

NOTHING IS FREE

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A 10-minute play  
by Terry Milner

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**Characters:**

Hendrick, male, any age.

Leonard, male, any age.

Both Hendrick and Leonard should have contrasting accents. Leonard's should be from some Commonwealth country, probably Australia. Hendrick's should be northern European, probably German.

**Setting:**

The basement of a very tall building, some time in the middle future.

**A note on dialogue:**

A forward slash (/) indicates the point where the next line or action should begin.

Ellipses (...) indicate an incomplete line or thought. An em dash (–) indicates an interrupted line or thought.

## NOTHING IS FREE

The enormous basement of a huge skyscraper. A set of double doors in the upstage wall. A table and two chairs, center. A large, flat projection screen suspended over downstage center, through which the audience can see images projected from behind: a constant stream of charts, graphs, photos and something like a stock ticker. Elevator doors downstage left or right and a call button that glows with an inner light indicating it has been pushed. There is a cot upstage. A low throbbing hum is just audible – the sound of an immense building come to life.

HENDRICK sits at the table watching the video screen intently. Occasionally he pays closer attention – as if something interesting were happening – then settles back into his chair. After another moment, the sound of footsteps coming down stairs echoes from the doors in the upstage wall.

Unless otherwise indicated, *one or the other of the characters ALWAYS has their eyes on the screen.*

LEONARD bursts through the doors, out of breath, his hands full of snacks and canned beverages.

LEONARD

There he is!

HENDRICK

Yes, here I am.

LEONARD

Good old Hendrick. Just where I left you.

HENDRICK

Where else would I be, Leonard?

LEONARD

I've brought us a bit of brekkie.

HENDRICK

And about time, too. I'm starving.

LEONARD

Hey, it's three flights up to the vending machine, mate. Six flights each trip. Like to see you do it any faster, you ungrateful bastard.

HENDRICK

Fine, fine. Thank you for going. My turn next. Will you watch / while I – ?

LEONARD

Sure. No worries. Got it.

Leonard fixes his eyes on the screen while Hendrick goes into the toilet. Without taking his eyes off the screen, he sneaks over to the elevator and pushes the button repeatedly.

A FLUSHING SOUND. Hendrick comes back out of the toilet.

HENDRICK

What were you doing?

Leonard quickly crosses back to the table and starts unwrapping two granola bars.

LEONARD

It can't hurt you know.

HENDRICK

*(Re: the screen)* Got it.

*(Re: the elevator)* It never comes, Lennie, no matter how many times you push. Come now, what is on the menu today?

LEONARD

*(pointing at the screen)*

Hey. Look look! Look! Yeah? Yeah?!

HENDRICK

No.

LEONARD

Shit.

HENDRICK

Anyway this is my shift. What's for breakfast?

LEONARD

So, for our breakfast today we have: two granola bars, plain. Two bags of chips, also plain. Two cans of cold mocha java, mind the rust. And one bar of nougat to share.

HENDRICK

How continental. Danke schoen.

LEONARD

My pleasure, monsieur. We try to offer a variety of selections, here in the basement of the Burj Intel Fa, the tallest building in all the world!

HENDRICK

Variety? It's the same as what we had yesterday.

LEONARD

Non, non, monsieur! Yesterday was granola with nuts! Today is granola with no nuts! Anyway, it's all free, isn't it?

Ritual: Leonard puts a can of coffee in Hendrick's hand, then takes one in his, and they each crack them open simultaneously. Then Leonard puts a granola bar in Hendrick's other hand, and they each stand side by side, eyes locked on the screen.

Ready? Me first now, okay? Count us off.

HENDRICK

Okay. Ready? *A - fünf-sechs-sieben-acht!*

They now go into a well-practiced precision eating and drinking routine which allows each of them to look away from the screen for a split-second to take bites and sips of their breakfast, perhaps biting and sipping in 4/4 time, something like this:

Leonard: BITE - 2-3-4-5-6-7-8, then SIP 2-3-4-5-6-7-8, and so on. At the same time, Hendrick does this: 1-2-3-4-SIP -6-7-8 -1-2-3-4- BITE -6-7-8. Or something like that. After a few repetitions, LEONARD changes it up:

LEONARD

Six, seven, CHANGE!

Without missing a beat they each now change the order of what they do: Leonard is sipping when he was biting, and so on. Whatever the choreography, the tempo should get faster until their mouths are full of coffee and granola. On the final count they each slam their cans down on the table.

LEONARD & HENDRICK

....six seven eight!

LEONARD

Well done! Well done! Well done, my friend. Much harder to do that when there's nuts involved!

HENDRICK

And the ones with the little dried cranberries? Forget about it. You choked that time, remember?

Hendrick's eyes remain fixed on the screen. Leonard takes a cloth and wipes Hendrick's mouth for him.

LEONARD

I never did.

HENDRICK

You did too. You choked and I saved your life.

Hendrick moves back to his chair. Leonard opens a bag of chips and brings it to him.

LEONARD

Yeah, well that was a long time ago.

HENDRICK

It wasn't, it was just the day before – hmm. Now I can't remember. It doesn't matter.

Leonard lies down on the cot and gets comfortable. Perhaps he pulls a mask over his eyes.

LEONARD

Enjoy your shift, Hennie.

HENDRICK

Sleep tight, Lennie.

Leonard goes to sleep. Hendrick continues to watch motionless as the images on the screen begin to move faster and faster, as lighting and sound effects suggest the passage of time.

The images slow. A sudden burst of WHITE NOISE and the screen goes white. Leonard wakes up and leaps out of bed. A new image appears on the screen: a beautiful CHINESE WOMAN smiling down at them (note: her dialogue is shown in transliterated (pinyin) Mandarin)

CHINESE WOMAN

(on screen)

fei1 chang2 gan3 xie4 ni3 qin2 fen4 de4 gong1 zuo4  
xu1 yao4 xiu1 xi de hua4 qing3 shuo1 yi1 sheng1

*[Thank you for your very hard work. If you need a rest, please say so now.]*

LEONARD

Hello? Yes! It seems the lift isn't working and we haven't been able to –

CHINESE WOMAN

Fei1 chang2 gan3 xie4 ni3 qin2 fen4 de4  
gong1 zuo4. Xu1 yao4 xiu1 xi de hua4  
qing3 shuo1 yi1 sheng1

LEONARD

Bollocks. Fuck. Hey! Hey! Can we  
please–?

But the screen goes back to the way it was before.

HENDRICK

You had to lie to them, didn't you?

LEONARD

Not this again. I didn't tell a lie.

HENDRICK

They asked what languages you spoke, and / you said Mandarin.

LEONARD

I never said – it was a mistake, all right? I ticked the wrong box on the bloody questionnaire.

HENDRICK

And ruined our chances of ever getting out of here.

LEONARD

Good morning to you, too. Look, there's always hope, Hennie. One day they'll fix the lift and we'll both get to go to the very top floor. Maybe even the roof!

HENDRICK

Just what do you think we'd find up there?

LEONARD

Blue skies. Sunshine. A fucking helipad with a whirlybird, a supermodel and a pitcher of Grey Goose martinis.

HENDRICK

There's always the stairs.

LEONARD

A hundred and sixty-three floors? With my bum knee?

HENDRICK

Who says it's a hundred sixty three?

LEONARD

It said so in the...

I remember reading...

I know it said somewhere a hundred and sixty-three. I know it did. Why would they lie?

HENDRICK

To frighten us? To keep us down here indefinitely.

LEONARD

I go all the way up to three at least once a day.

HENDRICK

And I've been to sixty-nine.

LEONARD

Why'd you stop? Why not seventy? Seventy-one?

HENDRICK

Because every floor is the same. One gray door after another, sealed up tight. Not even a handle or knob on this side. Not so much as a window to peek through.

LEONARD

We could stop watching.

HENDRICK

Shut up, Lennie.

LEONARD

Maybe that would get their attention / and someone would –

HENDRICK

I mean it. Don't even / talk about it.

LEONARD

What are they gonna do? Lock us up in the / basement?

HENDRICK

Stop it!

I'm going for dinner. Any requests? Money is no object when everything is free.

LEONARD

Nothing is free unless everything is.

With nuts this time, I guess?

HENDRICK

Okay. Got it? Have you got it, Lennie?

LEONARD

(fixing his eyes on the screen)

Yeah. Got it.

Hendrick exits through the double doors. Leonard walks upstage and listens as his echoing footsteps fade. Then, with great strength of will, Leonard **URNS HIS BACK ON THE SCREEN**, which goes immediately dark. All ambient noise it shuts down, and there is only silence. Leonard turns back to the screen to see if it will come back on but nothing changes. He panics, runs over to the double doors and opens them.

LEONARD

No. No! Hendrick? Hennie, come back! Something's wrong with the...

Hendrick's footsteps come running back down the stairs. He enters empty-handed.

LEONARD  
(terrified)

Hennie, I'm sorry.

HENDRICK  
What have you done, Lennie? What / happened to the –?

LEONARD  
It'll come back on, I'm sure of it. Where's dinner?

HENDRICK  
I didn't have any money. What happened to / the screen, Lennie?

LEONARD  
Money? It never asked for money before. It always just says "make selection."

HENDRICK  
Not anymore. Nothing is free.

LEONARD  
Unless everything is.

HENDRICK  
You stopped looking. That must be why.

LEONARD  
I thought maybe if we stopped, maybe  
someone would come, someone who spoke  
English or German and we could ask them  
to fix the –

HENDRICK  
The furnace shut down. The machines are  
asking for money again, Lennie. We have  
to find a way out on our own or we'll die.  
We'll take the stairs.

LEONARD  
All the way to the roof? I don't think that's such a good idea, mate.

HENDRICK  
What choice to we have? Something has to change, Lennie.

LEONARD  
So what? What happens when you get there?

HENDRICK  
I'll signal to others, someone will see.

LEONARD

A hundred and sixty three stories, eight hundred and thirty meters. You think you can just wave your arms and call for help and someone will come?

HENDRICK

Maybe. Maybe not. Let's try. Isn't this what you wanted?

Hennie packs a few things into a bag, makes ready to leave.

LEONARD

I can't, Hennie. My knee, remember?  
Hennie! What will you do if there's no one there?

HENDRICK

You said there'd be a whirlybird, a supermodel, some very good vodka.

LEONARD

That was just me talking bollocks, mate. It's like all the others. Just another locked door.

HENDRICK

I will find my way to the roof. I will signal for help. I will scream and wave my arms.

LEONARD

What if no one comes?

HENDRICK

Then I'll jump.  
Keep watching the screen. Maybe something will happen.

LEONARD

What if it doesn't? Then nothing we've done will have mattered. To anyone.

HENDRICK

It would have mattered to me. I'm glad to have known you, Lennie. *Auf wiedersehen.*

Hendrick crosses up to the double doors and opens them.

LEONARD

No one will see you.

HENDRICK

They will see me. Either at the top, or at the bottom.

Hendrick exits, the doors clank shut behind him. His footsteps echo, then fade. Leonard collapses onto his cot, sobbing himself to sleep. Time passes, lights and sound change. The Chinese woman reappears.

CHINESE WOMAN

fei1 chang2 gan3 xie4 ni3 qin2 fen4 de4 gong1 zuo4  
xu1 yao4 xiu1 xi de hua4 qing3 shuo1 yi1 sheng1

(she waits for a reply, then:)

Welcome to the Burj Intel Fa, the tallest building in all the world!

But Leonard sleeps on, and soon the screen goes dark again. A loud DING signals the arrival of the elevator. The button light goes out, the doors open, Hendrick stumbles into the room and collapses on the floor covered in sweat. Leonard wakes, sees the elevator doors are open and runs to them, but they slide closed in his face.

LEONARD

Wait! Wait! Stop! Stop. Stop.

HENDRICK

It only goes down.

Leonard goes to Hendrick, lifts him into his arms.

LEONARD

You made it to the roof? You made it, and you came back down to me! What did you see? Did you see anyone? Did you see the sky? Our building, this building. Is it really the tallest one?

HENDRICK

No. It's the only one.

Hendrick pulls free of Leonard, crawls center stage and fixes his eyes on the video screen. Leonard joins him. The video screen jumps back to life, the system reboots, all is as it was. The graphics crawl on, just as before. The building is audible again. They both stare at the screen, not daring to move.

LIGHTS FADE. END OF PLAY.