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MAN COVETS BIRD

by Finegan Kruckemeyer

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Original Production

The first performance of *Man Covets Bird* took place at the Space Theatre, Adelaide for the Adelaide Festival of Arts, in March 2010 in a production by Slingsby. The cast was as follows:

MAN Nathan O'Keefe

MUSICIANS Quentin Grant
 Steve Lennox
 Gareth Chin

The play was directed by Andy Packer, composed by Quentin Grant, and designed by Wendy Todd, with a design concept by Geoff Cobham, lighting design by Dave Green, animation by People's Republic of Animation, and illustration by Andy Ellis. All artists were involved in a second draft creative development, with additional input from Chris Drummond and Paul Blackwell. The initial concept for Finegan to be inspired by John Lurie's image *Man Covets Bird*, and the factory environments of Wolfgang Siever's photography, was by Andy Packer.

1. The bit where the play begins

All dialogue is spoken by the man.

MAN: We are looking, you and I, at a baby being rocked to sleep for the very first time in his life. But he cannot sleep – he has been born only ten minutes ago. Why in the world would he be tired yet?

It is later. He is a boy now, and this boy is being taught words in a schoolhouse by a stern teacher. They are arguing. She says that every word that ever existed sits in this dictionary. But he is sure there are more words than that. ‘There are not’, she roars. ‘What about hahhhhhhh, then?’ he offers. And he tells her about the words you say to ice, that makes it melt. And she walks away from him, shaking her head.

The boy has become a teenager. And everything he does right now, is sensible. And so everybody thinks, that he is growing into ‘a very sensible young man’. But what he hasn’t told anyone, is that he is just getting ready to be as unsensible as possible.

The young man is a nearly-man. This is exactly what it says. He looks like a man, and sounds like a man. People see him as a man. But he does not feel like a man. Because he has not had man experiences. And for different people these are different things. Buying a house is a man experience, as is becoming a father, or winning a fight, or loving someone more than you love yourself. But for him, the experience he needs, is... what? He is not sure.

The nearly-man sits with his parents at the dinner table, and wonders how to become a grown-up. He clears his throat and says: ‘Mama, Papa, tonight I...’ And he finds in this moment that the dictionary really isn’t finished yet.

Because there truly is no word for what he wants to ask, to these two people who look at him with their loving eyes.

‘Tonight I... Tonight I love you’, he says. ‘Hahhhhhhh’, they say together. And it melts any ice that was ever in danger of forming between them.

‘Goodnight’, he says, and kisses them both on each cheek, and goes to sleep. And even though everything is the same as every other night – he sleeps on the right-hand side, he has two sips of water before switching off the light, he switches off the light – what the nearly-man does not know, is that he will wake a completely different person.

2. The next day

MAN: The man walked down the stairs the next day – there was a funniness in his head, though he could not put his finger on it – the funniness, that is. He could put his finger on his head. He met his parents as they were putting on jackets and preparing to leave for work. ‘Morning’, he smiled.

Both stopped and looked at him, arms still only halfway into their sleeves. ‘Can I help you?’ asked Papa.

Pause.

MAN: ‘It’s me. It’s your son’.

Beat.

MAN: 'Mm', said Papa, the same way he did when someone on the tele made a comment he didn't agree with, but that he knew he couldn't argue about, because they were in the tele.

It was strange, the way things happened after that. The man and his Papa and his Mama stood together, making a triangle of awkwardness in the hallway. Finally, as though this might be necessary, the man led them up the stairs and opened the door to his room. Mama and Papa's eyes met suspiciously, like they had never known it to be there before. He took them to the height chart penciled on the wall in the kitchen. The man stood in front of it, but all he found was that he was taller than even the tallest line. 'Because I have grown', he explained. 'Because I was different then'. And with this, all agreed.

They were also surprised to find that he knew where the forks were, and that he could get the shower onto the right temperature, and that he knew the dog's name: Ignacio. Eventually, they decided to take this man on his word and let him share their house. They did it politely and without complaint, but whenever they spoke with him, it felt a lot like they were searching for clues in his answers, and finding none.

Sung.

MAN: *In the town, the man has started shaving with his other hand.
 In the town, the flowers close in summer, and open to the cold.
 In the town, the children rise and then the rooster crows.
 In the town, everyone has swapped their names and won't say why.
 They are sleeping in the daytime, in the town.
 They are standing in the water, in the town.
 They have all stopped cutting their hair, in the town.*

Over the next days, the oddities stacked up round the man. In the shop, he noticed that the name of the milk he always got, had changed by one letter – it was very strange. In the town square stood the clock that was always an hour slow. He checked his watch – the time was perfect to the second.

Walking home through the park, he saw her – the girl in the rotunda. Once, two weeks ago, they had danced together, a dance neither had ever learnt but that each knew perfectly. It was a magical time. But now they found there was no grace in their movement. They bumped into one another, and each fell over the other's feet, and finally he snagged the hem of her dress and she accidentally knocked him into a railing – and he walked off confused, nursing a blood nose.

Back in his room, the man sat on the windowsill, tired. And it was here, he was found.

Sung.

MAN: *It is a widely known fact,
We can see – looking back –
That more times than enough,
Things are found...from above.*

*When finding a key ring,
Or at the sea, with a sea thing,
Or a purse you've misplaced,
Or a place, on a map,
Or a backgammon piece that's rolled onto the ground.
Things are generally found... they are found, looking down.*

A search through the long grass,