

THE PRESENT

By Jeff Dunne

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CHARACTERS

- JESSIE A straightforward, no-nonsense woman who calls things as she sees them.
- JAMES A decent guy, but harboring a strange, unexpressed, and denied discomfort when it comes to Jessie.

SETTING

Pretty much anywhere. Present day.

REQUIREMENTS

The only requirement for this script is a wrapped gift box.

Note: This play is intended to be performed with British, Monty Python-ish timing.

(JESSIE approaches JAMES in a room or hallway. She has a present – a box with a bright bow on it – in her hands, and puts it down on a nearby table or desk.)

JAMES

What, uh, what you got there?

JESSIE

What does it look like?

JAMES

Hard to say, really.

JESSIE

Hard to say? Haven't you ever seen a present before?

JAMES

Of course I have.

JESSIE

And it didn't look anything like this?

JAMES

Not really.

(Jessie gives him a look.)

The bow was bigger. And blue.

JESSIE

Oh yes, I can see where that would cause a bit of confusion.

JAMES

And what are you, uh, what are you doing with it?

JESSIE

It's for you, actually.

Is it? JAMES

Yes. JESSIE

For me. JAMES

Right. JESSIE

It's not my birthday. JAMES

No. JESSIE

Or Christmas. Oh, god, it's not December already, is it? JAMES

No, it's not a Christmas gift. JESSIE

Well, what is it then? JAMES

I just wanted to do something nice. JESSIE

And this was it, then, was it? JAMES

Yes, James. This is it. JESSIE

What, uh, and what is it? JAMES

You'll have to open it up to find out. That's the way it works with presents. JESSIE

JAMES
Can't you just, you know, give me a hint?

JESSIE
Fine. It's something I made.

JAMES
For me?

JESSIE
Yes.

JAMES
You made something...

JESSIE
Yes

JAMES
For me?

JESSIE
That's right.

JAMES
With your own hands?

JESSIE
No, I used the vicar's hands.

JAMES
You did?

JESSIE
Yes. And then I had to throw them in the rubbish, because they got all dirty.

JAMES
(Beat)
You didn't really?

JESSIE

No, James. Not really. Are you alright?

JAMES

Yes, of course. Yes.

JESSIE

Well?

JAMES

Well what?

JESSIE

Are you going to open it?

JAMES

Open it?

JESSIE

That is the traditional thing to do with presents.

JAMES

What? Here? Now?

JESSIE

Unless you have a better plan.

JAMES

Right.

(He goes to take the box, but can't quite make himself do it.)

It does look very nice right there, though, doesn't it?

JESSIE

James?

Yes? JAMES

Is something the matter? JESSIE

Whatever do you mean? JAMES

What do I mean? JESSIE

Yes. JAMES

What do I mean?! JESSIE

Ye— JAMES

I mean, is there some reason you don't want to open the present? JESSIE

Of course not! JAMES

Really? JESSIE

I love it. It's a wonderful present. Seems... sort of a shame to disturb it, really. JAMES

I think it's ready. You know, psychologically prepared for the opening process. JESSIE

Sure but... JAMES

Open the damn present, James. JESSIE

JAMES

Right... (*Tries again, but can't bring himself to do it.*) You know, it might be better if I just... you know... thought about it for a bit.

JESSIE

Is there a reason you don't want to open it?

JAMES

No.

(She gives him a look.)

Well, it's just that you don't know what might be in there...

JESSIE

I do actually—

JAMES

And it could be something... uh... dangerous.

JESSIE

I *do* know what's in there, and it is *not* dangerous.

JAMES

How can you be sure?

JESSIE

Perhaps because I'm the one who put it in the box in the first place.

JAMES

Not dangerous?

JESSIE

Not even remotely.

JAMES

No... sharp edges?

No. JESSIE

No... pointy bits? JAMES

No. JESSIE

What about cognitive dissonance? JAMES

What? JESSIE

Cognitive dissonance. It could cause cognitive dissonance. You can't be sure about that, can you? JAMES

It's a statue. JESSIE

So it *could* cause cogniti— JAMES

It *won't* cause dissonance of any kind, James. Cognitive, digestive, spiritual... It's a very neutral piece of painted clay. JESSIE

Clay? JAMES

Ye— JESSIE

Painted clay? JAMES

They're bright, pleasing colours. JESSIE

JAMES

Do you know what kind of toxic sludge they put in paints these days?

JESSIE

They're watercolours.

JAMES

That doesn't—

JESSIE

That I got from a kindergarten classroom.

JAMES

Still—

JESSIE

If you fell out of a plane, this is the sort of paint that would help you float gently to the ground. It's perfectly safe. Look. Is there something you're not telling me?

JAMES

No...

(That look again...)

It's just that I have a rare medical condition that—

JESSIE

A medical condition.

JAMES

That's right. It's called... lympho... renal... boxicity.

JESSIE

Lymphorenalboxicity?

JAMES

Yes. And it can be very dangerous for me to receive presents.

That's not a thing, James. JESSIE

Of course it is. JAMES

No, it's not. Now tell me what in God's name is going on. JESSIE

Look. I... it's just... I have... chelonaphobia. JAMES

That's a fear of turtles. JESSIE

Oh. Not that, then. I love turtles. JAMES

Yes. JESSIE

I mean, who doesn't? They're adorable. With their little flippers, and when they stick their heads out and move them about like— JAMES

James? JESSIE

Well, they are ador— JAMES

James! JESSIE

What were we talking about? JAMES

The present. JESSIE

JAMES

Oh yes. Jolly good. Thank you *so* much. I *really* liked it.

JESSIE

You haven't *opened* it yet.

JAMES

Haven't I? Isn't that funny.

JESSIE

What's going on?

JAMES

Is there such a thing as a fear of opening presents?

JESSIE

Yes.

JAMES

And what is that called?

JESSIE

Doronophobia, I believe.

JAMES

Ah, yes. Doronophobia. That's it.

JESSIE

No, it isn't.

JAMES

That's not what it's called?

JESSIE

That *is* what it's called, but you don't have it.

JAMES

I might.

JESSIE

No, you don't. I've seen you open presents before.

You have? JAMES

Many times. JESSIE

And you're sure it was me? JAMES

James... JESSIE

It could have been my stunt double. Sometimes I have him— JAMES

James... JESSIE

Fine. I'll open it. JAMES

When? JESSIE

Today. JAMES

When today? JESSIE

Umm... Later today? JAMES

Why not now? JESSIE

Because... I'm busy now. JAMES

JESSIE

No you're not.

JAMES

Fine. I'll open it now.

(He stares at the present. She stares at him.)

JESSIE

Are you perhaps working off some other definition of the word 'now'? Did Oxford come out with a new version of the dictionary recently that I haven't picked up yet?

JAMES

You know, it occurs to me that any time I open the box, it is going to happen 'now'. So, there really isn't a rush, is there?

JESSIE

Alright. That's it. Either you tell me what the hell is going on, or I'm going to take the present back.

(He stares at her.)

Fine. That's it.

(She picks up the box and heads off.)

JAMES

Thank you for the gift!!

JESSIE

Oh, bugger off.

JAMES

Wow. That came out of nowhere.

(Lights out.)