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Half-Life

A play

Katy Darby

Samuel French—London
New York-Toronto-Hollywood



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HALF-LIFE

First produced at the Cockpit Theatre, London, in November 2001, with the following cast of characters:

Jay Spencer
Dirk Shulman

Katy Darby
Henry Douthwaite

Directed by Toby Smith

CHARACTERS

Jay Spencer, 35, English, female, attractive enough to interest Shulman sexually. A journalist by trade, she is dressed in combat or quasi-military gear. A fast talker and an enquiring intellect: keen and lucid.

Dirk Shulman, 50s, American, male, a former film star turned politician. He wears a well-cut grey suit and quiet tie. He should have the elegant, discreetly preserved elder-statesman good looks of a Paul Newman. Failing that, he must be believable as a one-time silver screen sex symbol.

The action takes place in a cheap, generic hotel room

Time—the present

Also by Katy Darby, published by Samuel French

Open Secrets

HALF-LIFE

A hotel bedroom

A cheap, generic Holiday-Inn-style hotel room, which Jay has hired for the night. There is a single bed with a chintzy bedcover, a wastebasket next to it and a desk and chair. On the desk there are a lamp, ashtray, hotel stationery, mini-kettle, etc. Next to the desk there is a mini-bar fridge stocked with miniatures and water

The Lights come up on Jay sitting at the desk, sideways on to the audience, facing Dirk who is sitting on the bed. Dirk is peeling off a fake beard and moustache. He is awkward, apprehensive and extremely uncomfortable. Jay is relaxed and in control – we'll see why in a minute

Jay Sorry about that. The fake moustache thing, I mean. They would have recognized you otherwise.

Dirk That's, uh, OK. *(He drops the hairpieces in the bin)*

Jay Still, I suppose you've worn quite a few of those in your time.

Dirk Excuse me? Oh, you mean back when I was acting. Yeah, a few. I usually grew my own, though.

Jay Accommodating of you. *(Pause)* I'm not sure why I bothered, really. I don't think the desk clerk looked at us once. And after I'd gone to all this trouble to be inconspicuous.

Dirk I guess he must see hundreds of people in a day.

Jay *(laughing)* In this dump? I sincerely doubt it.

Dirk Then why did we come here?

Jay Couldn't afford anything else. And it's obscure, small; the staff are jobsworths. Nobody cares what you do here as long as you're out by ten.

Dirk Good thing for you, I guess.

Jay Well, yes. *(Pause)* I'm Jay, by the way.

Dirk I'm — well, obviously you know. You can, uh, call me Dirk if you want.

Jay *(indicating the mini-kettle)* Do you want a cup of coffee or tea or something?

Dirk I don't go much on caffeine.

Jay Really? Most people go for hours on caffeine. That's what it's for.

Dirk What? Oh, right. A joke.

Jay Well, it had ambitions to be a joke. *(Pause)* So you don't want anything then?

Dirk Maybe some water.

He moves to get up from the bed and cross to the mini-bar. Jay immediately brings the gun up from the side of the chair — this is the first time the audience has been able to see it — and waves Dirk into a sitting position with it

Jay I'll get it. *(She crosses to the fridge and opens it up, looks inside)*
Sparkling or still?

Dirk Sparkling, thanks.

Jay opens the bottle and pours it into a glass, handing it to him, the gun still in her hand

Jay No lemon, I'm afraid. Bloody motels.

Dirk looks at her for a moment, trying to decide if she's taking the piss or serious

Dirk It's really not a problem.

Jay Yeah, I suppose it's the least of your worries at the moment.
(She flips the kettle on and begins unpacking the crockery and equipment for making a cup of tea) I used to be a waitress, you know.

Dirk Me too.

Jay A waitress?

Dirk Waiter. When I was just starting out. Everybody is, in L.A. I was twenty years old, waiting tables at Spago's, waiting to get spotted.

Jay And then you did.

Dirk No, then I got fired for flirting with Elizabeth Taylor. Took me another five years to get my big break.

Jay Better late than never. (*Pause*) I appreciate the fact that you're trying to make conversation with me. It must be quite a change for you.

Dirk How do you mean?

Jay Having to say the right things to somebody else, rather than the other way around.

Dirk Believe me, politics is all about saying the right things.

The kettle boils and Jay begins to make herself a cup of tea

Jay But you know what I mean. Obviously everybody has to kiss arse to the president, but ordinary people — your constituents, your fans — if I were famous I'd never talk to anyone. I'd be worried that they wanted something from me.

Dirk Everybody's got an agenda.

Jay But more so when you're famous. Much more. And the kind of things they want are much smaller — a look, an autograph, a photo — but there are so many of them wanting it the pressure must be huge. (*Pause*) Isn't it?

Dirk shrugs unhappily. Jay's face darkens and she twitches the gun in Dirk's direction

Indulge me by answering. I find this topic fascinating.

Dirk Fame?

Jay That's the one.

Dirk Well then — yeah, it gets kind of wearing. I get sick of being recognized. I get sick of people, some days, but I understand that those people are the same ones who got me where I am, and so I don't bite the hand that feeds me.

Jay That's very — practical of you.

Dirk It's a practical profession.

Jay Which one, acting or politics?

Dirk Oh, both.

Jay Hmm.

Pause. She gets her cup of tea and sits down in her former position, watching Dirk in silence with the gun trained on him as before

Dirk So what is this all about?

Jay Ah, the forty-five thousand pound question.

Dirk Excuse me?

Jay Sixty-four thousand dollars at the current exchange rate.

Dirk Oh. Right.

Jay Silly, I know. It's my way of symbolically reclaiming certain things from under the shadow of America's economic and cultural dominance.

Dirk Like dollars?

Jay Like language.

Dirk looks like he's been told he's about to have his genitals electrocuted. Jay bursts out laughing

My God, you should see your face! I'm sorry; I didn't mean to freak you out completely. I'm not going to put you and your nation on trial for crimes against the English language, tempting though it is. It's just something I do. A stupid idiosyncrasy. That's really not what I'm interested in here.

Dirk So what are you interested in? What's your thing?

Jay What's my *thing*? Why do you assume I have one?

Dirk Because you have a gun trained on me and I don't think you're waiting for an autograph.

Jay Well observed. (*Pause*) Why don't you tell me why you started acting?

Dirk smiles and looks down at the floor, slightly sheepishly. It is a look he has practised both as an actor and a politician, which he

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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