

*Twelve Very Short Plays
on a Theme of*

'Marriage'

By J. L. HERRERA

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All pieces can be adapted according to resources, available actors, sets, time, and funds.

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‘THE HAPPIEST DAY’

(A ONE-ACT PLAY)

Cast: Lisa. The bride. Already dressed in white but without her head-dress and bouquet. She is in her early twenties.

Mrs Cartwright. Her mother, a large woman in cream, and wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat with festoons of flowers.

Jenny Norton. Her prospective mother-in-law, looking rather out of place in a long flowing caftan-style dress in Thai silk and with a wild bush of henna-red hair.

Kate and Jodie. The bride’s sisters. A little younger than the bride. Both dressed in pale green.

Other female relatives. Number flexible. But the room needs to have a crowded look to it

Set: Large untidy bedroom. A double bed with coats and other items already piled on to it. A large free-standing mirror at the far end. A number of built-in wardrobes with their doors ajar. More clothes draped over an upholstered chair.

Time: Early afternoon.

Numbers, time, and set are adaptable.

SCENE ONE

Lisa: This garter is going to kill me. It’s cutting into me like nobody’s business. I’ll be able to think of nothing but what it’s doing to my circulation.

Mrs Cartwright: It’s tradition. Your grandmother wore it—

Lisa: I don't care if the Queen of England wore it. It's too tight for me.

Jodie: (*cheekily*) Or you're too fat for it.

Lisa: I am *not* fat.

Jenny Norton: It's what they always say—

Something old, something new,

Something borrowed, something blue

—but the something old could be something different ... surely?

Mrs Cartwright: The women in our family have always worn it, generation after generation. It would be bad luck to change it now. But perhaps you are not as familiar as we are with stable happy marriages? And if the garter can help Lisa achieve that, and against the odds, then I think she should wear it.

Lisa: Oh, come on, Mum! A mouldy old garter isn't going to make any difference. Why can't I wear ... say, your blue brooch? Then I'll get blue and old and borrowed all in the one thing.

Mrs Cartwright: (*firmly*) Because I am wearing it myself.

Jodie: (*going over to her mother's jewelry box on the crowded dressing table and opening it and beginning to lift things out of it*) What about this chain? Or the ear-rings? Even a bracelet? (*She begins to festoon her arms with her mother's jewelry. Kate comes over to join her.*)

Mrs Cartwright: Girls, put all that back at once! Now, come on, we haven't got all day. Lisa, turn around and let me— (*She picks the head dress up from the bed; it has a small tiara with the net veil fixed to it.*)

Jenny Norton: It reminds me of when I was a nurse, not the tiara, but the veil—they've done away with short stiff veils like that now, thank goodness. It was hard to keep them straight and neat and tidy ...

Mrs Cartwright: Lisa is getting married, not emptying bedpans. (*Her voice suddenly has a sharp edge.*)

Jenny Norton: Oh, I don't mean that, just the association of ideas—it's really a lovely piece. It reminds me of—

Kate: I had a doll with a veil once—

One of the other women in the room: (*They can talk among themselves, interject, agree, nod or shake their heads as suitable but without disrupting the main dialogue.*) Or Princess Di—when she got married.

Mrs Cartwright: I don't think much of *that* as an omen. Stop wriggling, Lisa, I'll never get this pinned on straight. Though if you're going to be grumbling all the time I don't suppose it much matters what you look like. Brides are supposed to be radiant, not looking sulky—

Lisa: I am *not* looking sulky. I never look sulky.

Jenny Norton: And it is supposed to be a spiritual occasion. The joining together of two souls, a kind of merging of their karma—

One of the other women to Mrs Cartwright: (*Lowering her voice but still distinctly audible to everyone*) What on earth is she talking about?

Mrs Cartwright: Don't ask me.

(*Jodie has picked up an old fashioned hat pin from the bottom of her mother's box.*)

Kate: Ow! That hurt! She poked me, Mum.

Mrs Cartwright: Stop it! Put it down! Come on, put all that jewelry back. I don't want any of it left out. Someone might ...

Jodie: Why don't people wear hat pins any more?

Lisa: (*beginning to sound rather flustered and upset*) Because they don't wear hats any more, you stupid—

Kate: But it's old, she can wear it, can't she, Mum. And if Brett forgets what to do she can poke him with it.

Mrs Cartwright: You girls are just getting sillier and sillier. I think you'd better go downstairs and wait for us. Go and see if Mrs Pinkerton has arrived. Tell her to go into the sunroom. Your Dad can talk to her. We won't be long.

One of the other women: Why did you go for her for your celebrant? Why not in the church?

Mrs Cartwright: Why do you think? Because Brett and Lisa don't go to church. Lisa hasn't been in years. And there's nothing I can say to change their minds—

Lisa: Don't start on that again, Mum. We just want to be married and done with it—

Mrs Cartwright: People who marry in church are more likely to stay together—

Jenny Norton: I really don't see why you're already worrying about divorce. They seem happy. What more do you want?

Mrs Cartwright: I want—(*She stops in mid-flow and looks around at her own girls, her friends, and her relatives filling the room*) I want—one of us. But as Lisa was foolish enough to be seduced by someone quite different—well, we just have to make the best of it, don't we.

One of the other women: (*Soothingly*) I'm sure it will all work out. Things usually do—

Mrs Cartwright: No, they don't. Look at the divorce statistics.

(*Jenny Norton has moved over to the doorway as though she would like to escape from this rather claustrophobic and unfriendly room. Kate and Jodie have begun draping themselves in scarves and beads from their mother's dressing table. Lisa is now facing the long mirror, the head dress still only half-fixed.*)

Jodie: That's what Lisa needs! Some colour. White is so boring.

Mrs Cartwright: Don't be silly! White is symbolic.

Jodie: I don't believe Lisa is a virgin.

Mrs Cartwright: (*Several of the older woman look slightly shocked. Mrs Cartwright turns to her daughter, looking and sounding cross.*) Put all those things back *this minute*—and do as you're told. I want you out of this room— (*There is the sound of voices downstairs.*) There! Now, it's too late. She's already here. Go and tell your father to—to—oh! Never mind! Let me get this thing fixed. (*She turns back to Lisa and starts to pin it on with sharp strokes.*)

Lisa: Oww! That hurt, Mum. Now, I'll have a leg with pins and needles and a headache. Is there anything else you'd like to hurt while you're at it?

Mrs Cartwright: It's a pity you didn't realize what a worrying fretful sort of business marriage is—before you got this far.

Lisa: I *can* dress myself. I wish you'd all go downstairs and leave me alone. I don't know why you had to invite everyone upstairs to watch—I'm not a circus—

Mrs Cartwright: (*Looks round the room then back to her daughter*) Very well, we will leave you, you ungrateful little minx—and if you look a fright in your photos—don't blame me. Come on everyone! (*She herds them all out of the room like someone shooing chooks.*) That means you too, girls—

(*People's footsteps can be heard clattering on stairs. She turns in the doorway and hesitates, then shrugs her shoulders.*) On your head be it.

SCENE TWO

Lisa: *She spends several minutes walking to and fro, stopping to stare in the mirror where she makes faces at it. The mirror will need to be angled slightly so as to make her reflections visible to the audience. Or use a hand mirror. She experiments with the head-dress but without appearing satisfied with it. She turns back to the audience and says in a rather fretful musing way:* That's weddings for you! You're supposed to be the star turn and instead you're made to feel about ten. We should've gone off quietly somewhere and done it, no family, no sisters, no *mother!* No *mother-in-law!* No *aunts!* No old biddies that went to school with Mum—and want to see little Lisa on her big day! (*This is said in a falsetto voice.*) But why shouldn't they just wait downstairs for the big entrance. (*She picks up one of the scarves and fans herself.*) Who wants to go downstairs looking all red and sweaty? But that's the way it's always been done here. Women everywhere—and the bride like some poor prize cow lost in the middle of the crowd.

(*She lifts her hair from her neck as though to cool herself and blows out a long breath audibly.*) And now they've brought all *my* doubts back. Maybe it's natural to have doubts but who knows how many doubts are okay—and how

many are too many? And why won't any of them speak of their own doubts? But it's always their certainties you get. How they *knew*—they absolutely *knew* from the moment they saw him across the street, across the dance floor, on the bus ... *(She shrugs and turns back to the mirror to see if the veil has slipped.)* Why can't they be honest? But they can't let anything slip, oh no—because, if they did—where would it all end?

(A pause.)

Do they think I'm blind?

Do they think no one knows? Do they think I don't see the way they treat their men ... and vice versa? They bore each other to tears ...

They talk at each other, past each other, over each other ... and neither listens ...

They paste on their happiness when it comes to commiserating with other women about the divorces *their* children are going through—but of course none of *us* ever divorce! Oh no! We are the chosen. The divorce-proof. All that sanctimonious stuff Mum does so well. But then she's had a lot of practice. And she's got her chorus behind her. If she flags—they'll pick up the tune and carry it for her.

And I'm expected to become the same. To carry on when they leave off. Another generation. Another daughter. My nieces. My cousins. That sharp little edge that Mum does so well. Nothing so crass as a knife. No, the sort of little unwanted cuts you get from a piece of paper. And you look down and see the thin line of blood.

We've all been brainwashed, right since I can first remember—only other families divorce, only other women admit to divorce and failure. We are above that kind of tacky thing. We sail along with our lovely public smiles at the ready whenever marriage is mentioned. No one ever sees the mess down below on the hull ...

(She begins to unpin the veil.)

I should go down. Ahhhhh ...

(But she goes on removing pins and finally places the tiara and veil back on the bed. Then she lifts her skirt and removes the garter from her leg.)

I will go down. In a minute.

But let's see if one marriage can survive without all this mumbo-jumbo.

(She goes over to her mother's wardrobe and begins to look through the scarves hanging there, swags of them in a large ring. She holds up those that are the brightest coloured. Several times she tries one on as a headscarf and goes over to the mirror. Others she throws over her shoulders as shawls; one she knots round her throat and says aloud Howdy, pardner! Like my new necktie? Then she tosses a large red shawl with a deep fringe over her head and says loudly Apples! Lovely red apples! Ten a penny! She pretends to hunch over and hobble along with an imaginary basket on her arm.)

Mrs Cartwright's voice in the distance: Jodie! Go up and tell Lisa to hurry up! Everyone's here now—and waiting.

Lisa: I like it! Something old, something borrowed, something red. Red! That's what's lacking from this wedding. Colour! Excitement! Blood! Life! ... Lust!

(She swirls the big red shawl round her shoulders. Her mood has gradually changed from something fretful and sulky to a sense of bubbling excitement. She looks at herself from various angles in the mirror, picks up her long skirt and does a small pirouette.)

That's what's wrong with all our marriages. We're afraid! We're timid! We take the known road, the safe man—because the unknown might do the unthinkable and want a divorce some day!

(She tosses a bundle of scarves in the air. They come down all over the bed and the floor.)

SCENE THREE

Jodie: *(Comes to the door. Peers in. Then walks towards Lisa.)* Are you ready to come down? Mum says everyone is waiting.

Lisa: No. Not really. *(From looking frazzled and sulky at the beginning of the play she has gradually become more relaxed and happy. Now she turns to Jodie with suppressed laughter.)* Don't look so worried. It doesn't matter. It's my wedding day. There's nothing they can do. They can't start without me.

(Jodie wanders round the room picking up scarves and shawls.)

Jodie: I didn't know Mum had so many. I've never even seen her wear these. *(She holds up a bright blue and red paisley scarf.)*

Lisa: I gave it to her for her birthday years ago. Maybe I should wear it instead of this red shawl. *(She takes the bundle from her sister.)* The Festival of Scarves. It would be much more interesting than wearing white and behaving like a shop dummy.

Jodie: Don't you think you should come down ... Mum'll be angry ...

Lisa: Whose wedding is it today? Mine or Mum's?

Jodie: *(Goes to take the bundle back but Lisa moves away.)* It is ... of course it's yours. But Mum said—

(Lisa turns away to the mirror and fluffs out her neat hair, kicks off her shoes, swirls the red shawl round her again.)

Lisa: Mum said ... Mum said ... Mum said ... But which do you think would be better. To assert my independence before I get married ... or after?

Mrs Cartwright *can be heard telling someone to go and see what's going on upstairs.* That girl! I don't know what she thinks she's playing at—

Jodie: I don't really know. But I guess you can do what you want ...
(*She looks increasingly worried.*)

Lisa: Exactly. Mine. Mum had hers. This one's mine. So bring the scarves—

Jodie: What are you going to do with them?

Lisa hands part of the bundle to her sister. Then she takes the younger girl's free hand.

Lisa: Divorce.

Jodie: (*puzzled*) But you haven't got married yet.

Lisa: I know. And already it's sitting there—like Jiminy Cricket on my shoulder. *We don't get divorced. We are superior to other people.* So I am going to tell Mrs Pinkerton to divorce us first. Then we can get married if we still feel like it. We can do it like Muslims. I divorce thee—said three times. That should clear the air.

Jodie: (*Still looking worried.*) I still don't think you can do that—

Lisa: Watch me.

She goes to the door, scarves and shawls trailing. Jodie follows her, also dragging multi-coloured squares of fabric. At the door, Jodie turns back and looks round the room, then she smiles and tosses scarves over both shoulders, before following her sister out.

CURTAIN

‘AN OLDER VALENTINE’

(A ONE-ACT PLAY)

Cast:

James. Husband in his thirties. Well-dressed but slightly ‘nerdish’ in style.

Melanie. Wife slightly younger. A quiet-looking woman with short blonde hair and wearing slacks and a blouse. She is slightly taller than her husband.

Boyd. An old schoolmate of James. A handsome surfer type. Casually dressed. Something slightly raffish and self-indulgent creeping in. A small pot belly or a double chin starting.

Extras. Diners and staff for the restaurant.

Set: Scene One: A modern kitchen. Nicely appointed but not big.

Scenes Two & Three: A restaurant, fairly full. A well-dressed crowd. The three of them are seated at a table laid for four.

Time: Scene One: Early evening. Scenes Two & Three: Later the same evening.

SCENE ONE

Melanie is busy cooking. It is obviously a fairly complicated recipe as she regularly consults a cookbook and she has various ingredients cut and diced on chopping boards and in bowls. Every so often she tastes what she is stirring infrequently on the stove. Some pleasant music is playing of a romantic nature; preferably of the Most Romantic Hits type of medley ...

Melanie: I should’ve taken up Jimmy’s offer. I’m not sure if this is going to come out right. But I wanted an excuse to try something more elaborate ... so I’ll only have myself to blame, I guess, if it turns out an expensive waste of time ...

But I've seen it happening. We get more rushed. We buy more takeaways and oven-ready things that all start to taste a bit the same ... Maybe, if nothing else, this will break the cycle. A few home-cooked meals and he'll be panting for takeaways again ...

(Sound of a door opening and closing and men's voices as they obviously hang up coats and umbrellas.)

Melanie: *(As she tips ingredients into the saucepan and turns the heat down slightly)* I just hope he hasn't brought someone from work home. I really don't want to spend the evening listening to all the bizarre things the market always seems to be doing to the company. It's never that they've misjudged the market. Oh no, it's always the market which has misjudged them.

Two men come into the kitchen. James immediately comes over and gives Melanie a hug and kiss. Then he turns to his companion and says: I don't know if you remember Boyd? He's the one who *didn't* come to our wedding.

Melanie: *(Smiles at Boyd but there is something perfunctory about it.)* Yes, you were off adventuring in some place I'd never even heard of. I suppose that was as good an excuse as any—

Boyd: *(Turns from Melanie to James.)* I'd forgotten that she bites.

Melanie: SHE doesn't bite. She is stating a fact. Other people who couldn't come sent us toasters or candlesticks or Art Deco prints. YOU sent us a postcard to say you were having a great time.

James: *(laughing)* I remember that! I thought it was very funny. Anyway, my sweet, he's back from—somewhere—and I offered—well, I said maybe he can join us. I know it was going to be a special evening, just the two of us ... but we can do that tomorrow. Boyd says he knows a great place to eat, just opened, and all the rage.

Melanie: *(Turns and indicates her cooking with an understated gesture.)* And this? Breakfast perhaps?

Boyd: Do you know something? That's a bloody good idea! *(He comes over and looks in the saucepan then around at the ingredients on the table.)* What's it going to be?

Melanie: A disaster.

Boyd: Then the sooner I book us a table the better. They'll be rushed today, St Valentine's and all the ballyhoo that goes on. Mind if I use your phone? Say seven-thirty?

Melanie looks at him then turns away in silence. James looks rather awkward but says: That sounds okay. Phone's in the living room. *He points.*

After Boyd goes out Melanie says: Why tonight—of all nights? It was just going to be us. No one else getting in the way. No waiters. No noise. No interruptions. *She abruptly tips everything into her saucepan and starts to stir it with unnecessary vigour.*

James: I'm sorry, honey. But we haven't seen him in ages ... and he's only in town for the one night ...

Melanie: I know you went to school together and shared a flat for a while—but is that a good enough reason?

James: No, probably not. But seeing he's here ... couldn't we just ... go along with it? He'll be gone tomorrow. We can forget him again—

Melanie: Except you never really do forget him, do you? Boyd is always the one who is out there doing the exciting things you would secretly like to be doing—if you weren't tied down to a wife and a mortgage and a company car—

James: You make it sound awful. He's just a guy. So why don't you go and change and I'll stir this for you. *He goes to kiss her but she moves away.*

She takes her plastic apron off and tosses it over a chair then goes out.

James shrugs and says with a wry expression: I was afraid she might get sticky ... but I think it'll be okay ...

SCENE TWO

Boyd gives the appearance of someone who has taken charge as they enter the restaurant from a side door and are guided to a table at the front. James faces the audience, Melanie and Boyd side on. All the other diners are clearly intimate couples as they lean towards each other, make mutual toasts, etc.

Boyd: (*expansively*) I told you you'd like it.

Melanie: What's to like about it?

James: (*placatingly*) The décor? The menu ... The wine list looks pretty good.

Melanie: Then let's get sozzled. We'll all feel better then and Boyd can tell us what he's been doing lately ... and then he can drive us home ...

James: Oh, come on, honey, I'm sure it'll be a memorable evening. We'll look back to it and be glad we tried something new ...

Boyd: Speaking of new—I've started a new company. Maybe I can talk you into investing? We're still undercapitalized.

Melanie: Good! You do your spiel and Jamie and I'll hold hands.

James: (*Looks awkward.*) What kind of company?

Boyd: Jetskis. The old days of being towed along behind a boat will soon be a thing of the past. Now you'll go out and do your own thing, decide where to go and when ... and how daring. You'll both want to try it.

Melanie: Why will we?

Boyd: I can't believe you've already turned into two old fuddy-duddies. Married a year and you're not even willing to try something new—

Melanie: You're not answering my question. Why jetskis when we enjoy doing things *together* ...

James: (*Considers his wife thoughtfully.*) They do seem to be getting very popular. But what exactly are you planning? To manufacture? To sell?

Boyd: The dealership for this area. It's an opportunity waiting to happen. I've already started a company, Boyd Marine, but I want to get in on the ground floor of the new trends. I just don't have the ready—

Melanie: And you think we do?

Boyd: I know you do. James is far more out-going about what's in the kitty than you ever were, my love.

Melanie: (*Puts the menu down abruptly.*) I am *not* your love—and I never have been.

(*James puts a hand on her arm and strokes it gently.*)

Boyd: (*Sits back and spreads both hands expansively.*) My apologies. But your eyes used to say something quite different, the way they would follow me across the room ...

Melanie: That's because you always wore such bizarre colour combinations. Those clashing shirts. I always wondered if you knew what a spectacle you were making of yourself.

James: (*Placatingly*) I don't remember him doing anything unusual, just those blond streaks in his hair, I used to worry about looking such a square.

Boyd: But you had money. I couldn't compete. And your dad had money. And Mel had money and wanted more.

James: Most people do. It's an odd thing. Even you, Boyd, want the stuff—

Melanie: Now I remember—

Boyd: Remember that you couldn't keep your eyes, even your hands, off me—

Melanie: No. Why I was so glad you didn't come to our wedding.

Boyd: Same difference—

A Waiter comes over and asks them if they are ready to order. The conversation lapses as they all turn to him. Boyd orders a bottle of champagne. James and Melanie give their orders ...

SCENE THREE

James: Are you both suggesting that the two of you—well, that there *was* something between you before I came on the scene?

Boyd: (*Mock seriously*) Never! Aren't I here, cap in hand, because the best man won?

James: (*Sounding doubtful*) Well, are you?

Boyd: I'm not here for charity. I'm here to float a great idea—and I know you'll be only too happy to get in on the ground floor.

James: (*Slowly*) Well, okay then, pitch away ...

Melanie: (*Sounding sharp*) Oh, for Christ's sake! Do your pitching somewhere else!

Boyd: I thought you wanted to get us off the personal, dear Mel?

Melanie: (*Looks from one man to the other then lifts a hand to her forehead*) I can't win, can I? I don't want to be reminded that I knew you before I knew Jimmy. I don't want to listen to you urging him to invest in something that always looks and sounds pretty much like hooning on water to me—and is probably shonky into the bargain. I just wish I—

James: Did you *really* know Boyd before you knew me?

Boyd: It wasn't a secret—

Melanie: He hung around with the crowd. I never regarded it as knowing—

Boyd: I believe they call it the Biblical sense. Knowing. But I seem to think there were some parked cars, some dim discos—

Melanie: You're thinking of someone else.

James: Could we—do you think we could talk about something else? The state of the nation? The weather? Why you said you're only here for one night—if you're planning to go into business here?

Boyd: Isn't it strange. I have this almost magnetic ability to always draw the conversation back to me. *He sits back and laughs loudly and easily.*

James looks at **Boyd**; and his look seems to change, gradually moving from something affable and friendly to something unsmiling and stern. So you did ... you still do ... and Mel is right. I was secretly glad when you didn't come to our wedding—

Boyd: (*He leans forward briefly*) And why was that, old buddy? Still afraid of my way with women, were you? *He sits back indulgently and folds both hands as though waiting for a child to attempt an explanation.*

James: I didn't understand why I had that vague sense of relief. I thought it was a failure on my part, that maybe I wasn't really the decent sort of friend I thought I was but something less ... maybe it was intuition ... something I couldn't pin down. If you'd come, it would've been your day, your event ... we would've been the extras. People would remember you. Your speech, your toast, your clothes, your stories, you laughing and being the life of the party ... And you would've said things about knowing Mel, about the tortoise winning the race, you would've imposed your views ... and whenever we thought back on it, looked at our photos ... somehow you'd be there, smiling, and cracking jokes and telling everyone, all *our* guests, all *your* plans ...

Boyd: That's coming it a bit strong, isn't it? You make me out to be the celebrity who turns heads—

Melanie: No, not a celebrity. That's the point. You always wanted the limelight because you *weren't* anybody—

Boyd: And you were? That really *is* coming it too strong—

Melanie: No, we weren't. That's the whole point. We were just two people in love and it was our big day ...

James *quietly pushes his chair back and stands up. He takes out his wallet and puts a note on the table.* That'll cover our share of the tab, my friend. Now, I think it's time we went home and had the dinner that's sitting waiting on the stove for us, just the two of us ... And if it's any consolation—we still are in love

...

Melanie *at first seems unsure, then she smiles and picks up her purse.*

Boyd: *(He at first looks slightly disbelieving, then angry.)* And what about me?

The Waiter arrives with a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket and says, after looking uncertainly at James and Mel who are now standing up, to Boyd: Would you like me to open it now, sir?

The Curtain Falls

‘MIX-’N’-MATCH’

CAST: Three children. **Alex**, approximately fourteen, **Danny**, approximately twelve, **Kristy**, approximately ten. Dressed in casual clothes. Two adults, male in his forties and a slightly younger female. **Man** wearing a light suit. **Woman** stylishly dressed.

SET: A large rumpus room in what is presented as a two storey brick house; a reasonably well-to-do family by the look of the set. Alex is playing a computer game which gives out regular unpleasant noises as he kills characters. A game such as Thief would be suitable. Danny is working on a complicated Lego crane, referring sometimes to the book of instructions on the table beside it. Kristy is sitting looking out the window and not apparently taking much notice of her brothers.

TIME: Late afternoon.

SCENE ONE:

Danny is making various frustrated sorts of noises. Finally he says clearly enough for the others to take notice: I think there’s something wrong with these instructions. I think they’ve got it mixed up with another model. *When the others don’t give him any response he speaks louder:* Hey! Did you hear me! This book’s no good.

Alex swings around, showing irritation: So? Fix it yourself. You’ve made enough cranes by now.

Danny: Can’t. It’s too complicated.

Alex: Then make something else. Just don’t bother me. I want to get up to the next level—before—

Danny: Before what?

Alex: Before she comes.

Danny: I don’t see how it’s going to matter.

Alex: Of course it's going to matter, you nong! You think Dad'll just bring her in to say hi and then she'll just go away again? The only reason he's bringing her here now is so ... we can ... see if we like her.

Danny: And if we don't? Will she just go away again?

Alex: (*Pauses*) If we're lucky.

Danny: We could do something—so she doesn't stay. Make like we're—

Alex: Monsters? Sure thing. I'll bet Dad's told her we're little angels and can't wait to meet her—

Danny: No, but we could ... we could do *something* ...

Alex: Like what?

Danny: Or not do. Say, we don't come down ... or don't eat ... or say she can't cook for nuts ... or blow raspberries ... or tell her she ... *He starts to giggle.* What say we tell her she stinks?

Alex: I'll bet she doesn't. I'll bet you anything you like she's all smart and pretty. After all, she worked in his office. They wouldn't have anyone there all stinky.

Danny: I hate the smell of perfume. It always makes me sneeze. What say I sneeze all the time? That'll put her off.

Alex: Does it matter? We'll be the ones that get into trouble. He won't send her away. Not now.

Danny: You don't know that.

Alex: Wanna bet? He didn't spend all those months getting Mum out of the house just so we can scare her off.

Danny: That's lawyers for you. *It has the sound of something heard and repeated. He leans back in his chair and surveys the crane.* But there's nothing that says we have to like her. And we'll be upstairs, mostly, and them downstairs ... won't we?

Alex: I hope they won't sit round kissing all the time. That'd be really gross. Dad's forty-two. That's old. And now he's pretending to be young.

Danny: Yeah, y'know—I thought he looked sort of different ... Why's he pretending?

Alex: Hey, don't ask me. Ask him. He'll tell you something about it being springtime, little birdies all about, tra-la, it's embarrassing, even my mates at school think he's trying to be different, sort of jazzed up.

Danny: I know what it is! I kept looking at him. It's because he's grown his hair a bit longer. That's what it is!

Alex: And those fancy ties.

Danny: And those T-shirts every weekend.

Alex: And that look on his face. But it's not real. He's only pretending to be young again. It's phoney. It's fakey ...

Danny: Just till she says yes, she'll marry him, you mean?

Kristy, still without looking at them or saying anything, leans forward to prop her elbows on the window-sill and put her chin on her hand. She seems to be absorbed by the darkening view outside.

Alex shrugs and turns his game off. I s'pose we should go downstairs—

Danny: Why?

Alex: Well, if she is going to be our new mum.

Danny: I'm not going to. I'm going to stay here till they drag me down. They won't want to do that. It'll make them ... it'll make *her* feel bad ...

Alex: That's stupid. Once she's here—we're stuck with her. You might as well try and get on her good side.

Danny: What if she hasn't got one? *Then he looks up from his model as though a shocking thought has just come to him.* What if she's got kids? What if they're coming here? Not just her. But kids like—like—

Alex: Dad's never said anything about kids—

Danny: Yeah, but maybe he wants to sneak them in, one at a time. First her, then it'll be dear little Georgie, your new brother, and then Katie and then—

Alex: She's only young—

Danny: She's not that young. Dad says he couldn't manage without her in the office. I'll bet she's thirty ... or forty ...

They both look at each other in dismay.

Alex: Still ... younger than mum.

Danny: I'll bet that's why she wants everything, the house and everything, because she's got kids and she needs lots of room.

Alex: I'm not sharing my room. No way, José.

Danny: Dad'll tell you to be nice to ...

Alex: Georgie? Kids don't get called Georgie.

Danny: Okay then, Trent, or Josh.

Alex: I'm still not sharing.

Danny: Me neither.

Alex: We've got to do something.

Danny: That's what I said. I can do a big fart right when Dad says—meet Susie, she's going to be your new mum. I saw it on TV.

Alex: She'll just think you need to be taught some manners.

Danny: I've got plenty of manners.

Brief silence.

Danny gets up and goes over to rummage in the shelves of toys. We had a whoopee cushion. Where's it gone?

Alex: In the box with the dog turds.

In between masses of stuff being dumped on the floor **Danny** says: I just want to make her think that being a step-mum is a really horrible business. Then she'll leave us alone. He can see her at the office ...

Alex: And you think Mum'll come home again?

Danny sits back on his heels and considers this for a long time. No, I guess not.

Alex: They say families are all about kids, all that stuff about kids being precious. But it isn't, is it. It's all about parents. We're just the props.

Danny: What do you mean?

Alex: Well, you can see it, can't you? No one ever asked our opinion on what we'd like. Dad never said, now what'll make you happiest? It's just—bing, bang, expect Susie on Saturday night and she can meet you and settle in. Sounds more like being sent to boarding school. *Settle in!*

Danny: Boarding school'll come next. She'll say she's too tired with all her own kids to be bothered with us. Dad'll say, that's okay, we can afford to send them all to boarding school. That'll give us lots of peace and quiet.

Alex gets up and goes over to the door which is standing open. He puts their 'No Entry. Genius at Work.' sign on it and closes it.

Danny watches him. That won't stop her coming in.

Alex: No. But it's a start. So now we've got to think fast.

Danny: But they'll be here soon. What about Kristy? Ask her.

Both boys turn to their overlooked little sister.

Alex: Come on, kid, give us some ideas.

Kristy turns around slowly. They can see the tears running down her cheeks.

Kristy: I haven't got any ideas. I just want my mum back.

Alex: You must have one idea. Maybe you could cry all the time. She'd soon get fed up with that.

Kristy shakes her head slowly. But I've got my weekend suitcase packed.

Both boys stare at her. Danny finally says in an awed sort of voice: Have you really?

Kristy: But it's too heavy to get it downstairs ... and I don't know how to find mum's house by myself. And Dad won't take me ...

Alex: Mum's flat is very small. You better not take much. And if we come too ...

Danny: We'd have to leave our toys here.

Alex: And the computer.

Danny: And the dog ... and ...

Alex: Maybe Kristy should go first. And we'll come later. One at a time.

There is the sound of a door banging downstairs, then footsteps and voices.

Alex: Kristy, quick hide, we'll let them think you've run away. Danny, you put the suitcase under her bed.

Kristy: No. They'd only get angry with me ...

The footsteps can now be heard coming upstairs then the door is opened without knocking. A man in a smart but casual suit and a younger woman also smartly dressed stand in the doorway. His hand is firmly and rather proprietarily on her shoulder. Then the man says to the boys: What have you been doing to your sister to make her cry?

Alex sounds sullen as he says: I didn't make her cry. You did.

Man: Don't be silly. Wash your face, Kristy, then all three of you can come downstairs. Don't be long.

They go out again and the woman can faintly be heard remonstrating that it must be upsetting for the children. The man's voice says more clearly: They are my children. I do know what's best for them. The voices fade.

Alex: I think I wouldn't mind boarding school all that much.

Danny: Maybe I could take my Lego with me.

Kristy: He'll never let her be a mum to us.

Both boys seem about to burst into speech. But Kristy goes on: She'll need us to look after her—same as mum needed us—

Danny: I don't know what you mean.

Alex: *(Slowly)* I think I do. Why do we need fantasy, why do we live up here, why do we never have friends around, why does Kristy have her case packed?

Danny: Heck, I don't know. It's nicer up here, that's all.

Kristy goes over and stands by the door. She still looks woebegone. She wipes her face with her sleeve.

Alex goes back and drops into his chair and starts to turn over the various lurid cases containing his games. He looks over to Danny and Kristy then around the playroom. He continues to hold up a game which has an illustration of a tower with lightning forking around it.

Alex: Yeah, you're right on the button. It's *always* been nicer up here.

CURTAIN

‘TRYST’

(Mainly Mime)

CHARACTERS:

Ben and Neela. Two young people of around sixteen or seventeen. One of them looking slightly ‘country’, maybe wearing jeans but obviously spruced up for a date. His girlfriend looking more fashionable. The period can be chosen to suit the actors and sets available. They need to age greatly, at least 30 years for Scene Two, grey hair, baldness, extra weight would be sufficient. Extras needed to mime the giving of information in Scene One, to fill the dance floor in Scene Two, and to mime a surprise meeting in Scene Three.

SET:

Scene One: A divided set. They cannot see each other but their movements need to be choreographed so that they both mime the frustrations of waiting. One side has a sign to say ‘Wood Lane Bridge’, the other to say ‘Wood Bridge Lane’. The set needs to suggest spring time, maybe some blossom on branches, bird song softly in the background, a pretty sky fading into sunset. Their movements need to look both natural, checking watches, putting a hand to the forehead, looking in the opposite direction, as well as graceful. But the grace needs to be tempered by the feeling of their youth, a kind of coltish awkwardness.

Scene Two: A dance floor. A country hall-type place, old upright piano or gramophone with pile of LPs.

Scene Three: Outside the hall. Light over the door. Cars parked in the dim reaches of an open space and barely visible.

TIME: Scene One: Late afternoon. **Scene Two:** Well-lit hall. **Scene Three:** Poorly lit.

SCENE ONE: All done in mime; four minutes max. At the end of the ‘dance of waiting’ they are each apparently informed by a passer-by that they might be waiting in the wrong place. Their relief and hope should be very obvious. The passers-by need to be dim and shadowy, not clear or memorable in any way except for a distinct silhouette such as piled-up hair or a limp.

SCENE TWO: Again all done in mime. Ben and Neela arrive together but nothing suggests they really enjoy coming there together. They both part and join other groups and become friendly and animated. They don't dance together but show pleasure in asking others, or accepting other offers. Their whole demeanour is of two people who have long since lost interest in each other. But the dance floor needs to be full of other people who will demonstrate pleasure as couples. Maximum 4 minute segment.

SCENE THREE: As Ben and Neela go out the hall door they are accosted by two people coming in. These two are not seen as faces, more as dark and shadowy characters. They need to have the same kind of silhouette as the passers-by in Scene One (eg. piled up hair, very tall, overweight, missing an arm or some other physical attribute.) They stop in front of Ben and Neela, they give every sign of delighted surprise, they raise their arms as though to cry 'You two!' They give the impression of brief but excited talk. They are choreographed to move together then to open a space between them so that Ben and Neela walk out between them and turn towards the darkened car park.

Ben: I wish ...

Neela: I'm tired ... Why did we come ...

Their voices sound firm but lacklustre. A suggestion of a resigned 'tch' on their tongues, of a long sigh ...

Both: Home.

They turn and walk towards the dark cars, their backs towards the audience, then turn together to stop and look back towards the now empty door to the hall. It remains lit with lively dance music spilling out ...

THE CURTAIN FALLS

‘TIME FOR DINNER’

(A ONE-ACT PLAY)

Cast

Mother: (a woman of about thirty-five years old; attractive, nicely-dressed without being fashionable or colourful)

Children:

Emma (aged about ten)

Toby (aged about eight)

Mia (aged about five)

The children’s ages and sex can be changed if necessary.

Set

A dining-room containing:

A table, six chairs, tablecloth, and five places set for dinner

A large window beyond the table

A door on the right of the set through which a kitchen stove can be glimpsed

Other furniture can be chosen as available

eg. sideboard, small corner tables, pictures on walls, clock, a trolley.

The set should suggest a family of some style and means

Time

Evening. A setting sun can be shown beyond the window. The light in the dining-room is not on at the beginning of the play so concealed lighting can be used to suggest the end of the day.

SCENE ONE

Mother: (*Standing over by the window looking out*) I don’t know what’s happened to your father this evening. It’s not like him to be so late.

Toby: (*Has just sat down at the table*) I’m hungry, mum. Do we have to wait?

Mother: Of course you have to wait! You know what the rules are. Even if everyone grabs breakfast and runs for the bus we all sit down to dinner in the evening as a family. It is the only time we ever see each other and get to share in each other's lives.

Emma: (*Standing uncertainly beside her chair.*) We know that. You've told us so many times about sharing over the dinner table. But I really am hungry. We had a big netball game today and it used up all my energy ...

Mother: (*Moves away from the window towards the kitchen.*) We'll give him a few more minutes. It's not like him to be so late. Normally he comes straight home after work. I hope he hasn't had an accident. The traffic through here just gets worse and worse.

Toby: (*Picking up his knife and fork and holding them up in the air rather aggressively*) But he's been getting later and later, mum, he said so himself.

Mother: Just a few little hiccups at work. But I wish he'd rung to warn me he was going to be so late.

Mia: (*Comes in dragging a large grubby doll by one leg and dumps it on the spare chair*) Mummy, I'm starving. I saw this ice cream on TV, can we have ice cream like it, can we? It's called Eskimo Stix. It's got chocolate things in it.

Mother: No, you can't. We eat good food in this house, darling, not rubbish. Have you washed your hands? (*Mia holds them both out*) No, you haven't! What's all that paint on them?

Mia: (*Sounding sulky*) That's Texta. It won't come off. I scrubbed it.

Mother: (*Sounding resigned*) Very well. Sit up to the table nicely.

Toby: That sounds like a car now. (*He gets up and goes over to the window and looks out*) Nah. It's only Benny next door. I wish we had a car like his. Vroom! Vroom! That'd be so much more fun.

Emma: No, it wouldn't. He's always running into something. Dad is a very safe driver. He never has accidents—

Mother: (*Nodding slowly*) I suppose there's always a first time ... but I'm sure the hospital would ring ... And a car like Benny's wouldn't be any good to us. It only has room for two people.

Toby: Yeah. And one of them he always says is a babe. What's a babe, Mum? I thought it was a pig ... but you wouldn't take a pig in your car if you had a car like that. (*He makes a loud oink-oink noise and Mia starts to giggle; as she had been pouring herself a glass of juice from the jug in the middle of the table the liquid starts to slop over her glass.*)

Emma: Watch out! Gosh, you're a messer, Mia!

Toby: Yah! Messy Mia!

Mother: (*She has hardly seemed to be taking in their talk and action; she glances again at her watch.*) I've tried so hard to make things nice at home ...

Emma: There's nothing nice about Mia. She spends her time making messes and breaking things and she took my hair clips *again*, Mum, and she says she lost them in the garden. I don't see what's nice about having a little sister!

Toby: (*Sitting down again and swinging his feet against the table leg.*) Yeah, all the books we read at school have only two kids in them, a boy and a girl, never three.

Mother: We aren't a family in a book. We're a real family. But I don't think we can wait very much longer. The dinner'll be all dried out and then he'll ...

Emma: He'll what, Mum?

Mother: Complain, I suppose. Perhaps I should do what other women seem to do and just buy those oven-ready meals ... But I can't see how they can be good for ... Anyway, I think I *will* feed you three and hope he's on his way.

(*She exits left into the kitchen; she can be heard opening an oven door and clattering plates*)

SCENE TWO

Emma: Mum is acting very strange tonight. What do you think is the matter?

Toby: (*Also dropping his voice a little*) She didn't like me asking about a babe. I bet I know what a babe is.

Emma: I bet you don't. Mia, you could've mopped that mess up with your napkin. Look at the way it's spread now!

Toby and Mia both speak at once:

Toby: I bet I do. It's a chick and I know what a chick is.

Mia: It's not my fault. Toby always makes silly noises when I'm doing something.

Emma: (*Shrugging and getting up; she goes over to the window.*) That's just making silly excuses. No one takes a pig in a sports car.

Toby: No, but he takes that girl with all the yellow hair—

Emma: Who takes?

Toby: Benny of course! Who did you think I was talking about? Dad? Dad has a girl with yellow hair at the office. I saw her that day he took me in in the holidays.

Emma: You shouldn't say yellow. You should say golden or blonde.

Mia: (*Giggles suddenly*) I've got yellow hair.

Emma: No you haven't. You've got flaxen hair. Dad said you have. And stop hogging all that juice. That's two glasses you've had already.

Mia: I'm hungry. I could even eat all my salad. (*She leans forward and accidentally knocks her glass flying.*) Oops! But Dad says he hates salad. (*She mops the mess up with her father's unused napkin.*) I bet that's why he didn't come home quickly, I bet he's gone to get a hamburger like those ones they keep showing on TV. I bet he's having one 'with all the works'.

Emma: I bet he isn't. Hamburgers make people fat.

Toby: (*Has been busy scouring the tablecloth with his fork.*) Dad's getting fat—

Mia: And he smells like—

Emma: You're being silly. Of course he doesn't smell!

Mia: He does so. He picked me up and I could smell something like Mum's shampoo all over his neck.

Emma and Toby both stare at Mia in silence.

Emma: Shush. Mum'll hear you.

Mia: (*Puzzled*) She can hear me. Why shouldn't Mum hear me? She's just in there.

Toby: (*Picks up his table napkin and ties it round his head like a pirate.*) You two are being stupid. Men use aftershave. I put some of Dad's on me that time I went with him. That lady in the office with him said I must've used the same aftershave and then she laughed and said it was a sign I was growing up fast.

Emma: I don't see that it was any of her business.

Mia: Dad had red Texta on him ... I don't see why *I* get into trouble when I get it all over me.

(She mimes getting it on her face.)

SCENE THREE

Mother: (*Enters balancing three plates.*) You can start on your vegetables. We'll wait and have dessert with your father when he comes.

Mia: What if he doesn't come? Does that mean we won't get any?

Mother: Don't be silly! Of course he'll come. What on earth have you been doing in here? The table looks like something the cat dragged in! I'll have to change the cloth now. Honestly, Mia, you're worse than any tomboy! You can't even sit at the table without making things turn into chaos! Come on now, turn the cloth back carefully and I'll get a clean one. It doesn't seem *much* to ask ...

Emma: What isn't, Mum?

Mother: Just to have things nice at home—for your father.

Toby: (*Holding his plate in the air while his mother carefully folds back the cloth.*) But he never notices. He just says you fuss too much and who wants to be bothered with everything ... I don't know what he means by everything.

Emma: We don't live like pigs here, not like some people. (*She sounds rather prim as she says it.*) Isn't that true, Mum?

Mother: Yes, darling, some people don't try to keep up their standards, they just eat out of cardboard boxes and use plastic spoons ... but all the books say ... (*She looks away to the window again in a slightly distracted way.*)

Emma: Say what, Mum?

Mother: Never mind now. It's the way I was brought up and all of you ... (*She lifts a hand to her eyes as though a headache is beginning.*) It's hard ... the way things change ...

The children all look at each other, slightly bewildered, but their mother busies herself in placing a clean crisp cloth on the table and carefully rearranging the flowers in the middle and making sure all the place settings are neat again.

Toby: (*Sounding overloud and a bit bossy*) We could ring Dad up. He might've forgotten how late it is. He might be in a *really* important meeting.

Mia: (*With her mouth full*) A really really important meeting with that lady Toby saw there—

Mother: What lady? What are you children talking about? (*She moves right and switches on the light.*) There, that's better, isn't it?

Toby: The lady with the yellow—I mean the golden hair. That one.

Emma: It's nothing, Mum. They were just being silly. It's Benny's girlfriend who has the golden hair.

Toby: No, it isn't. Benny said she wanted more than his car, she told him she wanted a man with a really good job ... like Dad's got ...

Mia: I wish Benny would take me in his car, really really fast. Dad says some girls are fast ... but he only drives slowly when he takes us out.

Mother: That isn't what he means, darling. You're too young to understand. Now eat up. You were all complaining about being hungry. And I'm sure your dad will be here long before you've cleaned your plates up—and we'll all sit down together and be a family, a proper family—

Emma: Mum—I can smell something burning!

Mother: Oh damn! (*She rushes toward the kitchen.*)

Toby and Mia grin at each other slightly guiltily. But Emma puts down her knife and fork and gets up and goes over to the window. It is dark outside now.

Emma: No sign of Dad.

Mother: (*Re-enters and goes over to the window.*) What a day.

Emma: (*Turns to her and suddenly hugs her mother.*) You've got us.

Mother: I know. (*She sighs and returns her daughter's hug.*)

Toby: Dad might as well stay away—seeing as now maybe his dinner's all black!

Mia giggles.

Emma: (*Suddenly*) Oh! I can see a car turning in to our street! It *must* be Dad coming home ...

CURTAIN

‘FIRST HOME BUYER’

(A ONE-ACT PLAY)

CAST: Jess: Young woman dressed casually. Obviously out for a Saturday afternoon stroll around the streets.

Guy: Her partner or boyfriend. Also casual. Jeans and T-shirts would do for them both. But give Guy something noticeable like a red-checked shirt.

Auctioneer: Large middle-aged man in a suit but no tie.

Extras: A mixed group of people attending the auction including one elderly man with white hair and possibly a beard. Auctioneer’s assistant.

SET: Open area in front of a brick house. House and lawn look scruffy. Large sign to show pictures of the house and ‘Auction Today 2 pm’ and an estate agent’s name.

TIME: Early afternoon.

SCENE ONE: Almost all the action takes place in one long scene with a very short epilogue. Jess and Guy are close to the street. Other people mostly seen side on but some movement as people wander in off the street or shift forward or turn to chat or point or rustle a catalogue.

Jess: Let’s see what it goes for. We’re not in a hurry.

Guy: (*Bends towards her*) Okay. But don’t you dare do anything that looks like a bid. No putting your hand up to your hair—

Jess: Or chasing flies—or waving to someone you know. I know, I know, like in books. But we haven’t seen the house. Maybe we should go in before it starts—

Guy: Why? We’re not intending to buy. We haven’t got to that stage—

Jess: Settled? No, we’re not settled. But we are ... sort of ... pretty sure.

Guy: But we don’t want a house—

Jess: We could start thinking about it—

Guy: Shussh. They’re going to start.

The auctioneer comes out to where a small table has been set up with a microphone on it. He doesn’t hurry to speak, apparently trying to get a feel for the audience.

Auctioneer: Afternoon, folks. Good to see so many people interested. And you won't be disappointed. This is a must have house. *He waves a hand at the house behind him. It looks an undistinguished square brick home with no garden.* It just oozes potential. I'll guarantee every one of you has seen it as a solid place to begin family life. I'll bet all of you have started to think about the sort of garden you would like to plant in this first class soil. And you're right, you're so right! This is a home to last. This is a home to grow with you. *His speech is loud and fast.* I can see you all, or nearly all, are in the first home buyer bracket—and it's a wonderful time of life. So take advantage! A home. A real home. And the government will help you get into it. You can't ask better than that.

Guy: But you've got to be married—

Auctioneer: Did I hear you right? You've got to be married? Now, wherever did you hear that? No, folks, all that you need to know is that you're in the market for your first home! Don't let anyone tell you different. So, let's get on our way! A house with three bedrooms, pleasant views, built-ins, large yard back and front, carport, picture window, pleasant, quiet neighbourhood, big yard with good soil—I'm drooling already—and don't forget folks, we can help you with finance. So let's get the bidding underway. Seventy thousand? Am I bid seventy thousand?

Guy: Well, it's out of our league even before we start.

Anonymous Bidder: Fifty thousand.

Auctioneer: Did you hear that folks? Did you hear someone offering to *steal* this wonderful home. Fifty thousand. Any advance on fifty thousand?

Guy: I'll—

Jess: No, you won't—

Auctioneer: That's what I like to hear. They came to mock and they stayed to pray. Who said that? To bid. To buy. A bid is like a prayer. So don't hold back. But we'll go up by ones till—

Different Anonymous Bidder: Fifty-one.

First Anonymous Bidder: Fifty-two.

Elderly Man: (*Has come in quietly to stand beside Guy.*) Take no notice. They salt the bidding ...

Jess: What do you mean? They aren't real buyers?

D.A.B: Fifty-three.

Auctioneer: This hurts me, folks, it really does. A home I'd kill for and you're offering me peanuts.

F.A.B: Fifty-four.

Guy: Gosh! That is cheap. It really is. I was thinking it'd go for around eighty— *He lifts one hand.*

Auctioneer: A new bidder. Fifty-five and it's still a steal.

Jess: You said not to do anything, Guy, you *can't* mean it—

Guy: You heard what he said. It's—honestly—I can't believe it.

Elderly Man: Don't bid. If they get no one, it'll get passed in. Then you can do a deal.

Jess: But I don't even *like* the house. We just stopped out of curiosity.

D.A.B: Sixty thousand.

Auctioneer: That's more like it, folks, I've been selling houses round this suburb for half my life and I know when I see terrific value.

Guy: Sixty-one.

Auctioneer: I was hoping we could rise by fives—but I know how nervous a young buyer can be. It *is* a big investment. But the most exciting and worthwhile one you'll ever make. So sixty-one it is.

F.A.B: Sixty-two.

Guy: (*Shrugs off the hand Jess tries to put on his shoulder*) Sixty-three.

Jess: Please, Guy, you told me not to—and now you're—you're—

Guy: But don't you see? It *is* a bargain!

Auctioneer: I never heard a truer word. A bargain. That's just what this solid, comfortable, pleasant home is. A bargain. A place to cherish and bring up kids. So come on, folks, there must be other people out there who can see the value this young man can see.

Guy: Sixty-four.

Elderly Man: No. You're upping your own bid.

Guy: Am I? But I want to be sure we get it—

Jess: We? But I don't want it.

Guy: But you said—

Auctioneer: Allowing for inexperience—it's at sixty-three, come on, folks, this is unbelievable value.

D.A.B: Sixty-four.

Auctioneer: Against the young gentleman here. Don't let it slip through your fingers.

Guy: Sixty-five.

Auctioneer: You'll never cease kicking yourselves if you let this home slip past and all for the want of a couple of thousand. *He looks around.* Sixty-five. *He shakes his head in apparent disbelief.*

Jess: I just can't bear to watch this. I'm going home. *She turns and walks away. Guy goes to run after her, one hand outstretched as though to grab her and bring her back.*

Auctioneer: I know it takes some getting used to. But you'll never regret it. All done at sixty-five thousand. *He bangs his hammer.* Sold to the young gentleman in the red-checked— *He turns to his assistant.* Grab him.

Auctioneer's assistant, a big fit-looking younger man, ducks through the crowd who all turn to watch. Guy stops and turns back rather than make a spectacle of himself. Everyone is staring and pointing at him ...

Auctioneer: Very wise, sir, this is not a home to run away from.

*The auctioneer's assistant brings him over to the table, propelling him with a firm hand in the small of his back. The **Elderly Man** says: It doesn't matter how often I see it happen—it never gets any easier to bear. Like sheep to the slaughter. But several of the people in the crowd start to laugh. An almost festive mood of laughing and joking and jostling seems to overcome them as they begin to disperse ...*

The Curtain Falls then rises almost immediately on a scene with Guy and Jess in a rather untidy and scruffy bedroom. The only light comes from a streetlight outside their window. It is furnished with a few unattractive op-shop pieces.

EPILOGUE:

Guy: *Sitting up in bed with a start. Oh hell! Oh gosh! Holy heck!*

Jess: *Also sits up startled and picks up a torch which is on floor beside the bed and flicks it on. What is it? She flashes the torch around as though she expects to find an intruder.*

Guy: The most awful dream, you won't believe it! I BOUGHT A HOUSE.

Jess: So what's so terrible about that? I'd like a house—if we had the money—

Guy: But that's the thing. I didn't have any money and I went mad and started to bid for it. And then I tried to run away. And they brought me back.

Jess: It was only a dream. They wouldn't make you buy it in real life—

Guy: You don't know that.

Jess: Well, I mean—if it was us—they'd soon know we couldn't afford a house ... and they would ... What happened next in your dream?

Guy: You went away and left me. That was the worst part of it all. Just seeing you walk away like that. Not even looking back.

Jess: You know I wouldn't leave you—

Guy: Are you sure? I felt like a ... like a ... it was an awful feeling seeing you walk away and I tried to run after you ... and they wouldn't let me—

Jess: But you know it was only a dream—

Guy: No, it was more than that. It was telling me something.

She switches off the torch and puts it back on the floor.

Jess: What sort of thing?

Guy: Well, how much I love you, I guess ...
Jess: And I love you too. You know I do.
Guy: Then maybe we should think about getting married—
Jess: So I'll never walk away?
Guy: *Laughs.* Well, not when I go mad and buy a house.
Jess: What house was it?
Guy: That one a couple of blocks over, the brick one, where that murder was done last year, where he killed her when she tried to run—
Jess: The one they can't sell?
Guy: Maybe we could ... think about it ... if it's cheap enough ...
Jess: *Oh no, we couldn't!* It'd give me cold shivers up the spine every night, just thinking about ... everything ...
Guy: Yes, we could ... if it goes really really cheap at auction ...
They start to argue over what constitutes 'really really cheap' as

THE CURTAIN FALLS

‘THE FOUR OF US’

(A ONE-ACT PLAY)

CAST:

Derek: A middle-aged man, short back and sides. Conservatively though informally dressed.

Alys: Slightly younger than Derek. Wearing bright colours and hoop earrings. An expansive personality.

Kate: Neatly dressed. The sort of person who ‘never has a hair out of place’.

Morgan: Wearing slacks and a colourful checked shirt. Despite his clothes he seems a rather aimless nondescript though pleasant sort of person.

SET:

A comfortable room set up with standing lamps as well as overhead lights, carpet, knick-knacks. It has a dining table at one end and an open counter into a small kitchen nearby. Several indoor plants in pots twine round the walls. Closest to the audience is a square table set up for bridge. It is slightly larger than the usual fold-up table and is covered with a white cloth, two packs of cards, four score books and pencils, and an ashtray. There needs to be a piano or a tape deck out of sight beyond a door opening into another unseen room. This would work best in a small intimate space.

TIME:

Evening. The lights are all on.

SCENE ONE:

All four of them are near the table but Kate is nearest to the kitchen and Alys is hovering rather aimlessly near Derek.

Derek: Does anyone want to change partners. For a spot of variety.

Kate: *(Not taking much notice)* Would anyone like some nibbles now? Nuts? Raisins? It wouldn’t take me a minute ...

Morgan: No, we’ll only end up with sticky fingers and then you’ll complain about marks on your cards.

Kate: I never complain. (*She sounds quite indignant.*)

Alys comes over and sits down. She does it gracefully. Morgan moves his chair slightly to give her more room. She is now sitting with her back to the audience. She repeatedly lifts her hair and shakes it out or twists it up as though to do something with it. She needs to speak very clearly.

Alys: I really don't mind one way or another. I always seem to end up as dummy.

Derek: That's because you never assess your cards properly. You just pitch in—

Alys: No I don't. I always look to see what I've got the most of ...

Derek: But it's not just numbers. You've got to make some judgement on the strength of each suit.

Alys: I can't see that it matters all that much. *You know what you're doing.*

Derek: (*Leans closer*) But it does matter. If I'm always thinking I'll need to try and win the bidding round just so that I can play your hand for you—

Alys: You don't have to do that. I am perfectly able to play my own hand. I just don't see that it matters very much who wins. We're all supposed to be friends. (*She is now sitting so that her face and Derek's are very close.*)

Morgan: (*Leaning back*) You two.

Derek: (*Testily*) It's all right for you. We went home twenty dollars down last week because of—

Kate: (*Still standing undecided.*) We could play for love. I don't mean love love. I mean love of the game. It doesn't need to be for money. Then Alys wouldn't feel so pressured. You wouldn't, would you?

Alys: I might. It's just something about Derek. The way he looks at me. And all those rules. It's like chess. You can never relax.

Kate: Then what if we didn't keep score either. Say we have six games and don't keep any scores at all?

Morgan: Here, hold on, Kate! This way you're going to turn it into something so weak and soppy it'll hardly be worth playing. You'll be like those teachers who don't want their kids to compete—

Derek: Exactly! I see it all the time at work. People don't want to really get out and push for what they want. They expect it to be handed to them on a plate.

Kate: All I'm saying is—Alys is new to our group. It takes a while to get used to our way of playing. And I don't see why you're not standing up for Alys more. (*She turns to Derek.*) It must be strange to come into a group where everyone knows everyone else's body language. Anyway, you'd better move around, Derek. You're in my chair. (*He moves to be opposite Alys. Kate hands him a pack of cards.*) Are you all sure you wouldn't like a drink or something first?

Morgan: Oh sit down, Kate! Stop fussing. We can get it ourselves—

Kate: But you never do. It's always, oh Kate, could you get me another lager from the frig, or another cup of coffee. I hardly sit down but I'm up again.

Derek has been dealing the cards in the meantime. Alys continues to play with her hair but at the end of the dealing consents to pick up her cards. As she puts them into suits she turns side on so that Morgan has quite a good view of her cards. He shows no sign of noticing.

Kate: I'll pass.

Alys: Oh, I think I'll go one club. There you are, Derek. A bid.

Morgan: Child's play. I'll go one spade.

Derek: Two spades.

Alys puts her cards face down on the table in a gesture which might be resignation. She pushes her chair back.

Alys: Here we go again. Derek is off to a flying start.

Kate: Don't be so ready to throw the towel in, Alys. It's early days.

Morgan: Well, are you going to raise it, Kate?

Kate: I wish. But ... no, I'll pass. Over to you.

Alys: (*Picks up her hand again.*) I always get the most awful cards. I'll pass too.

Kate: You shouldn't tell us what your hand is like.

Alys: You'll know soon enough.

Morgan: (*Clearing his throat.*) I'll pass too. All yours, Derek.

Alys: You see! It's hardly worth me sitting down at the table.

She spreads her hand out in front of her and gets up, pushing her chair well back.

Alys: What would you like me to do now? A bit of dusting? Maybe I could arrange some flowers for you, Kate, or whip up a pavlova?

Kate: You don't need to do anything, Alys. Just relax and watch.

Derek: Yes, you might learn something.

Alys: I think I'll go and play the piano. You don't mind if I play the piano, do you? (*She turns to give Morgan a sweet smile then rests her hand on Derek's shoulder.*) Play well for me, darling ... ooh, what a good hand you've got.

Derek: You shouldn't say anything about anyone's hand, Alys. It's not exactly cheating but it's ...

Alys: It's what? All bluff and double-bluff. (*She continues to circle the table vaguely, glancing over everyone's shoulders. Kate puts her cards up to her chest so that Alys can't see them.*)

Derek: Your lead I think, Kate. Oh go on, go and play the piano. It's too hard to concentrate when you keep looking over our shoulders.

Alys: Bridge instructors do that. The woman you sent me to did that all the time. She was giving us advice. Maybe that's why I'm not very good. I was distracted right from the start.

Derek: I didn't send you. You went.

Alys: Just as you didn't send me out of this room. But you didn't make it a very welcoming place.

Kate: That's not true! We want you to be part of our foursome. It will only take you a little while to get used to our ... our habits ... our ways.

Alys: I am not absolutely sure ... I would probably need to muse on it a bit longer ... but I am not certain that I want to get used to your habits.

Kate: And what does that mean?

Morgan: Oh, come on. Let's get started. I'm sure Alys didn't mean anything. We haven't got any dreadful habits. Alys just means we know each other so well. A raised eyebrow can convey ...

Alys: Yes, I read this Roald Dahl story where everything the people say is in coded words so that they know exactly what's in each other's hands.

Kate: Well, we don't do anything like that. We are just perfectly normal people who would rather play bridge of a Saturday night than go to parties or the pub. I don't see anything unusual in that.

Alys: You would if you were me. The big date. Mustn't agree to anything which might spoil our game. There's a whole world out there—

Derek: There might come a time when I wish you were out in it.

Morgan: (*Giving another rather artificial cough.*) Alys, go and play. Kate, for God's sake, lead a card. We'll still be sitting here at midnight and won't have taken a trick.

Kate: I don't think I like your tone of voice. Alys is right. This is all supposed to be friendly and happy. (*But she lays down a card.*)

Alys walks over to the door and goes through it though without closing it.

Derek: (*Lets out his breath audibly.*) I thought she was never going to go. But look at this—she's got quite a good hand. She could easily have done something more adventurous.

Kate: But she doesn't really want to, does she? Because she knows she's the odd one out. And we don't know ...

Morgan: Don't know what? Surely it's only a matter of time. Familiarity.

Kate: But we've been playing together for ten years. I suppose it really does seem like a conspiracy to her, that everything we say has some hidden coded meaning. Layers of meaning.

Morgan: *Did you send her to learn bridge?*

Derek: Yes. Why not. I send my staff on training courses. And I kept getting ratty with her. I thought someone else would do it better.

Kate: Oh Derek, no wonder she feels like the little kid who will be allowed in to play with the grownups as soon as she's got the hang of an adult game. I would hate it too if ... *(She turns to look at him.)*

Alys begins playing scales in the next room. She fumbles a bit. Derek gets up and goes over to close the door with something close to a slam.

SCENE TWO:

Alys moves on from scales to some simple pieces. They can be folk songs, or pop songs, old favourites or simple pieces from Bach. The main thing is that they be played with plenty of energy and verve and with a number of mistakes.

The others play on in grim silence for several minutes then Derek gets up, shoving his chair back.

Derek: You see what I mean! It is going to be another impossible evening! You should have set up the table out on the balcony.

Morgan: Quite a breeze out there.

Derek: I don't bloody well care! She is going to take over the evening willy-nilly—unless we get tough.

Morgan: And how do you plan to do that? She is your wife of only six months.

Derek: I think I must've been stark staring mad!

Kate: No, not mad. You said you enjoyed bridge, she said she had never played but she wouldn't mind to learn. You thought, oh goody, now I'll get myself a new partner—

Derek: Hardly. I just assumed ... women usually try to ...

Kate: *(Drily)* Please?

Morgan: And it wasn't the bridge at all, was it? You saw this gorgeous woman and all the old forgotten parts of you suddenly sprang to life and cried—How about us? Bridge is not like horse-riding. It doesn't exercise every muscle.

Derek: I don't want it to exercise any muscles! I just want a game that tests my mind and my memory and is pleasantly sociable at the same time. It doesn't seem very much to ask.

He goes over to the door, opens it again, puts his head in.

Derek: Would you mind to lower the volume. We can't hear ourselves think in there.

Alys says something which isn't audible to the others.

Derek: I'm not asking very much! And this isn't our house, you know. Kate's neighbours will be ringing up to complain soon.

Morgan sits back and plays imaginary keys with one hand. Kate sits still. Her posture suggests increasing tension.

Morgan: Don't make a thing of it. We don't *have* to gossip non-stop ... and even though she's never going to be asked to tour the country it's not all *that* bad—

Kate: Morgan, it is *excruciating*. Don't you have ears? I could put up with it, just, if she played softly ...

Derek closes the door and sits down again.

Derek: I'm sorry. I don't know what we're going to do. We need her ...

Morgan: Do we?

Kate: Well of course we do! We can't spend all our time playing three-handed.

Morgan: Put like that—I begin to wonder. Whose idea was Alys in the first place? Derek's—or yours?

Kate: As a matter of fact she was yours. You introduced Derek to her. Then you started giving him digs about getting hitched again ... and not to leave it too long. That sort of thing.

Morgan: I'm sure I didn't. I don't do blatant things like that.

Derek: You make it sound as if I have no mind of my own.

Alys has been playing more softly but now she begins to let herself rip again. And her heavy use of the pedal makes the sounds resonate.

Morgan: Oh, I wouldn't say that.

Kate: *(Places her last card down to take the last trick.)* A good hand, Derek, but you didn't make much of it.

Morgan: So what now? Are you going to invite her to join us for the next round?

Kate: I don't see how we can. I would feel embarrassed. *(She has raised her voice to be heard over the music and she sounds rather shrill.)*

Derek: Rubbish. Of course she needs to come and join us. We can't just let her—

Morgan: Opt out?

Derek gets up again and goes over to the door.

Derek: We are starting the next game, Alys. Come and join us.

Alys: (*Very loudly*) Why? The piano accepts me as I am.

Derek: We need you.

Kate gets up to come over and join him in the door way.

Kate: Is there something you would rather do, Alys?

Morgan: Oh, leave the poor woman alone. If she doesn't want to play why should she feel she has to—just to suit us. I hated cricket when I was a kid but there was no opting out. My teacher used to say 'we need you' ... but I never missed the undertone ... 'Useless little squirt! If I could find someone better I'd drop you like a shot' ... It probably scarred me for life.

Kate: We could alternate Saturdays. Bridge one week. A night club the next.

Derek: Hardly. Can you see me in a night club?

Kate: Well, a movie then.

Derek: No. We've got to resolve this—

Morgan: Don't push it. We're not a business deal and you only have two days to close on the option.

Derek: I run my life the way I run my business.

Alys comes in to join them again.

Alys: Yes, you do, don't you.

She goes over to where she has put down her handbag earlier in the evening and picks it up. She moves toward the far side of the room where it can be assumed there is an exit hidden by big pot plants. Morgan gets up and goes over to her.

Morgan: You mustn't go yet. We haven't had supper. We haven't ...

Alys: I am not a business, not a competition, not points on a score card. I am a woman. But you lot aren't people. You haven't got red blood. You might as well be robots. I believe robots and computers play bridge very well.

Morgan: You're thinking of chess ...

Alys: Same difference.

Morgan: Well, no, only in the sense that they're games of the mind.

Alys: So? Oh, never mind. Enjoy them whatever they are.

She bends forward to give him a light kiss.

Alys: There are all kinds of mind games. Some hurt.

She goes out.

Derek and Kate have been standing side by side. Derek, while Morgan was talking to Alys, had brought up one hand and rested it lightly on Kate's shoulder. Now he removes it and returns to his chair.

Kate: Shouldn't we try to persuade ...

Derek: Good God no! We've practically wasted the whole evening already.

Morgan: *(Returns to seat himself.)* Have you? I wonder ...

(His gaze travels between Derek and Kate, then he picks up the pack of cards again and begins to shuffle them.)

The Curtain Falls

‘TEST FLIGHT’

(Monologue)

CAST: Woman in her late forties. Vera May. Dressed in a blouse and skirt.

VENUE: Small sitting room, comfortable without being fancy. A number of framed family photos on the walls and sitting on top of an attractive polished wood cabinet containing some china. She is a collector in a modest way; something to fit her age and personality—and which is readily available: eg. Betty Boop items, toy owls, picture plates. But they mustn’t crowd the room. Thick pale carpet. TV. Cushions etc. Some coloured travel brochures lie on a coffee table.

TIME: To suit, but evening would be preferable.

SCENE ONE

Vera May. (*Standing by the table with the brochures. There is the decreasing sound of a plane overhead.*) It’s been a long time coming. That makes me think of waiting for a train. And instead, here I am at last ... I’ve had little trips and the rest has been working, always working ... and I’m not even *ambitious*. Mum always says she can’t understand me. One time I got angry with her. Did she want me to take just anybody—and just so I wouldn’t have to be the one who always provides for *me*. She didn’t like that. She thought it was a dig at her. She didn’t marry till she was thirty-five. Not because she didn’t want to marry, oh no, she was mad to get a husband. But she was like me. People didn’t notice her. And, let’s face it, she was plain. Even *her* mum called her a Plain Jane. No one talks about a Plain Vera ... but maybe they think it. But then if you go worrying about what people might be thinking ... lordy, it wouldn’t be much of a life, would it?

(As she speaks she moves to and fro, sometimes stopping to pick up something from her collection and fondle it or hold it up as though admiring it. Eventually she moves across to the windows and stands looking out. Some of the time she is facing the audience but she never gives the impression of talking to them.)

But then she’s never been anywhere either ...

(She seems to stop in mid walk and consider the implications of this.)

I should be sympathetic, I know. I shouldn't be critical. I shouldn't call her plain. But I do get riled. Because I do have lots of friends. I just didn't want them along on this trip. Maybe I should've invited her. Then she'd have one thing to always remember. She could gossip when she goes to bingo ... No, that would be even worse than asking someone at work to come along with me. It would be a *kind* thing to do. But I'm not feeling terribly kind.

(She wanders across and looks up at one of the photos. It is of a rather doughy woman in a hat with a cloche-style crown and a small brim.)

What I'm feeling ... and it's not something to say to anyone, not even a best friend, is ... I'm feeling *desperate* ... just plain old-fashioned ... *desperate*. There! I've finally admitted it.

(She shakes her head as though the admission has surprised her.)

God! What an awful hat! And she still ended up getting a nice husband. Just not ... a heart throb. Do nice men feel desperate at times? I s'pose they do. They get overlooked. Girls go for other things when they're girls. I did go out. Lots. The numbers of times I found myself filling in, making a foursome, being nice to someone else's guy ... you wouldn't *believe* it. I think I tried *too* hard to be nice ...

(She stands still for a minute possibly thinking back to those times ...)

And now it's all girls together ... and I'm me and half of them are divorced. But it doesn't stop us wanting, the eternal wanting. But I've got my position. And they come and go. I started in the laundry at twenty. I thought, I was very definite in my own mind, just for a while, just till something better comes up ... and Mrs Egan that was in charge then—Gosh, I haven't seen her around in ages! I wonder if she's still all right? And she said to me at the end of a year 'I want you to get serious about this, Vera, I'm going to suggest they promote you.' It's hard to get serious about *laundry*—but I *was* thrilled. How strange. I think it was that she'd picked *me* out. Me. I was so used to being the last in everything. The last to be asked to dance. The last to be invited. Oh Vera! Sorry, we didn't ... and then they would flounder around. Didn't notice, didn't think. Didn't care. How was that s'posed to make me feel? I sometimes thought Mrs Egan only wanted me as her replacement because it was a rotten job and no one else wanted it.

(She goes over and opens the cabinet and takes out a piece of china and turns it around in a sudden burst of admiration.)

And then they said I was lucky, I've got all this and no worries. There'll always be laundry, they implied. I took to creating a mysterious smile. Not smug. Not ... what's the word? Deprecating? Not 'look at me!' Not shoving it in their face. Just the smile of a contented woman. A contented, modestly successful woman. A contented woman who just may, but she's not going to admit to it, have more in her life than meets the eye ... And now she's going around the world ... And she won't be back for many a day ... I liked Harry Belafonte, he was about the only one that my parents liked that I also liked ... though mum admitted years later that she had a secret love of The Seekers. It does seem a world away, doesn't it? The young girls now want to work with things stuck in their ears and their bums wiggling while they load the machines. I had to come down hard. It makes me sound—it makes me *feel* like an old grump—but there are times and planes ... planes? ... places! I'm getting planes on my ...

(She goes over to the sideboard and pours herself a small glass of sherry.)

Won't it be wonderful! I should be packing instead of gloating. But then I want to have the joy of thinking about packing, what to take, what to buy, what I might get when I get there, an excuse to go into shops, not to say over and over again, 'just looking' ... and then there is a certain joy in packing, getting things to fit, deciding what to discard at the last moment, wondering about weight ... and then there's the me to tizzy up, what shall I wear on the plane, will I be sensible and go for one of those outfits that can be changed to make them look new? Reversibles. A casual scarf. A chain. Shoes. Comfort versus ... The New Vera. I don't want to end up with that deep vein thrombosis they talk about now. But I don't want to look like an old frump either. Because ... well, you just never know who'll end up sitting next to you. You just never know ...

(She goes over and puts her sherry glass down on the small table and picks up the top brochure. The lights dim slightly. There is the sound of a plane overhead. For a minute it takes over.)

SCENE TWO:

Vera May: *(She goes over and drops into a comfortable chair, still holding the brochure.)* So there I'll be sitting, a captive audience, can't get away, penned up for twenty hours. Of course he'll be captive too. The two of us. I've asked especially for a window seat. So I only have to deal with ... him. The mysterious him. And after he's read several business magazines and the paper he brought on board—and the in-flight magazine—what then? The stewards, stewardesses, I don't think they like being called hostesses any more ... I don't blame them, I've

never been fussed on being a *manageress*—that hiss at the end takes away the power in the position, somehow makes it seem weak and girlish ... anyway, they'll come round with a meal. It's only the short hops now where you're reduced to buying a Mars bar for your lunch. And it's quite easy to start chatting while you eat. I'm really not bad at starting conversations. It's something you learn as you go along. I could of course imagine him as a young hunk ... yes, going off backpacking somewhere, very fit, a sort of bleached blonde look from too much sun ... and he wants to tell me all about his plans, his doubts, the things he particularly wants to see. I'm quite a good listener. Plain women usually are. It's what mothers, teachers, women who think they should be dumping hard-earned-wisdom on young shoulders go on about.

(She tips her head back slightly and looks upward.)

'Now, dearie,' they say in that awful drab way that makes you close your ears to anything useful they might be saying. 'Now, dearie, the one thing you can show you're good at is listening. A good listener makes a man feel ten-feet-tall. Make him feel good and he starts to let down his defences. Every man wants to feel he's clever, witty, says things that are worth remembering ... of course, they don't really, but there's no harm in hanging on every word, putting on an interested expression, saying 'really!' every so often. Or, better still, 'so what did you do?' ... all those little clichés need to come into play. It doesn't matter if you can't remember what he was on about ten minutes later. You are out there—*hunting for a man*—and subterfuge is the name of the game if the first one didn't work. The first one being a cute smile and gorgeous boobs ... but of course you've got to catch them young if you're depending on your chest measurement. He won't look at you when you start to droop ...

(Unconsciously she reaches up and strokes her own bosom very softly ... it is an unexpectedly sensual gesture.)

So my young hunk cannot help himself. Instead of hours of boredom or hoping for a decent in-flight film or two he's starting to feel that his plans aren't just his business. They are proving truly fascinating to this old dear that's nearly old enough to be his mum. Yes, I can see it in his eyes. The vague thought: this might be worth holding on to. Of course there isn't very much he can do. Invite me for a coffee before he takes his huge rucksack and heads off under its weight into the metropolis. Or, yes, there's always the suggestion—why don't we exchange cards, letters, the occasional phone call. Maybe he isn't as confident underneath as he sounds on top? And I say, sounding more like a mother by the minute, yes, it would be good to know you're safe and well. The trouble with that is ... well, *one* of the troubles is this business of waiting round for mail, for calls, and they don't come. I had enough of *that* twenty years ago. I've got better things to do

with my time now. And I don't want to be a mum to *anyone*, no matter how hunky.

(She leans forward and takes the brochure from her knee and places it back on the small table.)

I am the eternally young. All that steam to keep me soft and round. All those dreams that can still bring a little smile to my face, a mystery smile, the hint that I know more than people realize, about life, about love, about *everything*.

(She raises both arms in an expansive gesture, flexes her wrists, waggles her fingers.)

I need an older companion for my flight. A man of the world. Together we can discuss ... business. Throughput. Turnover. Ups and downs. Not major business of course. That sort'll be up in the more comfortable cabins. Just getting by and feeling that there's worse things you might be doing. Something in a suburban shopping centre. Owns a string of Laundromats, ha, ha, or does the rounds of nursing homes. We can talk shop for twelve hours. Perish the thought! Well, then a pizza parlour. I wonder why they call them parlours? The faint smells of garlic and onions and mozzarella will hang about. A newsagency then? Somewhere which has that sense of being a hub, a centre of things. Somehow you always expect people in newsagencies to know everything that's going on locally. But I am a private person. I wouldn't want to reciprocate. Of course, on a plane, you can feel quite safe. Anything you offer ... well, it's not as though you're going to *see* him again, now is it? You can be as indiscreet as all get out. Except ... I'd soon start to feel uncomfortable. And my little indiscretions, my little hopes and dreams—would they *really* interest someone else? Even someone who's run a very mundane sort of business. Making bladders to go into footballs. Selling taps. Paying wages at a men's outfitters. Installing rainwater tanks. They might be fascinating jobs. Who knows? But I see him thinking the same thing. 'What about *my* life would interest anyone else?'

(She stands up and goes over to the glass she's left sitting and drains it.)

That's life, innit it, as a Cockney might say—this constant wondering. Am I *interesting* enough to hold somebody else's attention? And surely the honest answer must be NO. A great big fat NO. Most people aren't very interesting. And the ones that are usually have tickets on themselves. It's not much of an outlook, is it? Washing to and fro between boredom and being made to feel boring. The boredom cycle ...

(She goes over to the window and makes faces at her reflection in it, she sticks out her tongue, thrusts out her bottom jaw, blinks rapidly, raises her eyebrows and generally plays at making her reflection behave absurdly. Another plane comes over, the sound increases then dies away again ...)

SCENE THREE

(She turns away from the window and pirouettes around the room, though not very gracefully.)

Planes. I've complained about them often enough. No wonder there's cracks starting in the ceilings. And the noise. And always right in the middle of a favourite program. They should donate us all, every one of us living round here, a decent set of ear-muffs. I went along to that rally to stop them lifting the night time curfew. I don't think we've won, just a stay of execution.

And now, here I am going off in a plane. Maybe I should've gone for a cruise instead. Or a bus tour. But I was seduced ... by a brochure. And planes aren't the unrelieved elderly ...

(She stops her movement at the table and picks her brochures up again and holds them as a fan.)

I should be ashamed of myself, shouldn't I? Where are my principles? Except the planes will take off and fly over—and bother us—whether I'm on board or not, whether they're half-full, three-quarters-full ... or there's two people sitting looking self-conscious, outnumbered by stewards. I can send a donation to the Movement Against Night Flights ... salve my conscience. Fifty dollars—while I spend two thousand on a round-the-world-special. Oh ho! So that's your priority, is it, Ms May? Not hard to see *your* heart isn't in your demands—

(She fans herself rather theatrically.)

The embarrassment of being caught out. But then how many of us take our opposition to its obvious conclusion? I'll get there to check in and half the committee will be there looking similarly embarrassed. Like those people you see going into court with jackets or blankets over their heads. And there we'll be, not able to look each other in the eye, and we'll all be telling ourselves 'but this isn't a night flight ... no, this is just a normal day time nuisance ... we don't need to feel we're letting the side down ... ' And what happens when we get on board and there I'll have one of my fellow-members sitting right bang next to me and we'll say ... deprecatingly, yes, there's no help for it ... we'll say ... or will our

tongues be tied? We can't even say 'I'm not going far' as though that would undercut the noise of taking off and coming in to land, as though that would mollify everyone down below as their china shakes on the dresser and their windows rattle in their frames and the baby wakes up and starts to cry ...

(She turns as though to stroke the shoulder of an invisible person, a wicked little smile plays around her mouth. She winks as though to cement a secret pact.)

(Then she holds out both arms.)

Shall we dance, shall we dance, *(She begins to whirl around the room as though on a dance floor)* dance and dance the night away? Just the two of us, just the dull two of us, and then we all come pouring out on to the floor, everyone of us that's signed petitions and sent delegations, two by two, four by four, a great mass of us, all us good sober caring citizens, concerned about everything—babies and children and their little tender ears, wildlife, old people, social gatherings, community, businesses, we all have our reasons ...

(She starts to laugh as she continues to turn ...)

All us good dull *thoughtful* people ... all of us being naughty, being hypocritical, being *bad*—I've always wanted to be bad, not really bad, not wars and shredded documents, just being the person my mother never was, never will be, not the one that sits on the sidelines, that fills in a foursome, that helps out, the one that's kind and steps in when plans go wrong ... that me! That boring me! Just for once ...

That one that reads a Rosamunde Pilcher and eats buns neatly ...

That one! How I hate her! How I *long* to go into a chrysalis and come out twenty-four hours later as bright and beautiful and ready to test my wings and take on the world—

It's an odd thing and I've never really thought about it before—but planes are shaped a little like a chrysalis, a silver chrysalis, like the beautiful silver ones you find on the oleander bushes ... and out comes a pretty little butterfly with brown-and-white-spotted wings ... The new me ...

(She goes over and refills her glass.)

Drink to the new me, Vera, raise your glass, good health, long life ... much fun! Much much fun—delicious fun—

(She raises her glass. Another plane can be heard in the distance, its sound increasing. She drinks deeply then turns and goes to the door, flicking off the light as she goes out. The thunder of the plane increases overhead.)

CURTAIN

(FOR SUE AND EDWIN)

‘PANEL GAME’

(A DIALOGUE)

CAST:

Mother: A middle-aged woman dressed in a blouse and skirt, her hair permed neatly but looking rather flustered and harassed when she appears.

Daughter: Smart young woman in her twenties with long leather boots and wearing a short skirt and tight jumper or top. She has long hair and is fairly heavily made up.

SET: A sitting room with solid comfortable furniture, including a big sofa with a low glass-topped table in front of it. The room has dried flower arrangements and conventional prints on the wall. Tossed on top of the table are what appear to be several glossy magazines and several videos. A vacuum-cleaner sits on the carpet.

TIME: Afternoon.

SCENE ONE:

Daughter is seen through door left taking off a coat and hanging an umbrella on a stand. She walks in and calls out: You home, mum?

Mother: In the kitchen, love, come on through.

Daughter goes over to look at the things on the table, then bends and picks up a magazine and says in a surprised voice—Hustler? I don't believe this! Not mum! She goes through the pile saying—A Very Pretty Arse—The Last Virgin—Playboy—Nuns and Nudes—more Hustler—This is pretty hard to believe. Menopause is supposed to be a liberating experience—but—She puts everything down again and looks around the pleasant conventional room as though it is no longer familiar.

Door at the rear of the stage opens and Mother comes in stripping off some rubber gloves as she enters. She says in a dull voice: So you've found them.

Daughter: I know you've got a quiet life—but I did suggest—

Mother: They're not mine! You didn't think—for one minute—this filth—

Daughter: You mean dad has been—*She hesitates*—livening up his sex life or you just caught them in time before you took some boxes of jumble to the church?

Mother: It isn't a laughing matter! I don't think I'll ever laugh again.

Daughter: Why ever not? There's ... worse stuff around. And men ...

Mother: Men—what?

Daughter: Well, men are different.

Mother: I have noticed ... thirty years of marriage ... you do notice ... but this is ... different ...

Daughter: Where did you find it?

Mother: In the shed.

Daughter: I thought you left the shed pretty much to him?

Mother: I do. I did. *As she speaks she moves in a jerky agitated way around the room.* I needed a hammer—

Daughter: *Shrugs but doesn't look particularly sympathetic.* That'll teach you. Men don't like women messing round in their sheds—

Mother: I wasn't—*messing round*—I needed a hammer. And they were in there.

Daughter: Like Bluebeard's wife—you couldn't resist. Curiosity killed the cat and all that stuff. You picked one up and then two—next thing you were carting the whole bundle inside ... to do what? Confront him?

Mother: I don't know. That is the terrible thing. I just don't know.

She turns and goes out the door to the kitchen and she can be heard opening and closing doors, a kettle starts to whistle, china clinks ... Her daughter from sounding cheerful and light-hearted seems to lose her insouciance. She shakes her head several times. She goes over to take an attractive wedding photo from the top of a bookshelf ...

She turns back towards the audience and says loudly: The old bugger.

Mother: *(Coming in with a tray and pushing the material aside so she can set down the tray.)* It's done now. One brief moment and a life is changed for ever.

Daughter: Is it?

Mother: It doesn't really matter what I do now. I can put them back. I can put them in the bin. I can ask him. I can ... leave a note and pack and go ... I can take something ... and frighten him ... But it won't make a speck of difference. Every time I look at him I will wonder ... Why? Why him? Why us? And he will bluster his way through ... or refuse to talk about it ...

Daughter: Maybe they aren't his. Maybe one of his mates at work asked him to hide something for him—

Mother: And what good would that do? I cannot even pretend to myself that he wouldn't look—wouldn't ... *feel* ...

Daughter: But women now do take it in their stride. Sometimes they even want to share. They hope it'll make their sex life ... more exciting ...

Her mother looks at her and the room is silent except for the sound of a small bird piping a song beyond it somewhere ...

Mother: But does it make their sex life more loving? This kind of carelessness ... this ... this exhibitionist ... another person ... another woman ... their private parts are ... well, they're private ... they should be ...

Daughter: Try thinking of yourself as a doctor, a nurse, maybe. Sort of clinical ...

Her mother sits down on the sofa but her hand is shaking too much when she tries to lift her cup to her lips. She takes out a handkerchief and lifts it to her eyes. Her daughter comes over and lifts the other cup and saucer and carries it round the room.

Daughter: It's too late, I guess ...

She sets her cup and saucer down on another table and stands looking at her mother's bowed head. At last she sighs and says: So what are you going to do?

Mother: Do you ever have the feeling that your mind is not working? It just insists on going round and round the same little groove ... like the bunny at the track ... and you always come back to the same beginning ... *She gives way in earnest to tears.*

Her daughter comes over and sits down on the sofa and puts an arm round her mother's shoulders. But they are only pictures, mum, and you've had thirty years of happy marriage to offset them—

Mother: *(Sniffing into her handkerchief)* No, I haven't.

Daughter: *(Speaking cautiously)* You haven't had thirty years? You haven't been happy? You don't see them as just pictures?

Mother: Men and women made them. They make me feel dirty. Like a Peeping Tom ... like a ... a sneak ...

Daughter: Times have changed.

Mother: Oh yes, times have changed. Divorce is easier now.

Daughter: You're not—surely not—not for this?

Mother: Then what do you suggest I do?

The daughter puts down her cup and gets up again. But halfway round the room she seems to be hit by an idea. She stops abruptly.

Daughter: Not a court of law, prisoner at the bar, that kind of thing. Not a hypothetical. Mrs Jones, if this hypothetical man left these hypothetical magazines where you would find them—what would you do? But there they are, your panel of experts, they have advised countless people ... and now they can advise you ...

Mother: What panel of experts? There's just us ...

Daughter: Just us. And we have the distilled wisdom of sixty years, of two different generations ...

Daughter hesitates then strikes a pose. Many couples come to me in Marriage Guidance and one says—porn is harmless, porn is fun—and the other says—it has come between us—these other couples—their blank eyes, their meaningless smiles, the—the wet mess to prove the man has ... is virile ... Should we divorce? And the counselor says—what about all those happy years?

And the husband says—boring years—and the wife says—I lived in a fool’s paradise—

Mother: Whose side are you on?

Daughter: In theory—no one’s. And then the psychiatrist steps forward and says, I advise hypnotherapy. Perhaps there are unrecognized and suppressed conflicts which are now playing themselves out in this way. You want to hurt each other because neither of you has fully recognized the other’s needs.

Mother: I don’t understand what you’re getting at.

Daughter: He tells them it will be expensive but very effective—if they will put themselves in his hands. And then their family doctor steps forward and mumbles something about the middle years, the change-of-life, the sense that time is passing and little worries pile up. The fear of wrinkles and sagging ... and the way looking at smooth young bodies might be ... an antidote ...

Mother: Doctor Davison is not like that—he never talks about the personal.

Daughter: And then there are the next-door-neighbours. They’ve all seen things and wondered ... the late arrival home, the arguments floating out open windows ... gossip up and down the street ...

Mother: I thought you said these were experts?

Daughter: And then there is the minister. He is embarrassed but he tells you he counsels couples to try and work through their differences. A marriage, he says, is made in Heaven and should not be ripped apart because of a ... of a moment’s aberration ...

Mother: But he doesn’t know it’s that ... that *aberration* ... and *his* wife will never find him reading *Hustler* ... *She* will never have to look at him and wonder if it was only looking ...

Daughter: And then there’s me, the daughter ...

Mother: And what will you advise your naïve and unworldly mother? That times have changed and she should put her distress aside and let life go on?

Daughter: Heck no! I want you to stand up for your world and just for once tell him exactly what you think of his behaviour! It’s always been ‘yes, dear’, ‘no, dear’, ‘just as you say, my love’ ... there never was such a thing as a sexy doormat ...

They both hear the sound of a car driving in and parking, a car door slamming ...

EPILOGUE

Daughter: Well, here comes dad. Cry some more, mum, let thirty years of unspoken misery come out. Don’t even *pretend* to take it bravely and stoically.

There is a long pause with both women turned towards the door where they both expect to see a husband and father enter. But nothing follows on. After a long silence they hear a distant door opening and closing with a rattle.

Mother: He's gone to the shed ... *She stands up slowly and puts her handkerchief away ... I did live in a fool's paradise, you know ... She seems to become brisker ...* And these, take them away, love, I can't find my way back ... but I can tell him I don't know what he's talking about when he comes asking for them ... When he comes asking ... but, of course, he won't ... because we ... don't talk much now ...

Daughter: Oh, I know. And let me guess—your last words to him were—don't forget to take the garbage out ...

THE CURTAIN FALLS

'THE SHOW WE CAME FOR—'

(BRIEF SKETCH)

Cast: **Man** and **Woman**. Never seen but need carrying voices. A number of **Extras** to sit in the front rows of the theatre.

Set: The stage is set up as a sitting room with armchairs, tables, TV, wall decorations, some half-wrapped parcels on one table, a partly-assembled plastic Christmas tree in one corner, a box trailing tinsel and other decorations waiting to be hung. A door at the rear of the stage needs to be partly open. The two actors are unseen beyond the door. The extras sitting in the front rows of the theatre need to be clustered to allow for their ‘conversations’.

Time: Evening.

SCENE ONE

The Curtains open to show an empty stage.

Sound of footsteps and distant voices; what they are saying isn't clear but they sound angry. They come closer but remain unseen.

Man: Quit it! Just quit hassling me! If I want to go to a party—I'll go to a party—I'll go to a hundred parties! And you can like it or lump it!

Woman: You knew I couldn't come. You KNEW the kids were sick. But no—off you go—and then I hear you had your hands all over Moya—

Man: I did NOT have my hands all over anyone. I don't know what sort of lies someone's been telling you. And if it's any consolation—not that I care when all you can think about is hurling stupid accusations—she won't be there tonight—

Woman: Oh! So you're keeping tabs on her, are you? Ringing her up and saying—Darl, are you going to be there tonight—

Man: You're mad, you're just getting crazier and crazier—

Woman: I am, am I? And you'd know all about going mad about someone, wouldn't you? I've heard things—I've been hearing things for months now—

Man: Oh, can it! For Christ's sake, stop all this stupid jealous stuff! We're s'posed to be out there all lovey-dovey—and you're—

Woman: I'm what? Go on. Say it.

Man: Okay, I will. You're pathetic. You're a green-eyed monster. I often wish I'd never met you—

Woman: You do—well, you're not the only one! The day I met you was the worst day of my life! But you were all over me, pretending to be—

Man: It was you! Don't pretend. You practically had me into your bedroom and were panting in my ear before I'd even put down my umbrella—

Woman: That's a lie! That's the only thing you're good at—lying—

Man: Don't you call me a liar, you two-faced bitch!

Woman in front row says audibly: This is dreadful. Why doesn't the director stop them—

Man next to her: He's probably nipped out the back for a quick slug of—

There is a loud crash from behind the set.

Man: Now look what you've done!

Woman: Next time it'll be your head that cops it, you sleazebag!

Different woman in front rows: Why don't they draw the curtains?

Third woman: If they don't start soon I'm going to ask for a refund. I didn't come to hear people fight—and not just before Christmas.

More unclear noises from behind the ajar door and the set shakes slightly.

Woman: Screams. Don't you dare touch me! It's all you're good for—I know—get those pathetic little fists up and hit a woman—

Man: I did not HIT you! I'd like to hit you! Might knock some sense into that stupid head of yours—but don't pretend—and YOU got me with the hot iron that time—so don't play Little Miss Muffett with me—

First woman, leans across the aisle and says to third woman: We can't just SIT here—and do nothing—any minute now—

Man: Don't you dare!

Woman: Scared are you! I'll make you scared, you lying toad!

More noises of things falling and the set again shakes slightly.

More people in the audience turn to their neighbours; they need to look and sound awkward and embarrassed. The talk begins to spread from the front rows as people turn round to the row behind them and ask: What should we do?

Man: Put that fucking spear DOWN! Why the hell they left all this stuff lying round the back—

Woman: Don't you tell me what to do! I'll stick it right through you if you don't apologise! Not just your thigh—but right through your chest, you bastard!

Man: You wouldn't dare! All this is hot air—

Woman: You don't know what hot air is—you and that bloody bitch and all your whispering and kissing out the back—

Man: You touch me and it'll be the last thing you ever do!

Several people rise in their seats in a hesitating way. One man steps out into the aisle ...

Second woman says: I'm going to—I'm leaving—

Man in the aisle: We should all go back stage and—

Third woman: What if some of us went on to the set and started singing carols? That would shock them out of—

Different man: Why not sing them here? Loudly. All of us.

People start to rise in their seats, raggedly rather than all together ...

First woman: What shall we sing? 'Joy to the World'?

Second woman: Yes, let's—

Man: You think you can get away with it—but I'll make you suffer—and you'd better believe it—

Woman: That's right! Hit a woman! That's your level, isn't it!

There is the sound of a loud slap. Woman screams at the top of her voice. The set shakes again and there is the sound of scuffling feet and more physical sounds of hitting and shoving ...

The audience breaks into a carol. From its hesitant start more people gradually join in. The extras at the front of the theatre need to carry the tune well and loudly. They drown out the noises coming from behind the set.

As the carol winds to its close the man in the aisle moves towards the stage then turns to face the audience. First woman asks what carol they would like to sing next. Several suggestions are made.

The sounds from behind the set have ceased. Man at the front of the audience says loudly: Years ago they called it The Eichmann Experiment. Police used to call it 'Never Interfere in a Domestic'. We are all craven in the face of authority, of anger, of issues which don't seem to concern us—

First woman says in a puzzled way: You mean—all this isn't real?

Man at the front: It doesn't matter if it's real or it isn't, whether we believed the play hadn't started—or this is the prologue to what will happen on stage—we were all in agony. I know I was. We want to give husbands and wives, lovers, the privacy ... the space ... the closed bedroom door ...

First woman: And we want to save them from themselves—to stop them saying and doing the things which will mean there's no way back, no chance to resurrect their love ...

Second woman: Then let us sing for them, real or not real—not 'Deck the Halls' but 'Deck the Set'—

She leads the way, singing strongly and sweetly. The ajar door on the set is pushed right open. As the carol comes to an end there is the sound of clapping from behind the set. People in the audience begin to join in.

THE CURTAIN FALLS

'LEGACY'

CAST: Una: Middle-aged woman obviously busy cleaning, has on an apron and rubber gloves.

David: Middle-aged man in light shirt and slacks.

Graham: Ditto. As David and Una are his siblings they need to look reasonably similar in terms of size and colouring.

SET: Small office which gives the impression of being on a farm. Desk with telephone and drawers, blotter and pens in a mug, piles of papers. Bookshelves. Chair. Calendar on the wall with a picture of a tractor or farm machinery. Framed coloured photo eg. of a bull with prize ribbons decorating him. (Or similar suggestions of farm life.) Box on floor into which someone has been putting papers. Books need to be a mix of old encyclopaedias and light paperbacks. Window with a scene of trees and grass beyond it. Open door on the left.

TIME: Day. But the light in the room has also been turned on.

SCENE ONE: David and Graham *are standing with books in their hands.*

David: I'm not really sure that I want an incomplete set of *The Standard Cyclopaedia of Modern Agriculture and Rural Economy*—

Graham: Maybe you'd like some of this trash instead? *He holds up a copy of a novel with a busty blonde on the cover.* Instead of learning something you can be titillated. Not that it's probably what we'd call hot stuff now.

David: No, but it's strange to think of him in here, reading this stuff—and the rest of the family out there—and all of us going on with our lives.

Graham: You mean—like the Invisible Man, the Invisible Father ... everyone knows he exists but no one ever actually sees him? But he did turn up on time for his meals. He wasn't like the Absent-Minded Professor, his mind on higher things than a rolled roast and spuds—

David: I don't s'pose it really matters now, what he was and what he wasn't. He's gone and we've got to finish sorting this room and making sure we've got all the right paperwork to sell the farm.

Graham: I'll be sorry to see it go. There won't be a real ... centre to the family any more. The farm was more than where Mum and Dad lived. It was the centre of our universe for twenty years. And I still think of it as home—even though I've had a place of my own now for fifteen years.

David: We all become less rooted ... more mobile ... less willing to think of the generations planted in the one place for hundreds of years ...

Graham: I s'pose there is a moral in that. *As he speaks he lifts the desk's two drawers out and places them on top.*

David: What kind of moral?

Graham: Well, for instance, did you ever ask what kind of marriage they had, whether they were both happy here? I know I never did. It was just a given. And whether they were happily-married or not—other things seemed to be more important.

David: They say kids aren't good judges of their parents' marriages—but I don't know that I believe that. If they aren't then who is?

Graham *starts lifting old correspondence out of the drawers, putting business stuff in one pile and what he regards as more personal stuff in another pile.* Maybe. So which do you want to sort? The personal man—or the public man of business?

David: *Shrugs.* You're hoping the personal will surprise me—after what I've just said?

Graham: No. I just want the job done. Una's got the rest of the house to do with Mum. I thought we were taking the easy bit.

David *picks up the pile of old letters and envelopes and begins to riffle through them.* Wouldn't it be better to give these to Mum? She must know if they're worth keeping? *He picks up an envelope and feels it, then lifts the flap and takes out a bundle of photographs.* Uh oh! Maybe not. I didn't know he'd kept these.

Graham: *Comes over to the desk and holds out a hand. His brother passes them to him, one by one, as he looks at them.* The gay old dog! I didn't know he'd been such a hit with the women before he found Mum—

David: Who says he stopped looking round when they met?

Graham: Oh, come on! Did you ever see—or hear—or find a strange letter in the mail box—or answer the phone to a woman—

David: A husky-voiced siren? Darling, when are you coming round to see me again? No, of course not. I'll guarantee these were girls he met in the war. They were probably all over him. Good-looking fancy-free chap in uniform. He could probably pick and choose. But it doesn't mean he never had—regrets—

Graham: I don't know. He seems to have played the field pretty thoroughly. He must've known what he wanted ...

David: Maybe. And maybe he thought he'd got the pick ... but then the years went by, hard work, animals, kids, bills, worries about the weather, about everything ... maybe he sat in here and thought 'that was the life' ...

Graham: *Comes to the end of the pile of photographs and puts them down on the desk.* Gwen, Mary, Susie, Betty, Pat ... they're like a snapshot of the girls of fifty years ago. I wonder what happened to them all? Did they all find husbands? Maybe they went as war brides to ... the States maybe ... But this last one, Enid, she's different.

David: *Moves over and picks up the photograph.* Enid and baby Jane? Yes, I don't know what to think about that one. And on the back she says 'Forget me when I forget you'. Is that code for something? Did she marry—was she already married when she met him—

Graham: Are you suggesting Baby Jane might be ... our ... well, our half-sister? Surely not?

David: Your guess is as good as mine. Maybe better. Dad confided in you more, first son, all that bizz, my heir, my successor ... didn't he drop hints?

Graham: Of course not! I had no idea any of these women existed. And I can't see him simply walking away from a girlfriend and her baby—not if he knew it was his—

David: But you don't know, do you? None of us know that man. The have-a-good-time-because-tomorrow-I-may-die young airman. He's not the same man we saw as father and husband ...

Graham: No-o-o ... no, I guess he isn't ... I wish ... I wish he'd chucked them out, those pictures ... or told us ... or ...

The two men look at each other in dismay. An awkward silence falls briefly.

SCENE TWO: *Una enters right, stripping off her rubber gloves as she enters.*

Una: What are you two looking so upset about? Mum says can you manage a cup of tea yet?

David *has slipped the photos under an envelope at the sound of her footsteps. Now he brings them out and hands them over.* We couldn't help wondering ...

Una: All his old lady friends?

Graham: You knew already?

Una: No. But Mum always says she knew there were other women before he met her. I've never liked to ask her how she knew or whether she thought any of them had ever been serious.

David: It isn't the fact of ... of women ... it's that last one.

Both men stand and watch her as she leafs through the pile and turns each photo over. She says aloud: There's something rather touching about them, isn't there? Gwennie with her hair all curled up on those big rollers and saying 'Come back safe' ... and she was obviously in the WAAAFs ... so she may have been posted away from him ...

Graham: Don't say that. I'll start to think of them as star-crossed lovers, parted by the cruel edicts of the top brass ... and maybe they were all in the services and all got moved round like pawns on a chessboard, all longing for each other, all hoping they would come home safely ...

David: Now you're just being sentimental. There was nothing to stop them writing to each other ...

Una: But you don't *know* that. War was hard on relationships. And not having the time to really get to know how you felt about someone else ... and if you were posted overseas then maybe you thought you should be unselfish and leave that person free to find someone else ...

Graham: Maybe. But unless we want to go looking for Baby Jane—our question is—what do we do with these? Should we show them to Mum, take them away ourselves, burn them—

Una: It would be lovely to know what happened to those women. Did they survive, did their men survive, were they happy ... I wonder what would happen if you sent these to somewhere like the *Women's Weekly* and said 'does anyone recognize these girls?' and see what happens.

David: They probably married men pretty much like Dad and had kids pretty much like us—

Una: You make that sound a depressing prospect—

David: Well, a bit humdrum ... but Dad's will gives all his personal stuff to Mum. Do you think he meant her to have these or he'd simply forgotten all about them? I don't want to upset her.

Graham: Then take them away with you. And if she asks—you can mumble something about taking a few things home with you to sort through.

He places them back in their envelope and hands it to David who ignores the outstretched packet.

Una: But now we will always wonder—have we got an older half-sister out there? And the thought will prey on our minds—

David: I'm not going to let it prey on mine.

Graham: And if she did miss out on her dad—then she might prefer not to know about us. She might resent us having what she never had.

Una: *Moves around the room as though to see how much cleaning is needed.* And I can't believe Mum didn't know. She came in here regularly—to use the telephone, to get paper and pens, to help him with documents, to dust and tidy, and I know she read some of these books. *She waves a hand at the remaining books on the shelves.*

David: Okay, go and give them to her and ask her what she wants done with them. Destroy all that innocence and remaining happiness ...

Una: *Briskly.* You're just being silly. You can't be married for forty years and stay all that innocent. And I *will* ask her if she wants them.

She takes the envelope from Graham. She exits.

Graham: I feel the way I always felt when Dad sold the bull calves—when I found out they weren't going to a happy home.

David: I know Mum seems to have lived a very quiet protected life but I'm sure she knew ...

Graham: Maybe they had a big heart-to-heart—you tell me about your guys and I'll tell you about my girls—but it doesn't mean they were honest with each other ...

David: No. You'd either want to make yourself sound like a terrific catch—or you'd play it down. Those girls? Pah! I've met more interesting cows in a paddock—

Graham: You wouldn't want to over-do it though.

David: *Goes over and takes down another pile of books.* Did you—tell your wife about yourself?

Graham: I did. Maybe that's why I'm now divorced. Did you tell Annette?

David: No way. I went out of my way to sound like The Uncatchable Guy. Love 'em and leave 'em. She still thinks she did a great job in tying me down. Maybe it's psychological. You're more likely to hang on to what you think was hard to catch. You can try it next time round.

Graham: *Shrugs.* But it doesn't tell us what Dad did. *He snaps a rubber band around the pile of personal correspondence and turns to the other pile.*

SCENE THREE: *Una enters with a tray containing three mugs and a plate of mixed biscuits and sets it down on the desk.*

David: Well? Was she shocked?

Una: Of course not! She says we're a lot of sillies to be worrying about a few old photographs.

Graham: I hope she appreciates that we were worrying for her sake—

David: *Impatiently.* So—does she know about Baby Jane?

Una: Of course! We all know Enid. Aunt Enid that died last year. And Jane married years ago and lives in London.

Both men look at each other.

Una: *Goes on briskly.* Enid was already married but her husband was killed in the war. Dad did think of stepping in but the family were against it. They said they were too closely related ... and Enid was ten years older ...

Graham: You wouldn't know it from the photo—

David: And it doesn't quite explain—

Una: Mum doesn't seem to have done her sums? Or someone has fudged their dates. Or Enid wanted him for reasons other than food on the table? I know. It doesn't answer all our questions. But if Mum was prepared to live with unanswered questions ...

Graham: I always somehow thought they were an open book to each other, all those years together, you assume there can't be many secrets left ...

He finishes clearing the bookshelves and rests both arms on the piles of books now on the end of the desk.

David: I know. *He helps himself to a biscuit.* And Enid never re-married ...

Una: Do you think that is significant?

They all turn and look at each other in silence.

THE CURTAIN FALLS

‘DARBY WITHOUT JOAN’

(A ONE-ACT PLAY)

Cast: **Eddie:** Elderly man. **Faye:** Elderly woman. **Betty:** Elderly woman. **Pat:** Elderly woman. (**Annie:** Elderly woman. Eddie’s wife. Never seen.) Other elderly residents, all female. Two younger women, **Mrs Gabbett and Ms Shaw**, in nurse-style uniforms, eg. grey dresses with white collars and plain lace-up white shoes. All the elderly people are dressed in rather shapeless clothes, cardigans, slippers or suitable shoes. **Faye** is wearing several attractive rings and has obviously made some effort to make herself look attractive.

Setting: Large room in nursing home. Comfortable chairs scattered around. Several walking frames parked by chairs. A TV set is on with some kind of morning show, interviews or cooking. Doors opening to both the left and right. A bank of windows with curtains almost closed at the rear of the stage.

Time: Scene One: Morning tea time. Trolley with biscuits and mugs of tea.

Scene Two: Follows on.

Scene Three: Same room. But empty except for Eddie.

SCENE ONE:

Faye appears to be whispering something to Eddie as he sits in a comfortable chair in centre stage; she on his far side. She straightens up and runs a hand over his curly grey hair.

Betty: (Seated to their left and apparently preoccupied with her knitting; she puts it down abruptly on her knees as she sees Faye’s intimate gesture.) You really shouldn’t, no, I don’t think it’s right—

Faye: (Looking surprised) What isn’t?

Betty: All that ... *fondling*. Annie wouldn’t like it.

Faye: And what does it have to do with Annie? Annie doesn’t know what day it is, she doesn’t know if she’s a lady or a bird, she doesn’t remember who Eddie is ... why on earth should I care about Annie?

Eddie: Picks up the newspaper on the arm of his chair and appears to busy himself with the headlines as a brief silence falls in the room. Then he says casually: I hear wheels. Sustenance comes.

Faye: You see?

Everyone else in the room looks up. One woman fiddles with her hearing aid.

Pat: *Gets up slowly from her chair by the television set.* They are very punctual. But then Annie is also very punctual ...

Eddie: Is she? I can't say I've ever noticed. But she gets hungry and thirsty like us all.

Two women with a trolley containing a teapot, hot water jug, milk, mugs, biscuits etc, enter through door on the right. One of them says in a big jolly voice: Smoko! Several of the residents attempt to get to their feet. Eddie remains sitting squarely in his chair. Pat is the first to reach the trolley and say: I can take Eddie his mug—

Faye: I always do that!

Eddie: Don't fight, ladies. Mrs Gabbett will serve me. *He gives the big jolly woman a smile and a salute. She says cheerfully:* Coming up, one coffee, two custard creams.

Eddie: Ladies first.

Ms Shaw: You always say that, Eddie, but do you mean it?

Eddie: My dear lady—surely you are not suggesting that I am a fraud and a hypocrite?

Faye: Of course she isn't! But the lone male in the pride—he expects a lot from his lionesses.

Eddie: Well, hardly. *He sounds amused.*

Even so, he gets his coffee and biscuits first. The staff circle the room making sure several women who have remained in front of the television get their morning tea. The rapid-fire talk coming from the set is a vague irritant but it changes to the morning host saying clearly: Now, the special interview we promised you. We go live to Africa and Jane Patmore, the lady who talks to the lions—

Faye: *Loudly.* You see? I knew lions would come into it.

Betty: *Rather sarcastically.* Then maybe you would like to pipe down and we can listen—

Eddie: I don't particularly want to listen. Day time TV is made for ... the mentally challenged.

Mrs Gabbett: I thought you all enjoyed it? But I can turn it off if you would prefer.

Eddie: It isn't for me to monopolize ...

Ms Shaw: Would anyone like another biscuit?

Pat: If there's any to spare. But Annie hasn't come in yet ...

Ms Shaw: Annie isn't very well this morning. We'll see if she wants to get up or stay in bed.

Faye: Oh, the poor dear. You should've said. We all thought she was just off in her own little world. *She drops her voice slightly.* As usual.

Eddie: It's nothing serious. Old age, I'm afraid. But then old age is serious.

Faye and Pat laugh loudly. Several of the other women join in tentatively. **Mrs Gabbett:** Oh, that's very good, Eddie, but maybe you haven't got the right audience?

Betty puts her cup down on the small table beside her chair and picks up her knitting again; there is something about her vigour which suggests she is annoyed.

Faye: Betty doesn't like to be reminded of the facts of life.

Eddie: I don't know that any of us do. Aches and pains and crooked joints—

Faye turns and looks rather pointedly at **Betty's** hands.

Mrs Gabbett: Loudly. You are missing your program. About lions.

All the residents turn to look at the television. Mrs Gabbett says more quietly to her fellow staff member: Is Annie unwell? I didn't realize.

Ms Shaw: It's hard to know. Sometimes I think she just avoids the other women ... Sometimes I think she longs to be somewhere else ...

Mrs Gabbett: Another home, you mean?

Ms Shaw: (*Closes the biscuit tin and looks around the room as though giving herself time to think.*) Another world perhaps. A different marriage. Who can say?

Mrs Gabbett: Oh, come on. It's not *that* bad. Just ... silly banter. Poor dears, they haven't got much to look forward to.

Ms Shaw: And what does Annie have to look forward to?

Mrs Gabbett: Well, you must admit Annie was never the life of the party—even before she started to get so forgetful ...

They gather up the empty mugs and place them on the trolley. Ms Shaw pushes it out the door. Mrs Gabbett says cheerfully to the room at large: Well, I s'pose it's not a bad life—to be born a lion.

She exits behind her fellow staff member. The wheels can be heard squeaking away into the distance. The television presenter says: On the African savannah the king of beasts prepares himself to sleep off his heavy meal. The females of the pride can now take their turn at the duk-duk carcass. And they will be followed by the hyenas and jackals ...

SCENE TWO:

Eddie: I think we've been sold a pup, misleading advertising, whatever you like to call it. We've hardly got a glimpse of this lady who talks to lions.

Faye: *Laughs noisily.* I don't think she felt it was wise to get between a lion and his dinner. Or she just wasn't feeling very brave ...

Eddie: No, I don't think women make very good presenters—of wildlife, of current affairs, of news. It makes them hard and cold. They have to pretend to be men. It doesn't work.

Faye: I like a lovely rich dark sensual voice. It always makes me think of chocolate. Like yours, Eddie ... or Sean Connery ... maybe.

Betty: I like women with lovely dark rich voices too. Like Dame Janet Baker. I can't bear those high breathless little-girlie voices ... like yours, Faye ...

Eddie: Now, that is a little unkind. No one can help the voice they're born with.

Betty: *Puts down her knitting.* But you would be the first to criticize a man on the news with a piping little tenor.

Eddie: Not criticize. Feel sorry for.

Betty: Is he a man or a mouse syndrome? I've heard you.

Pat: I had a very deep voice when I was a girl. The teacher put me in with the boys for verse-speaking. I felt very ... exposed. I tried to be sick at the right times ...

Faye: You still have got a deep voice. But you can relax now—knowing how much Betty likes it.

Eddie: How ever did we get on to the subject of voices? *He picks up his paper again and appears to ignore the women. Faye cocks her head on one side and watches him intently until he puts the paper down and says:* What is it?

Faye: Nothing. The hours go by ...

Betty: You should knit—

Faye: Why should I knit? Who would want to wear the awful bilge-coloured things you knit?

Betty: It would still be more productive than flirting with another woman's husband—

Pat: Oh dear, you shouldn't say things like that, Betty.

Faye: And what would an old knitting cow like you know about anything?

Eddie: *Sounds genial.* Ladies! Ladies! I know I am next best thing to Clark Gable but ... that old lion, he knew how to keep everything under control, didn't he? To serve. There is no higher vocation—and if they had doubts—well, he had sharp teeth—

Betty: *Looks towards Faye then over to Pat and the other women. She opens her mouth to speak, then closes it again. The silence lengthens. Then she says grimly:* Annie is unwell in bed. You might like to serve—

Eddie: Oh no, my dear lady, my wife is not sick in bed. My wife is unfortunately senile and will never get better ... and the staff are now, very kindly and solicitously, feeding her a bit of mush ...

Faye: And you are tied to her till she ... till she ... goes. It doesn't seem fair.

Betty: We were all tied to husbands—till they ... went.

Eddie: Tied? You make it sound ... where was all that love you professed? All those wonderful husbands you brought in here in memory? Those paragons, those hard-working men who never left you in want? Haven't I been surrounded and burdened with their virtues—

Faye: I didn't. You know I didn't. At least I was honest. But I was brought up not to speak ill of the dead.

Pat: I can never understand why it is better to speak ill of the living ...

Betty: Because the dead have no ... right of reply. Not unless they come back as a ghost ... And what about the living dead? How would you treat them?

Pat: Are you asking me? I try to treat everyone—I try to find something good to say about everyone—

Faye: *Puts on an artificial voice.* Dear Annie is very punctual.

Pat: *Looking flustered.* Well, she was. She told me when she came, when you both came—*She indicates Eddie*—that she hated to keep anyone waiting.

Betty: Because she knew she had an impatient husband? My husband was like that. He liked to complain of the way the women in his life kept him waiting. But surely you can think of a better quality to give to Annie? Her kindness? Her tact? Her generosity?

Pat: It isn't really up to me ... but Eddie might like to suggest—

Faye: It all seems pretty silly to me. Annie isn't going to come in here. What does it really matter what her qualities are ... or were ... I don't suppose the truly senile have qualities any more ...

Betty: But remembered qualities—those are real. And it might happen to you, Faye, or you, Eddie, and would you like to think of us sitting here and saying you no longer matter, that you are merely a husk and a few clockwork questions?

Eddie: I will admit that women tend to outlive men. But I think you would agree that fewer men suffer from dementia.

Both Faye and Pat smile at him.

Mrs Gabbet *comes to the door and says:* It is just the most perfect day outside. Wouldn't you all rather be out in the garden? Not even lions seem exciting enough to keep you all indoors. And the sun is good for you.

Pat *is the first to move slowly over to the doorway. She turns and looks back at*

Eddie. Betty *also gets up slowly and begins to move towards the door, still carrying her knitting. The other women gradually join the exodus until only*

Eddie and Faye *remain. Faye looks at him and waits for a response. Eddie shakes out the paper again. Faye walks slowly over to the door where she turns and says:* It really is a lovely day ... and Vitamin D is good for you.

Eddie *only raises the paper slightly. Faye hesitates then follows the others out of the room.*

SCENE THREE:

Eddie sits in silence for a minute before getting up slowly and going across to turn the television set off. Then he makes his way back to his chair but stands beside it, one hand resting on the back of the chair.

Eddie: Without emphasis. Day follows day. Week follows week. Year ... will year follow year? Eddie, that gay old dog, with women hanging on his every word ... *He shakes his head slowly.* Are there worse fates lying in wait for a man?

He folds his paper and puts it on a nearby table. Ten killed in a bus crash. Presidential summit. Round the world lone yachtsman arrives. Draw in the cricket. And if a fairy godmother would offer to insert me into any of those stories I would choose to be one of those ten dead in the bus crash. But no—I've made my part, chosen my role—and I am now condemned to play it out to the bitter end. And people actually *envy* me ...

He walks slowly across to the window and pulls the curtains open. A world out there and Darby and Joan in here ... and everyone feels sorry for me because I am tied to a wife who has forgotten her name ... and some of them feel sorry for her because they think it is cruel fate that leaves her in her room instead of here, comfortably ensconced in an armchair beside me and listening to the TV ...

And the truth is ...

He drops back into an apparent reverie.

Mrs Gabbett comes to the door and says briskly: Eddie! You're not joining us! Why not? It really is a lovely day.

Eddie: No, I think not, dear lady. Age has to have its compensations. Sitting in an empty room is one of them.

Mrs Gabbett: *Laughs loudly.* They do chatter on, don't they? Well, if you're sure—we'll see you at lunch.

Eddie: I'm sure you will.

He waits until the sound of her footsteps has faded.

Eddie: And now I will go along and sit beside my wife. They will burble on about my loyalty, about my kindness, sometimes I long to say sharply, 'No, I am debating on whether I can get away with euthanasia, a finger pressed down either side of her neck, a painless way to go, what do you think of the nature of my kindness now', and Faye would find it perfectly acceptable and Pat would hesitate and Betty would be critical while privately agreeing with me that some lives have come to their undeniable end. And I can't tell them the truth—because I have created a persona to survive this place ...

Why do I want to survive? I am not sure. But something still runs strongly in me. And I can't tell them that it is the wish to outlive Annie, to be there as long as she needs me ... and even when she doesn't appear to know me any more ... maybe she still needs ...

No. That makes me feel good. Feel strong. Feel manly in a place that reminds me, every hour of every day, that I am old and weak and pathetic.

But it isn't the truth.

He walks towards the edge of the stage then turns.

I did not know it in the beginning when she began to get confused and anxious that her mind was going, I thought it would be more of the same, until the anxiety became mere repetition and blankness. But she liked to talk about the time when we met, when we were two young people wondering what life held in store for us. The funny little things she remembered that I had forgotten and the way she smiled over them. I understood then that it is not all sorrow and darkness and loss. Or she was that sort of woman—the one who would always find happiness in little things.

And she still smiles at me. That is the part that I cannot speak of. The tenderness in her smile, the peace, the serenity.

That is the horror of this life I now lead. If I could I would sit by her side, reading, talking, reminiscing, even a one-sided reminiscing now, listening to music ... but I cannot do that. It would be morbid. It would be unhealthy. I need company. I need ... how do they know what I need?

And I play my part so well. The old mangy lion. The centre of all attention. And Annie, poor Annie, the centre of none. But they have it the wrong way round ...

Ms Shaw: *Coming to the door and looking in before saying in a surprised way:* Oh, it's you, Eddie! I thought the TV had been left on.

Eddie: There are days when I truly believe that television was invented purely to harry us into our graves with its terrible inanities.

Ms Shaw: *Giving a rather flustered laugh.* Do you really think it's that bad? I know some of the residents like it. It takes them out of the ... the limitations of their lives here. But I won't bother you if you were wanting a moment of peace and quiet ...

She goes away again.

Eddie: But I don't want peace and quiet. There's enough of that waiting in the wings. I want ... I want ... what has gone for ever. For the two of us to be able to laugh again over the silly little things of everyday life ... for Annie to put out a gentle hand and stroke me one more time ...

He stands in silence looking out over the audience but not aware of his surroundings. Then he turns and slowly exits left.

CURTAIN

NOTE: I wrote 'Time for Dinner' and 'The Four of Us' for the mini-play section in the Kingaroy Eisteddfod (and they won in 2006 and 2007 respectively) but they dropped that section the following year. So all the other short plays were written for the fun and experience I found in it. But I remain grateful to Kingaroy for getting me started. And I see (2012) they have brought back their short play section. Perhaps it will inspire me to write some new short plays? Who knows?

LATER: Since then two more of these plays have won prizes at Kingaroy and the monologue 'Test Flight' received a 2nd prize in the Todhunter Awards in W.A.