

JASPER: And I stand there.

A BEAT.

JASPER: What?

HE LOOKS AT THE AUDIENCE.

JASPER: You'd have done the same.

HE SAYS IT LIGHTLY.

JASPER: Woman you love is about to run out on your wedding because she's panicking? You don't wave from the doorway and wish her a pleasant nervous breakdown.

(AS YOUNGER JASPER) Where are you going?

(AS MAIA) Move.

JASPER: She looked annoyed.

HE THINKS.

JASPER: No. Furious.

(AS YOUNGER JASPER) We can do everything you want. Travel. Volunteer. Whatever. We'll do it together.

(AS MAIA) I love you, babs, but I'm twenty-one. I don't know who I am yet.

(AS YOUNGER JASPER) Then we'll find out together.

(AS MAIA) Move.

JASPER: I told her I'd put painting on hold.

HE SMILES, PROUD OF THE MEMORY.

JASPER: That's what you do, isn't it? Compromise.

(AS MAIA) I could never ask you to do that. Painting's your life.

(AS YOUNGER JASPER) You are my life.

JASPER: Good line.

HE POINTS AT THE AUDIENCE.

JASPER: Don't steal it.

HIS SMILE LINGERS, THEN FALTERS.

JASPER: She cried. I held her. Told her there was nothing to be afraid of. Maia always needed a push when she got in her own head.

HE LOOKS BACK AT THE PHOTOGRAPH.

JASPER: Eventually she smiled.

A small correction.

JASPER: Sort of.

HE DEMONSTRATES THE EXPRESSION.

JASPER: More relieved than happy, maybe, but she'd stopped packing.

HE LAUNCHES INTO THE COMIC MEMORY.

JASPER: Then her dad bursts in, sees her crying and decides homicide is an acceptable wedding tradition. I'm on one side of the room, he's on the other, Maia in the middle. Proper Tom and Jerry.

(AS MAIA'S FATHER) I'm gonna one-bomb him! No one makes my girl cry!

JASPER: I hid behind Maia.

HE POINTS.

JASPER: If that leaves this room, I'll deny it.

(AS MAIA) Dad, stop! I was going to run out on him. Jasper helped. I had a freak-out. We're okay.

JASPER: And her dad looks at me.

HE SQUARES UP, BRACING.

(AS MAIA'S FATHER) You're an all right man, Jasper. You're good for her. Just what she needs.

JASPER PUFFS HIMSELF UP.

JASPER: Just what she needs.

THE PHRASE LANDS DIFFERENTLY NOW, THOUGH HE DOESN'T DWELL ON IT.

JASPER: We got married. We danced. We got absolutely bladdered. Honeymoon in Greece was—

HE GIVES THE AUDIENCE A LOOK.

JASPER: I'm a gentleman.

BEAT.

JASPER: It was excellent.

HE PUTS THE PHOTOGRAPH INTO THE BOX.

JASPER: So there. Happy ending.

HE REACHES FOR ANOTHER OBJECT. STOPS.

JASPER: Well.

HE RESUMES PACKING.

JASPER: Happy middle.

HIS PHONE RINGS. HE ANSWERS.

JASPER: Hello? Yeah, this is Jasper Walton... No, I know. I know it was due Friday. I can get it to you. I said I can get it to you... Give me till tomorrow.

HE HANGS UP.

JASPER: Artists. Very organised people.

HE SORTS THROUGH PAINTINGS, INCREASINGLY IRRITATED.

JASPER: Blackwell. Godding. Blackwell again. Why are there two Blackwells?

HE FINDS A SMALL FRAMED PHOTOGRAPH OF MAIA AS A CHILD.

JASPER: Christ.

HE SITS.

JASPER: At what age do we lose it?

HE SHOWS THE PHOTOGRAPH.

JASPER: That bit of us that thinks anything's possible. Kids don't ask whether they're qualified to draw a dragon. They draw the dragon. Purple wings, six legs, lives in Tesco. Done.

HE STUDIES MAIA.

JASPER: She wanted to design clothes even then. Used to cut up old curtains and wrap them round herself. Her mum went mental. A smile.

JASPER: I used to tease her about fashion. Not badly. Just... you know.

HE IMITATES HIMSELF.

JASPER: 'You spent three hundred quid to make somebody look homeless?'

HE WAITS FOR A LAUGH.

JASPER: It was funny at the time.

HE SETS THE PHOTOGRAPH DOWN.

JASPER: She was good though. That admission is quieter.

JASPER: Really good.

HE LIFTS THE HEAVY BOX AGAIN. IT GIVES WAY. A BABY RATTLE, FOLDED ONESIE AND DUMMY SPILL ACROSS THE FLOOR.

SILENCE.

JASPER STARES AT THEM.

JASPER: Oh.

HE CROUCHES AND PICKS UP THE DUMMY.