

# The Perfect Moment

## by Michael Olsen

**Characters:** Nicholas Durham, 30's, a school teacher

Jo Surrey, 30's, a psychologist

**Textual Note:** The forward slash indicates a change to a younger self.

*Lights come up on a stage with a large divan in the middle. Upstage centre there is a wide wall, black in colour, with a print of Klimt's The Kiss hanging on it. There are numerous props scattered around the space: drink glasses, a suitcase, beach bucket, tuxedo. NICK and JO stand on either side of the stage. They are looking out, seemingly unaware of each other. Then, they slowly become aware of each other's presence, shyly at first, then very much aware, and at the same time, they move closer to each other, until they're in each other arms and they're kissing madly, feverishly, and they start removing their clothes, until she is down to her bra and he is topless. Jo breaks away, pulling her clothes back on.*

**JO:** That's not how it happened!

**NICK:** What the hell—?

**JO:** This is Torquay, 1989, isn't it?

**NICK:** So?

**JO:** We built sandcastles. There were three-legged races. I walked off. Is this some kind of wet dream fantasy?

**NICK:** I'm not one of your goddamn patients, alright? I don't need you poking around in my head.

**JO:** I'm here to make sure you get it right.

**NICK:** Fine. You've said your piece. Now there's the door.

**JO:** This is my story as well you know.

**NICK:** It's mine!

**JO:** Nick!

**NICK:** This is my story, Jo, and I can tell it how I like. How do you know that's not what was going through my head anyway at the time?

**JO:** Because I know you, Nick. You were 18 and you had grander thoughts than that. Why the hell are you doing this?

**NICK:** I don't have to tell you.

**JO:** Fine. I don't care if you create something out of a *Penthouse Forum* letter. Just don't lie to yourself about what really happened between us.

*Jo starts to leave.*

**NICK:** There had to be—a moment.

**JO:** A moment?

**NICK:** One single perfect moment when I could have told you how I felt and you would have said yes.

**JO:** Do you realise how sad that sounds?

**NICK:** I told you where the door is!

*Pause*

**JO:** Sorry. *(Pause)* It never happened, this “perfect moment?”

**NICK:** Never.

**JO:** So you’re looking for the impossible. Something that never existed. The heart of romance.

**NICK:** Maybe.

**JO:** Does it matter now? Our story is over. Whatever story it was. If it was a story.

**NICK:** It was. Just don't butt into things, alright?

**JO:** OK. I'll be the soul of discretion.

**NICK:** Yeah right.

*Nick gives Jo a look.*

**JO:** Alright. Let's start at the beginning, OK? O Week. A riot of drinking and high jinks where a college tries to get you to bond with each other, meet everyone.

**NICK:** I loved it!

**JO:** It was excruciating. Like a Girl Guides jamboree only with heaps more alcohol and no curfew.

**NICK:** They saved the best till last, though.

**JO:** That beach day at Torquay? It was raining.

**NICK:** It had stopped by the time we got there. We were divided up into teams.

**JO:** *(unimpressed)* Building sandcastles.

*Nick starts building a sandcastle. Jo just watches him.*

**NICK:** We were both in the same group. It was fun.

- JO:** It was like group therapy. I'm glad I went, though. Coming from Cobar it wasn't often that I saw the sea. (*Jo moves downstage, staring out at the sea.*) I—I wanted to be alone.
- NICK:** How was I to know you were doing a Greta Garbo? / Jo!  
*Nick joins Jo at the water's edge.*
- JO:** / Nicholas.
- NICK:** / I told you—call me Nick.
- JO:** / (*smiling*) Nick.
- NICK:** / Why don't you come back and finish our sandcastle?
- JO:** / Doesn't it make you feel small? All that water? I keep forgetting how huge it is, how small we are.
- NICK:** You looked as if at any moment you were just going to take a step and walk out over that sea. / Do you want to go for a walk?  
*Nick and Jo start walking.*
- NICK:** I think that's when it started. (*Pause*) Why did you like me?
- JO:** (*half smiling*) Who says I liked you?
- NICK:** We knocked around together all the time in first year!
- JO:** You just seemed a really nice guy. I knew I didn't have many of those in my life. Besides, you were the only person I thought I could trust in college, for some strange reason.
- NICK:** Even with alcohol.
- JO:** Especially with alcohol.  
*Nick grabs two glasses, offering one to Jo.*
- NICK:** / It's called a Mort—or a Pilo. I haven't worked out which yet.
- JO:** / (*unsure, taking the drink*) A Milo with port in it? It sounds like the ruin of two drinks simultaneously.
- NICK:** / Try it.  
*Jo takes a sip.*
- NICK:** / Well?
- JO:** / I think the thing to say is, it could be a lot worse.  
*Jo hands back the drink.*
- NICK:** / Aren't you going to finish it?

**JO:** / No thanks.

**NICK:** / OK.  
*Nick takes the drink back, about to drink it when:*

**JO:** / Give it here.  
*Jo takes the drink back and sculls it in one go.*

**NICK:** / Way to go!

**NICK:** We then moved straight onto the port and got horribly drunk.  
*Jo and Nick sit on the divan in a heap.*

**JO:** / Nick?

**NICK:** / Hmmm?

**JO:** / I am horribly drunk.

**JO:** Why didn't you do it then? Take advantage?

**NICK:** Because I'd passed out.  
*Nick falls back—unconscious.*

**NICK:** That's what college was all about: excess. You could eat as much as you wanted, drink as much as you wanted, sleep around as much as you wanted—

**JO:** But you didn't, did you?

**NICK:** Didn't what?

**JO:** Sleep around as much as you wanted.

**NICK:** *(looking hard at Jo)* You know I didn't. No-one did.  
*Jo smiles.*

**JO:** If you had, everyone would have known. You were so honest it was almost painful to hear.

**NICK:** So of course you're going to remind me about —

**JO:** Jessica De Brun, the first girl you slept with.

**NICK:** And I rang home and told my mother —

**JO:** “Mummy, I've lost my virginity!”

**NICK:** With you to remind me, I never have to worry about Alzheimer's.

**JO:** I was terrified of my parents finding out. When Scott came over for dinner the next night after It happened I thought they'd read it

telepathically, or Scott would pass the sauce in such a way that said: "I've slept with your daughter."

**NICK:** Scott Priestly? You never told me that!

**JO:** Didn't I? At least one of us doesn't kiss and tell.

**NICK:** Was that in first year?

**JO:** Don't you remember what Leanne said? "Imagine being in first year and not getting at least one root."

*Pause*

**NICK:** Do you think you can be in love with someone and not know it?

**JO:** Of course not. Well, maybe a guy—

**NICK:** You were becoming a part of me and I didn't even see it happening.

**JO:** Well I certainly didn't think that at the end of first year when you dragged me onto that island in the middle of the Yarra.

**NICK:** Herring Island. It was great, wasn't it?

*Nick walks off.*

**JO:** *(calling out)* You insisted we leave the track to find the best picnic spot. I still don't know why. / Nick!

*Jo exits. Nick enters holding a picnic basket, brushing away some twigs and leaves from his hair.*

**JO:** / *(off)* Are we there yet?

**NICK:** / We're here.

**JO:** / *(off)* Thank god for that.

*Jo enters.*

**JO:** There was something sadistic about your behaviour.

**NICK:** Sadistic? That's bullshit.

**JO:** What about the state of my dress? It was ruined!

*She is clearly pissed off, brushing twigs and leaves away. Her dress is torn.*

**JO:** / Look at my dress! It's ruined!

**NICK:** / So take it off. It's warm enough.

**JO:** / Very cute.

**NICK:** / I did warn you.

- JO:** / Yeah, but you forgot to tell me to pack a machete!
- NICK:** / Come on, Jo. I'm sorry. I wanted to do something special for the end of the year. Something to mark the end of college and our new communal house. *(Pause)* Would you like some caviar, water crackers, champagne?
- Pause. Finally:*
- JO:** / OK. Give me some caviar.
- Nick scoops some caviar onto a cracker, and gives it to Jo, who swallows it whole.*
- JO:** / Now where's that champagne?
- Nick opens the bottle of champagne, pours two glasses, hands one to Jo.*
- NICK:** / A toast.
- JO:** / To?
- NICK:** / To the new house. The Nicholson Street Adventure!
- JO:** / Nicholson Street.
- They clink glasses and drink. Jo looks at her empty glass.*
- JO:** / These are quite small, aren't they?
- NICK:** / You think? I don't—
- Jo grabs the bottle off Nick and takes a swig.*
- JO:** / That's better.
- NICK:** / Do you think you should?
- JO:** / Should what?
- Jo takes another swig.*
- NICK:** / Do that.
- JO:** / Here. You do it, then.
- Jo shoves the bottle at Nick. Nick takes half a swig. He hands the bottle back to Jo.*
- NICK:** We gave it a burl that day, didn't we?
- Jo takes another swig—a big one. Jo looks at Nick.*
- NICK:** / What is it? What—?
- JO:** / What do you think?

*Nick kisses Jo. They become engrossed in the kiss. Jo breaks off the kiss and throws up. Nick pats Jo on the back.*

**NICK:** At least I know it wasn't the kiss.

**JO:** Oh yeah, we all take comfort in that.

*Nick leads Jo to one side.*

**JO:** / I'm sorry. I didn't mean—

**NICK:** / It's OK. It's OK.

**JO:** Of course it was OK. It was only later you could tell me you'd forgotten one crucial thing.

*Jo stands up, sobering quickly.*

**JO:** / What do you mean we've missed the last boat back? Don't they know we're here? How could they be so stupid? How could you—What are we going to do? Stay here all night till the boat comes back tomorrow?

*Nick nods.*

**JO:** / You are kidding me.

**NICK:** / Unless you want to swim in the Yarra.

**JO:** / Like that's going to happen.

**NICK:** / Well then.

**JO:** / You did this deliberately!

**NICK:** / I did not! You think I want to spend the night out here with the bugs and the snakes?

**JO:** / Snakes?

*Jo hops onto the divan.*

**NICK:** / (*quickly*) I'm sure there aren't any. Really. The boat captain said there weren't any. Probably just harmless ones.

**JO:** / Harmless ones? For godsake we're in Australia! We invented dangerous snakes!

**NICK:** Everything turned out OK. There were no snakes.

**JO:** It was the first and only time we were physically close.

*Jo and Nick snuggle up to each other—and eventually fall asleep.*

**NICK:** Was it all that bad?

**JO:** No. No of course not.

**NICK:** But that's the trouble with life: it's only after it's over that you realise it was a perfect moment. Why couldn't I see it? I should have said something!

**JO:** Whatever's happened to you, don't moan about it. God I hate that.

**NICK:** It's just a fact, that's all.

**JO:** It's a perception, and perception is a choice.

**NICK:** Is that your professional psychological opinion? You're the only choice in life I had no control over making.

**JO:** Is this romantic piffle meant to impress me? It's just bogus romantic claptrap. At least you're telling me now. I tried to provoke you, you know.

**NICK:** Provoke me? When?

**JO:** Remember David Clark?

*Nick's mouth falls open.*

**JO:** / What's the matter Nick? What is it?

**NICK:** / David Clark?

**JO:** / It's sudden, I know, but I really like him.

**NICK:** / David Clark?

**JO:** / I know, I know, but there's just something about him. I can't put my finger on it.

**NICK:** / David Clark?

**JO:** / For godsake stop saying David Clark! The way you go on about him I'd almost think you're jealous.

**NICK:** / Me? Jealous? Don't be silly.

**JO:** / Why is it so silly?

**NICK:** / We're friends for goodness sake.

**JO:** / Why should that make a difference?

**NICK:** / It just does.

**JO:** / Don't you think I'm attractive?

**NICK:** / Here we go.

**JO:** / Well?

**NICK:** / Of course I think you're attractive. David Clark is a very lucky guy and totally unworthy of you.



**JO:** / Oh really? In what way?

**NICK:** / Can I be blunt?

**JO:** / Don't let me stop you.

**NICK:** / He's a job.

**JO:** / A job. What exactly is a "job"?

**NICK:** / A job loves all the things you hate: beer, football, and wet T-shirt competitions.

**JO:** / I don't believe it! You are jealous!

**NICK:** / I am not!

**JO:** / You are. You just can't admit it.

**NICK:** / Of course I can't admit it because there's nothing to admit.

**JO:** Maybe this was your "perfect moment."

**NICK:** I don't think so.

**JO:** / I wish you'd just come clean. You'd feel better.

**NICK:** / If I really felt like that, don't you reckon I would have said something already?

**JO:** / I don't know. Would you?

**JO:** Good question, don't you think?

**NICK:** I didn't need to. We were living together! We shared a house! We were together all the time!

**JO:** Like you said, we were friends, weren't we? You were getting everything except the sex.

**NICK:** Well, yes, and I didn't want to risk that on something that had no guarantee at all.

**JO:** Isn't life all about risk?

**NICK:** Not for me.

*Pause.*

**JO:** I held you back, didn't I?

**NICK:** Held me back?

**JO:** Your feelings for me held you back with other people.

**NICK:** Don't be silly. My goodness you weren't *that* special.

*Jo sits on the divan. Nick enters, tentative.*

**JO:** / How was the concert?

**NICK:** / Fine.

**JO:** / Where's Emma?

**NICK:** / I dropped her home.

**JO:** / Nothing's happened, has it?

**NICK:** / What makes you say that?

**JO:** / Something's happened, hasn't it.

**NICK:** / Nothing's happened! We just...

**JO:** / Yes?

**NICK:** / She said I couldn't commit.

**JO:** / You've only been going out a couple of months! Did she want you to get down on bended knee already?

**NICK:** / She said she could tell I couldn't give myself totally to her.

**JO:** / *(Holding out her arms)* I'm sorry. *(They hug)* It's OK. You've just got to think there's someone for everyone.

**NICK:** / But what if they're a pygmy in the highlands of New Guinea?

**JO:** / Then go and buy a plane ticket now.

*Nick smiles.*

**JO:** / That's better.

**NICK:** You always knew what to say to cheer me up.

**JO:** And don't forget, you were there for me too.

*Jo mimes crying on Nick's shoulder.*

**JO:** There was Ben and Adam and Chris and Bradley and—

**NICK:** OK OK we get the picture.

*Nick holds Jo at arm's length and tries to smile reassuringly.*

**NICK:** My father used to say life was full of second chances, but there must come a time when they run out.