

REHEARSING THE FOUR-THIRTY-THREE

by

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Characters

GLENN, male, 30 or older, a concert pianist.

STAGEHAND, male or female, any age.

Time

Tempo giusto.

Setting

A concert hall stage, empty except for grand piano and bench.

NOTE: A performance by William Marx of John Cage's 4'33" is available at--

<http://bit.ly/Is36FY>

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A concert hall stage in dim light, with a grand piano and bench CS. After a moment, GLENN enters. He is wearing jeans and T-shirt and is carrying a thin musical score.

GLENN

(To unseen STAGEHAND.)

Kelly, can you get the lights?

Lights come up on stage. GLENN approaches the bench and sets the score on it. He surveys his instrument, opening the lid, lifting the fallboard over the keys, and so on.

STAGEHAND (O.S.)

Want me to stick around?

GLENN

No, no, you can take a break.

STAGEHAND (O.S.)

(Chuckles.)

Like four minutes and thirty-three seconds? Or can I take a full five?

GLENN sits beside the score and busies himself positioning the bench in front of the keyboard.

GLENN

(Preoccupied, reacting to the joke belatedly.)

Yeah. Take five, take ten. But when you get back, don't make any noise until you hear from me. I might still be in the middle of it.

STAGEHAND (O.S.)

You got it.

GLENN's motions now become very precise and deliberate. He places the score on the music rack and smooths it open. He takes a stopwatch out of his pocket and holds it up in front of himself with one hand. He takes a deep breath to begin the first movement. With his free hand, he closes the fallboard and then starts the watch.

Throughout the first movement, GLENN, his free hand resting on his thigh, stares at the watch in front of his face, unmoving.

GLENN (V.O.)

O.K...

Start strong. Audience will pay the most attention at the beginning...

Posture good. Breathing good. No excess movement...

How's the expression? Expectant but not eager. Alert but not anal. Poised. Professional. Focussed...

Coming up on the end of the first movement. I know some asshole out there will be timing me. More than one probably...

Have to hit it just right--especially this first one--or you can be sure I'll hear about it...

All right...

Here we go...

Closer...closer...Almost...

In the final second, GLENN's hand moves backwards slightly, then smoothly forward in an arc of a few inches that culminates in him stopping the watch with his thumb at precisely 30 seconds.

GLENN pauses, then sets the watch down with a grand gesture. With both hands, he opens the fallboard. His hands then fall to his sides and he relaxes. After a few seconds of apparent reflection, he re-assumes his playing position.

GLENN takes a deep breath, preparing to begin the second movement. With his free hand, he elaborately closes the fallboard and starts the watch. Throughout the second movement, GLENN, his free hand resting on his thigh, stares at the watch, unmoving, except to occasionally glance at the score.

GLENN (V.O.)

So far, so good. Have to meet expectations. Have to silence the skeptics. All eyes on me now...

(MORE)

GLENN (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Steady as she goes. Slightest waver in concentration and I'm screwed...

Reviews will be all over the place, of course. Morrison at the Times will be brutal. Fuck him. This is a modern classic. A masterpiece. Despite what he and Albers say...

And what about Judith? She hasn't picked up her ticket at the box office yet. Is she even coming? She said she would. Well, it sounded that way...

Better give her a call, remind her...No. Text. Yeah, a text is better. Something like: "Please remember, ticket waiting for you." No, too needy. Like a stalker. Or a cop...

More casual. How about: "Cage match tonight, don't let me fall AAK." No, too esoteric. She might have to look up the "asleep at keyboard" reference. Besides, she hates wrestling...

More to the point. Maybe: "J, look forward to see you at concert. G." No, too familiar, too presumptuous. Who said anything about getting together afterward?...

Fuck. Who am I kidding. I should come right out with "Judith, I'm sorry. Forgive me, please. I didn't mean what I said. But how was I supposed to know that your dress was an heirloom. I thought you were being ironic." Shit, that's three texts at least...

Whatever. If I don't hear from her, I will not check her seat when I walk out. Can't risk losing control, even a bit...

I can do this. I have to. Have to show Morrison, all the other philistines in this podunk town. Don't know genius when it kicks 'em in the nuts...

Speaking of...getting a little sweaty down there in the hold. Damn. Never considered that. Well, that's what rehearsals are for, right? Get the bugs out, so to speak, or the boys in line. Note to self: briefs instead of boxers tonight. And powder, lots of powder...

Jesus. How much does this fucking stopwatch weigh? People think it's no big deal sitting here for four and a half minutes. Don't understand the performance demands. No idea. Not easy marking time. Measuring the breath of the universe. Good line, breath, should use it with Judith...

And that's just about it for the second movement. Take that Mr. Asshole Timer in the Audience. Up yours...

And counting...

(MORE)

GLENN (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Here we go...three, two...

GLENN moves the hand with the watch forward to snap off precisely two minutes and 23 seconds.

GLENN pauses, then repeats his routine of grandly setting the watch down and opening the fallboard. Once again he relaxes, but this time with a curious underlying tension. He plucks a piece of lint from his shirt. He flexes his shoulders. He subtly adjusts his package. Finally, he again assumes his playing position, taking another deep breath before the third and final movement.

One last time, GLENN carefully closes the fallboard and starts the stopwatch. Again he stares at the watch, barely moving, as...

GLENN (V.O.)

This is it--home stretch. Final inning. Proof in the pudding and the mother of all metaphoric logjams...

Now you'll see, all of you. Including you, Albers--call yourself a concertmaster. Only thing you're master of is sucking up to shits like Morrison. You have no idea of what art, true art can do...

What? No...

My arm...no, please, not a cramp...I can't cramp up...Impossible...

Can't let the watch tremble--only tool I've got for the passage...

It has to end properly--the end of time. Right here on this stage, here with this demonstration of the raw power of human will...

That's my task--my Herculean labor tonight. Taking time by the throat so that everyone in the audience--friends and foes and aloof goddesses all--can experience, if only for a few minutes, what the idling of the inscrutable cosmic engine feels like...

But you, you all think this is easy, don't you? You all think I'm just sitting here, doing nothing...

(MORE)

GLENN (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Well, you have no idea. It's not nothing--it's a cockfight against death. I've put myself on display in a situation where the slightest error means instant ridicule and unrevokable disaster...

Oh, my arm...This cramp, unbearable...like torture...

So...Yes. Go ahead--try this at home, motherfuckers. Albers and Morrison and the rest of you dilettantes--try embracing the vacuum of the cosmos as I am now. Try confronting the universe the way I am doing, being ripped raw before your very eyes. Truth is, you don't have the guts to face the goddamn itchy, sweaty groin of existence, nor the mind to comprehend it...

God, my arm!...Pain like a knife...

Take that, Morrison. Take that, Albers...and Judith...

You have nailed me to the cross, and I can't make you care!...

Ten, I am sacrificed...

Nine, I am scorned...

Eight, I have no honor...

Seven, no hope...

Six, I am alone...

Five, and I beg you...

Four, even if you discard me...

Three, even if you kill me...

Two, you must acknowledge me...

Awkwardly, painfully, GLENN snaps the stopwatch at precisely 100 seconds. Using his free hand for support, he sets the watch down and gingerly lowers that arm to his lap, where he cradles it. He opens the fallboard with his free hand, which he then uses to massage his cramped muscles. After a few seconds, he's able to move his aching arm again, slowly shaking and flexing it. There is a noise OS.

GLENN

Kelly! That you?

STAGEHAND (O.S.)
Yeah. You OK out there, buddy?

GLENN
Sure.

STAGEHAND (O.S.)
How'd it go?

GLENN
Pretty good. Getting there. Probably going to run through it
couple more times. Just to make sure.

STAGEHAND (O.S.)V.O.)
(Laughs.)
Go ahead. I mean, how hard can it be, right?

*GLENN slumps on the bench, hugging his
sore arm at the foot of the cross. Fade
to black.*

THE END