

STOP TIME

By Dennis Bush

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CHARACTERS

HARMONY	female; 17; struggles with low self-esteem
HOPE	female; 18; ready to make things happen; sees the big picture
SKATE	male; 18; about to move out of the house; protective of his younger sister
STEPHEN	male; early 20's; passive-aggressive; has separated himself from his peers
DOVE	male (or female); 17; has been picked on; preparing for escape
SUMMER	female; 19; works as a waitress for a catering company
TYLER	male (or female); 19; works at a clothing store in the mall
BRADLEY	male; early 20s; paranoid; obsessive
ALVIS	female; early 20's; tough girl with sensitive side she works hard to hide
KENDRA	female; mid-teens; not very bright; anxious to get her sister's room

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Stop Time was first performed in Phoenix, Arizona, in May, 2008. The original cast included Kelsey Torstveit, Emily White, Alex Knerr, Scott McKown, Jared Sikes, Samantha Ortiz, Alex Rivera, Ben Whitmire, Macy Cobb and Ariana O'Rafter. The production was directed by the author.

SETTING

A variety of locations. The present.

For

*Alex, EJ, Kelsey and Scott
Time is precious. And so are all of you.*

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AT RISE: The characters are lost in their own thoughts. They're pondering decisions and details. Some are in delightful reverie; others are seized by fears and memories they can't seem to let pass. As each actor speaks, there should be a sense of their lines being only a glimpse of what's going on in their minds.

HARMONY: If I could keep them together.

DOVE: If I could float right up to the ceiling.

SKATE: If I could take her with me.

HOPE: . . .Get them to say what I want them to say.

STEPHEN: . . .Dish out a steady diet of contempt and disregard.

SUMMER: . . .Raise both your arms, smile and speak a simple sentence.

BRADLEY: Your dinner plate is not an amusement park.

ALVIS: If I could have a few more seconds.

TYLER: We steal. . . We steal time.

(A quick beat.)

KENDRA: It's ominous.

DOVE, SUMMER and BRADLEY: If I could stop. . .

HOPE: If I could. . .

SKATE: Stop time.

HARMONY: Stop.

STEPHEN: Time.

ALL: Please.

(A beat.)

STEPHEN: We have to have an understanding, here.

ALVIS: That's pretty much the only option.

BRADLEY: So you don't have any incorrect information?

KENDRA: I usually do.

TYLER: Your whole world can change in a matter of minutes.

HOPE: We're hanging by a thread.

SUMMER: No major problems.

DOVE: I talk to the ceiling fan.

SKATE: With the door closed.

HARMONY: I think about things.

DOVE: It's beautiful.

(Transition.)

HARMONY: I didn't change my name. A lot of people think I did. But "Harmony" is the name on my birth certificate. So, no, I didn't change it. *(quick pause)* I've thought about it a lot. *(quick pause)* It's not an easy name to have. When you go on vacation, there aren't any souvenirs with "Harmony" on 'em like you can buy little Chelsea or Megan key chains. And people usually have some kind of comment to make about your name, when it's Harmony. "Oh, were your parents hippies? Were you born in a commune where there was a lot of drug use?" Some woman asked me that at a party. I laughed, but I didn't think it was funny and I didn't think it was a very nice insinuation to make, especially at a party. I didn't choose my name. It was chosen for me. I think your name is something you have to accept. *(quick pause)* Like your family. *(quick pause)* You don't get a choice about the family you're born into and you don't get to pick your own name. *(pause)* I'm an only child. I think my parents decided to name me Harmony because they thought it would be symbolic. Like, "Here we are, two people who've come together in this relationship and we've created something like two voices that blend in harmony." *(quick pause)* That's what I like to think. I'm sure the choice of names was symbolic, but probably not as romanticized as my version of it. *(pause)* They named me Harmony but, as far back as I can remember there wasn't anything harmonious about their marriage or our family. They didn't yell and scream, but the silences were so loud. My mom used to say, "I love you and your dad loves you." But they never said anything about loving each other. It was like they were roommates. Roommates who were being forced to live together when all they really wanted to do was get away. *(pause)* When I was five, I remember thinking that maybe I was supposed to do something to make them love each other. Like that was what I was supposed to do. Like it's what all children are supposed to do. *(pause)* I used to draw pictures of our family and my parents were always on opposite sides of the paper and I was in the middle and my arms were stretched way out trying to hold their hands. Like if I could hold their hands, I could keep them together. *(pause)* As I got older, a lot of their fights were about me. *(quick pause)* I think they were. *(quick pause)* I'm pretty sure they were. *(quick pause)* I'm almost positive they were. They still didn't yell at each other, but the intensity of the silences was more suffocating than it seemed to be when I was little. Maybe it was the same and I was just more sensitive to it. I don't know. The fights started being

about me at the same time my mom started calling me “Harm,” instead of Harmony. Like all of a sudden I needed a shorter version of my name. I guess using all three syllables is really too much to expect from an unhappy woman. But Harm? It’s like she was saying, “You’re the harm, here.” Like I was harming her. Like I was what harmed her chances of having a happy life of her own. *(quick pause)* I don’t know. Maybe that’s not how she felt, but it seemed like it to me. *(quick pause)* And when your parents hate each other and are always fighting about you and your mother calls you “Harm” it doesn’t take much of a leap to make those kind of connections.

BRADLEY: My Internet connection is slow. My neighbors are tapping into it. I’m keeping a list of their infractions.

HOPE: I make lists. Things I need to do. . . things I should have done. . . things I want to do but don’t think I ever will. *(quick pause)* And not just for myself. I keep to-do lists for other people. Lists of things *they* should do. And say. When I’m talking to somebody, I’m thinking about what they should say back to me. In my head, I’m writing the script for our conversation, only they don’t get a copy of it. It’s a shame they don’t, because they’re always more articulate in my head than they are in real life. If they’d stick to the script in my head, they’d say really lovely things. Memorable things. People don’t think enough about what they’re saying or how they say it. Our communication skills are what separates us from the animals. We should strive for a higher quality of conversation. *(pause)* Nobody tries to be profound. *(pause)* Except me. I make a concerted effort to be profound. And, often, I am. But I shouldn’t be the only one trying. I know it’s not fair to impose my standards on others, but it’s hard not to. I get mad when people don’t make the same kind of effort that I do. I get disappointed. I get disappointed a lot. *(quick pause)* Let down. *(quick pause)* Frustrated. But that’s how you learn things. Through disappointment and frustration. If your life was always a big happy party, you’d never learn anything. *(pause)* So, I’m trying to accept people for who they are, not who I want them to be. I can want somebody to be the best person they can be but that doesn’t mean they have to be the person I want them to be.

DOVE: I lay on the floor in the living room and talk to the ceiling fan directly above me. It’s like an angel. It has a head, two arms and two legs. When it spins, there are 5 heads and 5 pairs of arms and legs. It’s a dizzying display of angels and they all listen to me. Where I lived before, we didn’t have ceiling fans. Nobody did. A climate kind of thing, I suppose. But, here, we have them in every room. And I talk to them all. It’s like having friends all over the house. Their faces are hopeful and their arms are open wide, as if they’re always ready to give me a hug. Their legs are spread apart,

too, kind of like they've been riding a horse. *(pause; a smile)* A cowboy angel. *(pause)* Sometimes, when I'm laying on the floor and the angels are spinning above me, I feel like they're lifting me up to them. Like I could float right up to the ceiling. *(quick pause)* An ascension. A glorious, holy ascension. And I could hover close to the angels. Close enough to feel their arms reaching out to me. *(pause)* That day will come. When they lift me up. When they talk to me, instead of me just talking to them. And I'll come when they call. Ascending to the angels is a calling. A calling reserved for only a few believers. And I'll leave everything behind. There's no loneliness with the angels. There's no one to spray paint a dirty word on your car. There's no one to post lies about you on the Internet. There's only love and acceptance and a peaceful humming sound. *(quick pause; explaining)* The angels don't sing. They hum. *(pause)* It's a beautiful sound. It takes away all the noise from other people that gets in your head. It's perfect and peaceful with the angels. *(pause)* And I'll be with them. . . I believe. *(pause, then, quietly)* I believe.

HARMONY: I spend a lot of time alone. Even when I'm with other people, I'm alone. My mind goes off someplace else. I think about things. I could be talking to somebody and, from the outside, it would look like I was completely engaged in the conversation, but inside my head, I'm a million miles away. I wonder about things like why women wear lipstick. And why people lie to each other when it would be just as easy to tell the truth. Last week, I met a woman named Melody at the gym. And I resented her because of her name. I still do. I have been actively resenting a woman who was perfectly nice to me while we were on the treadmills next to each other. I feel like she has less pressure on her to make sure the people in her life are happy because her name is Melody and mine is Harmony. She gets to sing whatever notes she wants and I have to try to blend in with everybody else. And I resent her for that. I know it's stupid. I know I'm stupid for thinking it, but that's what goes through my head. I've always defined myself by how I interact with other people—my parents, my friends. . . everybody. I just want to worry about myself.

SKATE: I don't want to move out and leave her. *(backtracking)* My little sister. *(quick pause)* When I move out, I won't be around to keep an eye on her. . . To look after her. . . To make sure she's OK. *(pause)* She's shy. She's not as outgoing as I am. She doesn't have many friends. And, when I'm away, I'm afraid she won't have anybody to talk to. *(pause)* My parents both work a lot. They're not home much. And when they are, they like to be left alone. I know how that is. I have a job, too, and when I come home I like to play video games in my room for a while. With the door closed. Sometimes, through the

wall between our rooms, I can hear my sister crying. *(pause)* When somebody's crying, it's hard to know whether they wanna be left alone or if you're supposed to say something to cheer 'em up or if they need a hug or whatever. It's hard to know what to do. When I hear my sister crying, I usually go over to her room and tell her about my day. Kinda distract her from what she's upset about. Sometimes, I tell her I feel like crying, too. There's a difference between feeling like crying and actually doing it. I don't cry. Crying is admitting weakness. It's surrendering to whatever it is that's making you hurt inside. When I tell my sister that, she keeps crying. That's what worries me. She hasn't figured out how to be strong. I kept hoping she'd see how I handled things and she'd start doing it that way, too. Nothing gets to me. I don't let it. You can say the most hurtful thing—right to my face—and I'll just look at you like you were talking about the weather. My sister can't do that. She's too sensitive. She's too vulnerable. That's why I'm afraid to leave. It's not that I'm scared about what's waiting for me out there in the world, it's leaving behind my sister that's the problem. When there's nobody here to take her mind off things, what'll she do? When I'm not around to make her laugh, will she? Will she laugh when I'm not here? I'm afraid she's gonna spend all her time crying in her room. My mom and dad like to be left alone. I like to be left alone. My sister is the only one who *doesn't* like to be left alone, but that's what's happening to her. I'm leaving. *(HE begins to cry.)*

DOVE: I'll leave everything behind.

SKATE: *(cont.)* And that means I'm leaving her alone. *(the tears flow more freely)* And I want to say, "I'm sorry," and I want her to know that, if I could, I'd take her with me. And I want her to know that I love her and I want her to be happy. *(pause)* More than anything, I want her to be happy.

HARMONY: I just want to worry about myself. But I'm not sure I know who I am. Or what I want. Or how I'm supposed to function in the world without worrying about how I fit in or *if* I fit in. *(quick pause)* Or if I deserve to fit in. I wanna be special and unique but I never believe people when they tell me I already am. I have trouble believing anything that people tell me. Even my friends. Even the people who love me the most. Compliments are what I put in the imaginary trash can in my brain so I don't take up any space reserved for thinking about things like my inability to do anything right. Nobody harmonizes with the music in my head. I won't let them.

STEPHEN: I like challenges but I don't like to be challenged. And by that, I mean that I don't like it when anybody disputes what I'm saying. I like to disagree with people but I don't like them to disagree

with me. We have to have an understanding, here, between you and me. You have to give me respect and admiration–worship me, even–but you can't expect that from me. Because you won't get it. You treat me like I'm incredibly special and I'll say things to you that are so rude, they'll make your jaw drop. I'll be nice to you, when I want something, but the rest of the time, you can expect a steady diet of contempt and disregard. That's the way it is and that's the way it's got to be. *(pause)* I don't have a lot of friends my own age. People my age don't respect my parameters. They wanna argue. They try to challenge me and I don't like to be challenged that way. I need to be able to share my knowledge and experience with people who take it at face value. Whatever I say is like truth on a spoon for them. It's like I'm the rock star and they're the groupies. They look up to me. They need me. And I need them to need me. *(pause)* I lead them on. I make 'em think they're special to me. . . like they mean something. . . like I care about them. *(pause)* The only thing I care about is how they make me feel. *(pause)* I had a girlfriend. I've had dozens of girlfriends. I'm sure that's no surprise. I mean, look at me. I'm desirable. I make any woman I'm with better than she is alone. There is no disputing that! It's truth on a spoon. But women don't always see it that way. *(pause)* My relationships don't last. *(quick pause)* Not very long, anyway. Just long enough for me to see that they can't follow the rules. They do, at first. They all do. They're sweet and they show me respect. They know who's the rock star and who's the groupie. But, then, I'll be at a party with one of 'em and I'll say something and she'll roll her eyes or laugh or make a sarcastic remark. In front of people. And that's unacceptable. Because I can't be responsible for what I do, then. I can't. I have to separate myself from a woman like that. From *anybody* like that. Somebody who looks up to you would never put you in a position where you're embarrassed. Not in private or in public. They have respect. They would never humiliate me. They would never go on a dinner date with me and call me an emotional invalid. That's what the woman I went out with last week did. She called me an emotional invalid. In front of the waitress. In front of the waitress! So, now, the waitress–whose only apparent skill is that she can remember what kind of pie they have–gets to look at me like she knows something. And my date nodded at her like they shared some big truth. *(angry)* Nobody shared any truth! *(with furious rages)* No truth was shared because I'm the one who knows the truth and I didn't share it with them! *(pause)* I pushed the waitress out of my way and I got out of there. *(HE begins to cry.)* Otherwise there'd have been trouble. I have to separate myself from situations like that. It's like when your foot gets an infection that can't be cured, you amputate it. *(his crying)*

Stop Time– Page 9

intensifies) You cut off what's bad, so the rest can go on. (*pause; trying to pull himself together*) Friends who can't play by my rules or a date who thinks she knows the truth all have to be amputated. They have to be cut off from me, so I can go on. (*quick pause*) I'm like a trauma surgeon in a war zone. I amputate what has to go. (*pause; regaining some composure*) I separate myself from them. It's the way it is and the way it has to be.

ALVIS: When I cross the street, I walk slowly. If a car tries to turn, when I'm in the crosswalk, I move even slower. I take my time, because that's what it is. My time. It's my time in the crosswalk. If the driver honks his horn at me—and it's always the men who honk their horns—I will stop in the center of the intersection. And the driver has to deal with it. Everything stops. I stop time. And everybody around me has to deal with it.

(Transition to SUMMER, HARMONY and HOPE at a cafe. The conversation begins as they take their seats.)

SUMMER: So, my sister was in town, last week.

HARMONY: The one in med school.

SUMMER: Yeah. She was at some kind of seminar about prosthetic limbs. Very high tech.

HOPE: Did she stay with you?

SUMMER: No. (*quick pause*) I offered, but she didn't seem very interested in slumming at my apartment.

HARMONY: So, she was in town but you didn't get to see her?

SUMMER: We went out for dinner. That was it. It was the longest hour and thirty-five minutes of my life.

HOPE: What happened?

SUMMER: The closer she gets to being a doctor, the clearer she makes it that no other career choice is as valid as hers.

HARMONY: She said that?

SUMMER: Not in those exact words, but she got her point across.

HOPE: People never say what we want them to.

SUMMER: And when I called my mother to tell her about the dinner with Sandra, she said, "Cut your sister a little slack. She works so hard and she gets stressed."

HARMONY: We all get stressed.

SUMMER: And, then, she asked, "How's everything going in your little life?"

HOPE: Your little life?

SUMMER: Exactly! My little life.

HARMONY: What did you do?

SUMMER: I told her not to baby me like that. I said, "Don't minimize

what's going on with me by calling it my little life. My life is not little.” And she said, “OK,” like “Calm down, Summer, don't make such a big deal out of a little question.”

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