

*Twelve Very Short Plays
on a Theme of*

DEATH

By

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‘AFTER THE FIRE’

One-Act-Play

Cast: Two middle-aged men. ROGERS a slightly bohemian-going-to-seed look with jeans and a colourful silk shirt and longish hair receding, good quality but a bit grubby. He looks and sounds rather impatient in his mannerisms and way of speaking. MAN looks more an outdoor type with rolled up sleeves, tanned arms, and a sense that he is not quite at home in a theatre. This is offset by something vaguely dreamy and impractical in his movements and the slight hesitations between words. He is wearing fancy braces as though to alter the man-on-the-land look. First man gets called Mr Rogers. He only refers to the second with names such as ‘mate’, ‘chap’, or ‘you’.

Set: An empty stage with a dark curtain or wall at the back but, if preferred, can have some stage scenery piled up at one side, eg. stacked chairs, table with lamp on it, a screen, a stepladder. Entrances both sides.

Time: Open. But evening preferred to use the lighting to best advantage.

SCENE ONE

Rogers: *Tapping a bundle of manuscript pages held together with a bulldog clip.* Look, I really haven’t got the time to be reading anything—I’m a busy man—you were lucky to catch me—

Man: Of course, for sure, but I’m only in town for a short time. If you wouldn’t mind, if you could give me some idea if I’m on the right track. See, I haven’t written a play before—just thought I’d give this one a go—

Rogers: Give me a quick pitch then.

Man: A what?

Rogers: *Impatiently.* Tell me what it’s all about.

Man: Oh! Of course. It’s a place on the east coast—after the fires come through—the trees are burnt, ash everywhere, smoke still rising, a sort of surreal landscape—

Rogers: No, no, stop right there! You’d have every smoke alarm in the place going off! No, that won’t work.

Man: It could be steam, I guess, or one of those fog machines they use, sort of just a hint of smoke. A devastated landscape ... It could be painted but that wouldn’t be the same ...

Rogers: I still don’t like the idea. But go on.

Man: See, these people, this couple with a bush block go looking to make sure there are no bush animals or birds suffering and they find a body, a man lying there.

Rogers: Don't like the sound of that either. I might want to put on something more than Twinkletoes or Peter Pan but I'm not a ghoul. What're you trying to do—make the audience throw up?

Man: It needn't be graphic. They can find him lying behind a log. Just a dark shape.

Rogers: So who's they? It won't work, mate, not unless you make them real characters—

Man: A couple, keep to themselves, keen on the simple life, grow all their own food, chooks, solar power—

Rogers: Not enough. You've got to make them seriously weird. Witches, crims on the run, Lord Lucan, escapees from the asylum. So who's the bod?

Man: If you read it you'll see—

Rogers: Haven't got time. *He looks pointedly at his wristwatch.* And whodunits need a good lead-in—apprehension, is he or isn't he—saying, ooh waahh, we've got a corpse—no, can't see that grabbing an audience—you have to work *forwards*—get it? Not back from the fact.

Man: *Trying to make it sound gripping and enthusiastic.* But that's the big thing! Who is it—a fire fighter? Some old bushie? A body somebody thought they'd safely disposed of?

Rogers: *Starts to walk towards the side door.* Still hasn't grabbed me. They have a conversation about who it might be? No, you've got to make your audience *care*. Why should they care about someone they've never met?

Man: *Follows Rogers rather tentatively.* But the body is the ... the catalyst. It is the two of them there—they depend on each other for everything—companionship, survival, everything—and suddenly—they have to invite the outside world in to their—their secret little world—and the outside world is—not kind to them.

Rogers: *He has turned back on the words 'secret little world' but only says with no obvious sign of enthusiasm,* Well, no promises, mate, but I'll give it a quick squizz. Won't be this week. You've got your contact details on it?

Man: Yes, there on the last page—and thank you—

Rogers: Well, don't get your hopes up. I'll be in touch. *He heads for the door and says in a lower voice,* Sometime. *He exits right.*

Monologue

Man: *Moves slowly towards centre stage, turns to the audience, and says,* I suppose we're being fools, Ella and me, but if you wreck one life how do you build another? We thought we'd found paradise—*He spreads both arms and looks upwards slightly*—just the two of us, a world of our own, everything we

thought we needed—we did everything together, planned everything together, we thought we could shut the world out and every damned awful thing it's done to us—and instead it came to us.

He falls back into a brief silence. That poor sod ... at first we thought it must be a fire, a volunteer, they went through there, trying to get up that back road to the tall timber back in the hills ... then we knew that couldn't be right ... nothing on the news ... and no one came to help us when the fires came down that long gully. Maybe they thought we were collateral damage or something. We didn't count. Or they thought we'd gone. Who knows. Maybe that's what happens when you ask the world to forget you ... it reciprocates ...

He grows brisk again. Ella said he must be a bushwalker, a birdwatcher, something normal and nice, and I said, no, he's up to no good ... and we argued over it, that was the awful thing—we *never* argue and suddenly we were trying to convince each other—and for God's sake why—because if he was there to hide something, to steal something, maybe someone had dumped his body there to hide it, a drug deal gone wrong, a gun sale, something in a family ... well, then, we needn't do anything, we could quietly let the animals, the birds, all the little creatures quietly ... Nature knows best, I said, see, and then Ella told me ... yelled at me ... called me a monster ...

He takes a brief turn around the stage. It was almost like seeing a stranger! Was this the woman I loved, the woman I had left everything for ... with ... the two of us finding peace away from ... and suddenly she was saying—demanding—what had got into me—how could I simply shrug and turn away—talk about animals, crows—she said nobody, absolutely nobody, deserves to be treated as carrion ... we had an *obligation* ... and I said—if someone wants to come looking but can't we plead ignorance until then—and I knew even as I said it that I was trying to convince myself, not Ella, not the police, not ... God ...

And yet, *he tugs slightly at his collar as though it suddenly feels too tight*, I knew I had to know. I swore I didn't. But accident, misadventure, foul play, Ella said the things I thought but wasn't prepared to say. She said over and over again that the man must have family somewhere. I said, no, some old bushie, some old hermit, the sort of fella I'd be without you—but she said, you don't know that, and, that isn't a good enough reason—and then she said she was *ashamed* of me for wanting to hush it up.

He moves a couple of steps forward towards the front of the stage and says earnestly, I said, it's not our land, he's outside our fence, he's someone else's problem. I said the Watsons don't look after their land, they don't even bother to come out to check their stock, so let this be a lesson to them. A dead body on their land and they didn't even know. They can take the blame if there's any blame to be meted out.

He turns away and does a half-circle. I could see she was wavering. It's true. She gets as upset as I do about them not checking on their animals. The dam could be dry and they'd be off junketing somewhere, not caring. But then she

got angry with me again. Why? Because I'd nearly convinced her against her will? And then she said two wrongs don't make a right and went and rang the police and they came and took the body away and we heard no more, nothing on the news, no gossip, no explanation. Is that good enough? They made us feel a nuisance for asking for news, a reason why he was there, though they grilled us when they came, said we must know ... something. Human beings want answers—and surely if anyone deserved answers it was us.

SCENE TWO

Rogers comes bustling back on to the stage. He is now wearing an overcoat and has a briefcase in one hand. You still here? Hasn't Sue come in to lock up?

Man: Sue? I haven't seen or heard anyone. *But as he speaks they hear the distant whine of a vacuum cleaner.*

Rogers: Just one more question. Is this based on true events? *He taps his briefcase.* Tricky things in the theatre, true events.

Man: Well, inspired by true events, you might say. An unsolved mystery. People still ponder on it—

Rogers: And you think you can solve it?

Man: I'm not saying that, Mr Rogers, and I've fictionalised everything. But I hope I've come up with a plausible story to answer—all the questions it asks.

Rogers: *Turns to go again.* Still, doesn't make it good theatre, mate. Maybe you should write a book. True crime. That sort o' thing. It's always popular. Don't want any lawyers sniffing round to see if we're slandering anyone.

Man: *Cautiously.* See, the police never released any information, not even a whisper. They never asked for public help. Never put out a description. You can't libel anyone in those circumstances. Not when they seemed determined to keep the death a—well, a big secret. And you have to go public to make libel stick ... I know that for a fact ...

Rogers: *Tapping his briefcase again.* You haven't had a smack at the police have you? That never goes over any too well. Police in America, that's okay, say what you like, police here, no, they're a touchy lot of bastards. Criticise one and you've made a lot of enemies ...

Man: Then maybe it's time someone here *did* ask some hard questions? *He doesn't sound convinced by his own words.*

Rogers: Not in my theatre, old chap, no way. *He hitches his briefcase under his arm almost as though he now feels nervous about taking away this playscript.* You want to do any kind of exposé you go somewhere else. This place pays, just, but there's no spare dough to fight big court cases.

Man: *Sounding slightly puzzled.* But you're the one that just called them 'a touchy lot of bastards' ...

Rogers: Slip o' the tongue. But keep that in mind. Fiction—you can say what you want. Fact—starts to get a bit iffy. *He goes to the door again.* Don't let her lock you in ... and don't hold your breath. *He taps the briefcase then exits.*

Monologue

Man: *For a moment he stands still looking after Rogers then he turns back to centre stage and moves forward.* Am I asking too much? But I need to know who he was, why he was there, because I'm certain I know how he died. *His voice rises slightly.* Because I killed him, that unknown man. That's the plain fact. Ella didn't want me to put the electric fence round the garden. She said, see, she was so passionate about it—she said, even if we do lose things to the possums we'll still have enough, we didn't come out to a bush block to ring the garden with electrocuted possums—but I couldn't see why I should provide every stray creature with a meal. We argued. Maybe *that* was when things started to go wrong? *He takes a step forward and his voice grows stronger.* But she forgave me when she realised possums are canny things and always stay well away from that fence. I've never yet found a sign of a singed let alone a dead possum. But that man ... did he try to come in, to take things, to take a shortcut ... I can't even make an educated guess. So was he thrown back, staggered back, died from the shock, did he have a bad heart? And so long as we live in this limbo of not-knowing ... then I have to live with this kind of guilt. I guess it *is* guilt.

There is the sound of a door closing in the distance.

I'd better go home before that Sue locks me in. Home! Home can never be the same again. The two of us sitting there looking at each other and the mystery man seems to lie between us, like a coffin. We can't seem to reach out to each other again, be happy again, not while the police fob us off, tell us it's not our business. We need to know—and somewhere out there someone else needs to know. Nobody is a true hermit. Everyone has *someone* ...

But I s'pose I'm wasting my time here ... it was just someone saying Dirk Rogers is a cynic, Dirk Rogers only wants successes ... but Dirk Rogers lost his son years ago and people say the police tidied it away as suicide even though things didn't add up ... I can't say that to him, they say he never talks about it, but I put my hopes in him, just that he would read it, think about it, put it out there ... help me make it stronger ... I just thought he might like the chance to ... ask some tough questions of make-believe police ... real police always look to take the easiest way out ... stage police can have more ... concern ... more ... integrity ...

He turns away then turns back to face the audience and suddenly pounds one fist into his palm. It isn't just to help *me* feel better about things.

His voice takes on a pleading note. It's for Ella as much as it's for me. She looks at me when we come indoors of a night and her thoughts are no longer about us, about the life we made for ourselves out there in the bush with the amazing way bark curls, the colours of the banksias and the sprays of gumnuts crunching underfoot and the birdsong when we wake and the frogs in the dam telling the world they're alive and happy and all the things we took the time to cherish, and now there's just this bloody great big question mark hanging over everything and we can't escape.

The lights in the stage area start going out one by one.

You can lock me in if you like, lady of the vacuum cleaner ... it would almost be a relief to be alone for a night, not to see her looking at me, not to have to make conversation, not to think about death ... and that's ... that's ... the terrible thing ...

He turns and starts to walk towards the exit right.

CURTAIN

‘THE WRONG BEDSIDE’
(ONE-ACT-PLAY)

Cast: Man late sixties, not quite shabby but obviously doesn’t take any particular interest in his appearance. Two elderly women in bed, only something of their heads with grey hair can be seen. Two slightly younger people, early sixties, smart and businesslike in appearance.

Set: A hospital ward. One bed containing an elderly woman, then a door, then another bed with a screen around it, then another bed with an elderly woman on the edge of the audience’s view. The suggestion of more of the ward unseen with another entrance and a nurse’s station can be indicated by occasional footsteps, voices, etc.

Time: Afternoon. But as it is indoors the ward will have lights on. A window to suggest daylight outside if not too difficult to arrange.

Scene One:

Older man comes in, looks first at the screened bed, peers briefly inside, mutters to himself and goes over to sit down by the bed just inside the door.

Man: I’m here at last, Mabel, the family black sheep, back from ... well, never mind about that. I wanted to see you one last time. It’s what ... twenty years since I saw you, dad’s funeral I s’pose and I was glad to see him gone, no, that’s when he was dead to me ... I wanted you to have some peace ... *he closes his eyes briefly* ... Peace ... You had a hard life with him, I know, and I always felt guilty that I never stood up for you ... *he puts out a hand to touch the grey hair just visible above the sheet* ... but I was a rolling stone ... never stayed anywhere for long ... never got on with anyone ... and certainly not with Rog and Paula ... sanctimonious little gits that they were as kids ... sucking up to dad ... smiling when he put you down, like ... they thought he was funny, the way they’d laugh ... laugh at you ... I should’ve cracked their bloody heads together, shouldn’t I?

He sits in silence for a minute or two vaguely punching one fist in to his palm.

All the things I should’ve done ... and didn’t ... and now it’s too late ... They were the ones with the get-up-and-go ... even if I was the one who got up and went. You always asked me not to go and I always went. It wasn’t because I

didn't care about you, what they put you through ...*he looks away* ... but I was no match for the three of them. That's the plain unvarnished truth. No, it's worse than that. I could've shrugged and said, I'm not going till I see them all start treating you better, and they wanted me to go, I knew that ... what would they have promised to get me gone? Would their promises have been worth tuppence?

He puts his hands up to his face briefly. I was the weak reed, the useless sod. I should've fought for a share of his money and given it to you, not left you at their mercy. They say wills make families fight. But that's the thing. I didn't fight. Easier to sponge on the government than insist I get my fair share. That's always been me, take the easy way, let things slip, not face up to people. When he told us to call you Mabel ... when he said in his sneering way 'you can see she's a Mabel' ... I let it go, I didn't have the guts to stand up and say you'd always be Mum to me ...

Pause. You didn't have much luck, did you? Two greedy kids and one useless one ... and what made them hard and what made me soft ... I know you loved me ... did you love them just as much when they were little? Maybe I'm kidding myself but I don't think you did. Why was that?

He looks around the ward. A murmur of voices comes from the screened bed. He cocks an ear in that direction then turns back to the old woman lying quietly, only the very faint movement of the bedclothes to indicate she is still breathing. He reaches out and gently strokes her thin hair.

You loved me, I never doubted you loved me, you used to call me your Little Bobby Shaftoe when I was very little. I never knew why. And ... did you hope I would grow up and go away to sea ... and be safe? Safe from the old man, that absolute bastard? And I did go, not a word to anyone, just went in the night. I'm sorry I couldn't let you know—but I was scared, scared he'd find a way to get me back, go to the police or something. But I did write, soon's I was well away and he couldn't drag me home. I never got letters back from you but I understood. And I sent Kenny Keefe to see you that time, spun him a yarn and asked him to call by and see how you were. I still don't know what he thought was going on, and he's been dead ten years or more, poor Kenny. And he said to me, he said, not the best place for your ma, that old man's got fists on him and looks like he doesn't mind to use them ... and I was this weak sod, couldn't bring myself to go back, and I let it go. I can see I was wrong, Kenny would've backed me up, gone to the coppers, said things weren't okay but I said something about 'leave it' and I thought when I got a bit of money put together I could come back and sneak you out of the house, get you somewhere safe, and then ... it's hard to say this, ma, but I never did get anything much put together, not enough for a house, hardly enough for a shed. But maybe you would've

settled for a shed, anything to be safe, and you could've maybe got a pension, enough to live on while I was away.

He sits back and shakes his head slowly. All the things I could've done—all the things I *should've* done, that's me, Hopeless Harry, remember him calling me that? What a way to talk to your own son. No wonder I hated him! But it was worse for you, I know that, I'm so sorry I didn't get my act together ... well, I still haven't ... always liked a bit of the hard stuff and never could resist, the guys on board starting a poker game and there's me saying, deal me in, instead of saying, no way, got to save a bit.

He rests a hand lightly on the bed, Wish I'd come back to gloat when he was dying ... wish I'd stood over him and said, got yours at last, eh, and not a minute too soon. The way he'd look at me, like gimlets those eyes of his, made you feel like the most useless kid ever made. No wonder I was never much good at anything. But then he wasn't either. I couldn't see that when I was a kid. Never saw that it was all hot air and out with the fists when anyone queried anything. And people were scared to criticize him, never knew how he would take anything, it wasn't just you, ma, but you were there every day and he could take it out on you. It grinds you down, doesn't it, always him chipping away, telling you how useless you are, how hopeless, after a while you start to believe it. Half of you knows it's not true but the other half, strewth, you get up in the morning, and life just seems a big load to carry. Did you used to feel like that?

The old woman doesn't move and after a long silence he goes on more slowly. I never came back, no, I only thought about it, and I couldn't make myself come back there. It wasn't about you, it was about that house, every stone and board and bit of tin seemed to be ... don't know how to express it, *steeped* in that sense of failure. I knew it would be bad for me to walk in that front door and suddenly I'd be that small snivelling kid again, anything seemed better than that. So I stayed away.

He reaches out again and touches her hair lightly. That's me. The one that stayed away. Did you get angry with me, upset, did you miss me? I should've put my own feelings aside and come back. And now I'm here and it's too late. You haven't heard a word I've said. But you know I'm here, don't you? But I only came because she sent me a note, my sneaky little sister, wanting to rub my nose in it. She didn't mince her words. She said that it was all baloney, me caring about you—and then she said and she underlined it, How many times did you come back to see mum? And then she said I'd better turn up here if I wanted to get anything from the house. Of course that's the first thing she'd think about, the greedy little git she is. What's waiting. But I never did care much for things, funny that, never wanted heirlooms, not even a memento. Maybe dad was right and I was hopeless but he couldn't say I was greedy, no, he couldn't say that, not like Rog and my dear little sister. I'll bet they stripped the house almost before they got you settled in here.

Pause. It is the end, isn't it? Not much of a life for you, but I hope you had a moment when you thought, that's my Harry, getting on well in life, he'll be second mate, first mate, captain, before he retires. You didn't know it was only a dream but I hope the dream made you happy. I wanted you to have some happiness ...

He falls back into a reverie.

Scene Two:

As Harry continues to sit in silence, two people come out from the screened area round the next bed. One of them says in an astonished way, I didn't believe it when Rog said he thought he could hear your voice! What are you doing, sitting here? Mum's in the next bed.

Harry looks at the top of the grey head he has been talking to. An old friend of mine. I wasn't expecting to see you two here. He gets up slowly and touches the top of the old woman's head. I'll drop by again later.

Roger: Who's that?"

Harry: No one you'd know.

Paula: So why did you call her Mabel?

Harry: None of your business.

Paula: And you didn't come to Dad's funeral so why tell lies?

Harry: What's that got to do with anything? Or have you been spying on me?

Roger: We heard every word you said. We just sit with mum. No point in talking much. She doesn't take anything in. Not after the stroke.

Harry: You don't know that.

Paula: It's what the doctor said. And Dad died eleven years ago, in case you've got more than your brains scrambled.

Roger: But we're pleased you don't want anything because you're not going to get anything. You never lifted a finger for anyone in your life, not even this mother you claim you loved and cared about. We were the ones who got her in here, who went round once a week to check on her. And if she gave us *things* it was because she was grateful to us for caring—so don't you go round saying anything different.

Paula: Anyway, you'd better come in and see her now that you've finally turned up. She won't know you but it doesn't really matter. Got to be seen to be doing the right thing, I guess.

Harry reluctantly follows them over to where the curtains are drawn back from the next bed. Roger picks up the chair Harry has been sitting on and carries it through.

Roger: She'll go at any minute so you'd best say your goodbyes now.

Harry: I don't need to say goodbye, I've got hundreds of her letters, that's the real her, the ma I knew better than any of you ever did.

Roger: That's rubbish and you know it. We just heard you saying she never wrote back. And we never found any of your letters in her house—

Harry: That's because she burnt them—

Paula: She loved you so much and she burnt all your letters? A bit hard to believe. But then I don't believe in all these letters anyway.

Harry: You can ask Mabel. *He waves a hand back to the bed where he had been sitting.* Not just Mabel but her daughter Prue. They popped in every day, just checking on her, getting her mail, reading my letters to her, putting them in the fire afterwards, same as she always did. She never quite trusted that dad wouldn't find a way to come back.

Paula: I always knew you had a problem with the grog, I didn't know it had completely pickled your mind!

Harry takes the chair and sits down beside the bed. He stays silent for a long time and then he says slowly, I don't need to say goodbye, Mabel, because I know Prue will be along later to have a chat with you. But I am so grateful for all you did for Ma. She always said it made life bearable. But I wish she'd had the courage to pack up and walk out. Anyway, I won't stay, I've seen Ma and I've seen you, and I know you'll be in heaven soon, and it's where you both belong. And I did what you suggested, I lodged all Ma's letters with a lawyer. I wasn't a good son, I know that and you know that, but I never took a penny from her. I wanted her to have a bit of comfort but that wasn't what they wanted, they took dad's side all his life and then turned around and helped themselves to anything they fancied—and she was too afraid, after all those years with him, to say Boo to a goose. But Prue cared and Prue kept me in touch and I wish there was a way for Prue to get your special things, I'm sure that's what you would have wanted.

Roger and Paula have been looking at each other and over at the figure in the bed and at the chart hanging on the bed.

Roger: You really are barmy. You don't even know your own mother—

Harry: *Stands up again.* It's you who don't. And you didn't go round once a week, not even once a month, you just let everyone believe that. So I asked Prue to swop the charts around—and you didn't even know the difference.

Roger: It's you who didn't know the difference, gabbing on there, while we came in to spend her last hours with our mum. You're not only pathetic, you're a nasty little sneak and a liar to boot. I'll bet you never asked Prue to do a thing for you—it's just hot air—

Harry *says loudly,* Bye Mabel, you've been a brick, and Prue too. And travel well when you set out on that last voyage into the sunset. *He walks away.*

Scene Three:

Roger: She was Mabel, same as Mabel down the street, but everyone called her May. Only Dad sometimes but then he'd go back to May. I'd forgotten that.

Paula: And it doesn't matter. That lazy so-and-so trying to put us in the wrong.

Roger: So he did it on purpose, you think? Sitting over by that other bed and talking loud enough for us to hear? You wouldn't think old boozier Harry'd even have the brains to think up such a devious ... thing.

Paula: He always hated us, just because Dad liked us and used to say, why on earth did fate land him with such a useless kid as Harry, you could see he would like to do us some mischief ... I'll bet it was him that pinched my farm animals that time—and your football.

Roger: I'd forgotten that. But you're probably right. He used to sneak around, making sure Dad wouldn't see him, see what he was up to. But it was a long time ago. I guess we just need to put all that behind us. Now we have to think what's best to do about the house and what's still in it.

Paula: But not just this minute. I feel—sort of—a bit mixed. And it can't be right—what he said about a lawyer, I mean.

Roger: Of course not. It's just another empty threat. That's all he ever was, empty threats. Hot air. He even wrote one to Dad when he was dying.

Paula: Did he? You didn't tell me that.

Roger: All hot air, just saying he'd lodged things with a lawyer.

Paula: Did he say that?

Roger: How Dad hadn't treated her right. As I say—empty threats. And you remember how annoying and frustrating she was. Never could get anything right, always running late, always got excuses when it came to going to things.

Paula: She was very accident-prone, I remember that. Now, of course they say that's a sign of domestic violence.

Roger: He'd yell but it was never more than that. We were there. We would've seen ...

Paula: Would we? Are you sure?

Roger: Oh, come on. He was a good dad to us, left us well off, and it's not our fault if he didn't leave anything to her—or to Harry. There must've been times when he got so fed up with dinner not being ready and his shirts not ironed—

Paula: Yes, you're probably right. And it's all in the past now. We'll just have to get through the funeral. I wonder if Harry'll come?

Roger: Or those busybodies down the road.

Paula: Prue, you mean?

Roger: And the other neighbours. She got quite pally with the neighbours in the last few years. I wonder what she told them? Anything for a bit of sympathy, I suppose. Well, we can always make it a private ceremony ...

Paula looks over to the bed and says slowly, Yes, and maybe sooner rather than later. I think ... this may be the end ... She gets up and goes over to the bed and touches the old woman's forehead, then folds the sheet back slightly and lifts one hand to feel a pulse. She tucks it back under the bedclothes and quietly motions to her brother that they should leave. She says under her breath, Mum

didn't have arthritis, this one does, I think we'd better just go out quietly before anyone comes in to check.

*They both go out quietly and pull the curtains round the bed closed.
Harry is sitting in silence beside the other bed. He is holding one frail hand in his. With his other hand he is slowly stroking the old woman's fingers. He doesn't look up as Roger and Paula hurry out.*

CURTAIN

‘THE SWEDISH PLAY’

(One-Act-Play)

Cast: Four men plus a very elderly man, fairly tall but slightly stooped. Their ages aren’t clear as the light is dim and they are wearing black clothes with some silvery luminescent material or paint on it. Not to make them look skeletal but merely vague and slightly abstract. They can be short or tall, fat or thin, but need clear deep resonant voices.

Set: Completely black, walls and floors, with dim light focused on the four men. There is a double door at the back of the stage which opens into a lighter space containing a saw horse, some timber, and a large handsaw.

Time: All the play takes place under artificial light. Time is irrelevant.

Scene One

Man One: *Enters right carrying a manuscript held together by a bulldog clip. He is followed by the three other men also carrying manuscripts. They halt centre stage and begin turning pages of their manuscripts. He says:* We are all dead. The war.

Man Two: What war? How?

Man One: Any war. The big war. War equals death.

Man Three: Do we know we’re dead?

Man One: Of course. We bewail the pointlessness of death.

Man Four: And the pointlessness of the lives we lived before?

Man Three: So we are merely an essay in existential angst?

Man One: No, we are dead men walking—and we want answers.

The three others look around and shake their heads.

Man Two: If this is ... what is it ... Purgatory ... the Ante-chamber to Hell ... somewhere unutterably dreary—where do we look for answers? I don’t think a boy’s going to come round delivering papers—

Man Three: And it is too quiet ...

Man Four: But I think I can hear ... I’m not sure what it might be ... an engine? Can anyone else hear something?

Man One: *firmly.* There is only one person, one being, who can provide answers. God. We didn’t find him in life but here we are ... living proof that death is not the extinction of everything ...

Man Two: Living? Well, I am willing to concede that we are in some kind of state which cannot be seen as death ... not unless death is not what we once thought it was ...

Man Three: What does the play say we find? Does it provide a route map to God? Does it tell us how we will know him when we find him?

Man Four: IF we find him. But I think, yes, I'm certain that noise ... it must mean something.

Man One: We can't go by the play. No writer of plays has been here before us.

Man Two: You sound very definite.

Man One: Once, long ago, I was a writer of plays. I liked a plain set with cubes and balls. Semi-abstract. And I needed good light at my desk.

Man Two: How long ago?

Man One: I wish I knew. Time seems to have become meaningless ... here. Was it yesterday, an hour ago, last week, years, decades—

Man Three: Centuries? I was standing on duckboards, I was looking between sandbags. I was waiting. So much of war is waiting. And then ...

Man One: If we keep strictly to the play ... it gives us something to grasp ... otherwise ...

Man Four: Nothingness. We have become nothing. With nothing we are nothing.

Man One: There must be answers. There cannot be cause without effect. Action without result. We must ... a noise cannot exist in a vacuum ... it must be part of the answer ... *He turns towards the rear of the stage, the others turn and go with him, the lights dim briefly then brighten slightly again.*

Scene Two

Man One *reaches out and swings two big black doors open. The space behind the doors grows brighter as their eyes accustom themselves to the brightness. A very elderly man with a long white beard and wearing a long white robe with a golden tasselled cord at his waist looks up, still holding a saw in one hand. He lets a long piece of wood slide down ... He waits for them to speak. He has a pleasant smile and a mild expression.*

Man One: *Turns briefly to his companions then to the old man.* May we ask—who are you and what are you doing here?

God: You were looking for me. I can always be found. Some people call me God but I believe you might prefer to call me First Cause.

The men look at each other uncertainly.

Man One: We need answers. Life has become—unbearable without answers. Will you try to answer our questions?

God: I think I understand your questions even before you ask them. Sawing wood is very good for ... it gives me a sense of purpose ... You want to know why life had no purpose but death and mud and casualty lists and you had no opportunity to see your loved ones before ... this journey ...

Man One: It begins to seem that way, the purposelessness ... here we all are, dead, and our purposes have been rendered meaningless by death so we must assume that all we thought was purposeful in life ...

God: You wanted a purpose which would transcend death? You don't think that sawing some wood might help?

Man Two: *Sounding rather desperate.* All the things that sounded so grand—greater love hath no man than to lay down his life for ... well, I remember some padre had that one ... and country ... loyalty ... not letting people down ... and we were all busy laying down lives for each other but it doesn't seem to have helped much ...

God: I considered a number of purposes for life but none of them seemed quite—BIG enough. A big universe, I often contemplate it, and little people in it with guns and mean little thoughts. So I fell back on purposelessness. I thought people contemplating nothing would be driven to re-think ... many things ...

Man One: But why go to so much trouble for ... nothing?

God: *Stands up straighter and brandishes his saw. The four shades draw back slightly.* Are you questioning my purposes?

Man One: *Rather grimly.* If you like to put it like that.

God: I bring purpose to some things. The smiles of little children. Birdsong on a spring morning. The way the sun turns dewdrops into diamond necklets. You didn't respect my purposes, did you? You thought your purposes mattered more.

Man One: At the time they did. We couldn't envisage this place.

Man Two: So you did intend something with us, for us, for the world?

God: No. You could not have free will if I intended ... something ... anything. You agree that you all had free will?

They look at each other and finally say reluctantly, nearly together: It seems that way.

God: *Drily,* You think I should have intervened?

When the shades don't reply God goes on: I have limited free will in other worlds, other things. Butterflies and birds, monkeys and fish, earthworms and sandflies ... you would prefer to change places?

Man One: It doesn't seem to matter any more.

God: *Crossly,* Of course it matters, you ungrateful wretches. The best gift of all and you can only make it meaningless. Worse, you take advantage of all of life not so fortunate, the unfree. Go away. Look for purpose. See if you like it when you find it. *He makes a shoing motion with both arms, one hand still brandishing the saw. The four shades step back. God slams the doors closed. The stage is in virtual darkness.*

Scene Three

Light gradually suffuses the centre stage and shows the four men standing looking rather bewildered.

Man One: *Shuffling through his manuscript:* I'm not sure ... isn't there something about God being Infinite Love? He didn't demonstrate much of anything—

Man Two: Impatience.

Man Three: This script isn't very helpful. We are about to be remembered. We always are. Anniversaries, wreath-layings ...

Man Four: Centenaries—

Man Two: Surely not. It seems like ... only yesterday ...

Man One: And what are they really remembering? Old campaigns, courage, sacrifice ...

Man Two: *Lugubriously.* Bungling.

They all turn pages in their manuscripts, their fingers trailing down the pages.

Man Three: The ending seems rather indeterminate. Can we change it?

They all murmur apparent speeches under their breath, but different speeches so it only sounds as a low gabble.

Man One: The choice is ours—unless one of you wrote the play and feels ... possessive of its integrity ...

Man Two: Not me. But the ending is awkward. What are we to make of it?

More muttering and murmuring of lines by all four.

Man One: *Cautiously.* Yes, it appears to imply that we are not friends, were not friends ... That in fact we were enemies. I think the playwright had no conception of this place.

Man Two: Or too good a conception ... we are still what we were ...

Man Three: But what were we?

Man One: Nothing binds us to these words on the page. We have a certain freedom—

Man Four: Do we?

Man Three: You haven't answered my question. Is there a traitor, a betrayer, an enemy among us?

Man Two: What purpose in an honest answer? We have no choice but to share this space.

Man One: *Slowly.* As we had no choice but to share the living world? If we take that to its logical conclusion ... I'm not sure ... We were so certain we were responding rightly, it gave our lives purpose—

Man Two: And drama and meaning and direction, all that, so why are we now ... drifting ...

Man Three: We have the play, the blueprint. We have found God, that is more than many do ... We can play it to the last page or ...

Man One: Throw it away? It is not a very helpful play. It says we lacked purpose in life, that we wandered in pointless angst ... in death ... but we are not dead ...

Man Three: A typical play in other words, limited by the human imagination.

Man Two: We didn't run our lives by plays—in life—

Man Four: Yes. We did. Governments, media cartels, armament barons, generals WANTING YOU, ordinary people thrusting white feathers ... clergy thinking they knew God ... we followed their scripts ...

Man One: And now ... at last ... we are free ... to choose ...

Man Three: To do what?

Man Two: *Turning pages in his manuscript.* The letters are very small, here at the end, and this light isn't strong, but here, right at the end ...

The others turn to their last page ...

Man Four: *Reads carefully:* Men divided by race, religion, class, national boundaries, family expectations ... though I don't remember what my family thought ...

Man One: Or mine. A lot of talk of the Fatherland ...

Man Two: The Motherland ... but they were short by then and said, black or white, brown, it didn't matter ...

The others turn and look at him.

Man Four: *Goes on reading firmly.* Men divided find divisions purposeless in other worlds. They cross eternity ... glad of the company.

Man One: But the last line doesn't follow our experience. It says, they find God and are finally able to lay the burdens of purpose down.

Man Four: Are we? Can we? *He removes the bulldog clip and drops it, then the pages, just keeping one which he proceeds to turn into a paper aeroplane.* Perhaps I understand. A smile on a little child's face ...

The others follow suit ...

The CURTAIN falls

Note: This piece was inspired by reading about Pär Lagerkvist's play 'The Eternal Smile'.

‘HE LOVED LITTLE THINGS’

(ONE-ACT-PLAY)

Cast: **Amelia Webb**, very old lady (103 years-old) with thin white hair, very frail, but with considerable sharpness of mind and speech. Dressed in a very old-fashioned way. **Jane Cooper**, a woman in her 60s or 70s, wearing a cardigan and skirt, with neat grey hair, and an air of quiet competence. **Family Historian**, slightly younger, quietly dressed but with an air of inquisitive interest and eager questions. Small changes can be made to fit cast available. Eg. Family Historian could be male if necessary.

First Set: The verandah or sun room in a pleasant bungalow, easy cane chairs, small tables, cushions, cups and saucers on a tray, biscuits or cake. An air of comfort and pleasant chat rather than wealth. The house is in Wimbledon so there can be some things to suggest tennis, a couple of old posters and framed photographs on the walls, perhaps two racquets crossed.

Time: Afternoon.

SCENE ONE

FH is ushered into the area and offered a chair. They fuss for a moment over pouring tea and cutting slices of cake after she is introduced to AW in a big comfortable chair with a footstool.

JC: It is a long way to come, my dear, and I’m afraid we never really knew your side of the family.

FH: My dad wasn’t much of a one for keeping in touch with people. He always said it was women’s business, all that about weddings and funerals and new babies. If it had been my mother ... now, that would’ve been different. So I hope you won’t mind me asking lots of personal questions?

JC: Ask away.

FH: I’ve been able to slot in almost everyone except our great uncle. The military records say he went AWOL and then later he was ‘missing believed dead’ ... and I wondered what had actually happened. My dad before he died just said ‘poor bloody coot’ and I couldn’t get anything more out of him. So I’m

not sure what he actually knew. And of course he was born just after the first war ...

JC: You came all this way just to find that out?

FH: No, I can't honestly say that. When I found you were living in Wimbledon—well, I immediately thought I'd try to get a ticket to the tennis. I'm not ... I only occasionally go but both my boys played at school and I was sorry they didn't go on with it ... but you know how it is ...

AW: I have seen some very good Australian players. *Her voice though a little cracked is clear and at the mention of tennis she has raised her head and seemed to take more interest in the conversation.* Very good. I remember Rosewall because we have roses on our back wall. Isn't that strange? But they put up that big block of flats behind us and now the back garden is in shade all day long. They shouldn't be allowed to do those sorts of things to people ... *Her voice tails off and she turns back to her tea.*

JC: We did complain but they didn't take any notice of us.

AW: *The old lady nods and says very quietly* I think that has been the story of my life, I didn't matter to anybody.

JC: Oh, now, Auntie, that's not quite right. You matter a great deal to me. *She turns to the FH.* But in war time, in that war, ordinary people didn't matter tuppence. That's what you've come about and ... *She looks at her aunt.* Do you feel comfortable to talk about it, Auntie?

AW: I will be gone soon, so perhaps ... perhaps someone should remember when I'm gone.

The FH puts her cup and saucer down and leans forward.

AW: He was my cousin. We had known each other all our lives though he was in Ireland and I came here when my parents moved. And then he went to Australia for his big adventure, that's what he called it, his 'big adventure', and he'd only been there about a year and the war came but they said he couldn't join up till they'd finished shearing the sheep and all the things they needed to do on their farm. It was a very big farm, many thousands of acres, not like the little patch the family had in Ireland, and he said ... I've still got all his letters from Australia and he used to send me things, all kinds of things ... he sent an emu's egg once but it got broken by the post office, I was sorry about that but I glued it all carefully together again. It's still here ... somewhere ... Janey says I must sort things through but I don't suppose it matters any more ... when I'm gone they can go too ... and butterflies and insects and worms and leaves and a chrysalis ... they probably would complain now ... you can't send bombs but perhaps they would allow a butterfly ... my parents, my dad, said once 'that boy must be mental', he wasn't at all sympathetic, and he just couldn't understand that David loved everything, even the ones that had teeth and stings, all the little creatures ... all the family on my mother's side was like that ... they could see things other people couldn't, my father would see a tree and grumble when it dropped its leaves, but David, all of us, we'd see the birds nesting, the beetles

going up and down, we would pick the leaves at every time of year to show how they would change, the veins ... the wonder of everything ... *She drops back into silence as the long speech has made her wheeze.*

JC: So you can understand what it was like to send him to France, to give him a gun, and say, there go and kill those Huns, don't mind the mud, don't look at the ruined woods and the bogged animals ... He was always trying to save things, nestlings, baby mice, stick insects, they kept telling him he was mad, that this was war and he must harden his heart ... and he would say, what harm have these birds ever done, they did not make up your rules, he was always in trouble for trying to rescue little creatures, he had an abandoned cat and a calf whose leg he had splinted. They took the calf away and ate it. But their sergeant, he went out of his way to ... to hurt the things David saved, he'd crush a beautiful iridescent beetle under his boots and laugh about it. He would call David a sissy and tell him he would 'make a man out of him' ... this to a man who had helped round up thousands of sheep and ride wild horses ...

AW: *nods carefully.* It was like that all the time. He wanted to save the horses, the mules, the fieldmice ... everything which shared the world with him. I said once, would you kill a mosquito, or a bluebottle, and he said yes, but I wouldn't let it suffer ... and I said, maybe God sees no difference between the worth of a fly and the worth of a beetle ... and he said, maybe, maybe, and I am forever condemned for trying to make them out to be less worthy ... but sometimes when you are trying to sleep ... you don't think of God ... and we would talk like that. About God and little creatures.

She drifts back into a long silence and closes her eyes.

JC: But he ate meat, they all ate meat, those tins of bully beef. We always see the pictures of them scooping out those tins ...

FH: Yes, and they had to shoot bogged animals, crippled animals, and of course they ate them ... you see only the lists of casualties ... but do you think he felt there was a contradiction between what he believed and what he did?

JC: Oh, of course, my dear. And every vegetarian worth their salt grapples with those questions. Wearing leather, shooting the bunnies that raid the garden, shooting rooks and foxes, even vaccinations, I believe, need millions of hens' eggs and think of all the white mice that nice people do nasty things to in laboratories ... even if they go home and eat lettuce and brown bread.

AW: We could not answer all our questions, we would sit and talk ... here ... and we could not know what God was thinking ... but my father said it was all a lot of poppycock and he would quote the Bible at us and say that, next thing, we would be feeling sorry for the little fishes Jesus ate. I can see us as clear as anything sitting out here ... and it was so quiet in those days, there were still horses on the streets ... and he would say my name should be Serenity ... I think because he could forget the sound of the guns ... he wasn't really poetical, his letters were full of the everyday ... but I read a poem years later about the way no one cared about anything but winning and I crossed out the name of the

poet and wrote in David's name, because it was what he would've written if he'd written poetry ...

JC: And your father was cross about that, wasn't he?

AW: He was often cross. He was a solicitor, you know, and a very honest upright man but he couldn't understand that people like my mother, like David, might look at the world in different ways. He would say, so long as it's down in black and white ... but some things, the sunset, the song of blackbirds, how can that be put down in black and white ...

There is a brief silence and then JC says more briskly, And then everything changed.

AW: Changed, yes. He was very badly wounded, you know, they dug all the bits of metal out of his legs but they said it might be better to amputate ... I wish they had. He would be here now ...

The others look at her with raised eyebrows and she says, Well, you know what I mean.

JC: He went home to Ireland to recuperate. He wanted to desert. He wasn't exactly a Nationalist, not one of those who wanted more than Home Rule, but he felt he was fighting for something that mattered less than it should. It's hard to explain but I think he felt that if you were going to exact the ultimate penalty from another man, his life, then it must be for something bigger and more terrible than a quarrel between kings or politicians. Anyway, his family talked him out of it. They said, surely it would all be over soon, he just had to be stoic a little longer. I wonder how much they really understood, living in a little country town, far away from all the horror, but he accepted what they said ...

AW: He returned to England, he came to stay a couple of days before he would need to report back to the depôt and ... we ... *Again she falls in to a long silence while the others wait.* I had a plover with a broken wing. I had found him on the Common and brought him home. He grew very tame. I fed him insects and worms from the garden. We used to sit in the back garden and watch him. His wing had mended but he showed no wish to fly away. I said perhaps I should take him back to the Common and leave him there ... and we would sit ... sit and talk ... *tears come to her eyes and she dabs them with a handkerchief* ... and I said I can't let him go, but I really meant I couldn't let David go ... he knew that ... he said his life was here, that we would travel to places and see amazing creatures, that our lives were ... I was seventeen, he was twenty-two ... he had lived a whole lifetime and I had barely begun ... but I knew if he went back to France he would die, I knew that more certainly than I have ever known anything in my life ... and I let him go. All my life I have mourned ... it wasn't enough to hope and pray ... if I had said the word ... if I had ... *There is another long silence.*

You cannot go back and change things ... I am one hundred-and-three and I have lived most of those years without him. That is surely the most terrible punishment God could inflict on a woman ...

She has grown breathless and shaky as she speaks. Her niece pours her another cup of tea before saying, We should let you have your nap, Auntie, there is plenty of time for ... for ... reminiscing ...

AW: Yes, plenty of time, always time ... but it must run out quite soon ...

SCENE TWO

Second Set: *Garden shed. Interior crammed with gardening tools, old boxes, bags of rags. A box of kitchen items, an urn of dusty broken dried flowers.*

JC: *Swings the creaking door wide open.* This is where she kept him. She was determined to keep him safe in here because she was sure the war would end soon and he would be safe.

FH: Did no one know?

JC: The whole family knew—except her father. They all agreed to keep the secret. He grew a beard. Whenever he came out he walked like an old man with a stick. It wasn't much of a life really but safe, that was the one thing Auntie wanted, for him to be safe, she was so much in love with him, you know, and I'm sure he felt the same. She would have gone to the ends of earth for him, she would even have gone to France in his place if she could think of a way not to be found out, her whole life was bound up in him.

FH: But he did go back to France.

JC: He did. He had been AWOL a month. They took away his pay. They called him a yellow Irishman, a coward, every name under the sun, they sent him back, threatened to have him shot, put him in the front line. He went back a month before the Armistice and was shot two days later.

FH: So terribly sad. But there was more to it than that?

JC: *Goes in to the shed and lifts an old dusty blanket off a pile of cartons.* You can still see where his legs were still weeping, they never healed properly but they were getting short of men. She wouldn't let it be washed, the poor darling. But it was more than that. It was her father who betrayed him, called the military police, had him taken away. They came when she had gone shopping with her mother. She didn't know what had happened and her father said, there, that's the back of that boyo, we'll never have to see him skulking in our yard again, a coward like him. She only found out when a letter he'd managed to send from London reached her, what had happened, and she said to her father he was responsible, and he said, traitors get shot in war time, and she said, then why was he sitting safe at home, with his nice house and his office and his family and everything.

FH: He cannot have liked her saying that? And for her to go on living here ... with him ...

JC: I sometimes think that was the most terrible part about it. He made sure she had no money, no clothes other than home-made clothes, he used the law to say he had complete control over her, that she was wayward and the police should bring her back if she tried to leave home. He always said it was for her own good. That she would soon forget and meet some nice young fellow who had done his duty by king and country.

FH: He cannot have understood his daughter very well if he thought those measures would make her forget?

JC: *Smiles a little sadly.* No. But he was a man of his times and he expected absolute obedience from his wife and children. It was her mother who tried to make it bearable by suggesting she have tennis lessons and he agreed to pay for the lessons because he thought she would meet nice men. Of course it didn't work like that. She put everything, heart and soul, into her tennis and she became very good, she won prizes when they let women compete, and he didn't like that, he said men didn't like girls who were good at sports. She said to him, of course I am good at tennis, every time I smash the ball over the net I imagine I am smashing you instead. Of course that made him furious and when he lost his temper he also lost control and hit her and broke her jaw. He went to prison for several months and he lost his practice. But his daughters went out and found work so they could pay all the household bills. And when he wanted to come home again his wife, my grandmother, fired up and said, haven't you done enough to hurt us. He tried to have them evicted. All the arguments and to and fro went on for years. But Auntie went on playing tennis and she got in to the papers even, and that made it harder for him to blame her. She was quite a star for those years and every time she won a match and they interviewed her, she would say, this is for David who is not here to see me play.

FH: That would hardly encourage young men to take her out, to see her as ... well, a date ...

JC: *Lays the old blanket back over the cartons and comes out and closes the door and says quietly:* I know they say 'old sins cast long shadows' but it would be equally true to say 'old loves cast long shadows' ... all that love and kindness and warmth and sincerity ... I suppose we benefited ... but it isn't the same ... she was meant to be a mother ... when they talk about 'the flower of youth' lost, I look at Auntie and even now when I'm in my seventies I still ... I still ... Never mind, come inside and I'll show you a photo of them together and the plover is there, roosting on his arm as though he felt completely safe with them, the two of them ...

FH: And—did the plover survive?

JC: There, my dear, I'm afraid I don't know the answer, not after he was taken home safely and set free. I hope he lived a long and happy life.

CURTAIN

‘DO GHOSTS DRY OUT?’

(Monologue)

Cast: Woman of indeterminate age. Fairly large and untidy, hair grey and uncombed, calf-length skirt of faded print, a blouse (and an old cardigan to put on), sandals or shoes without socks. Can be obviously Aboriginal or someone who sounds Aboriginal. Needs a good clear carrying voice, preferably fairly deep.

Set: This needs to suggest an old mining town now deserted; a row of buildings as backdrop, gravel space with an old car, rusting and on its hubs. She clearly lives in the car. (If a car is too difficult a humpy made from packing cases and a sheet of corrugated iron would do. It can have a line running from the bonnet to a post with clothes and bags or other things hanging on this. Blackened site of small campfire with several old saucepans nearby.)

Time: Early morning.

Scene One: *She sings in a vague out-of-tune way.* Oh what an awful place, oh what a terrible place! *She reaches up and stretches and draws her fingers through her untidy hair.* But it’s mine, all mine, because there’s no one else wants to mind its ghosts! *She turns back to the car and takes out a bottle and takes a swig. Then she sings again.* Everything here, bottles an’ cans, an’ tins, all mine, all old, they’ll keep me goin’ till I die, till I die an’ join the poor bloody old ghosts in me poor bloody old town, an’ it’s all mine, all mine, oh, what a dusty day, oh, what a sunny sun, oh, what a mad mad mad place is me poor little town an’ me poor little shops an’ me poor little pub! Little? Lord-love-us, there’s nothing little here! *She spins around slowly, waving her arms in every direction.* An’ it’s all mine! No one comes, no one stays, just me an’ me poor old ghosts!

An’ I put a ruddy great big ditch across the road in an’ the road out, ditches—so of course they don’t come! Not if they’ve got any sense, it’s me moats, keep the whitefellas out, keep them bastards out that’re in the books they had in me school, didn’t understand what they were chunterin’ on about. Normans, what’s Normans? Knew a Norman, was a right old bastard, well, he’s six foot under, so it wasn’t him they had in mind, but they never said, we’re the ones done a Norman, we’re the ones who come to take, oh, they took all right, never stopped tookin’, them mob, an’ diggin’, diggin’ up somepun, copper, lead, don’ remember, all them heaps out there, little hills, like, like, gotta stand there like the king of the bloody cassel, run up run down, look out, see the great blue sheets o’ water, funny that, I wish it was real, only saw the sea once, an’ they said youse kids better not think youse are goin’ to come again, an’ we never did, but I didn’t care, sunny days, I’ve got the sea right here, lyin’ across the land.

She puts the bottle back in the old car. I'd best be on me way, get stocked up again while the ghosts are takin' it easy, you wouldn't know what it's like of an evenin', walkin' through 'em, thick as dust, thick as leaves an' litter, an' chunder, an' all the rest. All around me, wantin' to touch, wantin' a bit of attention—an' I say, who me, you want me, an' I say, I'm not dead yet, Youse lot gotta wait, an' they don't like that, no, they bloody don't. But at least they stay indoors, never out on the street, they're thick as grasshoppers round the bar, an' it's worse down around that old churchyard, an' that place they stuck right on top of where me mob's been puttin' the old folk for a thousand years ... how did they think the poor bloody coves'd feel with a whackin' great mine stuck down on top of 'em, none of this please an' thankyou business whitefellers say they're so keen on, no, send in the bloody bulldozers, dig up bones, chuck 'em on the rubbish, only a few bloody bones an' they're probably a roo ... wouldn't know a person bone from a roo bone that useless lot ... an' then they wondered why they couldn't work in there, that things was always gettin' moved ...

She gives a chuckle and does a little skip. Wouldn't it make you laugh! All them ghosts, can't put a name to 'em but I s'pose they was me ancestors, but you wouldn't know, not with the missionaries comin' in and sayin', load of nonsense, this's a new day dawnin', new day, that's a laugh! But name or not they're me own folk an' I had to laugh to see 'em come screamin' outa that building! Whitey girls. It touched me, sometimes he, she, it, that thing, I can't work in there, how d'you expect me to type when there's *things* in there with me, always *things*, never gave 'em any respect.

An' then the management come out from the city, said they never heard such a load of hooley in their whole life, an' what's goin' on up here—an' then one of 'em sat down on a chair an' said, there's somepun on me ruddy chair, an' hit the roof an' wouldn't go back, an' the big bosses said, what's up, has everyone there gone stark starin' mad, an' then they said they'll send up some—forget what they called 'em, folk that goes round waving crosses or holy water or somepun, an' sayin', Be gone, youse lot of useless ghosts, this isn't your land any more, an' they got the wind up too, talk about funny. I stood there an' I grinned an' grinned, an' they said, what's that stupid old biddy grinnin' for, an' they said, she's not all there, too bad, she wouldn't know what's what, an' I said, youse lot want to build on a place where me ancestors got buried, course you're goin' to be sorry, an' they run me off to the cop shop an' said stick her in a cell till we get rid of these ... think they called 'em entities, that's no way to talk about folk never did anyone no harm, an' they knocked me around I was laughin' that much, had great big whackin' bruises over me next day an' I showed 'em to that minister come in to say the fellas, forget what he called 'em, was goin' home again, they said the place was that thick with ghosts it wasn't funny—an' he looked at me bruises an' said it was all me own fault.

She holds out her arms to the sun as it creeps up and the shadows get smaller.

Call yourself—what did I say, holy, yeah, holy moly lot, an' he said, respect the cloth, you old witch, an' I said, what cloth, an' he shook himself, looked like a big black crow, not that I was that old then ... but I could see he had the wind up, I can always see things people don't want me to see.

Still, I'd best get on over there an' get a few more tins. Funny how they just packed up, hardly drawin' breath, an' said they would ... what was it ... mothball their mine, aint any moths out here, poor little things'd dry up in a day, no moths, a few flies, yeah, there was a few flies, nothin' for them now, they went with them useless lot, a few birds, stayed to eat grass seeds, stayed around, I like birds, by heck, I like birds ... but even them, there used to be water gushin' out over there an' now it's hardly a trickle, they put a bad spell on it, that's what I think, that useless lot of greedy fellas, they said, runnin' out o' water, can't mine without water, an' they brought in this huge thing, s'posed to drill right down, down to where there's caves, s'posed to be caves, an' I thought that'll really stir the ghosts, an' next thing, they said that water's all salty, an' you should of heard the carry-on, what did they expect an' next thing they was spooked as all get out, an' I said, told youse so, an' they said, we'll have you back up there an' this time it won't be nice, no sirree, it won't be nice, an' then they said, what're we goin' to do with salt water an' they let it out an' there was a big sheet o' salt there behind the old pub an' that really got things sparkin' ...

She reaches back into the old car and pulls out a cardigan with holes in it and shrugs herself into it.

Every day, same every day, I done the same thing last year an' before that, but I still find ghosts over there, still tell 'em to get back in the shade, it's no good for ghosts, not let a bit o' burnin' sun on 'em, an' I went through there, shut up every window, every door, didn't want the wind howlin' through, the dust, an' dryin' them poor buggers out, no ghost deserves that, but the stupid old folk that's hangin' round, you can't tell 'em what to do, they think they know better than me, no wonder, they come roarin' up out of that old valley, like nobody's business ... I would of told 'em to move on, find a nicer place, but they was all over the place, an' those secretaries they got from somewhere, wouldn't even go in the building after a while, to hear 'em screamin', by heck, they made some screechin', an' then it got into ... first that shop along there, then the bank, weren't game to open their safe, the old folks'd be in an' out an' messin' up everything in there, an' then it was the butcher, then that fella with the chemist, he reckoned the smell'd keep 'em away, but it didn't, they follered him home, an' the school said they couldn't keep the kiddies safe, an' I had another laugh at that, what the heck did they think'd happen, me poor old folk didn't have no arms an' legs even, just a bit of cloud, that's what it is, rainbows an' clouds, but them silly fellas were that spooked an' they said if I didn't keep away from the kiddies, an' the kiddies used to throw stones at me ...

Yeah, I remember that, s'posed to be nice kiddies, all in their smart uniforms, but I told 'em, if you mess with things you don't understand they'll come round

to your house an' sit on your pillows an' they got scared then. They tried to run me outa town then, an' I said you tooked everything from me, me country, me rellites, an' they still said you gotta go an' they put me in a truck an' took me a hundred miles away an' dumped me, just there, by the road, no place in sight, but it didn't worry me, I know how to live off the land, an' I come back, not in a hurry, but slow, slow, an' when they saw me back they got in a big fuss an' said they'd arrest me for something, don't remember what, said I was a drunk, I said, can't afford to get nothin' in the pub, but I said, don't worry, the ghosts'll feed me, an' I went down to that pond, that lake, an' it was salty like you wouldn't believe an' they had all these stupid men down there putting water in jars, an' faces like a month o' wet Sundays an' I didn't say nothin', what's the point, but I knew what to do, you just take water an' put some plastic over the top an' the steam comes up an' runs down the sides an' you put an old dish underneath the bowl an' there's water an' I just hung around, hung around an' hung around an' you could see they was about done for. Yeah, an' then ...

She picks up an ancient shopping bag. Time to go. Every mornin', I think, time to go, but you gotta let the ghosts get back in their safe places, an' I don't wanta let their air in before they're tucked away safe again, you gotta look after ghosts, same as you look after the land, an' now I'm the only one left to look after 'em, up to me, an' I gotta be careful.

Can't let 'em dry out, they're me mob, me great-granddaddies an' all the rest, been here since the world began so of course they're goin' to go on hangin' around an' I'm here to keep an eye out, not much of an eye, can't hardly see me hand in front of me face, some days, but better than nothin'.

She gazes up at the sun then walks over to the retreating shadows. I'm comin' now, you've had plenty o' time to get safe back in the shadows, you know I want some tucker, I might get tired of camp pie but it'll keep me goin' till I join the lot of youse, so here I come. Diddle-diddle-doo-dah-day!

She turns round several times, raises her arms as though she is a flapping bird. Happy in the mornin', there was a hymn, wasn't there a hymn, only nice thing to come outa that lot with their collars on back to front, *she starts to sing off key*, oh what an awful day, oh, what a lousy ... Comin' ready or not!

She walks towards the building with a fading sign 'Telegraph Hotel', opens the front door and prop it open with a stone. She disappears inside and comes out a minute later with several bottles of something and sets them down on the step.

An' now for some company! Some beaut company for a lonely ol' biddy like me.

She takes the stone away and closes the door behind her. The audience can hear her steps thumping upstairs inside the building. A small bird comes down and lands beside the waiting bottles. It contemplates them with its head cocked to one side.

CURTAIN

‘BORDERLAND’
One Act Play
Dialogue

CAST: Two adults. They appear to be well-dressed adults in business suits, one wearing high heels, both with blonde hair which shines in the occasional moonlight.

SET: Night time. Trees with narrow black silhouettes. A moon and clouds riding high. The moon provides the only light so needs to be able to move, sometimes casting light clearly, other times dimming the scene. There is a car (or car body made out of plastic, cardboard, or something else light) bogged. There is the faint indication of bushes, ruts, and grass. At the beginning of the play, while the curtain is down, there is the light shining from the headlights, and the sound of a car revving in mud. When the curtain lifts the headlights are off and the engine turned off. Occasionally, in the distance, there is the sound of dogs howling. Closer, there is the occasional call of a night bird, whatever sound is easiest to produce, eg, owl, mopoke, or nightjar.

DIALOGUE

MAN: *Standing beside the car.* Hell’s Bells! This is the worst road I’ve ever tried—

WOMAN: *Standing by the passenger door.* It isn’t even a road! Surely, you asked if this was a realistic way to get to the house?

MAN: He gave very specific directions. I wrote them all down. He said nothing about the road being a quagmire.

WOMAN: *Gives a mirthless snort.* Quagmire! And how does he get out—if this is the only way in?

MAN: No, he said this would cut some distance off our journey.

WOMAN: He said that to your face?

MAN: No, I've only spoken to him over the phone. But as soon as I told Jeff the Honourable Gervaise Dutton wanted me to handle the sale of his ancestral home—Jeff said 'lucky you! You'll get a whopping great commission—and see inside it, it's supposed to be full of family treasures. There's been Duttons there for five generations'—

WOMAN: Well, I think you've been had. I heard he was the black sheep and the family wanted nothing to do with him. I'll bet there isn't an heirloom in the whole place. And if there ever was I'll bet they've all been flogged off. And if he never does any maintenance—then the whole thing will probably fall down around our ears before we can find a sucker to buy it for what he wants.

MAN: *reluctantly* Maybe. But a sale is a sale.

WOMAN: *sharply* So why did you leave it so late to visit him?

MAN: He said he's a night owl, doesn't get up till four o'clock in the afternoon, he said no one will answer the door if we come in business hours.

WOMAN: Well, I've ruined my shoes and we're going to have to try and walk there. How far away are we?

MAN: He said he owns all this and would leave the back gate open for us. He keeps the front gates locked apparently.

WOMAN: To keep people out—or to keep something in?

Dogs are heard faintly in the distance.

MAN: They're only dogs. We can handle dogs. *He doesn't sound very confident.*

WOMAN: We could if we were in the car. I'm not so sure if we come walking in to their yard ...

MAN: They're probably quite friendly—when you get to know them.

WOMAN: You don't know that. But if you want to go on I can wait here with the car.

MAN: No one is going to steal it.

WOMAN: You asked me to come for a pleasant run in the country with a possibly decent commission in the offing. You didn't say anything about boggy roads or dangerous dogs. I'll bet he has a big sign on the gate to say 'Beware of the Dogs' and then where will you be?

MAN: That's just being silly. Why would he want to put me in danger if he wants me to sell the place for him?

WOMAN: Silly, nothing! If he really wanted you to do a proper appraisal, take photos, check everything, look at things which need to be fixed, arrange an Open Day, all that—why would he want you turning up in the dark? It doesn't make sense. And what if you get in there and he's only got forty-watt bulbs—or, who knows, he only uses candles.

MAN: It all does sound rather eccentric, I know. But even eccentrics sell property. We can't expect every client to be a miracle of everyday good sense

and ... helpfulness ... the sort who practically sell the place for you ... all their friends and relatives spreading the word ... There have to be some who are challenges.

WOMAN: Well, I think I have been quite challenged enough for one evening.

MAN: Oh, come on now, aren't you just a bit curious? It isn't every day that some sort of aristocrat—even if he is seriously weird—asks you to come and poke around in every corner of his property, now is it?

WOMAN: Are you sure he is really an aristocrat?

MAN: Does it matter? So long as the place is saleable.

WOMAN: You keep saying that. But you aren't even going to be able to see if the place is full of dry rot. And what happens if we mislead clients? What then?

MAN: Why do you always look on the ... the dark side, always all this doom and gloom?

WOMAN: Because I know you. I may not know the Honourable Bloody Gervaise. But I know you. I've watched the way you try to do business for the last six years—

MAN: So what? I get results. Which is more than you get—

WOMAN: Says who? I make a good living—and I leave people happy which isn't what I've heard about you. So, seeing this looks like a serious lemon, I'm happy to leave it to you. I will sit in the car and wait for you. I may get cold—but at least I won't get compromised.

MAN: And when they told me you were a sanctimonious little bitch I thought it was just sour grapes—but now I wonder if they always—

WOMAN: *Straightens up from where she has been leaning slightly against the bonnet.* They—and who the hell are 'they'? That useless Kevin that always gives the shittiest properties to the juniors and then calls them useless when they can't shift them for the seller's price? That kind of 'they'? I know the two of you are best buddies—

MAN: But then you don't have any friends there, not even when you crawl to the big boss with all your excuses—how it wasn't the right time, the seller didn't warn buyers about the awful neighbours, you always have an excuse—like now. Here's a client waiting and all you can do is carp.

WOMAN: I'm not stopping you. I said you could have the sale and all the commission—so off you go. I am going to try and walk back out to the road. It'll completely ruin my shoes but anything to get away from here—

MAN: Scared are you? Scared an owl will bite you—or a stray cat—

WOMAN: Owls don't bite. But I don't like the sound of those dogs. *As if on cue the dogs raise a long howl, suggestive of bloodhounds. There is obviously more than one dog.* So they can go for you, I will be out there on the road trying to flag down a lift. I would call a taxi from that phone box we passed but I don't suppose they come out this far, or not unless I pay a fortune.

MAN: Well, go then, and don't complain if some weirdo comes by and does something nasty to you.

WOMAN: The only weirdo is obviously over there in that monstrosity of a place.

MAN: How do you know it's a monstrosity? You said you'd never been inside—

WOMAN: I haven't. But as soon as I heard he wants to sell I made a point of driving by and I called on that Mrs Miller who said she used to clean for him years ago before he went off his rocker and said he'd rather live in sloth and filth. That's how I know it is all monstrous. House. Man. The whole ridiculous thing.

MAN: You didn't tell me that! *He sounds angry.*

WOMAN: I do my homework. You don't. You think swanning up and sounding friendly sells properties. I like to know everything I possibly can before I even go in the front door. That's why I have satisfied customers—

MAN: How dare you say I don't! I can see just as much as you can—even with all your *homework*—and what does some old biddy of a cleaning lady know about him anyway?

WOMAN: Because a cleaning lady, in case it has never occurred to you, has an intimate knowledge of the house she cleans. She isn't like you, going in, having a quick look round, snapping a few photos, saying yes sir, no sir, just because he's an Honourable. She knows more than you'll ever know.

MAN: *Reluctantly.* Then you'd better tell me what she said before I head off.

WOMAN: If you apologise for that 'sanctimonious bitch' business.

MAN: Oh, for crying out loud! Just tell me and I can maybe get there before midnight.

WOMAN: Yes, it won't look good you turning up after he's gone to bed—

MAN: As he says he stays up all night that isn't likely to be a problem.

WOMAN: Doing what? Getting the place ready for buyers?

MAN: I thought you knew everything about him—from that so-called cleaning lady. I bet she was there a week and got sacked for prying.

WOMAN: Believe what you like. She had quite a lot to say about his personal habits and how he came to be the last of his family.

MAN: He ate them all, I suppose, *sarcastically*, or drank their blood?

WOMAN: Something like that. *She turns to walk away.*

MAN: You called him a black sheep—not a mass murderer—make up your mind!

WOMAN: When you meet him he can answer all your questions—

MAN: No, you'd better tell me now—or I'll—

WOMAN: You'll what? No one is going to take you seriously when I tell them you drove out in the dark, bogged the car, and threatened me.

MAN: I didn't threaten you—

WOMAN: Oh yes you did. So off you go. I'm going home. You can handle his dogs and all the time you can console yourself thinking of the whopping great big commission you're going to pocket.

MAN: Okay, I apologise, you're not a sanctimonious little bitch—just hard to work with.

WOMAN: So kind and generous of you.

MAN: Well, go on, what do you know about anything—if anything?

WOMAN: *After a long pause.* Mrs Miller left him because he grabbed her, put her over his knee, and belted her. She went to the police and tried to have him charged with assault. The police went to see him. He charmed them out of their notebooks and they came back and told Mrs Miller she was a fantasist—or it was a sex game gone wrong. She insisted he had assaulted her. They refused to believe her. She warned every other woman who does cleaning not to go there. He hasn't been able to find another cleaning lady. He got a hitchhiker who was there two weeks and then disappeared.

MAN: *In a disbelieving way and shaking his head.* That's only gossip. And hitchhikers move on. So what?

WOMAN: People thought the dogs might have eaten her. He didn't buy meat for a whole week. Maybe he ate her himself.

MAN: That's all baloney and you know it! You're just trying to scare me off.

WOMAN: Believe what you like. And he's not going to eat his real estate agent or feed him to his dogs, not if he genuinely wants to sell. But maybe he doesn't want to sell, maybe he's happy for it to fall down around him—and it's just hard to find a way to get someone to visit. Even the local kids don't try to sneak through his fence—

MAN: You don't know that!

WOMAN: Oh but I did my *homework*—and you didn't.

MAN: *Sounding increasingly upset.* Well, you didn't know anything about this road—

WOMAN: I didn't know you were going to sneak in the back way—

MAN: You still would've gone along with me.

WOMAN: You don't know that! We aren't tradesmen or hawkers—sent round to grovel at the back door. We should've gone up to the front door like normal visitors. It would've given us a good idea of how the house and the front garden look to anyone passing by. After all, if we're going to put up FOR SALE signs fronting on to the road past, we need to know how best to display the property—

MAN: You said you don't want any commission—

WOMAN: I don't. But I hadn't said that when you came sneaking in the back way and got bogged. I'll bet he knew all about this swamp and thought it would be funny to have us turn up all muddy.

MAN: You don't know that!

WOMAN: You're getting to be like a cracked record. Anyway, you'd better get on your way. It'll take you several hours to go over the house properly.

MAN: Stop telling me to get on my way! And when I make the biggest commission of the year—you'll be wishing you—

WOMAN: You got taken in by that aristocrat nonsense. You didn't bother to ask why anyone wouldn't want to show off his property to best advantage. You never asked why anyone would want you to sneak in under the cover of darkness. You didn't ask him to make sure his dogs are tied up—

MAN: Okay, okay—so I didn't question anything—

WOMAN: No, and you didn't even question whether he is the Honourable Gervaise, did you?

MAN: Why should I? I don't ask my clients to prove their identity before I even visit them.

WOMAN: But in this case you should—because I very much doubt if there is anyone called the Honourable Gervaise.

MAN: You're joking! Of course there is. He's lived here for thirty years—

WOMAN: No, he told you he'd lived here for thirty years, that's a very different thing. You shouldn't trust everything clients tell you.

MAN: Are you saying he *doesn't* live here? I think you're just trying to make me look a fool!

WOMAN: I checked with the Titles Office—because Mrs Miller said she didn't think any English aristocrat would behave like that.

MAN: English aristocrats are always spanking women—that's how they prove—well, that—

WOMAN: That they're English aristocrats? I don't think that's good clear thinking.

MAN: Well, forget all that! What did you find out?

WOMAN: You still haven't apologised properly.

MAN: Okay, okay, I'm sorry. But what did you find out?

WOMAN: That the place is in the name of a Mrs Mary Oakley.

MAN: And who the heck is she?

WOMAN: Don't you think it would be a good idea to find out who she is before you try to sell her property?

MAN: Well, you did your *homework*—so who the hell is she?

WOMAN: Now you might agree with me that it is worth doing some *homework*—instead of just depending on the big boss and Kevin to give you first choice of the best properties. The rest of us really have to work ... you just swan in and say, got a good one for me, Kev? ... and off you go.

MAN: Well, I've been there a long time, I deserve to get the pick—

WOMAN: And now you've got the pick—the most bizarre property of the lot—so I'll get on my way and you can ask him if Mrs Oakley is around before you get anything signed—and just make sure you don't turn your back on him.

MAN: You're the one that's mad! Trust a woman to have a great big chip on her shoulder just because Kev trusts me to do a good job with our most important clients. *He hesitates then pulls a torch out of his overcoat pocket.* So who is Mrs Oakley?

WOMAN: I don't know but I strongly suspect she might be his mother and that she bought the place to get a very embarrassing son far away from her, far away from the family, and if he wants to do weird things—at least no one will connect him to her. So good luck, I'll see you at the office tomorrow—if you survive those dogs.

She turns and carefully picks her way along the moonlit path. An owl hoots. The dogs start to bay again.

MAN: *He yells at the top of his voice:* But I've got the torch!

WOMAN: *She turns back briefly. Then shine it in the dogs' eyes! Good night! He flicks the torch off and stands undecided, then turns it on again and begins to walk forward. After ten steps he changes his mind and turns to follow the woman towards the road.*

CURTAIN

‘THE WHINE’

(ONE-ACT-PLAY)

I’ll bite you when you’re naughty
Bite you when you’re good
Bite you when you hit me with your head
That’s made of wood.

Bite you when you’re little
Bite you when you’re small
Bite you when you haven’t done
A naughty thing at all.

‘Song of the Mosquitoes’ by Michele Turner

CAST: Large man of middle-age, overweight with his belly over his waistband. Wearing a singlet and loose pair of shorts or underpants. Woman of around sixty with a rather yellow skin, scrawny and tired-looking, wearing a cotton frock and sandals.

SET: A bedroom with an iron bedstead with a cotton mosquito net. Various bits of suitable furniture including a small bedside table holding a candle or small lamp and a box of matches. A cupboard or wardrobe on the side opposite the bed with a door opening inwards next to it. Windows at the far end. The space has a slightly cramped look.

EQUIPMENT: A tape recorder to record a mosquito’s whine. Faint sounds of crickets or cicadas which fade as the mosquito’s sound increases. The tape needs to be set to a level a little louder than a normal mosquito but this will rise and fall slightly, for the sake of the audience. This recorder is hidden under or on top of the wardrobe and set to come to the mosquito’s ‘song’ once the man is in bed. It is the key to the following actions. Synchronicity is very important.

TIME: Night.

ACT ONE

Man: What a life! Too hot, too sticky. And here we go round the mulberry bush. Strewth, I could do with some mulberries! Sick to death of paw paws and mangoes stuck in your bloody teeth. And the papers haven’t come and I’m ...

He lights the kerosene lamp (or candle) with the flick of a match and turns the flame up a little. He lifts up the mosquito netting and stands there for a minute looking at the waiting stretcher with a rather grubby sheet on it and a frowsy pillow.

If it’s hot out it’ll be hotter in ... but not much of a choice. And the fridge isn’t working and I’ve forgotten what ice is ...

There is the faint whine of a mosquito and he goes round checking the door and window.

Hard to keep the little buggers out but I s'pose a net's better than nothing. But it makes me wonder why I stay. Little tin pot mine, hardly pays its way. And who says it needs me. If I fell off me bloody perch one night ... and I'll guarantee that water filter only does half the job ... but I'm stuck here, can't go nowhere else, not if I don't want ... well, what's wanting, it's done now, so no point in carrying on.

The mosquito whine builds up very slowly. He looks around and goes over to the bedside table and picks up a magazine and rolls it up.

Thought you'd sneak in, you little bastard, didn't you, but I'll find you, I'll squash you into mush, see if that doesn't stop your ruddy noise. So come on out wherever you're hiding.

He circles the room brandishing the rolled-up paper. The whine is now quite loud.

They told me, they bloody well told me, when I came to this god-forsaken country, the mozzies, the mozzies, you never get away from the mozzies. And I've been here—what've I been here—ten years? Eleven, twelve. Can't remember. Seems like a lifetime. And every day of it a misery.

The whine gets louder. His own voice goes up to a yell.

Come on out! Come out of where you're hiding! I'll get you, I'll get you, see if I don't! Think you're so smart—somewhere up there above me bloody head—just waiting to slip in—

He goes over and drops the mosquito net back down.

No way are you going to slip in when me back's turned! That's the way things go on here, nothing done to your face, all whispering behind a bloke's back—and no come back—because you don't know who started it. What a lousy life. What a rotten useless lousy life.

The whine fades a little.

So you're going to dupe me, are you—get me thinking you've gone away, slipped through a crack in the wall, and soon's I get into bed—there you'll be waiting, just like all bloody sneaks—nothing upfront. They said they'd get me—and now I can't even get into bed without some bloody INSECT at me—

The whine fades to a faint whirr.

That's right, make me let my guard down, let me think I'm safe, let me think ... Christ, who can think in this bloody country, me brains are probably turning green in there ... but I know what I know ... and they wouldn't listen to me, said it couldn't be an accident. I said it could—and it was—and I showed them how. Christ, there's accidents every bloody day here, and you only have to get the smallest cut and you're dying of something. They said it was me, that it wasn't blood poisoning, what would they know—those poncy doctors, never lived up here with the sweat dripping off me bloody teeth, me singlet wringing

wet, what the heck do they know about blood poisoning—wish they'd get blood poisoning and then we'd see whether they say it's poison, the useless bastards—
He walks around the room again brandishing his rolled up paper then goes over and picks up the lamp (or candle) and walks round the room lifting it up as though to check every nook and cranny.

So I've got your measure, you useless little bastard—and don't even think of crawling out of wherever you're hiding or I'll burn you to a crisp! Look at all the dead insects round the wick. And you'll be next, you snivelling little thing, just like the people all around me, all those bloody women, nothing better to do than point the finger, they shouldn't let them come, they should leave them back in the capital with their fans and their servants and all the rest of the stuff they think is their RIGHT! What do they know about rights? What do they know about a hard day's work and something to wind down with afterwards? All of 'em thinking a drink makes a drunk—don't worry, I heard the gossip, I know what was going on, I know why they all clammed up when they saw me coming—makes me sick to the stomach—

He goes over and has a sip from the bottle on the table after he puts the lamp down again.

Life isn't much chop if it's all work and you can't even get a drink when you knock off—and as for saying—

The whine starts again, faintly but getting louder very slowly.

Thought you'd gone, you miserable useless creature, so where are you hiding now? Inside or out?

He lifts the mosquito net and peers around, then lifts the pillow and swings it to and fro over the bed.

Come on, come out, you imp, you creature—you useless bit of creation! Show yourself!

The whine builds in crescendo.

A fella can't even go to bed without being pursued by some useless bit of life! If it's not a mozzie—it's them gossips going ten to the dozen—but never to me face, no, never to me, always sneaking and sniffing behind their bloody hands. That's life, is it? That's being Christian and all those things, is it? Like hell, it isn't. And when the police came and sniffed around they said, you're okay, mate, all a sad accident, not your fault—but oh no, that wasn't good enough for them, had to be me, I got away with murder, that's what they said—like they were there, they knew—like hell, they didn't—

The whine now very loud makes him lift the paper again and stalk the room.

You're here, I know you're here, and you won't be happy till—Christ, what's a poor bloody fella like me s'posed to do? You'll be at me till I die! If I know you.

He swishes wildly to and fro, catching the wick, but not enough to do any damage. He throws the paper on to the bed and picks up the bottle again.

I said I'd cut down—but you can't cut down—not when there's days I'm going mad—and who cares, who bloody cares—they turned me into a pariah—can't even drink down there with the others but they're pointing and sniggering, like those poor bloody skinny dogs that people chuck stones at—that's me, not much better than some starving dog.

He sits on the edge of the bed, the whine goes on. He lifts both hands to cover his ears.

That's better!

He gets a spare pair of underpants out of a drawer and ties them over his head. Christ, they don't half stink! Must be mould ... Maybe they were hers and I didn't wash them, she wasn't any good at keeping house, didn't do things, didn't like her food, but she gave me duds a good scrubbing—I told 'em that. The useless bastards said it wasn't relevant—*relevant!*—what do they know? A man needs company in this god-forsaken country—even if it's too hot to do anything—

He stands up and holds the mosquito net in one hand. Do your worst, bite me, sting me, poison me, drive me mad—it doesn't matter any more—nothing matters any more—

The whine now changes tempo, rising, falling, as though the mosquito is coming and going in a strange rhythm.

Never heard a mozzie do that before, never knew a mozzie that didn't head for me arms or me neck or me chest—I don't know what kind of mozzie can be here with me, maybe it isn't a mozzie, maybe it's something worse—me head, me poor bloody head—maybe it's about to split open and me brains'll come pouring out—and all me memories—good and bad—mostly bad—and I didn't do it! I didn't bloody do it, it was an accident—a sort of accident, only had a bottle or two, and all hot as heck, no ice, no frig—maybe hot beer scrambles a poor bloke's head—maybe that's what done it—and she was there, she was as ratty as a rattlesnake—we both were, thunder and heat, and nothing cold—and I said, what the heck did I say? Shut up, you bloody mozzie! I can't even think any more!

He drops to his knees, both hands pressed over the underpants, and bangs his head on the mattress.

And she said, you let a mozzie in, she accused me, like I stood there at the bloody door and said, come on in, you useless little mozzie, come in and join us! What a laugh, I told her she didn't know day from night, she was that useless, and she threw a plate at me, it was a plate, wasn't it, don't remember, I was that pickled trying to forget a lousy day with the help of a bottle—and I threw something, don't remember what I threw, and she said something else about a mozzie—and I said I'll mozzie you, the useless little bitch, and her all over bites and scratches, she was like a homing beacon to the bloody mozzies—and when they'd finished with her they'd head for me—and I'd had enough of everything, enough, enough—

He bangs his head on the mattress again but he misses the mattress and catches the iron frame of the bed. He sprawls forward on to the mattress, head down, and doesn't move. The wick of the lamp is burning low. The room gradually grows dim. The sound of the mosquito gradually fades and the room grows silent. The door opens with a faint creak and an elderly woman looks in and seems to consider the kneeling form. Then she goes quietly to the cupboard and lifts out several tattered books and papers and removes a tape-recorder from underneath them.

She gives it a little pat. Then she goes back to the door. Just before she goes out the door she says quietly:

Wonderful little things, these little gadgets, but I thought it might take more than one session to get the useless bastard to admit anything ... the police believed him, but I never did, I always knew he'd done the wrong thing by my poor daughter but no one would take me seriously. They didn't mind to gossip, all those other women, but they wouldn't support me. It took one little mozzie whining in his ear ... but then a guilty conscience ...

And because my daughter was brown, my poor little daughter with her big brown eyes and her smile till he made her give up smiling, the bastard ... and they didn't think she was important enough ... No more important than a mozzie around the room on a hot night ...

She exits quietly and pulls the door closed behind her. The man remains kneeling by the bed, face down on the mattress. It has the sense of a tableau of someone in the abandonment of grief.

CURTAIN

‘SOME ANNIVERSARY’

(ONE-ACT-PLAY)

Cast: Husband, James, nondescript man in his forties. Wife, Marina, nondescript woman a little younger. Neighbour, Alice, cheerful gossipy woman suggestive of a rather busybody grandmother.

Set: A dining nook with a table set with two chairs and a child’s high chair at one end. The table is set for two adults and a child, with a birthday cake with two candles on it and several other plates of party food. There are balloons tied to the high chair. A sideboard or dresser or glass-fronted cabinet to suggest people who are modestly comfortably off. A kitchen can be partially seen off to one side. A door at the back of the stage.

Time: Evening.

SCENE ONE

James: I still say this is one of your barmier ideas.

Marina: *Still fussing with the table, putting out more brightly coloured food and moving things around. She has obviously been crying. Her nose and eyes are red.* Oh no, love, it will bring everything back so clearly. He would be two today. Isn’t that something worth remembering? *She sniffles every now and again.*

James: Who says I want to remember?

Marina: Oh honey! But you must want—our poor little poppet—

James: Haven’t you carried on for long enough? Sometimes I think I’m married to Tim, not to you. Everything comes back to Tim all the time—and now this! *He waves his hand over the table.* But if I’ve got to eat his birthday cake, okay, let’s get it over and done with. Or do I have to sing Happy Birthday to a ghost first?

Marina: He's *not* a ghost. He's still real. He's just not ... we can't see him ... but he is here with us, can't you feel the touch of his little hand, and if you listen you'll hear his voice—

James: All I can hear is a storm getting up. Listen to that wind.

Marina: But, James, we are safe and cosy in here and he truly is with us.

James: No, he isn't and I wish you'd just accept it and let us move on.

Marina: Move on? Move on where? He is a part of us, not some old suitcase we can leave behind and not even miss. *She raises her handkerchief to her eyes.*

James: Well, look at you. You're a mess. If this is what remembering does to you I just wish you wouldn't.

Marina: Oh, you're like all men. You just don't want to show your emotions. *She seems to spark out of her sadness.* What's wrong with telling the world you're sad? Why is that something to hide and be ashamed of?

James: You've been telling the world how sad you are for a year. Don't you think they'd like a rest from it?

Marina: No. They understand how I feel, They understand how *you* feel, deep down.

James: No, they bloody well don't! How I feel is nobody's business but mine. *The sound of the wind increases and the first spatters of rain can be heard on the roof.*

James: But seeing you've gone and done all this cooking let's get stuck into it. We'll probably be chasing our roof down the street in another half hour.

Marina: Oh no, don't say that. It is the spirits of the dead out and about tonight. They know our little Tim doesn't belong with them but they can't bring him back to us—

James: That's a load of baloney and you know it. Look, even if it wasn't your fault he's dead—

Marina: Of course it isn't my fault he's dead! The first thing they asked us was did we smoke—and you said, hardly ever. You knew that was a lie but you still said it.

James: It was not a lie. I don't smoke. Much.

Marina: And what is much? I notice you didn't want to spell it out. So they didn't take it into account—

James: Look who's talking. You had that poor kid wrapped up like a cocoon most of the time. He probably died of heat stroke or smothering. But you didn't tell them that, did you, oh no, it was the Perfect Mother sitting there—

Marina: How dare you! When my life was falling apart—all you could think of was blaming someone! That's the sort of man you are! I always knew it! *There is a rattling sound as though something has come loose outside. James goes to the door and listens.*

James: Bloody guttering—

Marina: *Sounding slightly hysterical.* Don't change the subject!

James: Then—how about you copping some of the blame. Kids don't die for no reason. Usually it's someone doing something wrong—and you were the one with him all the time. I hardly got a look-in.

Marina: Oh, so now you admit it! You just wanted to be a father on the cheap. Never there when I really needed you—

James: I was so there! Who took him to hospital that time? Who bought him toys every week? Who paid all the bills? While all you were doing was mooning round like a—like a—

Marina: Like a what? Go on, let's hear your pathetic excuses. *She comes up close to him.* Soon as anyone criticised anything you did—you wanted to slap them around, me too. That was your way of working things out, wasn't it? Maybe you even did it to Tim when I wasn't looking. Is that why you don't want to be reminded? Because you feel guilty about something you did? *She is getting more and more angry and reckless.*

There is a sudden clap of thunder and they both jump.

James: That's what you've been going round telling everyone, isn't it? Well, isn't it? I've had people come up and tell me what a snake in the grass you are. The day we buried him—that's when I should've said—right, that's it—I'm outa here. Maybe that would've brought you to your senses—

Marina: Oh, you would've liked that! Mr Responsibility, I don't think!

James: *Lifts one fist and shakes it before letting it drop with some effort of will.* I never touched that kid and don't you ever say I did. He just died. They said it sometimes happens that way—so don't you dare go round saying I did something—and if he's up there—*He gives a sneering look round the room—* then he knows I didn't do a thing—

Marina: Of course he's up there! He hears every word you say and I'll bet he's thinking of all the times you didn't want to lift a finger for him—

James: Well, that's a change! You've just been accusing me of hitting him, just about—

Marina: Well, you did. I heard him crying—

James: You did not!

Marina: Yes I did!

There is another clap of thunder. The noise of wind and rain which has been a faint background to their argument seems to intensify.

James: Oh you say that now—when he was always crying—you must've been doing something wrong with the—

The lights suddenly go out.

They both let fly with angry comments then James says: Where are the bloody matches. At least we've got two candles on that bloody cake if I can find the matches. *They fumble round in the dark and something on the table gets knocked over.*

End of Scene One

SCENE TWO

Marina has found a torch and holds it up while James lights the two small candles on the birthday cake. A jug of cordial is seen to be lying on its side. There is the faint sound of dripping.

Marina: Don't move, I'll get a cloth.

James: Well, I hope he *is* up there watching—

Marina: And what's that s'posed to mean? You want him to be upset, is that it? You're not content with all you've said and done—

There is a loud knock at the door.

James: *Angrily.* That'll be the devil coming round to— *He goes to the door while Marina mops the liquid on the table then gets down to mop the liquid pooling on the floor.*

Marina: Round to what? Go on, say it.

He opens the door. A woman is seen, faintly, standing in it. She hurries inside, letting down her umbrella. She looks rather damp and dishevelled. James says Alice! What's the matter?

Alice: Wouldn't you know it? I can't find a single candle and I know I bought a whole packet not so long ago. I'm sure the grandkids must have taken them— *She looks around and sees the cake with its two candles. She looks back at the two of them.*

Alice: Gosh, I'm the clumsy clot, just barging in like this, when you two were having a little time to remember. I am so sorry. Your dear little Tim. Is it really ... he would be two today, wouldn't he? It hardly seems any time ...

Marina: I'm not sure where our candles are. But you can take the packet of cake candles. We won't do this again.

Alice: That's so kind of you both. D'you know, it reminds me of my gran. She got to ninety-five and she said there was no way she was having ninety-five candles and we said, how many would you like, and she said five. We said, why five, and she said she always remembered how happy she was at five, she hadn't started school so it was play all day, they were on the farm then, and she loved the animals, and she said, the sun always seemed to shine and even when it was cold and they had the wood heater on, it still seemed sort of happy and cosy, just the family there. To hear her speak you would think it was a magical year and she never mentioned how hard she had to work ... but when I started to think about it, there *are* those magical moments in life, aren't there, when everything just seems right. Deep down you know it can't last, but you always have that moment to remember.

James: You'd better have a piece of cake. She's been cooking all day. *He doesn't sound very friendly or welcoming but jerks an elbow in the direction of the cake.*

Alice: That is so very kind of you. And what a lovely cake! I'm sure little Tim wherever he is wishes he could be here to share it with you. It reminds me of one Saturday I saw all three of you out on the lawn and he was running through the sprinkler in his little togs and laughing and shouting like the happy little fella he was. And then ... this cot death is the most terrible thing, I do hope they'll soon find out what causes it and give parents some help ... there he was laughing one day, with his lovely blonde curls and so proud of his new tooth ... and then ... oh dear, it's the suddenness of it all, I just can't seem to get my head around it, what it must've done to the two of you—

Marina: *Rather brusquely.* That's true.

Alice: I don't know if it would be any comfort—and you've probably had that many well-meaning people saying things—but I read somewhere that 'our dead are never dead until we have forgotten them'. And I can see how real little Timmy still is to you both.

James finishes cutting several slices of cake. He looks round for something to put them in and takes up one of the party napkins on the table and wraps them.

Alice: *Looking at the picture on the napkin.* A little boy on a rocking horse. How lovely! It reminds me of Tim, the way he'd sit astride on that low branch in the garden and pretend he was riding a horsie. I'd hear him saying, Giddyup, Smokey. I don't know why he called his pretend horse Smokey—and one day he pretended to fall off. He was hanging upside down and he was giggling and saying, don't you move, Smokey ... well, I *think* that's what he was saying. I couldn't always guess ... but I know parents are much better at picking up things their little ones say because they hear them talking every day ...

Marina: And there's the packet of candles. I'm sure we've got more somewhere but I can't just think where.

Alice: Goodness, this'll be enough to keep me going till they get the power back on. Or perhaps I'll have an early night. Perhaps you should too. Even when it's a labour of love—it still makes you tired—or that's how I feel sometimes. Like when I take the little ones to the beach when Carly brings them over. It's a lovely time, seeing them paddle and make sandcastles—and I seem to remember seeing Tim with his little red hat on and his red bucket and spade—but you get home and all your energy's gone and you're just glad to sit down with a cool drink and talk back over your day.

James: I don't think we ever took him to the beach—

Alice: Of course you did. You picked him up and put him on your shoulders and he was waving his little bucket around and he was so excited. But you've had all the awful memories since then to drive away the happy memories. I am so sorry. I cannot think of anything worse—all your plans and hopes—but I don't need to tell you things you know already.

James: No, I don't s'pose you do.

Alice: So now I'll leave you to this very private moment, just the two of you, and take myself home and sure as eggs as soon as I get there the lights will come on again and I will have bothered you both for nothing.

She moves across to the door. James opens it for her. She picks up her wet umbrella and goes out. Nighty night.

James: *Comes back to the table.* Nighty night! Christ, what an old gasbag. *There is a long silence, just the sounds of the receding storm.*

Marina: *Slowly* It was almost like she has all the happy memories of Tim and we have all the—the—

James: The bad ones?

Marina: Not—not exactly. But I wouldn't let myself think of the happy ones because it only made me cry. But there *were* so many happy times. He did laugh and squeal. Why do we think of him as crying ... *But as she says that she begins to cry herself. James goes across to the table and picks something up.*

James: The party pies are cold now. *But he starts to eat.* Come on, sit down, we don't want all this to go to waste. *He cuts another slice of cake and hands it to her. She sits down opposite to him and next to the high chair.*

Marina: *Speaking hesitantly.* Did we deserve to be so unlucky?

James: Deserve? Of course we didn't *deserve*. It just happened.

Marina: So why didn't you want to sit down to this little party for him?

James: Because ... it brings back all my regrets ... all the times I didn't do ... didn't do ... the things I would go back and do different maybe ... if it could've saved him I'd throw those damn fags away ... if it'd bring him back I'd ... you know what I mean ... *The words are said reluctantly.*

Marina: But there is no second chance ...

James: *Rather wistfully.* Isn't there?

As he speaks the lights flicker and then come on again. Marina reaches over and turns off the torch. The candles on the cake have burnt right down.

End of Scene Two

CURTAIN

‘ENTROPY’ (DIALOGUE)

Cast: Two men.

First man S: Salesman has obviously fallen on hard times. His shoes have string around them to keep the soles attached. His clothes, obviously other people’s cast-offs, are mismatched. His dark hair is sleeked back with water or oil but he needs a shave. He puts on a loud cheery manner which sounds rather at odds with his appearance and his goods for sale.

Second man H: Man in house is tall, so that he stoops to come through his front door, wearing shabby clothes, his old trousers held up by braces, and his shirt sleeves rolled up. He is wearing scuffed leather shoes. He too needs a shave and his cheeks are fallen in, suggestive of someone who has had teeth removed and couldn’t afford dentures. (The men can be given names if you would prefer: eg. Silas and Harold.

Set: Front of old house with peeling grey paint and boards hanging loose. All that is visible is a door with a small porch roof, and two windows set in to the wall on either side. It has an appearance of blankness. In front is a yard with rough soil and a few half-dead weeds. It has a sagging fence of netting with an open space for a front gate. There is a wooden mailbox set on a post, its door hanging open. On either side of the house the set fades into greyness. This can be achieved by painted scenery or by the lighting. The salesman is pushing a squeaky wheelbarrow piled high with books resting on a tattered blanket and an old army greatcoat to protect them from the ruts and bumps.

Time: Day.

A DIALOGUE

H: No good coming here, cobber, never read a book in me life.

S: But always the right time to start. Don’t put it off another day. And every home is the better for a lovely calf-covered Bible like this, gives tone, don’t you know. Or perhaps an encyclopaedia. A world out there full of interesting things to read about—

H: That’s a bad sandwich and you know it. Look at you! That big world out there never done you any good by the look of it. You’d be better off carting round some seeds. I could do with a few to plant. *He waves a vague hand over the rough soil in front of his door.*

S: You’ve got a point there. But books—what I don’t know about books isn’t worth knowing.

H: *looks around in an undecided way as if he isn't sure whether to end the conversation and head for his front door. He keeps one hand on the door lintel.* Can't say I believe you. Fella that knows everything there is to know about books wouldn't be coming round here, he'd be one of them clever clods that live in whachamacallems, ivory towers.

S: They've fallen on hard times too.

H: Hoh! So you are?

S: Are what?

H: Some professor, some ... what was that mad scientist, turned animals into people—or the other way around—

S: I thought you said you never read books?

H: Don't. But I hear things down the pub. Well, I did when I could spare a coupla brums for a drink. Haven't been down in four years.

S: Well, what you've saved on beer you can spend on a decent book. Now, this one, *he holds up a book with a shiny cover*, Lawson's poems, now every house is the better for Lawson's poems.

H: Never heard of him.

S: For sure you'd find something in here you'd enjoy reciting. Impress your mates. Might bring back good memories from when you were a nipper.

H: You're a doddering old fool! Why would I want to remember back to things better forgotten?

S: *Hesitates as though to decide whether to give up this unpromising conversation and go on his way.* I s'pose most people have a happy memory or two tucked away. But you're right, school wasn't much fun and there are days I feel that even if I am not an old fool the doddering part's about right.

H: *Unexpectedly puts a hand out briefly and rests it on S's shoulder.* Shouldn't have said that, I s'pose, you're just doing what it takes to get by and I'm just ...

S: Anyone who goes on the roads has to be a bit of a fool. But some days you're lucky, you strike people that'll try and find a shilling or two to get something. They always say it's for the kiddies—but maybe they get something out of it too. *He opens the book he's holding and reads:*

We learnt the creed at Hungerford,

 We learnt the creed at Bourke;

We learnt it in the good times

 And learnt it out of work.

We learnt it by the harbour-side

 And on the billabong:

'No matter what a mate may do,

 A mate can do no wrong!'

I'm a bit short o' mates these days but there's days when that cheers me up, the sun shines, the birds sing, and someone says, come on in and join us for a bite. Then I think there's worse things ... but I don't reckon wheelbarrows were meant to be best friends with Man. If I could afford it I'd have a pony and cart.

H: If you had a pony and cart, you silly old fool, there's umpteen things you could be doing.

S: Such as?

H: Giving me a lift inter town. But no way am I going to ride in a bloomin' wheelbarrow—even if it wasn't full o' books.

S: *Looks up to the sky as though checking the position of the sun.* Might rain later.

H: And then your books'll be in a right mess.

S: I've got a bit of canvas to cover 'em with.

H: Think of everything, don't you?

S: I wish. So you're sure there's nothing here you'd like, while away the winter evenings ... look at the pictures maybe.

H: *Doesn't appear to appreciate this suggestion which implies he can't rather than doesn't read.* Well, I've thought of something. I'll bet I can sell those books better than you can.

S: *Looking rather startled turns back to his wheelbarrow as though to protect it from someone who might not be quite right in the head. He says tentatively,* You have experience in this line?

H: Nah. But you've got it all wrong. You come along a bit of a jaunty fella. Who needs books when you sound like you're doing all right? And then, a bit down the track, you tell me you're tired. Then I feel sorry for you. See, that's the moment ...

S: The moment you decided you'd buy something, after all?

H: Course not! What would I want with a ruddy book cluttering up me house?

S: Books give *tone* to a house ... they suggest, well, that a man of erudition and wide sympathies lives here. Even a simple shelf with a few good books turns a house into a home. *He sounds as though he is trying to convince himself.*

H: *Stands there tapping a finger on his lips. S puts the Henry Lawson back in his wheelbarrow. At last H says in a musing way* Erudition and wide sympathies, eh, that's a laugh ... but all the same it has a ring to it, doesn't it. A long time since anyone round here used words like that.

S: What sort of words do they normally use? It isn't a prosperous area, I know, but you can find clever and educated people in any neighbourhood. And now more than ever—where you can't go by appearances—well, the pollies still look like pollies and the clergy like clergy—but the rest of us ... it's hard to know sometimes.

H: They mostly have about twenty words. That's why I don't go out. Who wants to hear the same twenty words every day, every week, every year even? Pity me hearing's good. I'd be glad never to hear another word maybe ... till you come along with your *erudition* and *wide sympathies* but no good thinking about things.

S: I'm not an educated man but I read my books of an evening. They're company. Even if I have to camp out in a barn or under a tree ... I still read. I

keep a couple of candles in there. *He waves vaguely at the wheelbarrow.* A man with books is rich. *The cheeriness has gone out of his voice to be gradually replaced with an unexpected intensity.* Other fellas go round selling things, every day things, things the housewives want, shoelaces, salt, baking powder, soap, things like that and I can see the point of it. But books ... books are a friend for life. And even when I've gone all day without selling a book I have their company at night—

H: You can't eat a book. Not much good if you can't afford to buy a loaf or a peck of tea or maybe a sausage. You'd be better off selling tea. I might want a packet of tea and I can't get to the shop and the old fella up the road only delivers when he's not laid up. You could try him with a book.

S: Well, I'm sorry to hear it. Can I bring you a bit of tea? If you'd look after my books I don't mind to walk back to the township. D'you have trouble walking? I could get you a few other things if you're looking for—a few necessities.

H: No, I don't have no trouble walking. And I don't need tea. That was just a whachamacallum ... an example.

S: I see. Well, then I'm sorry I can't sell you a book but I s'pose I should be moving on. Someone might like a Bible or Lawson's poems. I've even got some detective stories in there, might liven up your evenings.

H: No good if I can't read 'em, but you're a gent, all the same.

S: I don't like to be a busybody, a man's life is private ... but I just wondered ... when you say you can't read ...

H: You're thinking this poor old hick of a fella, never went to school, never learnt his ABC, no wonder he doesn't need a book. That's what you're thinking, isn't it?

S: No, it could be all kinds of things. I had a granny who couldn't read any more because they gave her the wrong glasses, I mean the eye-chap cheated her, said they were good glasses and they were nothing but bits of window pane fitted in to her pa's frames after he passed on. He took her money and went away and she thought she was going blind ... and it might be your eyes get tired or the teachers, the school, when you were a young fellow ... you know what it was like. Or you need a better lamp in your house ...

H: Not much of a house, is it, it'll fall down around me ears one day. I don't s'pose it'll matter much ...

S: It wouldn't take very much to knock those boards back in to place. If you had a hammer—

H: What boards?

S: Those ones on the front there.

H: Poor old house, it can die with me. I'm seventy-three. It's not much younger.

S: Still, it wouldn't take much just to bash those nails back where they've worked loose.

H: Don't think I've got a hammer.

S: *Stands there looking at the front of the house not quite sure if he should try and persuade the old man to go and look for something—or give up and go. Even a block of wood might do the trick. One of these heavy books might be enough to knock those nails back in.*

H: *Them's your books, cobber, your living. And I said you were a gent. He stands there in silence, blinking, then seems to come to a decision. Look, what say I buy your biggest book and you can knock a coupla nails in for me. He puts his hands in his pockets. That's if there's anything sitting in me bloomin' pockets. He pulls out a pound note. There, would that do?*

S: *Looks rather startled. Well, it's very decent of you. But my heaviest book is the Bible. It's a very nice Bible and sort of holy. I could wrap it in something so it doesn't get marked. Not when you're buying it. He starts lifting his stock out on to the ground so as to lift out the old overcoat. This might do the trick. He puts his other books back before coming over to the house and starting to straighten up the boards and knock the nails back in before saying Well, that's a tittle better, not perfect, but it'll keep the wind outside. So, here's your book, and I better be on my way.*

H: *Tittle? Well, that's a new one on me. I always did like to hear new words. Maybe I'll give you something for another book, not that I want books ... no, just the thought, fella like you shouldn't be on the roads, no, you should be writing books yourself.*

S: *A bit startled but says kindly as he goes to hand the book to H. Jot and tittle? I think it's somewhere in the Bible. And that's very good of you to say so, me writing books, but needs must ... anyway, here's your book. He goes to hand it to H who doesn't seem to notice, just standing there blinking. S now looks closely at the old man. You must think I'm very obtuse, but all along I was just hoping to sell something, anything, and I didn't realise you can't see too well. There, it's no wonder ... He seems at a bit of a loss what to say next.*

H: *Obtuse, now there's a word I haven't heard in years. Funny, how you keep words in your head I mean. But as I say you're a real gent. So you keep your book and sell it to some other bunny. He turns, goes inside and shuts the door.*

S: *Looks down at the Bible he is still holding then he places it carefully back in his barrow and goes back to the road. I think it will rain. He reaches out and closes the little mailbox door. On the front of it is painted "Mr Rockefeller". Well, that's an odd one, Mr Rockefeller, I wonder why he thinks he's rich. He takes out the pound note and looks at it. Well, a pound's a pound so he can call himself anything he wants. He puts the note away and picks up the handles of his barrow. But a bit of a rum cove, all the same, and I wonder if he thinks some nails and some words are worth a pound? He exits left, pushing the wheelbarrow. Its squeaking wheel fades in the distance.*

CURTAIN

'BINNED'

(ONE-ACT-PLAY)

Scene One: *It is night time. As this brief scene has little action the set can be very flimsy, painted cardboard with plastic insets for windows to allow dim light through. Several garbage bins are faintly visible. A figure dimly seen is possibly wearing a dressing gown and carrying a bag. It isn't possible to tell the person's gender or anything else about them.*

Figure: *Lifts the lid of one bin. Oh damn! Damn! Double damn! It is clearly a woman's voice. She moves to the next bin and lifts the lid. They won't mind, the old grumps. They won't even know.*

There is the faint sound of something being dropped in. Then the figure fades back into the darkness. A door is heard closing. Several of the lighted windows go dark leaving only a faint glow from one window at the far right and above the ground floor of what can be assumed to be a block of flats. Then the final window goes dark.

Scene Two: *During the brief moment of darkness a different backdrop is slid across along with a stove, shelves, table laid for breakfast for one person, several chairs and other minor suggestions of a small kitchen/dining area. A counter contains several pot plants. There is a door and several windows at the back of the stage. Lights come on. There is the sound of a bird singing to suggest morning.*

A woman in a dressing gown comes over to the table with a carton of milk and pours it over a bowl of cereal. She sits down. She is seen to be a middle-aged woman with untidy grey hair. She is wearing fluffy slippers.

There is a knock at the door which is situated at the centre of the backdrop.

Woman: *Don't tell me they saw me! Wouldn't you know it. They never let up with their snooping. She gets up and opens the door. Two police in uniform are standing there, an older and a younger man.*

Older man: *Ms Brenda Garbutt?*

Woman: *Yes. Why? What's wrong. Are they making a fuss?*

Older man: *I'm Sergeant Richards. This is Constable Stevens.*

Woman: So? What's going on?

Sergeant Richards: Is who making a fuss?

Brenda Garbutt: The people in the next flat. I put something in their bin one other time, a couple of empty tins all nicely washed out, no smell, and I never heard the end of it. You'd think I'd chucked rocks through their windows or pinched clothes off their line—

Sergeant Richards: So you do admit you put something in the bin belonging to flat five?

Garbutt: I just said I did. And it gave me a lot of satisfaction. But I hardly think it needs two of you to come round to tell me they saw me and—

Richards: What did you put in their bin?

Garbutt: A bag of rubbish of course. *She looks from one man to the other with an expression which combines puzzlement and annoyance.* Look, I have to get ready for work and I haven't had my breakfast. So what the hell is all the fuss about. If they don't like me taking advantage you can take my bag back out and I s'pose I can manage to cram it into mine.

Richards: *Still stolid and unruffled.* What was in your bag of rubbish?

Garbutt: What was in my bag of rubbish? You're not serious? Can you remember exactly what you put in your bin?

Constable Stevens cannot help a faint grin which he hurriedly pretends is an itchy nose.

Richards: *More grimly.* This isn't a casual question, madam. What was in your bag of rubbish?

Garbutt: Well, some plastic bags and containers. There always is. A broken pair of thongs. A couple of worn-out rags. Some vegetable scraps. A newspaper maybe. A cracked flower-pot. I dropped one of my plants the other day and had to re-pot it. *She indicates the pot plants sitting on the counter next to her telephone. Constable Stevens walks over and looks at them. He picks up her telex by the phone and flicks through it briefly.* Now I have answered your questions. So how about you answering mine? What the hell is going on? *Her voice rises as she speaks.*

Richards: We've found a bag to fit—in your bin. So what was in the bag you tossed into your neighbour's bin?

Garbutt: You mean—they came out and crammed my stuff down and put my bag back? Well, if they want to be that nasty—

Richards: No, Ms Garbutt, the bag you put in your neighbour's bin contained a new-born baby. A passer-by early this morning heard it crying. It was inside a plastic bag identical to the ones you used for your own rubbish. You were seen placing it in that bin.

Garbutt: *She has grown progressively more astonished. She walks round the room briefly, shaking her head.* I don't believe what I'm hearing. Are you saying I had a baby and put it in a bin? Me? I'm fifty-two for heaven's sake!

Richards: *Doggedly.* You work in a hospital. You were seen putting a bag in your neighbour's bin late last night. Telling us how old you are isn't going to change anything.

Garbutt: Yes, and if I don't get there soon—I'll be in trouble. And that hospital, let me tell you both, has a perfectly good incinerator for getting rid of its rubbish—

Richards: So that's all a new-born baby is to you? Rubbish?

Garbutt: *Angrily.* I've put up with enough of your insinuations. Now get out of my house and don't come back.

Richards: Don't worry. We'll be back. *The two men exit. Brenda Garbutt raises a hand to her head in a gesture of anger and bewilderment. Then she hurriedly exits right leaving her uneaten breakfast and the carton of milk on the table. There is the sound of water running briefly then drawers being opened and a clash of coat hangers.*

Scene Three: *The lights dim slightly. Brenda Garbutt in a neat suit and carrying a shoulder-bag enters via the door. She puts the bag down on the table and looks at her forgotten breakfast.*

Garbutt: *Flopping down on a chair.* What a day! *The phone rings. She gets up wearily and crosses to it.* Hullo. *She listens.* Oh hi, Nancy. You'll never believe ... you've what? ... But that's crazy! Why didn't you tell her to come to the hospital? We're not ogres. Well, some of us are. I feel like biting someone right now. ... So—where did she go? ... You don't know? Oh God! Don't tell me she came round here? ... Why? Because they've just found a baby in a bin here! That's why! *She listens, shaking her head slowly.* What good will bringing her round do? ... She won't tell you? Okay, well, I guess bring her if she'll come. *She hangs up and tidies away the breakfast things and goes to a cupboard.* I need something quick. Heaven only knows what sort of state this girl is in. If it's the same girl. *She bustles round the kitchen putting a jug on to boil and pouring a packet of something into a mug.*

There is a knock at the door and Brenda Garbutt opens it to two women, one middle-aged and not dissimilar to Garbutt, the other a teenager with spiky blonde hair and a big ring through her lip and an expression which suggests both toughness and a desire to sulk.

Nancy: *She looks rather helplessly round the room.* It isn't what you think, Brenda. This is Jolie.

Garbutt: I don't know what to think. Would you like tea or coffee?

Jolie: I need something stronger. How 'bout a beer?

Garbutt: I can offer you a sherry.

Jolie: *Shrugs and takes out a packet of cigarettes.*

Garbutt: Oh no, you don't. Now, what's all this about a baby?

Jolie: *Shrugs again and sticks out her bottom lip. It makes her ring dance.* Nothing. I didn't want no baby. Half the time I'm on the street. So where'd I put a baby? You tell me. They wouldn't let me get rid of it, said it was too late, so I done what my mum useta do. Boiling hot baths. Jumping off tables. That did the trick. But it hurt like hell when it started to come. That's why she—*points to Nancy who looks worried and flustered*—she give me some help and said just rest, I dunno about resting but I was glad to be done with it all.

Garbutt: The baby? *She walks back over to the counter and picks up the mug of soup she'd prepared for herself.* Here, you'd better have this. You need to keep your strength up.

Jolie: I'm pretty strong. *She goes over and lifts up one of the wooden chairs at the table.* And I'm pretty mad. Them bastards—I never wanted no baby. *She brings the chair crashing down. A leg breaks.* Men!

Garbutt: Do you mind! *She looks at Nancy then back at the girl.* So what sort of baby was it? I mean—how old?

Jolie: What d'you mean—how old? It hadn't had a birthday.

Garbutt: Was it full term? *She goes over and puts her broken chair to one side.* Just as well it's an old chair.

Nancy: *Apologetically.* I'll get you another one.

Garbutt: No. Just tell me about this baby.

Jolie: I feel like breaking something else.

Garbutt: Well, don't—or I'll—

Jolie: Tell the cops! That's a joke. You're the one that stuck the baby in the bin—not me.

Brenda and Nancy exchange looks. They have moved closer together after giving Jolie the mug of soup. It suggests they need protection from this sudden irruption of an alien element into their quiet lives.

Garbutt: So where did you put your baby?

Jolie: That's my business.

Garbutt: Well, it's my business. I'm the one getting blamed.

Jolie *Starts to laugh.* That is really really funny! So whose baby was it you put in if it wasn't mine? Or they think an old biddy like you had a baby? That's a laugh!

A face appears dimly at the window and a faint sound of steps outside.

Garbutt: I did not put any baby in a bin! I put a bag of rubbish in. That's all. And now I'm getting blamed for something you did. *She sounds cross but her demeanour gradually changes.* But if you've just had a baby—well, it is an emotional time for a woman—a teenager—

Jolie: I'm sixteen.

Garbutt: So you need medical care—to make sure—

Jolie: That's garbage! No doctor's ever cared what happened to me. Just want a chance to poke around for free, that's all they're after. Y'know what I reckon about doctors?

Nancy: No, but you've obviously had a bad experience.

Jolie: Bad experience! *She walks across to the pot plants and picks up a maidenhair fern. Before anyone can stop her she has slammed it to the floor.*

That's what I think of doctors. Who d'you think put me up the spout. And then didn't want a pay? You got it. He said the younger the cuter, he wanted me in nothing but cute little white socks. *She stamps on the broken fern.* That's what I do to his baby—wish I could—and then chuck it in a bin—

The door suddenly opens and Richards and Stevens come barging in.

Jolie rounds on the two women. You bloody bitches! So it was all a set-up!

Garbutt: No, of course it isn't. Nancy wanted to help you. It's her job, helping new mothers—

Jolie goes over to the counter and another pot, a begonia, joins the fern on the floor. Jolie starts jumping up and down on the mess. That's what I think of you an' your help, you sly old bitches!

Richards: What is going on? Are you the baby's mother?

Jolie: Course not! It's these two, they steal babies!

She turns and runs out, slamming the door behind her.

Richards: And do you?

Garbutt: *Belligerently.* Do I what?

Nancy: *Hesitating to break in.* That girl, she really needs help. She's just had a baby.

Richards: And you helped her dispose of it.

Nancy: *Looks rather helplessly at the two men then at Brenda.* No, truly, I didn't.

Richards: You brought it round here and asked your friend to do it for you? Just dump it somewhere. And the young mother got angry—

Nancy: But I never met her before today. Yesterday I mean. I was just trying to help her—

Richards: By disposing of her baby.

Nancy: *Shocked.* Oh no! I would never do such a thing.

Richards: Then how did her baby get in this lady's bin?

Nancy: But we don't know if it is, her baby, I mean. She won't tell us what she did with her baby!

Both men look disbelieving.

Garbutt: You told me someone heard the baby crying. You didn't tell me if the baby is alive or dead.

Nancy: But it can't be. Her baby was dead. Stillborn. That's why she told me she would throw it away somewhere. *Her tone suggests doubt.*

Stevens: Throw it away? *He in his turn sounds shocked.*

Nancy: She said she had tried to get rid of it and it hadn't worked.

Richards: How d'you know her baby was stillborn?

Nancy: Because—because she came in, she said she'd had a miscarriage, she refused to be seen by a doctor and I suppose it was too late anyway. I do know

there was no baby with her. *Her voice grows firmer.* I have seen lots of women who have just given birth, you know. It is hard to hide ... the mess ...

Both men look at each other.

Richards: Let me get this correct. We've got one living baby without parents and one dead baby—somewhere—belonging to the girl who's just left? Is that what you're saying?

Garbutt: I know it sounds bizarre. *She sounds tired.* But you told me you found a live baby. So if she really did have a miscarriage ...

Richards: Quite frankly I don't believe you. You're in it together.

Brenda Garbutt goes to a cupboard and takes out a dustpan and brush and begins to clean up the mess on the floor. I loved my little plants and now look at them ...

Stevens: You said you broke a pot and threw it away. How do we know you didn't have another go at them?

Garbutt: Oh go away! Go and do tests or something. Go and find that poor girl and talk to her, help her, she's only sixteen and someone took advantage of her. But just GO AWAY!

She goes over to the door and opens it. Nancy follows the men over. Richards and Stevens hesitate in the door then go out. Richards turns back. You aren't out of the woods yet, ladies, two babies isn't a likely story. We'll be back.

Brenda and Nancy follow them to the door as though determined to see that they really do leave.

Scene Four:

Brenda and Nancy come inside, close the door, and turn on the light.

Nancy: It's your own fault. You were trying to save someone some work by only putting your bin out when it was really full—and now look at the mess you're in.

Garbutt: *Shrugs.* It doesn't make sense. I could not have put my bag on top of a crying baby. I just don't believe that. Someone took out a bag to give them room and put the baby in and someone, thank goodness, heard it crying. It's nothing to do with us.

Nancy: And neither is Jolie. Not now.

Garbutt: But you must have some idea where she took her baby.

Nancy: Well, I don't. She came in, had a cup of tea, Sister gave her some pads and urged her to stay, but she went out. I said she wasn't well enough to be walking round. She said she had to go for a walk. I think she followed me home. It was quite late when she came to my door. I'm not a Good Samaritan. I didn't really want her in my house. But I couldn't say no. I made up a bed and she just went to bed and slept right through the morning. I gave her some lunch. I tried to persuade her to see a doctor. Then I thought I would ring you. You would know what to do. You usually do.

Garbutt: Well, I don't. She obviously left the stillborn baby somewhere and then there was a twin and she went into labour again and had another and put it in ... and came back to your house ... something like that ...

Nancy: I need that sherry. *She hesitates.* But I just don't think that's possible. We would have noticed ... something ...

Garbutt: I wish you'd never brought her round. I might've convinced them I wasn't in the business of baby-making. Now, they still seem to believe I did ... I can't believe anyone would suspect me of ...

Nancy: Oh, that's right! Yes, go on and blame me for trying to help some poor street kid!

Garbutt: Well, you blamed me for trying to save the garbage men some work—

Nancy: I have never in my life put my rubbish in someone else's bin—and I *hate* people who do it to me.

Garbutt: Oh you do, do you? Well, let me tell you—

Nancy: No, I've had enough of you for one day—

Nancy goes over to the last remaining pot, an attractive fuschia, picks it up, and prepares to throw it on the floor.

Brenda Garbutt rushes over to her and wrestles the pot away from her. My poor little babies! How could you? Oh how could you? She bursts into tears.

Nancy steps back, as though shocked by her own actions, then she goes to Brenda and before Brenda can recoil she puts her arms around her. I don't know what's come over us, love. We are babes in the wood, with our pot plants and our soup, and our little sherries for a treat and we don't know what to do with the Jolies of this world—how we can help them—how to know what is help ... and what is ... I don't know ... being busybodies, do-gooders, patronising old so-and-sos ...

They cling together for a little longer and then step back slightly and look at each other then, ruefully, at the mess on the floor.

Brenda Garbutt says slowly And we're not out of the woods yet, not while they think ... She begins to tenderly lift the mangled plants and lay them out on newspaper ... My poor little babies ...

CURTAIN

‘DOWN THE STREET AND ROUND THE CORNER’

(ONE-ACT-PLAY)

Cast: Aleesha Blunden. Late teens. Attractive girl wearing shorts and a t-shirt but looking a bit sullen and fed up with life. Jared Binks. Early twenties. A bit overweight, cheerful, gives the impression of someone taken up with himself and not really interested in other people. Mr Blunden (Ted). Working man in his fifties relaxing at home still in overalls, balding head, looking a bit grimy and weary. Mrs Blunden (Ina) about fifty, hair nicely permed, but also looking a bit weary and worn down.

Sets: 2 sets, one a living room looking out to the street with the faint glow of the smelter silhouetting the houses the other side of the street. Conventional and unremarkable furnishings, TV, armchairs, knick-knacks and photos on several small tables, plastic flowers in a big urn, chocolate-box landscape prints on the walls. The other set a garden fence and gate with dimly-silhouetted houses beyond and the distant lurid glow of the smelter behind them with the silhouette of pipes, elevators, tanks etc. There is a faint but continuous sound of machinery in the distance.

Time: Evening.

SCENE ONE

Jared and Aleesha are standing by the garden gate. Jared is chewing gum. Aleesha fiddles with her hair.

Aleesha: It’s alright for you—

Jared: Hey, I don’t see what you’re worrying about. We can get married any time. They prefer married men.

Aleesha: No, they don’t. It’s never done Dad any good. And it’s not like we’re going to get anything. We’re Zone B.

Jared: That’s still better than Zone A.

Aleesha: I don't think it is. It all settles on us. Look at our awful garden—and Mum tries so hard—yours is heaps better. It's because all the stuff comes down here, on us. They won't admit that.

She goes over to the fence and lifts a notice taped on. Look at this. They're on every fence and we're all in the same boat. At least you're going to get some money—and help with moving. We don't get anything.

Jared: That's why I said that, about us getting married, you can come too.

Aleesha: That's not a good enough reason to get married. And there's mum and dad ... and you never said anything about us getting married till today. Nothing about love.

Jared: Doesn't mean I haven't been thinking about it. *He leans closer and gives her a kiss.* So there. We can go anywhere. Leave town, go up north, go down south.

Aleesha: *She doesn't seem to have been taking much notice and hasn't responded to his kiss. She pulls the notice off the fence.* Look what it says. All this about Zone A and Zone B and Zone C. It doesn't make sense.

Jared: Who cares? We'll be gone.

Aleesha: I care. This was my home. What's it going to be like to come home and find it's all a mess?

Jared: Tell them to move too.

Aleesha: They don't get a penny. You do. And how can they sell the house when no one'll want to live right next door to the plant? That's what I'd like to know.

Jared: They might—if it's cheap enough.

Aleesha: And why should they have to give it away? The company pushed them to buy in, now they're doing everything to make the place, the—the investment worthless.

Jared: *A bit snidely.* You should be a lawyer, that's the way they talk. *She tries to stick the notice back on the fence but it falls on the ground.*

Jared: You shouldn't of done that. The company'll come round and say ... you'll probably get fined or something.

Aleesha: I don't believe that. How are they going to know it was me? It might be the wind. Or someone going by.

Jared: Course they'll know it's you. It's your notice.

Aleesha: No, it's not. They're all the same, every one. I bet they are.

Jared: Aleesha, the clever clogs, got an answer for everything. You know what I mean. The one on your fence is yours.

Aleesha: Then I need to take it inside and show them. They might go out the back way, they mightn't go out at all tomorrow. Dad might be sick and stay at home.

Jared: I'll bet he doesn't. I'll bet he goes to work. Just so he can have a good whinge.

Aleesha: My dad doesn't whinge. And you can't say he does.

Jared: He does so. My dad says he's the biggest whinger there. *He waves a hand in the direction of the refinery.* They probably hope he'll get so fed up now he'll go away and they'll never have to hear him whingeing again.

Aleesha: Then *you* can go away too, because I wouldn't marry you if you were the only guy in town. So there!

Jared: Oh come on, everyone says you hate your dad, that he's nothing but a troublemaker and never wants you to have any fun. So how come you're standing up for him now?

Aleesha: You don't understand anything, do you? You're just stupid. My dad stands up for the things he thinks is right. That's why they want him to go. They don't like him saying things aren't good enough there. Your dad should be supporting him not putting him down. *She has got quite emotional as she speaks.* If he and all the others got behind my dad maybe things would get better. But they're all wimps like your dad, so long as they get their pay and don't get sick and get some compo for their house—that's all that matters. No wonder the company thinks it can get away with murder!

Jared: That's rubbish. My dad's got his head screwed on right. He can see what's what, like which side his bread is buttered on. Your dad is just some old leftie ratbag that thinks a few meetings'll make him look like the workers' champion. He doesn't know anything about the world as it is now. Might've worked in the old days, now the Chinese and the Japanese don't care how the stuff is made, they just want it shipped out, regular, and no upsets. No wonder the company wants him gone.

Aleesha: And all these? *She waves her hand as though to indicate all the other houses along the street, invisible now in the dusk.* You think they all deserve to lose everything?

Jared: If they couldn't see which way the world is going, yeah, sure. Guys like your dad are completely out of touch with the modern world.

Aleesha: And you had the absolute cheek to come round and say you want to marry me, you don't know anything, you're so up yourself it isn't funny—

Jared: No, I'm not, I'm saying your dad's an old has-been and mine isn't. And mine'll have a job long after your's has ended up on the scrap heap. And anyway you're better looking than Marcie—

Aleesha: *Raises her hand.* Take that, Jared Binks! *She gives him a good slap. Then she turns and walks along the street pulling each notice off each fence. Jared yells* I'm only telling it like it is! And I'll come round and laugh when your dad gets his redundancy ... and I'll bet it'll be soon. *He walks across the street.*

The lights dim.

SCENE TWO

Mrs Blunden *is peeling and chopping carrots. Her husband can be seen through a doorway seated in an armchair. He is obviously watching TV as a game show can be heard. She says:* Don't you think it's time she came in?

Ted: I don't know what you're fussing about. She can't come to much harm at the garden gate. *He gets up and comes in to the kitchen.*

Ina: He's been boasting about all the money they're going to get.

Ted: I know. I didn't say anything to her but I just hope she can see what sort of guy that young fella is, what all that family are. Crawlers. Still, there's no point in playing the heavy dad, don't want her to think it'd be fun to thumb her nose at me.

Ina: Why do you have it in for George and Jared? What have they done to you?

Ted: Slimy bastards the both of them. George's always sneaking to the foreman. You can't say 'look at that steam pipe, nearly rusted through, that'll be an accident soon'—and he's off to Knowles to say I'm making trouble. And Knowles told the young fella he's 'management material'. I wanted to laugh, talk about a prize sneak, and there's no way I want him in the family ...

Ina: But I do see the attraction—for a girl, I mean. He looks and sounds like a young fella going places. And when they get their compo and move and we sit here beside—beside everything, all this new machinery—well, maybe Aleesha'll want to move too.

Ted: When we go we'll go together—even if we have to walk away with nothing but our furniture and the car. Aleesha can see there's a principle involved—

Ina: Can she? I wonder. Could you see the principles involved in things when you were eighteen?

Ted: If I couldn't it wasn't because me dad never said anything—

Ina: But it wasn't really much of a life for you, not really, not with your dad going on day and night talking about the rights of the working man—and *then leaving your poor mum to bring up five kids on her own.* She never got much respect for being a working woman, no one talked about *her* rights.

Ted: *Hesitates.* But you can't get away from the principle of the thing.

Ina: But principles, even if you talk about 'em till the cows come home, didn't put any food on your table. She had to go out and clean and there was no one worrying about *her* pay and conditions, were there? So which message do you think Aleesha took from all that?

Ted: Well, if she gets serious about that smarmy Jared fella I'll know I've been wasting me breath all these years.

Ina: He's young, he might change.

Ted: Like hell, you've got no idea what it's like over there, just cogs in a machine, and then there'll be an accident, and they'll all be running round like

headless chooks saying it wasn't their bloody fault. That place is a joke. Maintenance is a joke.

Ina: Then—don't you think it *would* be better if we moved, started over, we're not too old—and the accident might be you—

Ted: That's what I'm saying, all the time, there's principles—next accident, maybe it will leave someone dead, not just missing a hand—and I want to be there to say 'I told you, all you lazy bastards that couldn't be bothered to fix things properly'. That's what principles are about, Ina, keeping the workers safe, keeping a good eye on pay and conditions.

Ina: That's all very well, Ted, it'd make a good speech if you were a pollicie—but what if you're the one dead? What then?

Ted: Then you can take up these principles and see you get a fair deal. You'll know what to do.

Ina: And don't you care if you get squashed or run over or burnt or vaporised?

Ted: *He gives that a bit of a chuckle.* Well, I do and I don't. I've been trying to get 'em to clean up their act there, do something about all the things wrong, for thirty years, sometimes I think the only thing that'll make 'em change is someone dead. What's that thing they say about it taking a dead kiddie to get a zebra crossing, something like that?

Aleesha: *Comes in rather tempestuously with a handful of torn paper.* What's that about a 'dead kiddie', dad? Who has died?

Ina: *Rather repressively.* Your dad is saying they won't make things better at the refinery until someone dies there. I know that's often the way it is—but I don't want it to be your father.

Aleesha: Well, I don't mind if it's that Jared. The turd said he only asked me to marry him because I'm prettier than Marcia. I think we should pack up and go before people realise what's happening, that way you can get a reasonable price. *She slaps the bundle of notices down on the table.* And we can go somewhere where I can find a job, not this useless place, where the only jobs for girls are disappearing anyway.

Ina: So you missed out on the supermarket job, love?

Aleesha: They say they're downsizing.

Ina: But ... if the plant is growing ... that doesn't make sense ...

Aleesha: I heard they're bringing people in on those visas now ... soon, maybe, there won't be jobs at the refinery either. If we go somewhere else, maybe I can get a really decent job, I can even make enough so you can take it a bit easier.

Ina: Oh no, love, your dad has principles. The working man doesn't send his wife, his daughter, his mother, out to work.

Aleesha: *Looks from her dad to her mum and back again.* I don't mind. I want to work. That way I might even meet someone I really like.

Ted has been smoothing out all the notices as she speaks. He has also been casually checking them. Now he says in a musing way, Which one was ours?

Aleesha *comes over to the bundle and says,* The most torn one. Why?

Ted: *In a puzzled voice.* It's different. All the others will be offered some compensation for noise and disruption. We don't get anything.

Ina: The sneaks! Why are they treating us like that!

Aleesha: Because, according to Jared, they say dad is a trouble maker.

Ted: Troublemaker baloney! I always said that lot wouldn't know a principle if they fell over it.

Ina *stirs the pot on the stove while she considers this.* So what are we going to do? Is there a principle which says a working man can't run away from a fight? *She looks from her husband to her daughter and says more slowly,* Are you sure you don't care about him, love?

Aleesha: I can't wait to go—

Ted: Did anyone see you take these notices down?

Aleesha: Only Jared.

Ted: And I'll bet he's telling his dad right now.

Aleesha: Do you think I should put them back?

Ina: *Drily.* It depends on what principle is involved this time.

She comes over and picks up the bundle of notices. And I think it is about time I did something to show that there is a different principle involved, nothing to do with working men, and all to do with non-working women.

Aleesha: *Puzzled.* So what do you plan to do, Mum?

Ina: I came here with Ted, thirty years ago, there weren't any jobs for women, but I made a home for us, I put up with dust on the washing, I put up with noise and dirt, I had to scrub your dad's clothes and we had to pay extra when they said we couldn't eat the vegies we'd grown because there were heavy metals on them and in the soil—and we breathed in the dirty air, and the school was hardly a school to be proud of, and we paid through the nose to get groceries here, and there was no public transport in the town, so we had to walk or cadge lifts ... and I never complained ... not even when your dad was passed over for promotion because he said that place is an accident waiting to happen ... the whole town is an accident, that's what I think, and I'll bet it's taken twenty years off our lives with all that dust in the air, and the racket day and night.

Ted *nods slowly.*

Aleesha *says loudly* You mean you want to go too, soon as we can?

Ina: That, for sure, but not yet, it's time I went over there and said something about principles—and I will take these, *she taps the sheets of paper,* and see what those mongrels have to say when it's a *woman* talking about principles—

Ted: What principle are you going to talk about?

Ina: Fairness. That's what I'm going to talk about. Would you like to come with me, love? *She turns to her daughter.* And if you see that Jared there you can give him the thumbs down. And *then* we'll think about moving. Where to go and what to do.

Aleesha comes over and gives her mother a big hug. **Ted** looks from his wife to his daughter and then he says with a wry grin: Yeah, principles, you can't beat 'em.

Curtain Falls

‘THE DEATH OF LANGUAGE’

(ONE-ACT-PLAY)

Cast:

Principal: Middle-aged man, fairly large, dressed in a suit, can have a moustache, be bald, or have neat hair to suit the sense of a responsible position. He is well-spoken with a strong voice. Mr Carter.

Secretary: Middle-aged woman, neatly but unobtrusively dressed, a businesslike air about her. She too is well-spoken with a clear strong voice. Ms Barnes. If you would like to use actors of a different ethnic background just change the names. But the play is about language so they need to keep clear precise speech.

Parent: Large man in his thirties. Untidy as though he has taken time out from work. His whole body language suggests belligerence and a slight unease in the company of people who are better educated and better dressed. Mr Sutton.

Set:

Principal’s Office: desk, shelves, cupboards. Kettle and a tray of cups and a packet of biscuits. A framed picture on the wall of the principal and a woman, of an age to be his wife, both staring unsmiling at the camera. Also several class photos. At the rear of the office is a door, centre, which is closed in Scene One but opens in Scene Two to give the illusion of a long corridor with plain lino, plain walls, a couple of pictures and some notices stuck up, can also have some drawings or paintings done by students. A distant door.

Time:

Daytime, hour doesn’t need to be specified but lights can be on in the corridor.

Scene One:

Mr Carter: I just can’t bear it. All these parents coming in here and mangling the language. It should be a school for parents so then I could yell at them, send them away to do homework, pull them up every second sentence—

Ms Barnes: Surely it isn’t that bad? And it’s only one day a year. Two at the most.

Mr Carter: Lay, lie, laid, lied, lain, lying. Them, they, that, which, you, I want to yell at them—there’s no such word as youse!

Ms Barnes: Then maybe there should be. Youse the plural of you. Think of the trouble it would save.

Mr Carter: And where, dear woman, do you stop—once you start messing with the language to suit the morons? Tell me that.

Ms Barnes: But think what fun it could be? *He pulls his mouth down and shakes his head slightly as she speaks.* And instead of some of us riding round on our high horses and feeling superior—well, we would all be part of the glorious experiment.

Mr Carter: *Still shaking his head.* And very soon no one would understand anyone else. Is that what you really want? For us to be like the New Guinea tribes that can't understand the people in the next valley?

Ms Barnes: *Puts a couple of folders down on his desk.* Never mind, it takes all sorts.

Mr Carter: I don't think it does. In fact I want it to take one sort, the sort which respects our language, loves our language, no other sort.

Ms Barnes: But it really isn't worth getting high blood pressure over. Look at you. You need to sit back and do some deep breathing.

Mr Carter: No, I don't. And don't go fussing over me. You can't change them. I can't change them. But that doesn't make seeing parents, listening to parents, any easier. Not parents *en masse*.

Ms Barnes: Well, you could avoid coming in at the beginning of the school year. I could tell prospective parents that you have been stranded somewhere.

Mr Carter: Or I could go conveniently deaf for a few days ... but it isn't the answer. I still have to live in a society which treats grammar as something only boring old jackasses take seriously. I still have to listen to mangled pronunciation. Every time George W. Bush opened his mouth and tried to say 'nuclear' ... what did our students take from that?

Ms Barnes: Not a lot I wouldn't think. Ten-year-olds are more likely to admire and copy footballers or singers—

Mr Carter: That is hardly comforting! Their main words are 'yeah', 'but' and 'like'—

Ms Barnes: Not to mention some less attractive ones.

Mr Carter: *Following his own line of thought.* And every year their vocabularies get smaller. Soon we'll need to explain the most basic things in words of one syllable.

Ms Barnes: Never mind. Would you like to have your tea now?

Mr Carter: Are you sure that's all the interviews for now?

Ms Barnes: You can have a cup of tea on your desk while you talk, you know, you don't need to feel that you can only have tea and biscuits in lone splendour. It might even put some parents at ease, seeing you as just a normal person—

Mr Carter: I *am* a normal person. I just want to see our language treated as something more than monkey talk. That should be the norm.

Ms Barnes: But perhaps something lurks in the minds of parents, a kind of fear of the principals they had as children. And being nervous makes them less articulate.

Mr Carter: It is very nice of you to come to their defence but why should vague fears lingering from their childhoods make them say ‘youse’ or ‘them books’?

Ms Barnes: I know. But perhaps those kinds of mistakes and their difficulty in expressing themselves, in what they want for their children, are two different things. I mean—

Mr Carter: Now don’t you start saying ‘I mean’. I just had a mother in here who started every sentence with ‘I mean’. I wanted to ask her if she had any idea what she actually meant.

Ms Barnes: Poor dear, that probably would have made her even more nervous.

Mr Carter: How do you know she was nervous? She had plenty to say for herself even if she didn’t have a clue what she meant by it all. She didn’t know what she wanted for her child except that she wanted him to become a lawyer some day, not because she admired the law, but because lawyers make pots of money. I told her that a student who mumbles into his boots isn’t going to make a lawyer. She didn’t believe me but at least it brought her back to her son’s needs right now.

Ms Barnes: And it isn’t necessarily true. Lots of lawyers mumble into their boots. Justice may be seen sometimes but it often isn’t heard, except by the people with the recording equipment. I don’t know why they don’t train lawyers to speak clearly.

Mr Carter: *Dryly.* You cheer me up no end, my dear. Perhaps we can have a debate, even a play, and call it ‘Should Justice Be Heard?’

Ms Barnes: Well, you certainly wouldn’t go in to a court of law to hear the English language at its most perfect.

Mr Carter: Then perhaps that is why there is so much petty crime. People do not understand each other. That might be a subject for a speech in assembly.

Ms Barnes: I think most people would understand ‘Hands up!’ or ‘Open the till’, and I doubt if most burglars, muggers, dangerous drivers, really see the need to go into any detail—and saying to the people who have come in to your corner store in stocking masks ‘I will only comply with your directions if you stop splitting infinitives and understand that the plural of you is you’—

Mr Carter: *Starts to laugh before saying* It might be worth trying. But I think you’d better go and see if any more inarticulate language-manglers have wandered in.

Ms Barnes: It’s all right. I left Marcella in the office. She can keep them waiting. I’ll send the next batch along when you’ve had time for your tea.

Mr Carter: You are very kind. I do appreciate it.

Ms Barnes *turns and walks to the door but as she reaches it there is a thunderous knock. She opens it cautiously.*

Scene Two:

Mr Sutton: *Barges in, almost pushing her to one side.* You the useless principal of this useless school?

Ms Barnes: Do come in, sir, and take a chair. Would you like a cup of tea?

Mr Sutton: No, I wouldn't like a fuckin' cup o' tay! No wonder my son's just got bashed up—you two wankers in here havin' your tea! Why aren't youse out there keepin' a bloody eye on things? Call this a school! I'd call it a disaster waitin' to happen!

Mr Carter: *Calmly, indicating a spare chair.* If you would tell us what the problem is. And your name is?

Mr Sutton: Sutton. You shouldn't need me to come in here an' tell you what the fuckin' problem is! My son's just been attacked by two big boys, that's what's fuckin' well happened! Covered in blood and youse two're in here havin' your cups o' tay! I should be gettin' on to the department, the papers, the ministers, everyone—and youse two should be bloody ashamed of yourselves—

Mr Carter: Your son has been attacked—where?

Mr Sutton: Out the bloody back o' the buildings, that's where, and no one mindin' out for him. I should take him straight out again—or bloody well sue the pants off this school! What sort of care is this, poor bloody little sod, with blood all over him—

Mr Carter: Did you ask the office to call an ambulance?

Mr Sutton: That's your responsibility, not mine! On school property—I know what the law says, all that guff about duty o' care, duty baloney, youse lot wouldn't care tuppence about my kid, sittin' in here having your tea an' bikkies, oh yeah, that's what youse lot do every day.

Mr Carter: I'm very sorry to hear about your son but the sooner we get an ambulance—and did you see which boys attacked him?

Mr Sutton: Course not! You think I'm some weirdo—stand back an' let some useless little gits punch him while I do fuckin' nothing? Whaddy take me for?

Mr Carter: So how do you know they were boys from this school?

Mr Sutton: *Leaps to his feet again.* Why d'ya think I come back in here? I want compo for my kid—either that or I send in a complaint—an' believe me, I won't be sayin' anything good about this useless school—

Mr Carter: Ms Barnes, would you go along to the office and make sure the boy gets medical care. If it looks serious ring an ambulance. *She nods and goes out.*

Mr Carter *turns back to the irate father.* Would you like me to call the police? An assault on school premises is a serious matter.

Mr Sutton: No, I want payment for my kid's bloody nose, that's what I want, an' if I don't get it, I'll be straight on to the fuckin' minister an' we'll see what the useless bugger's got to say for himself, an' I won't stop till I've got something to pay for my kid's mess up, bad enough sayin' kids gotta come to school, worse when the little buggers can't even be safe here.

Mr Carter: I'm sorry but we have to follow procedure. Medical help for your son first, then a report to the police, then I hope your son can identify the boys who attacked him—

Mr Sutton: Course he can't! He was down there on the ground, yellin an' screamin' at them. You think he was lookin' at 'em to remember 'em later, don't make me puke! I'd like to see useless little farts like youse lot up in court, think you're better than a hard-working bloke—that's all youse lot think about, how bloody clever youse all are—

Mr Carter: Mr Sutton, we will get to the bottom of this attack on your son, but you coming in here and yelling isn't going to help us get to the bottom of it.

Mr Sutton: Look, you snotty little bastard, all I want for me kid is some compo, so you pay up or else.

Mr Carter: It would have to go through the department to get you any compensation and it can't go through till we know exactly what has happened to your son.

He stands up as though to walk to the door.

Mr Sutton: That's right, go all fuckin' bureaucratic on me, keep me danglin' for twelve months, I know what it's like, an' go all smarmy an' say how you're so-o-o-o-o sorry but it's too late, I know the sort of useless excuses *departments* come up with.

Mr Carter: Maybe you do, maybe you've had lots of experience, but I still can't do more than send your son to be checked and call in the police. Now, if you'd come with me and show me just where your son was attacked we can—set everything in motion. And I hope he's sitting down somewhere quietly till the ambulance comes.

Mr Sutton: *Walks over to Mr Carter and shakes his fist in his face.* I shoulda known what sort o' lily-livered cowards run schools. But forget it, just fuckin' forget it, I'm goin' but it won't be the last you hear from me! *He gives a last fierce shake of a large fist, turns and barges out, slamming the door.* **Mr Carter** stands a minute in silence contemplating the closed door. *Heavy footsteps can be heard fading in to the distance.*

There is a light knock at the door and Ms Barnes enters carrying a folder.

Mr Carter: I'm so sorry about that. I would not have had you exposed to all that unpleasantness. And is his son badly hurt?

Ms Barnes: We could find no sign of his son. I think, but I may be wrong, that he was trying it on. I don't know why. He surely could not have expected to get you to pay anything just on his say-so.

Mr Carter: No, although I almost felt a twenty from my wallet would be worth it to see the back of him. I wonder if he's tried it on before. And the poor boy—it can't be easy living with a dad like that.

Ms Barnes: Well, that's the thing, we haven't got a student by the name of Sutton enrolled. The boy might be using his mother's name. There might be some custody issues playing out. I don't really know.

Mr Carter: Are you sure there's no sign of the son, blood, other boys hanging round?

Ms Barnes: I went outside for a quick look but there's no one behind the school and he definitely didn't bring his son in to the office. But there are two more sets of parents waiting to see you. I think that might be the key to it. He hoped you would give him a quick payment so as not to be embarrassed in front of other parents. I found him quite intimidating and I wouldn't want him talking to other parents, telling them ... wrong things ...

Mr Carter: No, you're right. And I wouldn't want to meet him down a dark alley though how much is sound and fury and how much is him gearing up to actually use his fists ... I cannot begin to guess. *He smiles slightly.* And I suppose he made mincemeat of my theories. I wish he *had* confined himself to 'yeah', 'but' and 'like' and maybe 'I mean'. And I didn't have a spare moment in which to look for split infinitives or to tell him the plural of you is you.

Ms Barnes: No, but I do agree with you. I do like to hear people, parents, children, everyone, speak well.

Mr Carter: Still, I won't bore you with it any more. I managed to drive my wife away, she said she never wanted to hear the word *Grammar* again. And I don't want to make you wish you'll never have to hear a word about the demise of English ever again. I'll just think it.

Ms Barnes: *Laughs out loud.* I don't mind and I sometimes have the same kinds of thoughts. Anyway, you've got two more couples to see, I've put the details there, *indicating the folders*, and after that I think you deserve to have your lunch in peace.

Mr Carter: And with luck we've seen the last of Mr Sutton and these parents will not say 'youse' once.

Ms Barnes: Here's hoping.

They exchange a look which is both sympathetic and affectionate.

CURTAIN FALLS

Note: 'Some Anniversary' won the Short Play at the 2016 Kingaroy Eisteddfod before they decided to close down their literary section.