

BUNNY

A play by

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SCENE ONE.

(A LIVING ROOM, WITH A SOFA FACING THE AUDIENCE. JIM, A MAN IN HIS EARLY THIRTIES, AND BERT, IN HIS MID TWENTIES, ENTER)

BERT

Come in. Lie down on the floor. There's nothing funny about it.

(JIM LIES FACE DOWN)

BERT

(STRADDLES JIM AND STARTS TO MASSAGE HIS SHOULDERS) Very knotty, very inexpressive shoulders you've got. (HE STARTS TO BANG THEM VIOLENTLY WITH HIS FIST)

JIM

Ow. You're hurting.

(BERT GETS OFF HIM AND THEY SIT SIDE BY SIDE)

BERT

What did you say your name was?

JIM

Jim.

BERT

I've heard you watching TV, Jim. Soap operas burn permanent pathways of banality in your brain, you know.

JIM

It's a substitute for neighbourhood gossip.

BERT

But you have real neighbours! Like me. Why don't you ask me some questions, I'll answer them honestly. Come on. Anything you're interested in finding out about me.

(JIM LOOKS AT HIM BLANKLY FOR A WHILE, THEN LOOKS AWAY)

BERT

Look me in the eye. It's how to win people's confidence.

(PAUSE)

BERT

Why don't you answer your phone? It rings all night.

JIM

Why don't you mind your own business?

BERT

There's no need to be defensive. If you dropped those barriers you wouldn't need to watch Neighbours. I can tell you're not an introvert. A social situation doesn't set your heart racing, does it?

JIM

No.

BERT

What you need is stimulation. That's why extroverts jump off buildings. Got to get their pulses going. It's boredom that's your enemy.

(JIM PICKS UP A FLESH-COLOURED BRA FROM THE SEAT BESIDE HIM)

JIM

Whose is this?

BERT

Helen's. My sister's. (PAUSE) She's not my sister. That was a slip of the tongue.

(JIM SMILES AT HIM. BERT TAKES THE BRA AND DROPS IT BEHIND THE SOFA. HE LEAPS UP)

BERT

I have to go out. I need random stimulation.

(JIM LOOKS AT A PRICE TAG ATTACHED TO THE SOFA)

JIM

Everything still has the prices on.

BERT

We had a fire. In our old flat. Everything was destroyed.

JIM

So you had to start from scratch.

BERT

In every detail. You know, it was watching the Houses of Parliament burn that set Turner painting in a completely different manner. Those fiery clouds. The colours!

JIM

Were you inspired by your fire?

BERT
I wasn't there.

JIM
When does Helen get back?

BERT
She's at the hospital.

(PAUSE)

BERT
Shouldn't you ask why?

JIM
Is she a doctor?

BERT
Yes. What time is it?

JIM
Half past seven.

BERT
(FLAPPING ABOUT) I must go, I must go.

JIM
What's the hurry? Go where?

BERT
I'm due at a restaurant round the corner. A birthday.

JIM
Whose birthday?

(BERT REACHES INTO HIS POCKET, TAKES OUT A PILL AND PUTS IT IN HIS MOUTH)

JIM
What was that?

BERT
What?

JIM

What you put in your mouth. (HE GOES TO BERT AND STARTS TO PRISE HIS JAW OPEN, TRYING TO LOOK INSIDE HIS MOUTH. BERT PUSHES HIM AWAY)

BERT
Nothing. It's nothing.

(JIM WRESTLES HIM TO THE GROUND AND STARTS TO SEARCH HIM. HE COMES UP WITH A LITTLE BOTTLE OF PILLS, WHICH HE RATTLES)

BERT STANDS UP AND DUSTS HIMSELF DOWN

BERT
Cognitive enhancement. You should try it.

JIM
Oh.

BERT
Hydergine. Used to treat poor memory, confusion, depression and lack of motivation.

(JIM TAKES OUT A PILL AND PUTS IT IN HIS MOUTH)

BERT
I hope you don't have low blood pressure? See, with new drug technology there is no excuse for walking round in a fog.

JIM
It's working.

BERT
It takes a while. Perhaps it's a placebo effect. You may be easy to please. I really must get ready to go out. They'll all be waiting for me.

JIM
OK. What do you have to do to get ready?

(BERT WALKS OVER TO THE TABLE, PICKS UP A PACKET OF CIGARETTES AND A LIGHTER AND PUTS THEM IN HIS POCKET. HE STANDS WAITING)

JIM
Why do you need cognitive enhancement?

BERT
I can never understand what worries people about it. Why just accept our limits? In today's world there's really no need.

JIM

What about side effects?

BERT

There are no side effects. Well, with this one (HE PRODUCES ANOTHER BOTTLE OF PILLS FROM HIS POCKET) you can get spasms in your hands. Mild, quite pleasant. Not disabling. And it improves the flow of information between the left and right hemispheres of your brain.

(JIM TILTS HIS HEAD FIRST TO ONE SIDE AND THEN THE OTHER, THOUGHTFULLY)

BERT

People have a tendency to use one side more than the other. Yes? So if you use the left side more and are cut off from your right side you are inarticulate, and if you use the right side you are verbally dexterous but not visually so. If information flows freely between the two you are using your brain correctly.

JIM

And that would be how?

BERT

I can't explain it clearly, I've only been taking them two days. I'm still quite left-sided.

JIM

Draw a map.

(BERT STARTS LINING UP BOTTLES ON THE TABLE)

BERT

This one's for creative thinking, makes you a bit thirsty but works well, whereas this one's for confidence. Enables you to stand up for yourself in the most deflating circumstances, but makes your eyes water.

JIM

What would I take if, for instance, I was going to face the enemy on unfamiliar ground, and needed to be sure of getting the upper hand?

(BERT HANDS HIM A BOTTLE)

JIM

Very good. What if, say, my library book's late...

BERT

(ANNOYED) Are you coming? (HE EXITS)

JIM

Certainly. (HE SPITS THE PILLS INTO HIS HAND AND PUTS THEM IN HIS POCKET)

(LIGHTS DOWN)

SCENE TWO.

(LIGHTS UP AGAIN. INTERIOR OF A RESTAURANT. A LONG TABLE IS LITTERED WITH DEBRIS. SITTING AT THE TABLE ARE HELEN, A SMARTLY DRESSED THIRTYSOMETHING, DAISY, A SLOANEY YOUNGER WOMAN, AND DAISY'S BOYFRIEND WALRUS, WHO IS HEARTY, STOUT AND LOOKS LIKE A WALRUS.

(JIM AND BERT ARE STANDING AT THE HEAD OF THE TABLE)

JIM

Whose birthday is it?

DAISY

Bert's.

JIM

(TURNING TO BERT) I didn't realise. How old are you?

DAISY

Don't tell him.

BERT

Jim wanted to walk me right to the door. He's not staying.

DAISY

Oh? Where do you have to be?

JIM

Nowhere. (HE SITS DOWN AT THE TABLE)

(BERT STILL STANDS, ANXIOUSLY WRINGING HIS HANDS)

BERT

I gave him a massage. I found him in pain on the stairs.

HELEN

You're the man upstairs. Why don't you answer your phone?

DAISY

How do you know he doesn't?

HELEN

I can hear it, ringing all night. And him moving about.

BERT

I asked him about his phone. He won't say.

WALRUS

(LOOKING UP FOR THE FIRST TIME) Bert! How are the pupils coming along?

HELEN

Bert has them all reading by the time they're five, he's very inspirational.

(BERT COMES AND SITS DOWN NEXT TO JIM)

JIM

What's Bert short for?

DAISY

Hubert.

HELEN

Cuthbert. Herbert.

WALRUS

Englebert.

JIM

Albert?

HELEN

He won't tell.

JIM

But you're his sister, you must know.

HELEN

I'm not his sister.

JIM

Oh, I forgot. He said you were.

(THEY ALL STARE AT BERT THOUGHTFULLY. BERT LEANS OVER TO POUR SOME WATER INTO A GLASS. A SPASM OF HIS HANDS SENDS IT FLYING)

WALRUS

Oops.

DAISY

Always knocking things over.

JIM

Spasms in his hands.

WALRUS

Have you?

BERT

No. Sssh. I'm going to the toilet.

(HE EXITS)

HELEN

It's the side effects of his medicine. Don't mention it again.

WALRUS

Ah. (HE TAPS THE SIDE OF HIS NOSE SIGNIFICANTLY)

DAISY

So... Bert's friend, tell us all about teaching.

JIM

I've never taught.

HELEN

What do you do?

(JIM LEANS FORWARD AND FINGERS THE MATERIAL OF HER DRESS)

JIM

Very nice. Is it new?

HELEN

How did you know that?

JIM

You lost all your possessions in a fire. Devastating. You must wake at night with the crackle

(DAISY AND HELEN LOOK AT EACH OTHER)

HELEN

I escaped the fire unhurt. Fortunately.

(BERT ENTERS. HE APPEARS MUCH MORE SPRIGHTLY)

BERT

(GOES AND SITS NEXT TO HELEN) So, my dear. How was your day? (HE RUBS HER ARM ENCOURAGINGLY)

HELEN

Terrible. I was threatened by a crowd of enraged chronic fatigue patients.

BERT

(TUTTING) A doctor's life! Worse than a dog's.

HELEN

They were fed up because one woman had got stuck in a store cupboard and starved to death because her cries were unheard. They chased me slowly down the street.

DAISY

Tell Jim about your theory of death, Bert. (to JIM) You've got to hear this.

BERT

My theory is that death is merely exclusion. The dead cannot join in anymore. They're forced to crowd round and watch us.

(EVERYONE LOOKS AROUND THEM)

BERT

It's what we're practising for, with the television.

HELEN

No one's watching you, don't worry about that.

DAISY

So Bert, if you masturbate, do you think all your ancestors are standing round looking on?

BERT

I get under the covers.

WALRUS

Bert has a theory for every day of the week. They're great value. What was that one about roadsigns we had last time?

BERT

(BECOMES VISIBLY EXCITED AND AGITATED) The thing is, I was reading

about this new experiment where they've wired up the brains of rats so they can move a lever simply by the process of thought...

HELEN

How do they know what the rats are thinking?

BERT

Well, this leads me to think, stories for instance about telekinesis, Carrie and so on, they weren't stories, they were predictions. A lot of myths and legends are not as you might think residues of the past but predictions of technologies to come. It's like the opposite of collective memory. Traces of the future.

(WALRUS, NOT LISTENING, MIMES HITTING A CRICKET BALL AND MAKES A TOCKING NOISE WITH HIS TONGUE)

BERT

For instance, there is a theory that it is possible to get tiny robots, nanobots, which we are capable of creating now, and programme them to convert atoms of metallic rock into the structure of the brain. So with millions of nanobots it should in theory be possible to convert a large mass of rock, the moon, say, into an enormous brain which would of course be far superior to humans. There is a debate going on right at this very minute as to whether humans should ensure that they remain at the top level of evolution, or should risk creating their own masters.

(PAUSE)

BERT

So in other words stories about God were in fact not memories or myths but a prediction of the time when

JIM

That's most intriguing.

DAISY

Oh marvellous. Why don't they do Jupiter and Mars and Venus at the same time, then we'd have a whole sky full of...

BERT

Gods! Exactly! See! It all starts to make sense! All those old stories! Traces of the future! (HE LEAPS TO HIS FEET IN EXCITEMENT AND STARTS GULPING WATER)

HELEN

Bert, calm down.

WALRUS

He's all right. He's a tonic. Aren't you, Bert? (RAISES HIS GLASS) Cheers.

DAISY

Jim, you must sign Bert's card before you go. (SHE HANDS HIM A PEN)

(JIM SITS AT THE TABLE AND STARTS WRITING IN THE BIRTHDAY CARD. HE CONTINUES WRITING FOR LONGER THAN IS EXPECTED, OBVIOUSLY FILLING UP MUCH OF THE CARD. EVERYONE STARES AND DAISY STARTS TO LAUGH. WHEN JIM HAS FINISHED HE GETS UP AND WALKS BACK TO HIS CHAIR. DAISY CRANES HER HEAD TO READ WHAT HE HAS WRITTEN; AS SHE DOES SO THE SMILE FREEZES ON HER FACE AND SHE LOOKS ANNOYED)

HELEN

What does it say?

DAISY

Nothing. (SHE PUTS HER NAPKIN OVER THE WRITING)

(PAUSE)

HELEN

Jim, why don't you tell us a few theories of your own.

DAISY

We never found out what you do.

JIM

I'm a policeman.

(PAUSE)

BERT

He isn't, don't worry.

(PAUSE)

JIM

Why don't I tell you about something I saw on the television. There's a group of scientists, and they're teaching this chimpanzee to communicate in sign language. They work intensively on this chimp, and part of their experiment is to tell it a story about a creature called Bunny who lives in the vicinity. The chimp is then encouraged to spend its time writing notes to the imaginary Bunny and leaving them in the woods, inviting him to a picnic. But of course Bunny never turns up.

BERT

We are of course descended from apes, who ate from the wrong tree.

WALRUS

My turn. I shall tell the world's most disgusting joke. Man goes in to a morgue, sees Marilyn Monroe's body lying there on the slab, says to the attendant, I'll give you ten quid if you let me feel her tits. (HE CARRIES ON MURMURING THE JOKE IN THE BACKGROUND)

HELEN

Bert had an imaginary friend as a child, didn't you Bert? What was the name again?

BERT

Mrs Hougmagandy.

JIM

Unusual for a little boy to take a married woman as his companion.

DAISY

And what happened to Mrs Hougmagandy, Bert?

BERT

She went on holiday and never came back.

WALRUS

... and so he cut out the cunt and gave it to him, by now VERY disgusted, and said well sir would you like me to WRAP it for you, and the man said, oh, no thanks I'll eat it here.

JIM

So why did you need an imaginary friend, Bert? Were you an only child by any chance?

DAISY

You can tell that a mile off.

JIM

Whereas you had two sisters, I think.

DAISY

How did you know?

JIM

I know the signs.

(HELEN'S MOBILE PHONE RINGS, WITH A VERY DISTINCTIVE RINGTONE. SHE ANSWERS IT)

HELEN

Yes. We've had pudding. Very nice. I had creme brulee. We're on to the telling jokes stage.

DAISY

(snatching the phone) Agh, Helen's got us all in totally strict formation. We daren't deviate.

(PAUSE)

HELEN

(to JIM) Bert still has imaginary friends, you know.

BERT

No, I...

HELEN

Hordes of them. I came into the kitchen once and he was standing on a chair making a speech.

DAISY

About what?

HELEN

I didn't really get the gist of it.

(BERT TAKES A PILL BOTTLE FROM HIS POCKET AND SURREPTITIOUSLY SWALLOWS ONE, NOTICED ONLY BY JIM)

HELEN

Oh Bert, don't cry.

BERT

(WIPING HIS EYES) I'm not.

JIM

Just getting some courage.

BERT

Don't know what you mean.

DAISY

Were you addressing your ancestors, Bert, in your speech?

WALRUS

What were you telling them?

BERT

(GAINING NEW CHEMICAL CONFIDENCE) There's nothing wrong with addressing your ancestors – it's an established tradition in many parts of the globe. I can see you have very little knowledge of the Bushmen.

WALRUS

You've got me there, I have to admit.

BERT

In fact, one may attribute many of the problems of modern life to the lack of attention paid to the ancestral spectator.

DAISY

I put on a good show for them.

HELEN

She does.

BERT

The social exclusion of the dead can have terrible effects on the fabric of society.

DAISY

What kind of trouble can they cause in their condition?

HELEN

Bert, isn't it time for your M-E-D-I-C-A-T-I-O-N?

JIM

What condition are you being treated for?

HELEN

Hush.

BERT

(ASIDE TO JIM) She thinks I'm under the chemical cosh. She's always trying to catch me out in mental illness. Many of her friends have succumbed, she's always on the lookout.

JIM

Don't let her push you into it.

DAISY

No whispering! (SHE GRABS JIM AND PULLS HIM AWAY FROM BERT) You teachers should know better.

JIM

I'm not a teacher, as I've said.

HELEN
What are you?

JIM
I'm a fire insurance investigator.

(LONG PAUSE. EVERYONE FREEZES)

BERT
He isn't.

(EVERYONE RELAXES)

JIM
I'm a psychic.

HELEN
A psychic!

DAISY
Men aren't psychics.

JIM
Why not?

DAISY
They don't believe in it.

JIM
Well, I can prove I'm a psychic. I predict, by the end of the evening, I will have discovered who started your fire.

(PAUSE)

DAISY
What colour knickers am I wearing?

JIM
Purple. It doesn't take a psychic to know that.

(LIGHTS DOWN)

SCENE THREE.

(LIGHTS UP AGAIN. BACK IN BERT AND HELEN'S FLAT. HELEN, BERT, JIM, DAISY, WALRUS PRESENT. THERE IS MUSIC PLAYING. DAISY AND HELEN ARE DOING A DANCE SEQUENCE, OBVIOUSLY ONCE CAREFULLY CHOREOGRAPHED AND NOW HALF-REMEMBERED. BERT AND WALRUS ARE SITTING ON THE SOFA WATCHING. JIM IS WANDERING AROUND. BLACKOUT.

LIGHTS GO UP AGAIN. DAISY AND HELEN ARE SITTING ON THE SOFA PASSING HELEN'S MOBILE BETWEEN THEM AND CHATTING INTO IT. BERT, WALRUS AND JIM ARE ARGUING OVER THE STEPS OF A DANCE. BLACKOUT.

LIGHTS GO UP AGAIN. DAISY AND HELEN ARE WALTZING. WALRUS IS STRETCHED OUT ON THE SOFA. JIM IS PERCHED ON THE ARM AND BERT IS WANDERING AROUND)

HELEN
Ow!

DAISY
Move properly then. Let's have My Fair Lady now!

BERT
No.

JIM
(TO BERT) Tell me your musical tastes.

BERT
I feel Debussy is the only thing worth listening to, although I can tolerate Neil Young.

DAISY
He's lying.

JIM
Why should he lie about his own preferences?

DAISY
He wants to impress you.

HELEN
He knows Joe Jackson won't do.

JIM

Why should he want to impress me? I hold no authority.

HELEN

You'd be amazed who Bert tries to impress.

DAISY

He's ingratiating towards the window cleaner.

HELEN

But in your case I'd say he has larger motives.

DAISY

He wants to catch you in his web.

(THEY DANCE TOWARDS JIM AND CATCH HIM BETWEEN THEIR LINKED ARMS AS IN THE CHILDREN'S GAME ORANGES AND LEMONS.

WALRUS HAS WOKEN UP AND IS OBSERVING SLEEPILY FROM THE SOFA.)

WALRUS

Run for it, whatsyername.

(DAISY AND HELEN DANCE PULLING JIM BETWEEN THEM. BERT STEPS OVER AND PULLS HIM AWAY FROM THEM.)

JIM

What did you do that for?

BERT

Just helping you out.

JIM

I don't need any help.

BERT

You looked ill at ease.

JIM

I'm perfectly at ease. (HE STRAIGHTENS OUT HIS DISHEVELLED CLOTHING AND SITS DOWN APPARENTLY CALMLY)

(HELEN'S MOBILE RINGS. SHE ANSWERS IT)

HELEN

Cassie! Fine. We're attacking some man. Friend of Bert's. No, neither did I (looking at JIM). About six foot. No, not quiet exactly. Don't really know yet. Perhaps you should ask...

(HELEN HOLDS OUT THE PHONE TO JIM. THERE IS A LONG PAUSE, WITH HELEN HOLDING OUT THE PHONE, WAITING FOR JIM TO TAKE IT FROM HER. HE DOES NOT, BUT SLOWLY BACKS AWAY)

HELEN
Well. Perhaps not.

(LIGHTS DOWN)

SCENE FOUR.

(LIGHTS UP AGAIN. HELEN, DAISY AND JIM, SITTING IN A ROW ON THE SOFA)

HELEN
If you were a film, what film would you be?

DAISY
I'd be Notorious!

HELEN
Jim?

JIM
I'd be Battleship Potemkin.

(PUZZLED SILENCE)

DAISY
Why?

HELEN
If you were a book, what book would you be?

JIM
The Trial.

(PAUSE)

DAISY
Let's play a game.

JIM
Wasn't that a game?

DAISY

It didn't feel like one.

HELEN

Name your most embarrassing moment.

DAISY

(WRIGGLING GLEEFULLY) Oh there's been so many! I think it was the time I wet myself while dancing the lambada.

HELEN

Your turn, Jim.

JIM

What? Oh, I fell over once.

(PAUSE)

DAISY

(politely) Where?

HELEN

Is that it?

JIM

I was a waiter. Carrying a roast duck.

(LONG PAUSE)

JIM

Perhaps I could tell you about a book I read.

HELEN

Go on.

JIM

It's about a great storm off the coast of America.

HELEN

We have no interest in that type of thing.

DAISY

Tell us something personal.

JIM

You tell me something personal.

DAISY

We've told you nothing but.

JIM

That's true. Tell me something impersonal. Don't you know any facts? Your private lives hold no fascination for me.

HELEN

What's your party piece?

DAISY

(JUMPS UP AND STARTS UNBUTTONING CLOTHES) I'll do mine!

HELEN

No, no. Keep them on. Jim first.

JIM

(STANDING, RECITES THE SECOND VERSE OF CHRISTINA ROSSETTI'S GOBLIN MARKET)

Evening by evening

Among the brookside rushes,

Laura bowed her head to hear, Lizzie veiled her blushes:

Crouching close together

In the cooling weather,

With clasping arms and cautioning lips,

With tingling cheeks and finger-tips.

"Lie close," Laura said,

Pricking up her golden head:

We must not look at goblin men,

We must not buy their fruits:

Who knows upon what soil they fed

Their hungry thirsty roots?"

"Come buy," call the goblins

Hobbling down the glen.

"O! cried Lizzie, Laura, Laura,

You should not peep at goblin men."

Lizzie covered up her eyes

Covered close lest they should look;

Laura reared her glossy head,

And whispered like the restless brook:

"Look, Lizzie, look, Lizzie,

Down the glen tramp little men...

DAISY

(WITH HER HANDS OVER HER EARS) No, no!

HELEN
Stop it!

JIM
It's Christina Rossetti.

HELEN
It's the work of a pervert.

(PAUSE)

HELEN
What's this supposed to tell us about you?

JIM
Nothing. I didn't write it.

(WALRUS AND BERT ENTER, CARRYING PLASTIC BAGS FULL OF BOTTLES)

WALRUS
We met a man with a dog. Bert's a sucker for a man with

BERT
He threatened me with the dog. It wasn't altruistic.

WALRUS
Ah, I misunderstood.

(HELEN'S MOBILE PHONE RINGS. SHE TAKES THE BAGS AND EXITS, TALKING INTO IT AS SHE GOES. WALRUS AND DAISY MOVE TO ONE SIDE, TALKING. JIM WALKS AROUND BERT. HE LOOKS CAREFULLY AT HIS EYES, AND EXAMINES HIS HANDS)

JIM
So. Tell me. Do you think of it as repairs to a deficiency in yourself, or more like say, lipstick, enhancing your natural charms?

BERT
It's maximising your potential. I found that I was not performing at my best in many situations. Ironically, often the desire to impress actually interferes with the ability to impress. I was not coming across.

JIM
And now you do?

BERT
Well. One has to complete the course to get the full effect. It's like antibiotics.

(WALRUS AND DAISY COME OVER WITHIN EARSHOT)

BERT

(HURRIEDLY) The dog tried to bite me. (HE MIMES HIS OWN DODGING MOVEMENT) It snapped at my seat.

JIM

(WHISPERS) Some would say you were embracing mental bedlam.

(HELEN RETURNS)

JIM

Poor Helen. Struggling to keep you on the straight and narrow of psychiatric health. As if her life almost literally depended on it. That smell of petrol. Very strong in here, isn't it? Now, who's it coming from?

(HE WALKS AROUND THEM. STOPS IN FRONT OF HELEN, LEANS FORWARD AND SMELLS HER HAIR)

(LIGHTS DOWN)

SCENE FIVE.

(LIGHTS UP AGAIN. JIM AND HELEN ARE ALONE IN THE LIVING ROOM, JIM SITTING ON THE SOFA, HELEN PACING AROUND BEHIND HIM)

HELEN

Are you a widely travelled man?

JIM

Far but not wide.

HELEN

Oh.

(PAUSE)

(JIM MUTTERS SOMETHING. HELEN LEANS FORWARD OVER THE BACK OF THE SOFA TO CATCH WHAT IT IS. JIM CATCHES HOLD OF THE FRONT OF HER CLOTHES AND PULLS HER DOWN TOWARDS HIM)

JIM

I said, tell me about your friendship with Daisy. Where did you meet?

HELEN

Selfridges.

JIM
And how well do you really know her?

HELEN
Thoroughly.

JIM
(THOUGHTFULLY) Hmm. Good... (LETS GO OF HER)

(HELEN CLIMBS OVER THE BACK OF THE SOFA AND SITS DOWN BESIDE JIM)

JIM
And Bert? Where did you find him?

HELEN
I didn't 'find him'. He found me.

JIM
Ah. Followed you home.

HELEN
No! We were both working in a record shop. He convinced me about Johnny Cash, I was undecided at the time.

JIM
That's good. (HE TURNS TO FACE HER AND PUTS A HAND ON HER LEG. SHE LEANS AWAY SLIGHTLY, TAKEN ABACK)

JIM
What about world music?

HELEN
When you say world music...

JIM
I mean say for instance Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan... (MEANWHILE HE IS GRADUALLY PUSHING HER OVER BACK ONTO THE SOFA)

HELEN
I don't really know him. Is he Asian?

JIM
From Pakistan. (HE PULLS OFF HER SHOES)
(UNSEEN, DAISY COMES IN AND SITS ON THE ARM OF THE SOFA, LOOKING ON WITH INTEREST)

HELEN
I like Talvin Singh.

JIM
(TAKING OFF HER SOCKS) I don't think he's categorised as world music.

DAISY
He's more drumnbass.

(JIM SITS UP QUICKLY. HELEN REMAINS WHERE SHE IS, UNPERTURBED.
SHE WAVES HER BARE FEET IN THE AIR)

HELEN
Look, isn't this strange?

DAISY
I thought it was strange.

(WALRUS'S VOICE PIPES UP FROM SOMEWHERE HIDDEN BEHIND THE
SOFA)

WALRUS
So did I.

(JIM JUMPS BUT RECOVERS SELF QUICKLY AND TRIES TO LOOK
UNCONCERNED)

JIM
Where's Bert?

(WALRUS EMERGES LOOKING SLEEPY FROM BEHIND THE SOFA)

WALRUS
Bloody strange.

DAISY
(TO HELEN) Aren't your feet cold?

HELEN
(THINKS A MOMENT) Yes. (SHE STARTS PUTTING HER SHOES AND SOCKS
BACK ON. JIM STILL SMILING UNCONCERNEDLY)

JIM
So, Walrus. Tell me all about your profession.

DAISY

Law. Can't you tell?

JIM

Now you mention it, I can. Do you get people off? Or...

DAISY

What's the opposite of getting off?

HELEN

(LASCIVIOUSLY) Bang them up? Take them down?

WALRUS

I prosecute.

JIM

Always?

WALRUS

Always!

JIM

What was your most celebrated case?

(WALRUS EMERGES AND STARTS TO PACE UP AND DOWN LIKE A HOLLYWOOD LAWYER)

WALRUS

It was a young child accusing its mother of the most heinous crimes against itself. I took the floor and I reduced that child to rubble.

JIM

Is that allowed?

WALRUS

It's encouraged! It goes with the territory.

JIM

I see. But surely... weren't you prosecuting?

WALRUS

Of course. Slander!

DAISY

Walrus is from a long line of firm questioners.

HELEN

His grandfather defended at the Tennessee monkey trials.

WALRUS
He prosecuted.

DAISY
(TO JIM) What was your grandfather?

JIM
Mine? Oh, he was a railwayman.

WALRUS
Good!

JIM
Yes. He hated it. After he retired he spent his pension

WALRUS
Hardly surprising.

JIM
No.

(BERT BURSTS IN, AGITATEDLY WAVING A NEWSPAPER)

BERT
(IN A PANIC) Evolution is going into reverse! It's the lack of oily fish in the diet!

(LIGHTS DOWN)

SCENE SIX.

(LIGHTS UP. BERT IS ADDRESSING THE OTHERS WHO ARE SITTING AROUND STARING AT HIM)

BERT
Keep your voices down. There's no need to give unnecessary pleasure to the onlooking ancestor.

DAISY
Are your ancestors that spiteful do you think?

BERT
It's only natural. They've been looking on with envy at our gains for long enough, a setback like this would give them enormous satisfaction. We live twice as long as they did! And we move faster. They hate our guts, let's face facts.

(EVERYONE LOOKS WARILY AROUND THEM)

BERT

Won't you hate your descendants if you see them living forever without a line on their faces?

WALRUS

I'll have better things to do than sit around watching them.

BERT

No you won't.

WALRUS

I'll make my own fun.

BERT

It'll be beyond your control.

WALRUS

What rubbish. (GETS UP FROM THE FLOOR AND DUSTS HIMSELF DOWN)

JIM

(WINKING) You're all right anyway, Bert, with your magic potions.

BERT

It's just running on the spot! I'm being dragged back ceaselessly into the past!

(HE RUSHES OFFSTAGE AGAIN)

DAISY

Oh, put some more music on.

JIM

Yes, let's drown ourselves out, shall we? Spite the old ancestral eavesdroppers.

(HE VAGUELY INDICATES THE AUDIENCE. HE TURNS THE MUSIC UP LOUD AND THE CHARACTERS MOUTH INAUDIBLE DIALOGUE AT EACH OTHER)

(HELEN SUDDENLY TURNS THE MUSIC OFF)

JIM

(ONLY ONE LEFT SHOUTING WHEN THE MUSIC STOPS) ... NONE OF YOU GOT A FUCKING CLUE ... (STOPS ABRUPTLY)

HELEN

No, we haven't.

DAISY
(WALKING UP TO JIM) You...

(JIM BACKS AWAY SLIGHTLY)

DAISY
You! (SHE POKES HIM IN THE CHEST) Who is your best friend?

JIM
What?

DAISY
Who is your best friend?

JIM
I don't think I have one.

DAISY
You should have.

(JIM LOOKS AROUND IN CONFUSION)

WALRUS
Don't look at me. I've only just met you.

HELEN
It's about time you told us something about your social circle.

DAISY
So... who is your best friend?

(THEY ALL STAND WITH ARMS FOLDED STARING AT JIM)

JIM
(STAMMERING) Well... I suppose... that would be... (LONG PAUSE) Alan.

DAISY
Why not say so straight away?

JIM
I haven't seen him for years.

WALRUS
Not much of a best friend.

HELEN
Why haven't you?

JIM

It's a long story.

(THE OTHERS ALL SIT DOWN, EXPECTANTLY)

JIM

I came home one day to find him in my house, with a girl. Naked. Together. They thought I wouldn't be back that night.

DAISY

So what?

JIM

I had to go and see his wife. She wrote me a letter. She had the sprinkler on in the pouring rain and she was gardening in a souwester and bare feet.

HELEN

What a shame.

WALRUS

No reason to dump a friend.

JIM

There was much more to it than that.

(PAUSE)

DAISY

You had an affair with her!

JIM

Well, I felt obliged. After I went there once and found her having dinner with a Teach Yourself Italian record... I mean to say! She was sitting there chatting away, with the record going "Splendido! Splendido!" We went on the rampage together.

HELEN

What's your idea of going on the rampage?

JIM

Shoplifting.

DAISY

What did you take?

JIM

Masks. From a toy shop. She was a cat and I was a dog.

(PAUSE)

HELEN

(DOUBTFULLY) Right... Have you ever left the confines of this island?

JIM

Of course I have.

DAISY

Where have you been?

JIM

Let's see. There was a journey to Hong Kong. An extraordinary city. Are you familiar with it? East meets West in a neon/wicker fusion. Markets, chickens, sinister women in sunglasses in late-night bars, lovesick cops in cafes. Cars! Many, many cars.

HELEN

I've been to Hong Kong.

DAISY

Is it like that?

HELEN

Somewhat. Where else?

JIM

Then there was Austria. The mountains like a family, the big father and mother mountains with their white snow hats, and their nephews and nieces. Of course that's just my fancy.

HELEN

The mountains were like your family?

JIM

Like a family.

DAISY

What a sad and lonely time you must have had, in your little bed staring out the window at the mountains, longing for them to hug you to their chilly bosoms. It makes me feel quite tragic.

HELEN

What you sow you reap.

DAISY
That's true.

HELEN
What had you done to your own family, that you had to go and huddle among the Alps for comfort?

JIM
As Forster said in A Passage To India...

WALRUS
I've never read A Passage To India. Tell me about it.

(PAUSE)

JIM
Something about a wasp.

(LONG PAUSE)

WALRUS
I see.

HELEN
It's your favourite book, and yet you can't tell us anything

JIM
I didn't say it was my favourite book.

HELEN
You quote from it like a bible.

DAISY
What's the name of the lead character? You must be able to tell us that.

JIM
It's Miss... Miss... A governess. Nurse? I can't quite remember. I read it long ago.

WALRUS
Even so. Don't seem to have retained much, do you?

JIM
Miss... I know it, I just can't remember it. The Marabar caves, you know.

WALRUS
No. What about them?

JIM
Something happens.

WALRUS
What?

JIM
I don't know.

(PAUSE)

JIM
It's slipped my mind.

WALRUS
That's pretty shoddy. What if this was a job interview?

JIM
They're not going to ask me about A Passage To India in a job interview.

WALRUS
When was the last time you had one?

JIM
I can't remember. Long ago.

WALRUS
I think you may find you're a little out of touch.

HELEN
I'm sure you have all your certificates.

DAISY
But they do become obsolete you know.

HELEN
Nobody wants to hear about O levels in this day and age.

WALRUS
Performance is what they judge you on. No good start lecturing them about EM Forster only to realise you can't remember a bloody word the man wrote. They'll think you're an idiot.

HELEN
Or you're deceiving them.

WALRUS

They don't mind that so much.

DAISY
What are your qualifications?

JIM
For what?

DAISY
In general.

JIM
In general... well, it's hard to know where to start...

WALRUS
Abilities first. Qualifications later.

DAISY
What are your abilities?

JIM
Well, I don't know...

HELEN
(TO WALRUS) Hesitant.

JIM
I am well organised and...

HELEN
What's the use of that

DAISY
Have you ever worked?

JIM
Of course, I've been out in the professional environment for some time.

DAISY
What was your first position?

JIM
In an office.

HELEN
Successful?

JIM

I would have done well, but I was exploited by the bosses, of course. The man next to me was running a bookie joint, using their phones, faxes, everything. No one said a word. As soon as I start refusing to put my flat at the disposal of the boss's extracurricular not to say extramarital whims, wham! Out on my ear.

WALRUS

Terrible start. Who put you on to that?

JIM

Oh, I started again elsewhere. This was when you could, you see.

WALRUS

No good trying that now. You've got to get off the blocks running. Too late by the time you're twenty-five. How old are you?

JIM

Thirty-two.

(SHOCKED SILENCE)

DAISY

(WHISPERING LOUDLY TO HELEN) Look at his clothes!

HELEN

I know.

JIM

But I keep telling you, I'm well under way.

DAISY

We're just trying to understand. And your relationship with this woman?

JIM

Who?

HELEN

The married woman. In the sou'wester.

JIM

Oh, her. That was a digression.

HELEN

Summarize your relationship.

JIM

She used to steal me ready meals and cigarettes. I bought her a dress. She put it in the bin right outside our flat.

HELEN

That was the end of that.

JIM

Yes. She was on her way to the airport.

DAISY

Spite!

JIM

I know. It was cruel of her.

DAISY

No, you. Buying her an ugly dress.

HELEN

She took one look at the dress and realised.

DAISY

I've been wasting time here with a man like this.

HELEN

And with that she got up and packed her bags.

DAISY

I bet she kept quiet about the whole thing to her friends.

JIM

She didn't.

WALRUS

And are you taken seriously at your place of work?

JIM

I wasn't. Until I got a haircut and started dressing in a businesslike way. To be taken seriously at work, you need serious hair. I took advantage of my boss's absence to renegotiate my position in the office. I took hers.

HELEN

And how would you say you'd affected the lives of those around you?

JIM

Well. Depends what you mean by...

HELEN

No.

JIM

Right. I've, er, well I've touched people's lives in so many ways.

HELEN

How?

JIM

Well, as I said. This woman. Audrey.

DAISY

You gave her a dress.

JIM

No. I mean. A shoplifting habit. Freedom! Well, not freedom. But a release from convention. Temporarily.

WALRUS

OK. You've been alive for thirty-two years. What deductions have you made?

JIM

So far?

HELEN

Just so far.

JIM

I'm not a philosopher.

HELEN

No deductions at all?

WALRUS

In thirty-two years?

JIM

I haven't thought about it properly. Just give me a minute to think about it.

WALRUS

Can you do in a minute what you haven't done in thirty-two years?

JIM

Not with people waiting...

DAISY

Let me try. Answer these questions. Are you generally the first to react to a sudden event, such as the telephone ringing or an unexpected question?

(PAUSE)

HELEN
Clearly not.

JIM
I'm tired.

DAISY
Think of a waterfall.

JIM
OK.

DAISY
Give me the first three adjectives that spring to mind.

JIM
Loud. Wet. Excessive.

DAISY
Agree or disagree with these statements. 'I feel comfortable/somewhat uncomfortable/very uncomfortable deviating from standard procedures'.

JIM
Somewhat...

DAISY
'I do what people expect me to, even when I disagree with them'.

JIM
No...

DAISY
'My life is full of dead ends'.

(PAUSE)

WALRUS
In one family each male child has as many brothers as sisters, but each female child has twice as many brothers as sisters. How many children are there?

JIM
I don't understand your questions...

WALRUS

Come on. It's simple, I just want to see how quickly you can do it. From a house in which windows on all sides face south, you see a bear. What colour is the bear?

(PAUSE)

JIM

How could I know that?

WALRUS

A boat's ladder has six rungs each a foot apart. The water rises a foot an hour. At low tide, which is noon, the lowest rung is 6 inches above the water. At 3pm how many rungs will be covered?

JIM

Er, three hours, three feet...

WALRUS

Quickly, quickly!

JIM

Two rungs!

WALRUS

It's a fucking BOAT.

DAISY

You're no detective.

JIM

Did I say I was?

HELEN

Weren't you here to solve our fire?

JIM

Yes. I mean, I, er... (DRAWING HELEN ASIDE) Can I talk to you?

DAISY

(PULLING HIM AWAY) No whispering! I've said!

JIM

(TO DAISY) You know, you have a look of a woman I used to know. Said her husband was dead. Then he reappeared and she went back to him. Didn't even explain, just left me catching a train on my own. I was bitter for many years.

DAISY

Yes, you owned a bar then I expect. In North Africa. The resistance drank there. People fought to get visas to America. I expect she reappeared with her heroic husband one day, didn't she.

(JIM STARES AT HER SPEECHLESSLY)

HELEN

Why don't you go back to your own flat? Your phone's stopped ringing.

(THEY LISTEN)

DAISY

Why don't you ever answer it? Are you afraid it's a wrong number?

(JIM SITS SMILING STIFFLY)

(PAUSE. HELEN GETS UP AND STARTS TIDYING UP, FINDING BERT'S BIRTHDAY CARD)

HELEN

He hasn't opened his card. (SHE OPENS IT AND SPENDS A LONG TIME READING WHAT JIM HAS WRITTEN IN IT)

(PAUSE)

HELEN

This is your solution, is it. Your little piece of detective work.

JIM

Yes.

HELEN

And a prediction in there too, the work of a true psychic. So, what should I do to avert this?

JIM

Call the police.

(BERT BURSTS IN AND FLOPS DOWN DEJECTEDLY)

BERT

I've reverted to nineteenth-century ways of thinking.

HELEN

What?

BERT

I've just realised. I am now almost entirely pre-20th century in my thought processes. I'm going in a straight line!

DAISY

Better than going in circles like you normally do.

BERT

You are failing to understand my point. If I am stuck in rigid, linear modes of thought, all I can do is plod along a narrative groove! Or trundle through the most basic theorising!

HELEN

Oh God, round and round like a stuck record, that's how you go.

DAISY

Yes, Bert, we haven't got time to play now.

BERT

(STAMPS HIS FOOT, CLUTCHING HIS HEAD IN FURY) No! (BERT RUNS OUT)

JIM

Listen. (PAUSE) Quick. Come with me. (HE GETS A COAT AND STARTS BUTTONING HELEN

DAISY

It's a Wonderful Life.

(PAUSE)

(JIM PICKS UP A HANDBAG AND HANGS IT OVER HELEN'S SHOULDER, THEN FINDS A SCARF AND STARTS WINDING IT AROUND HER)

JIM

Although of course it's only upstairs, so you don't really need all this. (UNWINDING) Central heating.

HELEN

Why should I vanish with you?

JIM

It's the solution.

HELEN

You're not really the problem-solving type.

DAISY

Yes, I'm sorry, but we can't help noticing.

JIM

You should mind your own business.

DAISY

If you stayed hiding away in your own little flat then we would, wouldn't we.

(JIM HOVERS UNCERTAINLY)

DAISY

(SCOFFING) "Dress in the bin"! Stranger Than Paradise!

WALRUS

What is?

DAISY

"Mountains were my family..."! The Lady Vanishes!

JIM

(TO HELEN, URGENTLY) You've really GOT to...

HELEN

What does she mean?

JIM

Don't listen to her. Come on! Before it's too late!

DAISY

And dinner with a Teach Yourself Italian record is in Georgy Girl! (SHE PUSHES JIM TOWARDS THE DOOR. HE LOOKS AT HELEN)

HELEN

Go on then! Better run and hide!

(DAISY PUSHES JIM OUT OF THE DOOR AND SLAMS IT)

(LIGHTS DOWN)

SCENE SEVEN.

(LIGHTS UP. BERT AND JIM ARE SITTING ON DECKCHAIRS, ON A STAGE LITTERED WITH ASHES AND CHARRED WOOD, BURNT REMNANTS OF FURNITURE: ENOUGH TO SUGGEST THAT THIS IS THE SAME FLAT IN THE AFTERMATH OF A MAJOR FIRE.)

BERT
People can be disappointing.

JIM
Yes.

BERT
I don't mean you.

JIM
No.

BERT
A general remark.

JIM
Even your ancestors?

BERT
Oh no. There's no point in being disappointed in the dead.

JIM
They come up to scratch?

BERT
Of course. And you could hardly hold it against them if they didn't. When you think about it, we're under the eye of those at every stage of human development. Some of them will be early hominids; some will be practically chimps.

JIM
What about the... very recent ones?

BERT
(SHRUGS) They have no more say than anyone else.

JIM
The poor things have to sit back and listen.

BERT
There's no need for pity. You appreciate things at their real value when you watch properly. Without distorting matters with your interjections.

JIM
Do you think the most... recent ones get a seat at the front?

BERT
Why should they take precedence?

JIM

Having been more involved.

BERT

I don't approve of hierarchies among the dead. They're all equally important. And equally unimportant.

JIM

(picks up a pill bottle from the floor) How's your cognitive enhancement coming along?

BERT

Very well. I'm on a whole new level, mentally speaking.

(JIM GOES TO HAND HIM THE PILL BOTTLE. BERT WAVES IT AWAY)

BERT

Oh, I'm far beyond that now. No need of it. Once you're in the right frame of mind, outside assistance is unnecessary. All the equipment needed has been provided, I feel quite confident of that. (He taps his head). It's putting it to the proper use.

(HELEN'S PHONE, LYING ON THE FLOOR IN FRONT OF THEM, STARTS TO RING WITH THE DISTINCTIVE RINGTONE HEARD EARLIER. THEY BOTH STARE AT IT BUT DON'T ANSWER IT)

JIM

So you're not downhearted?

BERT

Oh no, I never am. Even when there was a run on the bank in my home town, I kept the family savings and loan business above water. I kept those customers calm with my sheer force of optimism. That town wouldn't have been the place it was without me in it, that was made very clear to me.

JIM

You know, you remind me of a friend I once had. The best friend a boy could have had. I found him in the toolshed, I had to entice him into the house with Reece's Pieces. The atmosphere didn't suit him though. He always wanted to go home.

BERT

And cognitively speaking, don't feel too disadvantaged. I'll give you some exercises to do. You're up to about 1930s levels of thinking, I estimate. Far better than many. You'll soon be postwar.

JIM

Of course if you got too far advanced, those watching would find it difficult to follow.

BERT

They might not be able to follow but they can still appreciate. It's worth the effort. Think of your great-great-grandfather's admiring eyes on you.

(THERE IS THE SOUND OF A HEAVY KNOCKING ON THE DOOR. THEY JUMP BUT DON'T ANSWER IT)

BERT

How proud he is, no doubt about it. Sit up straighter. (THEY BOTH SIT UP STRAIGHTER)

(LIGHTS DOWN)

ENDS.