

THE QUESTION

TEN-MINUTE PLAY

By Nathan Hartswick

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SYNOPSIS: Four androgynous aliens from the other side of the cosmos - Bip, Bop, Bleep and Blop - abduct a hapless young man from Earth to ask him their planet's most troubling question. When young Andy hears the question, however, all he wants to do is go back to bed in his own plane of reality.

CAST OF CHARACTERS **(1 MAN, 4 FLEXIBLE)**

BIP One of four unisex aliens. The leader and captain of the spaceship.

BOP..... First mate of the alien spaceship.

BLEEP Crew member of the alien spaceship.

BLOP Crew member of the alien spaceship.

ANDY A young earthling abducted in his sleep by four aliens with a pressing question.

SET

A flat, which on one side is painted with spaceship dials, gauges and a portal with the blackness of space (and perhaps a bit of the earth) outside the window. On the other side if the flat is painted a bedroom scene. There is a bench, covered in solid colored sheet and a table and chair.

PROPERTIES

Glass with small amount of water in it (on table)
Plush pillow (behind bench)
Pocket calculator ("translator")
Large white Styrofoam ball with four forks stuck into it
One loaf of white bread
One head of lettuce
Restaurant-style squeeze bottles of mustard and mayo
Slices of ham and cheese

COSTUME SUGGESTIONS

BIP, BOP, BLEEP & BLOP should be considered genderless, and dressed in identical, simple black pants and shirts. Accents may be added, such as silver lapel pins, headbands, metallic belts, nifty shoes, etc., but they should be tasteful and not distract from the simplicity of the costumes. To distinguish rank, BIP might be given a few accents, BOP a single accent, and BLIP and BLOP kept in plain black, if desired.

ANDY should be dressed in simple, striped or solid cotton pajama bottoms and either a matching top or a clean white t-shirt.

SETTING

An alien spaceship hovering a few miles above planet Earth.

TIME

The present.

SETTING:

We are on a spaceship, represented by a painted flat with dials and gauges. A bench sits down stage right, covered with a solid colored sheet. A table and chair are at center stage. A glass of water is on the table.

AT RISE:

Four ALIENS (male or female) are on the ship, dressed identically, all in black. BIP, the captain, and BOP, the first mate, stand behind the table, at the "controls." Crew members BLEEP and BLOP are dragging in from the wing ANDY, a sleeping young man in his pajamas. BLEEP and BLOP each have a foot.

BIP: Now now, be mindful of his cranium, there.

BOP: Watch his extremities.

BLEEP and BLOP drop ANDY'S legs, leaving him sprawled out at center stage.

BIP: A fine-looking specimen, he is.

BLOP: He is not doing much.

BLEEP: Quiet fellow, is he not?

BIP: He is asleep, my fellow space travelers.

BLEEP: Asleep.

BIP: The state in which an Earthling rests, traditionally at night.

BLEEP: He is not much use to us this way.

BLOP: *(Looking ANDY over for a switch.)* How do we activate him?

BIP: Here, try this.

BIP hands BLOP a glass of water, with which BLOP douses ANDY.

ANDY: *(Jolting awake, into a sitting position.)* OHH!

BOP: That did it.

BLEEP: Well done.

ANDY rubs his eyes, sees the four ALIENS for the first time, and startles.

ANDY: AHHH! Who are you? Where am I? What do you want?

BIP: Ah, the inquisitive sort. Excellent.

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BOP: May I welcome you to the International Mothership of the Planet Drooka, located just six years outside the X-5 Galaxy, with convenient access to parking, shopping, and other fine cosmic attract—

ANDY: Who are you?

BIP: I believe he refers to our monikers.

BOP: Our full names or the abbreviated ones?

ANDY: I don't care, I just want to know—

BIP: My full name is Bippalottozuka Deeplehopperfott XJ519.

ANDY: Oh, brother. What do people call you for short?

BIP: Bip.

BOP: Bop.

BLEEP: Bleep.

BLOP: Blop.

ANDY: I must be dreaming. (*Pointing at BLOP.*) Bleep . . . ?

BLOP: Blop.

ANDY: (*Pointing at BOP.*) Bip?

BOP: Bop.

BLEEP: Bleep.

BLOP: Blop.

BIP: Bip. Bip, Bop, Bleep, Blop. (*Faster.*) Bip-Bop-Bleep-Blop.
What are you called?

ANDY: My name is Andy.

A beat, then the four burst out laughing.

BOP: That is an amusing name.

BLEEP: “An-dy.”

BLOP: “Andy. Andy.”

ANDY: What do you want from me? Are you taking me back to your planet?

BIP: Oh, good heavens, no. We are hovering just a few miles above yours right now. See it for yourself.

ANDY goes to the “window” and looks.

ANDY: Holy cow . . . so then . . . what is it you want from me?

BLEEP fetches a chair and seats ANDY in it, center stage.

BOP: We have journeyed a great distance, Andy, across thousands of light years, through dozens of galaxies, on a crusade lasting a millennium, for but one purpose – to reach the tiny planet Earth, nestled at the edge of the Milky Way, to select a representative of this spinning blue orb, and to ask of that Earthling one question – the most important question that has ever faced our people – a question that has gone unanswered for eons by thousands of Drooka's most brilliant minds. Its answer is the great secret to life on our planet.

ANDY: Wow. Well, I'll take a crack at it. What's the question?

BOP smiles eagerly, gathers the others at ANDY'S feet, and grows very serious.

BOP: How do you make . . . a ham sam-wich?

ANDY: A . . . what?

BOP: How do you make a ham sam-wich?

ANDY: Ok, now I *know* I'm dreaming.

BIP: Perhaps we are translating incorrectly.

BOP: Very likely.

BIP: You must pardon our horrendously inadequate communication skills. We have only learned the English language and its Indo-European and Germanic linguistic forerunners approximately 45 minutes ago.

ANDY: Approximately?

BIP: Earth time.

BLEEP: It is a rough estimate.

BIP: *(To BOP.)* Had we indeed mistranslated, Bop?

BOP: *(Who has been looking it up in dictionary that looks like a pocket calculator.)* Ahh! Yes, I see the problem immediately.

BIP: Very good. Please forgive the error.

ANDY: Knew it couldn't be a ham sandwich. So what's the – ?

BOP: *(Interrupting; staring at the dictionary.)* SAND-wich. Ham SAND-wich. We had been pronouncing it SAMM-wich. You see? It is SAND-wich.

A quick succession:

BIP: SAND-wich.

BLEEP: SAND-wich.

BLOP: SAND-wich.

BOP: SAND-wich.

ANDY: Stop it! (*Beat.*) You can't possibly want to know that!

BLEEP: Please. We must know the answer, Andy.

BIP: You are our planet's only hope.

ANDY: Look, Bop—

BIP: Bip.

ANDY: Bip, Bop, whatever. Look, I don't know how gullible you think I am, but I just want to wake up from this strange little nightmare and get back to life in my own plane of reality. Now if someone will just pinch me, I'll be on my way. (*BLOP pinches him. BOP exits.*) OW! (*A pause. Realization begins to dawn. ANDY pinches himself.*) Ow. I'm really not dreaming. How is this . . . how is this possible?

BIP: We have been trying for hundreds of thousands of years to build a viable ham SAND-wich, and this is what we were able to come up with.

BOP re-enters holding a large, white Styrofoam ball with four forks protruding from it. He hands it to ANDY, who looks perplexed.

ANDY: Okay, let me get this straight. You've built a highly advanced spaceship, capable of light speed travel. You've navigated your way here from the other side of the cosmos. You're responsible for constructing the most advanced technology in the known universe – and you don't know how to make a ham sandwich?

BOP: We are just as shocked that you simple earthlings have discovered the answer to such a profoundly difficult question.

BLEEP: Please help us, Andy.

BLOP: We beg of you.

ANDY: (*Sighs.*) I'm going to feel like such an idiot in the morning, I just know it. All right, bring me a loaf of bread, some ham, lettuce, mustard and mayonnaise, and a slice of cheese.

BIP: You heard the human! Scatter!

The other three disappear, then reappear with a loaf of white bread, a head of lettuce, restaurant-style squeeze bottles of mustard and mayo, two slices of ham and a slice of cheese. They place it all on the table.

ANDY: All right, now here's what you do.

He starts toward the table. BLEEP, BLOP and BOP stop him.

BLEEP/BLOP/BOP: NO!

BIP: You are not permitted to make the sandwich. You must teach us, and we must do it ourselves.

ANDY: O . . . kay . . . throw some mustard on one slice of the bread and some mayo on the other. (*BLEEP and BLOP toss the bottles, underhand, onto the bread together.*) No, no, I mean squirt it out of the bottle onto the bread.

BLEEP & BLOP: Ahhh.

They do.

BOP: What a strange group of ingredients we have assembled here.

ANDY: Strange? What do you mean? It's just a bunch of food . . .

BIP: Not on our planet. Mustard and mayonnaise are industrial lubricants. Ham, cheese and lettuce are hung as decorations.

ANDY: And the bread?

BOP: Kneepads, for athletics.

ANDY: How interesting. All right, now slap some ham and cheese onto the bread. (*BLEEP and BLOP literally slap the ingredients down onto the bread.*) Good enough. Now tear off some lettuce and place it on there.

They do.

BOP: But these are not the only ingredients needed to make a sandwich, are they, human? We still need a sheet of plywood and some ball bearings, am I correct?

ANDY: No, no . . . look, a sandwich is just two pieces of bread with something in between. Ham, turkey, pastrami – whatever you want. But the bread is the key.

BIP, BOP, BLEEP & BLOP: Ahhhhhh . . .

BLOP: So simple.

BLEEP: So easy.

BIP: So now what do we do?

ANDY: Oh, just put one side on top of the other.

They do.

BOP: That is it?

ANDY: That's it. Take a bite.

BIP: We are supposed to . . . eat the sandwich?

ANDY: Yes, of course. Go ahead.

They pass the sandwich around and each take a bite, nodding in surprised satisfaction. They begin to laugh, softly at first, then harder, working themselves into frenzies, running around ecstatically, laughing and shouting. They declare "A ham sandwich!" "I cannot believe it!" "He has done it!" and lift ANDY up, etc. When the mayhem dies down, BIP speaks.

BIP: Andy Earthling, thank you. We are forever in your debt. You have solved our planet's greatest mystery and enlightened our people.

ANDY: Hey, don't mention it. Catch me sometime when I'm not in my pajamas and I may cure the common cold.

BIP: Take the Great Sandwich to the Storage Bay! And be supremely careful with it!

BOP retrieves a pillow from behind the bench, places the sandwich on it, and exits triumphantly. BLOP gathers the ingredients from the table and brings them offstage. As this is happening:

BIP: Now, what can we do for you, oh Great One?

ANDY: I'd just like to get back into my own bed, if you don't mind.

BLEEP: Oh, but we must repay you!

BLOP: It is true! We must compensate the Earthling!

BLEEP: Perhaps we can help the Andy with his planet's greatest dilemma.

BOP re-enters with the pillow, placing it on the end of the bench. BLOP re-enters.

BIP: An excellent idea.

ANDY: Our greatest dilemma, eh? Well, let's see . . . there is this one problem we seem to have. And you folks seem to get along fairly well; maybe you can help us out with it . . .

BIP: Superb! What is the great enigma, friend?

ANDY: Well, we've never really been able to get a handle on the whole world peace thing.

BOP: "World peace thing?" I do not understand.

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ANDY: Well I mean, most of the people on my planet are decent folks, but there's still a lot of fighting going on. So I guess my question is, what's the secret? To world peace, I mean? *(A beat. They all burst out laughing.)* What? What's so funny?

BLEEP: You want to know about world peace?

BOP: Why, I have never been asked such a ridiculous question in my life!

BLOP: They do not know the secret to world peace! Ha!

BIP: Now, now, Bop, Bleep, Blop, we must remember how silly our question seemed to the human. Andy, the answer to this question is very simple, and much like your ham sandwich. You require two slices of bread to make a sandwich, correct?

ANDY: Yes . . .

BIP: *(Demonstrating with two more slices of bread.)* And what happens if you do not put one side on top of the other, as you have taught us?

ANDY: Oh, that's an open-faced sandwich. Everything falls apart.

BIP: Precisely. So, in order to keep the sandwich from falling apart, one must use both pieces together. In the case of your dilemma, the two slices of bread are represented by the head – *(Points earnestly to Andy's left elbow.)* – and the heart. *(Points to Andy's right shoulder.)*

ANDY: Actually, it's head – *(Points to his own head.)* – and heart. *(Points to his own heart.)*

BIP: Fair enough. But we evolved 6,000 light years apart; you cannot expect us to have exactly the same physiology.

ANDY: I suppose not.

BIP: The point is, you must use this – *(Points to Andy's head.)* – as well as this – *(Points to Andy's heart.)* – in order to achieve world peace.

ANDY: But we do, we're always using our heads, and our hearts –

BIP: Yes, but seldom at the same time.

Pause. ANDY sits down on the bench and thinks a moment.

ANDY: You know, I think you're right. *(Beat.)* But what goes in the middle? Like, a sandwich has to have a third ingredient; there must be something that goes – *(BIP whispers something in ANDY'S ear that stops him in his tracks.)* That's it? But that's so . . . so simple . . .

BIP signals the other aliens. BOP takes the table, BEEP the glass, and BLOP the chair, and the three exit.

BIP: Almost as simple as crafting a ham sandwich?

Lights fade to half. BIP sits at the end of the bench and eases a stunned ANDY's head down onto the pillow. Almost immediately, ANDY begins to fall asleep. BIP snaps his fingers, and BOP, BEEP and BLOP re-enter. The ALIENS work quickly and noiselessly. BOP covers ANDY with a blanket that has been behind the bench. BLEEP and BLOP turn the flat 180 degrees to reveal ANDY'S bedroom. BOP, BLEEP and BLOP exit, single file. BIP is on his way off and stops at the wing to smile a moment at ANDY. BIP then exits, leaving ANDY at peace.

ANDY: (Murmuring.) So . . . simple . . . so easy . . .

ANDY sleeps, a smile of enlightenment upon his lips. The lights fade.

THE END