

Youth against Experience

A Play for the Stage in Two Acts

by

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Text and Critical Analysis

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Youth against Experience

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I. Early Development

Origins

Initially it was just an image, an idea for the setting of a play that lingered in my mind after walking beside a Birmingham canal in winter. The frozen water; the steep banks and looming canopy of bare branches; the elevated balcony provided by a bridge; the lucid backdrop behind and above; every detail of the place evoked a stage upon which a story was about to unfold. What that story might be I was as yet unsure,

but I wanted to write something that echoed not only the canal's beauty but also its "elegiac sadness"¹: the torpor of the icy canal in a city bereft of industry.

It was my intention, given the starting point and the nature of my few preceding forays into drama, to write something in the tragic vein, but I was also anxious not to accept as set in stone the stipulations of sundry commentators regarding that ancient genre: the dramatists I most admire, Shakespeare, O'Neill, Beckett, Stoppard, etc., are those with insatiable appetites for experimentation and innovation. Of course, the new need not be born of one lone playwright's inspiration, but can be achieved by revisiting and reforming outmoded conventions; and so, when in those initial and variegated musings I dimly envisioned a completed play, it consistently featured a chorus of youths.

I also fixed in my mind as a fundamental objective the attainment of common purpose in the constituent elements of dramatic construction (setting, theme, format, plot, characterisation, etc.); something I had not achieved in writing before then. I hoped to engender each aspect with significance in a way that, when combined, they might act upon each other like telescopic lenses and magnify, rather than blur or diminish, the ultimate justification of the play. Upon reflection I admit that this ambition has proved a formidable obstacle to completion. Satisfactory alignment of so many nuances is an exact and time-consuming process: for a seemingly small alteration in one area will have manifold repercussions elsewhere; what's more, during a long writing process, the passage of time in itself breeds unforeseen complications. I mean to substantiate this apology at a later point in my essay.

As I have already insinuated, one appeal of the setting I had alighted upon was the manner in which the idea of a canal, feeding "back into itself, flowing nowhere but its beginning again"², resonated with my gloomy outlook on affairs anthropological,

¹ My original treatment

² Ibid

international, national (political and social), and personal. To me the world brimmed with people so mired by past experiences and misfortunes that they were failing to guard against present errors. In this way I believed history was bound to repeat itself over and over, and any talk of progress provoked my scorn. I had written months before a short play that concentrated on the uselessness of collective guilt, and passing time merely entrenched my opinion that humanity was myopic except when indulging in retrospection. I thought the Western World so lionised the heroes and lessons of the early to mid-twentieth century that it had failed to plot a course of action suited to the early twenty-first century. Britain I saw as too politically staid to resist the sinister creep of apathy and corruption (a notable example being the Bordesley Green vote-rigging scandal), let alone its own break-up and absorption by an over-mighty European Union. I took umbrage at the Government compensating, in effect, people for the adverse circumstances of their upbringing, thereby fostering a culture of grievance and entitlement, as well as an unbreakable cycle of social stagnation: why didn't the ruling politicians stop enshrining their mythical idea of working-class life (a lot of them never having experienced the real thing themselves), and instead attempt to combat the widespread prejudice against aspiration, especially educational?

This pessimistic perspective was probably more indicative of my own nature than that of mankind in general. Regardless, I harboured a fatalistic opinion of man's inability to reform; so there now seems good logic in my decision, after a long time spent trawling the Dictionary of National Biography, to seek inspiration for my plot in the legends of the ancient Greeks, for whom history after the Heroic Age was a woeful tale of degeneration.

I was particularly drawn to two consecutive stories in my edition of Robert Graves' *The Greek Myths: Eos and Orion*. Of Eos, the Titaness of the dawn (so often 'rosy-fingered' in the poetry of Homer), Graves writes,

Aphrodite was once vexed to find Ares in Eos's bed, and cursed her with a constant longing for young mortals, whom thereupon she secretly and shamefacedly began to seduce, one after the other.³

...Eos carried off Ganymedes and Tithonus... When Zeus robbed her of Ganymedes she begged him to grant Tithonus immortality, and to this he assented. But she forgot to ask also for perpetual youth... and Tithonus became daily older, greyer, and more shrunken, his voice grew shrill, and, when Eos tired of nursing him, she locked him in her bedroom, where he turned into a cicada.⁴

He also mentions Eos' brother, Helios, whose appearance has a transformational effect on her: "...she becomes Hemera, and accompanies him on his travels until, as Hespera, she announces their safe arrival on the western shores of Ocean."⁵

Orion, as a result of a ruse by Apollo, was accidentally shot through the head by Artemis, who subsequently set him in the stars. However, when alive he was "a hunter of Boeotian Hyria, and the handsomest man alive..."⁶

Coming one day to Hyria in Chios, he fell in love with Merope, daughter of Dionysus' son Oenopion. Oenopion had promised Merope to Orion in marriage, if he would free the island from the dangerous wild beasts that infested it; and this he set himself to do, bringing the pelts to Merope every evening. But when the task was at last accomplished, and he claimed her as his wife, Oenopion brought him rumours of lions, bears, and wolves still lurking in the hills, and refused to give her up, the fact being that he was in love her himself.⁷

³ Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*, p.146

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid, p.147

⁷ Ibid

Oenopion goes on to put out the eyes of Orion and deposit him, broken, on a distant seashore.

I did not seek to accomplish a faithful retelling of either of these stories, but many details found their way into the first sketch of my play.

Designs

In the beginning I proposed a story comprising three strands in three acts:

In the first strand an old man converses with a chorus of two local boys, revealing that he has come to the canal to aid his remembrance of someone who died thirty years before.

The second takes place predominantly in the house above the canal, where a man lies dying of motor neurone disease; the wife and mother-in-law argue about his care, but are interrupted by the wife's brother, arrived the previous night after a long estrangement. The ensuing conversation between the siblings demonstrates his barely concealed disdain and her desperate wish for approval; we also learn that the sick husband was once a close friend of the brother.

In the third strand a youth returns to his old stomping-ground after a period in juvenile detention; the crime, it transpires, was politically-motivated arson ordered by a corrupt councillor, whose daughter the youth desires. The youth renews his acquaintance with an old friend, and is followed wherever he goes by his younger sister. At the end of the second act, after the youth has been denied access to his paramour by the girl's politician-father, he encounters the middle-aged woman (from the second strand) and is seduced by her; his younger sister, seeing this, is racked by jealousy.

It was my intention that the final act of my play should fuse the three stories together and make it clear that they are merely episodes in a single, circular tale. The young girl uses a lighter and fuel to set fire to the house while, down by the canal, the

woman and her estranged brother argue about her failure to care for the dying man. When the blaze is spotted, the woman tries to prevent her brother from rescuing his old friend; he shrugs her off in disgust. The youth enters, covered in blood and panicked: he has stabbed the corrupt politician to death. His younger sister informs him of the arson she has committed; he is appalled and, attempting himself to escape, deserts her. The girl is only saved with the help of her brother's friend. Finally, the middle-aged brother enters, badly burnt and blind. His sister comforts him for a while, before rising, walking onto the ice, and disappearing under the bridge. Meanwhile, the old man has heard all this in horror; he is left alone on stage with the blind brother, a replica of himself.

One of my concerns with the scheme of this play was that many components of the story were overblown and melodramatic (perhaps not unexpectedly given the nature of my source material). I had hoped to use the opportunity provided by the Playwriting MPhil to develop a more subtle, refined touch as a writer; so I was frustrated to have saddled myself with a plot reliant on physical violence or injury for its effect, and scenarios foreign to a modern world more tame than ancient Greece. I should have heeded Maeterlinck's observation about the unsuitability of antiquated stories for a modern theatre: "What can I learn from creatures who have but one fixed idea, and who have no time to live, for there is a rival, or a mistress, who it behoves them to put to death?"⁸ By no means am I a proponent of naturalistic theatre, but I feared the prospect of incredible characters presented realistically.

In contrast, there were large portions of the play bereft of plotted action; a flaw exacerbated by an overpopulation of characters. My lack of vision regarding the purpose of the first strand (the old man and chorus of boys) was a source of anxiety, but structurally more pressing was the sparseness of the third: I didn't plan on

⁸ Maurice Maeterlinck, *The Tragic in Daily Life* from *Playwrights on Playwriting: from Ibsen to Ionesco*, ed. Toby Cole, p.30

introducing the politician or his daughter, which meant that the significant action of that story would have to be related; and the youth's friend, with so little to do, felt like a non-entity. Steve Waters' first reaction to my treatment was a succinct diagnosis of its shortcomings: "Nothing happens... until the end, and then everything happens."

In hindsight, these are deficiencies that I feel I have not satisfactorily overcome in the submitted draft of *Youth against Experience*. The difficulties I have experienced in producing a play along the lines of this early blueprint is therefore attributable, not simply to difficulty in reconciling myself to imperfections, but also my negligence in addressing, at an early stage, some glaring deficiencies in plot and character. When I should have been studying and applying models, I was daydreaming: in my mind distilling long, complex passages of dialogue into a dumb show of powerful, individual moments; and imbuing my play with a more and more elaborate pseudo-philosophical ideology. Instead of repairing the unsound foundations I continued to embellish the climax.

Furthermore, my insistence on an experimental and intuitive approach to playwriting meant I was often dismissive of generic principles and received wisdom that may otherwise have proved remedial. It was an attitude that backfired on me when, out of desperation, I was forced to turn to Robert McKee.

Truthfully, consulting *Story* proved very useful: it demonstrated to me the importance of a play's hidden machinery. First of all, with regard to plot, I set out a "Controlling Idea" (initially an encapsulation of my irate world-view), but I also accepted his assertion of the need for this argument to be contradicted "with as much truth and energy"⁹ as it is reinforced. That, and his reminder, "the choice between good and evil or between right and wrong is no choice at all"¹⁰, persuaded me to

⁹ Robert McKee, *Story*, p.120

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p.248

eradicate some of the moral didacticism in my play, and try to engineer a more ambivalent conclusion.

This was perhaps the point at which a subplot between the choric youngsters began to gain more prominence in order to “contradict the Controlling Idea and thus enrich the [play] with irony”¹¹.

Guided by the non-specific assignments,

INCITING INCIDENT
PROGRESSIVE COMPLICATION
CRISIS
CLIMAX
RESOLUTION

I reduced my play from three to two acts, and set about finding ways to foreshadow my climax so as to make it Aristotelian in its inevitability and unexpectedness. I also employed his suggestions of alternating between positive and negative charges within a scene, and ensuring that there is change at a scene’s conclusion between its opening and closing values, to create a more detailed and purposeful blueprint of the action.

Secondly, I did my best to apply his principles regarding characters to those in my play. In particular I took note of the methods by which hidden depth is achieved in a character: for example, the establishment of a conscious desire and a contradictory unconscious desire, whilst maintaining “a touch of the irrational”¹². McKee writes,

But for those protagonists we tend to admire the most, the Inciting Incident arouses not only a conscious desire, but an unconscious one as well. These complex characters suffer intense inner battles because these two desires are in direct conflict with each other. No matter what the character consciously

¹¹ Ibid, p.227

¹² Ibid, p.376

thinks he wants, the audience senses or realises that deep inside he unconsciously wants the very opposite.¹³

II. First Submission: *The Creative If*

By the time of the MPhil showcase, I had the beginnings of a play named *A Virtuous Circle*: Despite my best efforts, the first act remained an off-putting wasteland of monotonous exposition compared to the action-packed dénouement I was so desperate to write. However, the opening exchanges among a quasi-chorus of two twin boys, not yet specifically actors but in a vague way supernaturally endowed, was a challenging exercise in the construction of dialogue without the substructure of a dynamic plot.

The two characters are trapped by their vindictiveness in a repetitive performance of retribution against “people” for the killing of an elder brother (a soldier in a so-called “just” war, as is later revealed). It transpires that one boy has become friends with the very people he is supposed to punish, and he now attempts to persuade his twin to stop the crusade. However, concerned and jealous of his brother’s gregariousness, the other boy does all he can to force the continuation of the ritual.

I was careful that ‘Boy1’, who makes the case for reclusiveness and enmity, should be the more hypocritical and malevolent of the two. I did this with McKee’s admonitions in mind, but also because my own opinions had become less decisive; and I saw that by striving for a conclusion of ambiguity, compromise and brotherly love in this lesser storyline, I could beneficially offset the unmitigated suffering of the old man.

The Creative If, the text I submitted for my MPhil in the first instance, retained many of the structural generalities that first appeared in this draft scene. However, rehearsals of this scene for the MPhil showcase, the actors and director, Alison Kingsley, caused me to consider opening my play with a soliloquy. This

¹³ Ibid, p.192

decision had important consequences regarding the type of play I was writing and the relationship between actor and audience I envisioned; which in turn introduced new, metaphorical dimensions to the boys' discussions, and resulted in structural changes, specifically the development of *The Creative If* into a separate induction act and the adoption of a meta-theatrical format. As I wrote in my introduction, small alterations can have manifold repercussions.

II. The Final Script: *Youth Against Experience*

Criticism

Criticism and rejection of my first submission did not surprise me (although the vituperative and somewhat personal nature of the criticism did). Due to the difficulties and time pressures I experienced in writing the play, I handed in only the induction act I had been working on. Not only was it bloated, aimless and self-indulgent, I was naive to hope that it would make any sense to a reader without the main body of the play. In the event, I have completely abandoned the idea of an induction scene in *Youth Against Experience* and I hope it is the better for that decision.

The Influence of Theory

Dramatic theory and history was vital in the construction and understanding of *The Creative If* and remains so in this submission. For the Blind Codger's turmoil and indecision about the place he inhabits is partly an analogy for the long-lived dispute between the naturalist and metaphorical schools of drama.

During the long writing process I read a great deal of Renaissance drama, specifically Shakespeare and Marlowe, and supplemented my reading with visits to see the RSC at Stratford whenever possible. I also studied many essays by playwrights and critics on the theoretical dimension of drama in an effort to understand whether there was more logic in certain modern theatrical conventions than merely what is

fashionable. Whilst my interest was waning in the vague and glum determinism of my initial idea, the tangible and passionate intellectual content of these tracts heightened my obsession to perfect a structure which, as Eric Bentley writes of Lessing's aims regarding *Nathan*, "the dialectic of the theme is one with the dialectic of the dramaturgy: the different strands of the drama, drawn together by the unity of the structure, are identical with the different faiths which by tolerance – the leading idea of the play – are revealed as one."¹⁴

Tolerance was *Lessing's* subject; *my* emerging idea was derived from my reading of Shakespeare, whose brilliant gift as a philosopher of theatrical practice, I believe, has been understandably overshadowed by his poetic genius. He seems one of only a few playwrights who repeatedly explore, and evidently understand (in modern theatre Pirandello, Lorca and Brecht demonstrate something similar), the beauty of the relationship between setting and staging; audience, actor and character; individual and collective humanity; reality and fantasy. My assertion was that modulating, as Shakespeare often did, between realistic and metaphorical systems; between the actor/audience roles of lone, eavesdropping onlooker and the heroic performer (or *his* conscience, the two being effectively the same), both existentially and theatrically; simultaneously breeds in you sympathy for other people as individuals and empathy for them as fellow humans.

What then is the kingdom at stake in this civil war (for it is nothing less than a kind of fratricidal, dynastic schism) parodied by *Youth against Experience*, and who are the main players?

As is always the case in such conflicts the battle-lines are winding and unclear, and the ideals at stake have been complicated by centuries of individual caprice and terminological inconsistency. Ibsen, for example, began by writing subjective dramas like *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, moved over to naturalism with *Pillars of the Community* and

¹⁴ Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker*, p.51

The Doll's House, etc., and returned to plays of the consciousness at the end of his career, penning *The Lady From the Sea* and *Little Eyolf*. And Chekhov, who despised Ibsen's version of naturalism, has been hailed a hyper-realist for *The Three Sisters*, but also as a forerunner of absurdism because of the virtual soliloquies, awkward pauses¹⁵ and dream-like melancholy¹⁶ of *The Cherry Orchard*. (Of course, there is some confusion as to whether absurdism is an extension or a contradiction of realism.)

Bernard de Bear Nicol states, "The less we try to impose labels on major writers, the better for our critical health... Great writers often found schools of literature but they rarely belong to them."¹⁷ The author, however, is not equivocal when it comes to the naturalism/metaphorical argument outside his or her work; from Zola waiting for "a man of flesh and bones on the stage"¹⁸, to O'Casey declaring,

To me what is called naturalism, or even realism, isn't enough. They usually show life at its meanest and commonest, as if life never had time for a dance, a laugh, or a song.¹⁹

In this war the great playwrights seem like Homeric gods, or politicians: dictating events but never dying for their cause. Dramatic critics and commentators, on the other hand, are the fanatical foot soldiers of theatrical ideologies: "Naturalism is the

¹⁵ Ronald Gaskell, *Drama and Reality: the European theatre since Ibsen*, p.43

¹⁶ Stanley Evernden in *Varieties of Dramatic Experience: discussions on dramatic forms and themes*, ed. Bernard de Bear Nicol, p.175

¹⁷ Bernard de Bear Nicol in *Varieties of Dramatic Experience: discussions on dramatic forms and themes*, ed. Bernard de Bear Nicol, p.187

¹⁸ Emile Zola, *Naturalism on the Stage* in *Playwrights on Playwriting: from Ibsen to Ionesco*, ed. Toby Cole, p.6

¹⁹ Sean O'Casey, *Cock-A-Doodle-Andy* from *Playwrights on Playwriting: from Ibsen to Ionesco*, ed. Toby Cole, p.247

disease which propagates itself by contagion,”²⁰ wrote Jean-Louis Barrault; “I hated all falsehood on the stage, especially theatrical falsehood,”²¹ Stanislavsky.

When one considers Ronald Gaskell’s rebuke of Ibsen’s idea of the playwright as photographer (Drama should offer “images, not imitations, of reality”²²), one is reminded that not even Aristotle is beyond the reach of this debate. For surely Aristotle’s use of the word *mimesis*, and its uncertain meaning in the eyes of modern thinkers, is at the crux of the question. Some translate it to mean “imitation” thus using it to justify realism (Thora Burnley Jones: “I stress the word imitation, ‘*mimesis*’, because a play is an artifact; it is an illusion of reality...”²³); but Aristotle goes on to say that *mimesis* exists in painting, poetry, music and other non-artistic forms of activity, which does not suggest he was a realist in the modern mould.

It is nothing new to claim that many of Shakespeare’s plays are a mixture of the realistic and the metaphorical, despite the anachronistic use of the terms. Gaskell points to a Act Four, Scene Six, of *Antony and Cleopatra* in which the a soldier bears a gift of treasure from Antony to the treacherous Enobarbus: “The soldier’s words bring an offstage world to life in our imagination.”²⁴

Arguably Shakespeare *was* the first realist, but what I find most interesting is not his vivid depiction of an offstage world, nor the many beguilingly vivid exchanges of dialogue; but the way Shakespeare employs meta-theatrical elements to disjoint the realism of a play, as if to draw the audience’s attention to their own theatrical surroundings, and jolt out them of their state of credulousness. He uses the play-within-a-play format like a hammer in *The Taming of the Shrew*, and like a feather in

²⁰ Jean-Luis Barrault, *How Drama Is Born Within Us* from *The Context and Craft of Drama*, ed. R.W. Corrigan and J.L. Rosenberg, p.50

²¹ Konstantin Stanislavsky from David Margarshach, *Stanislavsky in The Theory of the Modern Stage*, ed. Eric Bentley, p.220

²² Ronald Gaskell, *Drama and Reality: the European theatre since Ibsen*, p.65

²³ Thora Burnley Jones in *Varieties of Dramatic Experience: discussions on dramatic forms and themes*, ed. Bernard de Bear Nicol, p.6

²⁴ Ronald Gaskell, *Drama and Reality: the European theatre since Ibsen*, p.4

Hamlet (I do not only mean *The Mousetrap*, but the more general sense that Elsinore is never not a stage: “my father died within’s two hours!” or “sterile promontory”). In other plays, such as *The Tempest* (“Our revels now are ended...”), realistic episodes are interrupted by soliloquies which themselves contain theatrical metaphors.

To illustrate what I think is the effect of interlacing realism with moments of subjectivism, I will briefly examine one of the most overused and popularly under-appreciated passages in the entire Shakespearean canon; one that I often referred to whilst writing my play: Jaques’ ‘seven ages’ speech in *As You Like It* (II.vii.139-166). The context is a scene in which Orlando encounters the outlawed nobles of the forest for the first time. The conversation is realistic enough, notwithstanding the poetic language, until the departure of Orlando; at which point Duke Senior offers this consolation to his melancholy companion:

Thou seest, we are not all alone unhappy:
This wide and universal theatre
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene
Wherein we play in.

If the audience had been tricked into thinking themselves eavesdropping on fugitives in the Ardennes forest then this platitude surely breaks the illusion, and Jaques’ elaboration of the Duke’s idea will further exacerbate their disbelief. Fortunately, I don’t believe this is the intended or achieved effect. When Jaques says,

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being the seven ages.

and goes on to list the seven transient roles, like a seven-stringed instrument, all humans commonly traverse, isn't the man in the audience at once aware of worlds within worlds, of himself as both observer and observed: an individual ostensibly, but on the plane of imagination comprising and comprised of a greater human spirit? It is my hypothesis that moments like this in the theatre instigate, by a kind of Brechtian substitution of parts, a simultaneous feeling of sympathy (for the characters' predicament) and empathy (for our shared human condition).

I discern a consistent theme in Shakespeare's plays that those characters unaware of their own essential theatricality are stupid and sane, whereas those who *are* seem intelligent but slightly unhinged. And the theme is taken up by a few expressionist and absurdist dramas of the twentieth century: Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, for example, hints at the stability of character in opposition to the mutability of the personality, the actor. A stage direction in the play reads:

The Characters should not appear as phantasms, but as created realities, unchangeable creations of the imagination and, therefore, more real and more consistent than the ever-changing naturalness of the Actors.

Although *Six Characters* is too influenced by the realist tradition to make the audience an explicit part of the play (Pirandello sets the action during a rehearsal), the effect upon observers is similar to that realised by *As You Like It*:

The play thus moves from an ambiguous realism through degrees of fantasy towards the climactic moment of crude reality which still retains an eerie fantasy... I hope and believe that the effect of *Six Characters* on me is to make me a bit more patient with other people, and even with myself.²⁵

²⁵ Stanley Evernden in *Varieties of Dramatic Experience: discussions on dramatic forms and themes*, ed. Bernard de Bear Nicol, p.201

This is the theatrical predicament in which the Mock Cynic finds himself in *The Creative If* and the Blind Codger in *Youth against Experience*, unsure where reality ends and fantasy begins. He is caught between two worlds: one enclosed, theatrical and imaginative, the other vast and experiential. His battle, therefore, is the battle of theatrical ideologies. I hope that the Blind Codger's peaceful and logical state of mind at the end of the play is an archetype for a theatre of compromise to come.

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Youth against Experience

Dramatis Personae

Blind Codger (late 60s)
Man (40s)
Jamie (19)
David (19)

Mother-in-law (70s)

Woman (40s)

Dawn (19)

Party Guests

Act One: *Day*

New Year's Eve. Across the land there is a groove, a rut, a frozen canal between two ivied banks. Stark, woven fingers upwards grope from birch, sycamore, oak, beech on either side, and seem to sully the sky with pregnant smudges. Beyond, through the brume, is a city: pillars that rise and fall with money's ineluctable tides. Beneath, the marbled slough extrudes flotsam branches, and bottles like nugatory shells. All is fixed by frost.

Something of two houses can be seen, one above each levee. The farther is the darker, and stained about its windows as though seeping darkness from within. In front a footpath mounts a bridge of weathered brick and makes a low vault over ice and path to reach the other side, where, meeting the nearer house, stairs rebound to the landing below. Here, on the muddied grass, there is an ornate lamppost and a simple bench beside a barrel-brazier to the fore.

Returning to the opposite bank, the exterior scene of tree-lined canal has dissolved into the kitchen of the farther house: floorboards; a table and three chairs. A suspended rectangle of multi-coloured fairy lights indicates a window, one of those remote and inky apertures above.

Scene One

*Music ('Jamie's Theme'). Crepuscular light waxes sickly. In the kitchen, a once beautiful **Woman** loiters next to the window in a silk robe with one hand raised to a switch. Her finger acts repeatedly upon the string of lights, extinguishing and rekindling. They also wink in miniature upstage.*

*The Woman's **Mother-in-law** enters from behind the nearer house carrying a bag and crosses the footbridge. At the apex of the arch she sees the Woman and stops to throw her a wave, which is half-heartedly reciprocated. With one hand securing her rain bonnet, she squints at the sagging clouds above, then the ice below. She flicks a pebble over the edge of the bridge-wall and watches it skitter along the surface, before continuing on her way. The music finishes and is replaced by the sound of a ticking clock.*

*The front door of the house is heard to open and close. The **Mother-in-law** exclaims from the unseen hallway as she removes her coat, etc....*

MOTHER *Brrrrr!* The cold! Colder than yesterday. The *ice* is lethal! Ha! I saw the milkman take a tumble as I was coming over. "Mind how you go, love," he said. [*She cranes her head into the room momentarily.*] "Love!" I'm old enough to be his grandmother. [*goes again*] And then he was on his backside. 'Pride before a fall,' I thought. I don't like him, not that one. [*returns, deposits her bag on a seat and begins to unpack the contents*] The number of times I reminded him to put the block of wood over the bottle tops... I had to cancel my order. It's the tits these days. So many people put out food and nuts, the winter does nothing to keep their numbers down. In Mrs. Alhusen's back garden at the moment it's like the last days of Rome. I can barely hear myself think for all the... tittering. But snow's on the way, today or tomorrow. And the ice is thick on the canal. [*pause*] A bit warm in here, isn't it? That must take some doing with a place like this. I'll never understand what possessed you to choose this one, and so many more appealing houses in the area, and to pay so much... But you were a young couple: you live and learn, live and learn. Still, expensive to heat... though no doubt you can afford it better than I, who can see my breath as I lie in bed.

She grinds to halt and stands with an array of objects on the table in front of her: a child's cup with a punctured lid; a carton of juice; two macaroons in a paper bag; a posy of artificial flowers; a pair of binoculars.

MOTHER So, how does he seem today? Is it a good morning or a grumpy morning? What time is it? [*The **Mother-in-law** looks at her watch.*] Did he relieve himself all right? You can't rush him, you just have to be patient and he'll manage quite easily. I suppose you've washed and dressed him by now... What about breakfast?

WOMAN [*dazed*] H'm? No. I'll give him something. He'll be up soon.

MOTHER You'll...? Speak up. I didn't catch that, dear. It's important that he eats regularly. Remember what the doctor said, if he's not fed the disease comes quicker. You can't just ignore meal times, whole meals... You look tired. Did he keep you up last night? The problem is that you never established a routine. He's helpless now. If he's hungry, uncomfortable or he needs to-

WOMAN It would drive me mad.

MOTHER Oh, for... You need to stop being so... [*She stops herself, sighs and begins to open the bag of macaroons.*] I had these saved for later. I saw them in the bakery window as I passed, fresh macaroons. They don't open until half past eight but I tapped on the glass. They know me there. I said, "My boy would enjoy those." [*She removes a small plate from her bag.*] Well, maybe they're a bit... dry for him, but with some apple juice-

WOMAN We have plates here.

MOTHER I know, dear, I know, but I didn't want to dirty one of yours. You've got enough washing up to do as it is. Now, if I can crush them up using the... [*rummages again in her bag*] ... the fork I brought. He'll enjoy them, even if he doesn't show it much. That's what he wanted as a boy, sweets for breakfast. Now he's got them. [*She stops and looks bemused.*] Oh, dear. I may need one of your forks after all. Mine's the wrong kind.

WOMAN What kind ?

MOTHER I don't know. [*showing it to the Woman*] Salad?

WOMAN [*surprised*] It's a tuning fork!

MOTHER Is it? What about other types of fish?

WOMAN No, tun-*ing*.

The Woman takes it from her mother-in-law, strikes it on the edge of the table and returns it. It emits a sonorous 'A' and the older woman regards it in bewildered awe.

WOMAN For musical instruments.

MOTHER I never learnt. It's not mine. [*She strikes it herself.*] I do hope this doesn't mean that somewhere a musician is misusing one of my pastry forks.

WOMAN It wouldn't give the right note. [*Her face creases into a smile.*] Too sharp.

They look at each other for a beat before the Woman covers her nose to stifle a snigger.

MOTHER Ha! [*She seems suddenly to remember another thing in her bag. Meanwhile, the Woman takes out a fork from a draw in the table.*] Oh! Listen... Tonight, after we've got him off, let's have a little celebration to bring in the New Year, you and me. We deserve it. I brought a tot of whiskey [*pulling out a large bottle*] for the occasion, h'm? Nothing special but we deserve a little something-

WOMAN No... No, not tonight.

MOTHER Oh. [*pause*] You've got other plans... How silly of me-

WOMAN No. I just don't... I don't feel well today.

MOTHER Poor dear, you're sick!

WOMAN I'm just tired. I didn't get much sleep.

MOTHER Was it the same thing... the laughing?

WOMAN No... Yes, he was laughing... but no. A friend came to visit... has come.

MOTHER Ah, now I see. Yes... [*waving the fork*] Well, you know what I think of those 'friends' of yours. What is it about teachers? They always seem the very worst examples for children. Another of them a nurse too... Forever showing up on your doorstep late in the evening, trying to drag you out to some shabby local establishment, wanting to disgrace you in public. The fat one's the worst... Lisa, and with five children already to look after, by different fathers I've heard. Do you know what they call her at the hairdresser's?

WOMAN Yes.

- MOTHER 'Lisa the Increaser'.
- WOMAN It wasn't her. You don't need to worry.
- MOTHER Well, the other two are no better... And they want to make you the fourth of their gang. Nothing but... trollops. There. You're better off keeping right out of it! [*pause*] H'm?
- WOMAN I didn't say anything. [*The Woman has picked up the flowers on the table. She twirls them in her fingers and smells them.*] What are these?
- MOTHER What do you mean? Flowers.
- WOMAN They don't smell of anything.
- MOTHER I thought they looked pretty. The girl in the bakery gave them to me. I'll keep them until the snowdrops come through... to cheer me up.
- WOMAN But they're not real. I'd rather have real ones, even dead or dying – at least they would smell. [*pause*] They might take away this stench.
- MOTHER Stench! What stench?!
- WOMAN From the canal.
- MOTHER Not in winter, dear. Not under all that ice.
- WOMAN It's there. Sometimes more, sometimes less. Always the stench of rotting flesh.
- MOTHER The... You're being very strange this morning. You're sure you're not feverish? [*She reaches up to the Woman's brow. The Woman quickly turns away.*] That's all right, dear. Many days I'm just the same... Where's it written we should be cheerful all the time, h'm? It's not a crime to be a little down-in-the-mouth. Not yet. [*beginning to crush the macaroons*] I blame the Americans. We're all turning into Americans. Just look at our new minister. He's an American now... from a place called Sunnyvale. He gives his sermons walking up and down the aisle, as if to say, "let's be friends". Well, I don't want to be friends, and I don't like being called by my Christian name before we've even been introduced. He's already got half the congregation doing all this... smiley-smiley... clapping, dancing... Mrs. Alhusen with her arms in the air shouting, "Jesus loves

you! God loves you!” A widow of her age! I’ve been going to that church every week for forty years, but it’s not the same anymore. [pause] Maybe it’s me. Enthusiasm’s for the young. It’s gone right out of me. That’s why I can recognise fakers when I see them. They know God doesn’t love them, really. Judge him on the world he created. He’s... callous... unjust... That’s what’s behind all this... simpering today. Everywhere you go people tell you, “Cheer up!” “Chin up!” Up, up, up! Just don’t let Him see you disgruntled.

WOMAN People don’t believe in God anymore. They’re probably just trying to be friendly.

MOTHER It doesn’t make any sense to me. “I believe”, “I don’t believe...” It’s not a debate on the radio. You listen to nothing... [silence] ...and either you believe it’s nothing, or something that seems a lot like nothing, and you never find out for certain which you believe in. It’s not a choice... and you can’t shake it off... sin, guilt, fear... judgment... retribution keep coming back regardless. People change as time passes, His name changes, but God remains the same. So does the sin He hates the most: petulance, that look backwards over the shoulder. He’ll teach them what more there is to lose... He’ll teach them until they smile at what they’ve got! [She has pounded the macaroons into a fine dust.] But with our bad luck ...With what is happening to my son, who used to be so... so proud and powerful, should we be smiling? He gets out of bed one day and can only drag one leg behind him. And before that, not long, three days before-

WOMAN Don’t-

MOTHER *Your* boy-

WOMAN Please.

MOTHER That... rash boy: so much energy, boundless energy driving him to the dusty ends of the earth, where they didn’t know there’d never lived a better boy-

WOMAN *Mum!*

MOTHER They shot out his heart.

WOMAN *Stop it!* [tearing the flowers to pieces] *Stop it!*

MOTHER I remember when I had sufficient: *three* sons; a big house, beautiful, and not my only one; a husband. So, I was getting old, and ugly... not as old as I am now, not as ugly. I had enough. That's when I should have been happy. For God's sake... He keeps beating me down and down and down. [*The **Mother-in-law** takes the bottle of whiskey, unscrews the lid, pours some into a cup.*] Eventually I'll beg for mercy. Dear Lord... thanks for what little you have left me... for the wisdom you have given me... for your enduring forgiveness... but I refuse. I refuse it all. Amen.

*The **Mother-in-law** drinks. Having lowered the cup, the two women wait for a moment in silence, apprehensive, as if expecting a token of divine displeasure.*

WOMAN [*stopping her **Mother-in-law** from pouring another cupful*] That's enough now.

MOTHER What can He do? I can't go any lower.

WOMAN I know... but no more hysterics, h'm? Not today. Not while there...

*She is interrupted by a noise from offstage: laughter. It began as a low chuckle, steadily increasing into uproarious convulsions. Some time passes before it subsides. The **Woman** wears a pained and weary expression, covering her ears when it becomes too much. The **Mother**, on the other hand, is eager to listen and moves to be better able to do so, closer to the kitchen entrance.*

MOTHER The disease... It's taking possession of his body. Soon he'll make no noise, won't move... there'll be no sign he's alive at all except his eyes, his breath... [*The **Woman** shivers.*] It's time we went to him. Come.

WOMAN No! No, not me.

MOTHER Why not?

WOMAN You go. I need to be here when our guest gets up.

MOTHER Guest?

WOMAN Last night-

MOTHER That's right, I remember. [*pause*] She's still here then. Which room?

WOMAN The basement. Him, actually.

MOTHER I don't under-

WOMAN A friend of my husband... [*beginning to tidy: disposing of the shredded flowers, replacing the whiskey bottle-top, etc.*] ...old friend.

MOTHER He doesn't have any old friends.

WOMAN No, we haven't seen him for years.

MOTHER Who?

WOMAN I don't think you'd remember him. Anyway, he arrived last night, late, without warning. He needs a place to stay.

MOTHER For how long?

WOMAN I don't know... a few nights.

MOTHER You obliged him.

WOMAN What else could I have done?

MOTHER You could have told him it wasn't respectable... that you're a married woman.

WOMAN I've done nothing wrong.

MOTHER Nothing? Isn't it wrong to keep a man under your husband's roof/while he lies sick...

WOMAN I'm not "keeping a man"!

MOTHER Alone and neglected, wasting away...

WOMAN I've given up everything for him, not just these two years. My life has been nothing but looking after him. When has he been neglected?

MOTHER Last Friday, I came... you were watching television, and the door to his room was shut, I don't know for how long-

WOMAN I didn't want to... He was sleeping.

MOTHER When I went in he was lying on his left side. He couldn't breathe, couldn't turn over. Out of your sight he was crushing himself to death. Meanwhile, you're waiting, killing time... What can I do? I have to bite my tongue. I'm just his mother, a guest.

WOMAN And I'm his wife. So, the disease controls him now, but he's always controlled me. He still watches me like... like he's a spider trapped behind a pane of glass, as if I'm luckier than him. He doesn't realise that he's not the only prisoner: I'm married to him. I've done all my duties and more.

MOTHER But loving him? Did you ever do that?

WOMAN You take him then! I'd like to see it, a sot like you.

MOTHER I can't.

WOMAN No, the days you were too drunk to visit; the evenings you could do nothing but weep gin tears; every night: it was me alone. But if it's love he needs, you take him.

MOTHER I want to but... I'm dying.

WOMAN [*A beat, and then she laughs.*] You've got thirty years in you yet. You'll outlive me. [*pause*] The only thing wrong with you is that you always suspect the worst of other people... even your own family.

MOTHER Not always. [*The Woman pours some apple juice into the cup and attaches the lid.*] Why did you buy this house? Why did they ever rebuild it? That was the beginning of it all. [*pause*] I want to help as much as I can. More than I am.

WOMAN [*banding over the cup and picking up the plate*] Here. Let's go and give him his breakfast.

MOTHER If you like I could take care of him this morning. You go back to bed for a few hours, get some rest.

WOMAN [*a beat, she smiles and gives her the plate*] I appreciate it. Thank you.

MOTHER [*turning at the door*] The Rilutek doesn't seem to be helping much. I'm going to ask for him to be included in the trial. It won't reverse anything, of course-

WOMAN They already told me, 'no'.

MOTHER There's no harm in trying again, dear. If we don't fight for him, no one will.

The Mother-in-law goes out, leaving the Woman alone. She picks up the pair of binoculars and returns to her window.

Scene Two

Birdsong (blackbirds, robins, pigeons, magpies, etc.), a distant pneumatic drill: sounds that evoke an oasis in an urban desert; and the bells of a distant clock tower mark half-past the hour. Jamie enters along the pathway under the bridge, humming a tune reminiscent of the play's music, carrying newspapers and an arm full of sticks. He pauses to view the nearer house, but sees within only a Christmas tree simply adorned with whitish lights. He continues to the brazier, where he deposits the sticks; he pulls apart the newspapers, scanning the sheets in turn before crumpling and casting them into the barrel. Once or twice more he glances up at the well-lit house. He breaks into song:

JAMIE [*singing*]

'Here's to him that's now set free
Who was once a prentice bound
And for his sake, this holiday we make
So let his health go round, go round,
Go round, brave boys, until it comes to me,
For the longer we sit here and drink
The merrier we shall be.'

David appears at the top of the stairs, dressed in a tuxedo, looking nervous. He tries to salute Jamie but his feeble utterance emerges at the very moment Jamie breaks one of the sticks over his knee. He descends and again fails to make himself

heard over splintering wood. David approaches until he is within a few feet of his friend and readies himself once more, but seeing him raise another stick is overcome by urgency.

DAVID *Jamie!*

JAMIE *[jumping from the shock] Eah!*

Jamie runs to the other side of the barrel and then turns, brandishing the stick like a sword.

DAVID It's me!

JAMIE Jesus!

DAVID Sorry! Sorry.

JAMIE What was that about?

DAVID Sorry, mate.

JAMIE You're sorry? I almost voided my poopy shoot, you Charlie Chalk!

DAVID *[pointing backwards]* I tried to... You didn't hear...

Now they set off laughter in each other.

JAMIE I was touching the void. *[stops laughing and indicates the stick he holds]* "Behold my sword!"

DAVID *[a beat]* Oh, no!

JAMIE "What see you at the point?"

DAVID Nothing! No way! I don't want to-

JAMIE Just say your line, Dave.

DAVID I don't remember it.

JAMIE Bollocks! It was the greatest moment of our school careers.

DAVID Wrong. It was the greatest moment of *your* school career. *You* played ‘Tamburlaine the Great’. *I* was ‘Third Virgin’.

JAMIE There was a shortage of girls.

DAVID They could’ve doubled up.

JAMIE Don’t be ridiculous. If any of those girls had claimed to be virgins it would have ruined the artifice. They’d have been laughed off the stage.

DAVID Thanks.

JAMIE You looked beautiful, star of the show, a triumph. Now deliver the line! [*thrusting the stick towards his face*] “What see you at the point?”

DAVID [*pause, sighs, effeminately*] “Nothing but fear and fatal steel, my lord!”

As Jamie pours forth some lines from Marlowe’s ‘Tamburlaine the Great, Pt. I’, David reaches into his inside pocket and takes out a packet of cigarettes. His offer of one to his companion is ignored.

JAMIE “Your fearful minds are thick and misty, then,
For there sits Death, there sits imperious Death,
Keeping his circuit by the slicing edge.
But I am pleased you shall not see him there;
He is now seated on my horsemen’s spears,
And on their points his fleshless body feeds.”

DAVID [*casually, lighting his cigarette*] My Dad said he preferred *Anyone Can Whistle*, the year my brother was in it.

JAMIE That’s why I hate politicians. When did you get back from Cambridge?
And what’s with the tux?

DAVID Giving a speech this evening.

JAMIE It’s nine thirty in the morning. How long’s the speech?

DAVID All the local Party top brass are coming round for a soiree. It’s a great opportunity for-

JAMIE An air strike.

DAVID For me... to get my foot in the door, really sell myself.

JAMIE What are you going to talk about?

DAVID ‘Rebooting Our Violent Youth.’

JAMIE What are you going to talk about?

DAVID Not a clue. Help me, please.

JAMIE H’m. Let me see. [*pause*] A little... Football; Education...

DAVID Uh-huh.

JAMIE Community; Kindness; Employment; Role models...

DAVID Yes, yes; like it...

JAMIE And Sobriety.

DAVID [*pause, he thinks*] ‘Little feckers’. Great. Thanks. Jesus, Jamie, this is serious. The country’s holed beneath the waterline. We’ve got some massive problems to sort out; that need fresh thinking; big men; big, fresh... men. [*hesitates*] And besides, I’ll be halfway to a nomination for the next elections if I can impress tonight: youngest councillor in the city’s history, fingers crossed. The march has begun, my friend!

JAMIE And you’re in the front rank.

DAVID Exactly. Our generation’s time has come early, but we shall answer the call!

JAMIE What a crock of shit.

DAVID What is?

JAMIE This Mardi Gras of yours. The people who matter want everything to go back to exactly how it was when they were raking in a shitload of money in dividends and property, and they want people our age who don’t have a piece of the pie as far away from politics as possible, and I

don't blame them. We're ill-educated, broke, and bitter. They made us like that because it suited their principles and interests.

DAVID Precisely the kind of negative, buck-passing mentality we're trying to... You don't think the Party will endorse me then?

JAMIE Of course they will: in spite of your youth. You *have* no new ideas. You're an old head on young shoulders... And your dad's an M.P..

DAVID [*pause*] If that's what you really think.

JAMIE Look, I didn't mean to-

DAVID I didn't choose to talk about the youth. Actually, I'm not interested in it at all, but I'm representative so it's not up to me. I suppose listening to me makes them feel enlightened and broad-minded, but it's just superficial. Why can't an old person represent young people, if the interest's sincere? Or a man represent women? Or a rich person represent poor people? And vice-versa, and the same for race and religion. That's what a true equality of human beings looks like! [*pause*] Anyway, I'd love to have a chat but I have some old ideas to regurgitate.

JAMIE Dave-

DAVID Why are you even here, anyway?

JAMIE It's New Year's Eve. We always meet here on New Year's Eve; stand around a fire; drink your dad's wine... just the three of us.

DAVID You should have called.

JAMIE I did. I tried. [*pause*] Good Christmas?

DAVID Busy. [*pause*] Y'know, uni work, family stuff. [*pause*] You?

JAMIE Same, same... without the uni work... and the family stuff. [*a beat*] What about Dawn? Have you spoken to her recently?

DAVID No.

JAMIE Me neither. Can't get hold of her. She must have lost her phone or something. You're not friends in Cambridge then?

DAVID Not really. So, what are you up to these days?

JAMIE Oh. I've had a few little jobs, here and there... mostly outdoors... gardening, bricklaying... that kind of thing. [*pause*] I can't stand being cooped up indoors, y'know. I wasn't meant to be shuffling papers in some windowless office. We men, we're supposed to be out here: farming, hunting, battling against the elements. Sometimes I feel like everybody's trying to shut me away, and I'm a freak for wanting to escape. I'm not lazy and I'm not stupid. I just want to make sure that when I work, it's not to build higher and higher walls around myself.

DAVID So what's the plan?

JAMIE The plan... People used to think that determinism wasn't so brilliant. Now you're certifiable if you don't want your life to progress as uneventfully as possible along the production line from university to a job for life, a house and marriage, children, retirement, then into a box and buried.

DAVID I was only asking-

JAMIE I know. I didn't mean to have a go. I just don't understand this place. I feel like I was born several hundred years too late, or shouldn't have been born at all but written... like Tamburlaine. I mean, how can a man be a man anymore, unless he's in a play?

A woman's voice calls from offstage: "David!"

DAVID That's my mum. I'd better head in. Last night she cancelled the children's entertainer after reading insinuations on a web forum for conjurors. Now I'm the games master. Plus, I'm freezing my nuts off out here. I'll let you know which evening I'm free next week and we'll go for a beer before I head back. [*"David!"*] Alright! [*to Jamie*] Nice one. See you later then.

David turns to leave and begins to ascend the steps.

JAMIE But, Dave...!

DAVID [*pause*] I'd stop thinking about her if I were you, mate.

- JAMIE You must have seen her around from time to time. It's not a big town. Just tell me that she's okay.
- DAVID I can't. She dropped out.
- JAMIE What?! When?!
- DAVID Do you blame her? After what you did?
- JAMIE I know, I know, for fuck's sake, I *know!* But where is she now? How do we know she hasn't... hasn't... because the first time we saw her, remember... here, four years ago today. We were talking together on the bridge...
- Jamie points in that direction and then stops speaking mid-sentence.*
- DAVID What? What's the matter?
- JAMIE Nothing. It's just... there's a woman in that house watching us through binoculars.
- David looks. The Woman immediately lowers the binoculars and pretends to be cleaning the glass.*
- DAVID Lonely housewife.
- JAMIE Anyway, there was Dawn beneath us, walking over the ice, slowly like she was sleepwalking. I called out, I can't remember what, but she turned and smiled... and fell straight down through the ice.
- DAVID And you, you mad twat, jumped in after her *from the bridge*, and broke your ankle on the way in.
- JAMIE She needed someone to save her. She still does.
- DAVID Someone like you?
- JAMIE [*irritated*] It doesn't have to be me. But I know her. Sometimes she feels like she doesn't deserve to live.
- DAVID She's safe.

JAMIE How do you know?

DAVID Because I'm the bloke who picks up the pieces after you jump in. Just like the first time I had to drag you both out the water, or you would've drowned. Because I'm engaged to her. [*silence*] Don't believe me? Actually, it's one reason for the bash tonight. [*taking out another cigarette but without offering first*] The Party smiles on family, commitment, stability, that kind of thing. What?! *You* can't look after her. You don't have any money. Anyway, you *wouldn't* look after her. You don't know about responsibility. Your only philosophy is saying, "yes, please" to every offer that comes your way. She told me everything. How it wasn't just attention you got from the girls at school, especially after you acted in the play... You were always talking about them, trying to make Dawn jealous, putting pressure on her; even though you knew her past and the only thing she valued about herself. Until she gave in, the night before you were supposed to go to Cambridge together. She told me that afterwards you didn't speak to her at all, just got up and left, disappeared... until now.

JAMIE I swear to God I'll never leave her again.

DAVID I told you to forget about her.

JAMIE Is she here? I want to speak to her.

DAVID Yeah, but the problem is she doesn't want to speak to you.

DAVID raises his lighter with one hand and cups it with his other. A pulse of rage electrifies JAMIE and he swipes at his friend's face with a fist, knocking him down.

DAVID Son of a bitch! That fucking hurt.

JAMIE Jesus, mate. I'm sorry! I don't/know what...

DAVID Little fucker!

JAMIE Really, I'm really sorry! [*stretches out a hand*] Here, let me-

DAVID O God, my face! My eye!

JAMIE Christ, I've blinded you.

DAVID How does it look?

JAMIE I can't see. Open it.

DAVID I'm trying to, you twat! That'll go black. How am I supposed to give a speech on solving youth violence with a black eye?! O God, I'm fucked! [*A voice calls again from offstage: "David!"*] I'm coming! [*to Jamie*] Get your hands off me! [*David picks up his bent cigarette and lighter, and throws them to Jamie, who doesn't attempt to catch them.*] Here. I'm trying to quit.

David turns and hurries away.

JAMIE Dave!

But he receives no response and finds himself alone.

Jamie takes a last look at the nearer house and exits under the bridge.

Scene Three

Before Jamie has disappeared from view, the somnolent ticking of the clock replaces birdsong. The Woman has raised the binoculars to her eyes again and behind her a Man enters the kitchen quietly. He observes her for a moment or two before rapping his knuckle on the doorframe. The Woman looks round and, registering the identity of the entrant, quickly hides the binoculars behind her back.

MAN Morning.

WOMAN Morning!

MAN [*pause*] Thanks for the towel.

WOMAN Oh-

MAN And the razor.

WOMAN My pleasure. [*pause*] You worked out how to use the shower all right?

- MAN Yes. Eventually. [*pointing*] But you have, erm... The boiler's been making a banging noise.
- WOMAN Oh. I'm sorry.
- MAN Could be a problem, that's all. Frozen pipe or... I mean, I could take a look.
- WOMAN No. No, don't do that. I'll call someone out. You shouldn't have to worry about that. What about breakfast? I'm afraid there's/not much...
- MAN I'm fine.
- WOMAN Some cereal... or toast.
- MAN Thanks, but no.
- WOMAN Or eggs... eggs and bacon. I could do pancakes.
- MAN I'm really not hungry.
- WOMAN If you're sure. [*pause*] Sleep well?
- MAN Yes, very well. Thanks. [*pause*] And you?
- WOMAN Yes, very well. Well, not well. I couldn't really. Too many thoughts... you know.
- MAN Are you bird-watching?
- WOMAN No, these aren't mine, they're his mother's. I don't know why... She's upstairs. I hope she didn't wake you this morning. No, there were two boys... fighting beside the canal. [*The Man comes and stands close to her.*] They've gone now.
- The Woman looks up into his face. The Man's gaze meets hers for a moment before he pulls away.*
- MAN I'd like to see her again, his mother. I wonder if she remembers me after all this time.

- WOMAN Don't be offended if she doesn't.
- MAN You think I've changed?
- WOMAN [*coily*] I don't know.
- MAN [*humorously*] Oh dear!
- WOMAN I mean, I can't tell. Well, we've hardly talked... only for a few minutes last night... and I was so... surprised. [*She can't help but smile.*] Some words just sound so ridiculous in certain contexts. When you haven't seen someone for twenty-five years, 'surprise' doesn't quite seem to cover it... unless you're Cilla Black, obviously.
- MAN 'Shock' maybe? As in, it was a shock for me to hear that you live in this house.
- WOMAN [*losing her smile and with a breathless laugh*] Yes, I suppose so.
- MAN Was it your choice?
- WOMAN It seemed right to me. [*pause*] Do you still blame me for what I did?
- MAN No.
- WOMAN [*pause*] I didn't think to ask you what you've been doing, where you've been.
- MAN Where do I begin?
- WOMAN What about the end? Where have you come from?
- MAN The past three years I was in Canada, the back of beyond, you might say. But I've been all over: cities, jungles, deserts.
- WOMAN I'd love to hear about all your adventures. It sounds wonderful.
- MAN [*curtly*] It was necessary. Maybe it sounds wonderful now... to you. I don't know about adventures. I've done the worst kind of jobs in the worst kind of places... alone, mostly: there's no other way when you can't stay long in one place.

- WOMAN Then... what's changed? Are you... out of danger?
- MAN No, probably not.
- WOMAN What did you come back for?
- MAN [*pause*] To see your husband.
- WOMAN Then you knew. You heard he was sick?
- MAN Not before two nights ago.
- WOMAN Then why?
- MAN I told you, to see him!
- WOMAN And me? Nothing about me.
- MAN And you. Of course, you! [*pause*] Jesus, woman!
- WOMAN Don't get angry. Why are you angry?
- MAN You know why. You're trying to get me to... You're tempting me!
- WOMAN *Me?* And I suppose I *tempted* you from across the Atlantic!
- MAN You did! [*pause*] See how grubby it sounds when you force me to say it aloud?
- WOMAN Say... what? [*silence*] No, heaven forbid we should speak in plain English. [*She moves to pick up the whiskey.*] Drink?
- MAN [*He shakes his head. The Woman pours one for herself.*] For years I've kept a hope of you close, closer than if I held it in my fist. And now you want to... prize it out like it's yours by right, with whiskey and a few tears.
- WOMAN [*confidently moving closer to him*] But it *is* mine and I'm not trying to prize anything from you. Nothing I won't give up myself, anyway.
- The Woman raises her hand to stroke his cheek but the Man angrily seizes her wrist and pushes it away.*

MAN I can't.

WOMAN You came back. I don't understand.

MAN I thought you would.

WOMAN I love you.

MAN Keep quiet, can't you?!

WOMAN No! I'm not a child now. Years of waiting... years of regret have educated me to speak. This can't be just a visit on a whim, out of curiosity. I've been doing labours since you left. I could've carried on for a long while yet, existing only the memory and hope of you. But that's all over now that you're here. I can't go back to my old life. I won't let you leave without me.

*The same laughter is heard again from offstage. Again the **Woman** bears it with anguish; she has to sit. The **Man** is astounded.*

MAN Is that him?

WOMAN He can't talk, but he can't help laughing about it. You'll take me with you.

MAN I'll take you nowhere! And don't tell me what I'll do. I'm back now and I'm not going to leave this city again.

WOMAN Then stay with me! I don't care: it's not where, it's you and without you nothing.

MAN What about your husband?

WOMAN [*She has no answer.*] I... He won't live more than a year.

MAN [*horrified by her*] Christ!

WOMAN His mother can take him.

MAN This is *his* house.

- WOMAN She wants to look after him.
- MAN It's wrong.
- WOMAN Why?
- MAN You, what are you? Amoral? He's my friend and he's dying! And you owe him: your freedom, a comfortable life...
- WOMAN No, I paid those debts two years ago in my son's blood – maybe you heard about *that*. It was my husband who encouraged... pushed him into the army. I pleaded with both of them. We women bear sons, feed them, raise them; a father has one duty: to stop them becoming soldiers. You should be asking me why I've stayed here to wipe his numb body clean every morning; why I've kept him alive knowing how desperate he is for the end.
- MAN [*stunned*] But you said he can't speak anymore.
- WOMAN Not for two months... but I know him, better than he knows himself. You think I'm exaggerating, but with enough time... I realised before he did when he began to lose his speech. We were talking to a doctor... She didn't notice; she didn't know how silver-tongued he'd always been... We were talking about the disease. A couple of times he slurred the name of it, couldn't get it out. The doctor thought it was ignorance and jumped in; my husband ignored it; but I knew what was happening. Month by month his speech got worse. It was like he was stuck in reverse, unlearning everything he learnt in childhood, soon just a mewling baby again. But he stopped before that, stopped trying to speak, I mean. I think it was so painful for him that he made a decision not to go on with it. [*pause*] I was with him, the last time, in his room. He fidgeted and stared at me... *at me*... and knew he wanted to speak. It took him a couple of attempts to form the word and his mother came rushing in from the next room because she thought he was calling her. [*pause*] But she didn't hear the 's' at the beginning like I did. Strange how similar those words are. He hasn't said another word since then.

The Woman lifts the glass to her lips with a shaking hand and drinks it down.

- MAN You *have* changed, haven't you? You're...colder, harder. You're not the girl I've been travelling half my life and the world to get back to. Just now I could have sworn... You remind me so much of...
- WOMAN Of what? Who?!
- MAN A woman I've been trying to escape.
- WOMAN Oh, *please!* She can have you. I'll even let her know where you're staying.
- MAN Only, there was never any good in *her* at all. I thought I left her three weeks ago in a town called Serpentine but the way you talk she got here before me.
- WOMAN Serpentine? [*She laughs derisively.*] What is she, a witch? There's no such place! I said I wanted to hear your stories, but there's no need to make them up.
- MAN It's there... named after the river flowing into an inlet of the ocean; nothing but trees and water and the town. I ended up in a paper mill there three summers ago, the only job going, doing maintenance in the belly of the beast... digesters, diffusers, drum displacers... all producing a stink that would embarrass a skunk. And when we shut them down to burn off gasses and black liquor, that stink would go out over the land like something biblical and kept people indoors. I worked with a man-mountain we called Rolly, who showed me the ropes, helped me to clear a bit of land, drank with me, took me hunting and fishing round about. He lived along the road from the mill and town, on the other side of the inlet. It was a good forty-minute drive round the bay, except from November to April when the water froze over and he could make the trip over the ice in half the time. He invited me for dinner one evening during my first winter there and took me with him in his truck in the dark. The only thing I could see was a little patch of white always the same distance ahead and instead of the radio I listened to the creaking and cracking below us. I tried not to show it but my fingers were fastened to the door. He was joking around to start off with, but he must have sensed I was sending up prayers... When we reached the middle of the ice and the lights of Serpentine had disappeared behind a... promontory, he quietened down and tried his best to reassure me: he'd done it hundreds of times before, he said. Only twice (once when he took a shortcut over ice he knew was thinner) ...twice had a wheel gone

through and forced him to call on his phone for help. His wife would place a light on the porch at the back of their house and we'd see it any moment, three miles away. *[pause]* It appeared, as he said. Within ten minutes we heard the beach of pebbles under the tyres and I thanked God for keeping his end of the bargain... but the price was too high. I met her for the first time that night. She was waiting, and when her eyes turned from Rolly's cheek and looked on me, I saw something... terrible... irrepressible. The same look I saw in *your* eyes just now.

The Woman appears not to have listened to his story. She has picked up the tuning fork from the table and sounded it once or twice.

WOMAN So. What? You're telling me you're in love with someone else.

MAN No! She's... in league with the Devil!

WOMAN *[She laughs.]* Oh, be brave, old man! Give me the real reason you can't bear me touching you. First, it was my obligations; now I remind you of a woman you once shagged... who probably later turned up on your doorstep, which in your book apparently makes her akin to the Antichrist. I wish you were more like you were as a boy: never scared. He didn't stand around worrying about what was right or wrong. He fought for what he wanted. There was a song you used to sing. *[She strikes the tuning fork.]* It began with an 'A'. Remember? *[again]* Sing!

MAN *[wrenching the fork from her grasp]* Enough! Listen to me! She came to me one weekend a month ago. We'd been carrying on behind Rolly's back for two years... Longer. A couple of times I tried to end it but she wouldn't have it. And we were both lonely... and I was weak. Then she told me she'd had enough of him, but that he'd never just let her go. She knew him, she said; he'd kill her before he let her go. The only way was to get him first. I told her not to be crazy but... but it was impossible! It seemed like she'd been planning it for years. She'd already hidden his 'phone. Rolly had told me the day before he'd lost it. She wasn't going to stop now. But if I hadn't been so *weak*... *[pause]* By the Monday I thought she'd probably have come to her senses. A couple of times I thought about warning him, but how do you go about a thing like that? I decided to wait another day, give myself a chance to get the story straight. I knew though, as soon as I waved him off that evening and watched him drive into the pitch black of the bay... I knew I wouldn't see Rolly again... and a part of me was relieved. *[pause]*

Nobody did see him again. That night she didn't shine a light from her back porch. She told me she just stared into the dark and listened for the sound of an engine. When I left Serpentine on the Friday, they still hadn't found his truck. *[pause]* See? I've only been able to make two friends in this world and I'm to blame for killing one of them.

*The Woman's **Mother-in-law** returns, but halts in the threshold unseen by the other two, listening.*

WOMAN *[pause, non-plused]* You think I want to murder my husband to be with you?

MAN I don't think... I was afraid-

WOMAN For God's sake-

MAN Do you blame me, when I hear you talk about smothering him?

WOMAN Did you come back to torture me? You say you have feelings for me but you can't bear for me to touch you. What made you retreat? I said too much. I should've been more like a girl. And now I'm accused. Is it fair? I did one bad thing when I was young, but otherwise I'm a good person. *[She begins to cry.]* I'm good, I'm good!

*The **Man** moves tentatively towards her, reaches out as if to console her, almost touches her hair. The **Mother** immediately bustles into the room.*

MOTHER Come, come, girl! It's no use with that. It looks like pride. Let Him judge what is good. And if He likes what He sees He may be merciful...

MAN Mrs.-

MOTHER Or He may not. It makes no difference to Him. But getting teary won't help you; better not to make a fuss at all.

MAN Hello.

MOTHER "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth." Isn't that right?

MAN Absolutely.

- MOTHER Promises, broken promises.
- MAN I wonder if I might introduce myself. I was... am a close friend of your son.
- MOTHER I know who you are.
- MAN You do?
- MOTHER I knew you immediately.
- MAN Really, because I was concerned... I'd been led to believe you might not remember-
- MOTHER My son was constantly remembering you to me... before he was so cruelly bereft of his oral faculties. He'd never have allowed me to forget you. He was an extremely magnanimous man in that respect...
- MAN I completely agree.
- MOTHER ...to whoever had the misfortune to be... displaced from his affections.
- MAN I hope you don't consider me-
- MOTHER I assign no blame. That's a private matter between you and my son...
[*She leads the Man to one side.*] ...but I am little surprised by your boldness in coming here. Some quarrels are just too... distressing to be healed.
- MAN I had no idea he felt-
- MOTHER I don't mean you shouldn't go up and see him. I'm sure he'd be grateful to see your face, for the sake of old times at least. But I'm afraid that a prolonged stay here is out of the question.
- MAN I understand.
- MOTHER Not only are our hands full with my son, but some of us have small battles of our own to fight... against cancer, for example.
- MAN [*a beat*] No! I'm so sorry. I had no idea. She never said.

MOTHER No, she wouldn't. And she has her own battle... against the demon of alcohol.

*With sideways jerks of her head, the **Mother** draws attention to the **Woman**, who is taking another sip of whiskey. The **Mother** mimics this action to emphasise her point.*

WOMAN [*noticing*] What are you whispering about?

MOTHER [*using one hand on the **Man**'s shoulder to move him further away*] Many's the time she's been no good for anything except weeping... that's if she's at home at all, and not out with her friends in some bar making respectable folk blush.

MAN Doing what exactly?

*The **Woman** approaches behind them and eavesdrops.*

MOTHER How should I know? I'm not a spy.

MAN No, of course.

MOTHER But I have heard from various sources in the area... my hairdresser, for example... that promiscuity wouldn't be an unfair accusation... and not just with men of a suitable age.

MAN You mean...

MOTHER I do. I do mean. Boys!

WOMAN Huh?!

MAN [*turning*] Is this true?

MOTHER Of course she'll deny everything.

WOMAN No, it is *not* true!

MAN She was watching two boys through binoculars when I came in.

MOTHER Denial is drink's most powerful ally and she is hard pressed by both.

- WOMAN What?! *She's* the drunk here!
- MOTHER “For the lips of a strange woman drop as an honeycomb, and her mouth is smoother than oil: But her end is bitter as wormwood, sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death; her steps take hold on hell.”
Isn't that right?
- MAN Certainly.
- MOTHER And don't expect any remorse. She's indifferent to it all, even my own impending death.
- WOMAN You're not dying! You can't be killed. It'd take a stake through the heart.
- MAN For goodness' sake!
- MOTHER Oh, she *is* a good girl, really! But I have to watch her with my son. Last Friday, I let myself into the house. I went into his bedroom-
- WOMAN [*to the Man*] Don't listen to her!
- MOTHER ...and saw her standing there, watching him as he struggled to breathe.
- WOMAN That's a lie! I was in a different room. I didn't-
- MOTHER No, she's not too keen on her husband. I would take him away, to safety, but what choice do I have? I must leave my baby behind me, in her... tenuous grasp.
- WOMAN She's deranged! She's paranoid! Ask her where the rest of her family is! They'll have nothing to do with her.
- MOTHER Sometimes I wonder if all she thinks about is killing him.
- MAN Then I was right. I must leave. [*striding towards the door*] I'll go up and see him, then later I'll pack. I won't spend another night under his roof.
- WOMAN You believe her!
- MAN [*turning*] I believe you wish he were dead.

The Man exits. The Mother-in-law exhales in relief and satisfaction.

MOTHER I'm sorry, dear, but it's all for the best. You can't keep a man *and* care for my son.

WOMAN *You!* Get out of my house!

MOTHER You wouldn't! Don't you understand?

WOMAN Leave and never come back! [*The Woman picks up her mother-in-law's bag, thrusts it into her hands and almost strong-arms her out.*] Now!

MOTHER At least let me say goodbye to my son!

WOMAN [*from offstage*] You'll never see your son again.

MOTHER Wait!

The front door slams shut. After a few moments the Woman solemnly re-enters the room and sinks to the floor beside a chair.

WOMAN [*loudly*] And if I did wish it, is that a crime? Is just thinking something a crime now? You'll force me. The way you think the worst of me, you'll force me to kill him!

Scene Four

Birdsong again. Dawn springs into view at the top of the stairs from behind the nearer house. She eagerly scans the towpath and landing before descending a few steps. Seeing nobody there, her energy dissipates a little.

DAVID [*from offstage*] Dawn! Wait!

DAWN [*to David, offstage*] I don't see anyone now. He must've left.

DAVID [*appearing now, still in tuxedo, with a bag of frozen vegetables held to his swollen eye*] Of course, he did. He wouldn't hang around afterwards, waiting to get picked up, would he?

DAWN I suppose not, but I hate to think about him getting away with that kind of thing.

DAVID I know. Dreadful!

The Mother-in-law, bowed and dejected, crosses the bridge from the opposite end. She pauses once and turns her head, as if tempted to look over her shoulder at the farther house, but soon continues.

DAWN [*with feigned outrage*] It's primitive! This is a supposedly civilised country and yet, out of the blue, any of us could be the victim of a brutal and motiveless attack by a gang of burly Eastern Europeans. What did you say the man looked like again?

DAVID The one who held me down, or the one who punched me?

DAWN The one who punched you, the burly Albanian.

DAVID Well, burly, obviously... shaved head... angular... fists. [*Dawn continues down to the canal.*] Come on, Dawn, let's head back inside. I'll write my speech about curbing youth violence while you draw a picture of a donkey's arse and find a pin for the kids to stick in it.

DAWN No, I need a break from your family and the never-ending political arguments. The worst thing is that none of you really disagree with each other... on anything.

DAVID It'll be over after tonight... for a while, anyway.

DAWN [*stretching*] I feel like I haven't been outside since Christmas Eve.

DAVID It's not safe here. They might come back at any moment.

DAWN You said they wouldn't hang around to get arrested.

DAVID The criminal mind feeds on risk-taking. Anyway, it's fucking cold. [*looking up*] Any minute now it's going to start snowing. My nipples already think they've been buried by an avalanche. [*He holds his jacket open to show his dress shirt.*] Look, they're trying to dig their way out!

MOTHER [*at that moment passing him and exiting*] Young hoodlum.

- DAVID Old harridan!
- DAWN One thing I don't get... How did you know he was Albanian? You don't speak Albanian.
- DAVID H'm? Oh, tattoo of a two-headed eagle... on his left forearm.
- DAWN And the Serbian who held you down...?
- DAVID Wearing the national football top.
- DAWN I just think it's incredible they were able to bridge the divide caused by centuries of national, ethnic and religious animosity, all to punch you in the face.
- DAVID Let's not stigmatise them.
- DAWN I wasn't. Oh, for God's sake, Dave! Give up! It was Jamie!
- DAVID What was? Jamie *who*?
- DAWN He found out we've been seeing each other. It's okay. I suppose it was bound to happen some time.
- DAVID I have literally no idea what you're-
- DAWN [*menacingly*] David... so far I've given you the benefit of the doubt. You think you're protecting me, or something, but if you don't tell me the truth right now, I will take that bag of frozen carrots and-
- DAVID Oh, *that* Jamie! Yep, he did drop by earlier.
- DAWN What for?
- DAVID [*descending to canal-level*] To humiliate me with memories of a school play. [**Dawn** *hides a smile from him.*] To ridicule my political ambitions. [*pause*] To ask about you.
- DAWN [*touching her abdomen*] You didn't tell him about...?
- DAVID No, of course not.

- DAWN And he didn't wonder why I'd dropped out of uni.
- DAVID I don't know. He thought it was because of him.
- DAWN I suppose he wanted to meet up for New Year's Eve.
- DAVID He mentioned that, *and* the first time we met... you walking over the ice of the canal. He seems worried that you'll try something similar again. So am I, come to that.
- DAWN No. I won't. I've struggled for a few months, it's true, especially that first week alone in Cambridge, feeling... unclean again, and behaving like it. I went a bit off the rails, but I'm stronger now than when you met me... plus you only discover something once. Wha'd'ya know, even the disgust at finding out you're the child of a rape becomes easier to bear! [*looking down*] Anyway, everything's different now...
- DAVID You make it sound like what happened between us in the first week of term was a one-off... because... and I'm not putting pressure on you... so far it has been a one-off.
- DAWN I asked you to give me some time.
- DAVID I know, I know. I guess I'm worried that maybe you're having second thoughts... I mean, you still haven't given me an answer.
- DAWN I've been thinking about it. It's not been easy but-
- DAVID And now Jamie's sniffing around again, asking to see you... I don't need to remind you, warn you, even though he's my friend, in a manner of speaking... he's fickle. Even if he's not in love, he acts like it and then, when he gets bored or he gets what he wants, he leaves. I'm not quite saying he's a bastard; that's just his nature.
- DAWN I don't need a lecture.
- DAVID He hasn't got any money. He's not in university. He's a bloody gardener, for Christ's sake.
- DAWN Do you want to hear my answer or not?

DAVID He doesn't even have a family to help him out. His dad's in Grenada and his mother's a ticking bomb.

DAWN Bloody hell, no wonder he hit you! So will I if you're not careful. This has got nothing to do with Jamie.

DAVID Well, okay, that's a relief! For a moment there I thought you were going to make the little chap a bastard.

DAWN [*shocked*] What?!

DAVID ...Or chapette, of course.

DAWN David. Listen to me. This is my answer to your question. I'm not going to marry you.

DAVID But you just said it has nothing to do with Jamie.

DAWN I'm not going to marry anyone! Firstly, we can survive without either of you. Secondly, you only asked because it seems like the grown-up thing to do. You're always desperate to behave like you're ten years older than you are. It's childish!

A voice from offstage calls, "David!"

DAVID In a minute, mother!

DAWN And I won't be "*making* the little chap a bastard" because I don't know who the father is!

DAVID Dawn... Think about what you're doing... to the baby, to yourself... to me. I was depending on you saying "yes". Couldn't you just give it a try?

DAWN It's not going to happen.

DAVID What am I supposed to do?

DAWN [*going to him, genuinely apologetic*] I'm sorry, Dave.

DAVID What am I going to tell the party chairman?

DAWN Why tell him anything?

DAVID For God's sake, Dawn. He's going to make an announcement this evening.

DAWN He's going to *what?!*

Dawn swings for his face but David just manages to swerve in time.

DAVID Jesus, you almost clocked me on my good eye!

DAWN You asked for it. As soon as the chairman walks through the door you'll tell him there's no need for any announcement.

DAVID Fine. [*pause*] I can see why you and Jamie were a couple. Your first reaction was violence, just like him. But at least he had the decency to apologise afterwards.

DAWN [*pause, she thinks*] He didn't punch you for merely going out with me, did he? You told him we're getting married!

DAVID No.

This time Dawn prangs his face with her fist.

DAVID Aw! Dawn, for crying out loud! My mouth!

DAWN How dare you! What made you think-

DAVID I know! I'm sorry, I'm sorry! But why the face?! What about the stomach or the testicles, where nobody can see the bruises?

DAWN If you want me to kick you in the bollocks, I'll gladly do it.

DAVID I'm bleeding!

DAWN [*imitating, in a shrill voice*] I'm bleeding!

DAVID Just take a look at my lip and let me know how it looks. [*Dawn does so.*] Ouch! Holy Mother of God!

DAWN Take your hand away and let me see, you pansy. Oh, that's a beauty!

DAVID Is it...? Oh, God! Is it... a fat lip? [**Dawn's guilty expression confirms his worst fears. He tries to remain calm.**] Fine. That's fine. Everything's fine.

A call from offstage: "Dav-"

DAVID Christ, fucking Jesus, fuckety fuck, mother! Can't you leave me alone for one shitting minute?! [**David stares at Dawn impassively for a moment.**] I have a treasure hunt to organise. [*He goes.*] I hope you're satisfied. A promising political career cut down in its adolescence, its slaughtered carcass hoisted up for all to see. [*at the top of the stairs*] I don't think he *will* walk out on you again. He swore. And you won't let him.

David exits. Dawn remains for a few moments.

DAWN No, I won't let him go. If I can find him. [*pause*] God, let it snow! This place is beautiful in the snow!

She stands there listening, smelling, embracing the open air, before returning to the nearer house. Music. Fading light.

Act Two: *Night*

The scene is as it was, except the kitchen of the farther house can no longer be seen. Instead there is only the incline of the right bank, tree trunks and the foliage of a multitude of creepers, festooned with the usual articles of human refuse. There is a small gap low down in the wooden slats of the fence at the crest of the slope.

The sun has fulfilled its grudging winter promise, abandoning the land and turrets of cloud to darkness, which even a full moon is weak to oppose. More than her diffuse pallor, it is electric light from the ornate lamppost and windows of the nearer house that brightens the stage. The tower clock chimes seven and the party will soon begin. In contrast, all but the outline of the farther house is lost to sight.

*The **Blind Codger** is sitting on the bench, his arms and upturned hands stretched towards the brazier, which he has lit. His eyes and every visible inch of skin bear testimony to the heat of a terrible inferno in his distant past. He is galled by the cries of several crows, disturbed from their roost in the branches above.*

CODGER Sleep! Go to sleep, you acolytes of Death! Aren't you content with trailing me here and there all day long in a spiral above my head, heckling? Am I not even allowed a little warmth on a night as cold as this? You can throng together wing to wing and console each other. I'm alone. Wind and water are my only friends, and they steal my heat... [*He reaches down and paws at his boots.*] ...to leave me itchy toes! *Ach!* [*pause, the crows fall silent, now he talks to the audience*] I have no society. People find my appearance repellent: my wispy hair, my melted skin, these plugs, my eyes; and for making them feel disgust, they hate me. For showing myself, reminding them that their own normality is precarious, they avoid me; shun me; sneer; mock and ridicule; debase, revile, curse and beat me. They call me 'cripple' because they have eyes, but if they heard the world as I do, they would hear cripples all around. I give no money and I beg none. I live by selling the things I find. [*This reminds him.*] ...except these... [*He reaches into a pocket and pulls out the lighter David earlier discarded. He ignites it once or twice close to his ear. He produces half a dozen or so cigarettes, bundled together by an elastic band, extracts one, lights it and smokes.*] Each day rolls off a production line and all of my steps are repeated now. My home is a cavernous building [*He points upstage.*] ...there, in the city; but tonight I had to get out, to come back here. I'm near the end maybe. They say that elephants leave the herd to die in a special place. Well, I don't belong to a herd but here's special enough. It'll be nice to sit for a while and recall

people and moments in my earlier life. It's almost the only story I care for. My own biography affects me so much more than those of other people, which is almost certainly to do with the perfect resemblance between protagonist and perceiver.

*The **Blind Codger** feels about for more sticks to fuel the brazier. **Dawn** walks onto the bridge from behind the nearer house, wearing a cocktail dress. She scans the vicinity briefly and then exits again. The **Woman**, dressed now, appears on the bridge from the direction of the farther house. She rests her forearms on the wall, enjoying the canal's serenity. After a few moments, **Jamie** comes from beneath the bridge and stands just inside a the light cast by one of the windows, looking up at the nearer house.*

WOMAN I think they have a front door, you know.

JAMIE [*looking round*] Not for me.

WOMAN I saw you here earlier.

JAMIE That was you up there... with the binoculars?

WOMAN [*She laughs.*] Yes. [*pause*] You were talking to another... young man.

JAMIE My friend.

WOMAN But I saw you punch him.

JAMIE He's getting married.

WOMAN Oh. Then you're...

JAMIE [*pause*] What?

WOMAN Is he your-

JAMIE Oh! Jesus, no! It's the girl he's marrying. She used to be my girlfriend.

WOMAN [*indicating the nearer house*] And she's in there?

JAMIE I think so.

- WOMAN And you think she'd rather marry you?
- JAMIE I don't know. I haven't spoken to her in months.
- WOMAN [*laughs*] You must have done something unforgivable! [*no reply*] Sorry, none of my business.
- JAMIE That's okay. You're right.
- WOMAN [*pause*] May I come down? I could do with some company.
- JAMIE Be my guest.
- WOMAN [*as she crosses the bridge and descends the steps*] You're right to try and talk to her. I often think that half the problems between people are caused by not talking. And a girl likes a boy who tries, even if she doesn't think much of him to begin with, the fight counts for a lot. We love differently from you men. Hello.
- JAMIE Hi.
- WOMAN But you're too young to be thinking about marriage, aren't you?
- JAMIE I'm not thinking about marriage. That's my friend. I don't have any money for that kind of thing. He's rich. His family is, anyway. I'm nothing.
- WOMAN You're better looking than him. That evens things out. [*Jamie laughs.*] We love differently, but not that differently. [*She produces a hip flask.*] Would you like a drink?
- JAMIE Thanks.
- WOMAN [*as he takes a swig*] You're shivering.
- JAMIE It's cold.
- WOMAN I thought you might be afraid. What are you going to say to her? You'll need to offer her something, to show your good intentions. Women are like gods, we demand sacrifices.

- JAMIE *[as she drinks]* Like jewellery?
- WOMAN *[laughs, struggling to swallow]* Something more valuable than jewellery. Though she'll wear it in the same way, as a trophy for all to see. You need to offer up a part of yourself.
- JAMIE *[pause]* I suppose I... I want to show her I'll do anything, even if it means doing something I consider wrong.
- WOMAN Go on.
- JAMIE Before I couldn't bear to think about getting my principles dirty. But that's what it takes to survive in this world, to succeed. I'm ready now to do that... but now's too late. *[The Woman is staring into space, as though not listening.]* Young love, eh? I guess when you grow up a bit all your teenage dramas fade to nothing.
- WOMAN No. No, it's exactly the opposite. I think it's the first time you fall in love, or the first couple of times, that define you for the rest of life. So whatever you do now isn't trivial, it's important. I fell in love when I was about your age, madly in love. *[Dawn returns from behind the nearer house as though she is anxiously patrolling. Hearing voices, she stops and listens.]* I became so jealous that it consumed me, it burnt secretly in every thought, fired every action. Since then no one has trusted me to control myself and I can't escape loneliness.
- JAMIE You're not married then?
- WOMAN Yes, I'm married... like a prisoner to her gaoler... but I was never in love with him.
- JAMIE Why don't you get a divorce? Are you Catholic or something?
- WOMAN Just principled, like you... but maybe I need to get mine a little dirty too. I don't know. If I were free, what would I do? I think I'd still be alone.
- JAMIE I don't.
- WOMAN *[smiles]* It's true! The man I love can't bear to touch me. No, it was my son who used to be my best friend. You remind me a little of him, actually.

JAMIE A sulking teenager, you mean?

WOMAN No, he's an officer in the army. [*pause*] What?

JAMIE Nothing. It's just... You don't look old enough.

WOMAN Wow...

JAMIE Sorry. I didn't mean-

WOMAN What a line!

JAMIE Now I'm embarrassed.

WOMAN [*She touches his arm.*] I'm sorry. I was only teasing. That was sweet of you. There was a time I'd have given you a kiss on the cheek for a compliment like that.

JAMIE Then let me. Just on the cheek, and put it down to the impetuosity of youth.

WOMAN Okay. [*Jamie kisses her on the cheek and then on the mouth.*] Goodness gracious, the impetuosity of youth! Kissing married women, punching friends... Do young people stop at nothing these days?

JAMIE We still have one principle.

WOMAN What's that?

JAMIE Anything for money.

WOMAN I see. Crime even? Burglary?

JAMIE If the rewards are there.

WOMAN What about murdering married men? Could you do that?

JAMIE [*pause*] I could for a hundred thousand.

WOMAN [*She laughs.*] You really are prepared to sacrifice your morals at this girl's altar, aren't you? [*She places his hand on her breast.*] Let's settle at ninety-

nine. [*They kiss again.*] Take me somewhere. Do you have a house? We can't go to mine.

JAMIE [*leading by her hand under the bridge*] This way.

WOMAN No! Take me away from this canal. I can't bear to be near it any longer. The stink of it! Do you smell it?

JAMIE [*violently*] This way!

Jamie and the Woman exit beneath the bridge. Dawn remains motionless for a time, horrified by what she has heard. She goes to the far side of the bridge and watches them leave, then turns and totters down the steps slowly, dizzily. At the entrance to the bridge's cavity, Dawn calls out his name and her voice echoes around the brickwork. The Blind Codger, who may have nodded off, is startled by the noise. He leaps to his feet.

CODGER What?! Who's there?! What d'you want?! [*silence*] There was a real voice, I'm sure of it. It sounded so much like... but it's not possible. My hallucinations have reached a new pitch, which must mean my end cannot be far away. [*pause, he whispers*] That would be to assume a logic I feel this place, at this time, does not possess! I have the idea of being in a no man's land. [*Dawn calls again.*] That voice was real! Announce yourself! I have ears like a hawk... [*scrabbling about for his walking stick*] ...and if you're trying to make mischief, I'm ready for you! Speak up now! [*Dawn moves downstage from the bridge and stands within a few feet of him.*] No one... and yet I have the curious feeling of being watched.

DAWN That's because I'm watching you.

CODGER *Eah!*

The Blind Codger staggers backwards in surprise and topples over the bench.

DAWN Oh, God! I'm sorry! Are you-

CODGER Back! Get back, you fiend! What are you, a phantom of my mind or some malefactor intent on violence?

DAWN Neither.

CODGER Or both. This is a strange place, indeed.

DAWN [*loudly, as one might to a confused octogenarian*] You've wandered down to a canal. I'm going to help you get up now and then we'll take you home.

CODGER [*swinging his stick*] I'll wallop you if you come anywhere near me.

DAWN Okay, fine. Have it your way. I was only being friendly.

Dawn watches the Blind Codger as he uses the bench to orientate himself and stand.

CODGER You call that friendly. It was an ambush.

DAWN I can't help it if you're blind and a bit deaf too.

CODGER And here comes the prejudice. I suppose you noticed me alone in my vulnerability, my aged frame, my hideous face, and found me an affront to everything your society stands for.

DAWN I don't think you're hideous.

CODGER Are you blind? I'm an abomination.

DAWN You look... venerable.

CODGER [*pause*] You're taking the piss out of me.

DAWN What's your name?

CODGER I don't have one. I've forgotten it. Look, can't you just bugger off? That's the problem with you people: you see someone or something you don't like and you won't just let it alone; you have to hold forth on the subject, blog about it, give it a good kicking... because 'everybody's opinion is equally valid'. Well, I'm not interested. Go and find someone who cares. go on! [*Dawn begins to cry.*] Now what are you doing?

DAWN I'm crying!

CODGER Bit touchy, aren't you?

DAWN Not because of you. You're just a lonely, miserable old git.

CODGER What are you, the Ghost of Christmas Past?

DAWN [*shrilly*] I'm very real and very normal!

CODGER How big are you? You sound tiny.

DAWN I'm an average-sized, nineteen-year-old woman.

CODGER Then what are you crying about?

DAWN I'm crying because my life's a total fuck up; because I'm pregnant and I don't know who the father is; because the person I hope is the father of my baby, who I care about most in the world... is actually a bit of slut.

CODGER I wouldn't get upset about that. It's true of half the men in Britain and would be true of the other half if they had the opportunity.

DAWN But I tried to change him. I thought if I made him jealous he might realise that he only wants me.

CODGER And?

DAWN I've turned him into a monster. I've given him my madness. He'll do anything to get me back, even murder.

CODGER Murder! Murder whom?

DAWN A man, nearby. A woman is paying him in money and sex.

CODGER [*to himself*] I begin to feel a little unwell.

DAWN I'd stop him but he's already gone. It's too late.

CODGER [*still to himself*] ...as though I'm going mad in this place. [*to Dawn*] Are you... completely... sincere?

DAWN You think I don't care about him?

CODGER Or a ...hypocrite, a figment?

DAWN You're right! If I love him as much as he does me, I should be willing to do anything.

CODGER Come here, girl.

DAWN [*moving in the direction of the brazier*] He once put himself in danger to save me, you know.

CODGER Give me your hand. Let me feel it!

From the barrel Dawn seizes a long brand glowing red at one end, and runs upstage, evading the grasp of the Blind Codger.

DAWN I still have a chance to do the same!

CODGER Wait! [*He dives at empty space and is left sprawling.*] For God's sake... Stop!

But she has gone, up the stairs, over the bridge and off in the direction of the farther house. The Blind Codger remains in a heap on the ground for a little while, not moving. Music can be heard from within the nearer house as the party begins.

CODGER Alone again. It was a fit of madness. I loved a voice like hers when I was a boy.

The Blind Codger gets to his feet, dusts himself down and returns to his vigil by the brazier. From beneath the mouth of the bridge emerges Jamie and following him, pulling at his sleeve, the Woman. He tries to climb the stairs.

WOMAN Then was it something I said?

JAMIE No, it wasn't that either.

WOMAN Well, *what?*

JAMIE I'm sorry. I just can't, alright!

WOMAN I thought we had an agreement.

JAMIE You *know* we didn't. You're no more a murderer than I am. It was just nonsense-talk, flirtation.

WOMAN I still expected you to fuck me! I don't understand. You could hardly stop yourself from tearing my clothes off one minute, and the next you're marching back here.

JAMIE I remembered something, that's all. Something I promised came back to me.

WOMAN Where are you going? To find *her*? I thought you needed money. I would've helped you with it... afterwards.

JAMIE I don't want it like this. I swore I wouldn't do anything like this again.

WOMAN Like this... like what?

JAMIE Without *her*.

WOMAN I must be the unluckiest woman in the world to find two men whose consciences rule their cocks. Go on then! Go and find her, this girl who likes you so much she's marrying your best friend. But *I* know... I promise you, a girl like that'll only bring misery on both of you. [*calling after Jamie, who has bounded away up the stairs, breaking into a wordless song to the tune of his earlier whistling*] And you'll be the death of her!

The Woman is overcome by emotion and sits with her back against the bridge between the towpath and the stairs. As Jamie exits towards the nearer house in search of Dawn, he collides with the Mother-in-law, who has been drinking.

MOTHER Watch where you're going, can't you?!

JAMIE [*from offstage*] Sorry!

MOTHER You will be, you... abortion! Bastard youth. No respect. They *will* be sorry. [*proclaiming loudly*] "Son of man, thou dwellest in the midst of a rebellious house, which have eyes to see, and see not; they have ears to hear, and hear not: for they are a rebellious house!" He'll punish you, as He's punished me for my impudence by parting me from my boy, my boy...

*The Man enters from the direction of the farther house.
The Woman down below hears their conversation.*

- MAN** Hell-o! [*The Mother-in-law looks behind her and back again, but says nothing.*] I'm glad to see you here. I'm so sorry about this morning. I was appalled by her behaviour!
- MOTHER** And who are you supposed to be?
- MAN** But surely... [*He laughs feebly.*] Ha ha. You got me. [*silence*] Anyway, it really was shocking but give it a little time to blow over-
- MOTHER** It's not proper for strange men to harangue respectable women in public. What's your racket?
- MAN** I... [*He points.*] This morning... You must remember!
- MOTHER** Of course I remember this morning! Don't change the subject. It's *you* I don't remember. If you're looking for charity, I've none to give. Not after this morning when my own daughter-in-law flung me from her doorstep as if I were a common... beggar, like yourself... and told me I'd never lay eyes on my youngest son again.
- MAN** It was a cruel thing that happened.
- MOTHER** You're right there, beggar. Cruel, and terrible, and just. The Lord gave him to me, the Lord has taken him from me, glory be His holy name.
- MAN** I don't see what's just about it.
- MOTHER** [*She points to the nearer house.*] I used to live in that house, you know... years ago.
- MAN** Yes, I know.
- MOTHER** A place full of light and warmth... three wonderful sons, a successful husband. I got it into my head one day that my husband was being unfaithful. I don't know why, he was an upright man. One night at dinner in front of the rest of the family, I accused him. He was... The whole family was furious. The shouting alone went on for a week. My husband divorced me... 'unreasonable behaviour'... and my sons haven't

spoken to me since, except my youngest. [*pause*] I've been a God-fearing woman, beggar, but not a God-abiding one, and for that He's reduced me to my present state: an old, drunken crone. He killed my only grandson, he's killing my son with illness, he'll kill me, and last night he sent a man here to corrupt my only consolation.

MAN I'm sorry. I don't understand.

MOTHER I don't know why she married my son. Even I could see she didn't love him; like him, yes, but not love. You might think it was for money, if that were in her nature. Whatever the reason, her dedication to him has been as true as... as true as I've been *untrue*. After so much time alone, nursing my son day and night thanklessly, she plods on. That's why I made a pact with God this morning. When I saw in her eyes that this man had sapped her resolve, and my own ears confirmed it, I made a pact with God to get him away! And if that ended in her turning me out in exchange, then so be it.

Below them, out of sight, the Woman rises to her feet and listens in astonishment.

MAN [*agitated*] So, er... What did you do... old woman?

MOTHER I told him what he wanted to hear, beggar. I saw what kind of man he was: desperate to believe the worst of her... I don't know why... Perhaps he loves the idea of his own... moral hygiene more than the truth. I merely gave a few nudges.

MAN Nudges?

MOTHER "She drinks," I said. Only a very ordinary amount; I put her to shame there. "She's loose with men." Ha! She could count the number of men she's had on one hand with fingers left to hold a pen. "She has a liking for boys." A mother's liking, maybe. "She wants to murder my son." And if she's thought he'd be better off dead, I can't say I haven't wondered the same in a few, dreadful moments. I don't believe she'd ever really harm a hair on his head.

Dawn scrambles through the hole in the fence atop the canal's bank, sweating, breathing hard. She crouches there for a moment, examining the tuning fork she holds in her hand.

MAN Then it was all lies? You even lied about dying of cancer.

MOTHER No, that's true enough. She just doesn't want to believe it. Spleen, ovaries... it's devouring me. I won't see another budding tree again. But because of what I've done, the man won't stay. She'll carry on caring for my boy until he's ready to pass away in peace. Thank God! Thanks for His mercy and for teaching me humility!

MAN [*to himself*] What have I done?! [*The Mother-in-law turns to leave from whence she came, but the man still follows her in disbelief.*] She's good then?!

MOTHER [*as she exits*] Beggar, all the saints together have less goodness in them than my son's wife.

The Mother-in-law and the Man leave, still in conversation. Once they have gone a safe distance, the Woman climbs the steps to the bridge in disbelief at what she has heard and remains there for some time before drifting off towards the farther house. Meanwhile Dawn has crept down to the edge of the canal and is testing the rigidity of the ice with one foot. Satisfied that it won't break easily, she begins to cross the waterway. When she is within two feet of the other side, one of her feet goes through the ice. Dawn screams. The Blind Codger jumps to his feet and responds in kind.

CODGER Her voice again! The voice I loved in younger days... but I drove her to her death long years ago. This portends madness. A ghostly memory has risen from the tomb of my imagination and lives again!

DAWN [*standing stock still as the crack in the ice spreads*] Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap!

CODGER [*moving towards the voice*] And riven by anguish, just as I recall her.

DAWN [*seeing the Blind Codger, she calls*] Excuse me! You again! Over here! I tried walking across the canal, the ice... Over here!

CODGER No! Never try to cross the ice!

DAWN If I move another muscle I'll go through.

CODGER [*with a hand to his head*] Apparition, why must you torment me?

DAWN Listen, please, and help me. Hold out your arm. [*The **Blind Codger** does so, terrified.*] Closer. Closer... and when I grab your hand, pull!

Dawn reaches and takes his hand.

CODGER Your hand, your wrist... I feel it! It's real!

DAWN Then please, pull it! [*The **Blind Codger** pulls and they both stagger sideways, falling in a heap beside the canal.*] Thank you! Oh, thank you so much!

CODGER Your body!

DAWN We can get up now.

CODGER What kind of manifestation...?

DAWN Please-

CODGER Let me touch your face.

DAWN No!

He touches her face.

CODGER Your nose, your mouth... I remember it all.

DAWN Get off!

Jamie enters from behind the nearer house, still in search of Dawn.

CODGER The smell of your hair. Don't struggle! I just want to feel you.

DAWN Stop! Get off me!

JAMIE [*hearing her voice*] Dawn?!

DAWN Help me! Jamie, help!

JAMIE *[sprinting downstage] Dawn! Oi! What the fuck do you think you're up to? [Jamie seizes the Blind Codger and hauls him away from Dawn.] Dirty, old bastard!*

CODGER Please, I know her! Don't-

JAMIE *[He kicks him repeatedly. David appears on the bridge from the nearer house, still in tuxedo. He sees the commotion.] Filthy! Fucking! Tramp!*

CODGER No! Oh, no!

DAWN Stop now. Jamie! Stop now.

DAVID What the...? *[He rushes down the stairs and puts his arms around Jamie to hold him back.]* Jamie, mate. Have you lost your mind?

Jamie lays off the Blind Codger, who goes on writhing around on the floor, and turns to Dawn.

JAMIE You're okay?

DAWN *[embracing Jamie]* I'm fine. He didn't do anything. He's just a little bit disturbed.

DAVID What the hell is going on here?!

JAMIE *[indicating the Blind Codger]* The son of a bitch tried to rape Dawn.

DAVID What the...?

CODGER Please! I wasn't. I was just-

Now David turns on him.

DAVID Shut up! You... miserable... blind... piece of crap!

David begins to kick him. On the bridge, two party guests emerge from the nearer house.

GUEST1 What a gorgeous night!

GUEST2 Just breathe that air! I'm so glad you suggested a stroll.

- GUEST1 I know it's cold, but look at the moon behind the moving clouds!
- GUEST2 The snow must already be falling, up there.
- GUEST1 [*catching sight of the ruckus below*] I say, what's going on down there?!
- GUEST2 Looks like a boy laying into an old man. You, there! Boy! Stop that!
- GUEST1 Stop that, immediately, you young savage!
- DAVID [*going towards them and into the light a little more*] He attacked my fian... my girl... [*points towards Dawn, who at that moment is kissing Jamie*] ...a friend of mine.
- GUEST1 I don't care! Outrageous behaviour!
- GUEST2 Good God! Isn't that Jack's son? The queer-looking boy who had to make an embarrassing U-turn about his engagement?
- GUEST1 The ruffian with the bruises and black eye? Gave that awfully preachy speech about improving young people? Well I never!
- GUEST2 What breath-taking hypocrisy!
- GUEST1 He'll go far.
- GUEST2 Without doubt. Let's give him a crack at the city council.
- DAVID [*indicating the Blind Codger, who is out cold*] Actually, if it makes any difference, I think he might be from Montenegro.
- GUEST2 Then carry on, old boy.
- GUEST1 As you were. [*turning to leave*] Just the kind we need to broaden our appeal!
- As the party guests exit in the direction they entered, they pass the Man.*
- GUEST2 Good evening.

MAN Evening.

*Before the **Man** reaches the midpoint of the bridge, the **Woman** enters. They stand there, looking at each other. Their conversation, when it begins, is interspersed with dialogue from the one going on below.*

JAMIE [to Dawn] You know, I've been looking for you.

DAWN I know.

JAMIE I'm sorry.

DAWN For what?

JAMIE For leaving you the way I did. For leaving at all.

DAWN It doesn't matter now.

JAMIE I was ashamed.

DAWN It doesn't matter.

JAMIE You dropped out.

DAWN Yes.

JAMIE Because of me?

DAWN I'm pregnant.

JAMIE You're... [He looks her over.] You're... And am I...?

DAWN I don't know.

JAMIE [pause] Who...?

Dawn looks at her feet in embarrassment. David clears his throat nervously.

- DAVID [*moving away from them, his voice fading*] The metalwork of this lamppost is just exquisite. Victorian, possibly... very nice... gives a good light...
- DAWN [*to Jamie*] The first week of uni... after you disappeared, I went a bit... strange. I felt like a-
- JAMIE Don't explain. You don't need to explain. It's my fault. [*pause*] Are you going to... marry him?
- DAWN No! I never was. He made that up to impress his political chums... and because his head's full of old-fashioned ideas, like chivalry... and the monarchy.
- JAMIE What do you want to do?
- DAWN I want to be with you.
- MAN [*to the Woman*] Forgive me.
- WOMAN No.
- MAN Forgive me!
- WOMAN How? I've no power to forgive. I'm no good.
- MAN Please don't use my words against me. What I said to you was-
- WOMAN What you said was true, all of it. You've done nothing.
- MAN Nothing? After accusing you of... selfishness, drunkenness, depravity... of plotting to murder your husband; based on my own prejudices and the word of an old lunatic. If you've ever done anything that wasn't entirely pure and right, it was because of me. Forgive me.
- WOMAN [*beginning to cry*] It's too late. Words are useless now. This is the end.
- MAN [*coming closer*] No, we've time. Let me stay with you in your house. We'll look after him together. I don't ask for anything more. But one day, when more water has passed under the bridge, perhaps we'll be able to think about a different kind of happiness.

WOMAN I wish it could be. I wish.

MAN [*touching her face*] What can prevent it? There's nothing between us now. We're free of misunderstandings.

The Man and Woman embrace.

WOMAN Sing me your song. The one you used to sing.

MAN [*singing*] 'Here's to him that's now set free
Who was once a prentice bound
And for his sake, this holiday we make
So let his health go round, go round,
Go round, brave boys, until it comes to me,
For the longer we sit here and drink
The merrier we shall be.'

While the Man sings, an orange light grows from the darkness of the farther house. It will continue to grow relentlessly in scope and brightness until the night itself is consumed by voracious tongues of flame; but for now, it goes unnoticed by the characters.

JAMIE I don't have any money.

DAWN It doesn't matter. We'll go away.

JAMIE Where?

DAWN A place without any straight lines; where the soil is unploughed, the trees aren't forested, the water's not dammed. It'd be us, and the baby and nothing corrupted. There'd be nothing to make us unhappy.

JAMIE Except ourselves. And we still need money.

DAWN I told you, it doesn't matter to me.

JAMIE I'll find a way, any way, to give you what you want.

DAWN I don't want it! Are you listening? I forbid it!

JAMIE Forbid what?

DAWN Anyway, you can't now. I've taken care of that.

JAMIE Dawn, what are you talking about?

DAWN [*pause*] I overheard you talking to that woman... I heard what she asked you to do. I saw you go off with her to... to... But I don't care about that now.

JAMIE Oh, God! Dawn! I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! I wanted... I was trying to find *you*. And she was like you in so many ways. I kissed her.

DAWN I know.

JAMIE But that was it! We walked a short way together and I came back for you. I wasn't planning on doing anything she asked!

DAWN [*horrified*] You... weren't?

JAMIE To murder her husband? It would have been madness! Evil!

Jamie hugs Dawn again, but over his shoulder she catches a glimpse of the burning building.

DAWN O God! Jamie let's leave. Let's go away now.

The noise of the fire reaches them now. The Man sees it.

MAN [*so that all hear him and turn to look*] The house... It's on fire! The house is burning! [*to the Woman*] Your husband! We have to get him out!

The Man turns, in hurry to reach the house, but the Woman stops him.

WOMAN No! Don't go! Don't go in there!

MAN I must!

WOMAN Leave him!

MAN He'll be burnt alive! [*She says nothing. The Man looks between her and the house.*] You did this!

WOMAN No!

MAN Again?!

WOMAN I didn't!

MAN You're not human! You're *her*, you're the Devil! [*She tries to pull him back.*] Let go of me!

The Man exits towards the farther house. The Woman remains, staring at the conflagration.

DAWN Let's go.

JAMIE Dawn...

DAWN No point in standing here, Jamie. There'll fire engines coming soon, and police.

JAMIE What did do you mean when you said you'd taken care of it?

DAWN I couldn't let you do it. You were going to go in there and murder her husband... for money, for me.

JAMIE It was... *play-acting!* It was lies!

DAWN I was angry too... with that woman, with you for going off, same as before. I can't remember how it happened! I can't! I got the idea of taking a stick from the fire... After that it's difficult... I was in the basement of the house. I threw the stick onto the bed. I was in the kitchen... [*She opens her clenched fist to reveal the tuning fork.*] ...and I found this. I hit it on the table. The note reminded me of your song. You know the one. Sing it. Sing it for me! [*She tries herself.*]

'Here's to him that's now set free
Who was once a prentice bound
And for his sake...'

JAMIE [*supporting Dawn and ushering her to David*] Dave, I want you to take Dawn and look after her. If anybody starts poking around, tell them you saw me set fire to that house.

DAVID I'm not going to-

JAMIE Dave! I'm not asking.

DAVID But what about you?!

JAMIE I'm going away. I might not be back for a while.

DAWN Going where?! I'm coming with you!

JAMIE You're staying here with Dave. [*to David*] With any luck the police won't think to look for suspects in the local MP's house. And maybe he can pull some strings if they do take an interest. [*The Blind Codger starts to groan close by.*] Go! Go now!

David begins to lead Dawn away. She breaks one half of his grasp.

DAWN Jamie!

JAMIE [*to Dave*] Just get her out my sight!

David and Dawn, who continues to look over her shoulder, ascend the stairs and disappear from sight. Jamie lingers a moment, before slinking off along the towpath and into the darkness beneath the bridge. Meanwhile the Blind Codger continues to revive. He sits up and rubs his head.

CODGER Am I finally in hell?

The Man enters. His body has been mutilated by the inferno: he is both blind and badly burnt.

WOMAN [*seeing him*] No! O God, no!

CODGER [*alert*] That cry stands my hair on end! I hear it every night.

MAN Is that you? I tried. I couldn't reach him. The way was blocked with flames. The floor fell away on all sides. I heard him... laughing. *Laughing!* And then something hit me. I can't see. *I can't see!*

WOMAN Here I am. You're fine. You'll be fine.

MAN Take me down to the canal. Put some ice on my skin. Why did you do it?

WOMAN I didn't. I promise I didn't. It was already burning when I arrived. Believe me, there was nothing I could do!

MAN Save your breath. I don't believe anything you say now. You should've gone in and locked the door. Put me down! I don't want your help.

WOMAN We're not at the canal yet.

MAN I don't care! You're not to touch me now or care for me. [*The Woman lowers him to the ground in the middle of the stage and cradles him.*] You might think of putting a pillow over my face.

WOMAN You're angry now, but later-

MAN I'm angry now and later too, and every day for the rest of my life.

CODGER [*in hardly more than a whisper*] No! It's not true!

MAN I curse the day I laid eyes on you. You've been nothing but a blight on me from the moment I saved you.

WOMAN What's left for me without you?

MAN Do what you like, you and all your...

The Man goes into a faint. The Woman bends low, kisses his forehead, then lays him down. She rises, and taking one look over her shoulder as she reaches the canal, walks onto the ice and through the archway of the bridge.

CODGER I fainted. And when I came to, she was gone.

The Blind Codger hauls his bruised body across the ground towards the unconscious Man. He cups his head in his hands.

CODGER Me! Me! And yet, not me. [*He cries.*] The main character... *and* a mere spectator. I'm one, little person *and* all humanity. This place *is* real *and* imagined. It is the world! Full of my mistakes remembered and other people repeating them. One moment I pity them, in the next they disgust me; in another I love them, then they beat me. It is the world and I... *despair*... but not alone. At least I have society now.

[*He sings.*] 'Here's to him that's now set free
Who was once a prentice bound
And for his sake, this holiday we make
So let his health go round, go round,
Go round, brave boys, until it comes to me,
For the longer we sit here and drink
The merrier we shall be.'

The music grows and takes over. Snow or ash or pieces of paper fall from above. Curtain.