

JACK IN THE BOX

A one-act horror drama by
Scott Mullen

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

EMMA, teen, quiet, careful.

HEATHER, teen, popular, a little conceited.

ALICE, teen, eager to please.

QUINN, teen, wild, cynical.

JACK, teen, friendly but conniving.

SETTING

A living room, which can just be suggested by a few chairs and a table. There might be the sound of thunder from outside. The box can be any small box that would fit into a backpack, though it should appear to the audience that the box has no seams.

(Night. The living room at Emma's house. EMMA leads HEATHER and ALICE in. They both have overnight bags.)

EMMA: I got everything we always have. I bought graham crackers, chocolate and marshmallows so we can make S'mores. I borrowed the *Gilmore Girls* DVD from my cousin Sandy – season 2, where we left off.

HEATHER: We're going to watch *Gilmore Girls* again?

EMMA: We watch it every year.

HEATHER: When we were kids.

EMMA: We watched it last year.

HEATHER: Because your parents were home. But they're gone tonight.

ALICE: All night.

HEATHER: So we were thinking maybe call up some boys.

ALICE: Cute boys.

EMMA: We can't.

HEATHER: Sure we can.

EMMA: I promised my parents.

HEATHER: Emma, if you want boys to like you, it helps to invite them over.

ALICE: It really does.

EMMA: It's my birthday.

ALICE: One boy.

HEATHER: Well, we'd need at least three.

EMMA: Quinn is coming.

(Heather makes a face.)

HEATHER: Then at least four.

ALICE: Just four boys. Quiet boys.

(To Heather:)

Right?

HEATHER: Of course. Totally quiet boys. They're just one text away.

EMMA: It's raining. And it's supposed to get worse.

HEATHER: They'll wipe their feet.

ALICE: They totally will.

EMMA: I can't. Seriously. It's a bad idea.

(The sound of the doorbell.)

That's Quinn.

(Emma heads offstage. Heather pulls out her phone.)

ALICE: Is she serious?

HEATHER: We'll wear her down.

ALICE: Is Quinn going to be on our side?

HEATHER: Who knows. She's gotten so weird. Ugh, the service here is terrible. When it's time to text, I may need you to climb onto the roof.

ALICE: It's raining!

HEATHER: I just had my nails done.

ALICE: It's slippery!

HEATHER: But you'll do it, right?

(Alice looks at her, and backs down.)

ALICE: If you really want me to.

HEATHER: You're the best, Alice. Shhh. Here they come.

(Emma comes in with QUINN, who has a backpack. Unenthusiastic:)

Hey, Quinn.

QUINN: Got the gang back together, huh?

EMMA: It's been us four, every year, since we were five years old. It's special.

HEATHER: It could be a lot more special.

ALICE: A lot more special.

QUINN: What's going on?

EMMA: They want to invite boys.

QUINN: Which boys?

HEATHER: Johnny and Steve. Plus Albert Johnson and his cousin Russell.

QUINN: Seriously? No.

ALICE: They're nice guys.

QUINN: First of all, no, they aren't. Second of all, if they were nice guys, you two wouldn't be interested.

HEATHER: You really want to spend another one of Emma's birthdays watching *Gilmore Girls* and eating carbs?

QUINN: I like carbs.

HEATHER: We're not ten.

EMMA: No boys.

QUINN: If Emma says no boys, no boys.

HEATHER: Quinn —

QUINN: But I have a suggestion.

(Quinn reaches into her backpack and pulls out a black box, maybe 4-6 inches on each side. She puts it on the table.)

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I found it in the antique shop on Blanchard Street.

HEATHER: Boring.

QUINN: The old guy there told me that it tells the truth.

HEATHER: Great. You brought a Magic 8-Ball.

ALICE: It's not really a ball.

QUINN: He said that it talks.

HEATHER: Great. You got a Siri.

QUINN: It's old. Before wifi.

HEATHER: Fine. Make it do something.

(Heather picks it up. Turns it over.)

Where's the "on" switch? There's not even a seam. Where do the batteries go?

QUINN: I have no idea.

HEATHER: How do you turn it on?

QUINN: The old guy said to knock on the lid three times.

HEATHER: Seriously?

EMMA: That's creepy.

QUINN: That's what he said.

(Heather puts it down on the table. They all look at it.)

HEATHER: I'm not going to do it.

ALICE: It's Emma's house.

EMMA: Don't look at me.

QUINN: Fine, I'll do it.

(Quinn moves to the box. She hesitates, and then knocks on it. Once... twice... She pauses, then knocks a third time. They all listen.)

Hello?

(Nothing.)

ALICE: You need to get your money back.

HEATHER: This is dumb. Let me text Steve.

(JACK's voice appears out of nowhere.)

JACK: Well hello there, ladies.

(The girls jump, startled. They look at each other.)

QUINN: Okay. This is pretty cool.

HEATHER: Come on. How fake is this?

JACK: You think I'm fake? Heather?

ALICE: Oh my God. The box knows your name.

HEATHER: Let me guess. There's some guy talking through his cell phone.

ALICE: You said there was no reception here.

QUINN: I swear—I got it at the antique shop.

EMMA: Who are you?

JACK: You can call me Jack.

ALICE: Jack in the box.

JACK: Yes. That's not a name I prefer, but it is the truth. I'm all about the truth—in a world in which truth is harder and harder to find. I know everything, and if you ask the right questions, I'll give you the answers you want.

HEATHER: This is a joke. Come on.

ALICE: You know everything?

JACK: Everything. Alice.

(The girls look at each other.)

Come, come. Someone must have a question.

HEATHER: *(To Emma:)* Birthday girl goes first.

EMMA: No.

JACK: Come come, Emma, you must have a question.

EMMA: Okay. I lost the bracelet my Aunt Tracey gave me. Do you know where it is?

JACK: All the questions in the universe, and that's what you want to ask?

EMMA: I'm sorry.

JACK: It's under your dresser. Up against the wall.

(Emma heads offstage.)

Who's next? Someone. Quinn? Don't you want to know whether you're getting that summer internship?

(Alice reacts. Looks at Quinn.)

QUINN: How did you know about that?

JACK: Do you want to know if you're getting it?

QUINN: Okay. Sure.

JACK: The answer is yes. The job is yours.

QUINN: That's awesome.

ALICE: I'm glad you're the one who got it, Quinn. You deserve it.

JACK: Alice? Do you have a question? Maybe about the internship? I know you really wanted it yourself.

ALICE: It's okay.

JACK: Is it?

ALICE: Can you tell me... Does Steve Ferguson like me?

JACK: Ah, questions about boys. Some things never change.

ALICE: Well does he?

JACK: Of course he likes you. He wouldn't be paying attention to you if he didn't like you.

(Alice smiles, nods.)

ALICE: *(To Heather:)* Ask him something.

HEATHER: This is stupid. He can say anything. It doesn't mean it's true.

(Emma comes back, holding a necklace.)

EMMA: It was there. Right where he said it would be.

JACK: See?

HEATHER: Of course it was under the dresser. Quinn probably stole it and put it there.

QUINN: Seriously?

HEATHER: Besides, everything winds up under the dresser.

QUINN: Ask him something, Heather. Ask him if Johnny likes you.

HEATHER: No.

QUINN: Are you afraid of the answer?

ALICE: Jack? Can you tell the future?

JACK: The future is never certain. It depends on the choices you make. Every choice leads to a different future. Of course, I know what futures could happen. I can see them all. Every option, every possibility, every path.

HEATHER: All right, I'll play. There are a bunch of possible futures? Tell me a good one.

QUINN: Of course she wants a good one.

HEATHER: You wouldn't?

QUINN: I'd want to know what's bad, so I can avoid it.

HEATHER: You had your turn. Jack, tell me the good news.

JACK: His name is Matt. You're going to meet him in college.

HEATHER: Matt? What about Johnny?

JACK: Do you want the story?

HEATHER: Is this Matt guy hot?

JACK: You seem to like him.

HEATHER: Continue.

JACK: In your senior year of college, he proposes one night, at a restaurant. He even makes sure your parents are there.

ALICE: Awww... Are there balloons?

JACK: So many balloons.

ALICE: Heather loves balloons.

HEATHER: Alice!

ALICE: You do.

JACK: After you graduate, you get married. You both get amazing jobs. Your house is a giant mansion, huge yard, hot tub, five bathrooms, great neighborhood. You have two dogs, and a cat.

ALICE: This is adorable.

JACK: When you get pregnant, you quit your job, because Matt's making a lot of money. You have a little girl, and then another little girl, and finally a little boy. And they are amazing kids, and Matt loves you, and you all live happily ever after.

ALICE: You're going to be an awesome mother.

(Quinn laughs.)

QUINN: No she isn't. She's going to be a terrible mother. Can't you stop kissing her butt for one second?

EMMA: Don't be mean.

QUINN: Like Jack said, the truth is the truth.

HEATHER: So what are the odds of that future happening? Sixty percent? Eighty percent?

JACK: Lower.

HEATHER: Twenty percent?

JACK: About one in a billion.

HEATHER: What?

JACK: If everything goes perfectly, if you just happen to come out of the library as Matt is going in, and knock over his books, and help him pick them up, and he asks you out—a long line of choices and luck just like that. It probably won't happen. Maybe a trillion to one. It's hard to predict.

HEATHER: So what are the odds that I marry Johnny?

JACK: A little over two percent.

HEATHER: Well that's better.

JACK: But you really don't want that. That's divorce and unhappiness and a lot of yelling.

QUINN: I could have told you that.

HEATHER: This is stupid!

(To Quinn:)

What did you do, program this box to be mean? To lie?

QUINN: I have no idea how to do that.

JACK: I don't lie.

HEATHER: No. This is fake. You don't know Billy. You don't know me.

JACK: I know that last Friday night, you let a boy sneak into your bedroom window. A boy who wasn't Billy Maddox. I know that he whacked his knee on the windowsill climbing in.

HEATHER: What is this?

(To Quinn:)

What kind of game are you playing?

QUINN: I have nothing to do with this.

HEATHER: You brought it!

QUINN: I have no idea who you snuck into your room Friday night.

HEATHER: Someone's been spying on me! Come out! Show yourself!

JACK: People never believe. Until they do.

HEATHER: You don't know anything!

JACK: I know that you gave him a Harry Potter band-aid for his knee. He made a joke about it.

HEATHER: How do you know that? Did Steve tell you?

ALICE: Steve? Steve Ferguson? You didn't tell me you and Steve—Jack, you said Steve liked me!

(To Heather:)

How could you? What about Johnny?

HEATHER: Johnny's for marrying. Steve's for fooling around.

(Alice turns away. Stung.)

You know boys like me better. I can't help that.

(Jack laughs.)

HEATHER: *(To Quinn:)* Whatever this is, make it stop!

JACK: It's important that you believe I know the truth, Heather. Maybe if I tell them about when you were 15, in summer camp, and snuck out—

HEATHER: Shut up!

JACK: Do you believe me now?

ALICE: What happened at summer camp?

HEATHER: This box is evil. Turn it off.

JACK: There's no way to turn me off.

HEATHER: Destroy it.

JACK: That would not be a good idea.

HEATHER: Why not? What are you going to do? You're just a box!

JACK: Is that what you think?

HEATHER: Fine. I'll break it.

(Heather reaches for the box, then cries out and falls down. She skitters backwards away from the box.)

Ouch. It shocked me!

(She looks at her hand.)

That hurt!

JACK: You deserved it.

HEATHER: I'm leaving. Alice? Let's go.

(Heather grabs her things.)

ALICE: I'm not going anywhere with you.

HEATHER: Yes you are. Come on.

ALICE: You're a terrible person, Heather. You always were, and you always will be.

HEATHER: Without me as your friend, you're nothing.

ALICE: I'm staying. I want to hear what he says about me.

HEATHER: Fine. Hang out with these losers.

EMMA: Hey!

(Heather starts to go.)

JACK: If you leave this house right now, there's an 87% chance you will die.

(Everyone takes a step back from the box. Heather just laughs.)

HEATHER: I don't believe any of this.

QUINN: Maybe we should.

EMMA: Why don't you stay? If she stays, she'll be safer, right?

JACK: Absolutely.

HEATHER: No. I don't know what this is, but I don't like it. I don't believe it.

EMMA: Wait. Jack, can you tell her the best choices?

JACK: Depends... What will she do for me?

HEATHER: Nothing. I won't do anything. Alice? Come on.

(Alice turns away from her.)

Your loss.

(Heather leaves.)

EMMA: She's going to be okay though. Tell me she's going to be okay.

JACK: Well, she only lives four blocks away. That's not very far. Exactly 139 steps if she runs straight there, but 297 if she

walks. It all depends on the choices she makes. For instance, there's lightning out there.

(A flash of lightning and a rumble of thunder from offstage.)

That one missed her, but she may want to stay away from trees. Let's see... Uh oh. It's raining, and she's trying to move between tree to tree to keep dry. That might not be a good combination. Three blocks to go.

(Lightning. Thunder.)

That one missed her too. She's scared now. She's moving faster.

(Lightning. Thunder.)

EMMA: Are you doing that?

JACK: She's still going. Running now. Of course, the biggest choice comes when she gets to that intersection at Maple. There's traffic on Maple, and people don't always drive safely in the rain. I hope she looks both ways. Or maybe the speeding car will come five seconds earlier. Or five seconds later.

QUINN: I'm going after her.

JACK: That wouldn't be smart. Besides, we're going to know, very soon. 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... Oh.

(Long pause.)

That's unfortunate.

EMMA: What?

JACK: She didn't look both ways.

(The girls all react.)

ALICE: She's—

JACK: Yes.

ALICE: Oh my God—

EMMA: You're lying, right?

QUINN: Of course he's lying.

JACK: I don't believe in lying.

QUINN: That's exactly what a liar would say.

JACK: Why would I lie?

QUINN: Because you don't want us to leave. You just want us to keep playing whatever sick game this is.

JACK: Call Heather's house from the phone in your mother's office. See if she got home.

(Emma heads offstage.)

Oh wait, she can't. The storm knocked out phone service.

ALICE: How do you know that?

JACK: I know everything.

(Emma comes back in.)

EMMA: It's dead.

JACK: See? I've been right so far.

QUINN: Knowing everything and telling the truth about it are two different things.

JACK: Yes. You're very bright, Quinn. Although I know the reason you got the internship is that your daddy made a phone call. Or else Alice would have gotten it.

ALICE: *(Hurt:)* Is that true?

QUINN: That has nothing to do with this.

JACK: I don't lie.

QUINN: So then answer this truthfully. You asked Heather what she'd do for you—what did you want her to do for you? Why are you here?

JACK: Because you brought me.

QUINN: When I walked into that antique shop, the old man looked at me like he expected me. Like you told him to sell the box to me. You're here because you want to be here. Why? What do you want?

JACK: Maybe I want to help you, Quinn. I can tell you the way to reach your dreams. You want to be a lawyer, don't you? Defending innocent people. Fighting for justice. Do you want to know how to get to that future?

QUINN: I can get there myself.

JACK: Maybe. I can also see a future in which you are a corporate lawyer. Defending companies doing terrible things.

QUINN: I wouldn't.

JACK: It's a much more likely future. Because the money is so good. But in this future you aren't happy. You have trouble sleeping at night. You drink. You're alone.

QUINN: That's not me.

JACK: It's nice that you believe that. But I can see the path. It's such a wide path.

QUINN: But you can help me find the right future.

JACK: That's a skinnier, trickier path. You'd need to make the right choices. But I can help you.

QUINN: No. I don't trust you. I can make my own way.

JACK: Fine. Then you can leave.

QUINN: What?

JACK: I don't think staying here will be good for your health.

QUINN: And then what happens to me outside?

JACK: Every second you stay here, the odds of something bad happening increase. And you don't want to make me mad, Quinn.

QUINN: You're not making the lightning. You just know when it's going to happen.

JACK: Maybe. But you don't. 3, 2, 1...

(Lightning. Thunder.)

EMMA: Maybe you should go.

QUINN: Emma!

EMMA: Tell her she's going to make it.

JACK: She probably will.

EMMA: Go.

JACK: Just make the right choices. You might want to go south, on Elm. Yes, I definitely think that might be a good idea.

QUINN: Why should I trust you?

JACK: You don't have to trust me. Trust Alice and Emma. Maybe the choices they make will keep you safe.

ALICE: What?

JACK: Go.

EMMA: We'll be okay.

ALICE: Go.

(Quinn looks at them, and goes.)

EMMA: She is going to be safe. Say it.

JACK: You know, I think she will. Provided that you keep your mouth shut, Emma. While I talk to Alice.

ALICE: Me?

JACK: I came here looking for someone I could work with. You're the one, Alice.

ALICE: *(Pleased:)* Really?

EMMA: Alice—

(Lightning. Thunder.)

JACK: Careful, Emma. Keep your mouth closed. Quinn has a long way to go. Nine long blocks. She's barely gone one. So hush now. Alice, I have the power to help you. To show you the path. To tell you the choices to make, at every step. So that you get the life you want. The perfect life. Tell me what you want, Alice.

EMMA: What do you want, Jack?

(Lightning. Thunder.)

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