

The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

The Watercooler

By Uma Nada-Rajah

FOR REFERENCE ONLY

Breakfast Plays: New Tracks

Traverse Festival 2020

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

[AUDIO BEGINS]

You're listening to the Traverse Theatre's Breakfast Plays: New Tracks, a series of powerful new podcast plays, fresh from some of Scotland's most exciting new creative voices.

The Breakfast Plays are a key element of the Traverse's talent development activities, and a mainstay of our celebrated Edinburgh Festival programme. They're usually performed at 9am in the morning throughout August, with the audience enjoying a breakfast roll and cup of tea whilst watching – hence the name!

Over the last four months the Traverse's artistic team have worked with five writers to develop new stories for this series of Breakfast Plays, which were each rehearsed and recorded remotely over the span of two days.

You're listening to *The Watercooler* by Uma Nada-Rajah.

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A saturation of beautiful water sounds absorbed by the sounds of office monotony.

KAI and M work for a corporate entity, in a role involving the systematic assessment of people's behaviour.

Here, as in most institutions, only the most indoctrinated are promoted into positions of power.

KAI has been in the staff room for a few minutes, standing by the water-cooler.

M enters. Nervous.

M:

There you are.

I didn't see you there. Hiding behind the water-cooler.

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TRAVERSE THEATRE – BREAKFAST PLAYS: NEW TRACKS
AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

KAI:

I wasn't hiding.

M:

Ha. I know. Uh. I'm just going to get cup of water.

(The sound of water being drawn from the water-cooler.)

Oh! Are you okay?

KAI:

Sorry?

M:

It's just your face. It's, uh, twitching.

KAI

I'm fine! Really.

It must have just been. Something.

M:

Can I get you a cup of water?

KAI:

No!

No no.

I'm fine.

M:

It's a nice sound, isn't it?

That the water-cooler makes.

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KAI:

Yes. It is.

M:

Would it be all right if I shut the door?

KAI:

Oh? You want to do this in here? In the staff room?

M:

-Do what?

KAI:

It's okay. I see where you're coming from. Keep it casual. A wee, casual chat.

(KAI laughs)

M:

I just thought I'd give us some privacy.

KAI:

Privacy for...?

M:

I mean- uh. So we can, catch- up.

KAI:

Don't patronise me.

M:

I'm sorry.

The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

KAI:

Go on then. What is this?

M:

I said to her that I didn't think it was entirely necessary.

KAI:

Yet here you are.

M:

It's just a formality.

KAI:

What kind of formality?

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M:

She wants me to assess you. And form an opinion. As to whether I think you're...

KAI:

Oh? And after that I get to assess you and form an opinion. As to whether I think you're...

M:

Well no.

KAI:

Yeah, I didn't think so.

(beat)

Do you remember our first day here?

M:

Yeah. Very clearly.

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

KAI:

God we were young.

M:

After work drinks.

KAI:

We would sit on that patio and put the world to rights.

M:

Feels like a long time ago.

KAI:

Before we only ever talked about our holidays.

(beat)

So. Are you going to be assessing my character or my fitness to practice?

M:

It's not like that.

KAI:

What is it then?

M:

I just need to give a, uh, an overall impression.

KAI:

Jesus. Nothing is more deadly than an 'overall impression'.

M:

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

This has been quite the year. There have been a lot of events. Upsetting events. Things that may have upset you. And me of course, but in a different way. Because of your-

KAI:

-Skin colour.

M:

Yeah. I guess.

(beat)

We just want to make sure you're okay.

(KAI laughs)

What?

KAI:

I literally taught you that line.

(pause)

M:

Fuck me. So you did.

KAI:

You're fact-finding and the subject feels confronted.

You lean in. Look them in the eye.

"I really just want to make sure you're okay"

They open like a flower to the morning sun.

M:

You know how much I respect your work.

KAI:

Yet here you are forming an 'overall impression'.

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

M:

It's not what you think-

KAI:

-You don't need to explain. I get it.

I understand. Of course I do. I've come this far. Haven't I?

M:

Yeah. You have.

And you could go further. If.

KAI:

If I behave myself.

M:

I heard that you'd said to one of the clients that-

KAI:

-I was just telling them the truth. For once. Without all the bullshit tacked on to it. They seemed to appreciate some honesty.

M:

You've not been yourself, these past few weeks.

KAI:

I feel like a different species.

M:

She. She wanted me to tell you that-

We're taking this very seriously. What's happening across the pond.

That even though the events, uh, happened in another country.

That the company was going to take a, uh, 'pause for reflection'.

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

KAI:

God, that sounds serious. Not a 'pause'.

Did she even mention-

M:

She mentioned that you had raised concerns in the past -

KAI:

And?-

M:

-And she said something about the importance of moving forward.

KAI:

(KAI laughs)

You know when all of that was going on.

I used to come in here.

And stand next to the water-cooler.

M:

Hiding.

KAI:

Not hiding.

I. would. Imagine. That I was *inside* the water-cooler

... When you're underwater, you can't hear the words that come out of people's mouths.

Or the ones that don't.

That's when it all began.

M:

That's when what began?

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

KAI:

I imagined that the water-cooler was a portal. And when people drew their water from the canister, I would get sucked down into the deepest darkest depths of the ocean. Not in that tropical blue angel fish layer, deep, deep down, in that murky black soup. As a sea creature.

M:

I could imagine you as a sea creature.

KAI:

Really?

Why?

M:

You're an incredible swimmer.

When we went to the beach.

I watched you.

I watched you undress into your silver and blue swimsuit and dive into the water, your body rippling in the waves, I was mesmerised.

And later I thought about it. I thought about watching you and

I thought it was just attraction.

But no, you were actually an incredible swimmer.

KAI:

Was that a compliment?

M:

No. I was just trying to separate facts from emotion.

KAI:

Oh, so there's emotion involved.

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

M:

Piss off.

KAI:

Well, congratulations. It looks like you're finally going to get that window desk.

M:

Woah. Let's not get ahead of ourselves.

KAI:

I think the time has come for me to leave this place.

M:

Wait. What?

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KAI:

Spare myself any further humiliation.

(beat)

You know, I thought we were friends.

M:

Yeah so did I.

KAI:

So why are you doing this?

Why are you in here, forming an "overall impression" of your friend *for her*?

M:

Look, the only reason I agreed to do this was because I overheard her saying to Marcus that the plan was to jointly promote both of us!

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

KAI:

What?

M:

Yeah. Isn't it great?

Both of us. In the top job. Not even having to kill each other over it.

(beat)

All of this is just a-

Look, you know as well as I do.

Something's up.

Whatever it is, I know you'll work it out.

She just wanted me to get a sense of what was going on with you. As a formality. So yeah, I know, it's a bit of a fucked up situation, but I figured- all I have to do is sit with you in the staff room for 20 minutes, have a bit of a blether, and then I come out and say to her, yes, she's all right. Maybe give her two hours per week of mindfulness or whatever the fuck. Job done. You and I start arguing over who gets the window desk.

KAI:

Imagine that.

M:

C'mon. It's fantastic news.

KAI:

The tragic unfolding of events in America, and four thousand miles away I get a promotion. Because of my-

M:

-You'd be getting promoted because you're good at your job.

KAI:

You're better at the job.

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TRAVERSE THEATRE – BREAKFAST PLAYS: NEW TRACKS
AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah
You're more efficient.

M:

You're more thorough.

You've worked hard for this. Come early, stayed late. Did your homework. You deserve this.

KAI:

No.

I don't.

Not like this.

M:

Where are you going?

KAI:

I think I might go for a swim.

M:

What?

As in you're going for some sort of cheeky mid-day swim and you're coming back- or.....

KAI:

Yeah.

(Laughs)

No. I'm not coming back.

I'm done here.

The window desk is all yours.

M:

...It isn't though.

KAI:

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah
What?

M:

I overheard her saying that either way they needed to put forward a person of col- (*stops*)

KAI:

-Of what?

Competence?

M:

Yeah.

KAI:

She said they needed to put forward a person of (*beat*) competence.

I see.

That wouldn't leave you out of the running.

M:

But it does.

KAI:

You know, I was thinking to myself the other night.

What is it we actually do at this job?

M:

We get through the case load. We clear the books.

KAI:

The endless cycle of revolving doors

Keeping things moving, albeit in circles.

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Granting the appearance of change.

M:

We used to talk about this on the patio. How we'd climb the ladder. And change things around here. Make them more human. Well, here we are.

KAI:

But you don't change things in a place like this, do you? You just become them.

M:

Ah, cynicism. That most vigorous driver of change.

KAI:

Do you think we're actually friends?

M:

Yeah. I've always thought so.

Friends first corporate whores later, remember?

KAI:

Yeah.

I remember.

(beat)

Then, where were you?

Back when I tried to raise concerns about-

M:

-I tried to be there for you. Through that.

KAI:

- Not publicly.

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TRAVERSE THEATRE – BREAKFAST PLAYS: NEW TRACKS
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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

M:

No.

Not publicly.

(beat)

I'm sorry.

(silence)

I should have been there.

Publicly.

KAI:

(to herself)

-That's was the start.

M:

The start of what?

You said: That was when it began. That was when what began?

C'mon. Two weeks ago, you would have killed me for that desk.

(The sound of the water-cooler as M draws a cup of water.)

KAI:

What are you doing?

M:

What? You're twitching again.

KAI:

Stop!

(M stops drawing from the water-cooler)

M:

What if I-

(Makes the watercooler sound)

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Oh. Wow.

...The sound of the water-cooler is making you twitch.

KAI:

I should go.

M:

No. Don't go.

KAI:

Let me out!

M:

No. Wait. Just wait.

Whatever's going on.

I can see that.

You need a friend.

I've fucked it up in the past.

I acknowledge that.

Maybe you shouldn't trust me.

I don't know.

But I'm here.

Okay.

I'm here.

I'm not going to tell anyone about this.

Whatever's going on with you.

You're going to need to talk to someone.

I'm here.

KAI:

I could- maybe- use a second opinion.

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

M:

Okay. I'm listening.

KAI:

One condition.

M:

Go on.

KAI:

I'm not one of *them*.

M:

Of course-

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KAI:

-Shut off that part of your brain.

I know which vein it is on your temple that bulges when you are thinking analytically. I know the guidelines the protocols the diagnoses better than you do.

I have thought them through in relation to my current condition. And they do not apply to me. Understood?

M:

Understood.

KAI:

Okay.

(nervous)

I'm glad we're doing this.

It'll be good to say it out loud. Yeah.

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

It's all happened so suddenly, and it's exciting but-

There's so much unknown.

And you, you're so familiar.

M:

I'm going to take that as a compliment.

KAI:

I'm going to show you something.

(shuffling)

M:

Woah.

KAI:

What do you see?

M:

Bruises. Bilateral. Outer aspect of your thighs.

KAI:

What do they look like to you?

M:

I don't know.

KAI:

Scales.

They look like scales.

M:

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I guess they do.

I don't understand.

KAI:

Scales?

M:

What?

KAI:

The water?

M:

I'm sorry?

KAI:

M. I'm turning into a sea creature.

M:

(Laughs)

Oh.

(beat)

What?

You're serious.

KAI:

Yes.

M:

Right...

KAI:

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah
That's the one.

That vein on your forehead.

There it goes.

Pulsating.

You've become a fucking algorithm.

You can't even help yourself.

M:

Look. I'm switching it off.

I'm taking that part of my brain and I'm switching it off.

I can do this.

KAI:

Believe me.

I have lay in my bed and thought it through.

Night after night.

I have explored all the textbook categorisations recognised by our profession, and many of the ones that aren't.

Nothing fits.

I am becoming a sea creature.

And I don't need your second-rate speculation.

M:

Ouch.

But fine.

Look at me.

I believe you.

KAI:

You do?

TRAVERSE THEATRE – BREAKFAST PLAYS: NEW TRACKS
AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

M:

Yes.

Whatever it is you are going through.

I believe you.

KAI:

Good.

M:

When did this start?

KAI:

I told you.

M:

I thought you were joking. I didn't think it was an actual thing.

KAI:

It started when I went to her with my concerns about-

I remember standing next to the water-cooler, after no one came to support me publicly-

M:

- Look, I've apologised-

KAI:

-I was just answering your question.

M:

Fine. Go on.

You were angry.

KAI:

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Maybe.

M:

That anger needed an outlet.
Where do you think that anger has gone?

KAI:

Into the watercooler.
Deep down.
Into the ocean.

M:

But this was years ago.
And things have been fine since then.
You seemed perfectly normal. Until...

FOR REFERENCE ONLY

KAI:

Until recently.

M:

I had wondered if it had affected you.
Everything that's been happening in the world.
Across the pond.

KAI:

Something awakened. A force that I have tried. So very hard. To lay to rest.

(beat)

You're theorising.

M:

I'm not-
I can't help it.

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah
I'm sorry.

KAI:

None of this has caused me any distress or harm.
I feel a sense of clarity, that I haven't felt in years.

M:

Kai, look at me.
You're about to walk out on a promotion.
That you have been working towards since the day I met you.

KAI:

Because that's what I want to do.

M:

It sounds like this creature-
Is some sort of manifestation of. Your anger.

KAI:

I don't know (if that's true).

M:

It's a projection of-
Look.
If you don't want to deal with it in the conventional way. That's fine.
But you need to nip it in the bud.
There's meditation or-

KAI:

-Two hours per week of mindfulness?

M:

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah
You need to shut it down, Kai.

KAI:

Do I?

M:

Yes.

KAI:

I know what it sounds like. But.

M:

What you just told me.

You know, of course you know.

How quickly we would escalate that.

FOR REFERENCE ONLY

KAI:

I know.

But it's not like that.

I'm not distressed. I'm fine.

I think. I'm fine.

M:

You think.

KAI:

Yeah.

M:

You don't sound so sure.

KAI:

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

I don't understand what's happening to me.

But not everything can be understood. Rationally. In real time.

M:

But. That's what we *do*.

KAI:

That's what you do.

That's what I *used to* do.

M:

Not everything can be understood rationally.

Right. Right-

Maybe.

What if.

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KAI:

Go on.

M:

Take me with you.

KAI:

Where?

M:

Into the deep sea.

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

KAI:

(laughs)

What?

M:

I'm serious. Take me with you.

We'll close our eyes and go in through the water-cooler. The portal to the deep sea.

C'mon. That's exactly what we have to do.

Otherwise. We'll just be sat here. Me trying to rationally understand what cannot be rationally understood. This fucking vein pulsating and giving my game away.

I'm serious. Let's do this.

KAI:

Okay. Wow.

(beat)

I didn't think you had it in you.

M:

You underestimate me.

KAI:

But I don't know about this.

M:

What's wrong?

KAI:

It's my thing, you know.

It's my-

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

M:

It'll be okay. We're friends, right?

KAI:

Yeah. Friends.

(beat)

Okay.

M:

Okay.

Let's do this.

KAI:

Close your eyes.

(The sound of water being drawn from the watercooler becomes the ocean)
(The nervous laughter of M and Kai)

M:

(nature documentary voice)

The deep sea.

A place so vast, so mysterious, so foreign to mankind.

Over 70% of our planet. It surrounds us entirely.

Yet we know more of the surface of the moon than we do of the ocean floor.

Down we descend.

Lower and lower.

To the midnight zone.

Where temperatures are near freezing, and pressures are over 100 times that of the earth's atmosphere. Here, only the extremes survive.

KAI:

Why are you speaking like that?

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

M:

I've been working on my 'nature documentary' voice for years.
This is pretty much, like, the only time I'll ever get to use it.
... I can stop if it bothers you.

KAI:

Speak however you like.

M:

(silence, M continues in a 'nature documentary' voice)

It's dark down here.
Down beneath the furthest reaches of the light.
Creatures of the deep sea use light as a form of communication.
Leaving glowing trails of luminescence.

(silence)

Uh, where are you?

Kai?

I can't see you anymore.

Uh? Hello?

Are you hiding?

(silence)

Right. Okay.

The deep sea.

What the fuck am I doing here.

Hello?

Deep breath.

(Deep breath)

I am here on a mission.

To provide a second opinion on the sea creature.

That my friend is purportedly transforming into.

...But really, I am just cold, alone, and losing the will to live.

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah
(beat)

Jesus, what the fuck was that? A flash!

A glowing trail of light, ten meters long and thin, silver and blue with bioluminescence.

A sinusoidal wave ripples across her dorsal fin, and I am mesmerised.

But.

(deep breath)

I am here on a mission.

To save my friend.

Doing what needs to be done.

Luckily, I've brought my harpoon.

KAI:

Wait. What?

M:

So. Without hesitation.

I launch! Straight for the heart of the beast.

(Sea battle sounds)

Fuck.

I've missed.

The beast lashes and thwacks me in the back of the head with her electric tail!

Urrgh!

(coughs and splutters)

(The sound of splashing water. The watercooler.

M and KAI are back in the staff room.)

KAI:

What the fuck was that?

M:

I missed.

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The Watercooler by Uma Nada-Rajah

KAI:

Damn right you missed.

Why would you even...?

M:

It was my angle.

KAI:

I should have known better.

M:

I was just trying to help.

KAI:

So, what, you brought your harpoon?

M:

I thought I was looking out for your best interests.

I thought I was doing you a favour.

KAI:

Yeah. I get that.

I know you were.

But.

M:

No.

Wait.

Don't go.

Kai-

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KAI:

Hey.

(beat)

Enjoy the window desk.

KAI:

(KAI exits, slamming the door.)

THE END

Thank you for listening to *The Watercooler* by Uma Nada-Rajah.

It was directed by Debbie Hannan and performed by Laura Lovemore and Anna Russell Martin, with sound design by Mwen and sound engineering by Richard Bell.

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[AUDIO ENDS]