

# GRAND PASSION

*An argument for one character by Eric Presland*

*The scene is the AUTHOR's bedroom. There are numerous coffee cups littering the floor, and crumpled pieces of paper. He has been smoking heavily. There is a door to the landing; off the landing one door leads to the bathroom, another to ALAN's bedroom. There is a chair, and a dressing gown over the back it. The AUTHOR wears T-shirt and underpants. On the T-shirt, a Gay Pride badge of some description.*

*Time: 1.30 on a Saturday afternoon, in the present.*

*[The AUTHOR is taking the last drag of a cigarette. He stubs it out furiously and paces the room. He is clutching a reporter's notebook. There is a sense that he is trapped.]*

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AUTHOR: He's in there. Doing it with Ben. Twelve hours they've been - at it. This is the third time they've... This is the third time. No, I tell a lie. Not twelve hours. Eight and a half if you don't count sleep.

*[He consults the notebook.]*

They stopped at twenty-five to four - woke up again at ten past seven. Eight hours, twenty-five minutes.

*[He flicks through the pages.]*

Alan has been to the loo three times, Ben's been twice.

*[He indicates the book.]*

This? Oh, just thoughts. Panic. Poison. Twelve hours of self-indulgent, self-pitying stupid hysterical CRAP!

*[He tears up the pages in a rage, throws them at the wall. Starts panting. Takes another cigarette.]*

Why am I doing this to myself? It's so bloody pathetic. Just a

simple little one night stand... Probably... I think... I hope...  
Along the corridor... Oh shit!

*[To himself:]*

Look, will you stop this? You're just tearing yourself apart. You're here, he's there, and that's all there is to it. There's nothing you can do about it. Calm down, for Christ sake. Look, you're an actor, right? You know the exercises. Get centred. Legs apart, eyes closed. Feel your spine. A shaft of energy... A shaft of light... Holding the skull... effortless...

*[He starts breathing slowly and regularly, but despite himself stiffens; the breathing becomes harsh and shallow.]*

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck...

It's so physical. That's what I can't get over. An absolutely overpowering physical force.

There I was, watching the telly, waiting for Alan to get back from the Gaysoc disco. Usually he's back by about one, at the latest. But I thought he must have stayed around to help clear up, or the night bus hadn't turned up or -

*[to ALAN]* Oh, hi. No, I wasn't feeling tired. I thought I'd wait up for you, and I'm into this amazing movie. "Shock Corridor". It's about this reporter investigating a mental hospital. It's a Sam Fuller. Quite extraordinary. There's an amazing fantasy sequence in colour coming up. It's got about half an hour to run. Do you want to stay...?

OK... No, I'm fine, thanks. I got a few cans of lager in.

*[ALAN leaves. The AUTHOR looks after him, curious. Then to audience:]*

It's funny, isn't it? What arouses your suspicions, I mean, there was nothing in the words... So, he wanted to be on his own. It wasn't the first time.

No, it wasn't what he said, it was what he didn't say. I mean, he just said, 'OK, see you tomorrow', very brusque, a bit nervous,

and went away again. Now usually he'd stick around and moan about the lager louts on the bus back, or the crappy music at the disco - he loves moaning - but no, he just said, 'OK'. And went back downstairs. And I thought, he's brought somebody back. No, I didn't think. I knew. He might have travelled home with someone local - I mean, there's a lot of students live in this area - he could have just brought them back for coffee. But no. I just knew he'd invited Ben back. For the night. Because last week we'd both said how much we fancied him.

Joking, of course. And then it all fell into place, the way he had said he'd stay on after lectures; he wouldn't come back to shower and change as usual. He'd get a pie in the bar, go straight to the disco.

*[As he talks to the audience, he mimes taking off a dressing gown and putting on the clothes he is now wearing. He goes into the bathroom, cleans his teeth, combs his hair, dabs on a bit of aftershave.]*

He said he wanted to try and grab a bit of computer time - they're so under-equipped you wouldn't believe it - all very reasonable, you might think. You might think.

He was hoping to meet Ben in the Union Bar. He didn't want me there at all. He was giving me the excuse not to go, do you see? Cos I can't say I really like it; I only go for Alan. Well, it's been two years since I got my PhD, and there's hardly anyone left now that I know. Mostly I just stand around feeling ancient while all these eighteen-year-olds pretend they're out of their heads on acid. They're only copying what they've seen on Night Network - if you offered them a real joint they'd run a mile.

So, it doesn't take much excuse for me not to go. And Alan knows it. Bastard.

Now, I knew all that the moment he left the room. Suddenly it was all there, fully formed, in a flash. But the funny thing was, I didn't feel anything. I just thought, 'OK, I will go downstairs and get a cup of tea after all. Just to see if I'm right.'

*[He is now ready. He is down in the kitchen. ]*

Hi, Ben. Making yourself at home, I see. No, please. Feel free. I just thought I'd have that cup of tea after all. Oh, thanks. Best china, I see. You're honoured, Ben. We haven't used the teapot since Alan's mother came. When was that, Alan? April? I was so nervous, Ben, you wouldn't believe it. 'Meet the in-laws'. Know what I mean?

No thanks, I won't. I prefer to keep a clear head.

*[There is an embarrassed pause. Then, to audience:]*

So, Ben passed the joint to Alan. And smiled. And then it hit. That was it. The very moment. Then, when he smiled, then it hit. My stomach went down like I was going up in a fast lift, my legs started shaking, I felt dizzy. I got pins and needles in my hands, there were flames licking round the back of my brain, here; my heart started pounding.... Can you hear it? In here it sounds like one of those pneumatic presses they use on the roads. What's the word they use for them? Shit, I can't remember. Even my vocabulary's cracking up.

Thump, thump, thump, thump. 115 to the minute, I counted it. And it won't stop. It just won't go away. On, stop it. Please. Just stop it and go away. That's all I want. A little peace. A little rest.

Christ, I've got to get out of this. Go for a walk. Anything.

*[He makes for the door to the landing. To himself:]*

You can't. You can't go anywhere. You're fascinated. Hooked.

*[He goes along the corridor, puts his ear to Alan's bedroom door.]*

Nothing, Silence. That's the worst of all. You fill the silence with your imagination. It's like a porn video you'd like to join in with, but you're on the other side of the screen.

It's not that, it's not. But I've got to see it through. You can understand that, can't you? I've got to know the worst.

And I've got to be here, bright as nine pence, when they come out. If they come out. They could be there all weekend.

And Monday's a Bank Holiday. Sweet Jesus, have I got the stamina?

*[He walks away from Alan's door, back to his own room. To himself:]*

This is your home, your lover. You invited him to live with you. It was your choice. Your decision. You knew what you were like, you knew what he was like. You knew the age difference; you knew he was cute and you weren't. You knew he knew he was cute. But you were flattered. And now you're paying for it, you sucker. For God's sake, you can't just keep the bits of him you like and cut out the bits you don't. This is a relationship, not a surgical operation. *[Pause. Realises what he's said.]* That's good. I must use that some time.

*[He picks up the notebook and writes it down. To audience:]*

Might turn into something one day. I don't really approve of writing as therapy. I mean, if you need therapy, go to a shrink. Why should the audience pay to see you working out your own problems? It's not your fault I haven't got the courage of my convictions.

Oh yes, I've got the convictions, all right. I believe in the Ten Commandments of Gay Relationships:

Thou shalt live each moment together as It comes and be thankful for it.

Thou shalt not make rash promises as a hostage to the future.

Thou canst still change.

Thou shalt not ask too many questions.

Thou shalt not give too many answers.

Thou shalt not give up seeing thy other friends.

Thou shalt keep separate bedrooms, just in case.

Thou shalt not open a joint bank account, except to pay the rent.

Thou shalt not talk about "we" and "us".

Thou shalt not wear identical T-shirts.

I saw a gay wedding on television once. It made me quite nauseous.

So why does it hurt so much? ... There isn't time ... It's so hard...

*[He picks up his dressing gown, on the back of the chair. He picks a hair off it.]*

One of Alan's. He has lovely hair. I can smell him on the pillow, round the room. He was here - what? - Thirty-six hours ago.

*[He bursts into tears]* Well, where are they now? Those right-on people with whom I had right-on relationships? 'We'll stay friends, won't we?' 'Promise you'll keep in touch.' 'Just call me any time you want to.' So civilised. Well I need help now. When you find out you're gay you can get help and support, but nobody helps with jealousy. It's more taboo than the clap, much more. Nobody'll admit to suffering from it, nobody.

*[As a confession, to the Audience:]* I am suffering from jealousy. There. I've said it. Dragged it out into the open. I am an upfront, politically correct gay man - well, almost; I've read all the right books from "Compulsory Heterosexuality" to "The Gay Book of Days"; I've seen all the right movies and been on all the right marches. And I am suffering from jealousy. Saying it doesn't make it go away. Ideological soundness in the head, and a chill in the gut. Empty. Hollow. Non-person.

*[He curls the dressing gown in a ball, comforts himself with it, then throws it away in disgust. To himself:]*

God, what a wimp you are. Haven't even got the guts to smash something. Might draw attention to yourself. That was safe, wasn't it? That didn't make a noise.

Well, go on. Do something. Talk to someone, for Christ sake. There's the telephone. There's the address book. Pick a name, any name. Ring them up. Ask if you can go round. That's all it takes.

'Hello, Eric here. I'm out of my head, and totally unfit for human consumption, but if you don't mind I'd like to come round and bore you for a couple of hours about how miserable I am.'

I can't. What would they think? It's not what my public expects.

Besides, I might miss something.

*[To audience again:]* Do you know what this feels like? I mean, physically? It's like that lurch in your stomach you get when you're walking home alone, and someone steps out of the shadows, and you know you're going to be queer bashed. Except this time you're queer bashing yourself. Because that's all this is. Conditioning.

But who would have thought it could be so violent? It mows you down like a force of nature.

'Attention. Attention. This is a jealousy warning. Force fourteen jealousy has just hit the coast and is heading towards town. Secure all light and movable objects. Make sure any breakables are on the floor or locked away in a safe place. Bolt all doors and fasten all windows. Stay indoors. I repeat, stay indoors. Do not attempt to leave your home.'

Well, maybe it is a force of nature. Otherwise, why so violent? Maybe "pair-bonding" is natural after all, something primevally important to the survival of the species, something so atavistic that there's no point in trying to fight it. And it's only when something like this happens...

*[To himself:]* This is nonsense, you're talking crap. *[He addresses himself in the mirror:]* You are talking crap. What do you think you are, a fucking mallard? You are a human being, you can make choices, you can change. This isn't natural, what you're going through. This isn't part of you. Do you want this to be natural?

*[To Audience:]* No. Do you think I want to feel like this? Twelve hours, 115 to the minute and still going on. I've got a little knot. Just there - where is that? Lower intestine? It feels like a tumour.

*[He holds out a packet with two cigarettes left.]*

I had forty fags, yesterday evening. *[Takes one]* Kamikaze by nicotine. *[Lights it]*

Of course, I should be pleased that Alan is enjoying himself.

We hadn't even planned to sleep together tonight - last night.

It's only sex. What's the big deal?

*[His hands are shaking on the cigarette; he indicates the shakes:]*

That. That's the big deal. You know, last night, with the two of them, in the kitchen...

*[We are back in the kitchen. The Author drinks his tea with exaggerated relish:]*

That's good. Alan makes a lovely cup of tea, Ben. Always has. I think that was the first thing that attracted me to him. Well, maybe the second or third. Love may come and go, but a good cup of tea endureth for ever. What? Oh that... Well, it wasn't that good a movie to be honest. Just something to watch while I was waiting for you to come home. Anyway, I think we've had the best bits by now. *[Pause]*

By the way, Alan, you haven't forgotten we're going to dinner with Derek and Clive tomorrow, have you? Well, I just thought I'd remind you. You know what your memory's like. 7.30 sharp - you know how fussy they are about things like that. Clive'll probably cook something which'll be a total disaster if it's not timed to the last second. *[To BEN:]* We know these two rich queens out in Pudsey - one of them's a producer for Granada. He says he likes my writing, but I think he's really just after Alan's body. A lot of people are.

*[Pause]*

Yeah... Well... I suppose I'll be getting back to the film then... I'll - leave you to it. *[To ALAN:]* Come in and - snuggle up - later if you feel like it. Sure. I'll see you in the morning, then. *[To*

*BEN:] Goodnight, Ben. I'll see you around some time. [To ALAN:] Sleep well. Darling.*

*[During the above, he has been trembling increasingly. As he turns, he drops the teacup.]*

Shit.

*[He pulls a hankie out of his pocket to wipe it up. His attempts are rather feeble.]*

Stupid of me. I'm sorry about that. I don't know what came over me. No, it's fine. I can manage. *[Suddenly shouting:]* Oh, for God's sake, Alan, stop fussing over me.

*[ALAN and the AUTHOR stare at each other for a few moments:]*

OK. Sorry. I don't know what you must think of me, Ben. Sorry I shouted. I'll leave it with you.

*[He rushes blindly from the room. To Audience, in the present:]*

And that's the way it was. Is. You make a prat of yourself, and you know you're making a prat of yourself, and you can't stop it. You find yourself saying all the things that you've laughed at other people for saying. 'How can he do this to me?'; 'Look what he's making me feel'; 'I wouldn't mind if he'd tell me about it – wouldn't tell me about it - did it at home – didn't do it at home – didn't have such dreadful taste in men – didn't have such good taste in men.' 'I'm not normally the jealous type, but –'

Actually, that is true. I'm not normally the jealous type. I haven't felt like this since I was seventeen and my best friend at school told me he was getting engaged. Of course, I didn't know what it was all about then.

But it's more than just jealousy. It's being left out. When I went down to the kitchen, they didn't want me there. Well of course they didn't. But the barriers... the lies and the silences... in your own home...

It's envy too. Cos - Ben's got a really good body. Very small and slim. His trunk's a bit big for his legs, so he's got this long,

tapering back. Nice little bum. Mind you, I've only seen him from behind.

Oh yes, I've been in. About an hour ago. I left my cash card in Alan's room on Wednesday, you see, I hadn't needed it since then, but I've got to get down to the off-licence today before they close at three, because we're going to need a bottle to take to Derek and Clive's... You have to think of these things. Alan never does.

No, I hadn't got to. It could have waited. That was just an excuse. Curiosity. And masochism.

*[He suddenly drops to his knees and starts searching among the pieces of paper he earlier tore up and threw away. He finds what he is looking for, and reads:]*

'11.45 am. Finally plucked up courage to knock. There was a slight shuffling, but no answer. I knocked again. It was Ben who said come in. Quite neutral. Well, why should he care? I went in. Alan was lying on his back with his legs apart, knees up, Ben was crouched between them on his haunches, his hand resting on Alan's chest, the nipple between his fingers. Alan was smiling, but when he looked up, his smile froze, and he gave me a look of such hurt and resentment. My face must have given my feelings away. I don't ever want to be the cause of such a look on anyone's face ever again.

'I mumbled something about my cash card, and Alan tossed it to me from the side of the bed. I kept my eyes averted as I fumbled for it on the floor. Out of the corner of my eye I could see a couple of condoms. Both used. I suppose that's something to be thankful for.

'I left the room backwards, groping for the door handle behind me. I can't begin to convey how humiliating the whole thing was.'

*[He drops the paper with contempt.]*

The condoms. Yes. I bought a box of a hundred by mail order a couple of years ago, when I was footloose and fancy free. Optimist that I was. And then I met Alan. We used them for the first three months, but after that...

It was a big thing. A big commitment. And we never even talked about it. It just happened one night. I put one on - almost automatically, I suppose - and he just reached down, and gently eased it off. Then he kissed me, on the tip of the cock, and smiled, and turned over, without saying a word.

He's too young to remember what it was like before AIDS. He's always had to be careful. But me... I never realised how much I missed it, till that night. Freedom. Not having to think, and remember, and stop, and fumble, and be embarrassed. They try and convince you that "playing safely" is somehow liberating, and more fun. I don't care what they say, to me it'll always be second best.

And that night. There was no fumbling. No stopping. No interminable waiting and praying you manage to keep it up while you get it on. Just gently oh so gently sliding in - and out - and in - nerve ends to nerve ends - no barriers - just pure surrender.

Well, I'm not going back. Do you hear? I - am - not - going back.

*[He stands transfixed, trembling.]*

Listen. Ben's fucking Alan now. Very slowly. There it goes. Creaking floorboards.

*[In a fever he gropes among the scraps of paper again.]*

Where is it? Where the fuck's it gone?

*[He finds it, reads:]*

'1.45 am. Thank God it's stopped. It seemed to last for ever, but by my watch it was only twelve minutes. Ben was very quiet, he didn't sigh or cry out or anything. Alan moaned and there was a lot of bumping towards the end. It's a good job we put the mattress on the floor, it cushions the noise. Alan came first, but he always comes quicker when he's being screwed.'

*[To audience:]* Don't we all?

*[His face freezes as he listens again]*

He's groaning. He never groans like that with me. Why doesn't he groan like that with me? What's the matter with me? What's Ben doing to him? What's Ben got *[suddenly realising what he's saying, laughing at himself]* - that I haven't got?

*[Suddenly serious, vicious]* Well, I'll tell you what Ben's got. He's got Alan's youth, and Alan's good looks, and Alan's taste in music, and Alan's taste in drugs, and they both like discos while I couldn't tell trip-hop if it bit me, and they're both doing computer studies which is equally incomprehensible to me, and they have the same taste in dress and the same politics, and they can get it up three times a night while I'm lucky if I can manage it once. And that's what Ben's got. And right now he's got Alan's body too.

*[He looks in the mirror again. To himself:]*

If I were Alan, I'd prefer Ben to you. *[Arguing]* It's not like that, it's not. You've been with Alan eighteen months. He opened himself to you, he took the risk for you; he wanted to share. That's got to stand for something. Now use your head. Now, think.

*[To audience:]* I can't. I haven't been able to string two consecutive rational thoughts together since I saw Ben in the kitchen. I HATE being irrational. Hate it, just hate it.

*[Listens]*

They're giggling. They're laughing again. What the fuck are they laughing at? What's so bloody funny? Tell us the fucking joke then.

*[His picks up a mug, opens the door, and makes to throw it at the other bedroom door along the corridor. With a great effort he controls himself.]*

Don't. Don't do this to yourself. If you keep this up you're just going to blow everything. If this is just a simple little one-night stand it'll all be over soon. Everything will be back to normal. If it isn't... *[He hesitates, reluctant to face the possibility]* If it isn't... If it isn't, if it turns into something more - permanent - you're just

going to turn yourself into the sort of person Alan won't want to know. Calm. Think calm. Deep breaths.

*[He takes deep breaths, then suddenly opens his eyes, panicking:]*

Oh Christ. Alan's going to come. I know he is. I can feel it.

*[He starts pacing]*

I can't take this. I just don't want to live around this. *[To audience, justifying:]* Look I work in a pissy dead-end job with the fucking D.O.E and I hate it. The only way I'm going to get out of it is if I can make it as a writer. Now a writer's got to be able to write. How can I write with this sort of thing –

I'll move. I'll find a bedsit and move out. Somewhere. Anywhere. I've just got to get out -

Why the hell should you get out? It's not your fault. You didn't start this. It's your flat; why should you be forced out of your own fucking flat by that little shit. *[Shouting]* Whore. Tart. Slag. Slut. *[To himself]* I'll teach you to spread your legs, you little bitch. Using my condoms too.

*[He rushes out of the room and into the bathroom; starts hunting; finds the cardboard box with the condoms in. He mutters to himself as he does it:]*

I hope it breaks. I hope you fucking get it. Serve you right. Think you can bring any old bumboy back here and I'll just stand back and smile, do you? Think you can put me through all this and get away with it? Well, I'll show you I'm not the fucking wimp you take me for.

*[He removes the gay badge from his lapel, bends the pin back, and starts puncturing one of the condoms viciously.]*

If you're going to start peddling your arse to anyone who fucking asks you, at least you can use your own fucking condoms.

*[Throws it on the floor, takes another.]*

I'm not going to tell you. Oh no. That'd be too easy for you.

I hope you sneak in again when you think I'm not looking, like you did last night. I hope you think you got away with it. I hope you use it. I hope it fucking kills you. Yeah. I hope you fucking die. Die, you bastards. Die.

*[He drops the badge and collapses in tears. To audience:]*

Dammit, I've got a right to - *[To himself:]* You have no rights. There are no rights, so face it. Squarely. Face it. You've got to go through it. This may be the first time it's happened, but it probably won't be the last, so face it. If you love Alan - this is part of Alan too. Open your eyes. Listen to it. Share it with him. Breathe with him. You breathe with one breath. Go on. Imagine what he's feeling. Doesn't that turn you on?

Oh no, no. No it doesn't.

Face it. Give yourself a chance. Look at the door. Look through the door. See them. Hear them. Feel and taste them. Ben's tongue in Alan's mouth. Lips brushing his neck. Alan is running his nails down Ben's spine, down, down, on his buttocks, pulling him in - NO - FACE IT!

Now. There they go. Ben pushing, panting. Faster. Alan squirming. Faster. Squeeze Ben's cock. Pump. Suck with the muscles - No - faster - hot and wet - round and round and in it goes - feel Ben - all of Ben - push - harder - push - feel Ben inside you - harder - faster - harder - faster. Now. Now. Now. Now. Aaah.

*[The fantasy has made him come.]*

Gently now. There. That didn't hurt, did it? Did it? Did it?

*[There is a long pause as he drags the answer out of himself. On the verge of tears:]*

No. Didn't hurt a bit. Oh, Alan, I want you so much.

*[He makes impulsively for the corridor. stops himself.]*

No. Wait. Your time will come. Be patient, be loving, and hope. God, how I hope.

*[He hears something.]*

They're getting up. Well, someone is. Is he coming in here?

*[Sees the condoms, realises what he's done.]*

What the fuck – ? You stupid bastard. What were you thinking of? You must have been off your head.

*[He picks the condoms up, stuffs them in his pockets.]*

They're getting dressed. I'd better get back. No, you can't hide in your own house. You have a right to be here. You've got to be here.

But what do I do? What do I say? 'Thanks for the floor show'?

'Thanks for the floor show.' – 'You were listening' – 'You were broadcasting' – 'If you don't like it you shouldn't listen' – 'If I don't like it, you shouldn't do it'.

Oh! stop it. stop it. You could at least try...

'Had a good night? Want some coffee?' Too brittle. Too metallic. False. He'll spot it a mile off. You've got to be truthful.

Truthful? Really? 'Help me, Alan. I'm thirty, and I feel ninety. I'm in a boring job which is rapidly turning me into a boring person, and I can't see any way out of it. My hair is beginning to turn grey and fall out. Because I smoke too much I suffer from bad circulation and cramps and I smell like an old ashtray. I suffer from athlete's foot. I have piles. Sometimes I erupt in spots, for no reason at all. My body is rotting. Out of control. I have no sense of taste or style; I look like a scarecrow. I feel very, very stupid. I am also full of guilt and shit and I know it, and I can't stop it. Love me, Alan, because I cannot love myself.'

The truth? Oh, no, no, no, no. *[To audience:]* Help!

*[Rehearsing]* 'I'm glad you enjoyed yourself so much.' More than you ever do with me. Oh, stop it, please. Try, for heaven's sake. Just try.

'I'm glad you enjoyed yourself.'

'I'm glad you enjoyed – '

'I'm glad you enjoyed yourself... '

'I'm glad you... ' 'I'm glad – '

*[He turns as the door opens.]*

Love?

*[He freezes, arms outstretched.]*

**BLACKOUT**